

*Initiatives of Change*

Developing a new generation of change-makers

After two months of intensive training with the Action for Life programme of Initiatives of Change, a new generation of change makers have started working with IofC teams grappling some of the core issues in Africa, Eastern Europe, Indonesia and the Pacific. Report by Mike Brown with additional material compiled by Mike Lowe:

They started, full of expectations, back in November last year. After two months of intensive team-building and training based at Asia Plateau, the IofC centre in India, they graduated – symbolically leaving a cave high on the plateau at sunset to face the challenging new tasks ahead. Now this intergenerational group of 30 which forms “Action for Life 5” has split into four “action teams” starting their respective journeys in Kenya, Romania, Indonesia and New Zealand. For three months, they will partner with IofC teams in those regions, getting involved in their national issues and programmes.

The aim of the Action for Life (AfL) programme is to “develop a new generation of change-makers, equipped with integrity and faith who are committed to bringing transformation in the world, starting with themselves”.

Two days before the end of his term as President of IofC International, Rajmohan Gandhi and his wife, Usha, joined in a dialogue with the Action for Life team members. The dialogue ranged from reconciliation between the Koreans to issues in Iran; how to personally sustain one’s vision and how to demonstrate a “powerful antidote to revenge”. Prof. Gandhi commended Action for Life for what it has achieved over ten years saying, “AfL has contributed new blood, new leadership to Initiatives of Change. It is keeping alive the integrity and the purity of the movement.”

The two-month stay in India included fieldwork encounters with change-makers working at the grassroots in Indian society – a doctor at the heart of the recovery process of the Bhuj earthquake in Gujarat 10 years ago, village

entrepreneurs in the eastern tribal belt around Jamshedpur, students at elite leadership and management institutes in Pune, a Muslim professor dedicated to communal reconciliation in Vadodara. And many more. These dialogues have had a powerful influence on the AfL members from 18 countries, helping shape their own concepts of calling and social change.

But more than these, this first phase of this five-month programme was framed by the “core team” facilitators around a context from IofC’s initiator, Frank Buchman: change yourself, engage others, create answers in communities and countries, give hope to humanity. Or to borrow Mahatma Gandhi’s motto: *Be the change you want to see in the world.*

Four teams in action

Personal change and development took on earthy reality as individuals in the group addressed cultural prejudices, past dishonesties, hurting relationships, family and office feuds, complacency or ignorance. “My life has been changing so much I hardly know who I am,” said Dana, a TV journalist from Romania. Her posts on Facebook have generated a stream of responses, some even quoted in national media following what she wrote on her changing cynicism and attitudes to her countrymen.

To equip themselves for the “action” in other countries, the group received training in a series of IofC programmes: Life Matters (a nine-day Course from Australia), Discover the Other (addressing difference), Creators of Peace Circles and an experimental workshop on the Caux Call to Action. They will be able to offer modules from these courses



Life Matter workshop in Auckland

wherever they are.

And “action” it has been. “They say a week is a long time in politics: this is because they have not been on AfL”, says the team from Romania, going on to say, “To make sure it got off on the right track, we spent a morning in quiet reflection, thinking how to best plan for a weekend workshop.” They are working with Diana Damsa, who took part in the third Action for Life programme and subsequently worked with IofC in Australia. Diana helps run the Club for Young Leaders in her hometown of Cluj, as well as Creators of Peace circles, working to bring the values and experience of IofC to her community.

Meanwhile, the New Zealand team has been running a Life Matters workshop for 12 participants in Auckland with the help of Roshan Valvalagi, who did the LM course in Melbourne a few years ago. “It was refreshing and inspiring,” says Roshan, adding “this will be a catalyst for more opportunities in the future”. The Indonesia team has been supporting a programme of peace education in schools, which aims to raise 100,000 young peacemakers. And in Kenya the team has been hosted in the “forgotten valley” (part of the great Rift Valley) by Andrew Kipkurir, the first from his area to graduate from university, who has been inspired by what he has learned of IofC to start a host of development initiatives – including farming co-operatives and persuading impoverished women to keep chickens instead of producing moonshine as a way to supplement incomes.

The journey continues, with fresh updates, photos and videos on the AfL Facebook site:

www.facebook.com/actionforlife

Message from Rajmohan Gandhi

At the end of his term as President of IofC International, Rajmohan Gandhi shared his reflections of 2010 and his hopes for 2011 in a letter to the IofC network.

