

Experiments in Personal Change

Stories from the plenary sessions: examples of change-makers

Stephanie Woollard is the founder of Blessed Life, a grass-roots development project empowering marginalized women in Nepal. Stephanie began Blessed Life in 2009 on her fifth trip to Nepal when she met seven women with disabilities operating out of a tin shed. Stephanie initially paid for a training for the women in felting and knitting to build their skills so they could be instrumental in the transformation of their own lives. Through marketing and selling the products in Australia and sending 100% of the profits back, the women were able to create a training centre in which to both work and live. The centre has evolved and now, over 100 disabled and disadvantaged women are able to work and support their families on their income. Steph shared her journey with us and was an amazing example that empowering people doesn't require a lot of money. She also challenged us by asking us to close our eyes and think of all the items we were wearing and ask ourselves if we knew where the items were made and whether we think the people who made them got a fair pay?

There was something about **Shanaka Fernando** that from a young age he wanted to learn more about life and the world and himself. He came to Australia from Sri Lanka as a young adult but soon after arriving decided to travel. This decision took Shanaka all over the world and he discovered cultures that greatly influenced him; cultures that had sustained a way of being for thousands of years without changing. He was influenced by how secure many of the family relations were in these cultures and he wanted to come back to the West and test how we trusted one another in our modern societies. In a culture that worshiped money he decided to try something radical – to open a restaurant that didn't charge any money. People pay what they can afford and in some cases that is nothing. When 'Lentil As Anything' first opened in St Kilda, Melbourne, they were ridiculed; told they would never last but as time went on and the money kept rolling in people started to take notice. 11 years later they have 3 restaurants across Melbourne, feed over 1000 people a day and make \$2 million a year. So what is the main ingredient? Trust. It was also the binding ingredient in most of the communities in the tribal villages that Shanaka visited. Shanaka shared how the more simple he is the more he learns and that there is power in simple ideas and arguments. He urged us that if we have an idea then we need to stick with it – whatever the challenges. A great example of this was when the Australian Tax Office took him to court for not paying GST. Shanaka argued that they should not have to pay GST as many of the people they feed did not pay a cent for their meals. After five years in court, Shanaka won the case and legislation was changed to accommodate his philosophy.

His final message was about being proud of who you are and not trying to fit in with those around you. "If you are yourself then you are already fitting in".

Inala Cooper is the Executive Officer to the Indigenous Advisory Council at Monash University. Her people are from the Yawuru nation in Broome, Western Australia but Inala has grown up in Melbourne and it very much her home. Inala shared how challenging it is to be an Indigenous women in Australia because of the perceptions. As the only Aboriginal person in her school, Inala felt she had to exceed everyone's expectations. She had to rise above the perception that all Aboriginal children are lazy and that they fail school. Everyone kept telling Inala that she was different – that she had to set an example. Slowly it dawned on her that the reason she was being told this was because she didn't 'look' Aboriginal. And she realised that many of the adults in her community, the people who were suppose to set an example , did not have the right attitude. Inala did well at school and went on to University, but she found the same attitude from many of her teachers. Rather than believing that all Aboriginals are capable of achieving academic success they continued to hold her up as the one, shining, example. In 2009 Inala was invited to speak at the 'Close the Gap in Education' conference. From the platform she shared her story. At the end of the session she had many people approach her, but they all wanted to know the same thing: "Whose story were you telling?" She was dumbstruck. "I was sharing my story...that was about me." "But you don't look Aboriginal..." came the response she had heard so many times before. One particularly bold man went further, "For you to have such fair skin you must have some other blood in you. What other blood is in you?" Inala replied, "yes, I also have German heritage but I choose to identify with my Indigenous culture." "But why would you," when I could get away with being white, is what he was implying. So Inala told him, "I've never been to Germany or anywhere in Europe, but I was born in Australia. It is my country and it is my right to choose which culture I identify with."

