

Diamonds in soles of his shoes

By Ruth Ostrow

DR Mansukh Patel once went around the streets of England collecting old shoes. He walked from door to door, asking for donations. His friends thought he was crazy.

After he and a few colleagues had gathered as many discarded shoes as they were humanly able, they got hold of a truck through an aid agency and loaded it with the 4000 pairs. And then they delivered their cargo to Moldova - on the border of the Balkans - a region ravaged by conflict and extreme poverty.

In Moldova no one thought he was crazy. Shoes mean the difference between life and death, particularly for children, as it is not possible to walk through the freezing snow without adequate foot cover. Mothers can't travel to get food or medicine. The vulnerable children often die of starvation or frostbite.

Those 4000 shoes possibly saved thousands more lives. For the poor will often cut the backs out of the shoes and share one precious pair between families.

I had heard this story about Patel before joining him on his peace walk through Byron Bay, where he was passing during his recent Australian visit, on his way to Canberra to donate a peace monument.

His fame has spread throughout Europe where he is seen as a symbol of world unity, through the Wales-based Life Foundation organisation which he helped found.

His Indian parents were friends and disciples of Mahatma Gandhi and he shares many of the great man's philosophies, gathering thousands of people at a time to join him in his peace vigils, inspiring people to help save lives, stop violence and act compassionately towards fellow human beings.

The shoe story captured my imagination for its simpleness. For although Patel and his team regularly perform acts of grandeur - helping negotiate the release of hostages, flying into war zones to work with refugees - it reflects the power of good deeds possible in everyday life.

Like a story I wrote last year, about a beautiful Australian couple who had saved the lives of many Africans simply by taking over old clothes, particularly hats, so the men could continue working in the searing sun and feeding their families.

So when I heard that Patel, with his world-famous peace flame, was marching through my town, the least I could do was stand beside him in his quest to raise public awareness.

Like many of my readers, I find myself wanting to do so much more than I ever end up doing. The poet T.S. Eliot once wrote: "Between the idea/And the reality/Between the motion/And the act/Falls the shadow".

I believe there is a terrible fear that arises in many of us in the face of human suffering. Even the bravest of us can become paralysed because we know that

our time will come. We too will suffer great loss, illness or humiliation. It is life's Wheel of Fortune and it always turns.

But not yet. "Please don't touch us yet," many whisper, while others simply don't know how to give of ourselves without being prompted or organised, getting caught up in our own daily dramas.

Patel, who trained as an oncologist, says everyone can start very small. "The simple things can mean so much. People don't have to go to [children's] cancer wards if it's too confronting for them. Not everyone can stomach pain. Not everyone has time to drive around feeding the homeless or travelling to troubled zones.

"But they can send sick children a bag of balloons. Or drop toys into a local orphanage. The look on the [children's] faces is enough to wash away any sadness people may feel."

Patel talks of going into Bosnia and Chechnya simply to play ball with the children. "It sounds like a stupid thing to do - to stand in the streets under fire playing with kids. But when children have lost everything, loved ones, homes, friends, then the only thing you can offer is love and hope, and help them trust again.

"It's magical looking at a child knowing you have helped soften something so damaged in him. You have held that child, kissed that child, and taken the trauma out of his or her body by gentleness."

Patel says the smallest deed is like the beginning of a tidal wave - it can have effects that are profound and unforeseen. It may help save someone who will one day be a great leader. Or it may simply alleviate the suffering of one fragile child.

"Take small steps. But go forward," says Patel, walking his way down the streets of Byron and onwards towards limitless hope.

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