

BUSYBODY FOR PEACE: The Life and Work of Nimalka Fernando of Sri Lanka

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2014 Women PeaceMakers Program



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A NOTE TO THE READER

In the following pages, you will find narrative stories about a Woman PeaceMaker, along with additional information to provide a deep understanding of a contemporary conflict and one person's journey within it. These complementary components include a brief biography of the peacemaker, a historical summary of the conflict, a timeline integrating political developments in the country with personal history of the peacemaker, and a question-and-answer transcript of select interviews during her time at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice.

The document is not intended necessarily to be read straight through, from beginning to end. Instead, you can use the historical summary or timeline as mere references or guides as you read the narrative stories. You can move straight to the question-and-answer transcript if you want to read commentary in the peacemaker's own words. The goal of this format is to reach audiences through multiple channels, providing access to the peacemaker's work, vision, lives and impact in their communities.

ABOUT THE WOMEN PEACEMAKERS PROGRAM

The Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice's (IPJ) Women PeaceMakers Program annually hosts four women from around the world who have been involved in human rights and peacemaking efforts in their countries.

Women on the frontline of efforts to end violence and secure a just peace seldom record their experiences, activities and insights — as generally there is no time or, perhaps, they do not have formal education that would help them record their stories. The Women PeaceMakers Program is a selective program for leaders who want to document, share and build upon their unique peacemaking stories.

Women PeaceMakers are paired with a Peace Writer to document in written form their story of living in conflict and building peace in their communities and nations. While in residence at the institute, Women PeaceMakers give presentations on their work and the situation in their home countries to the university and San Diego communities.

The IPJ believes that women's stories go beyond headlines to capture the nuance of complex situations and expose the realities of gender-based violence, thus providing an understanding of conflict and an avenue to its transformation. The narrative stories of Women PeaceMakers not only provide this understanding, but also show the myriad ways women construct peace in the midst of and after violence and war. For the realization of peace with justice, the voices of women — those severely affected by violent conflict and struggling courageously and creatively to build community from the devastation — must be recorded, disseminated and spotlighted.¹

BIOGRAPHY OF A WOMAN PEACEMAKER —
Nimalka Fernando

Nimalka Fernando of Sri Lanka is a prominent human rights defender, lawyer and activist with over 30 years of peacemaking experience. She is a co-chair of South Asians for Human Rights and the president of the International Movement against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism (IMADR) — an organization dedicated to eliminating discrimination and racism, forging international solidarity among discriminated minorities, and advancing the international human rights system.

A Sinhala Christian woman in Sri Lanka, Fernando is of the majority ethnic community but a religious minority — giving her a unique perspective on the bloody conflict that has polarized communities across the island for decades. As a colleague of hers has written, “Through Ms. Fernando’s biography it is possible to register key social movements in Sri Lanka, in South Asia, and globally.”

Fernando first became involved in human rights work with the Student Christian Movement of Sri Lanka, and then the Movement for Inter-Racial Justice and Equality, which sparked in her an interest in law for social justice. The Voice of Women, the first feminist circle in Sri Lanka composed of professional and progressive women, further influenced Fernando as violence and political tensions continued to rise in the 1980s between the Sinhala government and Tamil separatists.

In frustration with the Sri Lankan legal system that failed to provide redress for egregious human rights abuses, Fernando moved into community development work and full-time activism — exposing her to severe repression by the state which viewed her as pro-Tamil. She was forced out of the country for a time.

While in exile, Fernando worked for the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development and became engaged in international advocacy at U.N. conferences and through networks working on minority rights. During the peace process mediated by Norway in the early 2000s, Fernando was involved in track-two negotiations and participated in the Tokyo Conference on Reconstruction and Development in Sri Lanka, while continuing her grassroots peacebuilding activities.

Fernando has been a founding member of several organizations, including a network of women’s organizations and activists committed to peacebuilding, known as Mothers and Daughters of Lanka. In 2011 she received the Citizen’s Peace Award from the National Peace Council of Sri Lanka. She continues to face repression and threats for her fervent calls for accountability for alleged war crimes committed during the war.

CONFLICT HISTORY — Sri Lanka

The population of Sri Lanka consists of a Buddhist Sinhalese majority, Hindu Tamils, and Tamil-speaking Muslims. The Sinhalese and Tamil ethnic groups migrated from India to the island more than 2,500 years ago, and each claims to have been the first to settle on the island. For a long time, both communities coexisted peacefully as stable kingdoms ruled by their own kings.

This began to change with the arrival of foreign colonists: the Portuguese in 1505, the Dutch in 1658, and finally the British in 1796. The British, in their colonial rule of the island, treated what had been two separate kingdoms as a single political-geographic entity, disregarding their past historical existence, as well as the cultural, linguistic and ethnic differences between Tamils and Sinhalese. With that, the seeds were sown for antagonism between the two groups.

In 1948 Sri Lanka (then known as Ceylon) achieved its independence from Britain through peaceful negotiations. Power was transferred from the British to the English-educated Sinhalese and Tamil elites. But Tamils, a minority in the population, feared that they would be discriminated against by the majority Sinhalese. The country's newly drafted constitution did not provide the hoped-for protection for the Tamil minority.

The majority government passed a number of laws that, in effect, marginalized the Tamils. The “Ceylon Citizenship Act” of 1948 required Tamils, if they wanted to be citizens with voting rights, to prove paternal ancestry in Sri Lanka for three generations, along with proof of income or property ownership. In 1956 the Sinhala Only Act was passed, establishing the Sinhalese language as the first and preferred language in commerce and education.

During the 1970s, the government implemented a preferential admissions system known as the “policy of standardization.” Ostensibly, it was an affirmative action program to help students from geographically disadvantaged areas — like the rural communities in the south — gain university admission. But the quota system it employed ended up limiting higher education for Tamil students. In the beginning, Tamils tried non-violent and parliamentary means to restore their rights and obtain a devolution of power. But their demands were consistently met by military repression.

In the 1970s a generation of Tamil youth emerged that believed their demands for equal opportunity would never be met by democratic means, and so turned to violence: the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). In one instance, the Tigers ambushed and killed 13 Sinhala soldiers on patrol near Jaffna, the largest city in the Northern Province. That led to anti-Tamil riots in the Sinhalese south in July of 1983, resulting in the massacre of more than 3,000 Tamils and the beginning of Sri Lanka's long civil war. After what became known as “Black July,” the Tamil quest for equality escalated into a demand for a separate Tamil state.

Between 1983 and 2009, civil war raged between the LTTE and government of Sri Lanka, with periods of ceasefires and peace talks. In mediated talks in 2002, an agreement was signed by both sides for a ceasefire, which lasted almost five years in spite of numerous violations on both sides. But all such agreements eventually collapsed.

In 2008, President Mahinda Rajapaksa began a military offensive aimed at achieving victory over the LTTE once and for all. In May of 2009, after the last LTTE-controlled areas were captured, victory was proclaimed.

However, there was no political solution to the conflict, and both the government and LTTE were accused of massive human rights violations in the last years of the war. The final few months were particularly brutal on the island.

Throughout the long conflict, the government employed its army, navy and air force in the fight. The Tigers had only small arms and a willingness to use their bodies as human bombs. Most of the fighting took place in the Northern and Eastern Provinces. Hundreds of thousands of Tamils were displaced, with both sides unable — or unwilling — to provide adequate security, food, water and shelter, which resulted in a humanitarian crisis of epic proportions.

Since the conflict ended, many of the Tamils displaced by the war have yet to return to their homes and still live in squalid camps. The government has made it difficult for NGOs to provide humanitarian support. Human rights abuses continue, along with attacks on lawyers, journalists, human rights defenders and aid workers. Alleged insurgents, including child soldiers — who had been detained during the war by the government without charge or access to legal representation — are still unaccounted for.

Facts and Figures from the 26 Years of Civil War²

- More than 100,000 people were killed.
- Tens of thousands of security forces are still deployed in the country's north, and there are reports of widespread human rights abuses and repressive policies by the majority Sinhalese government.
- The military says there are about 4,000 suspected militants still at large.
- Hundreds of thousands of civilians were displaced during the war. Most have since returned home, although an estimated 90,000 were still uprooted within the country in May 2014, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre says.
- Another 120,000 are sheltering in other countries, according to the UNHCR.
- A UN-appointed panel said it had found “credible evidence” that war crimes had been committed by both sides. The panel estimated in a 2011 report that about 40,000 Tamil civilians were killed, mostly by the military. The government has consistently denied allegations that it targeted civilians, estimating that only 7,000 people died, and it refused to let the panel into Sri Lanka as it prepared its report.
- The panel also accused the Tigers of forcing trapped civilians to fight, using them as human shields and shooting people who tried to escape — allegations the LTTE denied.

- The UN Human Rights Council in 2014 began investigating the alleged war crimes, saying the Sri Lankan government had failed to do so properly.

The JVP, Marxism and the Collective Farm Movement

In April of 1971, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (People’s Liberation Front, or JVP) staged an armed struggle to overthrow the government. The movement, spearheaded by a self-proclaimed Marxist leader, Rohana Wijeweera, consisted mainly of Sinhalese Buddhist youth disillusioned with the country’s socioeconomic policies.

Unemployment and economic inequalities played a large role in attracting members to the JVP. Once there, they began receiving classes in Marxism that strengthened their belief in the need for revolution.

Among the principles underpinning Marxism is the belief in the creation of a society based on cooperation and the free distribution of goods and services. Marxism also recognizes the profound inequalities and injustices that separate the classes, and works to eliminate those inequalities through what it calls a class struggle.

The 1971 uprising, quickly suppressed by the government, nonetheless created turmoil in Sri Lanka’s national politics. According to available official figures, at least 5,000, probably more, died in the insurrection. Unofficial figures contend that nearly 25,000 Sinhalese youths could have been killed.

The JVP was subsequently proscribed by the regime, and by 1972 most of its members had been killed, imprisoned, sent to work camps or had given up on the cause. The JVP would re-emerge in later years — both as a political party in the democratic system and as a radical group.

In the ‘70s, some of those JVP members would find their way to the collective farms that were sprouting up in Sri Lanka. The Devasarana Collective Farm stands out as an example. The 14-acre farm was founded by a priest from the Church of Ceylon. It was set up as a place where people could live and earn a livelihood. But it was also envisioned as a way of building a new society on a socialist foundation — a kind of back-to-the-garden utopia where a balanced life of meditation, work, learning and recreation could be lived in cooperation with others. The farm welcomed people of different religious traditions and gave them a space in which to dialogue, side by side.

Politics

When Sri Lanka gained its independence from Britain in 1948, it had an educated electorate aware of its voting rights and the concept of majority rule. The rule of law was well established, as was the political party system. The United National Party (UNP) was the foremost party of the time. The country had a written constitution, a Parliament and a president popularly elected to a six-year term as the chief executive.

In 1956, the UNP, which had been in power for eight years, lost the election to Sirimavo Bandaranaike. Her Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)-led coalition came into power on the promise to make Sinhala the national language. This upset the country's minorities, the Tamils in the north especially. And the seeds for the separatist war in Sri Lanka were sown.

The two dominant parties during 50 years of independence have been the UNP (conservative) and the SLFP (socialist -left, and more recently center-left). The two parties have alternated in positions of power for half a century, with the UNP heading the government from 1948 to 1956, 1965 to 1970, and 1977 to 1994. An SLFP-led coalition government was in power from 1956 to 1965, 1970 to 1977, and since 1994 as a coalition called the Peoples Alliance (PA).

A short time before the end of the first term of the PA in 2000, the LTTE attempted — via a bomb blast — to assassinate the president of Sri Lanka, Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga. She was injured but survived, and her party was elected for a second term. In the years that followed, the PA had a very difficult period in government because of the financial and political pressures generated by the escalation of the armed conflict with the LTTE.

In August 2005, the Supreme Court ruled that presidential elections would be held in November of that year, resolving a long-running dispute on the length of President Kumaratunga's term. The SLFP nominated Mahinda Rajapaksa as its candidate; the UNP picked the former Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe as its standard bearer. Rajapaksa was elected president with 50.29 percent of the votes. He was re-elected for a second term in office in January 2010.

Mistrust of the government continues to grow, as it had throughout the civil war. According to one source: "Political violence has posed a serious challenge to the existing socio-economic order and the political institutions of the country. Therefore, successive governments have more often ruled the country under the draconian emergency regulations. The state has also used brutal counter-violence strategies to neutralise and discredit its opponents. It has also used material incentives to get groups and factions of its opponents to side with the state. Generally, the state makes use of supremacist or chauvinist ideologies to divide and distract the people."³

The Women's Movement and Human Rights

Even though women in Sri Lanka have been allowed to vote since 1931, the nation elected the first-ever woman prime minister in contemporary history in 1960, and women have had access to free public education since 1945, their participation in decision-making through local and national legislative bodies remains minimal. Though the principle of equality of the sexes is spelled out in the country's constitution, the social climate is still influenced by myths, prejudices, traditions and behavioral norms that have worked together to keep women "in their place" and deny them full participation in the social, political and economic life of the country.

The fact that the literacy rate for women in Sri Lanka consistently remains near 90 percent has helped in the spread of ideas about women's rights. The formation of women's groups has also played a key role in furthering the cause of gender justice.

In the early stages of the women's movement in Sri Lanka in the 1970s, groups such as the Women's Action Committee had varied goals ranging from trade unionism, demands for civil liberties, equal opportunity in the workplace, equal pay for women in the plantations, and maternity benefits.

But a fundamental shift occurred in the late 1980s and early '90s. At that time Sri Lanka was in a state of crisis, rocked by JVP violence and the ensuing government crackdown. With disappearances rampant, tens of thousands killed and even more displaced, women's issues such as sexual harassment, abortion, domestic violence and access to safe contraception were put on hold, as women's groups — like the Mothers and Daughters of Lanka — took up the cause of human rights and a political solution to the country's ethnic war. That larger focus continues to define the women's movement for many of its members today, though the movement encompasses a range of outlooks, methods and participants.

