

# A Journey to Smile

By Dr Toh Han Chong, Editor

**D**r Wee Teck Young is a physician and activist based in Afghanistan. In 2002, he moved to the Pakistani city of Quetta, where he spent two and a half years doing medical humanitarian work. He left for Afghanistan in 2004, where he helped start a potato chip business, and later set up a civil society volunteer organisation, Afghan Peace Volunteers, with some young Afghans in 2008.

## Taking the plunge

**Dr Toh Han Chong – THC:** How long have you been in Afghanistan?

**Dr Wee Teck Young – WTY:** I have been working among Afghans for ten years. Of these, I spent two and a half in Quetta, a city on the Pakistani-Afghan border, and the Afghan city of Kandahar. This was the wild wild east. I moved to Afghanistan in 2004 and am now almost completing my eighth year there.

**THC:** Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries in the world, and Quetta is one of the poorest towns near this poorest of countries. It must be really tough to improve livelihoods beyond the basics.

**WTY:** You are spot on. That part of the world experiences crucial challenges with poverty. Then again, you could say the same of the other conflict areas of the world. The takeaway message from a simple discussion on poverty is that what the local and international governments are doing doesn't seem to be addressing the economic issues sufficiently.

Quetta is like any border town; there is not much law in place and in practice. There is smuggling of all sorts of

goods and much violence around. When I went there as a Singaporean doctor, I realised that I wasn't quite educated to this situation at all. Here in Singapore, people grow up in school systems and can get away with the idea that we are fairly informed about things. In Quetta, I realised that I knew very little beyond my local experiences and book knowledge, and then my life education began. This was in 2002, and a couple of months after the 9/11 incident which arguably changed the rest of the world.

I was open to doing all sorts of things when I went there, and was part of an organisation called Life Community Services Singapore. The organisation gave me an open platform to do humanitarian work with my training in the medical field. With that, I looked after the Afghan communities that had swelled to two million along the border of Pakistan after 9/11.

**THC:** Tell us more about the organisation that you are leading in Afghanistan.

**WTY:** I would not consider myself a leader. The organisation is registered with the Afghanistan Ministry of Justice as a youth volunteer group, and it is now called Afghan Peace Volunteers (APV). I am glad that there are such outfits that function without hierarchical leadership. When the Arab Spring occurred, the Afghan youths were very excited about the uprising. While the situation was worrying to others, the youths were excited about the absence of leaders. In fact, no youth would call themselves a leader. In a war or drug lord situation, one would presume the presence of a leader but today's world is changing. It is more egalitarian and people are taking responsibility for their actions and the community.

**THC:** What was your job scope?

**WTY:** I was doing medical humanitarian work. I conducted a public health education programme, under the Director of Public Health in Bamiyan, Afghanistan. While I was doing relief work, I also ended up doing and learning all sorts of other things. This included the distribution of basic necessities and education among the refugees. Their hunger for learning was evident from the beginning. There were educational centres for refugees, and I began to tap into one of them to help out in running some programmes. In the process of working with the refugees, my life was changed.

