

An Indomitable Healing Spirit by Bela Shah

□

□For the past two years, James O’Dea has found himself synthesizing his remarkable life experience into what he calls “social healing”. Formerly Director of Amnesty International’s Washington, DC office, Executive Director of the Seva Foundation and President of the Institute of Noetic Sciences, O’Dea has now been asking (and answering) some profound questions:

□What does it take for an individual, community and a nation to heal itself? Our enriching conversation with O’Dea explored the roots of this tangled question, and unearthed deeply held truths.

□“Service is not a form of moral obligation. It’s more about feeling the potential of the universe, the latent energy within the universe that is waiting to be released and expressed through you and your own unique qualities. There is no single paradigm of service. How do we truly release ourselves into the field of action?”

□With this introduction, O’Dea began sharing about his journey.

□In the Midst of Rubble and Despair: Experiencing an Awakening

□As a teenager, O’Dea felt deeply oppressed by the poverty and social problems that he witnessed in southeast London, England. In response, he decided to organize people in order to conduct a survey of the treatment of senior citizens and followed up with a public report. This not only resulted in an award for “Teenager of the Year” but also an invitation from the UK government’s Welfare Authority to engage in a conversation about solutions. In retrospect, O’Dea is shocked by the arrogance of his response. He wrote back with, “You know what you have to do and when you do it we can meet.”

□

□The arrogance that O’Dea believed he demonstrated in his teens met its challenge when he moved to Turkey, and later, Lebanon. In Turkey, while serving as the Vice President of a school during the civil conflict, O’Dea’s home had been machine gunned and he had been knifed several times. People were dying all around him. It was the first time in his life where he could have had a legitimate reason to not continue in this line of work.

□“The first birth of real commitment came to me. We get tested along the path and we are asked, are you in this for the ride or are you in this to go as deeply as you can into the path of service and into the expression of who you could be?”

□After the 1982 war in Beirut, O’Dea felt like he had hit the lowest point in his own path of service. He experienced conflicting and negative thoughts about humanity and

questioned how it could be so sick and depraved. He felt that the problems were too great and wondered how could there be so much violence. And in the midst of this turmoil, a realization manifested.

□“A Palestinian man served me coffee in the midst of the rubble of disease and death and wounding. And I had an epiphany; the spiritual dimension of the human came through to me and I became deeply aware of the indomitable spirit of the human being. Our spirit cannot be mutilated away or bombed away. It stands there to remind us that we are spiritual beings having a human experience.”

□These profound awakenings are what led O’Dea to continue working for human rights with Amnesty International and later, in the field of international development as the Executive Director of the Seva Foundation. After Seva, he plunged one step deeper into the spiritual realm by leading the Institute of Noetic Sciences. There, O’Dea applied science to spiritual truths and started to explore the realm of social healing.

□He began to ask himself, “What is the root cause of these violations?” Instead of addressing deeply rooted problems through protests and prosecutions, O’Dea took the scenario of right and wrong and turned it inside out. Where does the wound begin and how can we create systems and approaches that are healing not only of individuals but of societies?

□Suffering as a Form of Grace: Moving Out of the Wound

□In a recent Tweet about a Ram Dass article, O’Dea described suffering as grace. While this is a beautiful way to interpret suffering in one’s life, couldn’t this also be seen as an intellectual response? What about those that are suffering from dire poverty, abuse, or war? Having personally witnessed atrocities all over the world, O’Dea explained two dimensions to suffering. When viewing it through the external lens, we have a profound responsibility to change horrific practices like torture. But when we try to interpret suffering through an internal lens, we are able to see that we can move out of and through our wounds. And by moving out of our own wounds, we will be able to begin the collective healing process. O’Dea has seen this even in cases of the most massive levels of wounding that a human can experience, where their children have been tortured and murdered.

