

SUSTAINABLE ENGAGEMENT BEYOND MEDICINE: TOWARDS HEALING OUR COMMON HUMANITY.

Thank you for inviting me to give this talk on the subject of “Sustainable engagement beyond medicine: towards healing our common humanity”.

Before I address the subject of this talk, I would like to tell you a bit more about myself. Who I am and my life journey so far is the lens through which I see the world and helps you understand why I view the world as I do. It also colours my thoughts on the role ordinary people have in enabling our communities to live in plurality and harmony meeting the needs of everyone within it.

I am an Egyptian professional woman who was born in Spain. I went to school in Egypt and then in Australia where my father was Egyptian Ambassador. I did my medical training in Australia, then specialised in paediatric emergency medicine. For the last 30 years my home has been Liverpool – the city of the Beetles and football – where I work in a children’s hospital with one of the largest and busiest children’s emergency department in the Western Europe.

When I was a teenager in Australia I was confronted by many stereotypes. The Western media portrayal of the Arab, Muslim world and especially Muslim women did not match my extended family and friends – many of whom were professional women doctors, dentists, architects, university lecturers. At that point, I thought that faith had a marginal place in the modern world; that to be a productive member of society I had to embrace western scientific thinking and that wider issues of equity for all and sustainable living was something that government and politicians should address.

At the age of 15 I was invited to a youth camp where I met the ideas of Initiatives of Change. I was the only Muslim in an intergenerational group of Christians. I was struck by the quality of life of the people I met who combined a real interest in the world with a deep personal care for people. They also combined big thinking with practical application of change in their communities and workplace. I wanted to know more about the their approach.

Initiatives of Change is a world wide movement of people of diverse cultures, backgrounds and religious traditions, who are committed to transformation of society through change in human motives and behaviour starting with themselves. Personal transformation starts by an honest look at one’s own motives and behaviour, applying absolute moral standards we wish to see in our society in our own personal life and seeking inner wisdom to guide our steps. Being a true scientist, even at the age of 15, I decided to embark on this experiment and try it for myself.

As I reflected in quiet on my own life against the four absolute standards of honesty, purity, unselfishness and love, I was surprised by two thoughts: I was jealous and dishonest. I was jealous of my older brother who was an extrovert, fun loving person.

I was angry about corruption and dishonesty in the world yet I took change from my father's dressing table without asking his permission. I realised that if I wanted a world free of corruption and dishonesty then I needed to apply this to my own life first. I apologised to my brother and was honest with my father. I felt a real freedom as a result so I decided to continue this experiment: having daily times of quiet reflection and continuing to look at narrowing the gap between the theory and practise of absolute moral standards in my own life.

As I continued on this adventure I started to read and learn more about my faith as a Muslim. I developed a deeper understanding of the importance of spiritual life, faith and the personal conduct that underpins it. In the Koran is a passage that says "God does not change the state of a nation until the people themselves change". One of the most important aspects of faith is in personal conduct and behaviour with others and in community. I also discovered that within the Koran is a statement that God made us all different nations and tribes "that you may get to know one another: that the noblest amongst you is he who is best in conduct".

From that point the real application of my faith was the central core of my life. But I wanted it to also underpin my working life and its ethics, the way I interact with people. I also wanted to find a bigger role as a change-maker in my wider community. As I prayed and reflected on what my specific vocation and calling was – I felt I had two callings. One was to children and their health and well being through my work as a paediatrician. The other calling was to build bridges of trust and understanding between people of different cultures and religions.

Building trust between communities is actually very simple. It started with a step towards others in friendship. Through friendships our preconceived ideas and stereotype about others changes. As our friendships and trust grow we are then able to move one step further to work together on areas of common interest. This has certainly been my experience in UK. It is this second calling to be a "trust builder" that has led me on an amazing adventure visiting many continents and working with other like minded people.

My life has been greatly enriched by my encounters with people of other backgrounds and traditions. Who I am today has been also shaped by what I have learnt from others who are different to me. I continue to be proud of my culture and heritage as an Arab, British, Muslim woman and I am passionate about the needs of my community, but I have learnt to be as passionate about the needs of others and as pained by their suffering. My view of the world has expanded into a more holistic view of "us all" in community, not "us" and "them".

There are many thinkers in the world, Huntington amongst them, who feel that the next great clashes in the world will be clashes of civilizations. I am not a philosopher, world thinker or academic researcher in this area. However my own personal experience of the world and encounters with people of different cultures and civilizations gives me hope that their predictions are incorrect. We do not have to live up to the predictions of these distinguished thinkers. We may not be able to change the past but what we can do is write a new story for the future that does not live up to the patterns of the past.

My own experience is that every meeting with “the other” is as an opportunity to turn stereotypes, judgement and ignorance into curiosity and learning. While there will always be extremists who confirm stereotypes and leaders who have their own personal agendas – ordinary people all over the world can reach out to each other and build networks of trust, friendships and write a different future together.

I am privileged and honoured to serve as President of Initiatives of Change International. The International Association, which is centred in Geneva, consists of 34 national bodies (including Malaysia); but we are also active informally in over 60 countries. We have special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the UN (ECOSOC) and participatory status at the Council of Europe. Our mission is to inspire, equip and connect people to address world needs starting with themselves.

