CHANGE MAKERS

FIGHTERS FOR PEACE

‘LET’S MEET’ SAY LEBANESE MOTHERS

LIFE AFTER LUCY

HOPE FOR LANDMINE CASUALTIES

ORDINARY MAGIC
All change for healthy living

Hope for landmine casualties

Hum the change you want to see

Ordinary magic: the power of tea

Where camels are part of the answer

Life after Lucy

‘Let’s meet’, say Lebanese mothers

Fighters for peace

Everyone welcome

Courage and resilience in Northern Uganda
From the Editor

The year 2016 is drawing to its close. It will be remembered for Britain voting to leave the EU, the election of Donald Trump and the biggest refugee crisis since World War II. With everything going on in the world, it is often hard to find positive inspiration. This is why I love stories of people who have a passion for social change and who remind me that the power to transform lives lies within us.

In this issue you will find stories of people with incredible courage, resilience and positivity. Take Merel Rumping (p6), for example, who found her passion in social entrepreneurship and is now transforming the lives of amputees in Colombia. Sergio Lopez Figueroa (p9) discovered that music improved his mental health issues and set up Humming in Harmony to help others. Marian Partington (p14) had the courage to forgive her sister’s murderers. What have all those featured in the magazine got in common? They started with themselves.

For more stories of change, and to subscribe to receive updates, visit our website: www.changemakersmagazine.org

Davina Patel, Editor
comms.uk@iofc.org

Welcome to Changemakers

John Bond
Muna Ismail
Mary Lean
Samuel Mallett
Kate Monkhouse

Kenneth Noble
Merel Rumping
Aleksandra Shymina
Yee Liu Williams

Our writers

Read online Free!
DOMINIC AND JO DE ROSA share a mission to help others to embrace a healthy lifestyle. Jo has struggled with drug addiction and alcoholism: for Dom, who says he was a social user, the issue was food. Their journey towards personal freedom and ‘congruence’ has run parallel with the growth of their wellbeing business, based in a 16th century farmhouse in Suffolk.

When they met, both Dom and Jo had given up drugs, but Jo was still drinking heavily. ‘She was teaching yoga and meditation fulltime, and she knew that doing that with a hangover was not congruent,’ says Dom. Various attempts at sobriety had failed, but when Jo finally told Dom, ‘That’s it, I’ve had enough,’ he knew she meant it. Eight months ago, Dom followed her example.

His passion is ‘clean eating’: meals at their Inner Guidance Retreat Centre are predominantly vegan, and free of wheat, dairy, sugar and preservatives. ‘I lost three and a half stone, not by dieting but by eating differently,’ he says. He writes books on how healthy food can be fun and easy, and they run the centre together, weathering the challenges of being business partners as well as life partners.

The centre offers yoga, retreats and healthy food, and ‘Quantum Sobriety’, a programme developed by Jo to help people struggling with various types of addictions. Born out of her own experience and their Buddhist faith, it combines neuroscience, holistic therapies, nutrition, one-to-one work and ongoing follow-up support.

‘We look on addiction as something in the brain, rather than a disease,’ says Dom. ‘Alcohol, cocaine, abusive relationships are the plaster over what is wrong. You have to remove the plaster and find the root cause. People abuse substances because it is easier to do that than find their truth.’ They do not run medical detoxes, but try to catch people before they are physically dependent or once they have withdrawn and are looking for help in sustaining their sobriety.

Four years ago, just after Jo stopped drinking for good, they moved into Hill Farm in Suffolk, which used to belong to Peter Howard, a key figure in Moral Re-Armament (MRA), the precursor of Initiatives of Change. They were attracted by the hall which Howard had built specifically for MRA gatherings, which Jo now uses as her yoga studio, and by the fact that the house was large enough to accommodate small residential groups.

When Dom started to research the history of the house, he was struck by MRA’s emphasis on silent reflection and inner change, and by the fact that the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous were influenced by the ideas of MRA’s founder Dr Frank Buchman. This synchronicity encouraged him to make contact with Initiatives of Change, and the De Rosas recently hosted the ‘descendants of MRA’ at Hill Farm for a reflective meeting.