Dear friends,

This year has brought many encounters with people of great courage and initiative – including some we met on our 14-nation “Voyage of dialogue and discovery”. The efforts of young people to tackle the “tribal monster” and to help uncover and heal the wounds of recent history in Ukraine are just two that stay with me. We see much that gives us hope for making a difference in the world, like the call for listening and dialogue from Aung San Suu Kyi as she emerged from house arrest in Myanmar.

I felt like letting you know that what has most burdened my heart and mind in recent weeks are the wanton killings of innocent children, women, the old, and the young in countries like Pakistan and Iraq, and in particular, perhaps, the gunning down of people because they belong to or have been raised in the

“wrong” faith or sect.

This is of course very subjective. So many innocents are being killed in places other than Pakistan and Iraq, including, sadly, parts of Africa, and then there are the natural disasters that also swiftly extinguish life, and the illnesses that do so more slowly, plus the tough daily fact that many of the world’s hard-hit are being called upon to assist the harder-hit.

But I want all of us including myself to raise our mental and spiritual restlessness over the deliberate heartless killings that occur in places like Pakistan and Iraq (and elsewhere), and to search for steps, no matter how small or indirect, that may make a difference.

These steps may include dialogue, research into, and acknowledgment of, underlying causes, visits to the places of suffering, a greater warmth and depth in friendships with people connected to those places, greater reflection, more ardent prayer, and God knows what else.

May we always be profoundly troubled by the ease with which, at times, individuals, groups, governments and regimes play God and decide to terminate disapproved lives; may we always yearn for mercy and repentance in our world, and for a new dawn in our world’s difficult places.

May we never forget that history, including that of IofC, contains so many relevant and even recent examples of forgiveness sought for wrongs done to individuals and peoples, of compelling alternatives to agendas of hate, and of the healing of wounds.

May individuals or groups in our fellowship be blessed with simple, creative, inspired thoughts.

To serve as the international president of IofC has been a great privilege for me. I sincerely thank the many friends and colleagues who supported me with thought, time, and prayer. As 2011 beckons, I remain as convinced as I was as a 21-year-old in 1956 that IofC is one of the ways in which the God of all is intervening in human history.

Dick Ruffin writes in appreciation of Rajmohan Gandhi’s two-year term as President of Initiatives of Change International.

I am grateful beyond measure for the opportunity to have worked closely with Rajmohan over many years, most recently during his term as President of IofC International. This has given me the chance to see up close the large contributions he has made to our fellowship and to personally experience the qualities of care that he extends to those around him.

Among his many contributions, I would like to recall three, each of which came to fruition because of personal qualities that exemplify the best of IofC’s heritage.

The first was the remarkable group of senior Indians and Pakistanis that came with him to the first Caux Forum for Human Security. His vision for a sub-continent at peace with itself, his persistence in holding to this vision despite setbacks, his deep care for those on all sides of the divides and for the Indian business family who made the delegation possible, his quiet faith that these friends could find something entirely new among themselves, with minimum interventions from himself, and

his trust that the IofC fellowship would be shown how to create a space where this could happen, all reflected qualities of heart and mind for which we all might pray. The presence of these friends also helped re-affirm Caux as a resource for world leaders.

A second gift for which we have reason for great gratitude was Rajmohan’s clear call for a simplified governing structure for IofC at the Association’s General Assembly in 2009. His brevity and simplicity in articulating a vision for effective ways of working together in the new millennium inspired those who took responsibility to work out the details, generate the necessary support and implement the vision. The benefits will doubtless be experienced for years to come.

Finally, I recall the “Voyage of Dialogue and Discovery” that he led so generously through the first six months of 2010. His servant leadership lifted the sights of teams in every land, and expanded our collective sense of how God wants to use IofC. It has made all of us stand taller and find greater courage

and confidence in responding to the inner promptings of the Spirit.

It is possible that none of these gifts would have come to fruition without Rajmohan’s relentlessly positive encouragement. I am fortunate to have been among many to have benefited from his quick encouragement of the slightest spark of inspiration, as well as from his restraint in noting the far more evident shortcomings.

Nor would these gifts have come to us without Rajmohan’s greater interest in what the other person had to say than in what he himself might say. Perhaps born of a recognition of a need for continuous personal change, Rajmohan prefers listening to talking. It was through listening, whether for inspiration beyond human ken or to the least among us, that unexpected, out-of-the-box ideas often came to him, and with these the ways to enlist others, including many new to IofC, to carry them forward.

