

“MUSLIMS, CHRISTIANS, JEWS: DIFFERENT FAITHS, COMMON ROOTS AND VALUES”

Thank you for inviting me to share my experiences of learning to live in creative community valuing diversity. As this is my first visit to Uruguay I also hope that you can share with me your own experiences on the theme of "different faiths, common roots and values".

Before I share some of my experiences and the lessons I have learnt on this topic, 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, originally come from Egypt, who went to school in Egypt, studied medicine in Australia and now work in pediatrics in England. 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. These experiences of diversity form an integral part of who I am today.

My father was a diplomat so traveling 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, regions and 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 camp organized by Initiatives of Change. The majority of young people at this program were Christian. They had a deep Christian faith that was practiced with integrity. They believed that any lasting change in the world had to start with people changing themselves to live out in their daily lives the change they wanted to see in society.

Their specific approach interested me: 1) daily practice of quiet reflection listening to the voice of inner conscience to guide one's life, 2) examining one's own life against moral standards of honesty, purity, unselfishness and love, 3) dialogue with others and honest conversations as a way to reach out to mutual understanding, 4) working with others to take focused action on issues that concerned us all to have a better impact.

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 realize that 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 this practice of listening to the inner voice I realized that I had to deal with the integrity gap in my own life if I wanted to make a difference in the world. I used to get angry at corruption at every level, but that did not stop me from taking change from my father's dressing table without asking his permission. Putting the small things right in my own life was an important first step to be able to be an agent of change in society.

This small first step, 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 practices – my faith is a central anchor in my life. I realized 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 without compromising our own beliefs. As I had rediscovered the depth of my own faith through being challenged by Christians who lived their faith with sincerity, I felt called to work to build bridges of understanding between people of different faiths, cultures and traditions alongside my medical work.

During my working life I have worked alongside doctors and nurses of all nationalities, and religious traditions. In that setting you have to make “living together” a reality every day. I would like to share some of my own experiences discovering and enlarging the circle of common ground that binds us together as part of a human family.

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, that their hopes and aspirations are similar to yours. Two early friends when I started my pediatric 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. With other friends we hosted international dinners as another way to appreciate each other’s backgrounds. On a wider community scale in some areas in England open days and interfaith walks take place - where communities walk from a church to a mosque to a synagogue to enable mutual understanding and 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 time of mutual learning but it can also be a painful time. It is a time when you realize 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, escalating conflicts in the Middle east, the ever increasing plight of Syrian refugees. But I have also had to live with the pain and suffering that Muslims with extremist views have caused others by events such as 9/11, London Bombings, recent terrorist acts in Paris and Belgium 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 and professional organizations to improve the condition of people wherever we can around the world.

It has been a privilege serving as President of Initiatives of Change International as this gives me other examples of how working together can make a difference. 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 behavior, starting with themselves. 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. 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” to help community building efforts across Europe. Interestingly this toolkit has attracted much interest in Tunisia as it grapples with transitioning democracy: with a newly written constitution and an elected coalition government. Young Tunisians activists asked to be trained as facilitators of this dialogue toolkit to enable them to build the capacity of young people keen to unpin the institutional efforts of good governance and democracy there.

Earlier, this year I was in Lebanon where there was much to learn from their experience of rebuilding communities after the civil war: 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 program, called "Creators of Peace" – which is specifically aimed at women to enable them to be empowered as peace builders wherever they live. This program is active in over 40 countries including 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 peace building that will be needed when the war and fighting comes to an end. They were determined to continue to expand their work to create a network of women who would be ready to underpin any future peace process there. It was 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 the following conditions enable true dialogue and discovering common ground to take place. 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. In this spirit we can start to talk about the shared common ground as well as respectfully listen to the different viewpoints and perspectives. As we talk the circle of common ground based on shared values enlarges and our differences seem less significant.

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. 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 equitable society wherever everyone's needs are met.

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 diversity could enhance our communities everywhere.

In a recent book "Not in God's Name" Rabbi Jonathan Sacks expresses much better than I can what is needed today.

"We need to recover the absolute values that make Abrahamic monotheism the humanizing force it has been at its best: the sanctity of life, the dignity of the individual, the twin imperatives of justice and compassion, the moral responsibility of the rich for the poor, the commands to love the neighbor and stranger, the insistence on peaceful modes of conflict resolution and respectful listening to the other side of a case, forgiving the injuries of the past and focusing instead on building a future in which the children of the world, of all colors, faiths and races, can live together in grace and peace. These are the ideals on which Jews, Christians and Muslims can converge, widening their embrace to include those of other faiths and none".

It is my experience that each of us can find the common humanity in others who are different to us. It starts with a simple decision to reach out of our comfort zone to others. Respect, honest dialogue, understanding the common ground of values as well as our differences builds trust - caring for each other and working together simply follow from that initial decision to reach out. We can all do that wherever we are and whatever our convictions, work or vocation.