

# *Peacemakers in Action* Podcast Transcript

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## Show Notes

- [Meet the \*Peacemakers in Action\*](#)
- [More about Dishani's work](#)
- [More about the \*Network Intervention in Sri Lanka\*](#)
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## **Conflict is a Flower: Dishani Jayaweera, Sri Lanka (Episode 2) Transcript:**

**MARK FOWLER:** Have you ever heard the story of the blind men and the elephant? It's an ancient Indian parable that's appeared in Buddhist, Hindu and other Eastern texts — and remains popular today.

The basic story is that a group of blind men encounter an elephant for the first time. Each one feels a different part of the animal's body: its trunk, its ears, its side, its tail. Then, when the men try to describe the animal to one another, they end up arguing — each one certain that the others are being dishonest or lying.

The lesson, of course, is that our subjective experiences can be limiting, and that we only get to see the full picture when we respect one another's perspectives.

These are wise words for anyone, particularly as the modern world seems to move more and more toward valuing specialization and impatience. But when it comes to peacebuilding, the lesson of the blind men and the elephant couldn't be more crucial.

Today on *Peacemakers in Action*, we meet someone whose life and work is all about seeing the whole elephant. Her name is Dishani Jayaweera and aside from being a Tanenbaum *Peacemaker in Action*, she's the co-founder of a remarkable organization called the Centre for Peacebuilding and Reconciliation. Based in the island nation of Sri Lanka — off the southern tip of India — CPBR, as it's known for short, has spent the past 17 years forging deep connections across the ethnic and religious divides that fueled decades of civil war.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** I'm coming from a tiny island in the Indian Ocean. People say it's the teardrop of India, because it looks like a teardrop. So it's a beautiful island, but unfortunately humans couldn't make it a heaven.

**MARK FOWLER:** In this episode, we'll examine the conflict that served as the backdrop to most of Dishani's life. It's important to note that our descriptions of these past events are based on our own reading of history, from news articles and other retrospectives. They are not Dishani's characterizations. In fact, she doesn't dwell on anything as reductive as who did what to whom, preferring instead to keep her focus on the whole elephant, in order to continue transforming the conflict beyond the violence that destroyed so many lives. Nevertheless, we offer these details as helpful context for understanding Dishani's story — particularly for those unfamiliar with Sri Lanka's history.

So, join me now, as we explore, with Dishani, her journey from confused, justice-seeking youth to peacebuilding champion — and how that journey was aided by an entirely *different* story about an elephant.

[Theme music - with narration: "From the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, I'm Mark Fowler and this is *Peacemakers in Action*, a podcast about..."]

On the morning of July 25, 1983, the tear-drop-shaped island nation of Sri Lanka was in flames. Riots erupted in the capital, Columbo, the night before, as mobs from the Buddhist Sinhalese ethnic majority attacked, looted and set ablaze the homes and businesses of the Hindu Tamil population. The uprising was revenge for the killing of 13 Sri Lankan Army soldiers by Tamil separatists days earlier.

In the middle of the burning city, 14-year-old Dishani Jayaweera woke to the sound of screams and stones hitting the back of her family's house. They were coming from her Tamil neighbors, seeking refuge from the chaos and fire about to engulf their home.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** And they were throwing stones to our windows to make us wake up. Then my father took them to our side and then they came inside our house.

**MARK FOWLER:** Despite being Sinhalese, Dishani's parents were quick to jump to their neighbors' aid, helping the family of four over the wall separating their houses and bringing them inside. At that point, Dishani's father made it clear that no one should know they were hiding a Tamil family — that it wasn't safe.

This confused young Dishani because her father was a police officer, and they lived in police housing. It seemed like they were actually in the safest place they could be. And yet, when she looked outside, Dishani saw that the other police officers weren't like her dad — they weren't trying to protect anyone. In fact, many supported and engaged in the rioting.

This became all too clear a couple of days later, when rioters showed up looking for the Tamil family. Here's Dishani to explain what happened next:

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** This is the most scary part, still my heart is so fast, bouncing as I share it. [sigh] They came to our house with guns and all. And my father was not there. And my mother took a knife and then kept it to her throat, and she told that “If you cross my gate, I’ll cut my throat.” Me and my brother were not crying even because we know our mother. Our mother is such a strong woman, and if she said she will do it, she will do it. I mean, like, I thought that’s it, that’s the end of our family.

**MARK FOWLER:** But thankfully it wasn’t. The rioters could see how serious Dishani’s mother was and backed down. Dishani’s parents then quickly arranged to take the Tamil family to another hiding place — one just as unlikely as a police officer’s home: a Buddhist temple.

