

## A Woman Among Warlords: Malalai Joya brings message of peace to Surf City

Written by Surf City Voice  
Thursday, 21 April 2011 00:00

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Joya denounces those who “mix Islam with politics and use it against the people.”

By Mary Adams Urashima, [Surf City Voice](#) , April 21, 2011



American author Robert Fulgham said, “Peace is not something you wish for. It’s something you make, something you do, something you are, and something you give away.”

Over the last two weeks, Golden West College has hosted national and international speakers involved in the work of peace building. Viewed too often as a passive state, peace is not the absence of conflict or inactivity. Peace is complex, involved work.

And, one should be “all in” because peace building often puts people in harm’s way.

Prior to the annual peace conference on April 15, Golden West College worked with the Los Angeles-based Afghan Women’s Mission to host Malalai Joya on April 8, one of the few women to be elected to the new parliament of Afghanistan. Prior to her rare appearance in Huntington Beach, she spoke at Harvard University, and afterward in Washington D.C.

Joya—a survivor of multiple assassination attempts—must move about under cover of the burka she hates while in Afghanistan. A group of Afghan men, armed, provide her constant

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protection.

“I never had to wear a burka before,” says the petit Joya, dressed modestly but leaving her long hair uncovered at her Huntington Beach speech. She appears at ease and obviously relishes being with people who speak freely.

Joya started speaking out against the inclusion of warlords and extremists in the Afghan government at the 2003 Constitutional Loya Jirga, or assembly. Only 27 at the time, she shocked the mostly male Afghan gathering with her criticism, chaos broke out, and the chairman promptly tried to oust her from the meeting. The United Nations team put her under their protection.

Taking her seat in parliament two years later—after a landslide victory in her home province of Farah—Joya again was criticized for comparing members of the unruly assembly to a stable of animals during a televised interview. Her colleagues promptly banned her from parliament, saying she could return if she publicly apologized.

In typical Joya fashion, she did apologize – to the animals for comparing them to parliament. This is a woman who doesn't back down.

### **A Woman Among Warlords**

Joya's visit to the U.S. is both to promote her book, *A Woman Among Warlords*, and also to speak out against the current strategy in Afghanistan. She has no filter. No one escapes her direct assessment.

Joya speaks about civilian deaths increasing, condemns the use of white phosphorus munitions, criticizes the Karzai government, and refers to the NATO presence in Afghanistan as occupation. She says the fact Afghan women can vote or run for office does not mean the status of women has improved.

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Joya denounces those who “mix Islam with politics and use it against the people.” She deplores the depiction of Afghans “as a backward people, nothing more than terrorists, criminals and henchmen” and thinks the stereotype is dangerous for “both my country and the West.”

Joya advocates for US withdrawal and tries to educate the American audience about Afghanistan’s centuries-long history of resistance to occupation. She clearly loves the Americans who come to hear her, believing people—not governments—can make a difference. At Golden West, it was apparent her audience loves her back, applauding her entrance and lingering after the program to get one more word with her.

“I would like them to invade us with hospitals and schools,” says Joya, writing “In solidarity” as she signs books. “A democracy is never successful unless it comes from the people themselves.”

“She’s very brave,” says Masoud Farand, an Afghan American documentary filmmaker and activist, who drove from Cerritos to attend Joya’s presentation in Huntington Beach. He has returned to Afghanistan often to film and assist aid efforts, taking time to meet with both political leaders and the “man on the street.”

Farand marvels that Joya has not been hurt or killed, but believes her icon status to Afghans and others around the world—including the female Nobel Laureates who defended Joya after she was banned from parliament—offers some protection inside Afghanistan. If anyone touches her, they would be found out.

“I think the truth is saving her,” Farand comments. Joya’s clear voice is part of what inspires Farand to continue his own work, seeking the humanitarian and political equation that will move Afghanistan into a new era.

### **Inspiration**

Also seeking inspiration, students in the Peace Studies program at Golden West brought more leaders to the college for the annual Peace Conference the week after Joya’s visit. Over 200

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students, professionals and activists gathered on campus for the day-long forum.

Conference speakers included global ecologists, filmmakers, experts in non violent civil resistance, humanitarians, an anthropologist speaking about biology and culture, a bioenergetics therapist addressing the effect of population-wide post traumatic stress on peace, a leader in alternative education, and a spokesman for the Washington D.C.-based United States Institute for Peace.

The message was clear: every discipline and every individual has an opportunity to nudge the world closer toward more sustainable and peaceful coexistence.

A highlight of the conference was an award presentation to San Diego-based “Invisible Children,” a non profit humanitarian organization started by college-age boys to help victims of the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) in central Africa. The LRA fuels one of Africa’s longest running conflicts in Uganda, and has moved into Sudan and the Congo.

On their first visit to Uganda in 2003, the southern Californians learned of children kidnapped at night from their homes to be used as child soldiers by the LRA. The LRA is known for having the youngest child soldier, a five-year-old who was armed and forced to fight in Joseph Kony’s pseudo spiritual war.

Meeting with survivors, who huddled together at night to hide from the LRA, became a defining moment for the visitors. Invisible Children was born.

Like Malalai Joya, the Invisible Children founders have come face to face with the risks of peace building. They lost 25-year-old Nate Henn, one of their American “roadies,” to a suicide bombing that killed 74 people at a World Cup match in Kampala last year. It was his first trip to Uganda.

Today, Invisible Children is raising funds to build a radio network in central Africa, to track the LRA and warn villages when they are approaching.

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“The pursuit of peace has a humbling effect on us all,” said Wes Bryan, President of Golden West, who commented on how the Peace Studies program has affected both his personal views and the curriculum at the college. Bryan emphasized how the program integrates with other studies on campus, changing how people think and behave.

Fran Faraz, director of the Peace Studies program hopes the conference will continue to grow. The goal is not only to raise awareness and new ideas, Faraz would like bring the community together.

“I’d like to invite entrepreneurs who started up companies that are contributing to the cause of peace, economically, socially, environmentally,” comments Faraz. She would like more hands on experiences for her students, more international figures in the world of peace building, and speakers who will talk about the role of women in peace building.

This brings us back to Malalai Joya and the continuing pursuit of peace. “We have two choices,” Joya told an East Coast audience a few days after leaving Huntington Beach, “To sit in silence, or to do struggle. But I’m alive. I didn’t expect to be alive.”

*Mary Urashima is a Huntington Beach resident and, in addition to local charitable efforts, has worked as a volunteer on humanitarian projects for Afghanistan for eight years. Her last article for the Surf City Voice was “A Seed Fallen.”*