‘Our aim,’ says Dom, ‘is to give people the opportunity to help themselves.’ They see their centre as a ‘bus stop’: a place where people can come to change the direction they are travelling in. Just as they have done themselves.
FIVE YEARS AGO I VISITED A TINY MOUNTAIN VILLAGE IN SWITZERLAND CALLED CAUX. THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE CENTRE OF INITIATIVES OF CHANGE (IOFC) IS BEAUTIFULLY LOCATED OVERLOOKING THE BRIGHT BLUE LAKE OF GENEVA. I PARTICIPATED IN A CONFERENCE ON TRUST AND INTEGRITY IN THE GLOBAL ECONOMY, WHICH AIMED AT FINDING WAYS OF CREATING A JUST AND SUSTAINABLE ECONOMY, THROUGH PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL ACTIVITY.

I came with a goal in mind: to explore how I could contribute to a more just world through my professional activities. My goal was clear, but the way forward was still unknown. Who would have thought that five years later I would be back at Caux as a speaker? And that I would have started LegBank, a social enterprise which increases access to prosthetic care for low-income amputees? And that our team would win several Dutch prizes, receive a million dollar donation from Google and brainstorm with Bill Gates?

‘The harsh world of the slums didn’t prevent me from falling in love with Colombia.’

As a student in my twenties (I am now 32), I went to Colombia to work in the slums with street kids and former child soldiers. We developed a theatre play together. Often the street kids were on drugs, slept on the streets and prostituted themselves, sometimes as young as 11. The harsh world of the slums didn’t prevent me from falling in love with Colombia, its warm and welcoming people, the sun, and the liveliness and the optimism with which all problems were met.

Several years later I returned to Colombia to work at a micro-credit bank. There I discovered the potential of social enterprise. I was heading for a diplomatic career, studying political science in France and working at the Dutch embassy in Morocco. It became clear to me that I believed in the power of social enterprise, and that this was where I wanted to put my energies.

Social entrepreneurs find innovative solutions for social problems. Social Enterprise NL, who promote the concept in the Netherlands, put it like this: ‘Like any other enterprise, a social enterprise delivers a product or a service and has a viable business model.'
However making money is not the main aim, it is a way of achieving your mission. The aim of a social enterprise is to create added social value, also called impact.’

I started to work for ProPortion, a creative organisation in Amsterdam that initiates social enterprises in emerging economies. This gave me the chance to initiate LegBank, to offer affordable, quality prostheses to low-income amputees, especially in emerging economies. We started in Colombia, which has the second highest number of landmine victims in the world.

One of LegBank’s aims is to decentralize prosthetic care. Our Majicast device speeds up the process of making prosthetic sockets and increases the quality and comfort for the end user. It was invented by Dr Arjan Buis of the University of Strathclyde and was designed for professional use by the Reggs agency in Amsterdam.

How does it work? A leg prosthesis consists of a foot and a socket which are bonded together with a tube, a kind of shinbone. The foot and the tube are mainly mass-produced, but the socket is normally made by hand, because it has to fit the user’s residual limb precisely. This is time and cost intensive, and requires a lot of experience and expertise. Majicast makes it possible to produce high quality prosthetic sockets in a relatively easy way without using your hands. This is important, because the world is short of prosthetic makers and clinicians.

Thanks to investors, funds and a strong development team we were able to design Majicast, and will be testing it out on 40 Dutch patients in the coming months. We also demonstrated it to Colombian prosthetic makers and clinicians in May 2016. There was great interest.

We are developing a business model so that we can start three pilot orthopaedic centres in rural Colombia where there is currently no or insufficient orthopaedic care, with funding from Google. If everything goes according to plan, the first centre will open in May 2017.

Translated by Irene de Pous
Sergio Lopez Figueroa, the founder of Humming in Harmony (HUM), describes himself as a nomad. He was born to Spanish parents from the Canary Islands and his love of music started early. ‘I used to pick up tunes and play them on my little keyboard,’ he says.

When he was 22, he left home to pursue a career as a composer, studying and working in Italy, the UK and Spain. In 2007 he returned to London and started Big Bang Lab, an educational social enterprise which aimed to break down barriers between generations. He used film archives to encourage people to question the present by looking at the past. ‘Part of the mission was to empower people to have a shared voice and work together to co-create new visions for the future.’