Why would such a seemingly peaceful place be an unlikely place to hide a Tamil family? Well, for one thing, most Sri Lankan Tamils are Hindu, whereas almost all Sinhalese are Buddhist. What’s more, some Buddhist monks were actually involved in the violence during that 1983 summer. Dishani even witnessed some of it firsthand, and yet, she also saw that there were Buddhist monks who worked against the violence, who were helping those in need.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** Same robe in two different places, in different ways. You know?

**MARK FOWLER:** Many times over her life, Dishani would return to this moment, finding it fuel for her own personal journey toward becoming a Tanenbaum *Peacemaker in Action*. It’s a journey that has taken many twists and turns, but is largely defined by wanting to be like the monks — and everyone else, including her parents — who chose peace over violence.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** When somebody asked me ... what is your quest? I mean, this is where my quest started.

**MARK FOWLER:** This is also where the Sri Lankan civil war started. Over the course of a week, the July 1983 riots — otherwise known as Black July — led to the deaths of between 400 and 3,000 Tamil people, as well as the displacement of 150,000 others. This brutal conflict — rooted in the legacy of British imperialism and defined as much by language as by religious differences — would go on to claim the lives of 80,000-100,000 people, both sides inflicting horrific damage. This was the backdrop to Dishani’s life for the next couple of decades.

[musical break/transition]

It’s not hard to see why Dishani credits her parents as her first teachers of peace. The selfless risks they took to save that Tamil family is beyond exemplary. But it seems they were always offering these kinds of lessons about helping others.

Dishani remembers one instance when her mother forced her to give her toy elephant — her most prized possession — to another little girl she was playing with.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** Still tears come when I’m thinking about it. Any other thing I would give, but that, no!

**MARK FOWLER:** Still, her mother was insistent, especially as the other girl cried and asked for the toy.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** “It’s just an elephant, Dishani. Just a little elephant.”

**MARK FOWLER:** Simple as it was, this lesson in the power of sharing — in understanding that strength comes from what you give not what you hold onto — has stayed with Dishani throughout her life.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** Still, when something is hard for me to let go, I think that it’s just an elephant. That’s playing a big part of my peace-building work. That’s where I start my Buddhist practice, I think.

**MARK FOWLER:** Dishani’s Buddhist practice was never a traditional one. In a way, that was to be expected after witnessing what some Buddhist monks had done during the Black July riots. At the same time, she was also greatly influenced by the books her mother — a political science teacher — gave her to read.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** I was reading socialist books, all. From age seven, I never got any other gift from my mother, all books.

**MARK FOWLER:** Meanwhile, her biggest heroes became Che Guevara and — perhaps, somewhat unexpectedly — Jesus of Nazareth. But over time she found herself gravitating in one particular direction, when it came to seeking justice.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** I found that Jesus is the most socialist nonviolent activist in the world, and with Che Guevara I can’t agree with the violence.

**MARK FOWLER:** And Dishani certainly saw a lot of violence. From 1987 to 1989, while she was in college, the People’s Liberation Front, known more simply as the JVP, staged an armed uprising under the banner of Sinhalese nationalism. Many of Dishani’s young friends joined the cause and were killed. Meanwhile, fighting continued between Tamil separatists and the Sri Lankan government.

One day, in 1987, while Dishani was riding on a bus in Columbo, a huge blast went off.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** Hundreds and hundreds died on the spot. And more than like hundreds of people, like wounded.

**MARK FOWLER:** Despite being just a few kilometers from the explosion, Dishani was uninjured. It took her four hours to find out that her family — also near the blast — were safe.

As news unfolded, it became clear the blast was the result of a Tamil suicide bomber. Dishani was disturbed that someone would want to inflict such damage, but — at the same time — looking at the images of the bomber in the media, she saw someone not unlike herself.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** I was looking at him. He was my age. And then those eyes, I saw, so bright, so pure.

**MARK FOWLER:** In many ways, he reminded her of her friends, the young Sinhalese revolutionaries. This forced her to reflect in a way she never had before.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** I was so worried about JVP people dying. But why am I not that worried when the Tamil young people die? I think that's where I started to reflect deeply about my own stereotypes, my own areas to unlearn, you know?

**MARK FOWLER:** What once seemed like clear divisions between ethnic groups, religion, and political ideologies, started to dissolve.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** I started to understand how the system works, how they are keeping us as one another an enemy. But then I thought the law is the best to fight.

**MARK FOWLER:** So Dishani started law school. And while she enjoyed her studies, it wasn't until the final step of gaining entry to the bar — where she was going into the courts and working on criminal cases — that she realized it wasn't the right career for her.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** I realized that I'm strengthening the system instead of transforming the system. I realized that laws are there to strengthen the injustice system, which I am not accepting.