INTEGRATED TIMELINE

Political Developments in Sri Lanka and *Personal History of Nimalka Fernando*

- 3rd c. BC** Tamils begin migrating from India to the island of Sri Lanka.
- 16th-18th c. AD** European influence takes the form of Portuguese, Dutch and English colonialism on the island. It is known as Ceylon while under British rule.
- 1948** Ceylon gains full independence.
- 1953** *Nimalka Fernando is born in Colombo to Esther and Tracy.*
- 1956** Solomon Bandaranaike is elected prime minister and makes Sinhala the sole official language. Tamil parliamentarians protest new laws that discriminate against the ethnic group, and more than 100 Tamils are killed during demonstrations.
- 1958** Hardline Sinhalese turn violent against Tamils across the country, leaving more than 200 dead and thousands displaced.
- 1959** Bandaranaike is assassinated and is succeeded by his widow, Sirimavo, who is elected in 1960, becoming the first female prime minister in modern history.
- Nimalka begins her schooling at Bishop’s College in Colombo.*
- 1971** Students and activists lead a Sinhalese Marxist uprising in the form of the People’s Liberation Front, or JVP.
- Nimalka learns of her cousin’s involvement with the JVP.*
- 1972** The name of the country is changed from Ceylon to Sri Lanka, and Buddhism is the favored religion, further marginalizing the Tamil minority.
- 1976** The rebel group the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) is formed.
- 1977** *Nimalka becomes secretary general of the Student Christian Movement (SCM), and begins her involvement with the NSSP, the New Equal Society Party.*
- 1978** *Nimalka travels with SCM youth to Jaffna. Through her friend, Ranjani Thiranagama, she begins to realize the discriminatory impact that the government’s policy of standardization has on Tamils.*
- The Prevention of Terrorism Act becomes law.

- Nimalka enters Law College to become an attorney.*
- 1980 *Nimalka marries a medical student she met through SCM.*
- 1982 *With her husband, Nimalka becomes increasingly active in the NSSP and forms a friendship with its leader, Vasudeva (Vasu) Nanayakkara.*
- Nimalka pioneers the formation of the Women’s Action Committee.*
- 1983 In what became known as “Black July,” 13 soldiers are killed in an ambush by the LTTE. Anti-Tamil riots follow, with several hundred killed. This is often considered the start of the civil war.
- 1984 *Nimalka’s son, Kanishka, is born.*
- Nimalka becomes director of the Development Commission of the National Christian Council, and in that role she starts a collective farm for women in the rural community of Ranna.*
- 1987 The Indo-Sri Lanka Accord is signed, granting more power to Tamils in areas of the north and east. It also establishes the Indian Peace Keeping Force, which was to enforce the ceasefire and disarm the LTTE. The NSSP supports the accord.
- Nimalka and her family come under threat because of their connection to the NSSP. After their home is attacked, they flee to India for one month.*
- 1989 *Nimalka founds Mothers and Daughters of Lanka, a coalition of women’s organizations to fight against political violence.*
- Under continuing threats for her political views and with her marriage in trouble, Nimalka accepts a position in Malaysia as regional coordinator for the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law, and Development. She and her son leave Sri Lanka and live in Malaysia for the next four years.*
- Ranjani Thiranagama, Nimalka’s friend and a human rights activist in the north, is killed by the LTTE.*
- 1990 The Indian Peace Keeping Force leaves the island after continued fighting with the LTTE in the north.
- The LTTE expels all Muslims from the northern areas.

- 1991** Former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi is assassinated by the LTTE in retaliation for the decision to send the Indian Peace Keeping Force to Sri Lanka.
- 1993** President Ranasinghe Premadasa is assassinated by the LTTE in a suicide bombing in the capital of Colombo.
- 1994** Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga becomes president and starts peace talks with the LTTE.
- Nimalka becomes president of the Movement for Inter-Racial Justice and Equality.***
- 1995** ***Nimalka and her husband divorce.***
- 1997** ***Nimalka becomes president of the International Movement against All Form of Racism and Discrimination (IMADR).***
- 1999** President Kumaratunga loses vision in her right eye in an assassination attempt by an LTTE suicide bomber.
- 2001** LTTE attack the international airport in Colombo, damaging half of the fleet of planes of Sri Lankan Airlines.
- 2002** February — A ceasefire agreement is reached between the government and LTTE.
- Nimalka and Vasu travel to Jaffna to celebrate the ceasefire with their friend, Saroja.***
- 2003** LTTE pulls out of peace talks.
- 2004** December — The Indian Ocean tsunami, caused by a powerful quake off the coast of Indonesia, kills more than 30,000 people in Sri Lanka and devastates western coastal communities.
- With IMADR, Nimalka coordinates relief and livelihood efforts for victims and those displaced by the tsunami.***
- 2005** November — Mahinda Rajapaksa is elected president.
- Nimalka meets with President Rajapaksa at Temple Trees, his official residence in Colombo.***
- 2006** October — Peace talks fail.

- 2008** January — The government officially pulls out of the 2002 ceasefire agreement and vows to defeat the LTTE militarily.
- 2009** January — The Sri Lankan military captures the strategic town of Kilinochchi, the LTTE's administrative headquarters. Thousands of civilians are trapped between the two sides.
- Lasantha Wickrematunga, a prominent journalist and editor is assassinated. He was an outspoken critic of the government.
- Nimalka joins with members of the Platform for Freedom Party to give a press conference about the conditions at the internally displaced peoples camp in Vavuniya.***
- March — Karuna, a former LTTE leader, becomes minister of national integration and reconciliation. The UN High Commission for Human Rights accuses the government military and the LTTE of war crimes.
- May – The Tigers are defeated by the Sri Lankan military and the leader of the Tigers is killed. The LTTE says it will lay down its arms.
- 2010** January — Rajapaksa is again elected president.
- 2011** ***Nimalka receives the Citizens Peace Award from the National Peace Council of Sri Lanka.***
- 2012** In a resolution passed by the UN Human Rights Council, Sri Lanka is urged to investigate war crimes that may have occurred in the last few weeks of the war. The government refuses.
- Nimalka faces ongoing death threats for her support of the resolution in the Human Rights Council.***
- 2013** November — Amidst controversy, Sri Lanka hosts the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. Several leaders boycott the meeting because of Sri Lanka's human rights record.
- Nimalka speaks out in support of human rights for sex workers. Threats on her life continue.***
- 2014** August — Rajapaksa refuses to cooperate with a UN delegation investigating war crimes during the civil war.
- September — Nimalka is selected as a 2014 Woman PeaceMaker at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice at the University of San Diego.

**NARRATIVE STORIES OF THE LIFE AND WORK OF
NIMALKA FERNANDO**

The Rise and the Fall

Nimalka tossed and turned on the thin mattress of her wooden bed. In the semi-darkness, she watched the shadows cast from the kerosene lamp in her parents' bedroom flicker on the cinder-block walls of the room where she slept. Wide-eyed, she listened.

Tracy and Esther, her parents, were arguing over money. Again. As they always did when the bill for their daughter's private school tuition was about to come due.

"I went to public school. What's the big deal if Nimalka does too?" Tracy snapped.

"No! Our daughter will *not* go to public school. She'll continue to go to Bishop's College!" Esther insisted, her voice uncharacteristically shrill.

Frail and pretty, Esther rarely insisted on anything. When Tracy occasionally bet — and lost — half his paycheck at the race track, she held her tongue. When he and his friends sat under the mango trees in the backyard talking and drinking *arrack*, a brew made from the sap of coconut flowers, the next morning she was the one who went outside to pick up the empty bottles. When Tracy dictated that his beautiful wife never, ever, leave the house unchaperoned, Esther waited patiently for an old uncle to accompany her to the market or bring back for her things like rice, lentils and the spices she learned to use in her cooking because the man she married loved them.

On most family matters, Esther seemed willing to acquiesce, except when it came to Nimalka's education. Their precocious little girl, their firstborn, who had finally come into their lives a full decade after Esther and Tracy wed, would attend Bishop's College for girls, an Anglican institution, and the best primary and secondary school in Colombo. Esther was adamant about that. And everyone — friends, neighbors and nearby aunts — knew it.

Through the chatter of those aunties who lived just up the road, Nimalka eventually learned the story of how her parents had met, married and come to live in what everyone knew as "the poor part of town."

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For a while in his younger days, the story went, Tracy had lived the life of a rich playboy. His father, the town's tailor, had made a small fortune sewing uniforms for the British army when Ceylon (as Sri Lanka was called then) was a British crown colony. The old man died a few years after British rule ended in 1948, and Tracy and his brother enjoyed the high life for a while, before gambling away much of their inheritance.

When reality set in, Tracy found himself having to move into a narrow four-room house on Muhandiram Road in Colombo — a humble row home with no electricity, no indoor plumbing, lattice for windows, and scant space for things like his tap shoes and cowboy hats, mementos from his moneyed past.

He took a job at the local hospital, initially as a common laborer, and later, drawing on his tailoring background, as a corsetiere — a worker skilled in the creation of supportive garments for patients. The impoverished neighborhood he now lived in bordered on a much better part of town. There, Esther’s father served as the driver for the well-connected and well-to-do Bandaranaike family, who would later give Sri Lanka two of its prime ministers.

Growing up, Esther lived with her family on the Bandaranaike compound, amidst its swing sets and manicured gardens, imported toffees, and toilets that flushed. The Bandaranaike children regarded Esther as a convenient playmate and often included her in their outdoor games. Esther’s older brother, Dick, struck up a friendship with Tracy in those public spaces where the games of the younger kids from both neighborhoods spilled into streets, blurring the edges of class distinctions. Tracy was introduced to Esther through her brother. But the couple came to love and choose each other on their own.

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Many mornings as a child, Esther watched as the Bandaranaike girls in their Bishop’s College uniforms happily headed off to school in the back seat of the car her father was driving. As Esther saw it, opportunity and upward mobility wore a pleated white frock, ankle socks, and a necktie the color of a bishop’s vestments.

An expensive school like Bishop’s College was out of reach for the young Esther, but she vowed that if she ever married and had a daughter, she would find a way to send her there.

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Now as her parents’ voices grew louder, Nimalka buried her head under her pillow. She prayed their argument would turn out as it had every school year before — with her father hunched over the Singer sewing machine in the corner of the back room of their little house, a row of pins pressed between his lips, adding the finishing touches to another white frock, a size larger than last year’s, but identical, as always, to the one worn by the “young ladies” of Bishop’s College.

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For Nimalka, the half-mile trip each weekday morning to Bishop’s was long, in more ways than one. Many of her classmates arrived in handsome Jeeps and shiny sedans, dropped off by their families’ hired drivers. “Tah!” she’d hear the girls call, carefree and confident, as they slid out of their backseats and skipped off to class.

Nimalka walked to school, accompanied by her old uncle, both of them side-stepping the mangy stray dogs that frequented their neighborhood, each of them careful to avoid the puddles from the communal outdoor spigots where families they knew came to bathe. On those days the journey between two worlds seemed interminable.

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Nimalka knew all too well the cost of her schooling — not just in rupees, but in the amount of tension it created in her home. Determined to make her education worth the heated words her parents exchanged about it, she resolved to always do her best. She would make her mark in studies and extracurricular activities like drama, debate and the Student Christian Movement. She would fulfill her mother's hopes. She would make her parents proud.

Early on, Nimalka figured out that the only way for someone from her social strata to fit in at Bishop's College was to stand out. And stand out she did, year after year, earning the highest grades in her classes, winning awards, and often getting tapped by teachers for coveted positions of responsibility: class prefect, hall and recess monitor, and in her final year, Head Girl — the Bishop's College equivalent of student-body president.

Faculty members, including the principal, seemed to sense in her the qualities of a leader. They went out of their way to see to it that the girl from Muhandiram Road was given opportunities to grow.

Nimalka became so respected among her fellow students that some, but not all, of her rich classmates chose not to mock the way she sometimes mispronounced the English she was learning there — words and phrases they already knew from home. A few were even willing to forgive her for the times she turned them in for hair-ribbon infractions when she was a class monitor.

Fewer still took the unexpected step of inviting Nimalka to their homes to help them with homework, study for tests, and every once in a while, celebrate a birthday. But Nimalka, too ashamed to let them see where she lived, never reciprocated.

“Just drop me off here,” she'd mumble, blocks from Muhandiram Road whenever their drivers were enlisted to take her home.

The differences between the school's haves and have-nots mirrored the social divide that was widening at that time throughout Sri Lanka. Trying to navigate that terrain left the young Nimalka feeling confused and conflicted — never more so than on those days when the school's Girl Guides, one of the many campus organizations Nimalka joined, were scheduled to visit Colombo's poor as part of the school's mission of Christian outreach.

“If you'd like, Nimalka, you can carry this today,” the teacher in charge of the Guides said, handing her a basket filled with fresh eggs. Once a month, the students from Bishop's College brought eggs they'd purchased for the purpose of feeding families who couldn't afford them.

The group set out from the gates of the College, giddy at the prospect of getting out of class to do good works in the nearby community. But with each step, Nimalka felt a mounting panic. Would this be the day this outing led them all to the homes of her aunties? Or worse, to her own front door? Would she soon find herself in the strange position of distributing eggs, meant for the poorest of the poor, to her own mother?

“Dear Jesus, please don't let that happen,” she prayed.

And as if in answer, she heard the teacher lightly say, “Come along. This way, girls,” and purposefully re-direct the group toward the streets below Muhandiram Road.

When they arrived at the place where the women of that neighborhood gathered each morning to fetch water and share gossip, the Girl Guides were too caught up in the moment to catch what the women murmured to each other when they saw Nimalka.

“Why, it’s Tracy’s daughter, isn’t it?”

The women smiled knowingly at Nimalka. Meeting her eyes, some of them held her hands in theirs longer than it took to give them the eggs. And their honest appreciation of this small gift touched her in a deeper way, as well. Like the co-conspirators they had just become, they whispered to Nimalka before she left, “Tell your parents we’re proud of you.”

It was a feeling Nimalka — obeyer of rules, doer of homework, and wholehearted believer in the institution of the Church — lived for. But no one who knew her during her final term at Bishop’s would have guessed that feeling was soon to end.