He also co-designed an award-winning educational media project on the Holocaust. Through it he met Alice Herz-Sommer, the Holocaust’s oldest survivor. ‘Alice was 104 when I met her and she was so active,’ he says. ‘I was blown away by her positivity.’ Her energy and passion to keep growing have been a lasting inspiration.

This period of his life included family breakdown and financial problems. He closed the company three years ago. ‘I was struggling and renting an unsuitable place. I felt like I was living two different lives, networking and trying to bring the business alive but also exhausted to a point that I had a nervous breakdown.’ For a short period he was homeless.

During this time of severe instability, he discovered the power of humming. ‘It was almost like a personal mantra of remembering pieces of music I liked listening to, especially Bach. I found this form of self-therapy very soothing and relaxing.’ Humming in Harmony was born, combining mindfulness and humming with a focus on listening and sound.

‘Humming is scientifically proven to be beneficial to the brain,’ explains Sergio. ‘Everyone can hum, it doesn’t require any physical training or effort.’ Sergio’s sessions help attendees to strip away the stresses of city life and reconnect with their inner peace.

He offers humming sessions to small companies and community-based organisations at venues including Westminster Music Library and the Royal Festival Hall. Participants have reported health benefits. He was one of the changemakers nominated by the Southbank Centre at the Festival of Love in July 2016.

He has also created Section 21, a healing choir made up of private renters who are dealing with housing issues. Their music and lyrics highlight the connection between poor housing conditions and mental health. ‘I want to engage people to make a change,’ he says. ‘I want every landlord to adhere to compulsory Quality Living Standards.’

On 22 December HUM opened in Sergio’s hometown, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, with a collective improvised piece for piano, orchestra, choir and humming audience on the theme of the forgotten inner child.

At 50, Sergio is still trying to connect people, and dreaming of taking Humming in Harmony from London to the world.

www.humminginharmony.com
www.publicrenting.uk

Samuel Mallett (left) meets HUM founder Sergio Lopez Figueroa.
ORDINARY MAGIC
THE POWER OF TEA

Lera Mimizu sought magic in the circus, and found it in tea. Aleksandra Shymina went to meet her.

Intense blue eyes stare at me. They don’t seem to be blinking. I shuffle on my seat, feeling seen, as if I am the one telling the truth about my life.

I am in a cozy little coffee shop in Borough Market, London, with tea expert and tour guide, Lera Mimizu. She is a single mum and a business owner. No matter how difficult it is at times, she is living her dream, having her freedom, being herself. How many of us dream of doing that? I am here to hear her story and enjoy being in the company of somebody so authentic.

I have attended several of Lera’s tea ceremonies, where a small circle of people meditate while drinking real Chinese tea from tiny cups. I have also been on one of her tea tours around London, discovering corners I have never been to and tea stories I haven’t heard before.

The first thing I want to know is ‘Why tea?’ She says she is attracted to tea by its depth and richness. ‘It is not only a drink with a beautiful taste and flavour, but also a plant medicine – for the heart, spirit, body. It is history too, because it’s a drink that changed the world. It is spirituality, as tea and presence go hand in hand. It is a great connector. When people sit together and drink tea, they establish a connection at a level deeper than usual.’

Lera travels to China regularly to deepen her knowledge of this ancient drink. But the first time she went there was to train as a trapeze artist for the circus. This adventure came at the price of leaving her secure job in the City of London, going against well-meaning friends who thought her a bit mad, and letting go of her family’s expectations.

‘When people sit together and drink tea, they establish a connection that is a level deeper than usual.’

Photo credit: Natalia Medvedeva

www.changemakersmagazine.org
She grew up in Lithuania, where her parents mapped out her course in life for her: school, hobbies and how she should develop her talents. A career in economics in London was a done deal and no questions were to be asked.

In the office, even her boss recognised that she was not cut out for a nine-to-five lifestyle. A spontaneous visit to Pune in India, to attend the Osho International Meditation Resort, set her off on a spiritual journey, which demanded that she should not ignore her soul.

