

Peace – Who Cares?

Dr Gill Hicks

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What a great honour to be able to stand before you, to balance on prosthetic legs and speak on a topic that is both personal and universal – the importance and value of peace.

In my acknowledgement and in my paying the deepest respect to the elders both past and present who so brilliantly have lived and cherished the land on which we meet today, I would like to reflect on their wisdom and their practice of peace.

The Welcome to Country is, in itself, an honour and a privilege, for to be ‘welcomed’ meant that you were wished a safe journey across the land, one that was without conflict or confrontation – a passage of travel where the intention was only for the ‘good’ of those stepping onto the soil in which you were the dutiful custodian.

So the ancient history of our shared land offers many great riches – and one of them is the sincerity and meaning of what it is to be ‘welcomed in peace’.

When I was creating this talk entitled, *Peace – Who Cares?*, I started reflecting on the history of world events that have been so shocking, so dreadful that it’s almost impossible not to care, not to have empathy for

those suffering from the absence of peace and the true horror of the reality of war and ignorance driven action.

Today, 11 September, marks the anniversary of one such traumatic event, one whose tentacles reached far and wide and in many ways has shaped a western world culture of emerging fear and vulnerability.

Sixteen years ago, almost 3,000 people were killed, murdered by the deliberate actions of criminals who were prepared to give their lives for the ideological beliefs that enabled them to dehumanise their perceived enemy and cause a cruel devastation that's felt to this day.

There are two stories that I'd like to share with you, actually I hate to call them 'stories' because their lived experience is not a story but a real account of human dignity and human tenacity, the substance within that enables us to choose how we react and how we respond to unimaginable trauma.

These are two women, two women whom I am so proud to call close friends, two women whose lives were irrevocably changed by the attack that we now refer to as '9/11' – the day that two iconic New York buildings came to a shattering end.

Elizabeth and her husband, Simon lived and worked in London – she was a human resources manager for a creative firm and he was in publishing – this was an exciting time in their lives as they were expecting their first baby!

Although Elizabeth didn't want Simon to go to New York because she was seven months pregnant and day to day tasks were getting just that little bit harder to do, she helped him pack reassured that it was just a few days and he would be back home! Simon never came home.

Their son was born that December, a healthy beautiful boy named William. Elizabeth had a choice. She could be consumed with hatred and bitterness that her husband and the father of her new born son had been so senselessly taken or she could raise her child surrounded and nourished by love – she could show him a world through the lens of beauty rather than destruction and she could show him the strength of human connectivity over divisiveness.

To quote Elizabeth: “Choosing the path to stop the cycle of violence is just as difficult, if not more challenging, as choosing a path of hatred or anger.”

She retrained and is now a psychologist, helping people journey through trauma, whilst her 16 year old son thrives into becoming a beautiful contributing adult.

Carie was only 26 when her mother, a passenger on the American Airlines plane that was flown into the World Trade Centre, was killed.

Carie's experience is yet another testimony to the fragility of our lives, how she too lived a life untouched by any presence of bloody conflict or being the target of hatred – she was busy planning her future and her mother being involved in a major terror action wasn't part of her wildest imagination.

These things happened to other people, somewhere else, someone else. It will never be you... until that moment life as you knew it comes to an end.

Carie chose to be involved. She chose to use the life and indeed murder of her mother to educate, to teach those who perhaps didn't care, those who may be willing to, themselves, take a path of extremist action.

The sad beauty of my relationship with both Elizabeth and Carie is that sense of 'knowing' – the unspoken words that never need to be said.

The pain of the loss of innocence, of blissfully walking through life and being frustrated with the mundane and minutiae of the day.

How we wish to have those troubles back – how we wish to be nonchalant about the need for change within our understanding of our role here on this earth and our responsibility to each other!!!

My entry into the field of 'peace' was one of great reluctance, I must confess. I am guilty of holding the privileged position of never valuing, in fact never even giving a single thought to a life where my peace was interrupted or indeed broken.

My perception of someone who was a peace builder was rather stereotypical – you know, someone who is softly spoken, eats lentils, wears white or brightly coloured clothing and plays the guitar

Was I wrong!!! (the guitar playing is optional!!!)

It wasn't until I parachuted into this work that I understood that choosing to 'do' peace, to advocate for a life free from war and conflict and terrorism for all would be the most challenging and exhausting things I could ever devote my life to....

It's a long way from who I was prior to the bombings in London on July 7 2005. I was a revered member of the creative community within London, working within architecture and design and fortunate to be the head curator at the prestigious Design Council – a position I was on my way to when a 19 year old man made the choices that led to him to take irreversible action.

He detonated his device, a bomb aimed at killing and maiming people like me, people who were just catching a train in the morning commute. My life, as I knew it, ended in the following minutes but in the hours that passed my second life emerged.

Can you imagine being submerged into a complete blackness – a space so thick with darkness that it could be easy to believe you were suspended in a container of hot tar.

Those who were once standing alongside me in the now unrecognisable train carriage, people who were strangers became vital life lines. In the darkness we held hands, we comforted and reassured one another and importantly we cared for each other as human beings whose lives depended on each other to survive.

The most profoundly transformational insight that was revealed to me in those moments of aftermath and throughout my fortunate second life is our power to choose – that no matter what happens to us – we each have the ability to choose how we react and respond.

This power first came to me in the hour that I lay trapped, waiting for rescue. The most beautiful voice entered into my space, it told me that I lost both of my legs and that surviving would mean a life of continuous physical challenge and discomfort...this voice was so softly spoken, so intensely captivating... I call this the voice of death.

As I contemplated going to where this beautiful voice was leading me, another 'voice' entered my field – it was male, it was loud and it was very angry!