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As Head Girl, Nimalka could have been paired with one of the old married priests for the job of selecting the readings and hymns for the week. In the world of Bishop’s College, working with the clergy in that way was as much of a privilege for the school’s student leader as it was a task. But instead of meeting with the gray-haired pastor, Nimalka found herself sitting across the table from Father X, a single priest in his early 30s recently assigned to the school. And at 18, Nimalka couldn’t help but notice the way his broad shoulders filled out his cassock. Or how an errant strand of his coal-colored hair fell across his forehead when he leaned over the hymnal.

“For the entrance hymn, I like ‘As We Are Gathered,’ or maybe ‘Arise to Greet the Lord of Light.’ What do you think, Nimalka?”

Not hearing an answer, Father X looked up from the index of his hymnal.

“Nimalka?”

Startled from her reverie, Nimalka laughed shyly.

“I’m sorry. What did you say, Father?”

The young priest smiled. One more feature Nimalka would add to her growing list of things she liked about him.

Because of their roles in the school community, they worked together often in those months when Nimalka prepared for the exams that would soon mark the end of her coursework at Bishop’s College and open the door, she hoped, for her to study medicine and become a doctor.

An undercurrent of mutual attraction coursed through the hours they spent together. Romantic relationships between students and priests were strictly forbidden. But there was nothing that said Nimalka and Father X couldn’t have lively conversations about all sorts of things — from the meaning of life and the role of religion to the latest Bollywood movies they both wanted to see.

With a doctorate in theology, he challenged her to think about scripture in new ways. With her quick wit, she made him laugh.

Secretly, she was smitten. But it wasn't until after she was officially no longer a student at Bishop's College that Father X confessed in a letter the feeling was mutual.

He came to the house. Met her parents.

“He's a good catch,” Esther trilled, “especially for a family like ours!”

“I can't put my finger on it,” Tracy grumbled, “but there's something about that guy I don't like.”

Father X proposed. Nimalka accepted. A December wedding date was set with the bishop. Small-town gossip heated up around the couple, fueled by sightings of them stealing kisses at the cinema or meeting up near his apartment. Gossips clucked their tongues and leapt to nasty conclusions about “that goody-goody Fernando girl,” assumptions they were only too eager to share with their neighbors as if they were facts.

Then, as quickly as Nimalka and Father X had become “an item,” their relationship ended. Father X simply stopped coming over. Didn't write. Didn't call. Dropped out of sight. Never said why.

The rumor mill again went into overdrive, but soon the real truth emerged. Father X, it was learned, was more of a predator than a priest, more of a cad than a cleric. Nimalka was not the first young woman he'd preyed upon with empty promises.

Nimalka was devastated. And she felt betrayed — not just by a man, but by the church he represented, the very institution that had guided, sustained, and in many ways defined her from the time she was a little girl.

For so long she had tried hard to please, to do what was expected of her. But now, because of her misplaced faith in a man of the cloth, her reputation had been sullied; her dear parents, shamed. In the past, Nimalka likely would have turned to prayer for comfort; that day she reached for the bottle of Panadol on her parents' dresser and swallowed more pills than anyone should.

“Wake up! Wake up!” her mother pleaded when she found her, shaking Nimalka as hard as she could. It would be hours later in the hospital before her daughter opened her eyes again. And when Nimalka did, her view of the world and her own role in it had already begun to change.

The Gospel According to Marx

For the Fernando family, Sundays had always been special. It was the day when Tracy, Esther and Nimalka walked together to St. Michael and All Angels Church, smiling and greeting those neighbors who were also on their way to Mass. Esther, in the simple sari she'd hand-washed the day before. Tracy, in clean cotton trousers, just this side of threadbare. Nimalka, in the latest frock her father had sewn for her.

Seeing the three of them together, an outsider might have thought Nimalka didn't quite fit in. Tracy made a point of his little girl looking especially stylish for church. What the family lacked in money for clothes, Tracy made up for in creativity at his sewing machine. With one of his designs, he attached fresh cherries to the front folds of a pink frock he'd labored over.

At first Nimalka refused to wear it, but then she relented, feeling she had no choice but to make her daddy happy, hold her head high, and act as if everyone in the congregation knew that wearable fruit was, in fact, a fashion statement.

No matter what she was wearing, Nimalka loved attending services at St. Michael's. The church offered separate Masses for the three communities it served — English-speaking, Sinhala and Tamil. Sunday mornings found Nimalka and her parents at the 9 o'clock service, the one said in Sinhalese.

The church itself was everything the homes on the street where Nimalka lived were not. Grand. Imposing. Beautiful. A massive Gothic structure with tall curved windows gracing the granite masonry of its walls. And inside, a long and lofty nave bordered on both sides by a row of wide archways. Nimalka loved sitting in the pews of polished teak. Or kneeling before a larger-than-life statue of the Blessed Virgin in flowing robes, bluer than the sea. Or receiving Holy Communion at a rail that looked to be made of gold. There was a richness to the experience of Mass at St. Michael's that went beyond the spiritual.

When the harmonies of the choir blended with the notes from the pipe organ, Nimalka closed her eyes and — for as long as the hymn lasted — left this earth. Compared to where she lived, St. Michael's was heaven.

Sunday after Sunday, she heard portly priests in satin vestments expound on the messages of Christ that came through the Scriptures. "Blessed are the poor," the parishioners from Nimalka's tattered world were told.

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But after her affair with Father X, Sundays were never the same. Nimalka stopped going to Mass, the ritual that had been so central to her life in the faith. Yet she continued to open the Bible that rested on the table in her room, still hoping it held answers for a young woman who had made a big mistake. Still trusting there was a God — a God who would be with her as she tried to figure out what to do with the rest of her life.

In those early post-priest days, Nimalka decided to forego college, dropped the idea of becoming a doctor, stopped caring what her busybody neighbors thought or said. And spent most days trying to

avoid the disapproval in her aunties' eyes and the disappointment in her parents'. The girl whom everyone at Bishop's thought "Most Likely to Succeed" felt herself adrift.

"For this I paid all that tuition?" she heard her father complain.

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A knock on the door echoed through the Fernando's too-quiet house. Nimalka shuffled over to answer it.

"Audrey!" she said, with an enthusiasm that had eluded her in the weeks since her trip to the hospital. "Come in!"

The two young women knew each other from Nimalka's involvement with the Student Christian Movement while she was at Bishop's College. Audrey Rebera was secretary general at the main office of SCM, and she often coordinated meetings and field work with students of the Bishop's branch of that organization.

Audrey knew where Nimalka lived. Knew, and didn't care.

They talked for a while, the way good friends who have missed each other do. Then Audrey said, "There's a meeting of the Student Christian Movement next Wednesday evening. I'll come over and we'll go together, OK?"

More like an older sister than just a friend, Audrey knew Nimalka's secrets and understood her hopes and hurts. She had also heard the vicious talk around town about what happened, the street-corner debates about the scandal:

"Nimalka had it coming to her," some said. "She should have known her place."

"Poor Father X. He was one of my favorite priests. If only he hadn't let himself be lured by that Fernando girl, the bishop wouldn't have transferred him."

And so it went. If anyone had been keeping score when it came to public opinion, Nimalka's side was losing.

With this visit, Audrey set out to do what she could to bring her friend back into the life Nimalka had recently left. A life of active commitment to Christianity — not through a parish, but through the Student Christian Movement.

"Wednesday night? Yes, I think that's OK."

Just the thought of being with lots of people her own age again — talking, laughing and snacking on the Chinese rolls someone was always sure to bring to meetings like that — cheered Nimalka.

She glanced over at her mother. Esther nodded. With all the gossip that still swirled around their daughter, neither Esther nor Tracy would have approved of Nimalka heading out to an evening

meeting on her own or, worse yet, with a man who wasn't a relative. But Audrey, whom they knew, and liked, was OK.

“Just be home by 9,” Tracy harrumphed.

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SCM meetings began to take more and more of Nimalka's time. Evenings. Afternoons. Weekends. Her mornings now were spent working as a classroom aide to the kindergarten teacher at Bishop's College, a job she had taken at the urging of the principal. Ms. Jayasoonya had seen Nimalka come into her own at Bishop's; now she was concerned about the detour the school's former Head Girl had taken. The job at the kindergarten didn't pay much, but at least Nimalka was gainfully employed.

In the mornings, she helped 5-year-olds cut and paste and color between the lines. But much of the rest of her focus was given to the SCM. Some meetings were at the YMCA, others at school halls around Colombo. Nimalka looked forward to entering those rooms and getting drawn into the spirited discussions that began opening her eyes to a radical new way of viewing her faith and interpreting the Gospel.

She also started attending meetings of the Christian Workers Fellowship — a group that not only claimed Karl Marx drew many of his socialist ideas from the Bible, but also set out to prove it.

Much of what Nimalka was hearing in both groups touched a chord within her. At the end of the day, when she would turn over in her mind the discussions she had been part of, she'd hear again the passion in her comrade's youthful voices:

“Is charity the way forward for the church? Are soup kitchens really the answer?”

“You say you're against violence? Poverty is violent! It kills people without using arms. But they end up dead just the same.”

“The church's work with the poor is only charity. The institutional church is too set in its ways to question the system that produces the poverty. We need to do that. We must!”

Nimalka thought of her own neighborhood and community. Parents who struggled to put food on the table. Children whose only pair of shoes had cardboard soles. The women from the streets below Muhandiram Road who continued to gather every day to wash and fetch water from a single spigot.

And she came to a conclusion that would guide her steps in the years ahead: *No, the problem of poverty won't ever be solved by simply giving someone an egg.*

Pilgrimage to Change

The red double-decker bus chugged through the busy streets of Colombo, coating the coconut trees with a thin layer of exhaust. In the glow of streetlights, thick swarms of insects swirled. The fishmongers had gone home, the city's over-sized crows taken flight. Beyond the closed stalls in the marketplace, the homeless set out their cardboard mats for the night.

Riding the bus as much as she did, shuttling between work and meetings, Nimalka got her money's worth from her monthly 5-rupee bus pass. She sometimes got time to think, too. On this day, her thoughts took her back to another trip, this one with her extended family in a different kind of bus four years earlier, in April of 1971, during her last term at Bishop's.

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The driver of the dingy green bus that Auntie Consy, the planner in the family, had rented from a local company lounged off to the side while Nimalka's family and extended family piled in with supplies for a week-long road trip: food, pots and pans, clothes, blankets, pillows. The kind of things campers pack.

The concept of a vacation was as foreign to the family as bell bottoms had earlier been to Sri Lanka. And Nimalka knew this trip would be nothing like the spring-break getaways her classmates bragged about. No fancy hotels. No afternoons lounging at a pool, sipping soft drinks. No airports, taxis or postcards from cities across the sea.

This was to be a serious pilgrimage to some of the holy places in Sri Lanka's remote regions. Esther was intending to offer prayers at those sacred spots for the success of Nimalka's final exams. Certain Christian churches were on the itinerary, but so were shrines from other faiths.

One of the aunts was married to a Buddhist. Another to a Muslim. At the start of the trip, everyone looked forward to sharing this rare sojourn that would take them all to a host of venerable destinations.

Nimalka wished her Uncle Nelson's family, who lived in the house next door to hers, could have come, too. But Auntie Consy, Tracy's brother's wife, had coordinated this trip with Tracy's side of the family, not Esther's. So Nimalka wouldn't get to share a seat with her favorite cousin, Sunil. When they were small, the two of them played together daily in the tiny backyard their houses shared. As they grew older, they often did their homework by the light of the same kerosene lamp. In spite of — or maybe because of — the fact they squabbled over things like who got the bigger slice of mango, they loved each other like brother and sister.

In the year that had just passed, Nimalka had seen less and less of Sunil. Her studies and Head-Girl responsibilities were keeping her busy. And something — Sunil wouldn't say what — was taking him away from home more and more in the evenings.

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Loaded up, windows down, the green bus turned onto Galle Road and headed out to the highway, its occupants excited to begin the pilgrimage. But on that spring day, they didn't know — few in Sri Lanka did — that it was revolution that was just around the corner.

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“Pack up! We've got to get back to Colombo,” Tracy shouted.

News had just reached Kataragama, the Hindu/Buddhist shrine where the family had stayed the night, that police stations in Sri Lanka's towns and rural areas were under siege by bands of armed insurgents.

The peace of the shrine hadn't been shattered by the gunfire and explosions thundering throughout the country, but the anxiety the news of the attacks had caused was palpable. And it grew even stronger when the group learned that a government curfew wouldn't allow them to leave.

When it was lifted the next day, the family surged into the bus with all their belongings. Tracy barked to the driver, “OK, let's go!” No one said much more the rest of the uncertain ride home.

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From behind the curtain that separated her room from her parents', Nimalka strained to hear their whispered conversations on the other side. In the hours since the bus brought them all safely back to Muhandiram Road, there had been lots of urgent talk in low tones at the Fernando house. Much of it between Tracy and Esther's brother, Nelson — Sunil's father.

By eavesdropping, Nimalka began to piece together what was going on — then and in the months before. Her cousin Sunil, in the evenings when he wasn't around, had apparently been attending local meetings of the socialist group called Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, the People's Liberation Front, or JVP — the organization claiming responsibility for the current insurrection. The same group that was now the target of a swift and brutal police crackdown.

Sunil's parents heard that the police had just taken away a young man in the neighborhood who in recent months had become a friend of their son. The authorities knew that that friend was a local leader in the JVP. Sunil's parents feared it wouldn't be long before their son's connection to him would lead to a knock on their door, as well.

At that point, they still weren't entirely sure that Sunil was a JVP member. But their suspicions were confirmed when his mother uncovered a stash of Marxist reading material in a suitcase in his room.

“Those books are evidence,” Nimalka heard her father hiss. “They've got to be destroyed!” Moments later, near a gulley at the edge of the backyard the two families shared, the glow from a hastily lit bonfire illuminated the fear for Nimalka's “brother” — and the country — that flickered across her father's face.