Finally, Lera went home to Lithuania for New Year, fell in love and didn’t go back to her training. Possibly this was exactly what was needed for the next step to happen.

After about two years in Lithuania, and just before becoming a mother, Lera moved back to London. Her son became her inspiration to keep searching for professional fulfilment. A conversation with a friend focused her interest on tea, a drink she had always enjoyed. The interest became a hobby and a kind of love affair, and it took her back to China on a different mission – tea research.

She also began to explore a world of deeper connection to herself, her body, the present moment, the world and love. She studied tantra, yoga, human design, Zen, non-duality – everything that had no dogma and rules.

She quotes Robin Carnes: ‘Spirituality is a conscious connection to what makes us alive – to ourselves, to another, to the Great Other. When we grow spiritually we find meaning in what once looked like chaos. On the other hand, we may also find questions where we once thought we had things all figured out.’

This journey affected Lera’s tea practice, which in time moved from hobby to life to business. She trained with the best masters of tea ceremony, designed her London tea tours, created a website and a community.

‘Spirituality is a conscious connection to what makes us alive - to ourselves, to another, to the Great Other.’

People return to Lera’s tea ceremonies not just for the beautiful tea but for the experience she offers. Being and living her passion, she brings a breath of magic into everyday life. I leave our conversation re-inspired to do what I love doing, to be what I am meant to be.
WHERE CAMELS ARE PART OF THE ANSWER

Muna Ismail meets a trendsetting dairy farmer in Hargeisa, Somaliland.

Mustafa Duale and I meet in a café in Hargeisa. He wants to know whether his dairy camel farm can be used for trial planting of Yeheb, a valuable food and fodder plant which I am trying to reintroduce to Somaliland. I am intrigued, and a bit skeptical, as overgrazing is a huge problem in Somaliland and camels are part of this. But when I listen to him, I discover that our views on sustainability are not as far apart as I feared.

What took you into camel milk production?

Somaliland has the largest domesticated camel population in the world. I keep 250 camels on protected rangeland about 120 km south of Hargeisa. I hope that my farm will change the way Somalis rear livestock and produce milk. The variability of our climate, and our rising population, mean that we must promote sustainable use of the land.

Somalis have been rearing camels for centuries, but traditional methods rarely produce more milk than one family needs. Camel milk has always been prized in Somali culture. We have a lot to learn about how to benefit from this resource without destroying plant biodiversity.

We are looking at ways of developing environmentally friendly silage, to use in dry seasons. We might also consider planting Yeheb on the rangeland where the camels graze.

How does your dairy business help the community?

When central government collapsed in Somalia, it was replaced by autonomous regional administrations which failed to regulate food standards. Poor food quality affects public health: people of all ages suffer from malnutrition. One remedy for bone diseases is to drink more milk. More good quality milk would improve health.

Our customers back this up. A single mother told us, ‘Before I started buying camel milk from your company, my children used to be on all sorts of medications for all sorts of ailments.’ And an elderly man said that drinking two glasses of our milk every day has kept him from having to go back to his doctors in Europe.

How are your methods making a difference?

We see our company as a trendsetter. We are one of the very few companies to bring high quality fresh camel milk to the market in Hargeisa. We take a holistic, environmentally conscientious approach to rearing camels in open rangeland. We apply strict standards of hygiene to milk production and handling.

Our prices are affordable and our customer service ethos is honest. I believe we are already triggering a change. More people want to set up dairy farms which combine traditional methods with modern knowledge and technology. I hope that one day we will export our organically produced camel milk throughout the Horn of Africa and beyond.
Marian Partington tells Yee Liu Williams how the power of dreams and silence helped her to find peace after her sister’s murder.

Marian Partington's younger sister, Lucy, disappeared from a Gloucester bus stop after visiting a friend at Christmas, 1973. Twenty years later, gruesome discoveries at 25 Cromwell Street, Gloucester, revealed that Lucy Partington had been a victim of serial killers Fred and Rosemary West. Marian's memoir If you sit very still tells the moving story of her traumatic loss and personal journey.

