WHAT WOULD GANDHI DO?

LISTENING WITH MY HEART

ONLY LOVE

HEALING THE WOUNDS OF WAR
In April 2017, I was lucky enough to spend time with Rajmohan Gandhi, a grandson of Mahatma Gandhi (p4). I must admit I was star-struck. Rajmohan has an impressive legacy in his own right. He told me, ‘Life is about continuing to do what you believe to be right, whether or not the results are immediate or adequate.’

In this issue, we feature individuals who have done this. Rudy van der Aar and Mohammed Kechouh (p8) met at the Initiatives of Change centre in Caux, Switzerland. They spent eight weeks cycling from the Netherlands to Mecca on wooden bikes to raise awareness within Islam about sustainability. Maxine Cockett (p14) has dedicated her life to marginalized young people in Nottingham. Ben Margolis (p18) and Marie-Christine Nibagwire (p10) are supporting refugees and asylum seekers in inspiring ways. They – and all the other people in this issue – have refused to give up on their determination to play their part in building a better world.

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What would Gandhi do?

Professor Rajmohan Gandhi is a historian, biographer and former President of Initiatives of Change International. On a recent visit to the UK, he talked to Davina Patel about his grandfather, Mahatma Gandhi, and the challenges of building trust in the world today.

Q: We can see our world at a crossroads. How can individuals stay strong and resilient?

It seems to me that once we have made that sacred decision to play a responsible part, there can be no going back. There are bound to be setbacks. Life is not about short-term successes. Life is about continuing to do what you believe to be right, whether or not the results are immediate or adequate.

I’ve been on this road for 61 years now. I’ve seen lots of setbacks. I have seen wonderful advances. But the thought of quitting has never entered my mind, because, as a young person, I decided, ‘I will do what I believe to be right. I will do what the inner voice tells me.’ Is it God’s voice or not? I can’t be absolutely sure. I weigh, I consider, I reflect – but when I feel that a certain step is appropriate, I want to take it.

So, when people ask about how to remain committed in a difficult world, I would say: think of your own decision, then think of many others who have stuck to the road. Everyone has to struggle. If struggle is also our lot, why should we be surprised?

‘I will face the music’

I can’t control what happens in the world. What I can control, to some extent, is how I respond to what happens. So, I will face the music, I will face the world. If something happens that I don’t like, let me see how to deal with it. I also want to be conscious of others. What is it that would help others?
Q: Your grandfather was assassinated when you were 12. What are your memories of him?

For the last two years of his life, 1946-8, he spent much of his time in New Delhi, where I was at school. I saw a good deal of him. There wasn’t much one-on-one conversation between him and me: he wanted to regard everyone in India as his family. It was a time of great tension, of Hindu/Muslim violence and clashes.

‘Quitting has never entered my mind’

For most of his life, he held a multi-faith prayer meeting at 5pm every day, to which anyone could come. My siblings and I would walk with him to the prayer spot. There would be a lot of teasing and banter during this walk. But as soon as we reached the prayer spot, we had to become serious. We would take part in the prayer with him, listen to his remarks and then walk back with him, again chatting light-heartedly.

What was interesting to me was his reaction when some angry people objected to the prayers including verses from the Qu’ran in Arabic. He would ask if they knew what the words meant, which, of course, they did not. He would ask others present if they objected, and most would say of course not. He would ask the protesters to please withdraw their objection. Normally they did. If they did not, he would say that he would not have the Hindu text either. He would then proceed straight to his remarks on what was happening in the country or the world.

I could see that some people were not happy with his efforts. They were not willing to put their anger aside. I would ask myself, if these people were to attack him, what would be my duty? How would I protect him?

I also observed that he spoke in a friendly, civil manner to people who were angry. He did not yield to threats. He did what he believed was right. This was something that I absorbed: one can be cordial and stick to one’s convictions, even if others strongly object.

Q: What influence has your grandfather had on you?

He worked for India’s political freedom and for friendship and reconciliation amongst India’s different communities. He wanted the better-off people in India to be concerned with the very poor people. These goals are still very necessary in India, even though politically India is free. I am proud of to be part of that effort.

But my goal in life is not to continue to do what my grandfather did, or to walk on the path that he recommended. I find that path very attractive, very compelling. But my goal in life to not to follow him; it is to follow my conscience.

Q: If you were interviewing Gandhiji today, what would you ask him?