**MARK FOWLER:** It seemed clear that she couldn't continue as a lawyer. But to give up and disappoint her family was a frightening prospect. Once again, though, her mother was there to guide her.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** She asked, "Okay, what does your heart say?" I told my heart says "Just leave." "Then leave." I was like, "Really? Then that day she has given me advice up to now that is what I'm following: Always in crossroads, just listen to your heart because the heart doesn't know calculations. It knows only the truth. So then make the decision and then use the brain to implement it.

**MARK FOWLER:** While it was helpful, empowering advice, Dishani was still leaving a defined career path for something totally unknown.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** So then I was like, just walking here and there, and I thought to be an interior designer because I have an artistic side, and I do like painting and all that kind of stuff. I do. I thought that it is only me, and I don't want to be a part of a big system.

**MARK FOWLER:** But just as Dishani began exploring her newfound freedom, she had an encounter that would change the rest of her life.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** I was walking all the streets, you know, wearing these bathroom slippers and a T-shirt, like a hippie, and suddenly one of my teachers I met in a supermarket.

**MARK FOWLER:** The teacher couldn't believe her star pupil wasn't in some kind of high-powered profession by now.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** And so she was asking "Dishani, what are you doing? What happened to you?" And then I asked "Why? Nothing happened to me! I'm so fine."

**MARK FOWLER:** But as they talked, Dishani explained how she struggled to fit into the "real" world — how the sense of justice she had developed from people like her mother and that teacher had made it hard for her to operate. Something seemed to click for the teacher, and she told Dishani that she understood her dilemma.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** And then after three days, I got a call from a professor, and then he told me my teacher "asked me to invite you for an interview."

**MARK FOWLER:** Dishani's former teacher set her up with a job interview at a new independently-operated government initiative called the National Integration Program Unit, or NIPU. This was the Spring of 1998 and Sri Lanka had a president, who was supportive of minority rights and pushing to transform the ethnic conflict as part of her re-election bid. As a result, NIPU was charged with promoting peace, national integration and power sharing across key sectors of society, such as the armed forces, the government, schools, and civil society organizations. Dishani was intrigued and — despite her interest in working outside the system — she decided to give the job a try when they offered it to her.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** As soon as I started that job, I thought, "Oh, my God. This is what I was looking for."

**MARK FOWLER:** She was working for nine professors who were experts in a range of disciplines, but united by their analysis of the conflict and belief in power sharing as a way to change the system. The reason for such an effort was that many Sri Lankans, on both sides of the ethnic conflict, thought power sharing would result in their side losing out. They had to be taught — much like Dishani with her toy elephant — that sharing was a power unto itself, one that could bring about peace.

So that's what the professors did: Aided by Dishani, they met with teachers, police officers, soldiers, government workers, and community leaders to explain how power sharing worked, what it meant, and that it actually had roots in their culture — before the colonial system created existing divisions. For Dishani, it was an invigorating experience.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** The knowledge was so fresh for me because I was so unhappy with what I learned as law. I realized nothing is creative there, you know? Everything is very stagnant. But here, it's such an open space for me to think and create and learn,

understand, discover about humans, economy, systems. It's a totally different way of learning and opening up.

**MARK FOWLER:** But it wasn't just the job that Dishani fell in love with. She also found a powerful personal connection with one of the professors — a man named Jayantha Seneviratne.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** From the first day I saw him, I fell in very, very deep love.

**MARK FOWLER:** Jayantha, or Jay, as Dishani calls him, didn't quite feel the same way at first.

**JAYANTHA SENEVIRATNE:** For Dishani, it was first sight love, but for me it was a process.

**MARK FOWLER:** Jay was in his late 40's — a good 15 years older than Dishani. He was also recently separated from his wife. So, he was struggling emotionally, and his mind was elsewhere. But he could see Dishani was a special person.

**JAYANTHA SENEVIRATNE:** My first impression about Dishani was a kind, passionate, intelligent, and creative young woman.

**MARK FOWLER:** Meanwhile, by 1999, the civil war in Sri Lanka reached a peak level of violence. For the members of NIPU, who traveled the country promoting peace, it was inescapable. They often found themselves on the frontlines.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** I mean sometimes, you know, the firing is happening in front of us.

**MARK FOWLER:** Yet the work pressed on. And Dishani, who had been playing more of a logistical role, as a program officer, began taking strides toward more directly influencing and shaping the work — finding ways to improve it. One major step in that process came after she attended a peacebuilding course in the United States, where she first learned about the concept of reconciliation — or the process of addressing, and hopefully restoring, fractured relationships.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** I realized, "Oh my God, this is what I love to do." And this is because I was searching for this emotional component of peacebuilding, you know?