**THC:** What is the greatest focus of APV – is it building up skill sets, education or empowerment?

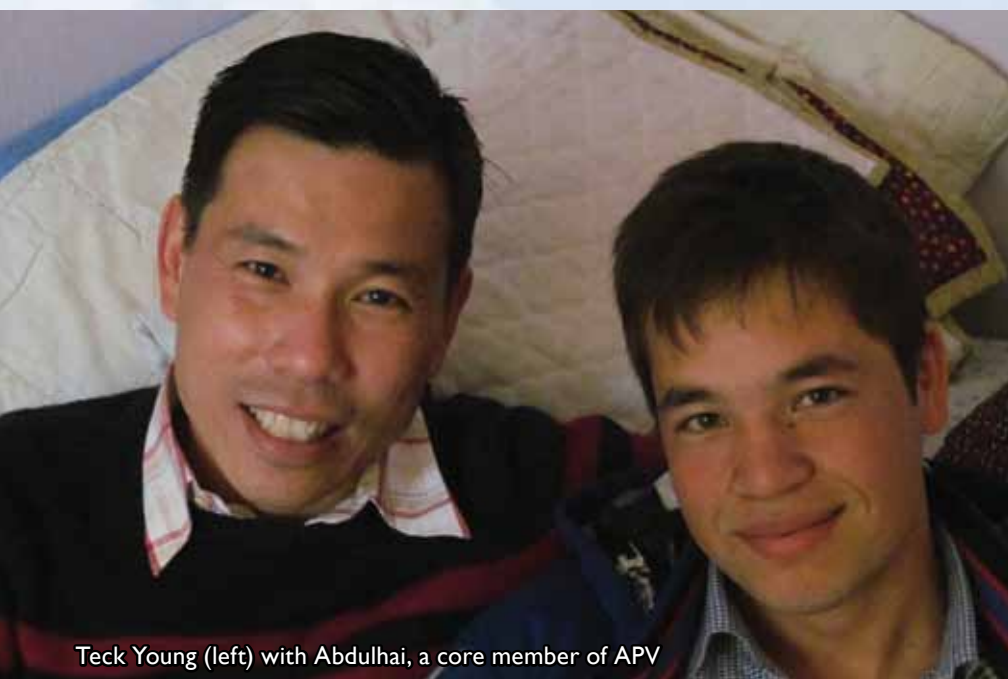
**WTY:** APV's mandate is to seek a life of non-violence. There

I find it worrying that wealth which has been pumped in is channelled through corporate businesses, and goes to the wrong pockets. Perhaps this is seen as successful. For example, the chasing after the production of minerals leads to the expansion of extraction businesses. ExxonMobil has also expressed interest in the north of Afghanistan. This is just an idea of what ordinary folks have to deal with.

**THC:** Is it feasible for Afghan cottage industries today to provide more and better jobs?

**WTY:** In name, yes. Groups are looking into small businesses or enterprises, but the general model is still that of the big fish cannibalising all others.

**THC:** How is APV funded, and how are you funded?



Teck Young (left) with Abdulhai, a core member of APV



APV distributing duvets to enable families to keep warm in the Afghan winter

are lots to discuss, such as achieving an equal social and economic world. This means social unity between Afghan groups. Right now, there is fragmentation and fractures along ethnic lines; civil war may break out again.

Martin Luther King spoke about such a violent sort of economy, and it is a challenge to find sustainable ways of creating livelihoods for ordinary folks, and at the same time, not leaving out the marginalised. There should be work that they are able to do, perhaps in returning to an agricultural economy as compared to one that is finance- or knowledge-based. It's not that complicated – we just have to look at what sort of opportunities should be provided to the most disadvantaged. Communities can be formed for Afghan youth so that they can complete their education and at the same time, cultivate the idea of a non-violent world.

**WTY:** The issue of funds is not daunting. We have simple daily needs, which are minimal by all standards. For example, my friends from medical school have been very kind to help me out. Personally, I have not been lacking.

The APV prefers to maintain self-reliance. Volunteers are not paid any salary. As such, it tries not to rely on external funds so as to be sustainable and not dependent on others. However, it accepts funds for the programmes it runs, mainly from Afghans who live overseas.

### More about Afghanistan

**THC:** Tell us more about the Afghans as a people and a community.

**WTY:** They are the good mix of central Asians, such as Pashtuns, Uzbeks and Hazaras. Visually, Afghans are

fascinating. The *National Geographic* Afghan girl was gorgeous, wasn't she? They are all like that. The official language in Afghanistan is Dari, based on the Arabic script and almost all Afghans are Muslim.

