

LIVING TOGETHER: IN UK AND SWITZERLAND

I would like to start by thanking you for your patience and willingness to listen to me speaking in English. Despite my travels, German is sadly not a language I have had the chance to study at any stage. Thank you for inviting me to take part in this discussion – sharing experiences of how to live together in diverse communities in Europe.

Before I share some of my experiences and lessons I have learnt from living in diverse communities, I would like to share a little bit about my background, as this is the lens through which I interact and see the world around me.

I am a British, Muslim professional woman who was born in Spain, come from Egypt (of parents who have Turkish and Moroccan ancestry), who went to school in Egypt, studied medicine in Australia and now work in a busy children's emergency department in Liverpool in England.

My father was a diplomat so travelling is in my blood – being part of a community that had different people was normal for me. Ever since I can remember I have enjoyed the excitement and wonder of encountering different countries and their traditions. It was only as a teenager in Australia that I became more aware that the western image of the Muslim world, and especially Muslim woman, did not match up to the reality of my extended family and friends. I became more aware then that different views of the world could cause conflicts and misunderstandings. I also became aware that I personally straddled two very different worlds as an Arab Muslim living in the west seeking to be at ease with both sides of this divide.

When I was 15 years old I was invited to a youth programme organised by Initiatives of Change. The majority of young people at this programme were Christian. They had a deep Christian faith that was practised with integrity and self-reflection every day. So I discovered that the moral values that were part of my Muslim tradition were common to other faith traditions. I was stuck by the fact that those present combined a global perspective and desire to make a difference in the world with working locally. It made me realise that we all wanted to make the world a better place for the future.

This encounter led me to look at my own faith traditions more closely and seek a better deeper understanding of it. It was the start of my journey of rediscovering my faith. I became more observant of the practises of my faith and this became a central anchor in my life. This encounter made me realise that across differences and divides we can learn from one another and deepen our own roots and traditions as we work together.

At University I felt a twin calling for my life: a calling to be a children's doctor and a calling to be a bridge between people of different backgrounds and traditions. After University I went to Liverpool to specialise in Children's Emergency Medicine and have worked in the National Health Service in the United Kingdom for more than 30 years. I have been lucky to work in the Health Service in the UK, as it is one of the largest and most diverse organisations in the world. During my working life I have worked alongside doctors and nurses of all nationalities, and religious traditions as well as treating everyone who presents regardless of their backgrounds. In that setting you have to make "living together" a reality every day. I would like to share some of my own experiences along this road.

The first step for me has been simply reaching out to others who are different. As you reach out to others and get to know them you begin to blow out of your mind the stereotypes and fears you have of them and their group. You discover what they like and dislike, their hopes and aspirations. Two early friends when I started my paediatric training were a Ghanaian Methodist and an Irish Catholic. When I fasted during the month of Ramadan, they gave up chocolates and when they fasted in Lent I gave up chocolates too. We then shared in each other's festivities. These friendships were an easy way to learn about each other. International dinners were another way to appreciate each other's backgrounds.

On a wider community scale in some areas of the UK interfaith walks take place - where communities walk from a church to a mosque to a synagogue for example to enable wider community understanding and mutual respect.

A second step, after forming friendships, is to go deeper in dialogue and honest conversations to discover the pain and suffering of the other. You begin to see history and world events through the eyes of others as well as sharing your own view of the world. This is a mutual learning time. It is also a time when you realise that as you look at world events, there are times in history when our own group is wronged and times when it is your group that wrongs other people. There are two sides to the same coin.

As political events have played out over the last 30 years, I have shared with those I encounter the pain and suffering of Arab, Muslims as a result of events like the Gulf wars, escalating conflicts in the Middle east. But I have also shared the pain that some Muslims have caused to others by events such as 9/11, London Bombings. I have been shocked and pained by these events and the suffering caused through them and can only express my apology for their impact.

However, it is not enough to get to know each other and dialogue, even if that creates better understanding and awareness of the perspectives of others. We need to go one step further and take action together on issues that are dear to us all and that enable true community building. This can be done in many ways: helping refugees, volunteering together in community projects, and supporting developments inside and outside of the UK. For example, unexpectedly, through the Royal College of Paediatrics, which has projects for children's health in Asia and Africa as well as the Middle East, I with other paediatricians trained Iraqi doctors to improve the standard of child care there.

It is also a privilege serving as President of Initiatives of Change International. One of the focus areas of our international work is **Trust building**. In many countries there are examples of diverse communities that are working together. In the last month I have travelled to the United States to attend a conference where many are working to heal the divides of racial and social inequalities in very concrete ways across education, health and civic services. Last week I was in Lebanon where there was much to learn from their experience of rebuilding communities after the civil war as well as working together in school projects, youth camps and promoting dialogues. IofC International has a programme, active in more than 40 countries, called "Creators of Peace" – which is specifically aimed at women to enable them to be empowered as peace builders in their communities. This programme is active in Lebanon and Syria. I am also grateful for the role the Swiss Conference Centre in Caux plays in hosting conferences that enable dialogue and trust during its summer conferences each year.

In Lebanon, I was told that they had learnt that the following conditions enable true dialogue to take place. First it must be a dialogue of equals. Second it must be a dialogue of hearts and minds to really bring understanding. Third it needs to be a dialogue that works for the good of the other not using them as an instrument. Fourth there should be no taboo subjects, but that respect is owed to the other in expressing all views. Fifth is to accept criticism from the other. While these conditions apply to good dialogue they also apply every day when we are faced with conflict or differences of viewpoints and perspectives.

In the Koran it says, "We have made you nations and tribes that you may get to know one another. The noblest amongst you is he who is best in conduct". As we each live out the "best of our respective conducts" - I believe that living together in diverse communities could enhance our communities everywhere. I am proud of my origins and religious traditions – but my life has been greatly enriched and enhanced by my encounters with people of other backgrounds and traditions. Who I am today is a product of that constant encounter and enrichment. I believe that my experience of enrichment from diversity can easily become the experience of many others.

It starts with a simple decision to reach out of our comfort zone to others. Respect, honest dialogue, understanding common ground as well as our differences and working together simply follow from that decision to reach out.

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