**MARK FOWLER:** She felt like the professors at NIPU were too stuck in their heads, too academic, too theoretical, and not action-oriented, or doing enough to help people connect with their hearts and emotions. So upon returning to Sri Lanka, equipped with this new perspective on conflict transformation, she started to develop her own workshop, which she piloted during Jay's lectures.

**JAYANTHA SENEVIRATNE:** Still I can remember her first 1 or 2-hour reconciliation session. I started to believe one day she will be leading and do this work better than us.

**MARK FOWLER:** At the same time, as work brought them closer, any hesitancy Jay had about a relationship with Dishani had fully evaporated.

**JAYANTHA SENEVIRATNE:** We started to share our life as a pair in life as well as in work.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** I found my life, both sides.

[musical break/transition]

**MARK FOWLER:** Just as life seemed to reach new heights for Dishani and Jay, power changed hands in Sri Lanka's parliament and NIPU was handed over to the Ministry of Buddhist Affairs. Peacebuilding was no longer the priority.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** I had to post the Buddha's birthday cards instead of doing peacebuilding work.

**MARK FOWLER:** This made it clear that Dishani and Jay could no longer be effective working within the government. So they both decided to leave NIPU. Despite feelings of frustration, though, hope wasn't all lost. The new government had actually signed a ceasefire agreement with the Tamil separatists, which meant the time was right to ramp up peacebuilding efforts — even if Jay and Dishani had to do it on their own. After all, they had forged strong ties with 130-or-so civil society groups.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** These people keep calling me and saying, "Dishani, we need to do this. How can we do that?"

**MARK FOWLER:** To meet the demand, Dishani and Jay began using their own funds to travel the country and lead trainings wherever they were invited. It was costly, time-consuming work, but they felt they were doing something new and important.

Previous peacebuilding efforts at the local level were typically run by organizations with specific agendas, tight timelines, and top-down, one-way communication. Dishani and Jay went about things differently. They were patient, they listened, and their mode of communication was interactive and collaborative with the communities/civil society organizations.

One of the key breakthroughs Dishani experienced in her newfound peacebuilding work was with Buddhist monks, a highly influential force within the Sinhalese Buddhist majority that had very little exposure to the ideas of peacebuilding.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** Most of the peace building or human rights organizations were run by either Tamils, either Sinhala Christians, not Buddhists. So we both realized we have a responsibility to go and work with Buddhist monks.

**MARK FOWLER:** For Dishani, this experience forced her to reckon with those dueling images of the '83 riots: where some monks helped Tamil people in need and others took part in the destruction.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** It was my real peacebuilding work to heal myself. I started my healing, and the monks became my very good friends. I was able to understand their feelings, why they are promoting war.



**MARK FOWLER:** By living with the monks for days at a time, Dishani began to see that they had — in her eyes — a limited base of knowledge. They weren't getting the same basic education as other Sri Lankans. They were limited in terms of their language skills, access to technology, and exposure to the world outside the temples. And, as Dishani saw it, this made the monks jealous of other religious leaders. So they found other ways to maintain their self-importance.

Through their dialogues with Dishani and Jay, some monks would make this breakthrough as well.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** Once one of the Buddhist monks told me, “When I was listening to you, I feel like you will attain Nirvana before us.”

**MARK FOWLER:** In Sri Lankan society, it's extremely rare for a lay person — let alone a woman — to receive such praise from a highly venerated monk. So, this experience boosted Dishani's confidence in her approach to peacebuilding.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** That really healed me and it supported me to connect with other religious leaders more, deeper level.

**MARK FOWLER:** At the same time, Dishani and Jay approached a breaking point in terms of how much time and effort they could put into the work without any kind of outside support. A wake-up call came one night when they were driving home from a workshop. Jay was at the wheel, and he was saying something to Dishani, but not making any sense.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** And then I asked Jay, “What did you say?” And then he said, “No, no, nothing. I didn't say anything.” And then after a while, he said, “Dishani, I was sleeping.”

**MARK FOWLER:** Jay was so exhausted that he fell asleep while driving. Immediately, Dishani knew they couldn't keep working themselves this hard anymore. Something was going to have to change.

So, at the urging of some friends, they applied for and received their first grant in 2003 from a Canadian foundation. This was no small step for them. Neither she nor Jay previously considered forming a non-governmental organization, or NGO. As a result, they were caught off-guard when they found out they needed to have a name for the organization in order to receive the funding.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** We were sleeping, and I asked Jay, “Wake up! Tell me a name for the organization.”

**MARK FOWLER:** He quickly came up with the Centre for Peacebuilding...

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** and I said “and reconciliation” because I wanted the name reconciliation in there.

