

CONNECTIONS

It's a real pleasure to be here with you all – since I've been president I have visited 18 countries and all continents – so it's a special pleasure to travel only a little distance and be with the team here in the UK. The theme of the weekend together is “connecting the dots” – this started me thinking about the idea of “connections”.

For those I don't know, I would describe myself as a wondering intercontinental nomad grateful to have been amazingly led to put deep roots in Liverpool where I have now lived and worked for 31 years. I am an observant Muslim and will speak from that perspective. I hope that despite drawing on my Muslim perspectives, those of you from other philosophies and traditions will still find some points of relevance.

I consider that I am lucky to have found two passions and callings in my life. My first passion is healing as a doctor: I work in the largest children's emergency department in Western Europe and have to deal with all types of emergencies. In my medical work, on a daily basis I have to “expect the unexpected” and deal with risk. The work is a very tangible with clear outcomes and results, which makes it immediately satisfying and rewarding despite its challenges.

My second passion is to build bridges across divides whatever they may be – this has grown out of a deep belief that lofC's approach stressing deep personal change is the pivotal point and lasting way to answer issues of the day at a national and global level.

In contrast to my medical work, the work of Trust building (and also to some extent the work of lofC) - is slow, patient, intangible work and suffers setback based on world events. Sometimes you see results when the window of another person's mind is opened and their previously held misconceptions and stereotypes of “the other” are blown away or when dramatic situations change through personal work. But mostly you have to accept that you “plant seeds that one day may grow”.

In both these two diverse callings of mine, I am committed to making a difference, using what limited capabilities I have to strive for excellence, embodying integrity in personal conduct, reaching out to others in teamwork and offering a serving leadership. As a result I find myself seriously out of my comfort zone, working beyond the limits of my ability and being asked to work with people with whom I have little common ground and may not even have a natural affinity for.

My sense of peace and sanity has been preserved by some serious CONNECTIONS that lead me through these uncharted territories and help me hold contradictions and unanswered questions in balance.

- 1) **SILENCE:** the first connection for me is to the daily practise of silent reflection. The practise of quiet time each morning has been a gift and tool beyond measure, which has enriched my life. I started this practise as an experiment at the age of 15. The first two thoughts I had were that I was jealous and dishonest –a shock to the image of perfection I wished to portray. Putting those two things right gave me an inner freedom that prompted me to continue having quiet times.

Times of quiet, especially after conflict or difficult situations, have uncovered the inner most thinking of my heart allowing me to confront my true self and deal with my true character. This has helped me to regularly stamp out my own self-interest and ego if I wanted to be trusted and truly bring about lasting change.

It is through the practise of quiet time that I have found peace about being a British, Egyptian, Arab Muslim professional woman fully at ease with all these dimensions as well as with being a scientist who is deeply spiritual.

It was also in silence that I was given the simple thought at the age of 21 to build bridges between people of different backgrounds. Little did I know then that this simple thought to do what I loved would grow into a passion and life long calling?

2) **Connection with the Divine, in my case my own faith as a Muslim.** It was through the practise of quiet time that I rediscovered my faith as a Muslim – not just as a set of religious observances that I followed on Fridays. I wanted it to be a moral compass and code of conduct that affected all aspects of my life. Dealing with the gap between the theory of my faith and putting it into practise is a daily challenge. For example, if I was angry about corruption in the world and its impact on development and poverty then I had to return money to the hospital for a shift I had not worked but still got paid for. I could not be a serious change-maker without moral integrity as well as my spiritual nourishment.

3) **Connection with others and working in a team. Relationships are the key to any effective work.**

I was interested in reading Philip's new book "The Spiritual vision of Frank Buchman" – that he felt "no one could be fully obedient to God who worked alone" – he felt that people needed fellowship with others for training, spiritual support and direction.

Teamwork is about reaching out and working with anyone and everyone, no matter how different they are. Team working is easy with people you like! More challenging is finding the spirit to deal with the "difficult person" in your team, the person who may actually be harming you or hurts you, or the person whom you really just don't like. I have had to work with all of those types of people in the course of my working life. I have to also say that I have had to also deal with a few challenging or difficult people within IofC. However it is all about perceptions: the other person might actually think that **you** are the person who is difficult.

At times when team working gets difficult, it is tempting to walk away but my sense of calling means this is not an option. In a moment of quiet, while pondering another difficult situation at work, I had a clear thought "no matter what anyone does or says to you, you are responsible for the way you react and you need to learn how to continue to treat people who hurt and harm you as if nothing has ever happened". This was a rather challenging thought at the time and was beyond my human abilities. I remember praying for weeks to be given the spirit that would allow me to do that and eventually something was given that enabled this particular relationship to flourish.

Over the years I have learnt a number of lessons about team working: keep short accounts, keep working at relationships, always give people the benefit of the doubt, don't bear grudges, don't spread divisions, keep a link with those who challenge you and never ever give up on a relationship - true affection may be amazingly given if you persist in team building despite the odds.

After a recent period of difficulties, both at work and within IofC, I was struck by a quote from Maya Angelou who died recently: "all my work is meant to say, you may encounter many defeats but you must not be defeated. In fact, the encountering may be the very experience which creates the vitality and the power to endure".

Team work is a bit like a long distance run, some parts of it are about endurance, keeping connections going and sticking at it to reach the desired outcome, it does not come easily and it takes a lot of time and practise.

4) Connecting with others who are like-minded as well as those who are totally different from us to make a difference in the world.

If we have a purpose that is beyond ourselves then we must work with other liked minded groups. We can no longer afford to think that we can be change-makers on our own – our potential impact is enhanced by partnerships. This means searching for the smallest area of common ground and then working to enlarge it as we work together.

We must also be prepared not to demonise or exclude others. This starts by being bold, letting go our fear and taking a simple step to reach out to the "other" whoever that other may be: honest dialogue can lead to insights and understanding which are needed if we want to work together to create lasting peace and social justice for everyone.

Connecting is at the heart of human existence – we have an innate longing to be connected with others in meaningful relationships. If we want to change the world for the better and impact on world needs, then we have to take enough time to hear in silence, that still small voice inside each of us. My own experience is that it is from that connection with silence that all the other connections can grow. In silence we can discover our calling, find grace to change our character, develop capabilities beyond ourselves and grow in our commitment to work with others and be change-makers.

Rumi

"In silence, there is eloquence.
Stop weaving and see how the pattern improves".

"Move outside the tangle of fear thinking, live in silence".