□“I see the heart like a phoenix and out of the ashes of terrible suffering something can arise and it is there that the most luminous force on the planet exists for me. One of the most viscous elements in the story is when we get attached to our wound. When we define ourselves by the wound, we stop serving, we stop moving with the deepest intention of the planet, which is to show us that we can transcend any of these deep wounds.”

□Everywhere is the Face of Your Teacher: Link between Individual and Collective Healing

□In his book, *Creative Stress*, O’Dea relates stress with “being wounded” and explains it as an opportunity for an evolutionary leap to take place. The book describes how our body has an alert system for truth and how we sometimes bury it, for example, by numbing it down or even pushing it back in other peoples’ faces. This catalyzes a circuitry of energy and activity because the body is being listened to it is an antenna of universal consciousness.

□“It’s not a trivial thing when we tap into our own truth and stand in it. So in relationship to the individual, I say that the obstacle becomes your teacher. That which obstructs you, if you look at your relationship to it truthfully, it’s going to be your teacher. Everywhere

you turn is the face of your teacher.”

□ In the field of social healing, problems are perceived through both the individual and collective lens which changes ones’ relationship to truth. Even if people have really different experiences, if one tunes in with honor, respect, and deep and compassionate listening to the truth of the others experiences, the circuitry of the two (not the circuitry of the one) is ignited, the relational field is ignited.

□ “We have a primal need to be heard and listened to and when we are, something opens up within us, that emphatic field of connectivity. Social healing is so much about bearing witness to the others experience and allowing that to be true. You don’t have to agree or disagree, but it’s bearing witness to the core, to the essence, to the truth of that person’s experience. When you’re in that relational field, the opening begins, the possibility for reconciliation begins, the possibility for movement beyond our fixed beliefs occurs.”

□ How, then, do we create that safe space where we are able to free ourselves of attachment to the wound? It’s amazing to understand how science has a real answer to this complex question. In O’Dea’s recently completed book, “Cultivating Peace”, there is a whole section on communication and listening.

□ “We know now from science that if I am not listening to you, but instead I am listening to my judgments of you, we will create a different electromagnetic field and a different biochemistry in our blood, which directly impacts our communication with the other person.”

□ If we switch into our hearts and say, “However different I think you may be, I’m really going to stay committed to listening deeply to your experience,” the biochemistry in our blood will alter. This shift from judgmental listening to compassionate listening is directly linked with the lessening of cortisol and adrenaline in our brains and the increasing of “happy hormones”, which affect the alarm system and alter the biochemistry in the other person’s brain. When the other person’s amygdala is less aroused, they feel safe to tell their story to you.

□ O’Dea wants to dedicate his life to the authentic refinement process of his own self, to polishing the mirrors of his heart. He asks himself, “Where do I get wounded and get attached to my wounds? Where do my judgments get very subtle? Where am I making subtle judgments about others and making distinctions and preferences about others? He elaborated that if everywhere we turn, we see the face of our teacher, we experience the power of a different “we”; not the collapsed identity of the “we” or the reductionist exclusivist identity of the “we”. This is how we’re going to evolve, and the old leadership and hierarchical models have nothing to do with this emergent “we”.

□ And in the immersioned “we”, we recognize that there is no inferior being, no lesser being. How do we practice that in the social body? Once we eliminate the first, “I am not inadequate in any way, I am not lesser”, and recognize that “my qualities are called into being by the universe itself”, then we recognize that in ourselves and also in others. Then we have a new game plan for humanity. It becomes a new evolutionary story.

□ Training Peace Ambassadors Around the World

□ Currently O’Dea is trying to build peacemakers across the world and he is leading a program called “Heal and Lead” in Ireland. So far he has trained 400 peacemakers and he is looking to start the Peace Ambassadors’ third training in March 2012 to train another 200 of these love warriors.

□

□“My image of peace these days is that we’re no longer shouting at the gates and raising our protest placards and opposing something. We’ve scaled the walls and we’re inside the educational system and inside movements that are so much about building a culture of peace.”

□

□In the Peace Ambassador Training, there are five pillars.