**MARK FOWLER:** While they now had a name — the Centre for Peacebuilding and Reconciliation, or CPBR for short — Dishani still worried about the downsides of becoming a full-fledged NGO. For example, how would she handle a funder asking her to change some aspect of the work? Would she feel the need to please, even if it meant watering down the approach she and Jay believed in?

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** Like a mantra, I keep saying that “Dishani, the moment your integrity goes, the elephant will be blocking you.”

**MARK FOWLER:** Remembering this important lesson from her childhood — about not letting material goods get in the way of doing actual good — helped Dishani stay focused on the peacebuilding work. Over time, Dishani found herself able to maintain her independent spirit without interference. Most funders tended to support CPBR’s unique approach of working at the hyper-local level, building relations and trust within communities or villages — oftentimes on just a person-to-person level — before bringing them together to work on reconciliation.

Within a few years, Dishani and CPBR instituted a youth program — oriented around photography — and set up interfaith dialogue centers throughout Sri Lanka, mobilizing religious actors and leaders to take on a sustained role in peacebuilding.

Unfortunately, by 2005, three years after the cease-fire agreement was signed, hostilities reignited. A new president had been elected with a hardline approach to ending the civil war militarily. Four brutal years later, in 2009, the civil war ended.

**DEMOCRACY NOW:** Sri Lanka’s quarter-century-long civil war is in its final throes, with the militant group, the Tamil Tigers, almost completely defeated. On Sunday, the Sri Lankan military claimed victory after the Tamil Tiger army said it was “prepared to silence its guns” and admitted the fighting had reached a bitter end.

[musical break/transition]

**MARK FOWLER:** Although the war had ended, hardline authoritarianism continued, making civil society peacebuilding work more difficult and dangerous. Terms like “peace” and “reconciliation” became so politicized that alternate words like “co-existence” had to be used instead. This certainly put the Centre for Peacebuilding and Reconciliation in a tough place. But Dishani and Jay held strong on their name — despite the risks it brought.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** Like four or five times, the Criminal Investigation Department came to our interfaith dialogue centers and questioned our people.

**MARK FOWLER:** But seeing that the CPBR-sponsored gatherings included Hindus, Buddhists, Christians and Muslims, the investigation department couldn’t easily crack down on it. That didn’t mean the state fully accepted the work Dishani was doing. Both Dishani and Jay were called in for investigations at various points.

Meanwhile, CPBR’s work was beginning to receive recognition on the international level. In 2012, Dishani was the recipient of two prestigious awards — the Coexist prize from the UK-based Coexist Foundation and the *Peacemaker in Action* award from my organization, the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, here in New York.

We first heard about Dishani from one of our program advisory council members, Susan Hayward.

**SUSAN HAYWARD:** My name is the Reverend Susan Hayward, and I serve as a senior adviser for religion and inclusive societies at the United States Institute of Peace.

**MARK FOWLER:** Susan met Dishani in the summer of 2006, while conducting research for her graduate studies on the relationship between religion and peace and conflict.

**SUSAN HAYWARD:** The thing that struck me about Dishani and CPBR generally was just the degree of heart and compassion they brought to the work that they did. It wasn't necessarily about having a million different workshops and doing all sorts of activities in the way that I think sometimes international donors demand and encourage, but rather about ensuring that the time was really taken to build the relationships of trust that could ensure more meaningful transformation.

**MARK FOWLER:** To Susan, a scholar of Buddhism, this rather methodical approach to peacebuilding is, in a way, a reflection of Dishani's own religious background and principles.

**SUSAN HAYWARD:** Dishani and CPBR bring to their work a really sophisticated analysis that is based on something like a systems approach to seeing that the work of achieving peace is not linear. It's not "you do one thing and lead to another and lead to another and then we'll have peace, love and understanding." The work of peacebuilding needs to operate in such a way that it is kind of multidimensional, in ways that can lead to a greater transformation and discussion. That's a very kind of Buddhist philosophical approach to understanding reality.

**MARK FOWLER:** This was among the reasons Susan was excited to nominate Dishani for Tanenbaum's *Peacemaker in Action* award.

**SUSAN HAYWARD:** I was aware that there weren't a lot of examples in the Tanenbaum network of Buddhist peacebuilders. So I was eager to highlight that, and I was also eager to highlight her as a woman peacebuilder who's been able to develop trust and respect from male religious clergy across different traditions, but — perhaps most remarkable — from her own religious tradition.

**MARK FOWLER:** When Dishani was finally named one of Tanenbaum's 2012 awardees, she became our first *Peacemaker in Action* from a non-Abrahamic faith. For Dishani, it was an exciting, but humbling moment.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** I felt like "Oh my God, I'm doing something important," you know?

**MARK FOWLER:** Like many peace actors at the local level, Dishani hadn't spent much time thinking about herself — and the award gave her some much needed perspective.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** I have my own self value for me, but some values you are not seeing until somebody shows it to you.

