

## Maya Soetoro-Ng: Ceeds of Peace

by Preeta Bansal

Earlier this year, we had the privilege of hosting a beautiful Awakin Call with Maya Soetoro-Ng, where we heard about her speak about a wide range of topics: from her expansive view of the role each of us can play in building peace, to how the Presidency of her brother, Barack Obama, as well as the divisive aftermath of the past several years, both transformed and reinforced her vision of the work of building peace.

By way of brief background, Dr. Maya Soetoro-Ng, a peace educator consulting for the Obama Foundation, was director of the Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution at the University of Hawaii. Her brother is former US President and Nobel Peace Prize winner Barack Obama. But Maya says we can't leave conflict resolution up to governments: resilience will come from ordinary people, not from centralized, powerful institutions or well-tested solutions alone. "It's imperative that we start paying attention to the work that's happening not only in the center of things but also in the periphery," she says. Maya develops peace education curricula in public high schools and for teachers, and is co-founder of Ceeds of Peace, which offers tools and practices for children and adults to develop daily practice in the key "C's" of peacebuilding: critical thinking; courage; compassion; conflict resolution; commitment; collaboration; community-building; and connection.

Here are some of the highlights from the call.

Influence of her mother and a global childhood in Indonesia and Hawaii: Roots of her peacebuilding work

"My mother was excellent at really helping to shape a sense of connection with both of us [brother Barack and me]. She exposed us to a lot of different literature, philosophy, religious texts, and secular poetry. She took us to a lot of places, always asking us the question, "how would you feel if?..." and making us to see things from another perspective. So my peacebuilding roots come from her.

"She instilled in me this idea that we have to learn to see the world from more than one perspective and thereby feel interconnected.

"When I was in New York [as a young teacher], I noted that a lot of the problems were from a sense of isolation even in a city as thriving and bustling and diverse as New York City. A lot my students, even though they had subway passes that could take them all over the boroughs to many places and anywhere for free, they never really left their 10-block radius because they didn't feel the outside world beyond their little neighborhood belonged to them, and they didn't feel they'd be welcome and that sort of thing. And it really kept them hearing and knowing only one story. And it also kept others who might have benefited from knowing them and being connected to them and knowing their story from doing so.

"So I really began to see my job as a social studies teacher to bring the flesh and blood of people's stories back into the work of teaching rather than having social studies be about memorizing discreet facts to be regurgitated and then forgotten. I really worked with teaching tolerance with New York Historical Society, "Facing History in Ourselves," to try to remember that history is about learning the depths to which we can plunge and the heights to which we can rise -- and the great complexities of being human. I really drew back upon that childhood not only of my mother, but also the negative things that I saw -- whether the inequality of growing up places, where people were not always kind to one another because of economic, or religious, or ethnic differences. There were a lot of anti-Chinese riots in Indonesia during my youth .... -- acts of brutality, hatred and malice which were coupled with (on other days) the same people giving me sugar canes to eat on the side of the road. It made me realize that humans are complex; that all of us need to be remain exceedingly vigilant to ensure that the best inside us is nourished (love, compassion) and that we engage in frequent reflection.

"I believe teaching is an important tool for peacebuilding but also that all of us have role to play in diverse definitions of peacebuilding. So I wanted to rebrand peace so make sure it could be seen as action-oriented and that peacebuilding was seen as the duty, obligation, privilege of each of us -- no matter our profession."

### Her Pivot from Teaching Social Studies to Peacebuilding

"It was really in NY that I began to identify my work as peace education. ... The school set the standard for me -- it had service projects (before charter school time) that students themselves would be responsible for building. They made all the decisions and they also did a lot of reflection on service and servant leadership." For example students and teachers transformed empty lot adjacent to school into community garden. In the school there were morning meetings Quaker-style where students would share, lift each other up. "For me it was a reminder that the work of educating another has to go beyond walls of classroom -- we have to bring in community. Bridges have to be built. I didn't define it as peace education, but when I took them to Rikers Island to visit their parents who were incarcerated on Saturdays, or to see the Museo del Barrio -- to look at the stories that expressed their roots, and engaged in place-based culturally responsive education -- I came to understand that without sense of connection, without a revival of storytelling, without a mandate that we explore with young people the ethical basis of human existence, we were making poor use of our time, we were wasting it, and we were failing to understand that a lot of the work of peacebuilding is not just negative peace (absence of conflict) but it is really about the presence it is positive peace (relationships; infrastructure of human rights, social justice, truly rehabilitative programs, environmental justice; understanding non-violent communication, personal peace) -- all of those things are really the ultimate goal and gift of education, but also have to be part of the output in moving from childhood to adulthood."

