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Jennifer Khakshouri [00:00:00] This is the ETH Podcast. My name is Jennifer Khakshouri. I'm your host and in this episode we're talking about conflicts and how to take steps towards peace. I'm here with two guests. One of them is located in Nairobi and we're connected via Skype.

Jennifer Khakshouri [00:00:23] Can you hear us OK.

Kaltuma Noorow [00:00:24] Yes I can.

Jennifer Khakshouri [00:00:27] (in distance) Please tell us what you do and where you work.

Kaltuma Noorow [00:00:31] My name is Kaltuma Hassan Noorow. I am from Kenya. I work with Green String Network. It's an organization that does social healing through the lens of trauma healing and I oversee the community program in Mombasa.

Jennifer Khakshouri [00:00:48] My other guest is here with me at the main building of ETH.

Simon Mason [00:00:52] So my name is Simon Mason. I work at the Center for Security Studies at the ETH Zurich. And we have a project together with the Swiss foreign ministry. It's called a mediation support project where we support the Swiss Federal Department foreign affairs in mediation activities through training research and working with people in conflict contexts. It's a joint project with Swiss Peace and so we are very applied in the sense of trying to learn from practitioners what works what doesn't work and why.

Jennifer Khakshouri [00:01:21] The two of you, Kaltuma and Simon: There's a lot that connects you but there's one person that actually brought you together.

Simon Mason [00:01:28] So yes the person who the reason why we're here really is Dekha Ibrahim Abdi. I think she's been an inspiration for many many many people the way she's worked for peace the way she's lived for peace. In a way by accident I bumped into her in a workshop and from the first moment was really fascinated by someone who's lived through violence but does not have hatred and who works for peace. And so it was like from that moment you know what can we learn how can we learn to work for peace in this world that definitely needs that kind of attitude of clarity, passion, modesty. It's a very strange mix.

Jennifer Khakshouri [00:02:13] So Dekha is the mother of Kaltuma and she passed away in a horrible car accident in 2011. Kaltuma, could you describe what your mother was like. What kind of a person she was?

Kaltuma Noorow [00:02:26] That's such a subjective question to ask and I'm very biased because I'll say she was a lovely human being because she was my mom but she really definitely meant a lot to a lot of people. She really cared deeply about her community and people on the street. So she really passed that on to us her children to be conscious and to be kind and to be tolerant of every individual. And she showed that through practice for us especially.

Jennifer Khakshouri [00:02:53] Simon, what did Dekha mean do you?

Simon Mason [00:02:56] I think if I try to boil it down it's something about being able to bring seeming opposites together and these can be different values different people different communities and bringing or helping them to bring together in a way that you know not one is sacrificed against the other. And so for me it's it's like the heart of mediation that she she lived and practiced where it's not one over the other be it an idea of value or your community or a person but somehow there's something very creative if you can bring these these seeming opposites together in a way that something new is created that's bigger and new and more full of life than it was. And so it's like this transforming of conflict which is it's not one person can do it but somehow people can come together and in the process through the right structure and mindset and heart attitude something really miraculous can happen.

Jennifer Khakshouri [00:03:56] Kaltuma, from you I hear that your mother was a very devoted person that she was very emotional very generous also in her emotionality and loving. Do you know what drew her to what she did why she became a peacemaker?

Kaltuma Noorow [00:04:13] (sound of airplane) I'm sorry there's an airplane that's passing by. I live near the airport. I don't know what drew her to peacebuilding per se. I think she was always connected to people I think she always felt a desire to help people. She was a person who did a lot of acts of service even outside of her work even at home. She always gave to people and she really cared deeply about the peace of her home. And also just living a good life you know living in a secure environment is is just I can't describe that to you. I'm so glad they don't live in such an environment anymore. But however specifically for her is what drew her was braver than us kids. She was pregnant at the time when my brother was 2 years old. She just got fed up with having to hide us underneath a bed and not be part of the conversation. She knew she had a stake. Her voice mattered and she really used her voice and and walked the walk as I said to make sure that if there's going to be sustained peace that she was a part of it and she's going to make it possible. And from 1991 to this day we're just all the resources are shared equitably the political power is shared equitably. So it's it's and we're still learning a lot from what she does because the work that I'm doing today is influenced heavily by what she has created in Kenya.

Jennifer Khakshouri [00:05:43] Simon, what was your key moment to become a peace worker? If that's the correct term I don't even - is it the correct term?

Simon Mason [00:05:49] Probably not but it doesn't matter.

Jennifer Khakshouri [00:05:51] What would be the correct term?

