

WFWP Birmingham/UK, Women's Peace Meeting, Birmingham

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Speakers : Oluseyi Kolade, Shazeen Iqbal, Anita Shervington

On Tuesday October 28th, we were happy to have 3 young women, Oluseyi, Shazeen and Anita, speaking on different aspects of Meditation, Healing and Development. We were the 'usual' amazing mixture of women gathered together, just over 100 of us and from such a variety of backgrounds. We were particularly happy that a number of our Shia Muslim women joined us, in spite of it being the holy month of Muharram, during which they normally spend most evenings at their mosque.



Shazeen spoke about 'mindfulness' as a form of meditation which can help teachers cope with the stresses of their profession, and which can also help meet the emotional and social needs of students. She has been undertaking research with Birmingham University, part of which has involved talking to young people both on the street and in the classroom. Speaking more informally with young 15 and 16 year olds in

school, they expressed to her some of the pressures which come from having to 'fit in' and be part of the crowd, often having to try and 'be somebody' that they didn't feel totally comfortable about. Mindfulness has the potential to help them live more in the moment, and be in touch with their true identity, as well as increasing their attention span and ability to concentrate. It can also make one more responsive and less reactive, more mindful of one's thoughts and actions. Shazeen is very concerned to help young people develop good character while at school, as well as achieving academically, and is looking at different character education programmes and methods, and trying to find ways to promote these in our school system.



Oluseyi described her extremely difficult childhood and upbringing in some detail, including having children at a very early age. Eventually, all of this led to her reaching a point where she needed to heal herself, particularly through forgiveness, and to 'fall in love' with her true self, on the basis of which she has then been able to help many other young women. Seyi founded a production company, Happy Days Productions, which offers job opportunities, work experience and apprenticeships to young people, and she also works with other young women, helping them to improve their self-awareness and understanding, discovering and affirming their own value and empowering them to follow their dreams. She stressed the importance of meditation as a means of improving self-awareness, centring us on our true value, and living in the moment. We were very inspired by the way in which she has managed to turn her life around, and used that as a strong motivation to then reach out to other young people, with such a genuine desire to help them find happiness, and fulfill their potential. At the end of her talk, Seyi mentioned a simple, lovely project which she has initiated : 'Sock-tober'. This has involved collecting donations of new pairs of socks which would subsequently be given directly to homeless people on the streets of Birmingham. Quite a number of the ladies attending our meeting had brought socks with them which we put in a large box, ready to add to Seyi's collection!

Anita was our third speaker describing how she, and many of us, have experienced stress and trauma in our lives. This has caused her to look at the underlying causes of trauma, as well as the actual trauma itself. She spoke about 'epigenetics', the study of the impact which traumatic experiences can have, not just psychologically but physiologically, such that when cells are multiplied there is an actual inheritance to the next generation. This is not a specific change to our DNA but chemical changes which influence the way in which the DNA's information is processed.

Anita cited scientific evidence for this but suggested that the negative effects of trauma, particularly those associated with fear, can be reversed. Meditation can help with this, as can good nutrition, and also physical contact such as holding and hugging our children which builds a feeling of safety and resilience.

Sharing. The floor was then open for others to share, and a number of women spoke from personal and faith perspectives, especially on the value of meditation, for Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, etc, as applied in their daily lives. Maureen, a lay preacher in the Methodist Church, said that we are all individuals and that as well as being something which we can do quietly, meditation can be carried out while gardening, singing [St Augustine said that singing is 'prayer twice'!], knitting [Maureen mentioned the wonderful Prayer Shawl Ministry] or walking in nature, all of which can have spiritual content and meaning. She concluded with a meditation written by Eddie Askew who had a ministry helping people with leprosy. Susan spoke from the Islamic tradition, where meditation is part of her everyday life and practice as carried out in prayer 5 times each day. She described it as speaking to God, and concentrating on the relationship between ourselves and God, in order that we can live rightly and be guided in our day-to-day life.



Malica, a Buddhist from Sri Lanka, shared how meditation and mindfulness go together, causing us to think about what we are doing in each moment. She and her husband have practiced meditation regularly for many years, including frequent retreats away from the 'disturbances' of daily life, where silence is maintained requiring considerable concentration. She recommended taking some time each day to quietly concentrate on oneself, meditating about how to do good, how to help others, how to be a friend, how to send good wishes to someone. Her 'thought for the day' is : "How can I help somebody?"

Swaran then told us that most Hindu homes have a shrine, where a candle is lit (light/candles play some part in most of our religions) and at the beginning of each day 5 or 10 minutes are spent there in meditation and devotion, thinking and praying for the day ahead. Although there is one God, the many attributes of God are expressed in different forms, so she encourages her children and grandchildren to offer a time of devotion to the goddess Saraswati who represents the attributes of Knowledge, Wisdom, the Arts and Nature.



Ruth spoke briefly how prayer and meditation are an integral part of the Jewish prayer book and worship services. These practices help her to communicate with her inner self, with family and friends, and to know where she stands in relation to God, as a Jewish mother, grandmother, friend, and as an old age pensioner!

Carol, a yoga teacher for 28 years, spoke of Sunita Kabral who brought the practice of Pranayama to the west, as described in 'The Lotus and the Rose', combining eastern and western cultures. Not a specifically religious practice, this allows anyone to detach from everyday life a little bit, and to cultivate a place of inner peace within oneself, out of which one can respond to the demands of our individual lifestyle and circumstances.

Following these and a number of other meaningful contributions, we lit candles and Seyi led us in a very beautiful meditation together (see picture at the top of this article). This created a peaceful atmosphere in which we could conclude our meeting with interfaith prayers and readings, particularly prayers for the tragic conflict and suffering which continues to plague the Middle East, with so many women and children caught up in all the horror and violence.



Conclusion

Our meeting was very positive and constructive, with a light, uplifting feeling during our time of sharing, networking and refreshments afterwards. There was some informal discussion about the possibility of setting up a Yoga Group in my home, and a number of women expressed an interest in this. That would be a very nice outcome from the effort which everyone made in coming together, and from the inspiration offered by our 3 young speakers.