



### WOMEN WHO MEAN BUSINESS

Around 30-40 people are gathered in the tea room on the terrace at 0730h. Seated in a large circle, we gazed upon a lit candle, a plant pot with bright red flowers and a dish with stones immersed in water. This centre-stage represents light, earth, water and life. It is August 2010.

A young Syrian woman, Iman, had been invited to share an experience of hers, as a Muslim woman living for a short time in Canada. She is wearing a hijab (head-scarf covering her head and shoulders) and a jilbab (long dress covering her body, arms and legs) and she speaks in a quiet, captivating voice. I watch and listen as she talks about going in to a local café hoping to get a cup of coffee. The owner – a man – sees her coming in and he turns his face away from her. She notices suddenly feeling uncomfortable and a little scared. But she remains seated quietly waiting to be served. Still he does not come. He visits every other table, persistently avoiding hers. Iman is left in turmoil with her own internal dialogue and emotions – fear rising, questioning herself, worrying about what he is thinking and believing about her; wondering if he is going to do something more extreme. She sits and waits, even though every part of her being is screaming at her to get out; to run away from this man she is believing is rude, hateful, mean-spirited and judgemental. A woman in the café notices the scene unfolding and with a small gesture of kindness and compassion, comes to speak to Iman, complimenting her on the fabric of her head cover. This gives her enough courage to gather herself together and leave.

Iman talked to us of how her anger, frustration, fear, hopelessness and resentment took hold once she left the café. She explained how hard it had been to stay there and not run away sobbing. On returning home she spent some time re-running the scenario – had she done something to offend him? Was he just bigoted? Through taking time to reflect, she was able to reconnect with herself and how she wants to be in her life. She talked about how she was able to bring herself to account – revisiting four principles that, for her and those connected to IofC, act as a moral compass, guiding life decisions and actions: honesty, purity (of intention), unselfishness and love. She realised that if she wanted this man to be different with her, then she had to move beyond her own fear and judgements of him.

So the next day she returned with an open heart and a commitment to reach out to him. In her heart and mind was a single sentence: *'Here I am and we are going to solve our conflict dear... get ready'*. When she entered the café he had his back to her. She knew she had to forget her hurt feelings and accept whatever his coming reactions might be. When he turned to face her, she smiled and greeted him and was shocked to see him stretching out his hand to shake hers.... he continued by introducing himself and she followed, each opening up a precious connection that forged a flourishing friendship between him, his wife and Iman.

Since 2011, Iman has been living back in Syria. She is in Damascus and yes, it is a war zone and amidst the turmoil and terror, she continues to run Creators of Peace Circles for women in her locality. Reflecting on her time in Canada as a woman with a strong faith, she said that it had been a gift from God and that the country had helped her learn about the importance of a human's responsibilities, humanity and duties:

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*'When I was in Canada I learned about Creators of Peace Circles while being surrounded with peace. Canada was preparing me for the future in the Middle East but I didn't know that then. I learned to be objective and to find peace in myself before searching for it in others. I learned to accept differences. Also I learned that change starts from the inside before we point at others.'*

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Iman was graced by women who introduced her to Creators of Peace (a programme of a world-wide fellowship of individuals and organisations, called Initiatives of Change – IofC). She was touched by the woman who reached out to her in the café. She herself, touched the lives of the Café owner and his wife; and was in turn touched by them. And in sharing her story with me and countless others, she continues to touch and inspire us to take focused action in making our world a better place, each starting with ourselves.



*'And now I am living surrounded by real conflict. How does it feel to learn about peace when you're surrounded by peace and how does it feel to participate in a Creators of Peace Circle while experiencing war, anger and seeing blood around you? How to practice what we thought we'd believed in? I asked God to help me share what I learned, to change my heart to the better and use me to help others. I don't know if we will wake up the next day alive or dead but I know that if I wake up I want to tell my people that we need to build peace. There is no way but listening with consciousness, compassion and values. I heard myself many times saying we HAVE TO listen to one another, we HAVE to find a way to communicate before we lose more and more people.'*

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There is nothing more potent and compelling than women who mean business. Iman is one of those women. She is alive to her purpose – her mission to work for peace in her homeland and the world. She started with herself. Then she reached out to others. How many of us wait for someone else to take the first step? I can recount, oh so many times, when I have fallen into this trap, stewing in my own 'poor me' stories, finding over and over that nothing changes. It is only when I realise, once again, that my inner work precedes all else, that I recover my capacity to be a positive actor for change and an influence for good. Iman and many like her in lofC keep me in touch with what is possible.

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Louie is keen to introduce others in Edinburgh and Scotland to lofC. If you would like to find out more, please contact Louie direct.

Also stay tuned for the TIGER Roadshow (another lofC programme) which is coming to Edinburgh in May 2014.