



Initiatives of Change

"Hatred found easy shelter in my heart"

Diana Damsa from Romania and Australian-Chinese Long Seng To were the guest speakers at a Creators of Peace event in August, which was held in the community centre in Belmore, Sydney. Fifty women took part, bringing plates of snacks to share. This was the second Creators of Peace event in the centre, and is a step towards an international Creators of Peace women's conference which will be held in Sydney in 2009. As a further step, a Peace Circle facilitators workshop was held in September. The guest speakers at the August event both spoke movingly of their experiences on Action for Life 3, a nine-month IoC program (see www.afl.iofc.org).

We print Diana Damsa's talk:

During the Action for Life programme we discussed the fall of communism in Eastern Europe. One person said this had come through peaceful revolutions. Suddenly I became emotional and needed to speak. I remembered those days, and they were violent. Peaceful demonstrators were shot in the streets and buried hurriedly in mass graves. My brother, aged 18, was doing his compulsory military service, and for more than a week we did not know if he was still alive.

I remembered too the enthusiasm, the hopes and joy of people at that time. But why after 16 years was I still so emotional? I was surprised to discover something that I had never been aware of. When our cruel dictator and his wife were executed we all felt relieved. We saw on TV how they had been caught, tried and condemned, and then we saw them lying dead. And I remembered, as I watched, saying in frustration, "That's not fair! I want to see them dying!" My heart was full of hate.

I was amazed to discover how much anger I held at the age of 15. This is what happens after years of oppression, humiliation and lies, after a childhood spent queuing for hours for basic necessities, being forced to study in ice-cold classrooms, doing homework by candlelight, and attending endless parades in praise of the dictator.

Until that moment I had not talked about all this. As a society we are trying to move forward, hoping for a better future. We don't want to talk about the past. Action for Life gave me the chance to open up about past hurts. Since then I have been able to forgive and to feel peace in my heart. I understand what oppression and humiliation can do.

There were other consequences of growing up under a totalitarian regime. The educational system taught lies, and discouraged us from questioning, raising doubts, taking initiative or expressing our opinions. In Action for Life I saw that, compared to young people from democratic countries, I lacked confidence, and found it difficult to trust that my opinions were valuable.

Now I see why, as a young lawyer confronted with the corrupt practices of the company I worked for, I felt powerless to make a difference. My compromises resulted in the loss of what little confidence, dignity and self respect I still had. It brought hate back into my heart - hate towards my job, the way business was done, the way people were treated. Unwilling to be part of this corruption, I gave up my career as a lawyer, despite its material advantages. I returned to studies and became a music teacher. This was more peaceful and fulfilling.

Soon after that I met Initiatives of Change. This helped me to regain confidence, to grow stronger in my convictions, to find hope for myself and my country. I realised that change was possible, even if hard, and that my experiences could be used for positive purposes. I understood that my decisions make an impact on the people around me. Corruption creates an abusive, aggressive society. The most important contribution I could make was to live with integrity, and to strive to be pure, unselfish and caring.

When I felt unhappy as a lawyer, it was because I focussed on my own needs and fears. I had no peace in my heart and hatred found an easy shelter there. Now I can see beyond myself and have found a



Diana Damsa

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passion to create a culture of peace and honesty.

In the past year I have worked with Initiatives of Change in Fiji, New Zealand and Australia. I have had wonderful experiences and learnt of the issues which confront these countries. Now I'm looking forward to going home and sharing these experiences with my people.

Peace Circles is one thing I take home with me. There is a great need for women in Romania to share their stories, to listen and learn from each other, to grow in confidence and to believe in their capacity to be agents of peace.

Rethinking our national stories

Last month John Bond, Initiatives of Change worker and an executive member of the Stolen Generations Alliance, spoke at a conference, hosted by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, to mark the tenth anniversary of the "Bringing Them Home" report. He said:

Generations of Australians have grown up believing that Aboriginal culture is worthless, that Aboriginal people are morally inferior to us. That is the myth by which we justified our takeover of the continent without making treaties. That is the myth which led to the policy of removing Aboriginal children from their families.