We are sitting cross-legged in Marian's hideaway cabin at the bottom of her garden. Her book lies on the floor between us. She tells me: ‘It is very difficult to find words to describe the pain and disorientation of one's sister simply disappearing without trace for 20 years.’

She likens it to searching for a body that is trapped somewhere beneath the frozen Arctic Ocean; as the freeze continues and the ice thickens there is no sign of a thaw. As the seasons pass and the ice builds up you have to go inside to get warm if you want to carry on with life. 'You have to be ready for the thaw and for the rescue,' she says. ‘But somewhere inside, I became disconnected from the past and disabled by the future.’

It was through working with her dreams that Marian found healing. The book's title comes from a dream Marian had a few months after her sister went missing, in which Lucy told her with a smile that she'd been sitting in a water meadow: ‘If you sit very still you can hear the sun move.’

Marian sees this moment between them as the place of ‘shining silence’, where speaking would interrupt the wonder and mystery. In that place of solitude and reflection she began to accept that whatever happened to Lucy was somehow all right because in the dream her sister was at ease. She sees it as Lucy's last gift to her, and a challenge to look at her own life.

Such dreams have put Marian on her long path towards understanding the horror of what had happened. As we sit peacefully together – a stark contrast to the reality of what her family had to endure – unspoken questions lie dormant: how could she trust anyone again, how could she find peace, and how could she forgive the Wests?

Lucy's brutally dismembered body and bones were found in March 1994. She had been buried with five other young women encased in concrete under the converted basement bedroom used by the Wests' children. Five years after Lucy's remains were found, Marian had a fifth and most challenging dream that included an intention to forgive Rosemary West.

In the dream, the two women
met at night on the edge of a park, by some spiky railings, under the sleazy greyish orange glow of the street lights. As they faced each other Marian said to Rosemary (without looking at her face), ‘I forgive you.’

The dream continued in a basement with West and another person who said she was a mediator. West scooped up handfuls of fresh and bloody placentas and pushed them into small polythene bags. She picked up each bag in turn, tossing them over her shoulder out of a window into the dark abyss and intoning a sinister mantra, ‘I keep throwing them into the sea, but the waves keep bringing them back.’

Marian sees this dream as facing up to the demonised ‘Rosemary West’ in her – her shadow side. She acknowledges her own shame and guilt and the bits of her life which she regrets: including abortions and a violent relationship, which left her as a single mother in her 20s, living in a council flat with two children on the at-risk register.

West could not rid herself of the contents of the Cromwell Road basement (of which she continues to deny knowledge) and she would rather edit out the ‘terminations’ in her life. Marian, by contrast, writes of her abortions: ‘It is not consoling, but true, that this has helped me feel more compassionate towards those who have killed, legally or illegally.’

Marian says that silence and ‘sitting very still’ has allowed her to move on to healing and to accept forgiveness for all the failed moments in her life. It has been difficult to be compassionate with herself, but essential for her own wellbeing and that of those with whom she comes into contact. The attitude of insight and compassion, which enables her to love her enemies and pray for them, goes far beyond ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, she reflects. To live from a place of profound interconnection and from ‘the peace that passeth all understanding’, to be genuinely liberated from all negative feelings, is, for her, the gift of being alive.

‘If only “I” (my small self that I cling onto as my only identity) can get out of the way,’ she says. The most creative way forward, she believes, is through cultivating circles of compassion – empathy with suffering – in a mindset of restorative justice.

In this place forgiveness is spontaneous.

You can buy Marian’s book at:

shop.iofc.org/if-you-sit-very-still

www.changemakersmagazine.org
‘LET’S MEET’
SAY LEBANESE MOTHERS

Marie Chaftari and Lina Hamade see difference as a spur to reach out across their country’s deep divides. Mary Lean went to meet them.

On a visit to Lebanon 30 years ago, the last place you’d have expected to meet a Muslim would be in Marie Chaftari’s home. From 1975 to 1985, she was a communications officer for the Christian forces in her country’s civil war: her husband, Assaad, was one of their leaders. ‘In those days “the other” for me was the Muslim,’ she says.