"I feel drenched with gratitude for the life I've been able to craft and co-create with the communities here [in Hawaii]. I got a PhD at the University of Hawaii in comparative international education -- and was a lecturer in the college of education teaching multicultural education initially. I saw multicultural education being less about teaching about every culture, but about helping to learn each others' stories, and develop an open mindset, fresh eyes." She introduced activities whereby students would push against perspectives and then champion that perspective -- and then try to settle on a shared perspective "that negotiates between or that allows for real complexity." "These became part of my daily teaching practice. Also getting to know communities in Hawaii --

saw they were transforming through the farms, fish ponds, etc. into spaces where community was welcomed into school and children were going out into community, and that was a source of their resilience. That became for me an essential mandate.”

“I started teaching multicultural education like I had previously taught peace education. Then I took the opportunity to teach peacebuilders. The idea was to get young leaders to really see themselves as leaders but also to begin to see the possibilities for transforming their ideas into action for the betterment of the community. Wonderful opportunities to reshape at first small spaces, and create peace gardens (involve edibles, pathways to peace for reflection, address issues of sustainability) and later the processes of action planning that involve backward mapping – taking a look at the beloved community we want to build and thinking then about how we take action to do so step by step. What resources we have present in our community, and that are manifest in our own stories, lives, identities – that helped young people feel empowered.”

“It was then that I created Ceeds of Peace [along with my co-creator]. We bring together family, community and educators in 360 approach. [We try to] revive sense of connection and shared responsibility – remind people we all have shared stake in future. Share resources in various communities – organizational, human leadership resources, various tools. We get folks co-creating action plans in their communities.”

### Peacebuilding as an Aspect of All Work

“I started teaching peace education to educators to help them to enliven the definition of peace as deliberative and action-oriented (about daily life).”

Nimo: “It’s not so much about building peace, but about building capacity to bring about peace is available at every moment. You have access to create peaceful space no matter where you are.”

Maya: “I’m not simply saying peacebuilding is within everyone’s capacity. I believe it wholeheartedly. A lot of the algorithm we ignite is that we begin with peace within, then we move to peace between people, then finally to peace in community. That is really central to leadership development. That’s really informed my work in teaching the leadership for social change class.”

“Peace within is about building courage, critical thinking. Peace between is about compassion, conflict resolution. ... That’s where the c’s come from in Ceeds of Peace.”

“I ask students to give me anything they aspire to do. We collectively think about how to transform their perspective of their work and their life’s purpose into a peacebuilding purpose. One student’s only ambition was to build golf courses and design them. I worked with him – we talked about how golf is regarded as an elitist sport (expensive to play), so why not transform it to look at issues of environmental justice, to allow others to play, to connect to community outside, transform golf so games create adjacent community library – how can we use golf course design to think about waterways; create a walk along golf course to create personal peace; have golf be an opportunity to think about mindfulness (putting small ball into small hole). Why not create a space where people are not separated from one another but that allows for dialogue, communication? There really is so much opportunity that is untapped for people to begin engaging in peacebuilding leadership, and have that be a part of what seems like an unrelated profession.”

Nimo: What an amazing lens – that everything is opportunity to build peace

## Her Work with the Obama Foundation

"The Obama Foundation is focused on the library in Chicago but also is focused a lot on programming. Eg My Brother's Keeper, Let Girls' Learn (global girls' alliance, counterpart to My Brother's Keeper). They have launched the Obama Fellows program (a year-long deep dive to build leadership). There is an Obama Scholars (masters degree at Columbia University).

"My program is the Obama Leaders program, which is really looking at embedded leaders (boots on the ground) - those who can't really take a year to develop their leadership, but seek opportunities to gather in short-term convenings and to build community and to build a sense of cohesion. Looking for stories and people who might otherwise be unrecognized or underserved - want to wrap around them mentors and innovators and resources. Mandate as part of our work is to think about collaborative work across the region. Looking at Oceania and Asia (Pacific Crescent, SE Asia and East Asia) - not yet India. There is also an Obama Leaders' program in Africa (last summer, did 200-leader convening there and doing big town hall in Europe), but those are outside my purview. I'm focused on the Asia Pacific region.

"Our mission is a sense of continuing to reach out and ensure that relationships between US and all these regions and regions that will be added to program incrementally, that there's continual bridge building and grassroots diplomacy but also opportunities of creating the model of democratic leadership that we think is part of my brother's legacy and needs to be ongoing part of mission of foundation. In January we had a cohort of 21 leaders from FSM [Federated States of Micronesia] and Marshall Islands, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, China, Japan etc. come to Hawaii. Got strong sense of place. We wanted to make sure they had connection with root culture in Hawaii." They asked other organizations they knew to nominate candidates; the initial cohort was "helping us co-design and unpack priorities of region so we can have larger, 200-person convening in the future in the region. In future, will be more open call for applicants. Leaders are of age 25-39 (educators, innovators or activists or nonprofit leaders) - have already been leaders but also still have lots of work to do in their lives and careers. We want to support them take their projects to the next level. We welcome new ideas and connections. We long to know more. Welcome ideas for young leaders or perhaps the people we might use to wrap around them as mentors, guides, as people engaged in innovative practices who might want to contribute to their development."

