

“ Keep on keeping on”

For the benefit of those who don't know me, I need to describe a bit who I am, because who I am and my life experiences are the lens through which I offer some reflections on the question of spiritual sustainability. I was born in Spain, come originally from Egypt, did my medical studies in Australia and now live and work in Liverpool in the United Kingdom. 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 may have embarked on a tentative spiritual journey at the age of 15, but that journey has been punctuated by “sabbaticals” when I decided that this life was too difficult, periods of struggling to understand the questions of pain and suffering through illness and abuse, some serious periods of wilderness through a spiritual desert as well as the constant daily struggle to find authenticity, wholeness, peace and sanity through these uncharted territories and help me hold contradictions and unanswered questions in balance.

I consider that I am lucky to have found two passions 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 trust across divides whatever they may be. In contrast to my medical work, it 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. 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 serving others. 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 naturally like. What is fascinating to me now, is to find these two passions of mine have increasingly intersected so that the skills, experience and learning from one feeds the other and vice versa.

SUFI POETRY

One of the things that has nurtured me in my, at times very difficult and painful journey and has help me find a deeper understanding the balance that Jean was talking about between “being”, “thinking”, “doing” and “spiritual” side of my life is poetry and in particular Sufi Poetry.

So I would like to start by sharing with you 10 life changing tips from Rumi – a Sufi poet who has an amazing ability to pack in a couple of sentences – some challenging reflections on what we should be seeking in our lives as change-makers.

CREDIBILITY GAP

It was through the practise of quiet time that I rediscovered my faith as a Muslim. I did not want my faith 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. 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. Our credibility as individuals and as an organisation comes through the example of moral integrity, ethical leadership, and good governance that we apply each day working together. Speaking personally I find that my compassion towards others is inversely related to my own daily struggle to deal with my own “cracked nature” and failures. The more aware I am of my own failings the more patient I am with others. At work where I have had to deal with the outcomes of other people’s mistakes, the more I repeat daily “there but for the grace of God go I”

RELATIONSHIPS – keep working at relationships – as they are the hinges on which the door of effective work hangs.

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, 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. At times when it was difficult, I was tempted to walk away but my sense of calling meant this was not an option. The thought I had, in a time of quiet, was that no matter what someone did to me, I was responsible for the way I reacted. I was meant to treat people who hurt or harmed me as if nothing had even happened. This was beyond my human abilities.

I remember a particular situation at work where a false accusation could have damaged my career and reputation. I had to praying for weeks to be given the spirit that would allow me to treat this colleague as if nothing had ever happened. Something eventually changed in me and a relationship was restored. This taught me a number of lessons about team working: 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 give up on a relationship - true affection may be amazingly given if you do.

MOVE OUT OF YOUR COMFORT ZONE

In both my medical work and within IofC I have found myself parachuted into leadership roles. It is a source of amusement to me that the pragmatic, follower, introvert that I am by nature, can have ended up in such leadership roles.

As you know it was through Kim Beazley senior that my family met IofC. I have always remembered his quote about reviewing his life as a politician “nothing to prove, nothing to justify, nothing to gain for yourself”. For me this has always been my litmus test for my motivation. If a decision passed the K Beazley test it meant I was doing it for the right reason.

No sane, intelligent person would follow in the footsteps of my three predecessors in the role of President. They are exceptional men of international stature. As I explained yesterday it took a long time for me to even consider this decision seriously. To say yes would be a huge step out of my comfort zone. What amazed me when I was seriously considering this was the total sense of peace that this was the right decision? It was scary, daunting, challenging, exciting, exhilarating and amazing in equal measure and has been ever since, but still remains a decision to step out on a limb surrounded by peace (although I still sometimes think it is insane that I am doing it).

In a funny way, it has opened up something in me – which makes me say “why not?” to new ideas and suggestions instead of “why?”

SILENCE-LIVING WITH CONTRADICTIONS

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 make sure that I stamped 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 also found peace about being a British, Egyptian, Arab Muslim woman fully at ease with all these dimensions as well as a scientist who is deeply spiritual.