FWLA Speech – 7 March 2014

“Creating Positive Change in Conflict: Early Lessons from a Fletcher Career in Peace Building”

It doesn’t really seem all that long ago that I was sitting with all of you, in the audience in ASEAN, as a student.

So it came as a bit of a surprise to be told that I would be the recipient of Fletcher’s inaugural women’s leadership award. But I think it is terrific that Fletcher is highlighting women in the midst of their careers - precisely because we are still so close to where most Fletcher students are at ... at the beginning of their careers or in the midst of a career change ... And I want to thank the Institute for Women in International Leadership for creating this award.

But of course receiving this award did make me reflect on the qualities of leadership, and in particular on the question: How does one 'create positive change,' which the award states as prerequisite?

When I think of these issues in terms of what I have learned from my work in conflict areas and in the area of rule of law and humanitarian assistance, there are some pieces of advice that I thought deserve to be shared with you today.

Now, everyone I talked to while writing this speech told me: “You must give an uneven number of pieces of advice, or no one will listen to you. Three, apparently, is the magic number. So I tried and tried – but I still ended up with four lessons. So I'm cheating and calling them my “three plus one” lessons, which are:

# 1: Show no sympathy
# 2: Look under the rocks
# 3: Once you’ve taken aim, don’t sway

And # 3 Plus 1: Invest in big guns

So, number 1: When you work out there, in the field, show no sympathy - what on earth is she talking about?

When you’re working with refugees or victims of sexual abuse or lawyers who are woefully under resourced ... showing sympathy, feeling sorry for them, is nice but doesn’t help anybody. But when I say “show no sympathy,” I don’t mean I want you to be indifferent and hostile.

What I mean is: “instead of showing sympathy, show empathy.”

Show empathy. Because empathy is the number one skill you’ll need if you want to succeed in the international development field and make a positive change – above any technical skills, above any degrees or qualifications – and the one skill that team leaders should most encourage in their staff:
the ability to listen, to observe and to understand others.

One area of expertise in which I feel I have been developing a great deal of empathy is with teenage Afghan girls (although sometimes, not having children of my own, I’m not sure if I’m learning about Afghans ... or just simply teenagers). The School of Leadership Afghanistan (short: SOLA) was co-founded by a Fletcher alum, Ted Achilles, who one night over Fletcher dinner in Kabul roped me unsuspectingly into volunteering as teacher and later into a position on the board. ...

On a side note: Ted graduated from Fletcher almost 45 years before me, which is just another proof of how Fletcher connects across the generations. And I’m honoured to say that Ted is here today and I’m quite certain that many of you will witness his unique powers of persuasion after this talk...

One of the SOLA girls I ended up working with a lot – and whom I admire greatly - is Farahnaz. She is also in the audience today – after having earned her A-levels at school in the UK, she is now studying on a competitive scholarship in Connecticut and is committed to returning to Afghanistan as a business entrepreneur. Over the last three years, Farahnaz has become part of my family – so much so that I thought that my parents and brother were here today for me, but it turns out they came only so they could see Farahnaz again.

Farahnaz has kindly agreed to let me share parts of her initial journey with you, and the immense challenges that she faced at the time. What I am about to tell you might sound quite trivial, but is, I believe, a good indication of what effects a lack of empathy can have.

Farahnaz has always been an ace in math, but when she first moved to the UK she simply could not do the exam questions.

Now, on the part of her UK school, the understanding in theory was there. The school knew that this was a girl who had been a refugee in Iran and Pakistan and who did not sit at a desk until she was 14, in Kabul.

But this theoretical understanding did not equate to true empathy - it took a long while to sink in that a girl who rattled off all mathematical formulae by heart, would have difficulties to apply her wisdom to certain tasks. Let me read you one question that stumped her:

“Calculate the horizontal length of ground under an alpine ski ramp”

- now, can you imagine what problems Farahnaz was facing here?

Because the school originally could not. Could simply not imagine that a word like “horizontal” would not easily translate into Dari. That a 17-year old might never have heard of the Alps. And that somebody from a country with lots of snow would never have seen, or heard of, a ski ramp.
Farahnaz herself wasn’t able to communicate her difficulties because she thought everybody was having the same problems. Nor was she able to convey her conceptual difficulties with understanding why on earth the school wanted her to calculate this in the first place – Afghan schools are all about rote learning, and you would never be asked to actually apply a formula to a practical problem...

That same principle could apply to oh so many conversations between expats and locals in a conflict or development setting. You have expats who ask their local staff or partners to do things that are impossible for them – not because they are not capable, but because they cannot relate, or because the task doesn’t make any sense in the local context. No empathy, no understanding, and no results.

And don’t think it only cuts one way. We expats may have a tendency to, at best, smile at the “naivety” of locals or, at worst, react with anger or condescension when our requests are not followed as expected, but just think of the numerous times we act naively or misbehave without even noticing.