What is the most important value among so many in terms of building peace?

We need all dimensions of the c's in Ceeds of Peace - "courage without compassion is dangerous. Lots of compassion without critical thinking, then you don't take compassion to take good work in the world. Central part of our message is you have to develop multiple arenas of self. But umbrella ceed is connection." Maya's organization tries to encourage people on how they can be more connected to self, others, sense of purpose, and to nature, and to transform opportunities to build real sense of connection.

"For example, you don't just have to meditate in isolation. Instead of 2 hours zazen, how can you connect to breath and reconnect with things you are seeing." She describes a 2/2/2 practice where she focuses on 2 things to see, 2 to taste, 2 to touch as a way to reconnect to environment.

In order to reconnect to people - "in every interaction, can you make that person feel a little better as a result of that connection? Even if person is difficult, how can you engage

in empathy/nonviolent communication?"

The key is to "seek to transform every moment into a moment of mindfulness/connection." "If you focus on connection, you'll make great progress."

Your personal practices? How do you stay grounded?

"It's important to try to build peaceful practice with those you love the most, where we take so much for granted."

"I have the gift of optimism that comes with working with young people, perhaps. I try to keep their stories in mind as part of my personal practice."

"I see how the challenges in the world are increasing, to the climate, democracy, etc. I also see how people's responses are increasing, in awareness, compassion, movement building, etc."

"I try to think of other person's universal need at any given moment. Then it becomes easier to be empathetic with them."

"I do daily meditations that tend to be short; a lot are walking or movement meditations - 2/2/2 practice [described above] or a 5/4/3/2/1 practice (focusing on things with all 5 senses to come back to senses), or when I get anxious, acupuncture to look at pressure points on my body."

"I'm trying to engage in opportunities for reflection and writing (very helpful for processing our experiences and coming to place of greater understanding)."

As someone who has operated at many different scales (as a teacher, nonprofit leader, and now globally through the Obama Foundation), at what scale are you personally most comfortable?

"Change happens at every scale, and every person has a different comfort zone. Every person should move forward with whatever scale is comfortable for them. I am comfortable at the personal, and interpersonal and organizational scale to some extent (nonprofit and schools). I wouldn't participate in government because I just don't think I would be good at it. Neither am I particularly interested. I'm glad there are people like my brother and others who I think are very good at it and who wield their power well and who inspire a message that is useful for the world. But I think everyone should start or continue wherever they are, whatever their vantage point."

"I do think all these different scales need to be simultaneously attended to, and made operational in terms of peacebuilding. If you don't have mindful government and mindful economy, and if we don't transform corporations, if we don't change schools, if we don't change tools of daily conduct and language—none of it is going to work well. We have to attend to all of it, but we can't get overwhelmed by thinking that we are individually responsible for all of it at once. I don't feel responsible for building peace with every state and there are some decisions of government that are well beyond my reach, I believe. So I take it where I can - I can do this community work, I have this impact on schools, I can inspire this in my daily life, and I feel ultimately content with that. Otherwise we do become overwhelmed and that becomes something that ultimately disempowers and breaks down our capacity to move, and makes us kind of immobilized and feeling impotent, right?"

"The work at the systems level is important because not everyone has the desire or even the consciousness to want to be good – since we can't guarantee that everyone will be mindful, we have to work at the systems level, but I do think there's something (certainly, in my personal development) – that allows us to begin to operate free of that system and to be thinking about personal agency in new ways and personal responsibility in new ways, and I think I've certainly changed. We need to have the system in place for those who have not yet undertaken that growth or even felt the desire or the need to do so."

What was it like for you to have your brother become the President of the United States? Did you see it coming when you were younger, and how did you maintain a normal brother-sister relationship with the President of the United States?

"I often get this question, and I hope that my answer does not sound disappointingly simple. I didn't quite see it coming but I definitely saw that my brother had something special – he was charismatic, he was super smart, he moved people, he inspired people, I could see that pretty young. That being said, when he was in high school, he wasn't in student government, he definitely didn't get straight A's, he was only moderately ambitious academically, he played a lot of basketball and goofed off and made a lot of mistakes. And so that's part of his story, and that inspires others, because they see that they made mistakes. My brother has often said "we can have a million Obamas." He's not interested in minion-building, but he believes everyone has the capacity to take the raw material of their life and do extraordinary things with it."