After dawn the next day, Nimalka watched her nervous mother hurry up the road to the Bandarnaike estate, the compound where Esther grew up. Worried that her nephew's name had

been given to the police by the young JVP leader now in their custody, Esther went to beg the patriarch of that family to use his influence with the authorities to keep Sunil — the grandson of the man who used to drive the Bandarnaikes everywhere — out of jail, or worse.

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With the April 5th insurrection and the days that followed, Nimalka began to see the lengths some — including Sunil — were willing to go to and the risks they were willing to take to bring about social and economic change in Sri Lanka. It wouldn't be long before Nimalka would also come to realize that her mother's rush up the road that spring morning only underscored how politically powerless "their kind" still were.

Talking the Talk

Grumblings about the selection of Nimalka Fernando to deliver the D. T. Niles Memorial Lecture at the 1977 Christian Conference of Asia began even before she strode onto the stage in Penang, Malaysia, speech in hand.

In spite of the fact she was well-credentialed — secretary general of the Student Christian Movement in Sri Lanka — some among the organization’s conservative hierarchy had raised objections to her giving that speech.

“I’ve heard she’s a Marxist! And people say she doesn’t even go to church. Is that the kind of youth leader we want speaking at our conference?!”

But the naysayers lost out to those who argued that the selection made a certain sense, given that D. T. Niles, noted theologian and an eminent leader in the CCA, had been from Sri Lanka. And besides, those who’d worked with Nimalka spoke highly of her leadership and commitment to the work of the Student Christian Movement.

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Standing at the podium, Nimalka looked out over the crowd. It was the first time she was speaking at an international gathering. And in the weeks leading up to it, back in her office in Colombo she had thought long and hard about what she would say.

The theme of the conference was “Jesus Christ in Asian Suffering and Hope.” Working on the speech with her friend Audrey, she wrote several drafts. None seemed quite right. Then she came up with an idea she believed would not only make the assembly sit up and listen, but would also be sure to get people talking.

Scanning the auditorium now, she took in the open faces of the hundreds of young people there, and the scowls of the many older clerics among them. Nimalka took a deep breath and began. She talked about what was going on in the wide world beyond the nice hotel where the conference was hosted. The poverty. The inequality. And the suffering both produced.

“I believe in the cross and the Christ,” she said. The clerics looked relieved. She paused. “But I also believe in the class struggle!” And she saw their expressions change again. Her subsequent criticism of the institutional church for its narrow focus on charity alone did nothing to win them back.

“And now,” she said, “I’ve invited some students to come up and share with us what the church means to them in the lands where they live.”

When that idea had come to her back in Colombo, she told Audrey, “The people who’ve invited me to speak see me as a representative of Christian youth. But I can’t possibly represent all the young people at the conference. I’m not from India. Or Australia. Or the Pacific Islands. I think it’s only right for me to ask students from those other countries to come up on stage and speak for themselves.”

Speak, yes. March up to the stage as the young man from the Maori tribe did — tattooed, bare-chested, in a loin cloth made of reeds and feathers, blowing on a horn made of wood and twine — well, that wasn't something Nimalka had envisioned when she'd reached out to him earlier about her plan. But she loved that he decided to appear before the group in his native dress, and loved even more the shocked look on the clerics' faces. And she appreciated how the young man's entrance made all-the-more-memorable what he had to say about the institutional church and its lack of response to the loss of the land of his people.

Nimalka's speech and the students' presentations challenged everyone there to see Jesus Christ as an activist for human rights, and to see His church as an agent for social change. Nimalka closed her speech with these words: "The church today is like a potted plant. To have an impact in our world, it needs to be planted in the soil."

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For Nimalka, those weren't just words. Through the Student Christian Movement in Sri Lanka during that time, she played a lead role in launching an experiment in communal farming and living — a collective in a rural area where economic opportunity was as scarce as chickens. And sometimes when she found herself there on the farm, bending over a fresh furrow, Nimalka would remember the standing ovation the students had given the message she had shared with them that day in Panang.

Walking the Walk

They called it “Ranbima” or “Golden Land.” A name that captured the hope those who chose to live and work on the collective farm felt for what they might achieve there together. That list came to include everything from self-reliance to interfaith harmony to a subtle sowing of the seeds for a peasant revolution they all believed had to happen.

Money for this SCM project had come from an outside grant. A suitable plot of land was researched and purchased. Word got around. Interested individuals — most of them young — stepped forward to be part of the Golden Land: Buddhists from Devasarana, a nearby ashram recently turned into a collective; JVP members from local farms the government had assigned them to after the failed insurrection; and a contingent of Christians from Colombo that included sons and daughters of the middle-class, as well as university students who put their studies aside for a chance to work the land and live the Gospel.

“If we’re going to fit in among the people there,” Nimalka heard her SCM colleagues in the city say, “we’ve got to de-class ourselves.” Even among the underprivileged in Sri Lanka at that time, there were class distinctions of sorts. And the rural poor were the poorest of all. To become part of that world, Nimalka would need to trade her frock for a sarong. Her shoes, for the most basic kind of sandals. And the plates and bowls she was used to at mealtimes, for lotus leaves.

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A three-hour bus ride with two transfers, plus a hefty hike, took Nimalka from Colombo to Ranbima on many weekends. With the cloth handbag that served as her suitcase, she brought with her little more than a toothbrush, a small packet of sweet-smelling powder (a “bourgeois” hold-over from home her friends on the collective teased her about), and every bit of her idealism.

Though the collective was sponsored by SCM, proselytizing wasn’t part of its purpose. In the evenings when the men and women would sometimes gather in the main house — one of three they’d built themselves from earthen “bricks” they’d dug from the land — talk of religion took a back seat to discussions of practical matters or politics. Typically, they were too tired to talk at all.

On those nights a faint Sinhala song from a transistor radio in the women’s “dorm” might drift on the air toward the river’s edge. Or the snores of exhausted men rumble across the rows of pumpkin they’d planted near the house they shared.

Whether someone was a Christian or a Buddhist, from the rural poor or the elite, a member of the JVP or a policeman’s daughter — at Ranbima none of that mattered. A shared commitment to a new way of living made them all equals.

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“Say, I’m having a little celebration tomorrow, would you by any chance like to join me?” one of the young women on the collective said to Nimalka on a day in late December. The 24th, to be exact. “I’d be happy to,” Nimalka said. “You must be Christian, yes?”

While she was working in the fields that day, Nimalka had been remembering the Christmas Eves she'd known as a child. It was the time of year that could make her sentimental for the church services she'd long ago renounced.

"I've got all the ingredients for what used to be my family's Christmas dinner," the woman told Nimalka. "A real feast! Come. You'll see."

As she walked to the communal kitchen the next day to meet her comrade for the special meal she'd been promised, Nimalka wondered what her own parents were doing at that moment. She pictured her mother turning juicy pieces of roast chicken in a pan resting on the hot stones of their kitchen stove. She imagined her father sitting at the table, reaching for salted biscuits and chunks of English cheese. For an occasion like Christmas, the Fernando family refused to be poor. Nimalka took for granted that's what every Christian family did that day, no matter where they lived.

"Look," Nimalka's friend said proudly. "Canned salmon!"

Canned salmon? thought Nimalka. *That's not much different than the dried fish we eat here every day!*

"And dal!"

Pureed lentils as the only side dish on a holiday like this? Really?

That's when Nimalka began to truly understand what it meant to grow up poor in an agricultural area of Sri Lanka, where 80 percent of the country's population lived. And the class struggle she had often talked about took on a larger meaning. That Christmas day on the collective brought home to Nimalka a keen awareness that if she stayed true to her convictions, life could very well ask her to give up even more than she already had.

Rajani

The issue of discrimination against Tamils never came up between Nimalka and Rajani Thiranagama when they first became friends in the mid-‘70s. The two had met through the Student Christian Movement at the University of Colombo where Rajani, a Tamil from Jaffna, was studying to become a doctor. With other medical students, including the man Nimalka would one day marry, Rajani often dropped by Nimalka’s SCM office in the YMCA.

With their shared commitment to the church and social justice, plus a love of good conversation and zest for life, the two young women struck up an easy friendship. Over lunches at the cafeteria in the “Y” or cups of black tea after a meeting or a play, they talked of many things: the failed JVP insurrection of 1971, the difficulties and disappointments at the Golden Land collective, their solidarity with the uprising known as the “Weerasoorya Struggle,” named after the student gunned down by police during an anti-government demonstration at the medical college of the University of Peradeniya.

But politics wasn’t all Nimalka and Rajani talked about. As girlfriends do, they also shared stories of their lives and families, or talked about the young men who sometimes joined them in the cafeteria or met them at the movies.

“I think he likes you,” Rajani, smiling, whispered to Nimalka about a certain medical student. Good friends, they could talk about anything and everything. Yet it wasn’t until an evening in Jaffna in 1978 that they took up the topic of discrimination against Tamils.

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They and several members of the SCM group from Colombo had traveled to Jaffna for a Christian youth workshop hosted at one of the Anglican schools. For several in the group, it was their first trip to the capital city of the country’s Northern Province. When they arrived, many of them probably wondered if they were still in Sri Lanka. Unfamiliar aromas of roasted curries, influenced by Indian cuisine and generously spiced with tamarind, wafted from family restaurants near the university. Instead of the traditional round *dagobas* of the Buddhist holy places in the south, Jaffna boasted Hindu temples characterized by ornate towers that soared above their entrances. To most newcomers from the south, street signs in Jaffna were indecipherable, written in a script unique to the Tamil language. The clipped intonations of the province’s mother tongue presented a sharp contrast to the sing-song cadences of Sinhalese. Even the palm trees were different.

Rajani was born and raised in Jaffna, in a nice middle-class neighborhood, where her family still lived.

“After the last session tomorrow, come over to my parents’ house for dinner,” Rajani said to the Colombo group. “My mother’s string hoppers are the best!”

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The group made its way from the dinner table out to the veranda that ran the length of Rajani’s childhood home, still commenting on how delicious those curly rice-batter pancakes had been.

With the night air soft as the scent of jasmine from the garden below, one by one, the young people from SCM sat down on the steps or the ground or got comfortable against the porch's pillars, settling in to continue conversations started over dinner.

"I'm telling you," Rajani said, "Tamil students are being systematically discriminated against. It's true! And Sri Lanka's policy of standardization is the reason!" Her pretty eyes blazing, she leaned forward, punctuating her words with a sweep of her hand and a shake of her head.

Nimalka had seen that kind of animated passion in her friend before, when it came to other issues.

"I'm not convinced of that," Nimalka countered, more than ready at that time to defend the government's policy of standardization, an affirmative action plan created with the stated intent of rectifying disparities between regional groups when it came to university enrollment and subsequent economic opportunity. "How can you say that standardization has brought about discrimination?"

You're a Tamil. Right? And you got into one of the best medical schools in the country! You can't deny either that in Sri Lanka today there are lots of doctors, lawyers and judges who are Tamil. In Colombo, nearly half of our SCM colleagues are Tamil too. Sorry, Rajani, but discrimination? I just don't see it."

As their debate continued, it grew more heated. From his armchair in the living room, Rajani's father looked up from the newspaper he was reading. Her mother stopped stacking dishes in the kitchen. The young people on the veranda exchanged anxious glances and searched for a way to break the tension that continued to mount between the two friends.

"Uh, what about other ways of achieving equality in Sri Lanka? Any thoughts about that?" someone finally interjected.

Nimalka and Rajani reluctantly backed off and let others carry the conversation for a while. They both listened as some of their colleagues argued for a parliamentary approach — social change through legal mandates. Others said that that particular path would be too little, too late, and too slow. Outright rebellion, they maintained, was the only way to bring about real and substantial change as swiftly as the disadvantaged needed it. And out of the corner of her eye, Nimalka noticed Rajani nodding in agreement.

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Decades later, Nimalka would think back to that night and often wish she knew then what she eventually came to know: For one, which of the two of them was, in fact, right about the effects of standardization. Nimalka wished she had also known that Rajani, who would join the LTTE — the Tamil Tigers — for a time, would one day renounce that rebel group and their violent tactics.

Nimalka wished she could have foreseen that the day would come when she and Rajani would advocate together on behalf of those brutalized by the country's war and those who fought it. And that, in collaboration with Rajani, she would meet with authorities from the Indian Embassy to seek justice for the atrocities committed against Tamil women by the Indian Peacekeeping Force in

Jaffna. Justice, they both believed, was worth the risks Rajani had taken to gather and document those victims' stories.

Through actions like that, Rajani would come to be known as a voice for the voiceless. But that evening on the veranda, Nimalka had no way of knowing that on a September day 11 years later, her outspoken friend would be silenced forever by an assassin's bullet as she biked from work, heading home to supper and bedtime stories with her two small children.

If only Nimalka had had that kind of foreknowledge of her friend's fate. Instead of the terse goodbye she said as they parted that night in Jaffna, Nimalka would have drawn Rajani close, called her "Dear Sister," and whispered two words — one Tamil, one Sinhalese — said more as a prayer than a familiar farewell: *Ayubowan-Vannakam. May your life be long.*

To Court and Beyond

Nimalka's argument with Rajani that evening in Jaffna ended in an uneasy stalemate. But back in Colombo, Nimalka kept returning to the points her friend had made, wondering if there might be something, after all, to the Tamil claim of institutionalized discrimination.

Determined to find out, she brought the matter to the attention of SCM and helped coordinate a research project that took her and a small team of students to the offices of officials, the reference sections of local libraries, and finally to the book-lined great room of the home of a former JVP leader who had become an academic.

"Here in this section," he said, pointing to a floor-to-ceiling bookcase packed with documents, history books and political texts, "I think you'll find what you're looking for."

Nimalka and the team set to work. With an internal report here, an old memo there, plus a growing list of irrefutable statistics, they came away convinced that Rajani was right. They saw for themselves that each year since standardization was introduced, a significant drop had occurred in the number of Tamil students accepted into universities. In spite of standardization being, supposedly, a way to level the playing field especially among the country's poor, the facts didn't lie: the net effect of that system was that a growing number of Tamils were being locked out of higher education and greater opportunity.

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With the facts and figures in hand, Nimalka, secretary general of the Student Christian Movement, set out to open members' eyes to the reality of state-sponsored discrimination against Tamils.

