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“TOWARDS A MORE COMPASSIONATE WORLD: BUILDING TRUST ACROSS THE WORLD’S DIVIDES”

Thank you for inviting me to take part in this discussion – sharing experiences of how to build just, caring and supportive communities which implies that we are learning to live together in diversity. Before I share some of my experiences and the 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 on real issues. It made me begin to realise that we can’t just rely on politicians and government to make changes and create a better society – Lasting changes are more likely if ordinary people are also engaged in issues of the day and work alongside policy makers in their own settings and communities.

This chance encounter was a turning point in my life. As I started to reflect on my own personal integrity I realised that there was a gap. I used to get very angry about corruption in the world but has no problems taking change from my father’s dressing table without asking his permission. I realised that there was an integrity gap in my own life that had to be addressed before I could be effective in society around me. This journey 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 and its core practises – my faith is a central anchor in my life. I realised that as well as differences and divides there is much common ground between the different faith traditions and that we can learn from one another and deepen our own roots as we work together. You also get a more rounded view of yourself and your group if you reflect on how others see you.

The other turning point was a growing realisation, while I was at University, that I had 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 because I wanted to make a difference in society beyond my professional medical career. 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 which has helped me open my heart and mind to an ever increasing circle of people and interests.

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 time of learning but it can also be a painful 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 other 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, numerous escalating conflicts in the Middle east, the ever increasing plight of Syrian refugees. But I have also had to live through what Muslims with extremist views have caused others by events such as 9/11, London Bombings, Charlie Hebdo to name but a few. I have been shocked and pained by these events and the suffering caused through them and can only express my apology for these and other such events.

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: working together to help refugees, volunteering together in community projects, and supporting developments through charitable organisations and professional organisations to improve the condition of people wherever we can around the world. 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.

As well as individual action, there are many organisations working in the area of multicultural dialogue. It is a privilege serving as President of Initiatives of Change International. Initiatives of Change is a world-wide movement of people of diverse cultures and background, who are committed to the transformation of society, through changes in human motives and behaviour, starting with themselves. Our mission is to inspire, equip and connect people to address world needs based on personal change. We focus 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. Our approach is based on a number of elements: 1) seeking inner wisdom through quiet reflection 2) examining our motives and behaviours using absolute standards of honesty, purity, unselfishness and love as a starting point for personal integrity and transformation 3) listening to others, honest conversations and an open spirit to build trust within teams and enable partnerships, 4) moving into action to address local and global issues. One of our three key focus areas of work is Trust building - I will share a few examples of trust building efforts that have encouraged me in the last 12 months

In collaboration with the Council of Europe, IofC was involved in developing a “tool kit for multi-cultural dialogue in Europe”. Interestingly this toolkit has attracted much interest in Tunisia as it grapples with the reality of making democracy a reality across its own divided communities. They have asked to have Tunisians trained to be facilitators of this dialogue toolkit to enable it to be used in Tunisia. Other European initiatives include: 1) Faith in Leadership a programme that brings together the young leaders of all faith communities in a value based leadership training programme. While training together it enables them to form networks that are important for the futures. 2) Initiative et Dialogue in France which brings together French and those of north African decent to enable common understanding between both communities in different areas in Paris.

As I have travelled around many continents and countries I am constantly inspired by the many examples of diverse communities that are working together to build trust, overcome differences and deal with their community issues in real ways. In April this year, I travelled to the United States to attend a conference where a programme called “Hope in the Cities” is working to heal the divides of racial and social inequalities in very concrete ways across education, health and civic services. As well as community training fellowships and hosting “honest conversations about race”, they also arrange walks through history of Richmond, Virginia – that a more tangible understanding of the legacy of history of slavery on the issues of race today. This idea of using “walk through history” of cities has been replicated in other cities to make recent history as well as past history more real and create better understanding and enable people to meet through the walk others in the community that they would not normally encounter.

Earlier, this year 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. The fragile community work in Lebanon has been strained by their acceptance of over a million Syrian refugees in recent months. 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. Given the daily news of Syria that is heart breaking, it was amazing to hear the courageous efforts of Muslim women daring to be voices for the necessary peace building that will be needed there when the war and fighting comes to an end. They were determined to continue to expand their work over the coming months to begin to create the network of women who would be ready to underpin any future peace process there. It was also touching to see Lebanese Christians and Muslims wanting to actively support them and encourage them in their efforts to train more women in methodologies of dialogue and peace building.

In Lebanon, I was told that they had learnt that to enable dialogue 5 conditions had to be present: 1) it must be a dialogue of equals; 2) it must be a dialogue of hearts and minds to really bring understanding; 3) it needs to be a dialogue that works for the good of the other not using them as an instrument; 4) there should be no taboo subjects, but that respect is owed to the other in expressing all views; 5) accept criticism from the other. While these conditions apply to good dialogue across diversity, they also apply every day when we are faced with conflict or differences of viewpoints and perspectives. The importance of creating the space and conditions that allow honest conversations to take place – is a skill we can all learn.

If we wish to create a different future for our grandchildren then education is an important tool in embedding multicultural practise and active citizenship. In France we have a training programme called “Education for peace” – this programme helps children and young people develop the social abilities which underpin co-operation and engagement as active citizens. The workshops are delivered using different methodologies for different age groups: “learning through philosophical debates (ages 13-14 years), understanding and overcoming racism (ages 11-14 Years), and living better together (ages 7-14). At the end of the programme with the support of teaches the participants are invited to carry out a citizen projects.

The programme includes a “let’s get the Peace attitude” drawing competition supported by a well known French cartoonist – which encourages participants to work in groups illustrating an unfair situation and propose how to deal with it in a just way to encourage active learning and integration of their learning in practise. CATS (Children as actors in Transforming Society) is an International Conference that takes place each year at our Conference centre in Switzerland which aims to encourage community advocates to promote the rights and participation of children as agents of change in their communities.

It is easy to think that many of the problems that we face in society and the world today should be dealt with by politicians and governments who have the power to make things change. What I have learnt and observed over the years is that the issues of the day are too important to leave them to government and policies alone. As Individuals and community based organisations, we are more powerful than we think and we have more opportunities than ever before to impact on policy makes.

Ordinary people can make a difference. If we want to create a compassionate society. it starts with us as individuals – we have to model in our own lives what we want to see in our communities. We then have to work in our communities to build trust and work together on issues that matter to us. But we also have to work at government and institutional level to ensure they are also representative of the changing diversity of our communities and listening to all voices when initiating policies. Jean Monet who was instrumental in the formation of the European Union after the war said “Nothing happens without people, nothing lasts without institutions”. We need to work at both personal and institutional level if we want to create more inclusive just equitable society.

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 real experience of many others.

It starts with a simple decision to reach out of our comfort zone to others. Honest dialogue, understanding common ground as well as our differences build trust, working together simply follow from that initial willingness and decision to reach out. We can all do that wherever we are and whatever our work or vocation.

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