We have three key focus areas:

- 1) Trust building
- 2) Ethical leadership
- 3) Sustainable living

All three areas are vitally important as we are to ensure a sustainable world that ensures the needs of all people are met.

In the area of trust building, I could give many examples from around the world of people who are working to counteract Huntington’s predictions about clashes across civilization divides. Amongst them are an Imam and Pastor from Nigeria who are part of that trust building network. They were fighters on both sides of a divide but decided to make the courageous step to reach out and build peace together in their region Nigeria. They have also taken their trust building methodology to Kenya and more recently to Chad to continue to give hope that a sustainable peace can be built in communities after conflict.

I think of friends in Lebanon across all the religious divides who, even while their country was at war, meet to form bonds of friendship and trust to prepare for peace. Their work continues to be part of an important foundation for lasting peace there after many years of conflict and war. I also think of young people in Ukraine who initiated a programme called “healing the past” which aims to foster the development of a free and just society through encouraging healing of the past and reconciliation at the levels of individuals, communities and nations of Eastern Europe.

You may wonder why I have spoken so much about building trust in this talk about sustainable living and working towards healing. Without trust we won’t overcome our differences to work together. We have to be ready to listen to differing views and perspectives. Many countries around the world are going through political and economic transitions. Our communities are becoming more diverse which is also a challenge. As we mix more we need to search for the common ground and we also need to look at the legacy of the past as it casts shadows on how we interact today.

Exploring that common history enables us to find healing and develop a shared narrative for the future society we want to build. I am not a politician, what I want for all societies, whatever their governance is that they deliver security, plurality of views and freedom from fear; access to health and education; meaningful work and dignity to all. The litmus test of any society is whether it guarantees the same rights to minority groups in society regardless of gender, education, wealth or position.

But if we are going to build lasting democratic societies and sustainable living conditions for all, the institutions alone are not enough. Institutions are only as good as the people who work in them. Sustainable, equitable holistic societies will only be built if we as individuals embody in our own lives and daily work the moral values, integrity and healing we wish to see in our societies. This places the emphasis on us as individuals to act alongside our governments and institutions to create the conditions that will enable our societies to flourish.

For me, this question of personal responsibility alongside government and institutions crystallized when I thought about the question of corruption. I used to get angry at the corruption I saw around me in society in the Middle East and I thought it was up to the politicians to change this. When I started work, the hospital paid me too much salary one month. It was tempting to just keep the extra money.

As I reflected on this in quiet one morning, I realised that if I kept this and did not return it, I was part of the problem of dishonesty and corruption. How could I expect politicians and business people to be honest and stop corruption if I was not prepared to live honestly myself? I decided to return the money to hospital. Little did I realise the chaos this caused as this was something that had never happened before and they did not know where to put the money or what to do with it. But because I returned this money they felt they had to check all my previous months' pay. In the end they found that they owed me money and, to my surprise, I had a return cheque from the hospital that was 100 times larger than the amount I had sent to them! It was a real lesson for me in the importance of personal honesty if I wanted a wider problem in society, like corruption, to be eradicated.

Good governance and democratic holistic societies will only be built by developing a leadership culture that is based on moral integrity, compassion and selfless service. We need to equip the younger generation with the skills and tools that will enable them to be future leaders in their societies. In Africa, Initiatives of Change have had a leadership-training programme for young people that is aimed at equipping them to be the ethical leaders of the future as well as training them to be trust builders across divides in their own communities. Last year 11 people from 7 African countries took part in this training programme and then 8 of them joined other IofC trainers who delivered training for 200 peace mobilisers in South Sudan. While the current conflict in South Sudan has escalated it is my hope that these 200 peace mobilisers will be the reconciliation force in that country when the time is right.

Initiatives of Change International, has developed another trust building training programme for women called “Creators of Peace”. This programme is aimed at enabling women to be facilitators of mediation and trust building in their communities. It has gone to 40 countries around the world including here in Malaysia. This year it has delivered a training programme in Iraq and also in Egypt – this will start laying important foundation stones for the future in these two countries

All these are small steps but to me they are reasons for hope and the foundation of lasting peace, democracy and a sustainable society as people learn to respect diversity and work together for the future they want. It is my belief that ordinary people can make a huge difference in their communities and in the world. We all have to believe that the way we live, the values we live out in our lives and our partnerships together – will build a world that is equitable and safe for all and where everyone has dignity and respect. That is the only lasting way to build a better future.

Without trust we cannot build anything lasting in our societies. Without ethical leaders and integrity in economy our societies will not flourish and develop. Without a change in attitude and behaviour we will not sustain the planet for future generations. Without learning from the past and healing historical legacies we can't be free to create a new future. None of this will happen unless everyone plays a part. We have to remember that everyone is needed; and that ordinary people can do extraordinary things if they are willing to listen to their inner voice, live lives of compassion, integrity and moral values. Together, if we adopt a more holistic view of our common humanity, we can make a difference in our communities. That is the great hope for the future of our countries and the world.

Omnia Marzouk
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