

■ By Hangama Ahmadzai

From Death to Dialogue



The earthquake that was the senseless death of Mr. Nasrat Parsa has caused the earth to open and a crater to form in the Afghan community. The after shocks are still being felt and rippled throughout the Afghan Diaspora as people shake their heads and ask why? Why such thoughtless violence? Why towards such a talented individual? Why in Canada? Why are our youth so lost? Why aren't we doing something about it? Why couldn't their parents raise them differently? Tough questions for areas not yet explored in a community that is still reeling from over two decades of war, destruction, displacement, uncertainty, hopelessness, unemployment, poverty and death.

This article does not attempt to provide answers because everyone's answers will be different, rather it is a portal through which communication can start and a dialogue can begin to take place. The questions are meant to be starting points of discussion rather than confusion.

How can this happen to our community? When one is still blinded by the shadows of the past how can one move onto the sunshine of a future? When parents are still reminiscing about their life back home and not integrating in a "foreign" or "beygaana" country how can they learn to adjust their thinking, coping, and living strategies to meet the demands of an alien culture and way of life? In turn how can the youth who are expected to be "Afghan" at home and "Canadian" outside adjust to a sense of identity that satisfies their parents and at the same time allows them to live without

stigma and discrimination in Canada? Who do they turn to when trouble does occur? Is there a support system in place already or are gangs their only source for support? Where are the youth getting their sense of belonging, identity and culture? Is it from their parents, their relatives, and their elders or is it from their peers and friends? Where are they spending most of their time, at home, at school, at a friend's house? Is having an Afghan friend necessarily better than having a non-Afghan friend? Would an Afghan friend be a more positive influence over a non-Afghan friend?

Does anyone really ask these ques-

tions from themselves, their partners, their wives, their husbands, and their children? Is there a dialogue between a generation that lost their identity to war and another still in search of their identity? Does anyone talk anymore or do the talks turn to accusations, finger pointing, patronizing and blame? Do you as a parent/guardian really know your child?

So many questions, yet so little time to uncover them all, to answer them all and to find a solution for them all. It is tough to blame anyone but yet someone has to take responsibility for all that has gone wrong. There is a dilemma here that plays out only in the Afghan community. On the one hand we have our pride on being Afghan and we would like to keep that image up as much as possible trying to fool ourselves, and the rest of the world that we do not have any issues. There is a danger of stigmatization, abandonment and ignorance in this approach. On the other hand we know that issues such as drugs, alcohol, and mental health are big contributing factors in the health and well being of the community. This seems to have played a factor in the attack of Mr. Parsa. These issues are not new, they existed in Afghanistan though perhaps not to such an extent and have carried over to Canada as well so why do we have difficulty expressing it, exploring it, uncovering it, and talking about it? According to a needs assessment conducted by the Sabawoon Afghan Family Education and Counselling Centre (S.A.F.E. C.C.) in 2003 Exploring the Mental Health Needs of Afghans in Toronto, of the 252 people who answered a questionnaire 8% of them identified themselves as drinking more and 15% identified their families as

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It is time for us to solve our issues in a humane, rational and effective way. It is time for us to listen to each other's pain, empathize with it and not judge.

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drinking more. About 6% identified themselves as using drugs to escape and 7% identified their family as using drugs to escape. What was surprising though was that the participants were more likely to identify their friends as having drug, alcohol or gambling problems than were themselves or their families. SAFE concludes that this may have to do with the additional stigma attached to substance abuse and/or use and gambling. In terms of identity 21% identified themselves as experiencing feelings of not belonging and 18% identified their families as experiencing this. When asked if they were getting the help needed to cope with their issues 40% of the participants stated no and 25% never even looked for help. If we are ashamed of such behaviour by our elders and youth alike why aren't we doing anything to change it? Why are we keeping a code of silence and hiding behind our closed doors issues and problems that can easily be brought to light and treated?

Has the fabric of our culture become so deteriorated that our youth are falling through its cracks? Have non-resident Afghans treated culture as a static element and have forgotten to adjust it according to the time and place? Have parents become still photographs of the time they left Afghanistan and not improvising actors in the stage of life that seems to be changing before the act even ends? It is important to note that though right now, at this moment, our troubles seem greater than our achievements we also have to acknowledge our positive strides. There are a segment of young Afghan-Canadians that are thriving and have overcome enormous adversity to rise to the top of their professions, their education and their way of life. Many parents are extremely supportive of their children and thus have developed leaders to take the next generation forward and present them with positive role models. Many youth have joined organizations to help other youth, they juggle homework with helping their family survive financially, they take care of their siblings so that their parents work and support them, they work many jobs and achieve high

marks to get accepted in the nation's top colleges and universities, they plan events, organize fundraisers and seemed to have found that crucial balance that most adults have trouble finding. Therefore, the picture is not all doom and gloom but as Afghans when one part of the population hurts it affects all the parts.

How does a community come out of this spiral of self-destruction and start to see the light of the day? How does a dialogue between the ages, the sexes, the generations, the classes, the ethnic differences, and the different religious beliefs begin to happen? How can the seed of change be planted so as to honour the roots but also foresee a stronger and more positive harvest?

It is time for the Afghan community to begin a journey of self-discovery. Who are we as a people? What are our values, norms, and morals? How important is our next generation to us? Do we want to continue to uphold our identity outside Afghanistan or do we want to completely melt into the population? What can we do to ensure that as a community the vision and ideals that we hold for our mothers, fathers, youth, and elders are nurtured, encouraged and upheld? How hard are we willing to work in getting our lives back, our identity back, our dreams and hopes back?

These questions can overwhelm a person and provide no end to a situation getting worse. It is not meant to be a negative force but a starting point. Until you ask a question you will not discover the answer. The damage of the earthquake that shook us a few days ago will always remind us of the task ahead. It will not be easy; it will be crucial but brutal. There will be much resistance, much protest, much controversy and much blame. It will take some patience and persistence but the end result will be worth it. It is time for us to solve our issues in a humane, rational and effective way. It is time for us to listen to each other's pain, empathize with it and not judge. It is time for us to talk to one another and get to know one another again. It is time for dialogue.



I was born in the beautiful city of Kabul, Afghanistan on what my mother described to be a calm, peaceful, and sunny day. My father dedicated most of his life to the teachings of his students and children. When I was born he was teaching as the head of the department of education in Kabul. My mother, just like all other devoted mothers of the world sacrificed her youth for the well being of her children. "Worship" is the word that comes into my mind when I think of Sima Parsa and the late Hafizullah Parsa (bless his soul), my loving parents.

The art of poetry, literature, sculpturing, painting, and music played a big part in shaping my fathers family. My uncle, Amanullah Parsa who now resides in Columbus, Ohio with his family, after his graduate studies in Italy, taught art at the University of Rome and Milan. My brother, Najeeb Parsa, was the first person to have such a great impact on my life involving music. He has given me tremendous guidance in this incredible journey, "I have never felt alone," even if we were oceans apart. In my childhood years I started listening to my brother Najeeb when he recited poetry while playing the harmonia. I started mimicking him, and thus began our close ties to music and each other.

Soon after, during a New Years celebration at Radio Kabul Studios, I sang two songs belonging to the greatest artist that ever lived in Afghanistan, Ahmad Zahir (God bless him), and received great encouragement and likeness from the people.

From official website of Nasrat Parsa