I still shed tears of embarrassment when remembering how, suffering from a dreadful cold, I was blowing my nose loudly and repeatedly in a meeting with Afghan Ministers - only to find out afterwards that, in Afghanistan, blowing my nose in public in these circumstances was essentially considered as inappropriate as if I had been publicly passing wind ... repeatedly ... in a meeting with Eric Holder and Sally Jewell and Chief Justice John Roberts! 😊

The problem is not having cultural mishaps like that; the problem is not noticing because you are not listening. How many of you can imagine lecturing your boss about diplomatic etiquette in such a delicate matter? No, my staff couldn’t either, so chances are, they are never going to tell you unless you insist to know why the minister of interior had such a funny look on his face...

And what does all this have to do with leadership again?

Some people may think that leadership is about storming in and “leading” the way. The US, and frankly, all international forces and organisations, in Afghanistan, have a history of ‘blazing in,’ thinking they KNOW. It is hard to admit that you don’t have an answer to a particular problem, particularly when the whole premise of your alien presence in conflict areas is that you are there because you are needed. If you are needed, the fallacy goes, it must be because you know ... something. And if you know, you surely have to do ... something. But actually, I believe that leadership in those circumstances is, above all, about recognizing as a starting point that you won’t always have the answers.

You can only listen, watch and learn to understand – the essence of empathy.

... And you can’t really get a better testing ground for empathy than Fletcher, with its diversity of culture, religion and opinion – and its potential pitfalls to practice run the occasional cultural mishap.
The other thing that Fletcher helped prepare me for were the realities of refugee and IDP camps. I know there are many humanitarians studying at Fletcher and in this audience who’ll shrug and say, “What’s the big deal?” But I was a prissy city lawyer before I came to Fletcher – I had no idea really what to expect before Fletcher facilitated a consultancy in Darfur and sent me on simulation courses to a State Forest, forcing me to eat MREs (Meals-Ready-To-Eat, and they are gross!).

And it was on my first real field mission after Fletcher that I learned my second lesson about work and leadership and how connections help you in your mission: “look under the rocks.”

Picture me, fresh off the boat: one day in a capital city ... 24 hours later in the Eastern Chadian desert; my bedroom a mosquito dome, my toilet a hole in the ground, my neighbours 60,000 internally displaced persons and my idea of a day out the fortnightly arrival of the mail plane.

In this camp, a colleague of mine one day found a boy without a nose - then she left the country, not before telling me that our organisation should try to “do something” for that boy. Saleh suffered from Noma, a horrible disease that eats flesh and bones, kills or at best disfigures. Saleh had lost the left side of his lips and of his nose. None of the organizations in the camp could help, since he needed state-of-the-art plastic surgery – not just for aesthetic reasons, but to avoid infection and ultimately to survive.

~ Here is a photo of Saleh. ~

I found a clinic in Niger that flies in German surgeons twice a year, and suddenly, helping Saleh seemed like a real possibility. But I realized that being humanitarian did not mean that people were willing to go out of their way or take personal risks. Using organizational resources was dismissed, and the only other option was to use my free time to get him a passport, and to hire somebody to accompany the child and his father by land across three countries. Everything else that could go wrong about Operation Saleh, did go wrong. The month they were meant to leave, a French NGO was accused of kidnapping children for adoption in France by dressing them up as ‘war orphans’. In the ensuing climate of mistrust it was simply not possible to take a child anywhere. Six months later; one week before scheduled departure number two, fighting flared up again in the area. We evacuated all staff and there was no phone connection and no way for me to get Saleh and his father out of there. All my attempts to mobilise help with bosses and people I knew, failed. I had missed the window for surgery yet AGAIN.

So, there I was, in a dinghy restaurant with plastic tables in Goz Beida, the regional humanitarian hub, telling the story to one of those remote acquaintances that you find yourself having drinks with on a Christmas Eve far from home. And, out of nowhere, the guy, a humanitarian worker, says: “but we still have a team in the camp; they are coming back tomorrow. Let’s call them on the radio now and ask them to bring him! ... Just don’t tell my boss.” ...
“Just don’t tell my boss.” That was a real revelation. The people I had turned to beforehand, expecting to help, had given me the cold shoulder, but here was a person I hadn’t even had on my radar screen, who suddenly showed up with an option, taking a professional risk to help. And I tell you this:

Look under the rocks – and take the help you find in unexpected places. And more than that – create the conditions to find these unexpected places. If Fletcher has taught me one thing, it is that there is an amazing network of people out there whom you will find ... in restaurants in Kabul, the streets of Bangkok, UN guesthouses in Darfur, or ministries in Kinshasa... And of course apart from the Fletcher mafia, there are other resources only waiting for you to tap into, rocks for you to turn. Go to those drinks, do that research on the internet, share your stories, don’t dismiss people as unimportant only because they don’t have the pay grade or the title, and do expect to be surprised.

By the way, Saleh left his camp, had surgery in Niger, and returned to his family 1.5 years later, with basic skills in French and money for a bike, which he uses to run courier services in the camp. That’s him rejoining his family - photo.

