Being Bilal
Confidently Muslim, comfortably British
In this 10th and final print edition of Changemakers, we share powerful stories of how arts can transform division, trauma and conflict.

We hear from changemakers who are challenging the way we perceive Islam through photographs which capture the diversity of the religion (p14) and through a dedicated TV channel which explores what it means to be ‘confidently Muslim and comfortably British’ (p10). We meet Gulwali Passarlay, who describes his harrowing flight from Afghanistan to the UK at the age of 12. As part of his advocacy work he also delivers storytelling workshops to raise awareness of the plight of refugees and to help refugee children address their trauma (p4).

The IoC youth leadership programme, School for Changemakers, celebrates its 10th anniversary in 2020. We share the stories of two alumni, Rupal Maru, who is using Indian arts ‘to help others as they have helped me’ (p20), and Rumbi Mukayi, who created Africa Youth Arise to create a place where young Britons of African descent can feel they belong (p18).

We find out how Raven Kaliana uses puppetry to raise awareness of child trafficking and aid recovery from trauma (p22), how Ram Bhagat uses drumming to help heal communities affected by gun violence (p12) and how a community arts project has given people with dementia a platform (p8). We also look back at a play that transformed relationships between the unions and management in post-war Britain (p26) and discover the power of ‘painting from within’ (p24).

As we all face challenging times, we celebrate the work of the many unsung changemakers who are prepared to take the first steps to make the world a better place. Changemakers will continue online. To read stories of change visit our website: www.uk.iofc.org
The last time Gulwali Passarlay saw his mother, she said: ‘Be safe, Gulwali. No matter how bad it gets, don’t ever come back.’ As she sent Gulwali and his brother, Hazrat, off on the long journey from Afghanistan to Europe she urged them to ‘hold on to each other and stay together’.

Smugglers separated them the next day. Aged 12, Gulwali travelled alone, for over a year, through nine countries, not knowing if the next day might be his last, if he would ever find refuge or be reunited with Hazrat. He eventually reached the UK ‘trapped inside a sealed refrigerator lorry with bananas’.


Gulwali grew up in a conservative Pashtun family in eastern Afghanistan. He recalls helping his grandfather tend the sheep and at night falling asleep under a vast, star-filled mountain sky. His father was a doctor, the first man in the family to receive a higher education. Such was his standing that Gulwali and Hazrat were known as ‘the sons of the doctor’.

His father, grandfather and so many relatives are now dead – killed by US forces. ‘Every type of bomb except nuclear bombs rained down on my country,’ he says. ‘Children are born with diseases and deformities caused by their toxic effects: two out of five die before their fifth birthdays.

The Taliban wanted the two boys to become fighters or even suicide bombers to avenge their father’s death. ‘Revenge is a central yet often lethal part of the Pashtunwali code,’ Gulwali says. ‘If you don’t avenge yourself against your enemies, you have failed as a man.’ In 2006 his mother, with her deep faith in Islam’s prohibition of the taking of life, arranged for her sons to ‘be sent away’. In The Lightless Sky, Gulwali describes the ‘unspeakable indignities and dangers’ of his journey. He travelled more than 12,000 miles, trekking over treacherous mountains, suffering imprisonment and cruelty in Turkey and Bulgaria, jumping from a speeding train. He had bullets fired at him by border guards. ‘There was rarely a day when I didn’t witness man’s inhumanity to man,’ he says. ‘Any childhood innocence left me.’ Many times he considered giving up and returning home. The only reasons he kept going were the memory of his mother’s face and the encouraging news that Hazrat had made it to England.

Gulwali was 13 when he arrived in the UK, after a month in the infamous Jungle in Calais. ‘I just knew I couldn’t spend another night in the cold, wet filthy conditions of the camp, where rats and cockroaches ran over our heads as we tried to sleep on beds of cardboard,’ he writes. He arrived
she wrote. ‘Your story has the ability to inform and inspire those who work frontline with refugee children.’

Gulwali and Nola work to raise awareness by delivering workshops and talks on the personal lived experience of a refugee. They deliver tailored storytelling workshops for unaccompanied minors dealing with child trauma and also connect refugee children in the UK and overseas with schoolchildren in the UK.

Gulwali’s own experience is a testament to the contribution that refugees can make to society, if given the right support and help with integration. He says that ‘his second chance at life began’ when, three years after his arrival, the authorities recognized him as a child and placed him in foster care. He started school, learnt English, developed his skills and integrated into the community.

In particular, he mentions his headteacher at Starting Point in Bolton, Mrs Kellet, who restored his faith in kindness and humanity. ‘She listened to me, smiled and said: “Gulwali, I believe you.” Although the system did not value me these people did. ’Teachers, foster carers, and youth workers encouraged and urged him on. He went on to study at the Essa Academy, where he exceeded all expectations by getting 10 GCSEs, all above C grade, and won many certificates of achievement for contributing to school life. In 2015 the school set up an annual award in his name, for overcoming adversity.