Gandhi was killed 70 years ago. He achieved a lot, but he didn’t solve all the problems of his time and certainly...
not of ours. To go to him for answers to today’s troubles seems to me to be irresponsible. Why should Gandhi tell us what to do today? We should discover some solutions ourselves.

But, yes, it’s a subject for curiosity: ‘What would Gandhi do, if he was around today?’ I would like to hear his assessment of today’s changing world. He was an environmentalist, ahead of his time. I would like to ask him what he thinks about China. India’s great neighbour: Indians and Chinese know much more about the rest of the world than they know about each other. Then there is Africa and Latin America.

‘Listening is crucial’

He had this idea, that everyone should spin their own thread and make their own cloth. He wanted to empower old people, women, unemployed, children – everyone could do something with their hands with the spinning wheel. I would ask him what is the equivalent for today. Is it the smart phone? Or something else?

Q: Gandhi said: ‘India cannot cease to be one nation because people belonging to different religions live in it... Those who are conscious of the spirit of nationality do not interfere with one another’s religion.’ This is not only true of India but the world. How do we move towards a more tolerant society?

Gandhi did confront the issue of different races, religious groups and nations. He totally rejected the idea that nation and religion could be synonymous. He felt that a nation where Muslims were the majority could also be a nation for everyone. He felt that a nation, like India, where Hindus were the majority, was a nation for everybody. He clearly separated religion from nationhood, and in this he was relevant also to our time.

Q: What are the building blocks of peace and how can individuals play a part?

I think listening is crucial: a willingness to understand the other person’s situation, history, pain, need, aspirations, and then perhaps to encourage the other person to do likewise with others.

We get angry with one another and with other groups. If this takes place, what is the next step? We can’t achieve too much without listening. We need dialogue, not to try to prove our point of view or insist that our feelings are absolutely justified, but because the other person’s feelings may have some ground and basis.

Q: What do you see as the future of Europe and the UK?

I’m aware that here in the UK there is great division about Europe and Brexit. I’m too wise to recommend to the British people what they should do. But I would say that some real honesty is called for. Are the problems we face today really because of some other country? Because of people from other countries? Are some other people really much worse than we are? When
we’re honest, we know that that blame based on race and nationality, on outsiders and insiders, doesn’t hold water. We are all responsible for the good things and the bad things that happen. No nation, race or religious community should build its future on finding flaws in some other group.

‘Blame doesn’t hold water’

Q: What advice would you give to the next generation of changemakers?

Study what is happening around you. Apply your mind to identifying the real problem. See what is the best way is to address it. If your friends and colleagues elsewhere have achieved some effectiveness, study that and see if you can apply it. Don’t expect immediate results, success is not your aim. Hope for results, pray for results, but do not seek satisfaction from publicity, from success or applause.

Difficulties, uncertainties, insecurities will always be there. You will not be sure of funds. You will not be sure of friends. You will not be sure of company. But that is the fun and excitement of life. So many people, far better than me, have fought and died, have made a difference and inspired by their example. If I expect results when I do difficult things, that’s no sacrifice. I should be thankful that I have the chance to do something for my fellow human beings.

Rajmohan Gandhi’s speech at the Our World at a Crossroads event in London on 20 April is available online. Visit: shop.iocf.org/shop/our-world-at-a-crossroads
By wooden bike to Mecca

Irene de Pous hears about a pilgrimage with a difference.

It took Rudy van der Aar (26) and Mohammed Kechouh (27) eight weeks to cycle from the Netherlands to Mecca, to raise awareness within Islam about sustainability.

Thousands of people followed their journey on Facebook. Both Al Jazeera and Egyptian TV broadcast items about ‘two Dutch guys cycling to Mecca for sustainability’ and, on their return home, they spoke in mosques and other gatherings and were featured in the national media.

‘People talk about Islam and sustainability, as if they were two things,’ says Mohammed. ‘But they are the same. Living according to Islam means being conscious of your environment.’

Rudy and Mohammed met in 2011, at a conference at the Initiatives of Change centre in Caux, Switzerland, which focused on peacebuilding and dialogue from an Islamic perspective. They soon discovered that they shared an ambition to cycle to Mecca. ‘I once flew to Mecca for the little pilgrimage, but I missed the physical and mental effort that should go with a pilgrimage,’ says Rudy. ‘I wished that I could return there in an environmentally friendly way.’ Mohammed discovered that biking helped him to reflect: ‘Thus the idea grew to cycle to Mecca.’

