

In April & May of 2005, I spent 5 weeks in a village in southern Afghanistan. I went to stay with, to visit a Pashtun family whose 2 adult children live here in Montreal. I paid my own expenses and represented no group or organization. The Pashtun tribe make up about 40 % of Afghans population.

The village, in a valley in Wardak province, was about an hour and a half south-west of Kabul, along the American-built Kabul-Herat highway and 3 to 4 hours from Kandahar. The household was of average size, about 15-18 people ranging from an old great aunt to a baby. It included the 2 family members from Montreal who speak English and translated.

The people in the village were extremely hospitable, I was invited for meals & tea to all the homes. Families came over the mountains to share the joy of the host family at having a guest. I was taken to a couple of villages to see relatives as well as to Kabul a few times. I kept up the schedule of a pop star. They were very conservative, practicing their culture of Pashtunwali- an ancient code of honour. One of the ideas of Pashtunwali is the importance of hospitality and sanctuary and I benefited from this.

I was very impressed by the way the people lived .In a climate like ours, but without any amenities, the people clung to their land, their lifestyle, their humanity. There was no running water, in fact, water was in short supply & most homes did not have a well. They lived without electricity, although a small generator had arrived in the village a few weeks before I did & was turned on for 2.5 hours in the evenings. Using the simplest equipment, shovels, a wheel barrow, a treadle sewing machine, or just their hands, they made everything: their carpets to sit on & sleep on, cushions, their blankets, clothes, they grew all their own food & prepared it, they baked fresh bread everyday. They built their own homes using the earth as building material and simple shovels and trowels. The women embroider clothes and household linen and they prepare wool which they weave and

knit. Their houses, their compounds are well designed and comfortable.

The people were in an extremely distressed state because they lived in a state of terror, caught between 2 groups of religious fundamentalists, the Mujahedeen, now called the Northern Alliance and sporting suits, led by Hamid Karzai & the Taliban. They described themselves as hostages. The men, as well as the women cried as they recounted the 30 years of war, ...how their houses had been bombed , their land ruined by mines, how the Mujahdeen, financed by the Americans had totally destroyed Kabul in 1992, they'd dynamited each building. How the poverty and the loss had taken a toll on their lives.....how, young men are beginning to die of cancer—perhaps as a result of exposure to depleted uranium. Then came the euphoric few weeks when the American planes first flew overhead and they thought the Americans had come to liberate them because they cared about Afghans. The villagers thought the Americans would give them jobs and help alleviate their poverty, that with their advanced technology, the Americans would help clean up the war-ravaged countryside—get rid of the weapons left by the Russians & still used to settle grievances..... give the international aid that had been promised. They were sure that, in no time, clinics and schools & roads would spring up and people would have a bit of material security, that they would enter a post conflict situation.

Instead, an ominous new problem, a catastrophe confronts the people of Southern Afghanistan. The Americans (read Canadians, Dutch, British) have come as occupiers, not as liberators and the Pashtuns will not be occupied. Stories begin to circulate....of civilian casualties and humiliations—apparently, in some village, the Americans forcing village elders to undress....the following day, they committed suicide. Dignity is everything. It's definitely not life at any cost.

In some areas, including the village in Wardak, the situation is worse than before. The boys school has been damaged and the small informal primary school that the little girls attended has been closed, the UN textbooks destroyed. In the village of Oozra, one of the married sisters, the girls' school closed after 2 bodies were found at the entrance.

The society is totally hierarchical and everyone has a clearly defined role to play. Yes, the women work really hard, but life is not a picnic for the men. The young men have to bring home the food. Now, there are no jobs. The only work available for those guarding the homes and villages is fighting. The young boys, beloved sons are forced to fight to feed their families. Both the Taliban and the "Central government pay salaries, so, if you can, you fight for both sides & get double the money. Neither side is strong enough to topple the other and a protracted civil war, financed they believe by Washington will keep the country weak. Meanwhile, we hear gleeful reports of murdered Taliban and should stop to reflect on who they are and think of the families mad with grief. We know how sad we are when our soldiers die. It's the same for these families, except that there's no government recognition of their grief. When they lose a breadwinner, there's no govt. compensation.

Even the locals are not sure who constitutes the Taliban. Some of them are local---indigenous Afghans who refuse the authority of the Western backed, highly corrupt govt of Hamid Karzai. Others are fighting to protect their village, or as part of the honour system , still others are bandits, criminals, or victims of an insult or wrong of some kind who are seeking redress. Then there are those from the outside, from Pakistan (the villagers described them as intruders), & there are others from more organized fighting groups Al Qaeda. There seem to be militia groups that fight each other.

Let's look at the 'good' guys..... the very corrupt government of Hamid Kazai supported by the NATO-led ISAF forces, the Americans and Canadians, etc all the contractors,

the NGOs. So why is Canada there? How can our soldiers, young people from a materialistic culture, terrified of death, trained in traditional warfare, & into hockey & Tim Horton's ignorant about mountains and the Pashtunwali code even begin to understand the ancient culture of the Pashtuns and other ethnic groups in Afghanistan? We have no respect for the people, for their culture, their art, their lives. Given our Canadian culture of lots of geography and hardly any history, how can we relate to people who lived in their area for 5,000 years. Imagine, if they came and bombed our homes, smashed our Mona Lisa's, killed our families and said that they were here to liberate us? What are Canadian troops fighting and dying for in Afghanistan? Perhaps to help the Americans secure a route for their pipeline.

Like all the armed groups in Afghanistan, Canadians are contributing to a systematic campaign of terror perpetuated against unarmed people who are in no way a threat to Canada. Canadians are patronizing towards the dirty, illiterate and utterly poor citizens of Southern Afghanistan. They don't see them as equals. The western obsession with the veiled female figure only adds to feelings of western superiority. Clearly, Canadians can feel superior, as they ride around in their armoured cars and tanks, really thinking that they are 'bringing democracy' to Afghanistan. But are they? Are these people really primitive and brutal and does the West really have the answer?

During my conversations, it came up that we have homeless people in Montreal. My Afghani friends were appalled. Where were their families? Why didn't the homeless people knock on the doors of those with homes? Well, we don't open our doors to strangers. They were horrified. A penniless person could show up at your door and you would leave him standing on the step? We talked about the low status of elders in Canada.....how a lot of them live alone and/or in modest circumstances, how they are not respected. In the Pashtun village, old people are the most highly regarded members of

the community : the men are community leaders and the women decide in the domestic sphere. They are treated with great tenderness and reverence.

The fighting is causing greater hardship than ever. More people are hungry, inflation is sky-rocketing and food prices have doubled in the last 2 years. Thousands and thousands of vulnerable people are living in bombed out buildings in Kabul in the terrible cold. The poverty and human suffering is truly overwhelming and, in my opinion, whilst I recognize the work of certain NGO projects, the situation in southern & eastern Afghanistan is not improving. Enough Canadians have died to say nothing of the Afghans. The Canadian Armed forces should leave Afghanistan & Canadians should get beyond the brainwashing of the commercial media and learn all they can about the Pashtun culture which , for all its flaws has much to teach us.