In 2012, he was selected to be a torchbearer for the London Olympics. He says that, of all the many national awards he has won, this was one of his proudest moments.

Manchester University, where he gained his degree in Politics, made him Student of the Year in 2016. Earlier this year, he completed a Master’s in Global Diversity Governance at Coventry University. As he stepped up to receive his degree he thought of how proud his mother and father would have been at his achievement and how sad he was that they could not be with him to witness it. He manages to talk to his mother once a week. He was reunited with his brother, Hazrat, not long after reaching the UK and now lives with him in Manchester.

‘We all have the power to help those around us or to harm them,’ he says. ‘The choices we make define our walk, define our own personal journeys and make us the people we are.’ His ambition is to ‘begin a slow reverse journey back home’ to return, ‘if it becomes safe enough for me’, to help to rebuild Afghanistan.
Recreating the past - transforming the future

Pamela Jenner meets the directors and cast of an unusual show, which gave a platform to people with dementia.

Letters can get lost and memories forgotten but a community arts project involving actors, musicians and those with dementia has proved that the arts can bring the past back to life.

The project, entitled The Lost Letters, was piloted this summer. Its cast ranged in age from 12 to 82 years. They worked with the award-winning performance venue Saffron Hall, members of the Britten Sinfonia, the Cambridge Institute for Music Therapy Research at Anglia Ruskin University and other professional theatre practitioners, musicians and singers, to devise a one-hour performance that exceeded all expectations.

During the 10-week rehearsal process those taking part divided into groups and corresponded through letters, exchanging memories and creating relationships. These formed the basis for a series of improvisations which, when the groups joined together, made up the performance.

Many of those who took part had never been on the stage before. Some were living with varying degrees of dementia. The performance also included photographs, projected onto the stage, of the performers now and as children, plus a film of the rehearsal process.

Music director Sam Glazer specialises in working collaboratively with groups on community music making. ‘I was stunned by the amount of material we created,’ he said. ‘I was taken aback by how much people were willing to share their stories with energy and enthusiasm. Art is transformative. This is why all artists make work and why people go to concerts, gigs, galleries, plays, because we know art has the power to enrich our lives in ways we cannot begin to understand.’

‘We wanted to make this project accessible to everyone, regardless of experience, bringing people together across the generations to work to a common purpose and break down artificial divides within communities,’ said Thomas Hardy, learning and participation director at Saffron Hall. He paid tribute to his predecessor Natalie Ellis who, with Rachel Yates, was instrumental in getting the project off the ground.

The youngest performer was 12-year-old Jude Holland. ‘I really enjoyed doing something with the older generations,’ he said. ‘I feel much more confident than with people of my age who I feel judge you a bit more. Being on stage and being part of the group felt so good. It was interesting working with people with dementia. I think they are the same as everyone else. Everyone had a story and I learnt so much.’

The oldest was Bob Stewart, aged 82, whose wife, Anne, has dementia and now lives in a care home. ‘I often feel that the carer is the neglected person,’ he said: ‘It was delightful to meet people in a similar position to myself.’

The highlight of the project for him was the applause at the end: ‘It seemed as if we got the message over. People in our situation – give us a challenge and we can rise to it. The organisers motivated us to achieve something above the standard I ever expected.’

A film of the performance will form part of an exhibition at Saffron Walden Museum later this year and will then be stored in the archives.

Lost Letters was a Saffron Hall project delivered in partnership with Orchestras Live and in association with Anglia Ruskin University, Britten Sinfonia, Creative Walden, Fairycroft House, Mind in West Essex and Uttlesford District Council.

‘Art has the power to enrich our lives in ways we cannot begin to understand.’
Being Bilal

Why did Bilal Hassam swap his stethoscope for reality TV? He talks with Yee-Liu Williams and Jonathan Ranger.

Doctor turned community activist, Bilal Hassam, is the embodiment of what it means to be a British Muslim today. He stars in the British Muslim TV (BMTV) reality show Being Bilal, which gives viewers a glimpse of a day in the life of an ordinary Muslim.

Bilal is also Creative Director of BMTV. He describes the channel as a platform to explore what means to be ‘confidently Muslim and comfortably British’. Its approach is not to discuss Islamophobia, racism or extremism directly – there are enough depressing narratives out there – but to subvert those ‘problematising narratives’ by celebrating the diversity and richness of ‘the immeasurable contributions’ that Muslims make to British life.

British-born young Muslims often struggle with shifting societal norms and cultural differences, says Bilal. ‘Like many young British Muslims, I have more in common with young Muslims in San Francisco or Sydney than I do with my parent’s generation.’

His father arrived in Britain, aged nine, from Malawi in the 1970s. His grandfather set up the first halal fish and chip shop in Leicester, which soon became a community hub. His father worked for the Royal Mail for over 30 years and ‘hustled’ so that Bilal and his siblings had a chance of a good education. Most British Muslim families have experienced ‘the growing pains of a community trying to reconcile post-colonial madness, socio-economic challenges and the day-to-day struggle of feeding their family’, he says.