‘Don’t waste water, even by a river’

Impressed by their plan, the Cocomat company offered them two wooden bikes. Minor disadvantage: the bikes only had two gears. ‘But they matched our
message of sustainability so well that we decided to use them anyway.’

They left in the middle of winter, travelling through snow and rain via Germany, Eastern Europe, the Balkans, Greece and Egypt. Twice, in the section between Greece and Jeddah, they had to take a plane.

‘The guards took selfies with our bikes’

They were back on their bikes for the last part of the journey, from Jeddah to Mecca, despite the strong warnings they got from Egyptians not to bike in Saudi Arabia. ‘When we were stopped by the police I thought they were going to arrest us,’ says Rudy. ‘But they just wanted to warn us to be very careful. When we arrived at the mosque the guards came to us. But they just wanted to take selfies with our bikes!’ This was one of his lessons from the trip: never let your prejudice guide you. ‘We met so many nice people and found help so often.’

Mohammed and Rudy are convinced that Islam can help us understand our responsibility for the earth. Both the Prophet’s life and his teachings give clues about how to treat nature and the environment. Rudy points out that the Prophet only ate meat twice a month: ‘He warned that eating too much meat is addictive and bad for nature and people.’ Mohammed quotes verses from the Qur’an about avoiding waste. ‘About the ritual of washing it is written: don’t waste water, even if by a river. Another verse says: eat and drink, but don’t waste anything, because God doesn’t like wasters.’

During their trip they put their convictions into practice. In Greece they raised money to bring food to refugees. In Macedonia they gave dog biscuits to the famished dogs on the roadside. On Egyptian television they explained that they boiled their water and carried it in a thermos, so that they didn’t have to buy plastic bottles. When they cut their hair in Mecca – an obligatory part of the pilgrimage – they sent it to a foundation that makes wigs.

They found the holy mountain Jabal Al Nour in Mecca covered with litter. ‘Many people feel powerless in the face of so much waste,’ says Mohammed. They put their bicycles, with signs about purity in Islam, at the foot of the mountain and started to put the rubbish in bags. In the days that followed people joined them. Local shop owners and taxi drivers displayed posters in different languages about their initiative.

Although their action got positive reactions, it was clear that the problem would not be solved overnight. ‘Some people threw their garbage right in front of me,’ says Mohammed. But with Muslims from different cultures and from all over the world visiting the mountain, it seemed a good place to raise awareness. ‘Just by standing there with our bikes in Mecca and at the foot of the mountain, we drew a lot of attention,’ says Rudy. ‘If you really want to make a difference, you should probably come back more often. But maybe we’ve at least planted some seeds.’
Healing the wounds of war

Yee-Liu Williams talks to a survivor of the Rwandan genocide who helps other refugees overcome the traumas of war.

Until that night in 1994, Marie-Christine Nibagwire was happy. She was an accountant, with a two-year-old daughter, Natalie, and was surrounded by close family, colleagues and friends.

That night, her house was full of guests, with nieces visiting from boarding school. They heard on the television that the President of Rwanda had been killed. Then an unexpected visitor arrived to tell her that armed militia had stormed into her sister’s house and killed her.

She was stunned: ‘Why would anyone want to kill my sister?’ The visitor told her that she must get out. But before she could do anything, she heard shooting and the screams of her neighbours. ‘It was total confusion,’ she says.

‘I could only think of my daughter. Where is my daughter?’ She picked Natalie up, but before she could escape men stormed in, lined everyone up against the wall and started shooting. Her nieces were killed along with other members of the household. Marie-Christine fell, with her daughter behind her, and miraculously they survived.

She ran from the house with no luggage or documents, with Natalie clinging to her. ‘I grabbed her,’ she says. ‘It was hard. I took every risk to see my daughter surviving.’ She recalls stumbling over the bodies of her neighbours, in the midst of the horror and carnage. As she hid in the bushes, she had no idea whether they would get out of Kigali alive.

It has been estimated that more than 800,000 Rwandans were killed over the next hundred days, in a genocide against the Tutsi tribe.

Eventually, in 1998, Marie-Christine arrived in Britain, where she received asylum. Today, she travels across the world to counsel those affected by conflict and war. She has set up her own charity, become an Anglican minister in the London diocese and works with refugee charities, global networks, universities and schools to raise awareness of the refugee crisis.

On a recent visit to Italy, she witnessed the depression of young, single men in isolated refugee centres. They are lucky to be alive, but as they wait,
unable to work and with nothing to do, trauma often sets in. ‘People do not understand the issues of being a refugee,’ she says.

