

Inspirational speech – opening 10th October 2015

Our call to action in 2015

Here we are gathering for the 30th Servas General Assembly – 200 of us from 58 countries and all 5 continents. It is 66 years since the inception of Servas. In 1949 a group of conscientious objectors gathered in Denmark keen to develop ways of living that would support enduring peace in the world, keen to understand how young Germans would be received beyond their borders in post WW2. The work travel programme was begun. People who were interested were given the name of a host where they could stay. They got involved in the local community contributing in what ever way they could. Mostly they listened and shared stories and learnt about others, how they thought, how they lived , and what mattered - all from within the intimacy of living with a family. One host led to another..... and so they travelled on and the network grew.

Food shelter and warmth was provided. The experience was a safe one. There was structure and an invitation to join in the activities of that particular household. There was an experience of belonging – of others being interested in your story and you in theirs. You felt part of a group of people who were interested in a better world. With this exchange confidence grew. Servas grew. Countries developed host lists. Membership was formalised with an interview and the issuing of an LOI (Letter of Introduction) Two nights stay was standard practice.

It is 70 years since the end of WW2. And now there is a raging war in Syria and several North African countries. Millions of people are

displaced and seek asylum. How is this different from earlier times? Are these events an earthquake shaking the foundations of democracy. What might the aftershocks look like? What could reconstruction look like? What are we willing to do? Is a network such as Servas able to offer a place to stay, will it be warm? Can this kindness be trusted? Can you help a refugee family belong? These are such big questions?

Last month I visited an uncle in Brussels – a former diplomat with the EU. This is a city where it is not uncommon for a person to come past your car window when stopped at the lights, begging for money. It was to my surprise that Ivo gave a coin or two each time – unconditionally. I was curious and asked him why he did this. What I had learnt was that giving like this develops dependency and further creates a stratified society of have's and have not's. The Lonely Planet some years ago taught me that there were other ways to support, to give and to contribute – for example in India - clean up a beach of its plastic bags, assist in an orphanage, purchase nuts from a nut bar and give it to the lead begging child – at least you know they are being fed.

So I asked Ivo why he gave. He answered so simply. The deepest desire in the human being he said is to connect with another, to be understood for who they are in that moment. Then I watched carefully and indeed when he gave, he offered a kind word or asked a question, making eye contact and warm smile. For a micro second

hope reigned on their face. The offering, making a connection with kindness, gave hope. This is the capacity within us!

A new part of us is being called to step into “this” space! The space between our comfortable lives and those who have been dispossessed is standing before us. Is it time to surrender your comfort of knowing the answers. Everyday we are seeing 100’s , 1000’s of people walking, leaving home seeking safety and a new life. It is on a scale that reminds us of post WW2 and the conflict of Rwanda.

I challenge you over the next few days to explore, to think about, to talk about how the members of Servas can respond individually or collectively to this human situation.

When a wise Maori chief was asked what is the greatest thing in the world he replied – he tangata, he tangata, he tangata – it is people, it is people, it is people.

So this is the choice - How will you, the people of Servas use your mind, your heart, your sense of humour, your every faculty to be of service to develop Servas!

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