Bilal’s younger brother was born with a heart condition, and had five open-heart operations before he died at the age of 13. Bilal spent most of his teen years going back and forth to hospital. His family’s heartbreak and the expectation that ‘clever kids did medicine’ propelled him into studying medicine.

In his final year as a medic at Nottingham University, Bilal astonished his family by enrolling for a Masters in theology and inter-religious relations at De Montfort University, Leicester. ‘They just didn’t get why I was paying to get another degree,’ he says. As much as he enjoyed medicine, he felt he had a ‘calling to do something beyond the medical space’.

Bilal sees his mission as ‘articulating an understanding of Islam true to our time and place’ and has spent the past 10 years managing a frenetic diary, travelling the world, working with grassroots communities and meeting religious and community leaders, while facing the daily highs and lows that form the basis of the unscripted Being Bilal show.

Leicester was the first British city to have a majority ethnic minority population. Although many of the migrants who came in the 60s and 70s experienced racism, the city managed to avoid the racial tensions that led to the riots in some British cities in the 1980s. He attributes this to the religious leadership from all faiths.

Bilal argues that the media narrative on radicalisation has become the lens through which Western society views Muslim populations and ‘lumps them together’. In the aftermath of the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks, clarifying misconceptions has been ‘a driving point’ for him.

On and off screen, being Bilal is about ‘exploring the richness of our faith traditions, enabling collaborations between all faiths and backgrounds’ and ensuring that people are treated the same irrespective of ethnicity or culture. Bilal sees his mission as ‘articulating an understanding of Islam that is relevant to our time’. He quotes a Muslim scholar who likens Islam to a crystal-clear river whose water is sweet, pure and life-giving but has no colour of its own. Instead it takes on the colour of the bedrock it flows over. Islam takes on the ‘different cultural manifestations’ of the countries its adherents live in, and so remains relevant to distinct peoples.

‘British Muslims give more to charity than any other group.’

He wrestles with such questions as: How do we articulate an understanding of Islam that is relevant to our time? How do we clear misconceptions about the Islamic faith? How do we make God relevant to people in their day-to-day lives? At its core, Islam is ultimately about facilitating a contented heart. The faith and all its rituals, edicts and teachings are about connecting with God. ‘In the remembrance of God, do hearts find tranquility,’ he quotes from the Qur’an.

As an example of British Muslims’ contributions to society, Bilal takes us on a tour of Penny Appeal, a Muslim-led humanitarian relief agency based in Wakefield. British Muslims give more to charity than any other group, and Muslim charities play an essential role in contributing to social welfare in the UK, he says, and yet this is hardly known. Amongst the local projects they fund are feeding-initiatives for the hungry and homeless, support for refugees, domestic violence counselling and a fostering and adoption agency. In 2016, the Charity Commission estimated that British Muslim charities raised over £100 million during the month of Ramadan alone. This year Penny Appeal is close to raising £30 million, with more than 200 staff in the UK and 2,000 working in over 52 other countries.
Drums no guns — healing the community

Ram Bhagat helps survivors to find healing through the rhythm of the drums. He talks with Yee-Liu Williams.

It was Drums No Guns (DNG) that led the Million Mom March along the National Mall in Washington, DC on that Mother’s Day in 2000, rallying the largest gun control demonstration in American history. Looking back on that day, the co-founder of DNG, Ram Bhagat, recalls the beating of the drums and the ‘cries of the women who had lost their children’.

For him, the pain is personal. He will never forget the ‘primal scream’, when he told his mother that his brother, Lester, had died from a gunshot wound. ‘Our lives changed in an instant,’ he says. Nearly 40 years on, it is possible to heal but ‘it takes a long time and leaves scarring’.

Ram co-founded DNG in the early 1990s to unite people of all ages and races and promote understanding and healing. He sees drumming as a spiritual practice where ‘the drum uplifts us and connects us.’ Drumming is a powerful ‘metaphor for the natural rhythm of life.’

Now 63, he is an award-winning science teacher, educationalist and academic, who says his life path is in healing trauma in classrooms and communities. He holds a doctorate and a number of emeritus positions, and travels the world as a motivational speaker, workshop facilitator and yoga practitioner. Among his specialist areas are restorative justice in education, trauma awareness and resilience, and culturally responsive mindfulness practices.

Ram grew up in a predominantly Black neighbourhood in New Haven, Connecticut. His early education was at a private Catholic school but, uncomfortable about the ‘hypocrisies of his world’, he ‘arranged’ his exit from private schooling. He then enrolled in a local public school, which made him feel more ‘at home’ in his neighbourhood.

In 1975, he went to Virginia State University, where he met Janeshwar Upadhyay, a professor of microbiology who became his spiritual mentor. Ram had already been reading about yoga and Hinduism. ‘Everyone is Hindu,’ Upadhyay told him. ‘It doesn’t have a particular belief other than you believe in God and that God is in all things.’ Ram decided to convert to Hinduism and, asked Upadhyay for a new name. He was given Ram Bhagat – meaning ‘Devotee of God’.