Since then Inala has takes every opportunity she gets to change people's perceptions. "We can't wait for people to come to us, we need to get out there and spread the message. But of course it has to be a two-way relationship." Inala then shared the challenge she is presently facing her people in her spiritual home of Broome. For 30 years the Yawuru people have been fighting a native-title case on their land. Recently the Court determined that it was indeed Indigenous land and so a title and large sum of money was awarded to the Yawuru people. The question is how to invest this money so that it is sustainable for generations to come. Although Inala has never lived in Broome she has been called upon to help them to work through this process. How do I best help my people to make positive changes and use these funds responsibly?

Benny Callaghan is CEO of the School for Social Entrepreneurs Australia

Everyone has their own way – the key is to find your way. Ultimately it's about finding the fullest expression of who you are.

The key skill for any entrepreneur is empathy; understanding and recognising the needs of others. To ask yourself the question “what are the needs of the people I'm serving?” Ashoka, a multi-million dollar organisation, operating in over 25 countries, recently advertised for a Director of Empathy...it took 3 years to fill.

What's the greatest social innovation of the 21st Century? It will be something to do with empathy and how we connect with others.

How we connect with ourselves is also extremely important.

The basic idea is to support people who have an idea and a desire to serve a community. They help to dismantle the blocks that stand in the way such as a business plan, funding. They run a 9 month training program where participants formulate a business plan and also look at their personal side

The biggest blocks aren't to do with money or the business plan – they are often personal challenges. We hit up against our own limitations.

The inner journey is the real work and it will be what gets you through. Give you the tools to face your own limitations. You need to develop self-awareness, reflect, ask the hard questions of ourselves and others.

Idea of forming a group around you is critical.

Simple ideas that may not change the world but will change the world for the people involved.

Investors never invest in projects; they invest in people.

Need to ask yourself the question: “when and how do the people I seek to help have a voice?”

Sara Sabbagh, a youth and community worker in Melbourne since 1989

‘Everyone has been made for some particular work and the desire for that work has been placed in every heart’. Rumi

All this attention on the hijab is a distraction from what really matters. It is not a true discussion of faith – it's a discussion of ego. It's all about the outer and nothing about the inner. She got so frustrated that she stepped away from it all and even questioned her faith but in the quiet space she once again found her calling...to give rise to that spirit inside Muslim women.

From here she started ‘Benevolence’ – a non-for-profit organisation that aims is to create a voice and a space for Muslims that do not feel represented in the Australian community. She yearns to create a Muslim identity that is uniquely Australian.

Based on Sufi traditions, ‘Benevolence’ attracts people of all walks of life, of all age brackets and all religious denominations; for our aim is to create an environment where people can come together and work in partnership in creating a more respectful and compassionate Australian community.

Some of our many programs include: Community events, such as monthly dinners, School programs, Mosque tours, Health & wellbeing, Convert support, Counselling, Keniesology and Bookclub.

Our goal is to establish Benevolence House.... where the seeker of knowledge can find their inspiration, where the sad can be comforted and where every individual is respected...a place that welcomes all.

She realised that all she was ever being asked about was Muslim women's dress code or Muslim's women's rights and she obliged these requests to discuss these issues because she thought it would help people to see the truth but the reality the opposite was happening and she realised that those who understand it, understand it and those who don't understand it, won't – until they are raised to another level of consciousness. She couldn't force people to understand her culture and religion and so she stopped trying and instead focussed her energy and attention on her heart's desire and true calling - raising God consciousness in the community and raising awareness of women.

Life as it is in our society is designed to take us away from our inner calling. That's why it's so important to come back to a time of quiet – to centre yourself. That's why praying 5 times a day is so powerful – it brings me back and helps me to nurture and listen to my spirit. I limit the unnecessary things in my life and try and stay connected with people – this is a journey to the Divine. Through serving you grow.

David Nyuol Vincent fled Sudan when he was three years old and lived in refugee camps for the next 18 years. During his younger years, David was trained as a child-soldier; an experience which left deep scars. "While I'm still alive I will do whatever I can to stop someone else from going through what I went through." To forgive is a painful decision but it's sweet pain.

What it takes to be a change maker...passion, conviction, action, support and perhaps most of all you will need courage.

He finished with the words of Mother Teresa 'What you do, I cannot do; but what you do, I cannot do. The needs are great, including me, ever do great things. But we can all do small things, with great love, and together we can do something wonderful.'