As we reflect with immense gratitude on all Rajmohan has given, let us pray that the simplicity, generosity, wisdom, vision and constant encouragement that he has exemplified will increasingly infect us as we seek to carry forward the work with which we have been entrusted.

Planting seeds of peace

As this issue of Newsbriefs goes to press, a new Life Matters course is about to start at Armagh, the IofC centre in Melbourne, running from 4-13 February. The nine-day course aims to develop skills and character strengths for those who want a part in changing today's society, and to help each person discover their own distinctive purpose.

Ten years ago Yoko Hisano took part in the course. Originally from Japan and now working in the field of interational education in the US, she writes about what she learned and how it has affected the way she lives now.

When I was in college, I found out about IofC Japan. I took part in several youth gatherings, conferences, and leadership trainings and met many amazing people from all over the world who came together because they all shared a common goal: a hope, a wish and a conviction to make this world a more peaceful place. I went to gatherings to spend time with these people. But there was even more significance than that.

What? you might wonder.

It was the space that allowed us to be self-reflective and to share the awareness that creating world peace starts from changing ourselves. Perhaps "changing ourselves" is a loaded phrase. I see it more as a process of dealing with my worries, concerns, fear, and frustrations—those negative emotions that affect my views and interaction with others.

How I came to this awareness is through the practice of a "quiet time" that was a part of any IofC workshop, session, or gathering. This was a time to reflect on oneself or on a specific topic. I first discovered the practice of a "quiet time" every morning when I participated in the Life Matters Course in Australia, in 2001. The friends I met there encouraged me to challenge myself, to look deeper at myself to find tendencies and patterns of life that negatively affect me and my surroundings.

What was life-changing about this experience is that it helped me to see who I really was. I felt that I was truly connecting with my authentic self without judging myself. Since then, in the effort to stay connected with this authentic self, the "quiet time" has become something that I include in my everyday life. It's not an exaggeration to say that this approach has been a framework for my life. On a practical level, through trial and error, I have learned to be flexible with how long

I take in silence in order to do this every day. Sometimes it's just three minutes, sometimes an hour. It simply depends on my schedule.

Through this self-reflective practice, I have been able to explore my passion and find my calling. For me, it is to build bridges with people, to inspire people to see different worldviews, and to heal people. I have realized that it's the work with people, for people, that makes me excited and happy.

Fast forward to where I am now: It has already been a little over a decade since I first learned about IofC in Japan. In 2004, I went to Vermont in the USA for graduate school and in 2008, I moved to Durham, North Carolina, for a job.

What was life-changing about this experience is that it helped me to see who I really was. I felt that I was truly connecting with my authentic self without judging myself. . . . The quiet time has become something that I include in my everyday life.

Currently, I work at Duke University in an office that supports international students and scholars. This profession, International Education, is in fact the exact thing that I feel I am meant to do: connecting people from all over the world and working with people (both Americans and internationals) to help them understand different worldviews through intercultural communication trainings. When I facilitate workshops and leadership training programmes, I include reflective activities to create a



Yoko Hisano

space and time for participants to connect with their authentic selves. I believe this is what it means to pass on what I have learned through attending IofC activities. I feel that I am planting small seeds of peace through my work.

This does not mean that I am perfect. I am constantly reminded of my assumptions that are rooted in seeing the world through a lens coloured by Japanese values and social norms. Sometimes I catch myself interacting with a student from another culture, thinking, "This student is so rude! He didn't do this and that and I'm much older than he is." I've realized that the voice in my head is judgemental. The student didn't respond in a way that I thought was polite from my Japanese point of view. As a matter of fact, the student might have been polite according to his own cultural values. By assuming things, I only create unnecessary conflicts in my head and negative emotions that accompany it. One night, during my "quiet time", I realized this.

Every incident like this pushes me to work harder to change myself, to be non-judgemental, to not assume, to be less fearful of the unknown, and to be a change-maker. Thus, the quote by Mahatma Gandhi, "You must be the change you wish to see in the world," has also been my motto.

In writing this article, I have come to realize that I am actively involved in IofC just by using the IofC approach in my work and my life. I am living in the spirit of IofC values. I try to practice what I believe and give something back to the world through my work of International Education. My encounter with IofC has definitely helped me find my true path and I am grateful for that.