Ram started integrating drumming and dance into his science classes to teach chemical bonding, in response to his students’ different learning styles. He sees the classroom as ‘a microcosm of society’. The disparities there often show him which students have experienced, witnessed or been traumatised by violence.

Since the massacre at Columbine High School in 1999, the US has seen countless school shootings. Even before then, Ram says, ‘we were already dealing with a lot of gun violence in the community’. He attributes the ‘dark cloud over the United States’ to the media’s glorification of ‘I need my protection. I need my weapon’. Many teenagers do not know whether they will live to celebrate their 18th birthday.

The shooting of 20 children and six adults at Sandy Hook Elementary School, Connecticut, in December 2012 hit Ram particularly hard, because it took place in his home state. ‘I played my drum right there to do some healing,’ he says. Each time the news breaks of yet another mass shooting, ‘it motivates me to do even more’.

The country is anaesthetized to the reality of gun violence, he says. Youth are using guns to solve conflicts. ‘We have so many guns per capita’ – twice as many as in 1968, according to the Congressional Research Service. In 2009, there were more than 300 million guns in circulation in the US. The debate around the Second Amendment – the right to bear arms – is one of the most divisive in American society.

The Drums No Guns Foundation is about teaching young people that they have a choice and that they can choose ‘life over death’, he says. ‘It’s not a campaign around the Second Amendment, it’s a movement about dignity, mutual respect, peace and love. Let’s not even get to the point of that’s how you want to solve a conflict.’ They called it ‘Drums No Guns’ rather than ‘Drums Not Guns’, because the title was less directive and ‘to give it that artistic flavour and break with convention’.

The non-profit foundation is an invitation to examine the ‘national conscience’. Ram sees violence as a chronic symptom of ‘social arrhythmia’. Where there is mistrust, alienation and disconnection, he says, ‘we lose touch with our own natural rhythms and the ability to feel the rhythm and come together to the “heartbeat” of the drum. He makes no claim to have a solution to world problems but is confident that ‘healing with rhythm’ can address the trauma that ‘we’re experiencing right now’. Activists have a tendency to give out to others and neglect themselves, but it all starts with ‘self-healing, self-love’, he stresses. ‘I’m a survivor,’ he says. ‘We’re all survivors.’

‘Drumming is a metaphor for the natural rhythm of life.’

Photos: TEDx Creative Commons 2015, courtesy of Ram Bhagat and IofC Switzerland.
Islamic windows on the west

Marwan Bassiouni’s powerful photographs capture the diversity of Islam in the Netherlands. He talks to Davina Patel.

The photographs show views of Dutch streets and countryside, seen through the windows of mosques. The focus is on the outside, western, world. The photographer, Marwan Bassiouni explains, ‘For me it was a way of finding a formal way of expressing that will to question not Islam but the western view of Islam. The images are all based on a perspective, a point of view.’

In his exhibition and book, New Dutch Views, Marwan’s focus is less on Islam as a religion than on how it is represented. He speaks of a ‘subtle racism’, which denies Islam’s diversity. “You know we can’t put all Muslims in one box, yet we are doing it,” he says.

After connecting to his faith, Marwan decided to create a project that counteracts negative stereotypes, challenges people’s perceptions and celebrates the diversity of Islam.

All photography has a message, Marwan maintains. ‘Photography can be in good or bad hands. It is often in the hands of big political economic forces. There’s no innocent photograph. As George Orwell said: “All art is propaganda; on the other hand, not all propaganda is art.” The same can be said of photography.’

Half Egyptian and half American, Marwan was born in Switzerland and travelled between Egypt and America from a young age. ‘A lot of people see these two cultures as in conflict with each other,’ he says. ‘But for me it’s just family.’

He grew up with many negative ideas about what was happening in the Middle East, as it was shown from a western, American perspective. As Islamophobia rose across Europe, with record numbers of hate crimes targeting the Muslim community, he began to see the media’s role in fuelling prejudice. ‘I started to question what types of information we see. That led me to be interested in political subjects.’

He discovered photography when he was 23 and working for a human rights NGO. At about the same time, he also discovered Islam. ‘I started to have an interest in spirituality, in our existence and in really understanding the world. I feel only religious practice can deal with these types of existential questions on a psycho-emotional level.’

Marwan cites the 11th century theologian, Abu Hamid Al Ghazali, as an inspiration and spiritual teacher. ‘He wrote all his books to share his knowledge about the religion, the unseen and jihad (the inner personal struggle with one’s self). His writings were rich in insights and lessons on how to improve one’s self. He was preoccupied with the purification of the heart and the inner dimension of Islam. How to become a better human being while adopting an Islamic (and cosmological) world view is something I was very much interested in.’

Marwan says that the more he studied Islam the more the way he took photographs changed. He started to look into sacred art and to question the form and impact of his images. ‘The more I understood the Islamic concept of beauty and excellence, which is called ihsan in Arabic, the more I was inspired to make work that really celebrates creation. With New Dutch Views, there are almost no shadows. I’m trying to almost scan the surfaces so the picture is focused on the subject matter and has that emotional connection.’