"Let's have a student conference on education in Sri Lanka," Nimalka suggested to her SCM colleagues. "I can share what I've learned about the impact of standardization on the system and Tamil community. At the very least, it could get people thinking, and, I hope, willing to challenge the government on this."

Ideas like that, needless to say, were not popular with those in power in Sri Lanka. And the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), passed in 1978, made SCM's support of a policy of fairness suspect. Not every Tamil belonged to the insurgent group known as the Tigers, but every Tiger was a Tamil.

Yet under Nimalka's leadership, the SCM continued to speak out on the issue of equal treatment under the law for the Tamil people and to pass resolutions to that effect within the organization. But because of the PTA, Nimalka found it harder and harder to draft those resolutions so they'd have some teeth, yet not give the authorities an excuse to shut SCM down for purported "ties with terrorists" or haul its key staff members off to jail.

"Can you help me with the wording of this?" she asked Mr. Pullenayagam, a respected attorney and former solicitor general, who lunched several times a week at the YMCA cafeteria. Back in his student days, he'd been a member of SCM. Now he often dropped by their headquarters at the Y to see what the organization was up to.

“Sure. Let’s have a look,” Mr. Pullenyagam answered. Like a kindly uncle, he was always willing to sit down with Nimalka to help her understand the law and how to stay within it in the current political climate.

A Tamil himself, he had lived with Sri Lanka’s ethnic and cultural undercurrents for more than 60 years, his insights into the dangers the fight against discrimination now posed were keen and heartfelt. “Tamil self-determination” had become a watchword in the evolving conflict. As events continued to play out, it became clear that that principle had the power not only to change lives, but also to end them.

“This is going to be a long struggle, Nimalka. If you want to play a significant role in it, you should become a lawyer.”

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Standing beside Mr. Pullenaygam, Nimalka bowed with folded hands to the middle-aged man and woman ready to take their seats in the chambers of Colombo’s Supreme Court.

The Tamil couple had made the journey from Jaffna, hoping to find out what had happened to their only child, their son. Along with several students, he’d been rounded up by the occupying Sri Lankan army near Jaffna University and taken away for questioning. Others in that group had been released, the couple had learned. But their boy never came home.

Nimalka knew the story. It was documented in the file she and Mangala, another attorney, had been working on under the direction of the two senior lawyers on the case: Mr. Pullenaygam and Mr. Chandrahasan. As a first-year attorney, Nimalka felt privileged to assist them in Sri Lanka’s highest court in their roles as the appointed representatives of the families of the disappeared.

A photo of the boy had been attached to the top page of that file: standard procedure in all such cases. Sitting in the law library where she often went to do her research, Nimalka sometimes found herself staring at those photos, wondering about the young people in them. Was Kumar someone’s big brother or favorite cousin? Did Amalraj have a sense of humor? A nickname? A best friend? A favorite song? Was Rajiv good at sports? A whiz at math? A budding artist?

As Mangala spoke in Tamil with the couple about what to expect from their time in court, Nimalka imagined what they had go through to get there. The father’s leathery face and hands told her he probably had to give up several days’ wages in the fields or on a fishing boat. The mother’s frayed sarong said they didn’t have much money to begin with. But still — like so many of the Tamil parents of the disappeared who were sure their sons had nothing to do with the Tigers — they had found a way to make the trip of nearly 200 miles to Colombo. Not because the court required them to be there, but because it was the only thing that offered any chance of finding out where the boy they loved, and lost, had been taken, and where he still might be.

The chief attorneys from both sides that day — the Sri Lankan Army’s and the Tamil parents’ — stepped up to the bench to confer with the judge. And Nimalka was quite sure this habeas corpus case would go the way so many others had gone, with the Army’s attorneys filing for an extension.

The next time the case was brought before the court, months down the road, it was likely the proceedings would end the same way. And the time after that, as well.

Nimalka watched Mr. Chandrahasan walk over to share this development with the parents. She saw the father's thin shoulders sag at the news and the mother's hands fumble for the dingy handkerchief tucked near the top of her sarong. The woman dabbed at her eyes and cheeks, but her tears wouldn't stop. Nimalka had to look away. She had seen it all too many times before.

She busied herself with gathering up the papers and the files spread across the counselors' table she shared with her colleagues, glimpsing once again the photo of the boy who, in all probability, would never be found. Above the rustle of those papers, she heard the muffled sobs of his mother. And though Nimalka was far from fluent in Tamil, she knew enough to understand the words his father cried: "Where is justice? Where?"

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"It's hard, I know, but we've got to keep trying," Mr. Pullenaygam said on several occasions after yet another disheartening day in court. "We must do what we can do."

Nimalka had learned so much from him, not just about the law but also what it means to be a decent human being in a compromised world. She agreed with him completely that we must do what we can do. But disillusioned by the maneuverings and machinations of the legal system itself, Nimalka began to feel she could do more good outside the confines of the court. And she vowed she would try.

Black July

After she stopped practicing law at the court in Colombo, Nimalka found new purpose through her work as a research officer at Voices for Women and, once again, through the church as the director of the development commission for the National Christian Council. But it was her activism in Nava Sama Samaja Pakshaya — the NSSP, a left-leaning party with deep Marxist roots — that filled her evenings and weekends and fueled her fervor for a more just Sri Lanka.

She was married now to a doctor, the medical student Rajani had introduced her to during her SCM days. For the most part, he shared Nimalka's political beliefs. And early in their relationship they were comrades as much as sweethearts.

Politics led them to the NSSP and a friendship with its charismatic national leader, Vasudeva Nanayakkara. They called him "Vasu"; the government called him "subversive" and "radical." And whenever it also dubbed him "Wanted," he'd either go into hiding or wind up in jail.

In July of 1983, life for Nimalka and her husband was complex and busy. Maybe too complex and too busy. Nimalka felt a gulf growing between her and the man she married, even as she felt the baby growing within her move.

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She was getting ready to leave the house for a meeting when the phone call came.

"Don't go out, Nimalka," her husband blurted.

"What?"

"Stay in the house. There's rioting going on out there, and it doesn't look good." He was calling from the hospital where he worked, a few bus stops from where they were living in a rented annex in a large house in Colombo 6, the area of town known as "Little Jaffna."

"Rioting?"

"You heard me. Stay inside."

There was something in his voice she hadn't heard before. She knew he could be abrupt, but she had never known him to sound afraid.

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With the rest of the household — Mary, the cook, plus the older couple who owned the complex, and their son — Nimalka headed out to the gate at the front of the house and saw her husband's warning confirmed. Flames were shooting up from the marketplace a few blocks away. Thick black smoke roiled into the blue.

There'd been an uneasiness in the air in recent days in the city. News had reached Colombo of an ambush by the Tamil Tigers that killed 13 Sinhala soldiers on patrol near Jaffna. It was decided at the highest levels in the government that all 13 be brought to Colombo's General Cemetery to be buried there with full military honors, rather than in the cemeteries of their home villages.

Because of the strong emotions the Tamil ambush evoked, authorities believed violence might erupt. Later, people would debate whether the choice to hold all the funerals in Colombo, in one place, was intended to facilitate crowd control or, in truth, meant to teach Tamils in Sri Lanka's largest city a lesson they would never forget.

A crowd started to gather at the cemetery to await the scheduled arrival of the fallen. But hours passed and it wasn't happening. Rumors flew. Anger smoldered. A procedural snafu, supposedly, had delayed the flight carrying the bodies. When the plane finally landed in Colombo, the crowd had grown to more than 8,000. And no one in it was in a good mood.

What had begun as a gathering of mourners turned into an ugly mob. Sri Lanka's long civil war was about to begin.

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After catching sight of the marketplace fires, Nimalka and the group hurried back inside. Over the next few days, curfews were imposed and fires raged on, unfought. A few times Nimalka ventured out again as far as the gate — never for long, but long enough to see and hear things she'd never thought she'd see nor hear. Sometimes neighbors joined her there.

“Why are they doing that?” the little boy from the Muslim family next door asked his mother. He was talking about the people running up the road, laughing and hooting as they carried off VCRs, TVs, lamps, armchairs, paintings, tables.

How does a parent explain looting? Nimalka wondered. How does a parent explain hate? Or madness?

Tamils in Colombo 6 and other sections of the city were being targeted for the “crime” of being Tamil. Their shops, torched. Their homes, plundered. Their loved ones beaten or raped or doused with kerosene and set aflame.

Mary, the cook, was the one who told Nimalka what had happened to the Tamil shoemaker — a man familiar to everyone at Nimalka's bus stop.

For years, sitting behind the wooden crate that served as his sidewalk shop, the shoemaker had a role in the larger community. People from every ethnic group left their shoes, slippers and sandals with him for repairs. Many mornings, waiting at the stop, Nimalka had seen him hunched over his humble workbench, tapping tiny nails to re-attach a sole or reaching for a jar of glue or polish.

Watching him work brought back memories for Nimalka of her father at his sewing machine.

Now, Mary said, the shoemaker's charred body marked the place where his wooden crate had been.

“He was my friend, Missy,” Mary wept.

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During the riots, the home where Nimalka and her husband lived opened its doors to Tamil individuals and families who needed a temporary place to stay until they could figure out where to go next. It wasn't without risk. If a mob suspected Tamils were inside a Sinhala home, that home too could go up in smoke, along with the people in it.

The homes and shops of the Tamils who huddled in the living room off Nimalka's annex had become the black ash that rained down on everything for days. Sinhala folks the Tamils had encountered for years in their places of business or on the bus or at the beach where their children played together — people the Tamils had always thought of as *people* — had inexplicably become inhuman.

But not all. While the riots raged, friends, churches and temples offered Tamils shelter and safety. And refugee centers were set up outside of town. Still, there was the issue of how to get to those places without being killed.

“I'll take them. They can ride with me,” Nimalka heard the burly son of her landlord say of the frightened elderly couple waiting in their home. The trip to their friends' house would be no ordinary carpool. To avoid detection, it was decided that the fair-skinned pair should disguise themselves as Muslims. The woman wrapped a *hijab* around her head and face to cover the tell-tale spot where the *bindi* — the dot on her forehead that identified her as Hindu — had been. She made sure every other part of her body was covered, as well. The man traded his sarong for a long white robe. Both were instructed not to speak if they were stopped, because their Tamil accents would give them away in a heartbeat. Before leaving, the son mapped out a route he hoped would help him steer clear of trouble.

It did. He'd soon make another trip, this one to a temple near the local church. And when he returned, Nimalka learned of the conditions and the needs at that crowded place. So many families. So little food. So much suffering.

For days she had felt helpless. Now she knew what she could do.

“That's right. Send the money directly to the NCC account here,” Nimalka said in a phone call to the headquarters of the World Council of Churches, the organization that the National Christian Council, her employer, answered to. “Those Tamil families need food now. And blankets. And clothes. And, well, *everything*. I've got a contact at the church. I can make sure the funds get to where they'll do the most good — and quickly.”

Nimalka paused as the voice on the other end began reminding her of the standard procedures for the dispersal of funds. The forms she needed to fill out and file. The approvals she had to wait for.

“Yes. I know. *I know*. I'm well aware of the proper channels for this sort of thing,” Nimalka said with mounting exasperation. “But the need here is urgent. It can't wait. Just send the money! I'll take

the consequences.” Nimalka couldn’t undo what had been done by the mobs those dark days in Colombo. But she could do this. And, by God, she would.

Facing the Evidence

“These files are evidence,” Nimalka said, pointing to the stacks of manila folders that filled the bottom shelves of the bookcase in the bedroom she and her husband shared. “We’ve got to get rid of them.”

On that day in early August, the need to destroy the documents from the NSSP they stored in their annex was one thing the often-quarreling couple, both active in the New Equal Society Party, could agree on.

“Sure. But how?”

The rioting in Colombo had finally ended the week before, but tension in the shattered city remained. With most of the Tamils gone, Sinhalese who had been supportive of them became the new enemy. The government was looking to lay the blame for the riots anywhere but at its own feet, and so pointed to groups like NSSP, which had been outspoken in support of equal rights for the Tamils and self-determination for the provinces of their ancestral homes. The government claimed the Colombo riots had been stirred up by the left wing to gain sympathy for the larger Tamil cause. Organizations, including church groups, known to be friendly to Tamils were blacklisted — their leaders interrogated, threatened, thrown into jail or eliminated.

Even before the riots, groups on the left had come under government surveillance. Because of her connection to the ecumenical National Christian Council, Nimalka had been called in for questioning the year before. But unlike many others taken up the stairs to the police department’s infamous Fourth Floor, Nimalka was able to return home to tell about it.

Now, she and her husband had just learned that their good friend, Vasu, the head of NSSP, had narrowly eluded arrest and had gone into hiding. Hearing that, they realized that the Party documents they kept in their annex, if discovered, could get both of them into a lot of trouble. And in the atmosphere of distrust that had settled on Colombo like soot from the recent fires, discovery wasn’t out of the question.

“I suppose we could flush the files down the toilet?”

“No, there are way too many. It’ll get clogged.”

“What about burning them in the backyard?”

“Are you crazy? That’ll only draw suspicion!”

What to do?

They considered soaking the papers in soapy water in a big metal bucket usually used for mopping floors, dragging it to the yard in the back, and pouring the pulp of what used to be NSSP receipts, meeting minutes, manifestos and letters from Jaffna into the Wellawatte Canal.

Glancing at the stacks and stacks of files, they quickly nixed that plan. Repeated dumping in the canal would arouse as much suspicion as any bonfire.

The looks they exchanged at that realization said the same thing: *Got any other bright ideas?*

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With a box of files wedged between her pregnant belly and her husband's back, Nimalka gripped his waist tightly as they took off together on his motor scooter in the first trip to deliver the rest of the NSSP documents to a trusted friend for safekeeping. It brought back memories for Nimalka of how her father, in 1971, had gotten rid of evidence that would have implicated her cousin in that year's insurrection.

Riding through streets littered with broken glass and bordered by burned out buildings, Nimalka couldn't help but wonder if the land she loved would ever know peace, and if she and her husband could find it again with each other.