So near but so far, and yet ...

The floods across Australia have devastated the hopes and dreams of many people. Even those most able to be philosophical about it cannot smother the gut-wrenching feelings of seeing their most cherished possessions being ruined or washed away. Worse still, some lost loved ones. And whilst much of the damage will be calculated in dollar terms, the most precious things can never be replaced.

Alongside the sights of such suffering were the lines of people – thousands of them – with mops, brooms and shovels ready to help those afflicted by the carnage. We will never forget the scenes of those joyful, willing faces any more than those of pain and tears.

The pleasures of life can be so near one minute, but so far the next. How can this happen and why does tragedy strike some but not others? Such questions have no answers. For those who experience such terrible hardship or inconsolable grief, a degree of acceptance will

ultimately be the only thing that enables them to keep going. And though bearing the scars for life, some may even find a sense of peace and freedom from the hurt and despair.

Through the awful darkness of tragedy, as well as the merciful bliss of good fortune can come new perspectives on life. When living in Ethiopia I was made aware of just how blessed I was the day I was taken by a local friend to visit a remote village. Driving for several hours, we then walked along a stony trail, arriving at this place which was cut off from the world. The villagers subsisted for food from day to day in what appeared to be a dry and barren moonscape environment. They welcomed us like long-lost relatives. My friend was well known to them, but I was a total stranger. With no phone for miles, they had no warning of our coming. However with spontaneous joy, they set about preparing - what was for them at least - a feast to honour our presence.

By worldly standards they were absolutely poor. They had nothing. Yet they seemed almost eager to share their 'nothing' with a complete stranger. I wondered how this could be. They had nothing to prove, and to share appeared more than an obligation. Extraordinarily to me it seemed to be a source of pleasure that gave meaning to their lives. Certainly it was an experience I would never forget.

For those who strive to create a world free from poverty and hardship, they are aware of the obstacles. For those who strive to build a problem-free life, they know how elusive it can be. Our experiences can sometimes present as being a kilometre wide but just a centimetre deep. Circumstances can suddenly call on us to go deeper in our response to personal suffering or the hardship of others. Character, courage, and even faith, can grow out of adversity and somehow make us different. What appears to be the secret of contentment can be so near, but so far, and yet return – perhaps unexpectedly - in another way.

David Mills

Hearing with new ears

Some weeks ago it was announced that asylum-seeker families would be housed at Inverbrackie in the Adelaide Hills of South Australia. The 40 empty houses were part of the Woodside Army barracks. However, the lead-in time was short, local people became polarised, a minor political party sought political mileage, there were disruptive meetings. While some locals had fears, others wished to support the initiative.

The Adelaide Hills Circle of Friends Group became crucial to developing a change of atmosphere. Circle of Friends is non-political and involves people from all walks of life. At a nearby town hall some 500 people gathered one Sunday afternoon to hear positive stories from refugees – their reasons for escaping, finding a home in Australia and the contribution they are now making.

We heard that one out of every 161 people on earth is displaced. We were challenged to hear with new ears, to open our hearts, clear our minds and have a

new awareness of those who are stateless and so offer a "life of safety, welcome, hope and meaning". A local Aboriginal leader spoke of his empathy for the refugees, saying "We (the *Peramangk*) are refugees in our country still". He then said to the audience, "you are all welcome here, everyone should have a home".

The stories flowed from former refugees from Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iran and Chile. One said, "I did not come to Australia to be a burden". He now teaches English and is an interpreter. A Chilean youth, whose father was sympathetic to a former regime, escaped a government death squad that came to his school when he was 16 years old. Now he volunteers in the country fire service saying, "I am prepared to risk my life for the country that took me in". Others shared heartfelt poetry and song in their mother tongue and in English. We did indeed "hear with new ears". Since the meeting, the organisation managing the

Inverbrackie centre is observing a compassionate "duty of care" and is liaising with the local CoFF leadership, churches and others in the local community.

Helen Stacey

Letter to the Editor

As two Brits who have had the privilege of being in Australia for six and a half years, and having left a large part of our hearts there, we always enjoy receiving *Newsbriefs* and appreciate its refreshing and challenging contents.

As we read in our newspapers about the disastrous floods and see pictures on TV, our hearts go out to that dear land and we grieve with you all. We continue to pray for the rebuilding of lives and healing of hearts in which you will be involved.

Maisie and Ivan Poulton