

It is a privilege to work in a health service where everyone gets the best care regardless of wealth, education or background. My medical work is challenging, demanding, time-consuming but immensely rewarding. I have always felt that I wanted to do more to make a difference in the world. So it is an added privilege and honour to be President of IofC International.

At the age of 15 years, when I was in school in Australia, I first encountered IofC. I was captured by a number of things:

- 1) The diversity of people of different ages, cultures and traditions working together to bring about change
- 2) The link between addressing world issues and active engagement in local issues
- 3) The underlying link between starting with personal change as a critical factor in having wider impact and impact

Even at the age of 15, I realised that there was a big integrity gap in my own philosophy of life. I was angry at the dishonesty and corruption in the world and the way it disempowered and marginalised people but I thought nothing of taking change from my father's dressing table without asking his permission. I wanted a just peaceful world but that did not prevent me from being indifferent to some people, superior or intolerant of others.

I began to reflect in quiet and examine my own motives and behaviours against universal values of honesty, purity, unselfishness and love. The starting place for me was to be honest with my father about taking his money and to apologise to another person for my indifference to them and their country. Through this hesitant start I embarked on a life long journey of dealing with my integrity gap. I rediscovered my faith as a Muslim and it is the rock at the heart of all aspects of my life.

I am proud to be a British, Arab, Muslim professional woman but my life and faith has been greatly enriched by my encounters with people of other backgrounds and traditions. At the age of 21 I felt a clear sense of calling to two passions in my life: one to be a doctor and healer and the second passion to build bridges of understanding between people of different backgrounds, cultures and traditions. It is this journey as a bridge builder that has taken me to many countries and continents working with others to promote dialogue. The inspiring stories are many: the Syrian woman who is promoting peace circle dialogues amongst women to prepare for the future; the courageous former Christian and Muslim fighters in Lebanon and Nigeria who are now partners in peace building are but a few examples.

Based on my own personal experiences I have never been convinced of Huntington's prediction of clashing civilisations. However, my own profound belief in the enriching effect of diversity and civilisations has been tested time and again by the horrific acts of fanatical extremists. I have to apologise repeatedly for these acts, for their profound impact on people and for the fear they generate in people regarding the success of multicultural societies.

Yet I cannot and will not allow the acts of a fanatical few to deflect from the efforts of many to build diverse multi-cultural societies that guarantee the rights of everyone to live with dignity, peace and security.

I am reminded of the quotes of two European statesmen: Jean Monet “Nothing happens without people, nothing lasts without institutions”  
Edmund Burke’s “the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing”: Both these famous quotes remind us that the expressions of democracy that we hold dear are not just written laws but dependent on people living differently.

Most people would agree that liberty, fraternity, equality, justice and dignity represent the fruits of an ideal society. However they don’t just happen in a society.

They are about the behaviours, values and practises of all of us that make the fruits of democracy a reality for everyone. Democracy is too important to just leave it to politicians. Ordinary people, non- governmental organisations also have an important part to play. The collective experience only happens when all of us live out each day and make choices to live the values we want to see in our society. if we want to see a hate free, greed free society then values of honesty, unselfishness, purity and love need to be daily choices we all make.

Democracy is about a choice we make each day, no matter what is going on around us, to embody our values in our daily life and interactions with others. Do the hundreds of small encounters we have each day make others feel listened to, valued, included and respected? Everyone of us can make a difference where we are. When honesty, unselfishness, purity and love are daily behaviours then liberty, fraternity, equality and dignity will be real in our societies – those who feel crushed, marginalised and see no hope will no longer resort to violence lawlessness and violence to achieve their aims.

I carry a coin in my purse to remind me everyday of the choice I have to make to treat everyone with dignity and respect. It is a 2 pound coin that was produced in 2007 to commemorate the 200 anniversary of the abolition of slavery in the UK, on the edge it says “am I not a man and a brother”. It is a challenging thought sometime, but a constant reminder to me that but for the grace of God I am also capable of acts of evil that can hurt, humiliate, cause pain and belittle people. With God’s grace the daily choices I make can also contribute to an inclusive truly equitable society. It may only make a small difference but it is better than doing nothing and ultimately it is the only way.