□* The first is inner peace and doing work around meditation to cultivate this inner peace.

□* The second pillar is moving out of the ideology of right and wrong and into wounding and healing.

□* The third is to look at nonviolent communication and dialogic strategies for peace-building.

□* The fourth pillar is the systems approach; there is a connection between inner and outer ecology and we’re beginning to see how systems are interdependent and interrelated.

□* The fifth pillar is to take it into the world and organize for peace work.

□For this last pillar, they bring together individuals like Mahatma Gandhi’s grandson, Arun Gandhi, and Louis Diamond to help bring their expertise to this 16 week training. It’s a global classroom and in each of the courses there are 20 to 24 nations represented. In this upcoming course, we have 2 people from Qatar, people from Pakistan, Nepal, and Nigeria and everyone is Skyping in from all of these countries in order to participate in a global classroom about peacemaking! “In great contrast to many current leaders in public office that are emotionally immature and over critical and judgmental, I truly believe that if we could have a generation of leaders who have been deeply healed and immerse themselves in societal healing, they are the ones to lead us.”

□

□Change Begins with Changing Yourself

□O’Dea acknowledged that we all want to change the world in some way but the problem is that we think we can accomplish this by changing others. But now science shows that if you want to change anything, you have to change yourself. Our compassion directly alters the biochemistry in the other person’s brain. These are very precise instructions for activism. This is what is so radically significant about forgiveness work. We must change and when we do, the whole thing changes in relationship to us....we are naturally able to forgive others by connecting with their essence, at a level that delves beyond superficial truths.

□

□In the opening quote of this recap, O’Dea spoke of a need to release the latent energy of the universe. What freezes that energy?

□“Unforgiveness freezes up this vital energy and the universe wants it to be liberated. It wants to restore love and harmony and connectivity. What is ironic is that people that have been victimized become the victim of being held in that energy instead of releasing it. Even to those they have been injured, the universe is saying that now you can open the story and release others as well as yourself. The root of that issue is that forgiveness is the opener.”

□What forgiveness does is that it takes something that is frozen in the universe and

ecstatically releases it, allowing you to be you and offer your connection to others.

□I was asked by a woman whose uncle was a Catholic priest and violently murdered when she was a child. Now, years later, she wanted to know how to approach this man who had murdered her uncle. I said to her, "Make it real. Don't make forgiveness this obligation business. Write to him and ask, "How does he feel? What does he feel at this point? Does he know how much you suffered? Open up the possibility for the real movement of energy to occur." There isn't a formula for this. If it's to be real, you have to go into it with all your clear emotions and with the desire to open and to heal.

□

□While conducting a social healing workshop in London, in an area that is quite divided, during a break O'Dea asked a woman from Northern Ireland why she seemed so clear on this theme of social healing. She explained how she had been shot and taken to the hospital and when she came to consciousness, the doctors told her that a bullet was lodged next to her aorta and that they couldn't remove it. They made her comfortable to die. But she didn't die. Six weeks later the doctors said to her that she had to live with the bullet lodged near her heart. At first, she wondered what she would do with her life but now she is a healer, a reconciler. She literally has a bullet in her body and yet she does peace work!

□"I feel the reality of the bullet in the heart of planet Earth. It's an extraordinarily painful moment for planet Earth. The bullet is in but that is not the end of the story because we have the will to create something that is so much greater. Even when the bullet is in, this is not the end of the story."

□O'Dea's life experiences serve as a beautiful example of the power of forgiveness and healing. O'Dea changed his own outcome and relationship with the world by the remarkable way that he framed adverse events in his own life. When he was teaching in Turkey and knifed several times, he was left lying on the streets and had lost a lot of blood. He was severely wounded but the way he remembers the story is that someone came and put him in a car and took him to the hospital and saved his life. Though he will never know who this person was, he held this injury as a remarkable gift -- it brought an anonymous act of kindness that he is paying forward for his whole life.