She feels a particular calling to help women and children deal with mental health issues and trauma. ‘So many women have been raped,’ she says. ‘Many have lost their husbands and children. They are unable to seek treatment because it is not something you talk about: it’s not part of our culture.’

She believes faith groups have an important role in helping refugees integrate into society. Refugees who are welcomed tend to do much better in coping with trauma and in finding a role in their new societies.

When Marie-Christine and Natalie first arrived in the UK, life was difficult. ‘It was a shock. Britain was completely alien to me. I didn’t know the culture or have any friends.’

But her dream for her daughter’s education came true. With support from social services, Natalie was identified as a ‘gifted’ child. She won a scholarship to a top independent school, Roedean, and became head girl. She graduated from Cambridge University and is now completing a Masters at Oxford.

‘After seeing her success, I believe that other refugee children can also be successful,’ she says. Her vision is to help refugee mothers rebuild their lives so that they can help their children. ‘Many children from traumatised parents seek more attention,’ she says. ‘They seek more love. But you cannot draw water from an empty well.’

She says her mandate from God is to support lonely women or single parents who cannot cope with their daily life. In most cases, she observes, human contact, kindness and compassion are what is needed. ‘I sit with them, talk with them, cook and clean, take them to the local shops and churches.’

‘You cannot draw water from an empty well’

In 2001, she left a good job with Eurostar to set up Saferugewanda. Part of its work is to help refugees in camps in Africa to generate income. She comments on the contrast between their lives, without basic food, shelter, clothes and medical treatment, and those of refugees in Europe. She has taught young single mothers how to sew and make jewellery, and fundraises for equipment and materials. She believes that enabling refugees to rebuild their own lives and communities is an answer to uncontrolled migration to the West.

www.saferefrugewanda.org

www.changemakersmagazine.org
Only love

Jean Paul Samputu forgave his parents’ closest friend for killing them. He talks to Davina Patel.

I meet Jean Paul Samputu just before he is due to give a performance at a World Refugee Day event at the Initiatives of Change centre in London. You can tell that he is a natural born performer. As he talks, his words turn into songs about forgiveness that flow from his soul.

Jean Paul’s parents were among hundreds of thousands of Rwandan Tutsis who were murdered by Hutus in the genocide of 1994. As a well-known artist, Jean Paul was an obvious target: he had spent six months in jail, three years before the massacre, when thousands of Tutsis were rounded up by the government. ‘When we were released to go to our home village, it was not just to release us and say we are free, no,’ explains Jean Paul. ‘They wanted to have a list of every Tutsi, that was the plan.’

It was Jean Paul’s father who told him to leave the country, fearing that the genocide of 1959-63 was about to be repeated. ‘Why can’t we go together?’ asked Jean Paul. His father said he was too old to flee again. He believed his family would be safe because they lived side-by-side with Hutus.

‘You become what you don’t forgive’

Heeding his father’s plea, Jean Paul travelled to Burundi as a touring artist and then to Belgium and Uganda. He returned to Rwanda once the violence had stopped. ‘I learned that I had lost my parents, three brothers and my sister. When I came back to my village to
see what happened, I found my house empty.' His neighbours told him that they had been killed by his father’s best friend, Vincent. ‘My father loved Vincent because he was an intellectual, the principal of the local school,’ says Jean Paul. ‘He was somebody who my father would call and ask anything.’

The news pitched Jean Paul into ‘self-destruct mode’. He lived with bitter resentment, anger and the desire for revenge for nine years. He turned to alcohol and drugs.

‘The real enemy is your anger’

‘My friends were praying for me because they thought I was going to die. I heard a voice telling me: “You need to forgive. Forgiveness is for you not for the offender. Forgiveness means liberation. Forgive!”’

This wasn’t easy; but Jean Paul realised that he had to forgive for his own sake, not for Vincent’s. ‘He was in prison for 11 years [for the crimes he committed], but my prison was more horrible than his. In prison, they eat and sleep but I wasn’t. I was killing myself with drugs. So I had to forgive myself and forgive Vincent and now I am free.’

In 2007, Jean Paul publicly forgave Vincent, who by then had been released, at the Gacaca (a traditional court) in their village. He was the first Rwandan to go to the Gacaca and speak publicly about forgiveness. ‘At first Vincent was shocked to see someone forgiving him,’ Jean Paul goes on. ‘He didn’t even think to ask for forgiveness. He said: “I cannot forgive myself. How can you, a Tutsi, come and forgive me? You said it’s God?” And I said: “Yes!”’