**MARK FOWLER:** Unfortunately, that didn't stop some people in Sri Lanka from asking why Dishani, not Jay, received the award. CPBR was perceived by many as Jay's project, partly because he had been doing peacebuilding work for much longer and was a bigger name — but also, no doubt, because they inherently doubted a woman could operate in peacebuilding circles as effectively as a man. Painful as it was to hear such things, Dishani ultimately rose above the criticism, using it as fuel to take her work to a new level.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** Always my anger ended up producing something beautiful.

**MARK FOWLER:** In receiving the *Peacemaker in Action* award, Dishani was able to step into the spotlight and take credit for her skills and accomplishments as a peacebuilder — while also giving strength to women more broadly. In fact, going forward, she would put more and more of her time into supporting and advancing women peacemakers in Sri Lanka.

Meanwhile, Dishani also looked for other ways to enhance her work and effectiveness on the heels of becoming a *Peacemaker in Action*.

**SUSAN HAYWARD:** I think what she was most excited about is the opportunity to learn from other religious peacebuilders for whom she has a great deal of respect.

**MARK FOWLER:** As I explained in the introductory episode of this series, Tanenbaum's *Peacemakers in Action* award recipients established their own network in 2011 to facilitate regular dialogue, skill sharing and even interventions in each other's countries, which are scattered around the world — from South Sudan to Columbia to Bosnia. This makes them a tight-knit group of unique individuals, who — in many respects — have more in common with one another than almost anyone else.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** When you feel that you have a community, that's such a gift.

**MARK FOWLER:** Dishani would soon have a chance to put the *Peacemaker in Action Network's* collaborative strengths to good use. In 2015, CPBR encountered a breakthrough in its work following the election of a new Sri Lankan president with a decided interest in healing the nation's wounds.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** The state has identified peace and reconciliation as a state agenda, and they set up two ministries for that, and all the people who left peacebuilding came back.

**MARK FOWLER:** This opening of political space meant that Dishani and her CPBR team could finally try to bridge the gap between the grassroots and the policymakers. Their idea was to hold a national symposium called the People's Forum, where Sri Lankans of every age, gender, faith, and ethnicity could present their recommendations for furthering reconciliation efforts. This would not only give people a voice in the process, but it would also ensure a better chance of success.

Of course, it was going to take a lot of careful work to prepare for the People's Forum. The recommendations couldn't be randomly and spontaneously presented — they would have to be

gathered, organized and whittled down ahead of time. Dishani and Jay got to work. They scheduled a gathering with over 50 faith-based leaders from all regions of the country a few weeks ahead of the People's Forum. Here, they would bring their community's recommendations and work together to finalize them.

At the same time, the gathering served as an opportunity for these leaders to interact in-person, share knowledge, experiences, strategies, and tools. Dishani envisioned it as the potential starting point for a sort-of Sri-Lankan version/adaptation of Tanenbaum's *Peacemakers in Action Network*. If set-up properly, such a network would be a major boon to peacebuilding efforts in the country for years to come. So, with all this in mind, Dishani decided to invite fellow Tanenbaum *Peacemakers* Pastor James Wuye and Imam Muhammad Ashafa to the pre-People's Forum gathering and turn it into a *Peacemakers in Action Intervention*.

**PASTOR JAMES WUYE:** My hate for the Muslims then had no limits. I lost my hand in trying to defend the church.

**IMAM MUHAMMAD ASHAFI:** The anger is there and I move to the issue of revenge. I want to take vengeance. How can I forgive this enemy of mine?

**MARK FOWLER:** This is from the 2007 documentary "The Imam and the Pastor," which tells the story of James and Ashafa's transformation from mortal enemies into brothers working for peace in their native Nigeria.

As a fan of the film, Dishani had shown it many times over the years at various trainings and interfaith dialogues. Now, thanks to her new *Peacemakers in Action Network* community, she invited her new friends Pastor James and Imam Ashafa to meet her Sri Lankan cohorts in person.

And that's exactly what happened, thanks to the Tanenbaum Network Intervention. Over the four-day gathering, Sri Lanka's faith leaders across all religions got to see a living example of how religiously motivated peace actors can overcome differences — and also how the duo's unique partnership serves as a model of cooperation. As a result, the attendees left the gathering ready to move forward with their nascent interfaith religious leaders network. At the same time, the gathering also achieved its other aim of preparing a tight set of recommendations for national reconciliation — having honed and synthesized a list of over 2,000 down to 67.