There is universality to them. Rudyard Kipling wrote about the great game in his book *Kim*, on the British Empire that wanted to hedge the Russian encroachment into Afghan land. The Afghans have had to be resilient since 100 years ago. On the other hand, they have been dehumanised and demonised as a whole in the name of the Taliban or Al Qaeda related ideas and labelling. People think they are sympathisers, and that is not true at all. We want to change that perception, but unfortunately this "demonisation" affects even trivial issues such as visa applications by Afghans to travel abroad. Fear for one's safety when working among Afghans is a legitimate fear because there is an ongoing war, and anyone would be

Americans decided to move into Afghanistan in 2001, they basically levelled the place. In Arundhati Roy's essay "War is Peace", in her book *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, she writes of a discussion that took place in a Pentagon meeting room. American pilots said that it had been so many years and there were no targets in Afghanistan left to bomb. The reply given was that there was no target; the entire country was the target and that the pilots should keep going.

Following that till now, I would say that the strategy hasn't changed. It has been predominantly military. Hillary Clinton's favourite phrase, "fight, talk and build" applies here. In this civilian world, we fight before we talk and then we do a bit of building. It sums up the international strategy that has been employed in Afghanistan. I would say that it is very clearly failing.

**THC:** From your perspective, having been there for ten



Children, displaced from their homes because of conflict, living in a camp in Kabul

concerned, including my mother; but Afghans shouldn't be demonised as the cause of danger.

**THC:** Was it because of 9/11 that the American military forces decided to move into Afghanistan in a significant way?

**WTY:** My reading of the overall strategic ideas that the American government may have had is that they wanted to have a say in the whole region. 9/11 could have been the opportunity to enter. If you look at the facts of the event, it's not so simple. The 19 hijackers from 9/11 were of Arab descent so if retaliation was on the cards, the Americans would have gone to the Arab-speaking world.

The Al Qaeda stronghold is not in Afghanistan. Information has been out there for ten years and the cell that designed 9/11 was in fact Hamburg-based. When the

years, what is the root cause of this failure?

**WTY:** I think we are witnessing something amazing in the world today. Many different uprisings – beginning from the Arab Spring to Greece and Spain – have shifted American dominance to something that is more multilateral. Chinese President Hu Jintao spoke on this last year in Washington, that the zero sum diplomacy of the US needs to stop. You can't have a win-lose policy, you need a win-win policy.

I think that is one of the things people movements are trying to adjust to. There is an allied strategy not only in Afghanistan, but also in many parts of the world. And the basis is a militarised concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few people.

**THC:** How interesting, your thoughts seem similar to



Teck Young (first from right) with Ali and some students from an after school programme run by APV

Noam Chomsky's (Professor Emeritus in Linguistics and Philosophy at Massachusetts Institute of Technology)!

**WTY:** I've had the privilege of having three interviews with Noam! The interviews the Afghan youth and I have had with Noam are available at our website, <http://www.ourjourneytosmile.com>.

It is inaccurate to say that those who speak out in the face of a dominant narrative are necessarily anti-something. It is about addressing the issue of power and injustice. In one of our interviews with Noam, he said that the current strategy in Afghanistan, to him, is a picture of overall global militarisation. As a humanitarian worker, I tend to see that on the ground as well, both in reality and in practice. There are other root problems, such as poverty and corruption that drives the conflict.

**THC:** The vicious cycle of poverty and corruption in Afghanistan was highlighted by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Will the recent US\$16 billion pledge of aid money mean anything?

**WTY:** In order to deal with corruption, you slap US\$16 billion on it – that doesn't work. That to me is an approach that is illogical. You could use a half-truth and say that if the money is properly utilised, it can be used to deal with poverty, but more money is not useful in addressing corruption.

**THC:** With the gradual withdrawal of the American troops, do you think Afghanistan will witness a period of economic neglect?

**WTY:** Afghans have been neglected for too long. Look at the humanitarian indices – any non-statistician can tell you that they have one of the highest infant and maternal mortality rates in the world. They are the third most corrupt nation, and were ranked by Maplecroft as having the worst food security in 2010. Basic things that humans need include food, water and health, and Afghanistan is at the rock bottom. What more can happen?

The international community needs to talk about reparation instead of glamourised humanitarian aid. These include compensating for the mistakes of policy makers. Those who examine the situation closely would see the "withdrawal of American troops" as similar to establishing in the troops' place an Okinawan base.