Following their reconciliation at the Gacaca, Jean Paul and Vincent became beacons of hope and ambassadors of peace, sharing their story at conferences and to the media. Not everyone was happy and their lives were threatened. They both left Rwanda and went their separate ways.

Jean Paul continues to share messages of forgiveness through his music. ‘Why do people sing about violence? In America they sing about bad stuff, sex and murderers.... Why can’t I sing about good things, like forgiveness? Music speaks directly to the heart.’

‘We are receivers of inherited trauma and patterns from conflict rooted before our time,’ he says. ‘The generation that passed have not resolved their problems. We live in a world where there is a culture of revenge.’ He hopes his latest album, Only love, can inspire leaders to talk above love, not hatred. ‘Only love will break these cycles of violence. Only love will stop genocide. Only love can bring the peace we need. Only love can stop our children killing each other in the future.’

As our time together draws to an end, I ask Jean Paul if he has any last words of advice for people who are struggling to forgive: ‘You become what you don’t forgive. Forgiveness is for you – not for the offender. If you don’t forgive, it will destroy you. Your real enemy is not who the one who wronged you. Your real enemy is your anger, bitterness, resentment, your desire for revenge or the negative thoughts towards yourself and the person who made you suffer.’
Breaking barriers, building bridges

Homeless at 17, Maxine Cockett offers hope to marginalized young people in Nottingham. Yee-Liu Williams went to meet her.

British-born Jamaican Maxine Cockett describes herself as a foot soldier. She holds a beacon of light for young, ethnic and minority people in Nottingham.

An ebullient Rastafarian, she walks the ‘hood’ (neighbourhood) with confidence and dignity. Her street incantation of ‘brop, brop’ echoes as she waves to each passerby. Everybody – young, old, black, white – seems to know her. She points to the street where she was born. ‘I come from the streets; the streets are my home,’ she says with pride.

Her early life was tough, growing up in a home with no love. She tells me she was a fast runner, spotted to run in the Olympics. She would race home from school on Fridays. That was the day when her father got home early, and she dreaded opening the front door to be greeted with cries from her mother. ‘I knew how to love but didn’t feel love,’ she says. But she believes that her early life has made her the resilient woman she is today.

She was 17 when her stepfather threw her out, and she found herself homeless and living on the streets. She endured the humiliation of having to live in a public toilet and on park benches for over three months. Trying to find a safe place was traumatic. Sex was a possible currency, accepted by some landlords in lieu of rent. But, she says, she put her ‘trust in God’ and believed that she would be all right if she did the right thing.

She observes that there are so many young people with such ‘dark cold lives’. Because of what happened to her, she wants to be a beacon to make young people see that all things are possible. This discovery doesn’t have to come from believing in God, although she says it helps, but from ‘believing in yourself and knowing you’ve got life’.

She set up her charity, Breaking Barriers Building Bridges (4Bs), with her long-term friend and business partner, Adhi Scott (pictured below). It seeks to find and create safe places for young people so they can develop skills, share experiences, discover new opportunities and make right life choices. ‘We are still judged by the colour of our skin, not by the good deeds that are done in our communities,’ she says. Much can be achieved with proper funding for community youth development, education and outreach work, she believes.

‘If you have life, you have hope’

As we walk the hood, she comments that behind the façade of new build houses there is serious deprivation. Deprivation, for her, is not just about poverty but also
lack of opportunity. She sees it as a postcode lottery. ‘If you happen to come from a place where people don’t believe in you, and you also don’t believe in yourself, anything can happen to you,’ she says. Her part of Nottingham, St Ann’s, has been branded as a place for young ‘no hopers’. Maxine doesn’t accept that term: ‘I believe if you have life you have hope.’

Over the years, St Ann’s has seen high levels of anti-social behaviour, knife crime and drugs. The Robin Hood Chase area was once a bustling hive for educational youth activities. Today, the youth outreach work has stopped and it is a potential battleground for gangs.

It is close to the place where 14-year-old Danielle Beccan was murdered in 2004, on her way home from the local fair. She was the innocent victim of a senseless gang feud, killed by a single bullet fired from a car. Beneath a spreading oak, the annual place of remembrance, Maxine reflects: ‘People have to carry on because if you don’t, the violence wins. But we do need to motivate and educate our youth to stop this vicious cycle.’