Yet here I am, on the verandah of her flat in Beirut, meeting her Muslim friend Lina Hamade over a huge Lebanese breakfast. We are joined by members of the women’s organisation they co-founded, Linaltaki (‘let’s meet’). They run summer camps for children from Lebanon’s different communities, andCreators of Peace Circles where Muslim and Christian women explore what they can do to build peace.

The turning point for Marie came in 1988. Three years earlier, a split in the Christian militia had forced her to flee Beirut with Assaad and their baby son. ‘Over night we went from being called heroes to being called traitors,’ she said. They lost their home and found themselves living among strangers, in constant fear of assassination. Even now, she cannot bring herself to read Assaad’s book, which tells the story of those days.

Marie’s uncle introduced her to a priest who was visiting the town where they had resettled. He asked her when she had last been to confession. ‘What have I got to confess?’ she replied, ‘I’m the victim.’ She told him how much she had sacrificed for the cause of Lebanon’s Christians. ‘He said, “What about love? The only cause is love.” Something turned in me, and I began to cry.’

Later that year, she visited IofC’s international conference centre in Caux, Switzerland. ‘I came back to myself there,’ she says. ‘I asked myself, how can I be a Christian and hate? I began to look again at my opinions.’
After the war ended in 1990, the Chaftaris returned to Beirut. Marie and Lina met at an IofC summer camp, but it was not until 2005 that they began to work together. Lina says, ‘Marie called me and said, “We need to do something: there is so much fanaticism and hatred.”’ They invited their friends and family to meet and talk.

For Nawal Chhaibar, these meetings came at the ‘perfect’ time. ‘We didn’t accept what was going on: we are mothers and we fear for our childrens’ future. Linaltaki was an opportunity to feel the old Lebanon before the division between Christians and Muslims.’

When they first visited Lina’s home, the Christian women were nervous, in spite of Lina’s efforts to put them at their ease by dressing informally and not covering her hair. ‘One of the ladies wouldn’t drink the juice for fear it was poisoned.’ Afterwards everyone breathed more easily when they drove back into the Christian area of Beirut.

It took time to build understanding and friendship, but now, says Adele Nehme, whenever she meets a Muslim woman she thinks of Lina. ‘Then I am not afraid; I can meet them with happiness and joy.’

Each summer, Linaltaki brings together 13-year-olds from Lebanon’s schools for five days of workshops, creative activities and games. The workshops cover conflict resolution, communication, emotional intelligence and prejudgment. On the last day the children present what they have been doing to their parents and school heads. Previous participants, some of them now university students, come back to help, and when we met they had just had their annual reunion.

The women clearly enjoy each other’s company: the test comes when they go home to their own communities, says Marie. ‘I refuse to listen to any jokes about Muslims or Syrians or refugees: if people attack Muslims, I defend them. It’s challenging to be the same when I am not with Lina as I am when she is here.’

The same challenge faces the Muslim women. In September 2005, when a Danish newspaper printed cartoons which outraged Muslims all over the world, rioters stoned a church in Beirut. ‘Lina and the Muslim ladies called a meeting with the director, teachers and parents of a Christian college, and condemned what had happened,’ says Marie. ‘They said that these Muslims did not represent all Muslims.’

The women of Linaltaki see their differences as something to cherish: a spur to reach out and learn more about each other. ‘Our country has been bleeding for the past 40 years, due to all kinds of wars and conflicts,’ says Lina. ‘We are united in our fear for the future of our country; our fear of polluting our children’s hearts with hatred. We care less about what we each believe in, and more about how she translates that belief. Isn’t the best prayer that which calls for reaching out to my brother and sister? ’

‘We are united in our fear for the future of our country; our fear of polluting our children’s hearts with hatred.’
Six years ago the New York Times described Assaad Chaftari as the one major participant in Lebanon’s civil war who had ‘truly apologised’ for his role in the atrocities committed.

Today he is not alone. Twenty-five ex-combatants from differing factions, Muslim and Christian, have joined him, calling themselves Fighters for Peace. One of their aims is to help younger Lebanese ‘to realise what we realised too late – that in a civil war everyone loses’. They speak in schools, universities and public forums.