"When he became President, he said to all of us who were his family and friends that this would be a difficult journey – that we would hear people saying mean things about him, that we shouldn't take that to heart, just know that that's part of the process – and that he was committed to staying connected and keeping sane. And he definitely was true to that commitment at well. He worked hard to normalize relationships, spent time with the same people at Christmas that he always spent time with. He and I started a Scrabble game in 2007 and we continued – we play Scrabble together every day since, so that's an 11-year game now, and we often connect with each other through Scrabble chat. We see each other every summer in the same way we always did. These simple things make a difference. It did, of course, at times threaten to be overwhelming – to see him, to worry about him, and to just find time to be together because he was so busy during those 8 years, but he really made sure to stay connected and he has not changed as a person, so that made me feel better, and we get our families together every summer and every winter and have a lot of silly conversations and we play games and we do talent shows. And these kinds of things are, I think, essential."

"The feeling that we could do anything, and that we were responsible to do what we could to make the world better, this sense of service, is one that she [our mother] instilled in us. And when my brother got the Nobel Peace Prize he credited her with all of the parts of him that were peaceful and mandated peacebuilding. And I think she would recognize in his work and in mine the things that she taught us and asked of us. And I think she would feel, I think, a sense of real connection to the ongoing international work that is part of the Obama Foundation's leadership programming. She lived in so many spaces and everywhere she went, she found a sense of home – of community, of family. She really fell in love with all of these communities. I'd go back to some of the villages where she worked, and many of them remembered her, and they all expressed great tenderness. I think that notion of recognizing all the ways we are intertwined and mutually responsible, are things she would be happy to see furthered in the mission of the Foundation and in my work and his."

How did your brother's Presidency, and some of the divisiveness afterward, change your sense about the nature of your work?

"I've been transformed by my brother's Presidency insofar as I realized that there are so many uplifting stories of courage and competence in operation in our world. I felt that during that time it was a very inclusive time. I became aware of voices I didn't know. I was informed by the beauty and perspectives of so many people in this country, in the United States, but elsewhere there was a lot of good will that made me feel connected both near and far. It was an appreciation of value of both individual and collective movement building that was really transformative. Now, since then, I have often felt disappointed or deflated by the rancor or the anger or the exclusion that I feel is more present in public life. And I have to remember and find strength in all that I know to be true - not only the previous 8 years, but also the work of these organizations and individuals and artists and innovators, as well as the work of my students. I have to retain that optimism. That optimism really is my resistance and my resilience. It's not Pollyanna.

"I once heard from this woman who was both an anxiety therapist and a stand-up comedienne. She talked about how we spend a lot of time 'awfulizing and catastrophizing.' If we continue to do that, then we really can't make any progress in our own lives and minds and spirits, or in the world at large. So I really think we all of us really need to bring whatever we can - whatever energy and optimism we can - to healing from trauma and to this kind of, this notion of our buoyancy as individuals and communities and collective nations forming this world. So I just want to encourage everyone on this call, that it's not Pollyanna to be optimistic and really go out and feel and experience and share rigorous gratitude and make people feel empowered, and that's a powerful act."

How can we best support your work and message?

"I'd be grateful if you can share ideas for me for how to support the Asia Pacific region or any ideas for powerful leadership for social change, but really supporting young people - the next generation - in whatever ways you can will be critical to the success of my work. I think that operating within your own spaces and lives with an attention to cultivation of personal peace and global peace - those things are going to make my work easier because I will have more partners in the world and because you'll be shaping a global sense of resilience and you'll be sort of building social and emotional well-being.

"When we do that, we have greater [non]violence and more opportunity for not only leadership development, but for those leaders to engage productively in the world to solve myriad problems. And develop your own brand of peace. What is your inroad, your point of access? Whether negotiation or mediation or environmental justice or prison reform or mitigating extremism or building intercultural connection. All of these things are things that each of us can do. What is your personal one thing that you can commit to right now to move forward? Maybe there's a small bet - something we can smallify - in the next 24 hours. But what is one larger thing - what is one thing you can commit to that is about your personal definition to peace and the one thing that will not overwhelm you but that will make things better? Experiment and try and build action plans. Those are all things that will help me."

To stay connected with Maya's work, please go to Ceeds of Peace, the Matsunaga Institute, and the Obama Foundation. If you have suggestions for innovative leadership organizations and individuals in the Asia Pacific region, please contact Maya at The Obama Foundation.

Lots of gratitude to all the behind-the-scenes volunteers that made this call happen!