The Crucial Role of Empathy
by Brittany Koteles

A conversation with Molly Melching, founder and executive director of Tostan and the protagonist of Aimee Molloy’s However Long the Night.

Molly Melching was 24-years-old when she first arrived to Senegal as a University of Illinois exchange student in Dakar. She quickly fell into the rhythm of Senegalese life – in some ways, she says, feeling more at home than she ever did. School ended, but Melching stayed, teaching English at three different cultural centers to cover the rent of her $40 room. “It was enough to keep me there,” she remembers with a laugh.

40 years later, Melching’s story continues in Dakar. She is the founder and executive director of Tostan, a nonprofit organization turning top-down development on its head. Tostan uses a three-year, non-formal education program that puts African communities in charge of their own futures. Called the Community Empowerment Program (CEP), Tostan is taking a holistic approach.

One of Tostan’s most notable results is the abandonment of Female Genital Cutting (FGC), a deeply ingrained tradition that has affected more than 100 million African girls and women. Because of Tostan, now over 6,000 communities have publicly declared their decision to abandon FGC.

However Long the Night extends beyond a humanitarian’s four-decade adventure in Africa. Aimee Molloy tells Melching’s story through the eyes of countless communities that are taking part in Tostan’s movement.

Q: Hillary Rodham Clinton said that However Long the Night’s story is “proof that commitment can drive transformational change.” How do you think Tostan is changing the way we approach development?

A: I feel that empathy is often forgotten in the world of development. People are outraged about what’s going on in the world – and with very good intentions, they translate their outrage into telling people, “This is wrong!” or “Stop this immediately!” But we are talking about systemic change, and that goes deeper than telling people what to do.

There are things that are difficult to accept. I have had to live through the sights and stories of little girls being cut, hemorrhaging, and dying. And you are outraged. But with outrage alone, you can maybe save one girl, possibly a few girls. You need strategy to reach a critical mass of people who can make this a thing of the past – quicker than we ever thought possible.
Q: And strategies take time, right?

A: Absolutely. A friend called the book’s story a “40-year overnight success.” I thought that was a good way to put it. The story is just now arriving to most people, but in the book, you realize that it took a very long time to incubate the model, make some mistakes, and persevere to achieve big change. You can’t target just a single issue because that’s just one isolated part of people’s lives.

A lot of donors say that our model takes too long; they say that three years to end FGC is too much time or too much money. But we are having incredible results, and it goes so far beyond just ending FGC. We are seeing amazing results in health, economic growth, education, environmental impact, and governance. Women are running for office, villages are financing their own projects, children are staying in school, and villagers themselves are discussing and debating – so at the same time FGC is abandoned, child marriage is abandoned, and domestic violence is lowering. We are really affecting generational change – in only three years!

A girl from Boubé, Senegal speaking about the human right to health. Photograph by Adrianna Catena © Tostan

Q: That sounds big...

A: This is not just about FGC. This is about a different approach to development. It’s about the systemic change that can happen when people get access to good information – in their own language, designed for people that have probably never been to school – and giving them the opportunity to peacefully discuss their own hopes for their future. FGC abandonment is just one result.

Q: Have you had any surprising reactions to the book?

A: Two big ones. In every presentation, someone has asked how they can adapt a program for the United States. That’s reinforced the idea that empowering education and human rights is something that we need everywhere – not just in Africa.

There have also been a lot of young women who have reached out to me after reading the book. Many felt empowered; others said they lived vicariously through the story. One woman even told me that the book helped her decide to move to Angola! I think that shows that changing the world doesn’t take any brilliance; it just takes perseverance and time.

Q: Tostan has received countless awards and recognition as an innovative education program. What do you think makes it different?

A: Our conversations start with human rights as the guiding principle. It’s critical. Knowing, understanding, and discussing human rights in class gives women the confidence they need to act on many human rights violations in their families and communities.
Our participants discuss questions like, “Does everybody really have the right to be free from violence?” If they decide that’s true, then there are certain practices in the community that may threaten that right. Then it’s about giving the space for dialogue and discussion, allowing the change to come from within.

Q: So you never make the ‘first move’ to abandon harmful practices?

A: I would never have the audacity to ask a person to rethink their cultural practices. It upsets me when people publish articles about Tostan with phrases like “fighting” or “eradicating” FGC. We’re not fighting – to the contrary! We are promoting human rights and the well-being of communities.

If you start fighting, you’re going to get resistance. These decisions can’t be imposed from the outside. We use words like the “abandonment” of harmful practices like FGC because they are actions that come from within. They always make their own decisions; we just try to provide the information and the space to deliberate and discuss.

Actually, I’m not the leader of this movement. I am merely a facilitator. The villagers are the real leaders.

An adolescent participant gives a speech during the regional public declaration in Zinguinchor, Senegal. Photograph by Angie Rowe © Tostan

Q: What’s next for Tostan?

A: We hope to reach national abandonment of FGC by 2015, but it won’t be easy – we’re talking about reaching 340 more villages in Senegal in areas of resistance for abandonment. We’re also opening a training center to share our approach with others.

We have a new campaign called Generational Change in Three Years, focused on achieving up-front investment for the entirety of these three-year classes. We’re trying to say, “Instead of finding organizations to fill your own objectives, invest in a model that we know works.”

If people invest in that, I actually think it’s the most cost-effective way to bring about change. Instead of sending drones or troops, I really believe that sending out human rights education is what will change the world.

Q: It sounds like hard work. How do you know it’s worth it?

A: A week before I came to the US for the book tour, I visited a community that completed the Tostan program a year ago. A woman stood up and began to speak. She told me how they started a community savings program with just $5. It’s grown to $6000. They have federated with eight other villages from the Tostan program to make an even larger fund for community projects. They built their own school – they did, not Tostan. They are advocating on a regional level for human rights.

And I thought to myself, even if I just came to that one community and had that one result, it was worth everything. Even if it took a long time, even if it was just one village, it was all worth it.