When the Bringing Them Home report was published, the Federal Government's response came straight from the myth. The heart-rending stories seemed to make no impact. But many Australians reacted differently. As Professor Mick Dodson told an Aboriginal conference a few weeks after the report's launch: "We have seen a most extraordinary turn of events in this country. Day after day the letter pages in the papers and the airwaves are filled with the reactions of ordinary Australians who are horrified at the truth that they never knew. Never before has Australia really cared about our children, children taken from the arms of their mothers, taken from their culture."

The report held up a mirror, and what we saw was not the friendly people we like to think we are. We saw that, towards Aboriginals, we have been emotionally dead. One of the deepest pains is that of a mother who loses her child, or a child its mother. Yet the gulf between our communities was so huge that even this pain could not flow across.

Sir Ronald Wilson, the former High Court judge who chaired the inquiry, was deeply affected. "I was a hard-boiled lawyer", he said, "and this inquiry changed me. If it can change me, it can change our nation."

And he set to work to change the nation, criss-crossing the country, speaking passionately at meetings which drew hundreds of people, discussing the

report's implementation with State Governments. When the Federal Government rejected the idea of a Sorry Day, he called together 30 of us in Sydney, a mixture of Indigenous and non-Indigenous, and asked whether we could make a Sorry Day happen without Government support. We decided to try.

We were a small group with no resources. But we got word out through the media that a Sorry Day would be held on 26 May 1998. The response was beyond anything we could have imagined. Nearly a million people signed Sorry Books. Hundreds of events took place on the Day. Over half the ABC TV news that evening was devoted to these events.

"Sorry" was the word we needed, because to say it means rejecting the myth that we are better people. We are beginning to realise that we cannot go on, on this fragile continent, as we have done. As General John Sanderson, former Governor of Western Australia, said last week, "It takes some doing to destroy the entire ecology of a continent in two and a half centuries, but we are well on the way to achieving this staggering feat." We will have to open our eyes to Aboriginal perspectives on managing this land. Especially as the southern part of the continent dries out, and our European agricultural methods become less and less viable.

But Aboriginal people will have no interest in teaching us unless they are respected. The hope for our future is that millions of Australians have recognised that we have unjustly denigrated Aboriginal people. That is the first step towards building a relationship of respect.

In response to Sorry Day the stolen generations showed an incredible generosity of spirit. They initiated a Journey of Healing, inviting all

Australians to play a part in healing the wounds. The people whose childhoods had been ripped up, thanks to the blindness of my people, welcomed us to work with them for healing. Again, there was a huge response. The next year a million people walked over bridges in all our cities, calling for reconciliation.

These people have not just walked. They have supported the stolen generations, organising hundreds of community events which bring together Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in barbecues, concerts, walks. Schools organise special events. Memorials have been built. The Sorry Day flower sells in tens of thousands. In a supportive environment, people can heal. That is the importance of these community initiatives.

And gradually the Government has shifted. I remember the scepticism with which Coalition politicians treated the stolen generations ten years ago. Today practically all accept that Bringing Them Home tells a true story. "The forcible removal of Indigenous children is an episode of which we are rightly ashamed," stated Health Minister Tony Abbott in May this year. "The premise on which it was based - that children were better off away from their black families - was wrong, indeed repugnant. We should have known it then. We certainly know it now, and we do have to atone for it."

The Government hasn't shown much atonement yet. But the myth has been undermined. Now we need to replace it with stories which build instead of denigrate, stories that bridge the emotional gulf. Stories such as the community response, from Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike, to the tragedy revealed by Bringing Them Home.

John Bond

Book Talk

*A Muslim encounters
Initiatives of Change*

Imam Abduljalil Sajid is the Chair of the UK Muslim Council for Religious and Racial Harmony. He and his wife visited Australia, Indonesia and New Zealand last year, speaking in mosques and at interfaith encounters. On this journey he

was asked what had led him, as a Muslim leader, to work closely with Initiatives of Change.

