

‘At a Swiss castle, minds meet, problems are probed and sometimes, solutions seem possible.’

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Columnist with the TORONTO STAR, wrote from CAUX, SWITZERLAND.

It was a dark and stormy night. We were in the Great Hall of an aging, elegant belle époque castle-style hotel, high up a Swiss mountainside. Lightning flashed beyond the bay window and here, inside, rows and rows of us were focused intently on what was happening at one end of the room.

The vaulted ceiling of the hall in the former Caux Palace Hotel framed the stage set up in front of the massive stone fireplace. The people on that stage weren't trying to do anything appropriately atmospheric, such as animate Frankenstein's monster; they were trying to do something much more difficult, they were trying to animate hope. The momentum had been building all night.

And now, on that stage was Prince El-Hassan bin Talal of Jordan. He was telling us a story. This was the first night of what was to be a five-day retreat on human security. The audience was made up of politicians, business leaders, academics and those who just cared. We'd come from all over the world to discuss problems and, gasp, start thinking about solutions. It wasn't as delusional as it sounds.

This hotel had been the site of remarkable events for decades. After being a haven for Jewish refugees during World War II, it was bought by an influential and sometimes controversial Christian movement that had gone under the name Oxford Group and then became known as Moral Re-Armament (MRA).

The Oxford Group philosophy played an important role in the formation of Alcoholics Anonymous and, with MRA as hosts, this same hotel was where postwar French-German talks were held that sped the way towards reconstruction. Sometimes, solutions can be found. Eventually, MRA morphed into Initiatives of Change, a self-proclaimed transtheological, transcultural, transnational NGO dedicated to “building trust across world divides.”

And now, every summer in this castle-hotel, Initiatives of Change runs retreats on everything from sustainability to trust to capacity building. Anyone can apply to attend. It is to learning vacations what grad school is to summer camp. There are plenaries, like this one with Prince Hassan, but most of the day is taken up with smaller discussion groups on specific topics, such as governance or climate change — or, if it all gets a bit much, rambling strolls through the Swiss mountains to do something a little less obviously productive, such as count cows.

While playing hooky is allowed (especially if, conveniently, it just happens to be part of your spiritual reawakening), participation in the group is encouraged. That extends to chipping in with daily chores, such as serving tea in the dining room, or peeling carrots for lunch. Everyone does it, even the current president of Initiatives of Change

International, Dr. Rajmohan Gandhi, grandson of the Mahatma. From where I was sitting in the Great Hall, I could see him, up near the prince. He was listening as intently as the rest of us.

Outside the *sturm und drang* raged. Inside, Prince Hassan offered a metaphoric umbrella for those wanting to find a way through the equally stormy world of geopolitics and geoeconomics. He spoke eloquently and passionately about taking responsibility rather than apportioning blame. About building on commonalities rather than reinforcing divides. About doing, rather than talking. Coming from an earnest undergraduate, it might have sounded naïve but, geopolitically, Prince Hassan has been there, done that. He knows how things work. And how they can work. His comments are well reasoned, challenging and thought provoking.

The prince's talk was punctuated by personal anecdotes. Describing a discussion with a well-known Israeli politician he said the Israeli told him "we are surrounded by enemies." "You think that's bad," the Prince countered, "we are surrounded by friends!" The room laughs. For a moment we are not labels. We are not "the politician from Sudan," "the media baron from Pakistan," "the journalist from Canada". We are just people, laughing. And that's when you know that solutions are possible.