### **A glimmer of hope**

**THC:** Is there a glimmer of hope in the envisioned future?

**WTY:** Afghans are finding hope in the midst of their hopelessness. I am trying to walk with them in their journey. 68% of Afghans are below 25 years of age with nothing much to look forward to. While there is progress made in the number of schools being set up, there is also corruption within these schools, which leaves much to be

desired. Despite schooling, Afghans face an employment rate of only 36%.

In the face of the existing international strategy, this leaves a lot more to be discussed, and the role of militarised power and wealth allocation and redistribution needs to be addressed. Importantly, there needs to be discussion on how ordinary Afghans can find hope, how they can maximise their agricultural economy, and the underground drug trade issue.

**THC:** What about Afghanistan has impressed or touched you the most?

**WTY:** I met a young Pashtun orphan boy, Najib, on the streets of Quetta. He was about 12 or 13, and his parents had been killed in the conflict post 9/11. All the youths there are not sure of their age, as they have no birth certificates. He worked as a rubbish collector, and had fled from Kandahar. This boy was barefoot and grimy, and earned only a few rupees for himself and his grandmother. Somehow, we managed to click and became friends. I would speak to him in "survival" Urdu, and sometimes give him some soft drinks and fruits. He would come visit me, and this human interaction was good enough despite the language barrier.

One day, I invited him and his grandmother over to have some mangoes. Because his hands were dirty, I scrubbed his hands with a brush. I then asked my colleagues to take a photo of him and me. I asked him to smile, and upon hearing that, his grandmother became very angry. She asked, "How could you ask him to smile? Najib has nothing to smile about." That incident inspired the name of our website, Our Journey to Smile. Afghans had beautiful smiles, but the lost smiles need to be recovered.

Another incident happened in the hills of Bamiyan province, which is situated at the tail end of the Kush mountains. I moved there after Quetta, and stayed there for seven years. There was a boy, Abdulhai, about 9 or 10 years old, who lost his father at 5. He could hardly remember his father's face, and had no photos to remember him by. His mother was also chronically depressed. Abdulhai remarked that he liked me more when I first came, because I used to smile and laugh a lot more in the earlier days. He asked if I could retrieve my smile. I then made a pact with him. Whenever either of us starts to frown a little, he will be nudged by the other, and be reminded to smile. Our pact is still maintained, and Abdulhai is 16 today.

**THC:** Have you seen danger in the course of your journey and work in Afghanistan?

**WTY:** Yes, but it is relative. The worst outcome is death, and nobody can deny that Afghans are more exposed to danger than Singaporeans. There are physical dangers that I

have experienced, but this is not unique only to Afghanistan. One must take the usual precautions. There are many who expose themselves to danger in their work with various organisations. They can cope by protecting themselves, and in doing the wisest and safest thing. I also think that there are other dangers, such as the trap of a comfortable life.

**THC:** Can you describe the essence and spirit of Afghanistan for our readers? Not many will have the opportunity to go over.

**WTY:** Afghanistan is a beautiful country, and Afghans are beautiful people. Both are being destroyed. This can be seen in Kabul and the surrounding provinces. Gradually, more will start sensing the destruction. However, there is a capacity for hope, change, and a hunger for peace. The Afghans need to feel engaged and involved.

### **A different cause**

**THC:** Tell us more about the Singapore tetraplegia workgroup that you've set up.

**WTY:** The workgroup was set up in 1999. I read in the newspaper about a group of volunteers bringing a group of quadriplegics out, and from there, I wondered about tetraplegics. A hand surgeon I knew from Singapore General Hospital was pursuing tendon transfers for tetraplegics. He took out a list of patients, and told me that I would fail in my wish to assist tetraplegics – not to discourage me, but with hope that I would persist despite the challenges. The surgeon had written numerous letters himself to help his patients, but he had received negative responses.