In an attractive booklet, just published, he answers this question, relating some of his life experiences. His encounter with Initiatives of Change, he writes, has made possible a deeper

teamwork with people of other cultures and faiths and the finding of common ground in tackling the moral needs of our society.

Available from - Grosvenor Books
Melbourne: 03 9822 1218 or Joyce Fraser
Sydney: 02 9559 2301 for \$2.50.
Postage is free.

I have a dream

Pastor Ray Minniecon from Redfern, Sydney, attended the Global Indigenous Dialogue at Caux, the Initiatives of Change conference centre this summer. On the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples he shared this vision with the conference:



Pastor Ray Minniecon

I have a dream: that all Indigenous peoples will truly take their rightful place within our global community.

I have a dream: that our elders and leaders will be truly respected and accepted for the depth of their wisdom and knowledge that they possess and that our elders and leaders will make their contribution to responsible stewardship and renewal of our mother earth so that our children's children, to the tenth generation, will not be denied the fruits and riches of our mother.

I have a dream: that our wise elders and leaders will care for our people in our communities so that our people will grow strong in their identity, their dignity and their integrity and they will grow strong in the knowledge of their responsibilities so that our communities will become communities of peace, prosperity and well-being rather than communities of violence and destruction.

Interfaith encounters

Uniting Church minister Lindsay Cartwright writes:

At an interfaith evening in Perth earlier this year I found myself in a discussion group with Jews, Christians and a Muslim. Yet I did not see them in those categories. We discussed as friends.

I met the idea of Initiatives of Change while studying at the Presbyterian Theological Hall in Melbourne. It opened my eyes to my prejudice against Catholics. I apologised to a Catholic for this, and subsequently became good friends with him and his family. I still have a St Christopher medal which they gave me when I left to work in Europe. There I spent four years in Italy, working largely with Catholics.

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I have a dream: that our prophets and our prophetesses will challenge the world's governments, multi-nationals and global institutions and their systems so that these systems and structures will be a blessing for all human beings and all living things, without oppression and injustice.

I have a dream: that our communities will produce strong leaders that will show grace, wisdom, truth and integrity - in our families, our communities, our nations and our world.

I have a dream: that Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples will live and work together in the spirit of true reconciliation, where there is equality, where there is justice, and where there is respect for each other.

I have a dream: that we can all work together to make this dream come true.

In 1950, when I first visited the Initiatives of Change conference centre at Caux, Switzerland, I shared a room with an Egyptian. I discovered that it was natural for me, a Christian, and him, a Muslim, to take time in quiet each morning, and to share with each other the insights we received. Despite our religious differences we could enrich each other spiritually. Later I worked for several years in India and found that this held true with Hindus and Buddhists too. People of different religions can work together for a common cause while still practising their own faith.

Doves and Crows in Fiji

Twenty-two young Fijians represented Initiatives of Change at the International Day of Peace in Sukuna Park, Suva, last month.

They included eight from the Solomon Islander settlement of Matata - a minority group whose ancestors came to Fiji during the era of blackbirding, when Pacific Islanders were captured and brought to work on sugar plantations. The group presented a skit depicting a peace protester bearing a dove, who becomes increasingly violent when the dove is mistaken for a crow! The moral - that peace begins with me and my relationships - was reinforced when they sang David Mills' song, *Let's create a culture of peace*. A homegrown skit showed a variety of groups claiming they could move Fiji forward - government officers, the army, the chiefs, the church, NGOs. But the country only moves forward when they learn to work together.

Ana Vesikula and
Metuisela Tuivavalagi

Candidates for integrity

Among those preparing for the forthcoming national elections is the Australian Independents Coalition (AIC), which seeks a more independent Senate and greater integrity in the democratic process.