When the People's Forum took place three weeks later in Colombo, in July 2015, Sri Lanka's leading policymakers were there to receive the carefully honed recommendations, which covered six key themes: media, religion, constitutional reforms, language, education and healing. Over 2,500 people — from all sectors of society — attended. It was a momentous occasion for this conflict-scarred country. Here is one participant's exuberant reaction right after the forum ended:

**PARTICIPANT:** You have invited everyone: the youth, the women, all the members. Everyone's participation was to the fullest, and I was so happy I never expected such an experience. I have really enjoyed it and I await that our country will fly into peace, equality, justice and love above all.

**MARK FOWLER:** For Dishani, it was a completely satisfying feeling of long, hard work coming to fruition.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** I always say conflict is a flower. So then, that is the flower bloomed.

**MARK FOWLER:** Reflecting back on the success of the Peace Forum, Susan Hayward points to the years of careful groundwork and relationship-building that Dishani and CPBR put in.

**SUSAN HAYWARD:** Just a testament to Dishani's long-term vision and her understanding of all the work that is necessary in order to get to an event like a People's Forum versus other organizations in Sri Lanka and elsewhere I see the jump to do those kind of high visibility events in the capital with cameras and platforms and statements and that kind of thing. But it can sometimes feel like theater because it's not necessarily built on the kind of strong foundation that Dishani had built over several years before she did that kind of an event.

**MARK FOWLER:** That strong foundation helped the reconciliation work expand further at the governmental level. In the ensuing years, in collaboration with CPBR, a pilot project called “Heal the Past, Build the Future” was created to focus on developing cooperation between government and civil society. It began in just a few districts and has since spread to nine, comprising 20 locations in Sri Lanka.

For Dishani, it was such a relief to see these efforts and connections between local and national levels take root.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** We thought that as soon as they go there, “Oh my God, they are like totally equipped.” Conflict transformation, negotiations, mediation, interfaith dialogue centers around community consolidation, nonviolent communication, direct action. So then we thought, “Okay, so we did our job. Like a parent is releasing their children, go out and see how the world is.”

This allowed Dishani to step back from interfaith reconciliation work and focus on some other endeavors — specifically expanding their work with youth and also developing the power of women. So, once again, she set to work on developing a new training curriculum and leading workshops around the country.

**SINTHUJA SHANMUGANATHAN:** Ms. Dishani is a born facilitator. The way she facilitates and the way she designs and directs the workshop and training flows are very very unique and special... very spiritual and very, very interactive.

**MARK FOWLER:** This is Sinthuja Shanmuganathan, or Sinsan as she likes to be called — project coordinator for CPBR’s WOMAN initiative. She assumed the role two years ago, after meeting Dishani at a low point in her young career as a psychologist, working with victims of the civil war.

**SINTHUJA SHANMUGANATHAN:** We were not supposed to cry when clients started telling their stories and everything, I really wanted to cry with them. So from that point on I really wanted to do something different.

**MARK FOWLER:** It was through her brother, who was working with CPBR's youth-wing, that Sinsan was introduced to Dishani. It was a perfect match for a mentor/mentee relationship, especially considering how easily Dishani could relate to Sinsan's struggle to fit in and find a career.

**SINTHUJA SHANMUGANATHAN:** I felt like I met my guru, my teacher or my guide.

**MARK FOWLER:** It has been a big process of learning and unlearning. Much like Dishani, who gradually transformed her perceptions of religion — particularly toward her fellow Sinhalese Buddhists — Sinsan has had to rethink aspects of her own upbringing as a Tamil Hindu.

**SINTHUJA SHANMUGANATHAN:** There were many things implanted within me. So, going through that unlearning process itself, making me every day a new human being. And I was seeing things in a different perspective, which feels so healthy.

**MARK FOWLER:** While so much progress had been made toward peace and reconciliation in the decade since Sri Lanka's civil war came to an end, violence erupted again in tragic fashion on April 21, 2019, Easter Sunday.

**DEMOCRACY NOW:** In Sri Lanka, more than 300 people were killed and more than 500 were injured after a series of bomb attacks tore through churches and luxury hotels across the island nation Sunday.

**MARK FOWLER:** This time the violence came as a surprise. For one thing, the attackers were extremists who claim the mantle of Islam, and the victims were Christian. That didn't follow the standard ethno-religious storyline in Sri Lanka at all. Meanwhile, just as perplexing, was ISIS's eventual claim that the attackers were fighting for the Islamic State. Prior to the bombings, there was little sense that ISIS had made any incursions into Southeast Asia.

Still, two years later, Sri Lankans struggle to make sense of the attacks. More than anything, they are concerned about old tensions reigniting — and with good reason. In the weeks after the Easter bombings, many Muslim businesses and homes were destroyed by Sinhala Buddhist mobs. Then, months later, a new hardline president was elected with ties to the militant regime that ended the civil war.

