



## Caring for the soul of Humanity



I was 25 years old when I witnessed human misery for the first time. It was 2008, and I had moved to a remote city in the underprivileged state of Maranhão, in Northeast Brazil. Despite moving with the illusion of building a new life, the harsh realities of extreme poverty and structural violence expanded my worldview in ways I couldn't imagine.

Maranhão is a challenging place to live. It is one of the most impoverished and most unequal states in Brazil, with a high percentage of people living below the poverty line. The legacy of colonization, corruption, and ecological destruction wounded the state's biodiversity and its rich culture. The western half of Maranhão, where I lived, belongs to Amazonia Legal, a socio-geographic division encompassing nine Brazilian states in the Amazon basin, and deforestation has played a key role in the destitution of local communities. Extractive industries, agribusiness, and cattle ranching have cleared enormous portions of the rainforest in the region, concentrating power in the hands of a few while dispossessing the majority of the population.

Back then, I still worked as a dentist and was part of a medical team bringing health education to residents of remote villages. In one of our medical expeditions, my life course was redirected.

The contact with suffering broke open gateways of deep care and love for others within me. I was never the same.

I still remember that moment vividly in my mind. The dusty road leads us to a poor village formed with mud houses. In the horizon, a group of naked children with distended bellies and brown skin covered with layers of reddish dust. We drive slowly. They run after our van, waving at us.

The scene attracts my eyes and puzzles me.

But, none of my colleagues seemed to notice the children. I then ask two local nurses who were sitting next to me, "Why are those children running after us?" For a moment, I thought they were just having fun and being playful. The nurses told me, in a cold tone, that the children were waiting for us to throw pieces of food through the van's window so they could catch from the ground and eat.

Their answer left me speechless.

Although they had normalised that reality, I couldn't distance myself and become numb to the predicament of those children. Numbness deludes. Once numbed to the suffering of others, our own humanity might become numbed as well.

In the short 18 months I lived in the region, I worked closely with malnourished and dispossessed children, trying to improve their oral health. This experience opened a space for reflection and inner transformation. Even though I had a stable life and promising career as a dentist, a sense of uneasiness grew inside me. Along with conflict and confusion.

It took me years to realise the uneasiness was a voice in my heart calling to me, whispering the song of service to the whole. This song is the heartbeat of every living creature on Earth. We are here to serve life's highest purpose. But, for most of us, the song in our hearts is covered with a dust of forgetfulness.

It was time to search for meaning and find new ways of being in the world. So, I put my career on hold to follow the song, never to return. When the gateways of deep care and love for others are open inside us, we build a new perception of the other, one in which we care enough to reconsider our priorities and values in life.

This is what global citizenship evokes in me. It opens space for a place inside which understands we belong to one interconnected humanity and we share a common home. From this understanding, responsibility, care, and love grow. This is the attitude that our beautiful and suffering home invites us to embody.

Becoming a global citizen in a fragmented global society is a challenging and courageous stand. Our awareness, as global citizens, holds the connecting threads together in these dark times.

Today, I work with forcibly displaced communities from different parts of the world. In the face of the worst humanitarian crises of our times and so much suffering, holding awareness of our interconnectedness has never been more critical. Particularly in humanitarian responses, when only too often asylum seekers and refugees are reduced to threats to national security, social order, and cultural heritage. This narrative amplifies suffering at borders, detention centres, and refugee camps. Deploying military forces to national borders as ways of replacing humanitarian response signals the urgent need for unlocking our individual and collective door to deep care and love.

In a world broken by sharp inequality, wars, and climate change, those living in the landscapes of destitution are stripped of their humanity and dignity daily. We need a new story for people dispossessed by the dominant narrative. We need to humanise the lived experiences of people forced to flee their homelands, of people living in extreme poverty, of people who are excluded in our societies. We need stories that not only celebrate our interconnectedness and care for the soul of humanity, but also acknowledge the voices and contribution of those living in the landscapes of destitution.

A humanitarian narrative rooted in oneness and love recognizes the intrinsic value of all life forms. As we widen the humanity circle, we weave together the threads of love, belonging and care for the soul of humanity. I imagine this narrative as a path for the emergence of global citizenship.