One of their candidates, Sydney teacher Graeme Cordiner, writes: "The recent film on William Wilberforce, *Amazing Grace*, captures the essence of our vision. Slavery had morally and spiritually enslaved Britain. When Britain abolished the slave trade, she became a freer nation. The AIC believes that until Aboriginal people are accorded their true dignity Australia too will never find its true greatness as a nation."

The AIC holds to five core values in assessing legislation: integrity in the process, sustainability, fairness, dealing with historical injustice and building community. "In all these areas we have much to learn from Aboriginal culture. The path to the future passes through our past."

Where shattered lives can start afresh

Last month Arnold Zable spoke on "The Power of Story - recognising our common humanity" at Armagh, the Melbourne centre for Initiatives of Change.



"Here shattered lives can start afresh, and we can share in the dreams of people from all corners of the globe."

His talk was one of an international series of lectures organised by Caux Initiatives for Business, a program that engages people in conversation on issues

associated with globalization. Zable, an award-winning writer, educator and human rights advocate, presented haunting descriptions of displacement from homeland and the way the effects of war linger in the minds of survivors.

"Ours is a nation of immigrants and indigenous peoples," he said, "a new world with an ancient past. A grand symphony with many melodies. Listen to the song through the open door of a single-fronted terrace in North Carlton sometime in the 1950's. My mother is singing When Irish Eyes are Smiling. She who lost her loved ones in a ferocious war, who fought her way to

these shores in order to survive, who usually sings in Yiddish, the language she acquired in Poland, is singing an Irish song. She sings as she cooks and sews and works her way towards a prosperity she never dreamt of in the run-down tenements of her childhood.

"Here shattered lives can start afresh, and we can share in the dreams of people from all corners of the globe."

Action for Life 4

Action for Life 4 starts in October 2008. So far, applications have come from 10 countries.

The deadline of 15 October 2007 is early so that we can start working with each participant long before the course begins - building a deeper understanding of our aims and helping them to raise the funds they will need. To find out more, check out www.afl.iofc.org. Alexander Birnberg (Australia), Chris Breitenberg (USA), Nigel Heywood (Australia), Leena Khatri (India), Suresh Khatri (Fiji), Hanting Pan (Taiwan).

Jane Mills writes from Sydney

David and I have been working with the Hills Interfaith Dialogue group.

Our next occasion will be a celebration of Advent featuring a Christian and a Muslim speaker, the documentary - The Imam and the Pastor and an a cappella choir singing Christmas carols!

This will be held on: Wednesday, December 5, at 7pm at the Imam Hasan Centre, 165 Annangrove Road, Annangrove. For further details contact us on: (02) 9599 1428.



WANTED: mature adventurers

A wonderful experience awaits older people who join the international community serving the Asia Plateau Intern Program (APIP) at Panchgani, India for one or two or, better still, six months.

The APIP takes 8-10 interns, starting in January and September, to explore the basic qualities of being a "change-maker" and help with the programs at Asia Plateau. Right now, a promising young group have assembled from Kashmir and north-east India, Korea and Latvia.

Several "senior citizens" have come during the past year, including Australian Gordon Wise with his wife, Marjory. All say they have been invigorated by the interactions with the interns and with the policemen, students, business-people, bureaucrats, teachers and others who stream through this place.

No particular qualifications are needed except clean hands, open hearts and a willingness to share how to listen to the inner voice. You find yourself helping someone improve their English, cutting vegetables, meeting nearby village farmers or sharing the deepest you know with a lonely soul or a questioning government official!

The APIP is run by James Mangte, an Action for Life graduate from Manipur. Among those supporting him are Mike and Jean Brown from Adelaide and Suresh and Leena Khatri. But help is needed. From late January the Browns will be in Australia and then Europe for eight months.

And the Khatri's have promised full support for the program of Action for Life 4 starting in October 2008.

The APIP program needs support throughout this period.

Interested? Drop a line to us at apip@in.india.org

Mike and Jean Brown