They came together in 2012, when fighting broke out in Lebanon’s second largest city, Tripoli. ‘We saw the sectarian mobilisation for violence,’ said Haydar Ammacha. ‘We were terrified, knowing that this was how civil wars had started in 1975.’ He was part of a coalition of NGOs called Unity is our Salvation, in which Assaad and other ex-fighters were active.

Faced with a perilous situation, several of them called a press conference. ‘For the first time I spoke publicly about my past,’ said Haydar. Then they went to Tripoli to meet the groups in conflict. Their unity across sectarian lines caught the media’s attention, and Lebanon heard about former enemies working together to prevent violence.

Gradually other ex-combatants joined. For each of them this has meant a painful re-evaluation of their actions during the 15-year war in which 150,000 people died. ‘I thought about the bombs that I used to throw,’ said Haydar. ‘I had joined the militia to defend my people, but gradually I had turned into a criminal.’

Such frankness does not come easily. Like many ex-combatants, Fadi Nasreddine had hidden his past from his children. But the ‘courageous honesty and humanity of Fighters for Peace convinced me that peace is possible in Lebanon’. He knew that his sons could be enticed into taking up arms for a cause. ‘So I confessed that I had been a fighter, and told them what this had led to.’ Now he speaks publicly.

Fighters for Peace do not just speak. They reach out to people who lost relatives during the war, and to refugees. They organise summer camps with Syrians and Palestinians. Documentaries about their work on Lebanese national television have inspired others to take action.

In one town school pupils organised a marathon for peace in cooperation with Fighters for Peace, and 400 ran. Last month 100 young people came to a hall in central Beirut to see a play about the 17,000 people who disappeared in the civil war. The event was hosted by Fighters for Peace, who are doing all they can to find the disappeared and return them to their families for burial.

Recently they were approached by the Forum of Cities in Transition, which is working to encourage peace in 15 conflict-ridden cities. Now the Forum has added Tripoli to their concerns – giving Fighters for Peace the chance to extend their work not just in Lebanon but in cities far beyond.
My work for many years has been about advocating with those who find themselves at the edges of public life in London. I’ve shared and heard testimonies from those who for reasons of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, money, education find ourselves excluded in some way.

The tradition of Initiatives of Change invites us to make space for inner listening – to our own deepest wisdom, to our moral conscience, to who or what we call God. However we name that practice and relationship, I have found that I now experience my quiet times as a place of welcome. The more I feel called to go out to work for social justice, the more I know I need to start from a place of coming in, turning towards Love and inviting Love to reside in my life.

Inner listening often leads us to places where there is a need for reconciliation, trust or justice. We can have a role in ushering in a welcome in the lives of others, if we are willing to be of service and to listen.

When I was working at the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), I opened the door to many refugees. We were taught this was the most important thing we could do – open the door, smile, show them we were delighted to see them, invite them in, ask if they would like tea or coffee, had they eaten that morning, would they like to sit down. The asylum seekers who JRS receives are often shut out – not only from housing and employment, but increasingly from healthcare and education. We call them by name, welcome them in, build community with them – and in turn, bit by bit, we are welcomed into their lives.

For the practice of welcome contains a paradox. As we orient ourselves towards others, we are often changed by the encounter. Everyday interruptions as well as intentional acts of connection become invitations for us to see ourselves in a new way. The truest moment of welcome is not necessarily when I open a door, but when the person I think I am helping invites me into their life, with a story or gesture of trust.

Welcome in our search for fairer communities will often mean being challenged as well as surprised and delighted. It will take us across the limits we set for ourselves and for others. We will transgress boundaries, cross thresholds and be made welcome ourselves by those we least expect to need to be welcomed by. We will also face rejection, have doors slammed in our faces and be shut out in the cold.

Welcome matters – for ourselves, for those we share our lives with and for our world. If we can welcome parts of ourselves that we are unsure of, we can welcome those who might challenge us. We might then be able to listen to others’ fears of difference, and to open doors for transformation and hope.

Kate Monkhouse reflects on the practice of hospitality.
COURAGE AND RESILIENCE IN NORTHERN UGANDA

Kenneth Noble reviews a film which pays tribute to the spirit of people who have gone through unimaginable trauma.

