

Clementina Cantoni  
Ordination  
New York, May 7, 2006

As many of you might know, almost a year ago exactly, my life changed dramatically- setting in motion a series of events that have somehow led me here today, to accept this prestigious award. After 3 years of living in Afghanistan as an ordinary aid worker – I suddenly became famous- when I was held hostage for 24 days.

When my friend Roger told me last year that he'd nominated me for an award established in memory of his grandfather, I was extremely surprised and deeply touched. I remember telling him, "Rog, the fact that you even nominated me, makes me feel like I actually won it". And I thought that was the end of the story. But when I received an email a few months later, confirming that I had actually been awarded the prize, I realized I was in deep trouble. I balked when I saw the names of previous recipients.

But then I realized, that perhaps there are two categories of people to whom this award would apply- firstly, extraordinary people who achieve extraordinary things, secondly- ordinary people to whom extraordinary things happen. I clearly belong to the latter and in accepting this award I would like to highlight the extraordinary things that happened as a result of my kidnapping.

Firstly, the world finally took notice of some of the most marginalized and disenfranchised women in Afghanistan when hundreds of widows took to the streets to demand my release. Some of them were even brave enough to show their faces on camera. The significance of what they did is profound- especially if you consider that many of these women are illiterate, have no marketable skills and survive on less than \$1 a day. Many live in precarious housing situations and some are forced to beg simply to survive. So, you would think they have bigger problems than to worry about some unfortunate foreigner, fallen into the wrong hands. And yet, their behavior did more to show the world who Afghans really are than a thousand articles, TV documentaries, or well- written novels. Afghans are a proud, dignified people whose generosity and respect towards foreigners who come to their country to work honestly as part of the reconstruction process, is complete. But you have to earn this respect. And rightly so.

People are often curious as to what motivates aid workers to choose a job that takes us to some of the world's most dangerous regions and sometimes, puts our life at risk. The fundamental reason for me, is that I don't like the world I've inherited and I want to try and understand the causes and perhaps in some small way, change the injustice and inequality I see around me. Many people think this is absurdly naïve but they have never known how satisfying it is to see a woman who has never been allowed to work, receive her first month's

pay- or what remarkable joy you can feel just by looking at a trail of girls going to the schools from which they were excluded for many years.

But I suppose the most important reason why I enjoy the work I do, is that it teaches me the value of humility in a very direct way. I remember once, how I had returned from accompanying a widow to a job interview which had gone badly, because she had made up 100 excuses as to why she couldn't do the job. I sat down at my desk feeling dejected and frustrated and asked a colleague, "what are these women so afraid of?" Yet these are the same women who a few months later bravely screamed their indignation and rallied in my support in front of the world's press.

My greatest hope is that one day, these women will demand their rights with the same dignity and strength.

Thank you,

Clementina Cantoni