I persisted with this list of approximately 20 patients, and visited them in their homes. These patients were bedbound, but would tell me about another in a similar situation. Over time, my list grew to more than 90 patients. I then surveyed their needs and challenges, such as public access to facilities like the MRT. Things have changed since then. The patients who became my friends brought me into a world of being totally dependent on caregivers for items aspects such as transport or other facilities.

I would like to encourage Singaporeans to spend some time with this group. More information can be found on



Starting the day with breakfast

the Tetraplegia Workgroup (Singapore) website, <http://www.tetraplegiaworkgroup.org>. It is a website about tetraplegics, run by tetraplegics. Do come and join in the social activities, encourage them, and provide them with some help if you can. Dr Adela Tow from Tan Tock Seng Hospital is the engine behind the workgroup's able-bodied volunteers. Tetraplegics are supporting themselves, but it would be great if the able-bodied could help out as well.

### Concluding thoughts

**THC:** Where did you derive your passion for humanitarian work?

**WTY:** It comes from the inherent sense of compassion that exists within every human. This may sound unconventional, but I don't have a "special compassion"; all people in general wish to be kind and helpful. Entering Medicine as a profession presupposes an inclination to provide a service to others. Over time, it became more and more of a passion. Through travelling, I explored these feelings and ideas. With my experiences in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, I could see myself working in this area, which was motivating.

**THC:** Congratulations on receiving the International Pfeffer Peace Prize earlier this year! Tell us more about this award.

**WTY:** The International Pfeffer Peace Prize was established in 1989 by Leo Pfeffer, an American humanist, and acknowledges activists who work for humanity. The Afghan group that I work with initially declined the award, as we do not agree with the conventional thinking that being awarded a prize validates the work that we do. It doesn't. Even though we've declined a public reception of the award, we appreciate the gesture, and we've accepted the monetary token that will go towards helping Afghan youth.

**THC:** What were the inspiring influences that drove your spiritual engine, and has faith been a factor in your journey?

**WTY:** I am grateful for the opportunity to have studied in Anglo-Chinese School, as it exposed me to religion and many new ideas. I learnt of love as something important, and spoken by both Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi as nonviolence.

I have also read widely: Leo Tolstoy, Henry David Thoreau, most of Gandhi's writings and Martin Luther King's civil rights struggle. Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* woke ideas within me. There are labels present in the world to categorise people, and Tolstoy speaks of

love as a practice rather than an opinion. When the time comes, a collective consciousness across the board, shifts to pursue community ideas, of being kind to everyone. I would say that humanity has become an important part of my life, so religion has taken a backseat.

**THC:** What about your parents? How do they feel about this?

**WTY:** They were petrified ten years ago. They still are. I would like to take this opportunity to thank them. Mine are typical Asian parents, and I have an older brother who works in a bank. My parents have sacrificed much because their child has taken an uncommon route. I am thankful for their sacrifices.

My mother is 72 this year, and she still worries about me. The worries are valid and laudable. I love her and my father. My wish is for them to always be the happiest they can be, and that they will be healthy in their elderly years. I would also like to take this chance to tell them to live their lives to the fullest, and to dream for themselves. This would make me very happy as well.

**THC:** How have you learned to live with so little, and how can others do it also when Singapore tends towards excess and consumption?

**WTY:** People can live very simply and still be able to carry on. Singaporeans need to have more confidence. Material things do not always bring happiness.

**THC:** Do you have any advice for young medical students, and how to further grow their civic conscience towards others?

**WTY:** I am encouraged, because many Singaporean doctors are indeed humanitarian. Tolstoy's idea of a shift in consciousness can be brought in here and I would advise students to step out of their usual areas, be more involved, and to explore more.

German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer was the soul of hermeneutics, in that he encouraged people to entertain the possibility that one could be wrong, and the other side could be right. In a Singaporean context, this could mean moving out of one's comfort zone and into somewhere different, such as Quetta.

**THC:** Thanks, Teck Young, it has been truly inspiring for me, and I am sure, also for our readers to learn of your many years of dedication and giving to those in need. **SMA**