Road to Ranna

Nimalka looked out the window of the bus and glanced again at her watch, impatient to reach Ranna. She'd left Colombo hours ago for the long bus ride to the collective farm for women she'd been instrumental in starting. The project had come about through her role in the National Christian Council/Development Commission and a request from Ven Chandra Rathna Theo, the activist monk for peace she'd worked with in the Movement for Inter-Racial Justice and Equality. It was hoped the farm would not only offer women in the village gainful employment, but also foster inter-religious harmony.

She knew the drive to Ranna would be long, but she hadn't counted on this delay: a herd of 30-plus elephants, lumbering across the road in a long gray line. They were on their annual migration north, a trip that was becoming more and more problematic — not only for the elephants, but also for the populations in their path. All sorts of obstacles — new roads, expanding villages, larger farms — had begun to impede the elephants' ancient migratory routes. Yet the herds, each led by a matriarch (males tended to travel solo), trudged on. Steadfast. Undaunted.

Even the little ones seemed to march along with a sense of purpose, shepherded by their mothers or “aunties,” and kept in line, occasionally, by a trumpeted warning or a long mottled trunk. The herd's arrival at its destination was just a matter of time. Time and tenacity.

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“Welcome back!” Daya called, as Nimalka arrived at her doorstep. The first official meeting of the entire group participating in the collective would be taking place that morning. It had been in the works for some time, and both women had been looking forward to it: Nimalka, from her NCC office in Colombo; Daya, from her little house in the village, across the road from the temple of the Buddhist monk who'd offered the village women a plot of the temple's land to use for their farm.

A native of the region, Daya had volunteered to be the local point-person for the project. But the farm had been Nimalka's brainchild — inspired by her memories of Golden Land and given new impetus by her involvement with women's issues in Sri Lanka. Initial funding for the farm had come from the NCC, but the vision for it can also be traced to the Women's Action Committee (WAC), a group Nimalka and others pioneered to bring together feminists already active in the cause of women's rights. Meetings of the WAC offered opportunities to network, share ideas and, it was hoped, become better able — together — to effect social change and promote feminist thinking.

The women's farm in Ranna was intended to put that to the test. Groundwork had already been laid. An easy-to-grow main crop — green lentils — chosen. A money-earning project — making cement bricks — decided upon. And a structure — a meeting place — built on the property by the locals. Unlike Golden Land, this collective wouldn't require its participants to live there. The women would arrive on foot or by bike, and return to their homes the same way when they were done for the day.

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They came. More than 25 in all. Some, pedaling the creaky bikes that were their family's main means of transportation. Others, walking in small groups with their neighbors. A few, carrying the babies they still nursed.

Standing at the doorway of the room where the meeting was soon to begin, Nimalka greeted each of them as they entered.

“Please, come in. Sit down,” she said.

They nodded and smiled and, adjusting the colorful cloth of their sarongs, eased themselves onto the cool floor, a traditional combination of hard-packed cow dung and clay. The structure's thatched roof shielded them from the rays of the hot Sri Lankan sun, and its “windows” — nothing more than rectangular openings in the walls — let in the soft breath of a sea breeze.

The women in the village rarely went anywhere other than to fetch water from a well or rice from the market. Most of the time, their homes were their world; their husbands and children, their social circle. By the sound of their voices now, lively and loud, it was obvious to Nimalka that they welcomed this opportunity to get out of the house and be with each other. And she was happy to give the group extra time to chat.

“So glad to see you all here today,” she said, when they finally quieted down. After a few preliminary remarks, including acknowledging Daya and her role in the collective, Nimalka began explaining the activity she had planned for the meeting.

As she spoke, Daya walked among the women, handing each a sheet of newsprint paper and a couple crayons.

“OK, here's what I'd like you to do,” Nimalka said. She told them to draw two large circles, side by side, and then, by adding numbers, turn them into the faces of clocks. On one of them, they were to illustrate what they typically did every waking hour of the day. For instance, if they got up at 6:00 to start a fire and make breakfast for the family and tea for the husband, they were to mark that portion of the clock accordingly. If 7 to 8 saw them washing dishes and sweeping the floor, that, too, had a place on the clock. Everything — from cooking to cleaning to getting children ready for school to making lunches to husking rice to baking *roti* to doing laundry — everything, Nimalka said, should be included on the clock.

“I'm going to need one with 24 hours instead of 12,” one of the women joked. And everyone laughed, because they knew it was true.

Then Nimalka instructed the women to do the same thing on the other circle, but this time, illustrate their husband's daily activities.

Bending over their papers, the women set to work.

“Anyone want to share their clocks with the group?” Nimalka asked when the drawings were done. Several did. And a pattern emerged. Typically, the women's days were crowded with tasks, a round-the-clock jumble of things to do. The men's, they noticed, told a different story: 7 to 8, eat breakfast.

8 to 4, work in the fields. 4 to 6, get a drink — or several — at the village tavern with co-workers. 6, eat supper the wife has cooked. 7 on, chat with buddies on the porch, listen to the radio.

It's one thing to sense the inequities of the division of labor in a household, it's quite another to see that point made on paper. And so began the consciousness-raising needed, always, for fundamental change to even have a chance.

The collective became a hub for women of the village. A place where they could work together, talk together, support one another and grow — not only green lentils, but also as individuals.

Initially, the men were not happy about all this. In more than one household, on more than one occasion, a husband could be heard grouching, "Where is my supper!" But complaints like that quieted when the women started bringing home the rupees they'd earned from the crop they'd grown or the bricks they'd made.

Eventually, sewing machines were brought in to add to the mix of livelihood projects. Nutritionists came to offer guidance on healthier cooking. Health workers gave talks on how to prevent malaria, a common problem in the area. And the collective organized a pre-school for the children of the "working moms." Some men in the village were even known to give their wives a lift to work on the crossbars of their bikes and wave a friendly hello to the women in the field.

Nimalka called the early success of the women's collective "my happiness." Her work in Ranna strengthened in her a growing conviction that relationships in which men and women are equals are better, for everyone, than marriages mired in tradition and the stereotypes of conventional roles. A few years later, that belief would lead Nimalka to end her own marriage and become partners with Vasu in the class struggle, in politics and in life.

Perhaps the elephants she encountered on the road to Ranna had something to teach about the path to gender equality and progress in general, Nimalka thought. In spite of obstacles, they kept moving forward, steadily and together, until they arrived at the place they wanted to be.

Ceasefire, 2002

“Oh-oh. Gotta go, Nimalka. I can hear the helicopters getting closer. I’d better get to the bunker before the shelling starts.”

During President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga’s “war for peace,” Nimalka’s phone conversations with her friend and colleague in Jaffna, Saroja Sivachandran, frequently ended with a sudden click and a dial tone that left Nimalka on the other end — in Colombo — wondering when she and Saroja would talk again.

The two had become friends years earlier through their work on human rights and women’s issues in Sri Lanka. But the war had made travel between their cities impossible. The LTTE and the Sinhala Army had fought for control of A9, the main highway that linked the southern provinces with the north.

“Let’s make a pact,” Nimalka suggested the next time she and Saroja talked. “If and when a ceasefire happens and the A9 highway reopens, we’ll all celebrate the New Year together in Jaffna. Yes?”

“OK. Sure,” Saroja said quickly. The swiftness of her reply made Nimalka wonder if Saroja really loved the New Year’s idea or had to hurry once again down to a bunker.

In either case — both friends would have agreed — a ceasefire couldn’t come soon enough.

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At the start of the drive to Jaffna, the mood in the van was festive. Travelling with Vasu, a couple other activists and a few journalists, Nimalka had brought along small packets of holiday cookies she’d baked for the trip. In each she’d tucked a note that read “Happy New Year” in both Sinhalese and Tamil. For security reasons, checkpoint guards aren’t supposed to accept gifts of any kind. But when they recognized Vasu, who by that time was a well-known political figure in Sri Lanka, bending the rules on a holiday seemed a safe thing to do. With tacit approvals in place, Nimalka handed the sweet treats to the government troops and the LTTE “boys” at their respective checkpoints along the A9. And their “Thank you’s” — though in different languages — were equally heartfelt.

“Happy New Year to you too!” both groups said, as they waved the van on to continue its journey. With the ceasefire in place, it was a wish that was starting to feel like a real possibility.

But as the trip continued and they passed the Omanthai checkpoint, the mood in the van began to change. Looking out the window, Nimalka saw red signs warning of “Danger! Explosives!” on both sides of the highway. They were everywhere, as much a part of the landscape as the miles and miles of palmyra trees, nearly every one decapitated by the shelling.

Whenever a car riding ahead of the van suddenly dropped down and popped up again, Nimalka braced herself for the jolt of riding over another huge crater created by the war’s mortars.

She remembered taking the train to Jaffna years ago, and the bustling towns it stopped at along the way. Now, splintered stalls and deep craters marked the places markets used to be. On streets once-crowded with people heading to work or school, restaurants or temples, cricket matches or weddings, Nimalka saw no one. The only signs of life, here and there, were the listless cattle that still roamed the land their owners had left.

She could not believe the scope of the devastation including its human toll. While the war had been going on, she was, of course, aware that battles were being fought in the northern provinces. But no story in the *Daily News* prepared her for what she was seeing. Even Saroja's mention of bunkers never completely captured for Nimalka what was happening to the Tamil homeland and its people. Her friend's references to helicopters in Jaffna might appear in southern newspapers, if at all, as small stories on pages 3 or 5 with headlines like "Skirmish in Jaffna Targets Guerillas" or "Ten LTTE Militants Killed by Government Forces."

My God, what have we done? Nimalka thought. She wasn't alone. As they rode on, some in the group grew quieter than their colleagues had ever known them to be. Others expressed anger — at the Sri Lankan government, at the Tigers, and at themselves for not doing more to stop the "damned war."

When the van finally arrived in Jaffna, some 15 hours after setting out, Nimalka headed with Vasu through the rubble of the war to Saroja's home. The celebration they'd been looking forward to now seemed as far away as Colombo.

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Nimalka watched as Saroja blended spices for her legendary curry. Watched and learned. Nimalka loved to cook. In her own kitchen, she was queen of the cardamom, fennel, and cumin. But here in Jaffna, Saroja ruled.

"I don't have some of my favorite ingredients. They're either unavailable or way too expensive since the war. Fresh vegetables and fish are also in short supply. But we make do," Saroja said. "We make do."

Off to the side, a fan hummed. The light from the bulb overhead let Nimalka see exactly what Saroja meant when she said, "a pinch of coriander." Dinner would be ready soon. Nimalka could almost taste it.

Then the power went out. Fans stopped whirring. And the temperature in the kitchen and the rest of the house started to climb.

"Oh, well," Saroja shrugged. "Looks like dinner's going to be late. Let's go wait in the living room."

Nimalka knew that if a power outage like that had happened in Colombo in the midst of preparing dinner for guests, she would have been much more upset than Saroja. And probably would have spent the rest of the evening — even after the lights went back on — railing against the local government and apologizing for the "bloody utility company."

Not Saroja. As they joined Vasu and Saroja’s husband in the next room, she explained, “This happens almost every day, Nimalka. Here in Jaffna, we’re used to it.”

For the next three hours, they sat talking in the dark — not about recipes, but about life and the war. And Nimalka began to understand her friend’s attitude of acceptance. *In conditions like these, what choices does a person have?* she thought. *People can either be mad and miserable all the time or they can, as Saroja has done, make peace with life as they’ve come to know it.*

“We had no idea things were this bad,” Nimalka confessed. “I feel like all of us in Colombo were asleep. If we and the rest of the country had known — not just known, but seen and felt and truly understood what was happening here in the north — maybe things would have turned out differently. If we had known, we would have done more to stop the war. If only ...” Nimalka’s voice trailed off. And in the silence that followed an idea formed.

“OK. What do you think about this?” she said to Saroja, and proceeded to outline a plan to bring hundreds of women from the south to visit Jaffna. A bus caravan up the A9. When they arrived, they would meet with women from the war-torn town. Talk with them — mother-to-mother, wife-to-wife, sister-to-sister — and hear their stories. Saroja, in her role as director of the Center for Women and Development in Jaffna, could help coordinate those meetings.

“I have no doubt that mothers of LTTE Tigers love their sons just as much as moms of soldiers in the Sri Lanakan Army,” Nimalka continued. “And widows in the north grieve just like women in the south who’ve lost their husbands.”

The more Nimalka talked, the more animated she became.

“I’m sure the women from the collective in Ranna will want to come. Plus many of the Mothers and Daughters of Lanka.⁴ Think of it, Saroja! If each of those women comes back and shares what she’s seen and learned from that trip with, say, 10 of her friends. And those 10 tell 10 more, and so on. Now, I’m not saying it’ll change the world, but even if it just opens people’s eyes to what all of us in the van became aware of on the drive here, well, I think it could make a difference.”

“Logistically, it won’t be easy. You know that, right?” Saroja said, practical as ever. “But I like the idea. Let’s make it part of International Women’s Day!”

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Even though Nimalka’s new position of president of the International Movement Against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism gave her an opening with authorities, the trip wasn’t easy to pull off. She had to raise funds, obtain permission through facilitators from both the government and the LTTE, and take extra steps to assure that the women had safe passage to and from Jaffna.

Against all odds, the trip happened. Five buses, each with a purple banner on the side that said, in Tamil and Sinhalese, “International Women’s Day Celebration,” brought more than 300 mothers, wives, daughters, and sisters to Jaffna for the first time since the conflict had ended. And as Nimalka and Saroja had hoped, a heart-to-heart dialogue — the first of many — between women of the north and women of the south began.

The Camps

Sitting with her four male colleagues at the long table at the front of the hall, Nimalka listened as each took a turn speaking to the members of the media at the press conference. Because of her long-time participation and leadership in national and international advocacy groups, Nimalka often found herself in front of a microphone. So much so, she designated one of the saris in her closet as her “press-conference sari.” Now its deep red color matched the background of the banner hanging behind the table. “Platform for Freedom” it said. In English, Tamil and Sinhalese.

