

Sacred Slam in South Africa

Our introduction.

We arrived in Cape Town International Airport after a long 24 hours of traveling, and were so happy to be picked up by Avra Stein, her father and her sister. Avra is one of the three main organizers of the F2F South Africa camp. She was our primary contact in the months preceding camp, helping us with all logistical and programmatic issues. “I can’t believe you’re actually here!!” she exclaimed as we walked across the terminal floor. We were in good hands and so pleased to be on solid ground again.

After a much-appreciated day to ourselves to rest and acclimate, our second early morning brought us to the Stein house, where with 10 other counselors we packed up the cars and headed to the farm in Marmesbury where camp would be held. From the very beginning, we were so impressed with the planning these young college students had done to put together a five-day residential program for 45 high school students.

The youth arrived at camp later that afternoon – from the high vantage point of the farm on a mountain, we could see the bus as it approached on the single dirt road, and we gathered outside to welcome them, collect their belongings, and bring them to their rooms.

The participants.

The group of students gathered was incredibly diverse in terms of race, religion and socio-economic background and represented many different communities in Cape Town. Some knew each other from school or from a previous camp, but many of them had never met before. Most were between the ages of 15 and 17. Some lived in government-funded townships, and others in wealthy suburbs. Most were Jewish, Muslim, or Christian, however, there were Hindu and Bahai practitioners as well.

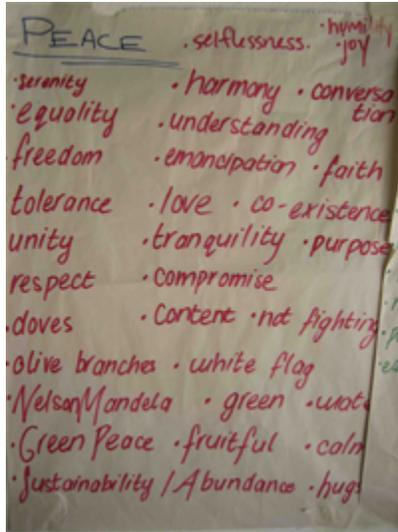


Five days of camp were full of programming from morning till night. Ian led meditation every morning at 6:30 – and incredibly, these teenagers who were on their summer vacation, came in increasing numbers to learn this new practice and enjoy the early morning silence.

Each day Ian and I led our own workshops with the participants, and we also assisted in other activities and discussions. We alternated facilitation with the other South African counselors and were pleased to see how well all of our activities blended together. Some of the topics covered were privilege, self-esteem, religious practice, prejudice, and reconciliation. We found that our focus on defining, understanding, and expressing experiences of **war** and **peace**, was a focus that mingled well into every other topic on hand.

Our workshops.

We designed our first workshop to expand the typical understanding of war and peace through group and personal brainstorm exercises. Through a process of free association with the participants we created large lists of words with connotations of war and peace. Similarly, we asked each participant to spend time personally reflecting on their own experiences with war and peace. These two brainstorms set the stage for the rest of our work together by creating a resource for participants to draw upon when deciding what to focus on in their writing or art.



On our war list were things like *greed, explosions, power, AIDS*

And on our peace list were words like *no poverty, safety, education, home*

Expanding the notions of war beyond battles fought among armies and peace beyond treaties signed among dignitaries, was an exciting and challenging leap for many of the youth. We found them eager to explore war and peace as they existed in their own lives. And when we gave the instructions for the collage-making workshop the following day the activity took on a life of its own. We could not stop them!

It was an amazing sight to watch 45 youth sprawled over the floor with magazines everywhere creating passionately. Our simple instructions were to cut up the images and text presented in the magazines and rearrange them to create a collage of your personal experience with war and peace. We wanted to give the participants the opportunity to deconstruct the various media images they are bombarded with on a daily basis and reconstruct their own imagery.

The following day we focused on writing, resulting in some fantastic poetry – both group pieces and individual – but more important for us was to watch the process itself: rigorous scribbling of self-expression. We began the writing workshop by breaking the larger group into several smaller groups consisting of 7 people. Each person in each group was asked to write a line of poetry on a large strip of paper. Once everyone had written their line, the group was charged with arranging the individual lines into one group poem. A group representative then read the poem to the entire camp. After each group had the opportunity to read their poem we rotated groups offering everyone the opportunity to create a new poem from their peers' words.





Later, we gave participants the choice of working either with Ian on poetry or with Ronit on journaling. The writing workshop concluded with the whole camp coming back together and giving participants the opportunity to share what they had written.

Camp was a whirlwind of activity and new experiences for the participants and also for the two of us. It was an exciting time that began as quickly as it ended. Ian and I wanted to do something special for the youth and so on the last day of camp we organized an exhibition in the farm's interfaith chapel. By hanging up all of the participants' collages and other artwork created during our five days together we turned the chapel into a spectacular gallery.



The participants and their parents came up the hill next to the chapel for the camp's closing ceremony, and once it was complete we swung open the doors to the chapel and invited everyone in. It was a pleasure to hear their gasps of delight and see them pointing their work out to each other and to their parents as well. This visual display was a tangible illustration of all of the work and ideas created at camp. We also offered an opportunity for some participants to present written work to the whole group.



Many of the participants are eager for their work to be shared with a wider audience, and they graciously offered their art and writing to us to bring back to the US for this purpose. We were touched by their willingness to do this, and look forward to finding creative ways of achieving this goal. Currently, we are undertaking the laborious task of cataloging and organizing the photos, writing, and collages from camp so that we can determine how best to exhibit their work.



After camp: Home-stays

We are especially grateful to Rashaad Fortune, one of the home-group leaders, who, together with his family hosted us in his home for a week after camp. Our week with the F2F counselors Rashaad, Avra, Emile, Suhair, Amanda and others, driving and walking around Cape Town and learning more about the social, political, and cultural context of our work was invaluable. These counselors, in their late teens and early twenties are the first generation to grow up after apartheid's end. We felt privileged to have such interesting conversations about how this translates in their lives and those of their families.

We had the chance to tour important sites in the city, including Robben Island where Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners were detained, the Jewish museum, which chronicles the history of Jews in South Africa and their role in the anti-apartheid struggle, District 6, a region famous for its once integrated neighborhoods and infamous for the total razing of the area by the apartheid government, and Bo-Kapp, a Muslim neighborhood which holds in one of its mosques, the first copy of the Koran written down in South Africa.

Emile's father took us through a number of townships where we were able to meet with grassroots activists running community centers, job training courses, and counseling programs. For example, we spoke with a minister in the Manenberg township who is building a center for education and worship in the same building that once housed the main gang leaders of the community.

In addition to the invaluable time we were able to spend with our co-workers and their families after camp we were also able to continue with our project by conducting interviews and determining ways to stay connected once Ian and I returned to the US. A number of participants, for example, will be sending us photographs in the coming weeks of what war and peace *look* like in their communities, adding an important medium to the creative exploration we undertook at camp.

Next steps

Overall, we were extremely pleased with the feedback from the South African staff, who are already requesting we return next January to participate in camp again! In addition, we plan to be involved with the F2F summer intensive in New York – a chance to follow up with participants from all the countries, and make more detailed arrangements for a trip to the Middle East in the fall.

Our current task is two-fold: Synthesize the art created at the camp in South Africa in ways that effectively communicate the youth's experience to a larger audience and begin active work on the second phase of our project in Northern Ireland. We look forward to keeping you up to date on the project's development.

In thanks,

Ronit and Ian