

Congratulatory Address: The 45th Soka University /The 33rd Soka Women's College Commencement Ceremony

Dame Claire Bertschinger

President Baba, members of the University, Ladies & Gentlemen

I am very honoured to be invited to speak to you today, and in particular to you, the graduating students, the future leaders of our planet.

In a way I am, however, surprised to be talking to you here today—as a child I struggled in education, being not only bottom of the class, but of a 'reform' class made up of all the so called 'dunces'. It wasn't until my 20's that I began to realise that I was Dyslexic, something that had not yet been properly recognised ... and certainly not spoken about then. So, I was too embarrassed to mention it in public.

I eventually managed to become a nurse and as I had always loved adventure, and camping, the idea of nursing somewhere remote had always appealed to me. I had studied tropical medicine and worked in accident and emergency so I applied to the International Committee of the Red Cross, who are the guardians of the Geneva Conventions & International Humanitarian Law. A month later I found myself in Lebanon—during the Chouf Mountain war.

Since then I was stationed in over a dozen wars including Lebanon, Ethiopia, Uganda, Afghanistan, Liberia, Sudan, Nigeria ...

Back in 1984 I was working in a remote area of Ethiopia running a feeding center for 500 children whilst the country was gripped by famine. I remember thousands of adults and children outside the feeding center each day who were starving of hunger. But I didn't have sufficient food to feed everyone.

Dame Claire Bertschinger (Director for Professional Diploma in Tropical Nursing, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine)

One day I counted ten rows of children waiting to come in—in each row there were over a hundred children. I only had enough space for 70 extra children, so how was I going to choose? They were all malnourished, with no fat or muscle, just skin hanging off their bones. I knew most of those I turned away would die from hunger in the days to come.

At the time, the rest of the world had no idea of the scale of what was happening there.

It was a nightmare. I had never seen people so desperate.

Perhaps the most dangerous place I worked was in Afghanistan.

I was based in Kabul which was controlled by the government and surrounded by Mujahedeen War Lords.

Each day I crossed the front line with an ambulance under the protection of the Red Cross, to a First Aid Post where they collected the wounded, waiting for me to transfer them to our Red Cross hospital.

I needed to pass 12 Mujahedeen check points, firstly arranging ceasefires with the different War Lords in charge, often with shells falling round us, injured soldiers and civilians crammed together.

At one time I had 12 wounded in one Land Cruiser: space for just two stretchers but each of them held two people, head to toe, with children held in the arms of wounded adults.

One day I was invited by the War Lords to official “Shura”, a remote fortress at the foot of the Hindu Kush Mountains. The snow had just melted and there were new shoots on the trees, spring flowers brightening the countryside.

I'll always remember sitting listening to Mujahedeen leaders negotiating cease fires and explaining Geneva conventions, missiles, Rocket Propelled Grenades and who they were going to target next.

One of the commanders then turned to me and asked

“How can you Claire, a gentle woman, think you can make any difference to this situation?”

I remembered a proverb

“There's nothing sweeter, gentler or softer than water” I said. “but water has the power to

move mountains”.

“Ah yes you are correct” he said and laughed. He then said “But that is not our way.”

But the most amazing thing happened when I emerged from the fortress. I discovered my Land Cruiser smothered with red tulip petals—tulips grow wild in Afghanistan, and the soldiers were all stood around sheepishly, as if they had nothing to do with it. This beautiful gesture was a thank you. I was stunned. These men were the epitome of machismo, the situation we were in was tense, but this was such a contrast. It seemed such a gentle, un-war like thing to do.

It made me realize that despite the way we describe each other at any one moment as angry, greedy or jealous, these feeling inside are capable of changing in an instant to compassion, caring or generosity.

As I drove away, the petals all blew off into the wind, like tears of blood raining down around me. This was the other face of war.

My last story is from my time in Uganda.

The story is based in one of the prisons, where the prisoners had rioted and the officials had not been able to gain access to them for several weeks.

It was here that I learned one of life’s valuable lesson.

After negotiations the ICRC was allowed in as neutral mediators.

The conditions in the prison reminded me of images from concentration camps.

The prisoners were skeletal, filthy dirty, many had diseases associated with malnutrition, and scabies was rife.

I set up a supplementary feeding program.

In my last week, I was approached by several prisoners in a dark passageway which smelled of urine and damp bricks. They surrounded me and told me to follow them, I went with them nervously not knowing what to expect.

They led me to a tiny dank cell with a small barred window too high to see out of.

They shook out a dirty piece of cloth and laid it on the ground & invited me to sit down.

As if from nowhere one of them produced a cup of tea with the flourish of someone who had served as a head waiter in the finest of restaurants. The cup was chipped & stained and without a saucer. The tea was sweet and made with condensed milk. Where they got it from I have no idea; some kind of their black market supply?

But they presented it to me with such respect and gratitude, thanking me for everything I'd done for them.

There wasn't enough to share with my 'hosts' who'd squatted beside me so I drank alone. But it was clear that this was a tremendous privilege and momentous occasion.

Another prisoner started picking away at the mortar round a brick in the wall. Very slowly he managed to free the brick. From behind it, he pulled out something wrapped in a dirty frayed piece of cloth. Shaking off the dust, and grit he presented me with a piece of chocolate (Mars Bar) to have with my tea.

This was clearly the ultimate honour.

They gave me their most prized and coveted possession.

I was so touched by this gesture, and reflecting back, I realized it taught me the importance of the thought behind each action we take in our life, the intention of an action or gift.

I believe that the power to change the world and stop wars and human suffering, lies with ordinary people like you and me.

If we truly care about changing the world, then we must also look at making changes within our own lives.

We can begin by challenging our own anger and nurturing our wisdom and compassion.

As your founder and my mentor Daisaku Ikeda said

"A great human revolution in just a single individual will help achieve a change in the destiny of a nation and further, will enable a change in the destiny of all humankind"

We must take responsibility for our own actions, viewing each encounter in our daily life as a chance to make things better for others.

Finally, just to sum up.

Technology has made the world small.

Technology made us all neighbors, but Technology can't do the really important thing.

Give us the village mentality of yester-year to look after each other.

I believe we must transcend our differences, and make humanity our highest priority in life.

So, do you think you can make a difference?

If you think you are too small to make difference,

Then you have never slept in a room with a mosquito. *African proverb*

Thank you.