Despite these seeming backslides toward renewed violent conflict, civil society is stronger — and more practiced in the ways of peacebuilding — than ever before. Almost immediately, the network of interfaith leaders CPBR had been cultivating over the years sprang into action in an effort to stem further violence.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** 26 religious leaders came together from all faiths. It was just so, like, refreshing feeling, right? Because everybody angry with Muslim people and Muslim

people are so ashamed. And so then that is the day I felt we have done something for this country.

**MARK FOWLER:** For Dishani, it was an even bigger, more important day than the People's Forum.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** Because the things they talk, and the way they react, and the way they connect, and the way they cried, and then the way they forgive. You know, like they were ready to move forward.

**MARK FOWLER:** And this time the network of interfaith leaders wanted to establish themselves as an independent movement.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** They very strongly said, "This is not NGOs work anymore. This is not somebody else's work. This is religious leaders' work from this point onwards."

**MARK FOWLER:** Still, they needed some support getting started. Luckily, CPBR had already been experimenting with a sort-of incubator model with its women and youth initiatives. So, these interfaith leaders decided to bring their new movement under the CPBR umbrella, which it can leave when it's ready to take off on its own.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** They came up with this name called APINAM. "Api" means in Sinhalese "we." "Nahm" means in Tamil "we."

**MARK FOWLER:** Now with 200 members across nine of Sri Lanka's 25 districts, APINAM engages in the work of healing, getting their respective communities to see themselves as resources for change. They do this by getting people to think more like Buddha, Mohamed, Jesus or Rama Krishna.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** If your Buddha is alive, if Jesus is alive, if your Rama Krishna is alive, what will they be doing? What kind of tools will they be using? What will be their vision? What would be their mission? Interpret according to your spiritual leader's character and identify what they will be doing in this moment.

**MARK FOWLER:** For outside observers like Susan Hayward, these kinds of efforts are extremely encouraging.

**SUSAN HAYWARD:** You see some of the ways in which the state and larger social systems have responded to the Easter bombing. That is cause for concern that it's only going to exacerbate some of the drivers of conflict rather than transform them. So I'm very optimistic when it comes to civil society.

**MARK FOWLER:** Nevertheless, the work has only gotten more difficult since the pandemic began. Coronavirus lockdowns have forced trainings and other outreach efforts online, and CPBR has had to invest much time and resources to aid that endeavor.



**SINTHUJA SHANMUGANATHAN:** Ms. Dishani is really giving her heart, soul, time to, you know, design something online. So it's very challenging.

**MARK FOWLER:** This is Sinsan again, and she seems to feel — despite the difficult times — that progress is tangible.

**SINTHUJA SHANMUGANATHAN:** I have seen the Islamic religious leaders hugging Catholic priests, you know? So this work has transformed certain human beings, which is a huge victory.

**MARK FOWLER:** And yet, at the same time, everyone engaged in peacebuilding and reconciliation, knows there is still so much more work to be done. Organizations like CPBR helped lay the groundwork, and are now evolving as the people they trained have become leaders and trainers themselves.

But stepping back won't be hard for Dishani. She just thinks of the toy elephant and remembers the power in sharing. Because, ultimately, the more people there are doing the work of peacebuilding, the better it is for everyone.

**DISHANI JAYAWEERA:** My dream is to build a movement, right? How small it is, okay. But it is quality too. It is practicing totally different principles in life than what we are practicing, and based on love. Deeper love. And on that deeper love, we will talk about politics, economy, and even about your enemy.

[theme music plays leading into credits]

**MARK FOWLER:** If you'd like to learn more about Dishani Jayaweera and her work in Sri Lanka, check out our upcoming bonus episode, which features an in-depth conversation with religion scholar Susan Hayward, who you heard earlier.

While you're at it, please make sure you're subscribed to *Peacemakers in Action* wherever you listen to podcasts. And, if you like what you've heard so far, leave us a rating and review on [Apple Podcasts](#).

We also encourage you to visit our website, [tanenbaum.org](http://tanenbaum.org), where we have lots of additional resources related to this episode, including a full transcript and photos. You can also learn more about our *Peacemaker in Action* award, the PIA network and past case studies. And, if you'd like to support our work — so that we can make more episodes like this one — visit our [donate page](#).

Now for the credits:

I'm your host, Mark Fowler, Tanenbaum CEO.

This episode was written, edited and produced by Bryan Farrell.

Tanenbaum Peacebuilding Assistant Director and series creator Janie Dumbleton, served as Co-producer, along with Tanenbaum *Peacemakers in Action Network* Coordinator Élie Khoury.

Our theme music is Bridgewalker by the Blue Dot Sessions.

This episode was mixed by Resonate.

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