A Film for Northern Uganda shows both the vibrant beauty of Africa and her suffering. But, even more, it shows extraordinary resilience: how people who have been through torment and despair can make a fresh start – and help others to do so.

The northern part of Uganda, and the Acholi people in particular, suffered terribly under the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) insurgency for some 20 years until its leader was forced into exile in 2006. Local communities suffered murder, abduction, mutilation and the forcing of children to be sex slaves and soldiers.

Things are different today. Traumatised people are refinding their dignity and slowly the victims, and even the perpetrators, of violence are rebuilding their society. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) commissioned Initiatives of Change to make the film, under the direction of Kelly Burks, an American living in London, and his co-director Eric Bednarski from Poland. The result is an absorbing and inspiring story told by the people themselves. The vision for the film came from Ahunna Eziakonwa, then Resident Coordinator in Uganda for the UN, who felt the courage, strength and forgiveness in Acholi culture was a story that should be known.

Among those we meet is Louis Lakor, who was forcibly abducted by the LRA. They ordered him to shoot a friend. When he refused he was tortured. ‘I was afraid of dying from the way they were torturing me. It was so painful to me. I stood up. I shot the guy.’ When Louis returned home after the hostilities, he went to the parents of his friend, explained what had happened and asked for their forgiveness. Remarkably, they accepted that he had no intention of killing their son. They performed an Acholi ceremony called Mato Oput, where they stood on an egg as a sign of forgiveness.

‘Traumatised people are refinding their dignity and slowly the victims, and even the perpetrators, of violence are rebuilding their society.’
Louis went on to learn welding at the Northern Uganda Youth Development Centre, part-funded by UNDP, which offered training to young people who had missed out on an education. He now has his own workshop and spends much of his time passing on his skills to other young people so that they can earn a living.

Annet, who was abducted at the age of seven and became a child mother, speaks words that are painful to hear: ‘The rebels burned our home and started killing people. I was asleep but my dad heard the screams. The rebels hacked both of our parents in front of us and then boiled them in a big pot. As the youngest, I was asked to carry our mother’s head and walk with it, tied in a line with other children.’

Single mothers have traditionally been shunned by their community but many women now find themselves in that predicament. In 2011 Annet was invited to join a group of single mothers and they were given a cow. Annet became treasurer and they try to earn and save money. They started a dancing group because dancing helped them to block out bad memories. They used jerry cans, but now they have drums. Later the Send a Cow charity gave Annet a cow of her own. She can now sell milk and earn enough to pay for her daughter’s education. Her dream is to save enough money to build a ‘good house.

Annet and other single mothers started a dancing group because dancing helped them to block out bad memories.

‘Annet can now sell milk to pay for her daughter’s education.’
The film also features Tonny Kidega, a qualified vet who founded and runs the Gulu Uganda Country Dairy as a model farm using modern techniques. He convinces young people that ‘farming is cool’ and trains them. The land is fertile and there is great potential for dairy farming and vegetable growing. Tonny drives all the way to Entebbe to buy liquid nitrogen so that he can use artificial insemination to improve the genetic characteristics of the local cattle. He expects milk yields to improve in the next two to three years. He speaks of his passion to be a ‘transformational agent’: ‘If I give you advice that will put money into your pocket, that is my happiness.’

I cannot end this review without paying tribute to the artistry of the Polish Director of Photography, Jacek Petrycki, and his assistant cameraman, Karol Masiarz. Some of the shots of the Murchison Falls National Park, with its dramatic waterfalls and abundant game, will make many dream of visiting. Aerial shots, taken by drone operator Sebastian Sielewicz, are also awe-inspiring.

To view the film, search A film for Northern Uganda on Youtube.com.
SUBSCRIBE TO

CHANGE MAKERS

Subscribe to our print and digital editions to receive new stories of change

DELIVERED TO YOUR DOOR

Future issues printed and delivered directly to you by subscribing online at: www.changemakersmagazine.org

Two issues for only £5.00 a year.

READ ONLINE FOR FREE

Get instant access and read the online digital edition at: www.changemakersmagazine.org

Subscribe to receive a link to new issues of Changemakers by email.