It was from such tragedies that a new community spirit of resilience was born. At a community dialogue organised by Initiatives of Change, Maxine had the idea, which she believes came from God, to bring people together to ‘hold hands around St Ann’s’. This annual event, which began in 2005, celebrates all that is good in St Ann’s.

Maxine’s warmth and good humour masks the pain of her childhood. But she knows that cycles can be broken. When she found out she was pregnant, the consultant advised her to have a termination, because it was almost certain that her daughter would be ‘born a cabbage’.

‘The streets are my home’

Going against the doctor’s advice, Maxine went ahead with the pregnancy, trusting God that everything would be all right. ‘I loved her as soon as she was born,’ she says, remembering holding her ‘perfect’ daughter for the first time, all those years ago.

From that moment, breaking the chain of her own strained relationship with her mother, she came to realise what love was about.
Open House

Ashley Muller meets an unexpected activist duo, who are tackling homelessness in Oxford.

Miranda Shaw and Neo make a remarkable team. Neo, who has lived on and off the streets for 26 years, is a musician who busks for his income. Miranda, born and raised in Oxford, has been battling injustice as long as she can remember. On one of last winter’s coldest nights, they were part of a group who legally occupied an empty building belonging to Wadham College, to provide shelter for 20 rough sleepers.

Miranda sees homelessness as a humanitarian crisis. In Oxford, homelessness has quadrupled in the last five years, as funding has been cut and shelters have closed. Last December, Oxford activists were fired into action by the news that a homeless man had been found frozen to death on a bench in Birmingham.

The vision behind the squat, Iffley Open House, was to utilize empty spaces to get as many people off the streets as possible. Over a period of three months, the group occupied three buildings in succession. They were twice evicted when new building plans suddenly emerged for the spaces they were squatting.

Miranda remembers lying in her sleeping bag in a cold garage on New Year’s Eve, the first night of the squat. ‘I thought about how bonkers this might seem to most people I know. I wondered what my mum might think and what my community might say. It was freezing that night and it reminded me why we were doing this.’

‘Empty spaces need people’

Hundreds of people caught wind of what was happening through social media and local activist networks. Volunteers with full time jobs from around the UK queued up to help sort donations, cook food, arrange the shelter and advocate for the cause. Other cities
followed Oxford in occupying buildings.

Neo is well known in Oxford as a spokesperson for the homeless community. ‘Stigma and stereotyping are the problem,’ he says. ‘At the end of the day lots of people are on the streets because the system has failed them. If people understood people’s real situations, we would be able to look at how we work together to solve the problem.’ He emphasises the need not for money but for empty spaces. ‘People need empty spaces and empty spaces need people’ became the motto of Iffley Open House.

‘A crack in the fabric of normality’

The group was summoned to court three times to answer accusations of trespass. Other obstacles included lack of resources to cope with the complex needs of homeless residents living in community, instability and lack of long term planning.

When asked about her motivation, Miranda responds, ‘I was brought up to enact change when I saw injustice and to challenge the systems of oppression that I saw.’ Dig a little deeper and she speaks of her own experience of unstable housing as a teenager. Her experiences with Iffley Open House, and the depth of pain they ignited, led her to start a new journey of personal exploration. At the end of January, she co-facilitated a women’s peace circle, through Initiatives of Change’s Creators of Peace programme. It looked at forgiveness and took her back to a place of love and compassion by reminding her of her faith in people. This helps her to go on working with institutions that she has found challenging.

‘The amount of support we received for Iffley Open House was glorious,’ she says. ‘Sometimes a small group of people just need to make a crack in the fabric of normality for the light to shine through.’ Throughout the journey, ‘compassion and empathy have been crucial’. Two of the main lessons she learned were ‘don’t assume that you know best, and set and maintain strong boundaries between volunteers and residents whilst utilizing support services if you can’.

‘I believe we achieved very positive results, but at the same time I recognise that there were things that could have been done better,’ says Neo. ‘Stability and boundaries are important: it was a learning curve for all of us.’

After three months, as the weather got warmer, Iffley Open House closed. As another winter approaches, Oxford churches and NGOs have rallied to plan citywide responses to homelessness. Neo is working with local councillors and activists to find new solutions to a continuing problem.

Visit Miranda’s blog nettlesandwebs.com
From despair to resilience

Talia Smith finds out why Ben Margolis and Sophie North founded a home of sanctuary for refugees and asylum seekers in the Norfolk countryside.