Nimalka was one of the founding members of the Platform for Freedom, or PFF, a coalition of civil society organizations and political parties dedicated to protecting human rights and freedom of expression in Sri Lanka. “Let People Live and Speak!” was the group’s motto and rallying cry. The impetus for starting the organization came in January of 2009 with the assassination of Lasantha Wickramatunga, a prominent journalist, newspaper editor and harsh critic of the increasingly repressive policies of the president, Mahinda Rajapaksa.

“In the course of the last few years, the independent media have increasingly come under attack,” Lasantha had written in a prescient article, published days after his own death. “Electronic and print institutions have been burned, bombed, sealed and coerced. Countless journalists have been harassed, threatened and killed. It has been my honour to belong to all those categories, and now especially the last.”

The purpose of the press conference was to draw attention to the deplorable conditions at the camp the government had set up in Vavuniya for Tamils displaced near the end of Rajapaksa’s brutal war. Intended for 70,000 people, the camp now held more than 300,000. If any of the 50 or more media reps that day wondered why the five PPF members sitting before them were taking the risk of speaking out, they would have found the answer in Lasantha’s words from that same article: “But there is a calling that is yet above high office, fame, lucre and security. It is the call of conscience.”

As one of her colleague finished his remarks, Nimalka shifted in her chair. She was next. She hadn’t prepared a formal statement, preferring in such instances to speak extemporaneously. She intended to detail for the group what she had discovered in her fact-finding forays into the border town of Vavuniya, conducted in connection with Mothers and Daughters of Lanka and the International Movement Against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism (IMADR). She brought with her first-hand accounts from aid workers who managed to get inside the camps. Her goal was simply to provide accurate information and let the facts speak for themselves. She expected that her presentation might get a few reporters’ pens moving.

What she did not anticipate was that the words she suddenly found herself moved to say would reverberate like a bomb blast through the hall that day, and the through the country for a long time afterward:

“The IDP camps in Vavuniya are modern-day concentration camps in Sri Lanka.”

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The road that led Nimalka to make that statement began three years earlier with an invitation to a private meeting with President Mahinda Rajapaksa at Temple Trees, his government residence in Colombo. It came through a mutual friend, Siritunga Jayasuriya.

Back in the early days of NSSP, Siritunga, Mahinda, Vasu and Nimalka had worked together in Sri Lankan politics and, at that time, had been on the same side of justice. Vasu and Mahinda hailed from the same Sri Lankan clan in the south and regarded each other as brothers. Like brothers, they often disagreed, especially now, but a bond remained nonetheless. During campaigns for public office, Mahinda had spent many evenings with Nimalka and Vasu in their living room, talking politics and strategy late into the night.

“I hope you’ll come with me, Nimalka,” Siritunga said, when he called her about the invitation President Rajapaksa had extended to him. “Mahinda said I can bring two people, one of them from the media. A reporter I know has already accepted. The president won’t be expecting you, but let’s surprise him. What do you say?”

Siritunga had run against Rajapaksa as the United Socialist Party candidate in the presidential election a few months earlier in 2005. He’d come in third. No doubt Rajapaksa hoped this meeting would be viewed in the press as an outreach to a political opponent he’d known for over three decades.

Nimalka, on the other hand, saw the meeting as an opportunity to lobby the president for a peaceful solution to the violence that had begun escalating again in the north, in spite of the ceasefire. Within the new government, a case was already being made for all-out war as a way to put an end, once and for all, to the Tamil quest for self-determination.

“Yes. Definitely. I’ll be there,” Nimalka told Siritunga.

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Temple Trees was familiar terrain to Nimalka. The posh estate wasn’t too far from the poor working-class neighborhood where she grew up. As a little girl, she sometimes trekked there with her father on *Wesak* — Full Moon Day — a traditional Buddhist holiday, when the grounds of what was then the prime minister’s home would be opened to the public. Walking through the gardens, holding her father’s hand, Nimalka loved looking up at the canopy created by the branches of the frangipani trees, heavy with fragrant pink and white flowers. With the rest of the diverse community, she and her father would make their way to the tables filled with sweet treats — fresh fruits, rice balls, coconut cakes — compliments of the government. Prime Minister S.W.R.D Bandaranaike himself was there sometimes, walking without guards among the people, stopping to chat with a Hindu shoemaker and his family, or a group of school teachers, or a Christian tailor and his little girl wearing her newest frock.

Nimalka thought back to those days as she and her two colleagues walked passed the compound’s barbed-wires walls and through the metal detector on their way to meet with President Rajapaksa.

A security officer ushered the trio to a small lounge next to the president's office, where they waited for their meeting to begin. They all rose as President Rajapaksa strode into the room. After greeting Siritunga and the reporter, the president turned to Nimalka.

“Good afternoon, Mr. President,” she said.

In the past, he used to tease her about being “a busybody,” so he didn't seem at all surprised to see her. “Hello, Nimalka. Say, I see you've put on some weight!” he grinned. It was the kind of thing a cheeky big brother might say. She was caught off guard and, for the next few moments, was uncharacteristically speechless. But even though she was taken aback, she wasn't about to be taken in by his show of familiarity.

“Please, everyone, have a seat,” Rajapaksa quickly continued. After tea arrived, it didn't take long for the conversation to turn serious and for Nimalka to raise the issue of recent reports that the government had shelled an orphanage near Jaffna.

The president didn't deny that it had happened. “If you knew all the circumstances and the information we had, you wouldn't be so quick to judge,” he said, before finally conceding, “Yes, we are investigating. This might have been a mistake.”

Mistake? Mistake! Nimalka thought. *Who makes a mistake like that? Over 70 children died due to this mistake!*

She and Siritunga reminded him of other reports, other stories of mounting violence against Tamil civilians.

“You leftists shouldn't believe everything you hear,” the president scoffed. “Don't you understand? The LTTE is hell-bent on dividing this country!”

Siritunga and Nimalka proceeded to argue for a political solution and for an end to the violence and chauvinistic Sinhala nationalism Rajapaksa's presidential campaign had stirred up.

“You have unleashed the dogs,” Siritunga told his old friend. “Now be a true leader, Mr. President. Call them back.”

“He's right, Mahinda,” Nimalka added, addressing Rajapaksa this time by his first name. She did it deliberately, as a way of reminding him of his more principled past, as a way of saying, in effect, “Be the person I once knew you to be.”

For most of the meeting, President Rajapaksa acted as if he got the message. He smiled. Listened. Gave appropriate assurances. And at times appeared to be genuinely surprised at some of the army's actions in the north brought to his attention. But when speaking of the Tamils and the people from the international community who worked with them, he let slip words that revealed his true feelings. Those disparaging terms dropped into his speech so easily, so naturally. Nimalka surmised that he must have used them so often, he no longer heard how they sounded.

He's already made up his mind to crush the Tamil uprising once and for all, Nimalka thought afterwards. War in the north is inevitable.

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In her role as president of IMADR, Nimalka often traveled to Geneva where she met with Tamils who had fled the country. Early on, IMADR had made the decision to expand its advocacy for human rights and take up the government's treatment of Tamils in Sri Lanka and the issue of accountability. Meeting and talking with the Sri Lankan diaspora in Europe played an important role in her ongoing work to address issues related to human rights violations and to bring them to the world's attention.

In the months and years that that task continued, she was joined in her Geneva work by colleagues in the cause — people like Dr. Saravanamultu, Ruki Fernando, Sandya Eknaligoda, and Kiruba, Sunanda and her good friend, Sunila Abeysekara.

On one of those early trips to Germany with directors of IMADR, Nimalka had the opportunity to visit Buchenwald, the largest of Nazi Germany's concentration camps, now a museum and a memorial. It was a trip that would become deeply and unexpectedly personal for her.

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Sitting in the front seat of the bus that would take the international group to the infamous camp where they planned to leave a wreath to honor those who had died, Nimalka waited for her friend and colleague Helen to arrive. On excursions like that, the two women typically sat together. The first of the two to board would always save the adjoining seat for the other.

An old man Nimalka guessed to be in his 80s hobbled up the steps of the bus. *He must be the Buchenwald survivor they said would be joining us*, she thought. His breathing was a bit labored from the short climb. His balding head, bowed. When he looked up, his eyes met Nimalka's, widened, and he broke into a smile that bordered on beatific.

With a gesture to the empty seat next to Nimalka, he asked — in Romanian — if he could sit there. Though she didn't know his language, Nimalka understood. Patting the seat, she nodded. He sat down. Then turning to study her face as if it were the only map to a long lost treasure, he reached for her hand, and with a catch in his voice said something loud enough for those in the rows nearby to hear.

"He called you 'My sister,'" a fellow traveler translated for Nimalka.

The old man continued talking and Nimalka learned that she bore a strong physical resemblance — raven hair, bright brown eyes, gentle smile, long pointed nose — to his sister who had died in Buchenwald. For the rest of the trip, Nimalka was, in his mind, his sister.

And they walked together through the camp: beneath the iron gate near the entrance with its inscription "*Jedem das Seine*," or "Each to His Own." Past the narrow line of cells where prisoners were tortured and held until executed. On to the wasteland that was the barracks, now nothing but foundations outlining the hell that once held thousands. And off to the side, memorials to the many groups imprisoned there: Bulgarians, Romanians, Gypsies, Jehovah's Witnesses, conscientious objectors, Soviet prisoners of war, women and children and Jews.

They lingered at the memorial to the murdered Roma Gypsies: slabs of stone with the names of Nazi concentration camps engraved on them, topped, Jewish style, by black rocks in memory of the individuals who died.

Arm in arm, Nimalka and the old man covered ground he knew too well: the Disinfection Building, the crematorium. At the camp's former storehouse, now its museum, Nimalka saw photos of the people who had lived and died there. Images that would etch themselves forever in her memory.

When they parted that evening at the end of the tour, the old man, sighing, tenderly tapped Nimalka's nose with the tip of his finger, then turned and walked oh-so-slowly into the night.

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Nimalka had stared at the photos taken inside the camp at Vavuniya by aid workers and smuggled out to her. Those who had made it their mission to work there reported that the guards from the Sri Lankan Army treated all Tamils as if they were Tigers. In many cases, individuals hauled off for questioning never came back. Images of the cramped quarters, the unsanitary conditions, the hopelessness on the faces of the families trapped there, took Nimalka back to Buchenwald. Especially the photos of the women, their thin bodies framed by the barbed-wire fence they were now forced to live behind.

Sri Lanka is better than this, Nimalka believed. It was that conviction that led her to sit behind a microphone at a PFF press conference and tell the world — no matter the cost and in no uncertain terms — what the government had wrought in Vavuniya.

Epilogue

Long before she visited the Anne Frank Exhibit at the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles while in the Women PeaceMakers Program at the University of San Diego, Nimalka was familiar with the story of the young Jewish girl who had become the most well-known victim of the Nazi's concentration camps. In Sri Lanka, Nimalka had seen the play "Anne's Diary", performed by popular actors who got their start in the country's street-drama tradition. And on one of her trips to Europe in her younger days to attend a Marxist study school, Nimalka toured the Secret Annex in Amsterdam where the Frank family hid during the war.

Those earlier encounters with Anne's story left an impression, but none stronger than the one created on a November day in Southern California. It might have had something to do with the women who made that trip to Los Angeles with Nimalka — her fellow peacemakers: Margaret Arach Orech from Uganda, who had lost a leg to a landmine planted by rebels of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). Ashima Kaul from India's Kashmir Valley, whose family had been driven out of their homeland by the religious majority they didn't belong to. And Robi Damelin, the Jewish woman who had moved to Israel from South Africa and whose son had been killed by a Palestinian sniper near a settlement during his army reserve service. Each of the women, no stranger to the hurt of hate.

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At the entrance to the exhibit, Nimalka paused to take in the welcoming image of Anne. Illuminated on an orange-gold background, she looked as if she was bending forward to peek out from behind an unseen barrier. With her long hair falling away from her face and a shy smile playing about her lips, Anne Frank is Everyteen, wondering what's around the next corner.

Nimalka continued on to take in the corridor-length re-creation of street scenes in Frankfurt; the reproduction of the famous bookcase that was the doorway to the family's hiding place; the replica of Anne's diary with its red-plaid cover and handwritten pages; and the exhibit's Infinity Wall, a curving corridor constructed of pieces of clothing, folded and stacked, creating a color palette that dims to black as it goes on. The wall is meant to evoke the 1.5 million children claimed by the camps of World War II. And for Nimalka it did that and more, bringing back images of the boys and girls behind Vavuniya's barbed wire.

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In addition to the opportunity to have their stories chronicled, the eight-week Women PeaceMakers Program promises its participants time for reflection and renewal. But during most of her free time in San Diego, Nimalka found herself on the computer in her Casa de la Paz apartment — answering emails from colleagues in Geneva, strategizing with her staff, writing op-ed pieces for newspapers back home — continuing her work on issues of social justice, human rights, reconciliation and accountability.

But the evening she returned from Los Angeles and the museum, Nimalka allowed herself to linger for a while in the garden of the Casa with its expansive view of the city and bay below. Looking out

to Point Loma and beyond, Nimalka thought back to the land she loved, the complicated life she'd lived, and the causes she knew she would care about always.

She would find a way, she decided, to take that day with Anne back to her work in Sri Lanka. She would look for opportunities to bring the messages from a Jewish girl's diary into her training sessions with groups grappling with religious extremism and intolerance. She would incorporate the book into grassroots dialogues among Buddhists and Muslims and Christians and Hindus. She would draw on words, like these from Anne, for inspiration:

“I simply can't build up my hopes on a foundation consisting of confusion, misery, and death. I see the world gradually being turned into a wilderness, I hear the ever approaching thunder, which will destroy us too, I can feel the sufferings of millions and yet, if I look up into the heavens, I think that it will all come right, that this cruelty too will end, and that peace and tranquility will return again.”

Nimalka thought she might even create a human rights center in Sri Lanka someday — perhaps on Muhandiram Road in the working-class neighborhood where she grew up. She imagined turning her childhood home, empty since her parents passed away, into a place where people of all faiths and ethnic backgrounds could come together in peace and work toward understanding. At that moment, beneath a sea of stars, anything — and everything — seemed possible.

