



Dr Omnia Marzouk

PEOPLE BUILDING TRUST

A two-fold vocation

The new President of Initiatives of Change International feels called to heal and to build trust.

Dr Omnia Marzouk talks to Mike Lowe.

As Consultant in Paediatric Emergency Medicine in one of the UK's busiest Children's Emergency Departments – Alder Hey Children's hospital in Liverpool, and Associate Medical Director of the Hospital, Dr Omnia Marzouk is highly respected within her profession. She has wanted to be a children's doctor as long as she can remember. 'When I started to train in this area, my thought was to always treat children as if they were my own and to give my all and not to be drawn by other professional temptations of position or influence.'

'Shattering some of the stereotypes ... has been rewarding'

A Muslim woman, originally from Egypt, Marzouk has not faced any issues of discrimination working in the UK. But she does face a constant barrage of negative stereotypes about being an 'Arab Muslim woman' - part

of a wider ignorance and prejudice towards the Arab world in general.

In this context, Marzouk's sense of vocation is two-fold: both to her medical work and also as a bridgebuilder between communities. She finds herself regularly invited to speak about her spiritual path to various groups, schools and religious communities – both at home and abroad. 'Shattering some of the stereotypes and enabling people to gain a different perspective has been rewarding,' she says. When she speaks, it tends to be about her own moral challenges that people of any faith – or none – can relate to: for example whether to use the office telephone and photocopier for personal stuff.

'As Muslims we are called to live in community,' she says. 'God could have created us all the same, but the Holy Qur'an says we were made different nations and tribes so that "you may get to know one another". Your neighbour is part of your obligation to care, regardless of whether they are like you or not. There is no contradiction there. You have your religion and I have mine – there should be no compulsion in religion. It is



only God who leads people to an experience of faith not we humans who do that.’

In many ways, her journey began at a youth conference organized by Initiatives of Change in Australia, where her father was the Egyptian Ambassador. ‘What interested me was meeting an intergenerational group of people with a real sense of purpose for their lives and the world; who walked the talk with integrity and were prepared to admit their mistakes.’

‘I was challenged to deal with the credibility gap in my own life by examining my life against standards of honesty, purity, unselfishness and love. I found myself wanting in a number of areas,’ she says. ‘As I practiced a daily routine of quiet reflection, ideas came about what I could do to restore integrity in my own life.’

‘Systems are important, but unless people change they are not enough’

‘I was outraged at the corruption that I saw in my youth in the Arab world, yet I took change from my father’s dressing table without his permission – two sides of the same coin. I apologized to my father for this. Similarly, I thought that the legacy of British colonialism in the Middle East justified my feelings of indifference toward them – yet this attitude would not enable a different future to be created. So I decided to apologize to a young Englishman at the conference for my lack of interest in his country. This small beginning sowed a seed of love and passion for a Britain that is now my own country.’

For Marzouk it was the start of a journey of discovery of her religious roots as a Muslim, and a decision to live with integrity and work for positive change in her community and the world. ‘As I had found my own sense of direction through Christians who lived with integrity, it fostered in me a sense of calling to build bridges between different faiths, cultures and communities,’ she says. ‘From that point my life had three concentric circles to it: my faith as a Muslim and living with integrity at the centre of it, my professional vocation and my calling to build bridges across world divides.’

Her election as President of Initiatives of Change International – the first Woman to hold the post – she sees as providential, coming at a time when the Arab Spring holds so much promise. She has always believed that ordinary people can make a difference in the world if they were prepared to model in themselves the ideal they wanted in their communities. The changes in

the Arab world this year have given her and others a renewed belief that people can make a difference, shape their own destiny and hold politicians accountable. There is also a renewed sense of pride in being Arab.

‘The biggest challenge,’ she says, ‘is to build a community where moral values are embedded in the governing systems, so that they are based on lasting solid foundations.’ In some parts of the Arab world, access to rights and services has been easier for those with status, who know people of influence or are prepared to pay to make things happen. ‘It has not been a level playing field.’ So for Marzouk, one litmus test of any new government will be not only guaranteeing basic human rights and providing political choice, but also whether they guarantee the same rights for all minority groups in society.

She longs for a world community that helps the Arab world build their own future as they see it, and for the West to develop ‘a values-based foreign policy in the Middle East where interventions and actions are based on what the people on the ground want, not what suits Western interests’.

‘The West has long established good governance systems, so good or bad governments can come or go and things still work. Despite this, some people are marginalized, economic inequalities persist and whole economic systems are on the verge of collapse because they are not values-based. Systems are important, but unless people change they are not enough for long-term sustainability. It is human values and integrity that make them sustainable.’

For this reason, Marzouk believes that IofC has a particular contribution to make at this point in history. ‘In the West and also in emerging societies, the issues of ethical leadership and application of values are two of the most important needs.’ Another need is to encourage dialogue and partnerships across divides of cultures, race and religion to create diverse pluralistic communities that work together to create a better future.

As a diverse intergenerational movement of people, IofC is well placed to meet those needs, she says. ‘We need to think globally, act locally but start with ourselves modeling the changes we want to see more widely.’ Her vision for IofC is a community of change makers who work by inspiring, equipping and connecting people to bring change, starting with themselves, and who partner with like-minded organizations to impact key issues.

She quotes Margaret Mead: ‘Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.’