‘What I do is born out of the fact that I am a third generation Russian immigrant,’ says Ben Margolis, co-founder and Executive Director of The Grange, a smallholding in West Norfolk which has provided a sanctuary for 500 refugees and asylum seekers from more than 40 countries since 2012.

Born in Yorkshire, Ben has been a national ranked badminton player, a tennis coach and Campaign Director of the Global Campaign for Climate Action leading up to the Copenhagen climate conference in 2009.

‘After Copenhagen, like a lot of people, I felt extremely frustrated, disillusioned and burnt out,’ he says. He and his doctor wife, Sophie North, started thinking about how they could be more effective.

A first clue came during a course in permaculture, which takes its inspiration from the health and resilience of the natural world. It stresses care of people and the earth, and the fair distribution of resources. Ben started to think about how these principles related to activists: and realised that care for himself was an element of care for people. Ben spent a year volunteering with the Berks, Bucks and Oxon Wildlife Trust. ‘It was the most amazing time: chasing sheep and spending days counting orchids whilst thinking what to do next!’

‘No guilt, no judgment’

What they did next was to set up The Grange, a listed 18th century rectory set in 10 acres of countryside in the village of Great Cressingham. ‘We wanted to have our own permaculture small holding where we could put into practice the theory we were inspired by.’ Through their work, Ben and Sophie had both had contact with refugees and asylum seekers, and they knew they wanted their home to be open to others. Today, The Grange is a permaculture demonstration site and the first place in the UK to be designated as a Home of Sanctuary.

The Grange receives refugees and asylum seekers...
through formal channels, usually for about a week – although people are welcome to visit regularly. Those who come to stay are not guests, visitors, beneficiaries or service users, but family members, with about 15 people sharing the home at any one time. Ben is quick to point out how he and Sophie have benefited from the experience. ‘Sharing our home with people from all over the world restored our faith in the human capacity for love, kindness, forgiveness and resilience.’ They have moved from their post-Copenhagen despair about humanity to feeling part of creating a more sustainable, resilient and equal world.

They see The Grange as a pilot. Since the Syrian crisis has been in the headlines, Ben has been contacted by a number of people who want to start similar projects in different parts of the country. A central tenet of permaculture is to ‘go where the energy is’. Ben doesn’t go out shouting that everyone should do what he does, but he responds to the energy that is being created.

Another key thread of permaculture is ‘no guilt, no judgement’. Ben explains that activists tend to spend a lot of time feeling guilty and judging others, both of which are damaging and negative emotions. The Grange’s residents have taken particular care about relations with their neighbours in the village. ‘We are proud that we have huge support which wasn’t necessarily going to happen.’

While he was working in NGOs, Ben saw many organisations which were dependent on their founders. To avoid this, Sophie and Ben have been planning their exit strategy from the start, and this year they have handed over to two new live-in coordinators. ‘It’s not Ben and Sophie’s project; it’s the community’s,’ he says.

‘Go where the energy is’

Ben believes that traditional skills are going to become more and more important in communities. Some of those from other countries who have stayed at The Grange have passed on their traditional skills to the team. ‘For us it is fantastic and for them it is powerful to offer their own skills and not to be seen as a charity beneficiary.’ The Grange offers a spectrum of workshops from weaving and tapestry-making to woodwork and horticulture.

Ben has recently received funding to develop ‘Gardens of Sanctuary’, a project to enable community gardens all over the UK to engage with refugee and asylum populations. ‘The aim is to bring these people into the garden and to do all of these things together – community integration, traditional skills and the culture of hospitality,’ explains Ben. Many projects and initiatives have been inspired at the Grange, making ripples across the country and Europe.
Célia Demoor reflects on her passion for change.

My journey as a peacebuilder began 10 years ago, when I was 17. It started with a deeply rooted feeling that life is precious and full of potential for learning and growth. We are all interdependent and interconnected. Every living being matters, and each person’s chances affect how we live as a human community. As Frantz Fanon said in Black Skin, White Masks, any injustice done to a human being on the other side of the world is an injustice done to me. The condition for growth is that you radically open your heart to the unknown, outside and within you.

As a researcher I had a strong desire to understand human and social relations: why do people behave the way they do, how different or similar are they, why does war exist, and most importantly, who am I. I was guided by the belief that nobody is naturally bad or violent. Whatever I may not understand about people’s behaviour, there is always something to explore, something that is not said, some cultural or social explanation that I do not know.