New Dutch Views is his first solo exhibition. He sees it as ‘the first chapter’ of a bigger project. ‘My plan is to go to all the western countries that have enough mosques and take pictures through their windows. I want to create New French Views, New British Views, New American Views and so on.’

Rumbi Mukoyi’s experience of not belonging spurred her to create African Youth Arise. She talks to Mary Lean.

Rumbi Mukoyi traces her drive to engage and empower young Britons of African descent to the day her 11-year-old brother was questioned by the police for a crime he did not commit.

‘Something had been stolen in our village and the victim said the suspect was mixed race,’ she says. ‘My brother just happened to come out of our house at that moment, and he is very light in complexion. You can imagine how a young Black person would feel having that interaction with the police.’

Not long afterwards, in 2011, the death of Mark Duggan in Tottenham sparked protests in cities across England. ‘When I saw the riots and looting, I thought this is a conflict between young Black men and the police,’ Rumbi says. ‘I knew I had to find a way of engaging the young people of our community; African Youth Arise (AYA) was born in 2013.

Since then some 400 young people have been through the programme, which offers skills development, mentoring and a peer community to 11- to 25-year-olds in the East Midlands. Monthly workshops cover such topics as African history and heritage, work and life skills, financial management, sexual and mental health, and include creative arts such as African drumming. Each summer AYA runs a camp for some 70 participants, and they also take young people to participate in other youth programmes in the UK and Europe.

‘When they finally re-join there is so much anger and commotion.’

Rumbi describes young Britons of African descent as a ‘wounded generation’. Some were left behind with relatives while their parents got established in Britain and feel that they were abandoned. ‘When they finally re-join there is so much anger, so much commotion.’ Even where families have stuck together, the parents are often working so hard that they cannot engage with the challenges facing their teenagers. Meanwhile the kids feel torn: ‘they don’t know whether they are British or African or whatever’. She speaks from experience. Born in Zimbabwe, she came to Britain with her parents when she was 14. Even before then, she felt a lack of belonging. Her father was a minister in the United Methodist church, moving from circuit to circuit every few years. Sometimes this meant uprooting the family: at others the family split, with Rumbi staying with her mother, and her brother with their father. For a period Rumbi went to boarding school, which she hated. ‘The structure was a nightmare for someone who was dyslexic.’

By 1999, Rumbi had two more siblings and economic conditions were getting bad in Zimbabwe. Rumbi’s mother moved to Britain to study to be a nurse, and the family followed later in the year. Rumbi’s father set up a church for the Shona community in the East Midlands. Both parents worked full time alongside their studies and church ministry, so many household tasks fell to Rumbi. ‘I sacrificed being a teenager,’ she says. ‘When I went to university I felt ill-prepared.’

Rumbi studied at Sheffield University and then embarked on a career in human resources, alongside volunteering as youth coordinator for a local charity and working with the National Citizen Service of the University of the First Age. For the last six years she has been employed by DHL, who, she says, are very supportive of her voluntary work.

In 2012, through a fellow Zimbabwean, Rumbi attended the School for Changemakers (SfCM), a five-day leadership programme for young people run by Initiatives of Change at Liverpool Hope University. ‘I remember arriving, feeling absolutely overwhelmed,’ she says. ‘That feeling disappeared completely when I met the organisers and the other attendees. For the first time since I came to Britain I felt I was being welcomed, embraced.’

SfCM is celebrating its 10th anniversary in January, with a conference in India. Over the last eight years, its regular follow-up events have given her a network of friendship and support. ‘If I am struggling there is always someone I can talk to,’ she says. ‘It’s a space where we are completely honest, where we can feel really safe and help each other along the way.’ Many of the network have come to AYA to run workshops and offer mentoring. SfCM taught her the importance of taking time in silent reflection – ‘if I take time just to be in the quiet and take it all in, I find I come out with better solutions’ – and opened her heart to the possibility of forgiveness. ‘I had a really difficult relationship with my Dad: we are just as hot-headed and passionate as each other. The sacrifices he made affected us; we missed out because other people needed his time. I’ve just learnt to forgive. Not long ago we were laughing together and I thought a few years ago we would not be having this conversation.’

Africa Youth Arise asks its alumni who have gone on to university and careers to come back and give back to present participants. ‘I’m 35, there’s a huge gap between me and an 11-year-old,’ she says. ‘The model that has worked is to bring back young people who have been through the programme.’

In 2018 AYA took part in an EU-funded Erasmus+ programme. ‘We ended up in Georgia, with young people from ethnic minorities in Montenegro, Georgia, Russia, the Czech Republic and Italy, sharing our stories and learning from each other.’ The 36 participants were astonished to discover the similarities in their experiences and struggles.

‘As a Black person in the UK, it sometimes feels as if you are alone when you face discrimination,’ said one of the AYA participants. Hearing from people ‘that don’t necessarily look like me’ had enabled her to relate on a different level.