It said: "How dare you even think of leaving – there is so much for you to do, regardless of your physical ability....but....it's your choice."

I was given the choice to live or die – extraordinary, surreal and deeply profound.

And in choosing to live I instinctively knew I was entering into a contract – one where I couldn't read the small print, but I just knew that my path would reflect the gift of life – it would be measured by what I had been given not by what I'd taken.

Death forced me to see life as something with a purpose attached, with an enormous responsibility to make a difference to the people and the world around you....

Death essentially changed my idea of what it is to have a life.

Our insignificance is extraordinary, we're here for just a breath of time and yet each of our lives can offer such incredible significance, each of us can make positive differences, differences which can inform and indeed change the world.

We just need to care enough!!!

I know what we are capable of because I am the living fact, living proof of the brilliance of humanity.

Just four words opened up my understanding of our intense humanity and the connection we all share.

Difference of any type made absolutely no difference to my rescue.

It was a month into my hospitalisation when I was able to read the original id tag that was placed on my wrist band when I was admitted.

It chillingly read: "One unknown, estimated female". Four words, four words that shaped my second life's meaning, message and work.

Those words said loudly that the rescuers were prepared to put their own lives at considerable risk to come and save 'one unknown' – to save as many unknowns as they could.

To them, it didn't matter who I was, what the colour of my skin was, if I had a faith or no faith at all, whether I was rich or poor...nothing mattered other than I was a precious human being – a person.

Wow.

And their actions went deeper to leave a lasting impression – because when I woke up, when I reflected on what happened, when I read the chilling label...all I remembered was how I felt...and I felt loved.... My hand was always held, my face was stroked, someone was always ensuring that I stayed connected and that connection was through unconditional love.

I am the person I am to this very day because ultimately love saved my life. It wrapped itself so tightly around me that it shielded me from the erosive emotions of hatred and bitterness and it guided and informed my choices of how exactly I wanted to react and respond.

Love buoyed me in my dark moments – helping me to smile through the pain and learn to live again as a double amputee.

There are so many wonderful examples of what could be viewed as simple acts of kindness that in fact made a monumental difference to my ideas of how I go forward.....

Linda was one of my intensive care nurses and had the task of giving me my first shower. Having a shower was something I had dreamed of but the emotion of knowing that I would never stand again to feel the

water on my face as it gushed from the shower head was somewhat overwhelming....as the tears rolled down my face, Linda proclaimed “I’m coming in with you!”

And with that, she jumped into the shower, uniform and all, and we giggled and laughed at just how ridiculous this scene would look. Her actions actually let me add ‘her confidence’, enabled what could have been a difficult memory of my first shower to one that is hilarious and loving.

And then there was Claire – my intensive care physio – yes, physio and intensive care don’t seem like they belong in the same sentence....but.

Whilst I was still on a life support machine, my dear brother sitting by my side, she appeared in my doorway and gleefully yelled “I’m going to check your reflexes and muscle response, ok Gill?”

What!!!

She had a basket of rolled up bandage balls and suddenly she started to throw them at me! Miraculously I caught them – which impressed my brother so much he rushed out to call his wife back in Australia.....he said “Its Gill!” and she said “What, what’s happened?” “Gill can catch!!”

Now this is only amazing because I couldn’t catch before the bombings!!!

One of the most difficult moments in hospital was when I first looked in a mirror. Katie decided that my first time in front of a mirror would be at the hospital hairdressing salon!

Yes! That's right. Even though my hair was brittle and patchy, the idea of doing something 'normal' was very welcomed.

The challenge was moving me from the ward to the salon – and the solution came in the form of a food tray! I was transported on a food tray that was balanced on a wheelchair, don't ask me why!!!

I looked out at the person in front of me, this reflection in the mirror resembled the 'Gill' I knew, but the person staring back wasn't me, couldn't be me! My skin was completely burnt, my eyes looked so sad – and bandages replaced the space where my legs were.

The voice of death was right – living without legs is an ongoing, continuous journey of facing change, no two days are the same, some days the pain is so intense all I can do is wait – because eventually it will pass – just as all things unpleasant, they will pass.

I've had to learn the skill of focussing on the 'other side' and to associate pain as a positive – as something that signals being alive, being able to feel and to know what being grateful looks like – when I chose to have life, I didn't get to choose what that life looked like.

Pain in its many guises is a feature within my second life but equally so is love and it's through love and the belief that humanity can shine through adversity, conflict and war and it's within this space that I work.

When I speak to someone who is going down the path of becoming a violent extremist, when I connect with someone who has been affected by a senseless act of violent extremism, or someone who has survived continuous bombing and the destruction of their land, I hold the position of hope through the belief in 'us'.

But my position is often challenged – with every horrific event, every cruel gesture or action inflicted on another I am left asking 'why' – where is the humanity that I know?

My frustration is trying to answer a perpetual question –

Does it have to take a tragedy for us to value each other?

Does it have to take a lack of peace for us to care about creating peace?

And why – why isn't there a greater learning from history – surely our evolution is all about learning from past mistakes and growing as individuals and as a collective – as global citizens – people without the markers of difference, but the acceptance for their commonality!

So, who cares about peace?

I do.

Who cares enough to commit to being the advocate for positive change?

May I ask you all to stand – and whilst we are standing can I ask you to take a moment to think about your life and what you stand for.

Each time you rise from a chair, each time you stand in a queue, please reflect on this shared moment and the impact your life can have....

I can summarise my entire lived experience with this single quote:

“Someone, somewhere is feeling the effects of something you have said or done” – what a great responsibility we each carry and how important it is to stand for the brilliance of humanity.