

It gives me great pleasure to return to Caux to take part in this conference "Living Peace" celebrating 25 years of Creators of Peace. My pleasure is two fold, one as the outgoing President of Initiatives of Change International and one at a personal level.

Creators of Peace, is an International Programme and Associate Member of Initiatives of Change International. This is a world wide movement of people of diverse cultures and backgrounds who are committed to the transformation of society through changes in human motives and behaviour starting with their own. IofC's approach focuses on the link between personal change and global change - because of our belief that lasting changes can only come about if people live and work differently.

"Creators of Peace" over the last 25 years has empowered women to be radical peace builders in their communities. CoP's methodology provides women with a transformative space for inter-personal, interethnic and inter-religious dialogue as a stepping stone to building stability in communities in conflict and rebuilding efforts post conflict. By addressing the roots of conflict (internal in us and external around us) it promotes a change of heart and attitude as a primary tool for peace creation. It has enabled bridges of forgiveness and friendships across many divides. It has created a global solidarity network for women engaged in peace building around the world. It raises awareness of the personal ethical prerequisites for effective social action and continues to build just, caring and inclusive communities wherever it has been started. During this week we will hear more about some of the many initiatives that have grown out of this work. It is also an opportunity to hear the work of many other organizations represented here who are also working for peace.

So it gives me great pleasure, on behalf of Initiatives of Change International to congratulate those inspired founding women who nurtured this idea into what it is today. The work of CoP and the need for women to be engaged in peace building at grass roots level, in the home and at work is more needed now than ever before. I look forward, with anticipation, to the new initiatives and stories that will be given during this week together and to what will emerge in the next 25 years of CoP.

I would like to share a bit of my personal story with you and some of the lessons I have learnt in my journey. I am a British, Egyptian, Muslim, who was born in Spain, studied medicine in Australia and now work as Paediatric Emergency Medicine consultant working in one of the busiest children's emergency departments in Western Europe. I am proud of my origins and heritage but my life has been greatly enriched by my encounters with people of different traditions, backgrounds and faiths.

I met the ideas of Initiatives of Change as a teenager at school in Australia. At that time, I thought changing society and building peace was the responsibility of politicians, diplomats and those in power.

I naively thought that, if those in government and businesses lived out their ethical values in daily life and work then: corruption would be eradicated, conflicts would be resolved and an equitable just society would emerge. I did not think ordinary people had a role to play in wider societal change or peace making.

My meeting with IofC was a transformative experience in a number of ways:

- 1) It made me aware of the power of inner listening as a source of inspiration in my life and re-enforced the importance of spiritual health to balance the needs of mind and body.
- 2) It helped me understand that people can make a difference in their communities provided they apply in their own lives the ethical values they wish to see in society such as honesty, purity, unselfishness and love. Without that personal integrity it is not possible to be an effective change-maker. I used to get really angry about corruption in the Middle East, but I had no difficulty in taking change from my father's dressing table without asking his permission! I realized that personal honesty in small things mattered if you wanted to fight corruption at large.
- 3) It reinforced the importance of honest conversations across divides as a starting point of trust building and partnerships - the world seemed too interconnected for us to work in silos, the problems demand a level of co-operation for lasting solutions. This was the start of my sense of calling to build bridges of understanding between people of different cultures, backgrounds and faiths wherever I was.
- 4) My inquisitive mind realized, even then, that ordinary people, NGOs as well as government and politicians, we're all needed if our societies were going to be just, equitable and inclusive. It made me understand that ordinary people are more powerful and important than we think.

When I was asked to be President of IofC International more than 5 years ago I was, to use a local Liverpool expression, "gobsmacked" (speechless). My predecessors were extraordinary international statesmen, I was simply a medical doctor with no claim to fame except for being part of a team that made history for delivering the first surviving sextuplets in the UK! In my time of inner listening when I finally decided to consider this question a bit more seriously, three questions came to my mind: do you believe that ordinary people can do extraordinary things? Are you willing to serve despite your limitations? Are you willing to move out of your comfort zone? The decision to say yes was linked very closely with this passionate belief that ordinary people can make a difference wherever they are if we are willing to serve others and build trust.

I have been asked often, how did I combine my medical work, dialogue work, the role of President of IofC and still remain relatively sane and peaceful. As I am stepping down from many of my formal roles (as president of IofC as well as full time medical work), it is a question I have thought about more in recent weeks. Stripped of all these roles what defines me and what matters to me?

If you do what you are passionate about you somehow find the time to balance conflicting demands. Inner listening alongside my prayer life have been important anchors at times of stress as well as a decision to just take one day at a time and do what is needed now. I have learnt to be content to do a few clear things, leaving many other possibilities in God's hands - accepting to live with unanswered questions. My motto in life is taken from a former Australian Minister of Education: "Nothing to prove, nothing to gain for yourself and nothing to justify" - it has served me well as a litmus test of my motivation in anything I do and will continue to guide me.

If like me, you have had a sense of calling since the age of 21 to promote diversity in community, especially between Muslims and people of others traditions and cultures in the west, the last 15 years have been very challenging. It makes me angry that violence is used in such an indiscriminate way killing and traumatizing innocent people, promoting fear and divisions. But it also makes me angry when freedom and democracy don't deal with inequalities and justice for all. Alongside anger about what is wrong there needs to be hope that things can be better and can change.

So despite the challenges of these times, I remain passionate about unity in diversity, inclusivity which affirms the essential dignity and contribution of every single person - whatever race, religion or background - while also being passionate about the importance of freedom, democracy, dealing with inequity and injustice.

My calling and vocation to build bridges between the West and Muslim world, may suffer temporary setbacks but rises stronger and more resilient despite the times. I have learnt that peace building is not a once in a lifetime decision. In the face of the realities of life around us, it is a DAILY decision and commitment to open my heart to others and reach out no matter what. Conferences such as this, affirms that there are in fact many of us that continue to work for peace in different ways which is very hope giving. So my sense of anticipation and excitement about the coming days together relates to the new transition in my own life as I discern what shape and form my vocation of inclusive community building will take in the coming years.

I first came to Caux when I was a medical student. The diversity of people, inspiring stories of change gave me hope that it was not idealistic to believe that the world could be different and better. Being in Caux now, can recharge our batteries and inspire us again in our task of peace building. Each and everyone of us can make a difference. Each one of us can decide to move out of our own comfort zone to reach out to others as a first step in creating peace around us and across divides. That is the real reason for hope that we can re-commit to during our days together. To use the motto of one of Liverpool's famous football clubs : "you will never walk alone".

Omnia Marzouk. 5 August 2016. Living Peace conference.