# WEAVINGLIFE

#### Introduction

by Jonathan Larson

Every now and then, a story comes along that seems so improbable it causes us to stop and reconsider what we thought were settled issues. The Dan Terry story, though set in a remote place, does exactly that. Going against the grain of almost all conventional wisdom, Dan set out to build bridges where everyone else was blowing them up. He spanned the chasms of suspicion, religious hatred, and outright warfare with patient bonds of trust and openness.

Reflecting on the bewildering aftermath of an earlier war, German leader Harry Kessler concluded, "Until we have created a romance of peace that would equal that of war, violence will not disappear from people's lives." The present account of the Dan Terry story is offered as part of that "romance of peace," containing all the courage and dash of the well-known genre of the "romance of war" but none of its bitterness or wounds.

## Using this discussion guide

The Weaving Life DVD is 57:30 minutes in length. The discussion questions included here are intended to draw the audience into reflection by exploring the issues underlying the story and using the garnered insights to probe present context. (You won't be able to discuss them all, so choose the questions that will work best for your particular group.) The major themes pursued in the reflection are development, faith, humanitarian action, and peacebuilding, the focuses of Dan's experience among the Afghans.

## **Opening questions (before viewing)**

1. What do you think could/should be done about the long and historical problems of countries like Afghanistan? How can one person respond?

## **General questions (after viewing)**

- 1. What was your main feeling as you watched the film?
- 2. What drove Dan to do what he did; what were his motivations? How does this compare to what drives you?
- 3. What stood out to you from the language, behavior, and expressions used by Dan Taylor and Jonathan Larson in describing Dan and his life?
- 4. Could you do what Dan and his family did? What feelings are generated in you by considering that?

## **Development**

- 1. What did the documentary communicate to you about development efforts in a country or among a people?
- 2. Do you think Dan would have considered himself a development worker? Why or why not?
- 3. To what extent is development outward/material (e.g., wells, electricity, schools, immunizations) and to what extent is it inward/mental (e.g., esteem, reflection, worldview)? How does Dan's story show engagement in both spheres?
- 4. Imagine a Swede or German or Australian coming to your hometown to do "development work." What thoughts and feelings does that spark? If you were an Afghan, what would you want from a foreigner who had come to Afghanistan to live and work?
- 5. Dan was something of a nonconformist, maybe even a loose cannon, (as some have suggested) and he did not always follow to the expected norms of foreign development workers. What are some possible reasons for this, and some possible consequences?

#### **Humanitarian Action**

- 1. Identify one scene/image from the documentary that you think represents humanitarian action. What did the documentary communicate to you about this theme?
- 2. Lisa Schirch noted that the international military forces in Afghanistan provided aid in order to get information and for political and military interests. Development and humanitarian assistance organizations typically try to relieve suffering and meet basic human needs to fulfill their missions. These competing objectives can be confusing for those who are recipients of aid. In your opinion, is it acceptable or unacceptable to leverage information for aid?
- 3. What do you imagine Dan learned about humanitarian action during his time in Afghanistan? From the film, do you think his perspective changed or grew in that context?

## **Peacebuilding**

- 1. To what extent are development and peacemaking related? Is there a specific way to do development as a peacemaker? When or how does development work become violent?
- 2. Who were the likeliest influences on Dan's approach and vision? Can you think of other peacemaking/development figures who used a method similar to Dan's?
- 3. Discuss the attributes described in the following quotation from the book *Making Friends among the Taliban*—written about Dan Terry's life. What traits affected Dan's ability to work at peacemaking? What other traits are important to peacebuilders?

He never failed to invite neighbors to his table and to friendship. In turn, he learned to be an appreciative and deferential guest among the Hazaras, both great and poor. Dan's capacity to befriend and serve prepared him for the role of the *rahnama*—a

trusted guide and go-between who gently nudges travelers on their way through uncharted terrain toward a more peaceable country.

To be effective in the role of *rahnama*, Dan learned the art of hanging out with people and setting aside personal destinations for the sake of the itineraries of others. Being a *rahnama* requires curiosity about a community's fears and anxieties and attentiveness to the wisdom expressed in its stories and humor. It sometimes even requires lying awake in the darkness of Himalayan nights, pondering a people's conundrums and dilemmas.

- 4. Identify one scene/image from the documentary that you think represents peacebuilding. What did the documentary communicate to you about this theme?
- 5. What local dynamics influenced how peacebuilding played out in Afghanistan?
- 6. What costs and benefits would be tied to living out the theme of peacebuilding in your own life context?

#### **Faith**

- 1. What did the documentary communicate to you about faith?
- 2. How do you see faith shaping Dan's vision and practice of development? How necessary is faith to doing such work? (Can a nonreligious person do this work?)
- 3. Some might question Dan's commitment to and personal sacrifice for Afghanistan, especially when they understand that in his personal love for the people he did not use the term *Christian*. How do you feel about Christians who work to meet needs without attempting to evangelize? As Christians, can/should we do good deeds when we must not use the name Christian?
- 4. Describe Dan's interface with Islam as shown in the documentary.
- 5. What do you think Dan learned about faith during his time in Afghanistan? Do you think his perspective changed or grew in that context?

#### Other

- 1. To what extent is Dan's story a narrative of globalization? Is it part of a larger pattern?
- 2. Dan's brand of service was done differently than some development or mission workers; he made friends and became intimately connected with the people he served. Some would accuse him of losing his objectivity. Others would agree with his method of serving through friendship. What do you think?
- 3. Dan's Afghan nickname was *Pagal*, meaning "crazy one." What does acquiring a local name suggest? Do you think this nickname was a positive or negative one? Why?

## **Concluding questions**

What do you feel is the most outstanding legacy left by Dan Terry's life and example? What messages/challenges has the documentary most poignantly left with you?

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See <u>www.Weaving-Life.com</u> for a summary of the documentary, information about those interviewed, and video clips from the program.

See also the blog <a href="http://emuweavinglife.wordpress.com/">http://emuweavinglife.wordpress.com/</a> for more history of Afghanistan, stories, and background.

## Related DVDs and books available at www.MennoMedia.org/store

Making Friends among the Taliban: A Peacemaker's Journey in Afghanistan by Jonathan Larson

In a remote valley north of Kabul in August 2010, American peacemaker Dan Terry and nine other aid workers were attacked and killed in an event that made worldwide headlines. Why would one man take his family, follow faith and calling into the political and religious maelstrom of Afghanistan, and—through years of war and strife—believe he could make a difference? 130 pages, paper, \$15.99.

#### Waging Peace: Muslim and Christian Alternatives

A one-hour documentary helping viewers overcome mistrust, hatred, and violence, and learn ways of peace and tolerance. This program traces the threads of peacemaking that exist in both Christian and Muslim traditions, peaceful efforts which are often drowned out in the media. Meet Christians and Muslims—sometimes working together, sometimes separately—who have dedicated their lives to peace. DVD, \$24.95.

#### Understanding Islam

by Calvin Shenk

A brief Christian reflection regarding understanding the faith of our Muslim neighbors, coworkers, students, and friends. 20 pages, paper, \$3.95.

### Christians Meeting Muslims Book Series

Journeys of the Muslim Nation and the Christian Church, by David W. Shenk

A Muslim and a Christian in Dialogue, by David W. Shenk

Teatime in Mogadishu, by Ahmed Ali Haile with David W. Shenk

All three books address questions of spiritual and cultural difference between Christians and Muslims and promote peacemaking between Muslims and Christians, through dialogue and sharing of experiences. Each book \$14.99; all three \$37.99.

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