‘Combat the tendency to box, blame and follow’

I changed through exploring, travelling and meeting people. Instead of watching the news, I used to go on my own to the refugee camps in Calais to meet people. I believed strongly in the freedom of human beings to define who they are. A good friend once told me, ‘You
do not see identity, you see people.’ I changed through listening, not with my ears, but with my heart.

I would describe myself today as an educator and an enquirer. I constantly look for new answers. Peace is not the mere absence of war, but rather a condition where all living species can reach their full potential, free from all forms of violence. I believe that when people change, they change people around them. So I am passionate about facilitating learning spaces, at university or elsewhere. I love to inspire young people to be agents of change – to combat the human tendency to box, blame, and follow; to gain a higher consciousness that brings us back to the sacredness and interconnectedness of life; to understand that there are different ways to be and act in this world; to understand that peace or the potential for peace is in every moment and that we have limitless ability to respond – we have responsibility.

‘Open your heart to the unknown’

The neoliberal model of civilisation in which we live stresses an individualism based on status and material success. Through it, we tend to lose our sense of human and spiritual connection, and become apathetic about the needs of others. The lack of consciousness of our limitless responsibility is a major issue for the world that calls itself developed.

However much we claim to be free in the era of new technologies, new subtle forms of control are subjugating us. Many forms of oppression still exist – over nature and over people, on the basis of their ethnicity, nationality, gender, mental and physical abilities, sexual preferences, age… These discriminations are rooted in our brains, our cultures, our institutions. History always needs to be relearned. In times of uncertainty and self-doubt like today, the vulnerable become more vulnerable, because people tend to close up, single out and erect walls. The struggle for peace is an unending endeavour.

The DEEP (Dialogue, Empathic Engagement, and Peacebuilding) Network was born in 2014 from the initiative of Alberto Gomes, Director of the former Centre for Dialogue in Melbourne. DEEP is a global network of peace practitioners and researchers who want to contribute to a more peaceful and sustainable world. We believe in community-oriented action through local nodes based in different countries and regions. I founded DEEP France in Lille in the end of 2015 in an attempt to promote peace through dialogue, understanding and empathy in the face of extremisms, racism and apathy. I have led different projects to educate, raise awareness and foster dialogue.

Peacebuilding is my journey. It is a journey of the self and the world, entangled in one single dance.

To watch Voices of Migrants, the seven films Célia Demoor made in Calais in March 2016, or learn more about DEEP, visit globaldeepnetwork.org/france
Long way from Adi Ghehad

John Bond reviews a book about a remarkable refugee.

Stan Hazell's biography of Teame Mebrahtu, an Eritrean educator who received asylum in Britain 40 years ago, demonstrates what refugees can contribute to their host countries and the world.

Born in rural Eritrea in 1939, Teame was the first in his family to go to school. The book describes how he overcame obstacle after obstacle, to become head of the Teacher Training College in Asmara, Eritrea.

When Ethiopia annexed Eritrea in 1962, resentment grew, not least in Teame. At this stage he met Moral Re-Armament (later Initiatives of Change) in Asmara, and concluded that hatred would not achieve justice for his people. He understood that if he was to help create a free and just Eritrea, he had to live the moral qualities he wanted for his country.

This took courage. When an Ethiopian student at his college drowned, Teame travelled 1,600 kms into hostile territory to take his body back to his home village – only to be met by an angry crowd, many of them armed. Eventually he won them over.

In 1976, amidst the turmoil of Eritrea’s struggle to break away from Ethiopia, a close colleague was assassinated and Teame learnt that his own name was on a death list. He left for Britain, followed by his wife, Teblez, and three daughters.

For the next 24 years he taught at the Graduate School of Education in Bristol. He initiated an array of programmes and conferences aimed at improving education around the world, and trained hundreds of educators. In 1984 he became Bristol’s first black magistrate.

Through it all he kept a focus on Eritrea. During the liberation war, he made five visits to refugee camps in Sudan, helping to improve the Eritrean schools there. He also went into the areas liberated by Eritrean fighters to train teachers. After independence in 1991, he helped to develop Eritrea’s education system.

‘Hatred would not achieve justice’

Eritrea has since become an authoritarian state from which tens of thousands are fleeing. Some of the most moving stories in the book describe the Mebrahtus’ care for their fellow refugees.

Long way from Adi Ghehad by Stan Hazell, published by Shepheard Walwyn (£19.95). Order on Amazon: amzn.to/2u4YP8T
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