Simon Mason [00:05:53] Well when I explain it to my grandmother who is hundred years old I say peace researcher. But I'm hopefully one day also putting it into practice I think for me the moment was also very much an experience so I was studying environmental science and did a Ph.D. in water sharing and then I heard of course about mediation I thought that sounds cool I didn't know what it was and I did the course. But the real moment of of believing the method works was during a mediation I did as part of the training between two people so it was an interpersonal conflict and the sensation of it's not me it's not the one person or the other who unblock this tangle of conflict but there's a process there's some kind of a space that's created between us that untangles the misunderstanding and the silence - they had stopped talking for half a year - and it's just like an blockage that is miracle and so experience that miracle feels a bit like magic. And

it's not me it's not them but it's somehow together through this structured process of mediation that that is really unbelievable to experience and building on that to say well if it works on the interpersonal level can it also work on political conflict? And I think since then basically my my research and training and work with people in conflict context is that question how can it work also with violent political societal conflict and then learning from Dekha is yes it can work. So it's again it's the sensation of something very life affirming in mediation and this work for peace that is beautiful.

Jennifer Khakshouri [00:07:39] You told us that you wrote a book together with Dekha that you started writing the book many years ago and that it only was able to come out just now. Can you tell us how you proceeded how you worked on the book after Dekha passed away?

Simon Mason [00:07:53] So maybe one or two years I didn't. It was like emotionally too it was not it didn't feel right and then it was very much that sense of there's so much value and wisdom for the world in her approach that it's worth bringing out somehow. The book is is maybe a dialogue between my more conceptual maybe a bit more dry academic approach and her in-depth experience storytelling poetic approach. The purpose is to try and say well what can the world. And here I'm talking a bit about my world. So the west and slightly over conceptualized world of peacemaking. What can they learn from some like Dekha who struggled lived in conflict transformed conflict and had such a unique approach? And so it's like trying to reach her approach her world into the academic teaching that the more dry world and I think there's great benefit of trying to bring those together. But of course there was the worry of of pinning it down too much because there's something very intuitive about the way she worked for peace. But when you want to learn you have to use some concept so that for me a challenge and one way of dealing with it is the some parts are more like a framework of how you approach mediation and governance building and parts are more or less the original interview case studies of what she did who she worked with how they reacted the crisis and someone who read it said it's like a mystery story for mediators and the storytelling for me is the beautiful part because you if you have your concepts you can read the stories and you just feel what is happening rather than you know over making it too abstract. And so for me that's the beauty of the book is the the wisdom and sharing it with the world and trying to bring this more poetic storytelling arts or spiritual approach and some conceptual framework that I think can be helpful if you're starting work or you want to organize yourself mentally in work for peace and governance building in these very fragile contexts.

Jennifer Khakshouri [00:10:11] What's happening to Dekha's legacy?

Simon Mason [00:10:15] So for me there's something very special about the person but in the book project we did together which was interviewing her for six days and drawing from workshops where we work together. There's always a sense too that it's not just about the person but there's some message there's some approach that she lived and used in her work that we can learn from and that we can make our own and adapt. So it's not it's not a copy paste and so it's like using the inspiration of her approach and her wisdom and her struggle I think it wasn't easy Ronchi she really struggled for for she struggled working on conflict. It's learning and being inspiring and then making it your own in your daily life in your family in your community and your work.

Jennifer Khakshouri [00:11:07] Kaltuma, if I look at my Facebook news feed in my Twitter and if I listen to the radio and look around the piece seems like something that's really far away on many levels around the world. What keeps you going nevertheless?

Kaltuma Noorow [00:11:23] What keeps me going?

Jennifer Khakshouri [00:11:25] (in distance) What keeps you going as a person who works for peace?

Kaltuma Noorow [00:11:30] The resilient individuals that still push on despite all the traumas and all the pain that they've lived through. I feel like I owe it to us as a people of Kenya because we are a regional power now in East Africa that holds pretty much all the other countries that are surrounding us together. And in 2017 when there was a state of relative peace and we didn't know where the country was going to go as far as the election because we had two elections in one year I had conversations with Uber drivers that would drop me to work and they would say they were angry and they would like or if we don't win this election we're going to burn the country down and I would ask them where are you going to be refugees. Because the West is no longer taking people in and countries like Somalia countries like South Sudan are not places a Kenyan would want to go live. If anything went south.

Jennifer Khakshouri [00:12:26] Why is it better to take many small steps towards peace rather than one big one?

Kaltuma Noorow [00:12:31] I think a peace agreement can be great but also we have to sustain that unlike in Kenya for example we always have political reconciliation. But there's always something bubbling in the background and I think small steps are very necessary to make sure that we attain that sustained peace that world peace that peace that we're looking for. So for example in Kenya if we don't at this time work to do what I'm doing right now to have these conversations to have these dialogues at the grassroots level and also with the police service anything can pop off and (in distance) I think those small steps are very important as much as the big steps.

Jennifer Khakshouri [00:13:13] This is the ETH podcast. My guests in this episode were Kaltuma Noorow who was connected to us from Nairobi via Skype and she recorded what she was saying with her smartphone. My other guest was Simon Mason from the Center for Security Studies at ETH. My name is Jennifer Khakshouri. I produced this podcast together with This Wachter's Audio Story Lab. Music, mastering and sound design by Luki Fretz. Thank you for listening. You can subscribe to the ETH podcast and always receive the latest episode that we produce for you.