But of course I often wonder what would have happened if things hadn’t turned out right with Operation Saleh, and this brings me to a third insight about leadership that I wanted to share with you: once you’ve taken aim, you must not sway. Let me explain:

With Saleh, there are many valuable reasons why we could not help Saleh on an institutional level and why my colleagues hesitated to get involved: what if he had gone missing on the road, the surgery had gone bad, the organization I worked for blamed for what happened? These risks constantly had me question my decisions - and with increased hierarchical responsibilities, I realize that today I would not get so easily involved in a similar initiative again.

But dilemmas of a similar sort continue to come up in this line of work:

The family of one of our Afghan girls at SOLA found an IED – an improvised explosive device - in the drive-way to their house in Helmand – a clear threat for sending her to boarding school in Kabul, and they were very lucky that it didn’t explode. Do we - do I - share responsibility in putting her and her family in harm’s way? How would I feel if something happened to that girl, or to the other 36 girls studying at SOLA today? Is it a responsibility I am willing to assume, or would I be better off not engaging in this unless I can be 100% certain that nobody will be harmed?

Decision-making and taking responsibility for your actions can be an extremely painful process in any career but, in conflict zones, can literally affect lives.

I recently found myself as acting head of office during a period of time when Goma came under shelling attacks by rebel forces. Suddenly I was responsible for all our staff in the city.
What would you do? Do you order them to vacate their homes and move closer to evacuation assembly points in the city, even if this exposes them to greater risk whilst moving?

Or do you tell them to stay where they are if this means that a later evacuation might be impossible?

It does not really matter which decision I took but I learned for myself that in these situations you have got to make decisions, clearly communicate them and stick to them, even if you will always have doubts. I have seen managers who, in situations like that, were shocked into indecisiveness, and there is nothing worse than that.

Some of these decisions will be disputed, some risky. I have had people point fingers at me, and I must say that sticking up for a decision when you yourself are riddled with doubt, is not easy. But it’s what you gotta do: own your doubts, don’t sway.

So, those are three things that I have learned about leadership:

1. Practice empathy.
2. Use the networks you have – in expected and unexpected places.
3. Own your doubts and your decisions.

But here is one thing that I am still struggling with every day: how to transfer the small changes across scale, across to the 2 million or 20 million dollar projects, which you end up managing in this kind of career. There are many people in this audience who have bigger budgets than me and who can tell me a thing or two about impact...

But the conclusion I have come to for myself, is that I don’t ever want to lose the passion that I feel for individual success only because I may have outgrown individual involvement.

It is important to think BIG. When working for organisations like the UN, you think in the millions and measure your impact at least in the thousands.

But it is also important to think SMALL. I strongly believe that only appreciation of the small, of the individual, inspires and motivates teams to reproduce that impact on a larger scale.

And this is why, lastly, point 3 Plus 1, I want to talk to you about investing in big guns and why it is the most resourceful way of effecting change on a larger scale.

I have met many big guns and potential big guns in my life, “change makers” as we call them in UN speak. But when you are out there, in Afghanistan, Congo, Syria … you meet future big guns without ammunition, budding rock stars without a stage, potential Nobel Prize winners without a laboratory. You meet
those who would benefit immensely from somebody holding the stirrup for them whilst they get on their horse. And to illustrate that point is why I want to tell you about Shahira.

In September 2012, I interviewed a 10 year old girl for admission to SOLA. A 10-year old from Kandahar, a traditionally conservative Taliban stronghold 300 miles south of Kabul.

Kandahar is not really a place where you want to be a woman. And Kandahar is not really a place where you imagine a father getting into a car to drive for 6 hours along the notoriously dangerous Kandahar-Kabul highway for the sake of his daughter.

Yet that is exactly what Shahira’s father did, when he drove Shahira to Kabul to deliver her application.

So I found myself interviewing Shahira as one of 55 applicants. I had to join the panel via Skype—we were on ‘lockdown’ because of an earlier terrorist attack, and I was unable to leave my compound; a sad reality in Kabul these days. Shahira owned the room even through a shoddy Skype connection, despite not speaking more than three sentences of English. I knew immediately that she was a definite ‘yes’: something about the way she moved, held her head, and looked you straight in the eye.

And I want to take just two minutes of your time to show you what 15 months of SOLA have given to Shahira. This is her in January 2014, and let me just say, she was NOT prepped for this interview:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-UIFSWM1Tg

So SOLA invests in ‘change makers’ like Shahira, like Farahnaz. Can you imagine what change these girls will bring to their country? I have met girls and women like that in Congo, in Sudan, in Syria, in Saudi Arabia. They are the only ones who can really fix their countries.

If you happen to have the possibility to contribute to giving them the tools to do so, then you really should, and you really must.

And it may sound like a cliché, but it is, quite simply, and honestly, the best shot most of us will have of creating positive change.

And so, when people ask me what I have achieved in my work, I do not usually think of the courtrooms that my projects have built or the scores of prisoners we helped feed or the legal reforms we pushed through. I think of the handful of individuals whose lives have changed because we and I were able to give them something concrete – a better way of working, a scholarship, or maybe, a new nose.

Thank You for this Award. It is an incredible honour.