‘I learnt that we need to become more tolerant and accepting in order to eradicate discrimination,’ said another. ‘Going forward I am going to be more open-minded and start talking to people from different backgrounds.’
A child growing up in a violent home, Rupal Maru found an outlet in Indian dance and henna painting. Now a primary school teacher, she has set up a business with a positive social impact, RuShee, with her sister, Sheetal, through which she hopes Indian arts will ‘help others as they helped me’.

RuShee was created seven years ago, after Rupal and Sheetal entered a business competition. As well as offering henna and dance for weddings, they deliver workshops at community events, and to schools and companies. Rupal explains the impact: ‘Straight away it brings a smile to people’s faces. That’s one thing. And then you see kids who are a bit unsure and apprehensive. At the end of the session you see them being more open, confident and participating.’

They have also delivered henna workshops to women who have experienced domestic violence. ‘It’s a way of taking time out from whatever conflict is going on at home. It is such a therapeutic art. The henna has essential oils and can be used for medicinal purposes, so it has a calming effect.’

Rupal’s parents had an arranged marriage, a common practice in the Indian subcontinent. ‘My mum’s parents liked the idea of their daughter being married abroad,’ says Rupal. Her mother came to the UK alone, speaking no English, into the ‘shelter’ of her new husband. ‘She believed everything he said and did. After a few months the abuse started. My mum ended up having four girls through the abusive marriage. She survived and is a survivor!’ The abuse continued through their school years until, when Rupal was 18, they made a complete break with her father. ‘We got help and ended up in a few women’s refuges,’ says Rupal. Connecting to her Hindu faith helped Rupal with the trauma of living with the abuse. ‘I had so many questions,’ she says, ‘like, why is this happening to me? You can become quite angry. It can really have an impact on your emotions and on your mental health.’ As a teacher, Rupal sees the effect such experiences have on young children. Her faith has helped her to deal with conflict, relationships and emotions on a daily basis. ‘Through meditation and taking time to understand my feelings and behaviours.’

‘I went for pizza and ended up getting involved.’

Going to primary school was Rupal’s ‘escape’. ‘Home wasn’t great for me, apart from seeing my mum and my sisters. It wasn’t a pleasant environment. There were so many teachers that I loved and were there when I needed them the most. But there were also teachers who made me feel worse about myself. I really saw good and bad things about education. This was another inspiration to be a teacher.’ In her five years in the profession, Rupal has discovered how brutal the education system can be. ‘Because of the pressures, the cuts, the workload and the stress, so many good teachers are leaving,’ she says. Rupal has now left full-time teaching to influence educational policy and create awareness on teacher well-being through her Vlog and Indian arts business. She continues to work alongside children’s rights projects following her involvement in a series of international education conferences on Children as Actors for Transforming Society (CATS).

One catalyst for Rupal’s decision to be a teacher and develop RuShee was taking part in School for Changemakers, an Initiatives of Change programme for young leaders. ‘A friend of mine said there was an event going on and there will be free pizza,’ she says. ‘I just heard free pizza! At that time, I was looking to get involved in volunteering, mentoring and helping other people. I went for pizza and ended up getting involved.’

School for Changemakers helped to build Rupal’s confidence. ‘I remember the first time I went to its residential course, the programme’s director, Krish Raval, asked me to speak at the opening ceremony. I said no, but he said, “I think you can do it, just say what you feel”. In that moment I got some motivation and idea of what to say. I then gave the opening keynote speech!’ Rupal will be joining other School for Changemakers alumni at a 10th anniversary event in Panchgani, India.

Rupal will be releasing more educational videos over the coming months and expanding the offer of henna workshops to women in London.
Where only puppets can go

Raven Kaliana uses puppets to raise awareness of child trafficking and aid recovery from trauma. Lucy Patterson interviews her.

Q: Why did you make your award-winning autobiographical film Hooray for Hollywood?

In 2008, I created Hooray for Hollywood, a live puppet play, based on events from my own childhood, when I survived and escaped trafficking initiated by my family. After each performance, I’d facilitate a post-show discussion, assisted by representatives from Childline. In 2011, I produced a film version.

In most news coverage of paedophilic crimes, the child victims are represented only as statistics. This blots out their humanity. I felt that speaking from my own experience, using puppetry as a medium, could be a way to invite conversations on a difficult topic.

Q: What was the impact of the awareness-raising event you organised with IofC in 2013?

Charlie Ryder, a fellow film producer, friend and puppet aficionado, recommended I get in touch with IofC. They brought together a team to work with me on producing an awareness-raising event on human trafficking. It featured the film, my testimony and a panel discussion.

After the event, I was invited to show Hooray for Hollywood at London City Hall and was interviewed for Shadow City, a study on human trafficking in London. The researchers were particularly shocked by one scene in the film, where children approach the police for help and are turned away. They asked, “Does that still happen?” I suggested they check with the charities in London working with current trafficking victims. The answer was yes: it was still fairly common. This received worldwide press coverage when the report was launched.