A CONVERSATION WITH NIMALKA FERNANDO

The following are excerpts from interviews with Peace Writer Sue Diaz in the fall of 2014.

Q: What was the thing that really made you stand up and take action as a peacebuilder?

A: I have seen people — my close colleagues — assassinated. I have also seen the 1983 pogrom, the communal violence, and the barbarism that happens in a society when people are hating each other. And I saw people looting from their friends' homes, I was there when this happened.

My commitment to peacebuilding stems from my convictions and my experiences. As a leftist, I was trained to analyze the world situation. And in Sri Lanka we know there is the issue of the ethnic conflict, the unresolved national question. In 1983 we had the communal pogrom, and I saw with my own eyes, how the Sinhala society and its political leaders were turning my country into a field of conflict. I have lost friends to the conflict, some have been killed by government forces. Others have been assassinated by the LTTE or various other militant groups operating at the time. These were people with whom I had had discussions about peace. I have started this journey to find a political solution to the ethnic conflict. So I supposed that is what is still keeping me moving on in life. Knowing that they are no more with me, but I have to still be with them in spirit.

Q: The Sinhala/Tamil conflict has loomed large in Sri Lanka's recent history. What was your first encounter with Tamils?

A: I've known Tamils all my life. When I was active in the Student Christian Movement, most of my friends were from the Tamil community. In the '60s and '70s the universities had a large Tamil population because part of the minority aspiration is to get a good education.

At that time I also was exposed to Marxist teaching. We believed in equality and the class struggle. So I said I will always stand for self-determination for the Tamil-speaking people. I am still working to see that the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka is resolved through a political solution.

Q: How has the stand you've taken for Tamil self-determination affected you personally?

A: As the Sinhala majoritarian doctrine emerged, those who work for peace have been the target of vilification and hatred by the government and also from Sinhala chauvinistic forces.

In the aftermath of the war I've been lobbying both nationally and internationally based on the broad framework of human rights, reconciliation, and accountability. Since 2005 I've advocated for peace and a stop to the country's increasing militarization. When the war ended in 2009 it left hundreds of thousands of Tamils internally displaced, thousands still detained, and still more unaccounted for. Through the UN's Human Rights Council, I've taken up this issue of accountability. And because of that, I've faced many threats as the government of Sri Lanka considers as traitors those who engage with the UN.

Q: Tell me more about the work you do in connection with the UN.

A: I am not alone in this struggle. There are many people raising their voices about human rights in Sri Lanka and the issue of accountability. It is a question of warfare and the manner in which governments indiscriminately shell and kill innocent civilians. This happened in Sri Lanka. This happens in Palestine. Israel. It happens everywhere. People disappear. And in Sri Lanka we are still searching for the disappeared. Ours was a war without witnesses.

So as part of my work in Sri Lanka today, whenever possible I go to Geneva and talk about the need for accountability. Or I go to the affected communities in the north — which is very difficult — and if possible bring them to Colombo and train them with regard to how to document the disappearances. Because the UN will not just accept if I take a letter saying somebody disappeared. We have to provide the facts and figures.

So as a lawyer and as a person who deals very closely with the UN work, I've worked with others to initiate training programs to help mothers and wives of the disappeared fill out the forms to start the process of finding out what happened to their loved ones. These women do not know the UN charter, but with our help, they become human rights defenders overnight. So that has been the strength for us.

Today if there is one campaign which is not stifled by the Sri Lankan government, it is the campaign against the disappearances. That is because mothers come out and they tell us, "My son has disappeared." Or a wife will stand up and say, "My husband has disappeared." There is this woman in the eastern province. Every time I see her she tells me, "I will serve a bit of rice for my husband in the night and I will keep it for him to eat it." Every night she does that. So when our lives as activists get intermingled with that kind of hope, it keeps us going.

Q: What role does international politics play in Sri Lanka's conflict history?

A: Sri Lanka is in the Indian Ocean and it was known as "The Pearl of the Indian Ocean." But in the '80s it became known as "The Teardrop of the Indian Ocean." If you look at Sri Lanka, it is just below great India. So you should understand that what happens in India with regard to international politics and international positioning impacts the Indian Ocean region.

Sri Lanka is placed in a very strategic position. And we have a natural harbor that is a strategic catch for super powers. We have China on one side and Pakistan on the other. Of the two main political parties in Sri Lanka today, one is very aligned to US. The other one has a very progressive-socialist outlook and is aligned to China.

Which side will ultimately win out? That is the drama that is unfolding in Sri Lanka today.

Q: I know you have had to leave Sri Lanka at various points in time — because of the threats. Are you at all worried now about going back because of your exposure here?

A: I've had to leave the country several times, the first in 1989 when my name appeared on a very public hit list. But recently, in 2009, when one of my good friends, a very prominent lawyer, who used to interview me like this when he was working for newspapers and TV, was shot dead. He was

assassinated in broad daylight. And we were in Bangkok and we all rushed back. And over his dead body we pledged that we would not run away from Sri Lanka. We will stay and fight.

Q: Is there any possibility of reconciliation in this kind of environment?

A: We believe in people's power. We believe in the resilience of people. If you go to the north and you see the devastation and how women are now planting their fields, both Muslim and Tamil communities. They've gone back. They want their land back. It's easy for me because I'm living in Colombo. My life is not that hard. But these people who have lost everything, they are fighting back. That is why we are raising the issue of accountability. We know what happened in South Africa, reconciliation. So my work with women from ceasefire time up till now is to bring the Sinhala and the Tamil women together to understand that our pain is the same and our vision is the same for this country.

Q: What do you see as the main challenge to peacebuilding, not just in Sri Lanka, but also in the world?

A: It's necessary first to define peace. It's not as simple as saying, "Live peacefully. Don't harm each other." There are causes that do harm to each other. How do you remove that? I can't tell Tamil people to not to think as a Tamil person. And I can't ask myself not to think as a Christian. People like to say, "Live peacefully," but the world is not like that. We need to address the root causes of conflict — things like poverty, marginalization and the lack of opportunity.

As Sri Lankans we can't go on and on in conflict without looking into ways and means of reconciliation. But we also know that reconciliation involves much more than two leaders signing in agreement. Any agreement must also be the people's document. Real reconciliation means addressing the concerns of the people who have been affected by the war.

Q: How did your affiliation with the International Movement Against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism (IMADR), a human rights organization based in Japan, come about?

A: It's a long story. In 1993 as the regional coordinator for the Asia Pacific Forum, I participated with a team from Sri Lanka in the UN World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna. A former colleague of mine, Musha-ji, came looking for me in the Asian tent there on the grounds. We'd met back in 1982 through ARENA, a network that brought academics like Musha together with activists like me.

At the time of the UN conference, Musha was working with IMADR, an international organization founded by the Buraku community in Japan, a so-called "low-caste" group historically ostracized by the society there. Musha knew that I had been speaking out in Sri Lanka on issues of sexism, racism, and the brutality women migrant workers often face. And he asked if I'd be so kind as to speak about human rights and woman migrant workers at a side event IMADR was sponsoring at the conference, which I was glad to do.

After I spoke, he invited me to join IMADR. I became an active member and at the Human Rights Center in Osaka, I learned more about the Buraku community's organized struggle for human rights,

which began with the Levelers Association in 1922 and grew to include Buraku Liberation League (BLL) Movement.

IMADR, much like the rest of Japan, was traditionally patriarchal. After I'd had the opportunity to work with the group for a while, I asked Musha and leaders of BLL, "Where are your women leaders?" Musha came back with, "Nimalka, we want you to become the president of IMADR to answer that question."

As IMADR president I came in contact with many extraordinary individuals, including Astuko Tanaka, a young IMADR staff member, who was working with the UN in Geneva on issues related to society's outcasts like the *Burako* in Japan and the *Dalit* in India. She herself was from the *Burako* community. Talking with her convinced me to take the Tamil cause to Geneva through IMADR. With Atsuko's support, our work there expanded to include bringing to the UN's attention and the world's the war crimes and human rights violations in Sri Lanka.

We worked together on many project until she passed away in 2007 after a battle with cancer that was as brave as her fight for justice.

Q: What about women in politics?

A: That's my dream and passion. My first passion is to see reconciliation in Sri Lanka. And that we have a different state formation, very technical there. I want a different constitution that recognizes the Tamil area as a second nation in the country. And that the Muslim community be given the power over their own rights. I want to see minorities treated equally.

Having said that, if you look at the Sri Lankan population, 53 percent is women, but our parliament is only 5 percent women. In the local government, that number drops to 1 percent. And in the north, because of the war, 80 to 90 percent of the households are female led. So if you look at the population of Sri Lanka, it belongs to women. And if you look at the economy of Sri Lanka — tea planters are women, migrant workers are women, factory workers are women — so the economy is in the hands of women. But women are nowhere in the decision-making process. And politics remain patriarchal.

That's why in 2012 I started what is known as the women's political academic process in order to get more women into politics. Especially in the war affected areas, women are not consulted about their lives. What kind of future they want. What kind of peace they want. It is men who come to the decision-making process and cease-fire agreements, but it is the women who have to bear the brunt of the war. It's women who get raped — without justice. We still have places occupied by military and women are facing insecurity. There are protection issues. So we want women to come into the government and begin to define the contours of peace and democracy in Sri Lanka.

Coming into politics is not necessarily contesting elections. We have to know the sciences. We have to know how to debate. We have to know how to answer questions. And we also have to know how to give back to the community we are in. So it's a matter of training, education, and confidence. That's a new dimension we want to bring in.

Q: What do you see as the value of a program like the Women PeaceMakers?

A: I would say the more I think about your processes and the more I think about the time I have spent with the team here and the other three peacemakers — it's a one-of-a-kind experience. But more than that, it's an investment for peace. I see this project as a process and a major contribution that the Institute for Peace and Justice and the team who developed this program are giving to the world.

Much of the world has a negative view of the United States and its wars. But here at USD is an initiative by women, for women — talking with women peacemakers for the past 12 years and drawing lessons in peacebuilding from their experiences.

I have learned quite a lot from the other peacemakers here this year. We've shared strategies with each other. It's an investment in people. When we are working for peace, sometimes funders ask, "What is the outcome?" How do you give the outcome? When you are working for peace the outcome is a process. The outcome is changing the systems, changing the minds of the people. So we are not expecting a 24-hour transformation. We know that the struggle will be maybe short, maybe long.

We are not doing this for ourselves. We are doing this for the country, very honestly. I want Sri Lankans to live in peace. It's a beautiful country. My childhood was spent with the happiness of living in a diverse society. I've had uncles who are Muslims, aunties who are Buddhist. My mother comes from the Buddhist tradition. My ex-husband is a Buddhist. My present boyfriend is a Buddhist. My friends are Buddhist. We have a Catholic tradition. We have a Christian tradition. So we should be able to enjoy that diversity without being afraid of each other. It's up to us as Sri Lankans to create that country again.

Q: Do you consider yourself brave?

A: I want to be. I think it's a matter of being part of a community. I know when I fail, when I am down, there are friends who will hold my hands and say, "We are with you." There are many, many people like that. Sometimes that kind of response comes from a total stranger, sometimes from quarters I wouldn't have expected it come from.

For example, my sister-in-law — my ex-husband's sister — comes from a Buddhist family. In 2012 when all the abuse and all the threats were coming my way, she called my son and told him, "Please ask Nimalka to come and stay with me in my house. I'll take care of your mother."

Now, she lives in a very strong Buddhist area, and she's a Buddhist. That area is a well-known Sinhala-dominated area. For her to say that, that gave me strength. So when you talk about being brave, for me it's knowing that there is international solidarity. I can think of many friends — friends like you, sitting here interviewing me — who want to share my story with the whole world. That's solidarity. That's the kind of thing that has kept me going.

BIOGRAPHY OF A PEACE WRITER—
Sue Diaz

Sue Diaz is an author, educator and freelance journalist whose work has appeared in a variety of regional and national publications, including *Newsweek*, *The Los Angeles Times* and *Readers' Digest*. The award-winning series she wrote for *The Christian Science Monitor* about the war in Iraq and her personal connection to it was syndicated nationally and internationally. Those pieces were the starting point for her most recent book, *Minefields of the Heart: A Mother's Stories of a Son at War* (Potomac Books), which explores the impact of war on the souls of those who fight and those who love them. It was one of two books selected in 2013 by Silicon Valley Reads, a community-wide reading program in the San Francisco Bay Area.

A passionate believer in the power of story to effect change and an advocate of writing as a path to healing, Diaz has also conducted writing workshops for war veterans at the San Diego Vet Center, the Naval Medical Center and Veterans Village of San Diego.

In 2013, Diaz worked with Woman PeaceMaker Rehana Hashmi of Pakistan and wrote the narrative "Standing with Our Sisters."

JOAN B. KROC INSTITUTE FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE
at the University of San Diego's Kroc School of Peace Studies

The mission of the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice (IPJ), based at the University of San Diego's Kroc School of Peace Studies, is to foster peace, cultivate justice and create a safer world. The IPJ was established in 2000 through a generous gift from the late Joan B. Kroc to the university to create an institute for the study and practice of peace and justice.

The institute strives, in Joan B. Kroc's words, to not only talk about peace, but also make peace. In its peacebuilding initiatives in places like Nepal and Kenya, the IPJ works with local partners to help strengthen their efforts to consolidate peace with justice in the communities in which they live. In addition to the Women PeaceMakers Program, the institute is home to the Joan B. Kroc Distinguished Lecture Series and WorldLink Program, and produces several publications in the fields of peace and justice.

ENDNOTES

¹ A version of this paragraph first appeared in the article “‘Women Cannot Cry Anymore’: Global Voices Transforming Violent Conflict,” by Emiko Noma in *Critical Half*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2007). Copyright 2007 Women for Women International.

² <http://www.trust.org/spotlight/Sri-Lanka-conflict/?tab=briefing> (Thomson Reuters Foundation)

³ <http://groundviews.org/2013/08/18/political-violence-in-sri-lanka/>

⁴ Nimalka is a founding member of this network of women’s organizations and activists committed to peacebuilding.