

00:04

Sometimes, you have a negative feeling about things. You're not happy about the way things are going. You feel frustrated and dissatisfied, and so often, we choose to live with it. It's a negative that we tell ourselves we have to endure. And yet, I passionately believe that we all have the ability to turn that negative feeling into a positive by allowing our dissatisfaction to give birth to change.

00:40

On January 6, 1999, I was working in London when the news channels began to report the rebel invasion of my hometown, Freetown, Sierra Leone. Thousands of people lost their lives, and there were bodies littering the streets of Freetown. My husband's elderly aunt was burned alive, and I thought of my own two-year old as I saw images of little children with amputated limbs.

01:12

Colleagues said to me, "How could we help?" I didn't know, so I began to call the telephone numbers that came up on my screen as international aid agencies started to make appeals to raise money to address the tragedy. The vagueness of those telephone conversations disappointed me. It felt like the people who were raising the money seemed so far removed from the crisis, and understandably so, but I wasn't satisfied and I wasn't convinced that the interventions they would eventually implement would actually have the level of impact that was so clearly needed. There were butterflies in my stomach for days as I continued to watch horrors unfold on television, and I continuously asked myself, what could I be doing? What should I be doing? What I wanted to do was to help children affected by the war. So that's what we did.

02:13

Myself, my sister and some friends started the Sierra Leone War Trust For Children, SLWT. We decided to focus on the thousands of displaced people that fled the fighting and were now living in really poor, difficult conditions in camps in Freetown. Our work started with the Ross Road Camp at the east end of the city. Working with a local health organization, we identified about 130 of the most vulnerable single mothers with children under the age of five, supporting them by providing business skills, microcredit, whatever they asked us. Working in those difficult conditions, just getting the basics right, was no small task, but our collective sense of dissatisfaction at an unacceptable status quo kept us focused on getting things done. Some of those women went on to open small businesses, repaid their loans and allowed other mothers and their children to have the same opportunity they did.

03:23

And we, we kept on going. In 2004, we opened an agricultural training center for ex-child soldiers, and when the war was behind us, we started a scholarship program for disadvantaged girls who would otherwise not be able to continue in school. Today, Stella, one of those girls, is about to qualify as a medical doctor. It's amazing what a dose of dissatisfaction can birth.

03:52

(Applause)

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Ten years later, in 2014, Sierra Leone was struck by Ebola. I was working in Freetown at the time on a hotel construction project on May 25 when the first cases were announced, but I was back in London on July 30 when the state of emergency was announced, the same day that many airlines stopped their flights to Sierra Leone.

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I remember crying for hours, asking God, why this? Why us? But beyond the tears, I began to feel again that profound sense of dissatisfaction.

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So when, six months after those first cases had been confirmed, the disease was still spreading rapidly in Sierra Leone and the number of people infected and dying continued to rise, my level of frustration and anger got so much that I knew I could not stay and watch the crisis from outside Sierra Leone. So, in mid-November, I said goodbye to my much loved and very understanding husband and children, and boarded a rather empty plane to Freetown.

05:11

Freetown was now the epicenter of the outbreak. There were hundreds of new cases every week. I spoke to many medical experts, epidemiologists and ordinary people every day. Everyone was really scared.

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"We won't succeed until we're talking to people under the mango tree." So said Dr. Yoti, a Ugandan doctor who worked for WHO and who had been involved in pretty much every Ebola outbreak in Africa previously. He was right, and yet there was no plan to make that happen.

05:48

So during a weekend in early December, I developed a plan that became known as the Western Area Surge plan. We needed to talk with people, not at people. We needed to work with the community influencers so people believed our message. We needed to be talking under the mango tree, not through loudspeakers. And we needed more beds. The National Ebola Response Center, NERC, built on and implemented that plan, and by the third week of January, the number of cases had fallen dramatically. I was asked to serve as a new Director of Planning for NERC, which took me right across the country, trying to stay ahead of the outbreak but also following it to remote villages in the provinces as well as to urban slum communities.

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On one occasion, I got out of my car to call for help for a man who had collapsed on the road. I accidentally stepped in liquid that was coming down the road from where he lay. I rushed to my parents' house, washed my feet in chlorine. I'll never forget waiting for that man's test results as I constantly checked my temperature then and throughout the outbreak.

07:08

The Ebola fight was probably the most challenging but rewarding experience of my life, and I'm really grateful for the dissatisfaction that opened up the space for me to serve.

07:24

Dissatisfaction can be a constant presence in the background, or it can be sudden, triggered by events. Sometimes it's both. With my hometown, that's the way it was.

07:39

For years, our city had changed, and it had caused me great pain. I remember a childhood growing up climbing trees, picking mangoes and plums on the university campus where my father was a lecturer. Went fishing in the streams deep in the botanical gardens. The hillsides around Freetown were covered with lush green vegetation, and the beaches were clean and

pristine. The doubling of the population of Freetown in the years that followed the civil war, and the lack of planning and building control resulted in massive deforestation. The trees, the natural beauty, were destroyed as space was made for new communities, formal or informal, and for the cutting down of firewood. I was deeply troubled and dissatisfied.

08:38

It wasn't just the destruction of the trees and the hillsides that bothered me. It was also the impact of people, as infrastructure failed to keep up with the growth of the population: no sanitation systems to speak of, a dirty city with typhoid, malaria and dysentery. I didn't know the statistics at the time, but it turned out that by 2017, only six percent of liquid waste and 21 percent of solid waste was being collected. The rest was right there with us, in backyards, in fields, rivers and deposited in the sea.

09:20

The steps to address that deep sense of anger and frustration I felt didn't unfold magically or clearly. That's not how the power of dissatisfaction works. It works when you know that things can be done better, and it works when you decide to take the risks to bring about that change. And so it was that in 2017 I ended up running for mayor, because I knew things could be better. It seemed the people agreed with me, because I won the election.

09:52

(Applause)

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Today, we are implementing an ambitious plan to transform our city, and when I say we, what gets me really excited is that I mean the whole Freetown community, whether it's being part of competitions like rewarding the neighborhood that makes the most improvement in overall cleanliness, or whether it's our programs that are leading and joining people and waste collectors through our apps.

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In Freetown today, it's a much cleaner city, and those trees that we're so well known for, we planted 23,000 of them last rainy season.

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(Applause)

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And in 2020, we plan to plant a million trees as part of our "Freetown the Tree Town" campaign.

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(Applause)

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Sometimes, sometimes we have a negative feeling about things. We're not happy about the way things are going. We feel dissatisfied, and we feel frustrated. We can change that negative into a positive.

11:13

If you believe that things can be better, then you have the option to do something rather than to do nothing. The scale and circumstances of our situations will differ, but for each of us, we all have one thing in common. We can take risks to make a difference, and I will close in saying, step out, take a risk. If we can unite behind the power of dissatisfaction, the world will be a better place.

11:47

Thank you.

11:49

(Applause)