Hoping to promote the IofC event, I approached a freelance journalist. This led to an article in the Guardian, which set off a chain reaction of interviews. Hundreds of people wrote to thank me for helping them to understand these crimes and better protect their children. Invitations followed to present the film at the United Nations in Geneva and the Commission on the Status of Women in New York; and for charities, safeguarding teams, care homes, counselling offices and universities.

In 2015, the UK passed the Modern Slavery Act to help protect trafficked people. One of the main provisions was the establishment of an Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner to evaluate and coordinate law enforcement and ‘ensure good practice in the identification of victims’.

Q: Tell us about your new puppet play.

Love vs Trauma is about leaving an abusive situation, finding support, managing trauma symptoms and going on to have a good life. We’ve performed it in Beijing and Puerto Rico and are taking it to conferences in Greece and Wales. The BBC have filmed it for Wellness Project.

Trauma responses, if unrecognised, can be incredibly destructive of relationships, family, community, politics and the planet. If we identify and defuse the emotional roots of destructive human behaviours, there may still be a way to circumvent extinction. Healing involves facing the truth about one’s life – but it does work, and it’s worth it.

Q: How are you using puppets to address trauma?

I have also developed a variety of workshops on trauma recovery, using puppets – for teenage survivors, adult survivors and professionals working with child victims.

Puppetry is an amazing medium. Children can use toys to act out the emotional dynamics of something upsetting, in a safe way, and maybe come to a different solution. Perhaps this time the dinosaur eats the lorry, instead of the lorry running over the dinosaur.

Puppetry helps us see different possibilities. We can look at ‘what should have happened’ to help us grieve ‘what did happen’. It can help us realise that people’s behaviour was not ‘about us’. It can help us to see a situation in a ‘one-step-removed’ sort of way – ‘trying on’ the reality it might represent.

Trauma gets stuck because we don’t process it the same way we process everyday experiences – the verbal part of our brains turns off when primitive survival mechanisms kick in. Trauma experiences are tough to express in words, so images, metaphors, colours, sounds – the components of puppetry – allow a person to reclaim difficult experiences and reconnect to supportive people in their life.

Q: What about your own journey of healing?

It was initially tough to escape, establish a new support system and to heal. However, I’ve led quite a joyful life for the past 20 years, directing Puppet (R)Evolution and working as a professional puppeteer, artist and puppet maker. I created Hooray for Hollywood after a long healing process and many years of living a life filled with warmth and love.

My own disclosures have chimed with the global chorus of the #MeToo movement. Before I made the show, there was horrible social stigma – so much shaming and blaming of survivors. It was difficult to mention what I’d been through without enduring a barrage of demeaning stereotypes and discrimination. There is much more public support for survivors now.

Q: I imagine the process of creating a puppet play is incredibly lengthy?

Hooray for Hollywood was my first full-length show, so I needed to build up a whole suite of skills. I took workshops on puppet-building, script writing, improvisation, mask work, storytelling… I also did an MA in Advanced Theatre Practice at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama.

I built the puppets in a weekend – the poor little things are mostly wire and bubble wrap. They were just meant to be temporary, but people loved them, so we’ve kept them, wonky as they are.

Later, someone volunteered to help me produce the film. We discussed the play script line by line, and I rewrote it into screenplay format. It was challenging to learn about filming and editing, skills I used later when making animations for other plays and documentaries.

Q: What is the message you want to give to the world?

Our past doesn’t have to determine our future – we all have the capacity for radically positive change, if we face reality instead of running from it.

Raven can be contacted at http://ravenkaliana.com

Photo of hand and puppet by Gordon Anderson | Portrait of Raven © 2017 Gaynor Perry | Other photos by Alfredo Robles
Painting from within

For over 20 years, Su Riddell has been painting in silence with friends and strangers.

Something sort of settles in now as I paint in silence not knowing where the paint is leading me,’ said one person who took part in a Painting from Within session. ‘For me it seems to be about finding my balance.’

Painting from Within is a relaxed time of creating in silence, using acrylic paints, regardless of experience or skill. Swedish artist Gerd Ekdahl developed this way of painting as a therapeutic tool, and I was introduced to it by her sister, Elisabeth Peters, who used to live near me in Oxford.

A small group of us started meeting regularly for relaxation and to reflect on our lives in a different way. The emphasis is on responding to colour and brush in an hour of quiet, connecting to what is within us and producing our own expression in paint and shape. Some undoing of school art class learning may need to take place.

We try to set aside expectation and judgement and to keep noticing what is going on within us and what is emerging on the paper before our eyes. This helps us to see beneath the immediate concerns running in our heads and to connect with how we really are. Observing what we are doing is a mindful process, which slows us down and gives other parts of the brain a chance to make some input.

We take a moment of quiet together for a few minutes before we start. Sometimes we have a theme, otherwise we look within ourselves for our own starting point. The aim is to put our brains and thinking away for a while, using our other senses as we set up, choose colours, brushes and paper, and start to paint, still in silence. After an hour we boil the kettle and make a hot drink, put our paintings up on the mantelpiece and settle down to look at them.

‘Responding to colour and brush in an hour of quiet’

For me, this hour is a reflective space where I connect with my feelings and reflect on what they are telling me. I’m no artist, but I enjoy playing with the paint, with no pressure to produce a finished product. Sometimes I like what I’ve done, sometimes I don’t like it so much. But I prop each one up on the mantelpiece anyway, as they all have something to tell me.

As I paint, I ponder. At our most recent session, I started with an awareness of my sadness that the oceans are being affected by climate change. As I painted imaginary seaweed, I pondered on what I can do about it, and what sources of hope exist. The process was enjoyable and gave me space to find fresh inspiration on an issue that is on my mind.

‘As I paint, I ponder.’

When we look at each other’s paintings, care is needed, so we don’t hurt each other’s feelings. The trick, rather surprisingly, is to only say what we see. For instance, if someone says they see a fish in my painting of seaweed, that image belongs to them. It might help and amuse me to find that I produced a fish shape when I wasn’t intending to, but I can take it or leave it. If on the other hand someone was to tell me that they found my seaweed sinister, it would upset my new feeling of optimism.

We find it’s important to avoid our own interpretations, and instead to truly see through the eyes of the other. Getting together to express how the session has gone and describe what unfolded enables us to expand our reflective process and confirm our discoveries.

I have run sessions at conferences and gatherings in Britain and overseas, and in my own home. Both painters and those who believe ‘I can’t paint’ tell me that the experience helps them to relax and connect with their feelings. ‘At the beginning I was a little bit resistant to come, because I had never painted before,’ said one. ‘After each session my spirit feels calm and quiet and I really enjoy it.’

‘This is a chance to express myself through paint without needing to worry about what the final picture will look like,’ said another. ‘There is no pressure to produce something “pretty” or “good” but simply to let go and be free, letting the painting become whatever it wants.’

Our latest session took place on the UN International Day of Peace in September, when we joined up with Creators of Peace, IoC’s women’s empowerment programme. The Day’s focus this year was the climate emergency, which in the words of UN Secretary-General António Guterres ‘threatens our security, our livelihoods and our lives’. We took this as our starting point. The photo opposite shows what emerged from a group aged from 13 to 88!

For more information, contact Su Riddell at oxford@ioc.org
Centre stage for social reform

Pamela Jenner tells the story of a theatre which reached out to the factories and mines of post-war Britain.

More than 70 years ago Moral Re-Armament (MRA), now known as Initiatives of Change, staged a play at the Westminster Theatre, London, which was to impact the British working class on a scale that had never been achieved before.

Playwrights throughout the ages, from Shakespeare to Brecht and from Shaw to Caryl Churchill, have sought to influence their audiences. The founder of MRA, American Lutheran pastor Frank Buchman, knew only too well the force for social reform that a theatre could create.

In 1946 MRA purchased the Westminster Theatre in London in order to present plays that would, according to the fund-raising team, dramatise ‘the spirit that can meet the tasks of peace... which alone can secure freedom in Britain and brotherhood between nations’.

The theatre’s first major production was The Forgotten Factor by Alan Thornhill, an MRA worker. The play emphasised the need for change that theatre could create.

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MRA continued presenting plays at the Westminster for the next 50 years. The Forgotten Factor was just one of many examples of theatre pushing boundaries and bringing about change.

Former Daily Express journalist and Buchman’s successor, Peter Howard, transformed the Westminster into a professional venue which launched the careers of many well-known figures, including Elaine Paige and the impresario Bill Kenwright. It was supported by such leading performers as Sybil Thorndike and Cliff Richard.

Howard was a prolific playwright and his pantomime Give a Dog a Bone was performed annually from 1964 until 1975. It was seen by thousands of children and led to the development of MRA’s most innovative programme, The Day of London Theatre. Launched in 1967, it was one of the most extensive and long running independently operated theatre programmes for schools in the country. It finally came to an end in 1989.

Just as one project was ending, the Westminster was embarking on another successful programme, First Floor Theatre. This aimed to stage new plays in a more intimate setting above the main theatre, tackling such topical and controversial issues as the Northern Ireland conflict and child abuse.

The Westminster Theatre was sold in 1998; MRA moved to its present premises in Greencoat Place a couple of years later; and in 2001 the movement changed its name to Initiatives of Change.

During its 50-year reign at the Westminster, MRA’s achievements were huge and at times groundbreaking. The movement brought theatre to the working classes; its plays and musicals were performed throughout the world; and it proved beyond doubt that the arts can indeed be a huge force for good.

‘There was no need to act. We only had to be real.’

Dr Pamela Jenner is the author of Changing Society through Drama, which provides a detailed examination of the work of Moral Re-Armament at the Westminster Theatre. It can be purchased online through Amazon either in paperback or on Kindle and is also available from 24 Greencoat Place, London SW1P 1RD.
‘Stories are the secret reservoir of values: change the stories individuals or nations live by and tell themselves, and you change the individuals and nations.’

Ben Okri