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Something Kinda Inspiring

By Tia



Goonaratna

Aritha Wickramasinghe is a man of many things. He's an international banking lawyer and the founding trustee of Think Equal, a UN Human Rights Office endorsed education initiative. He was recognised for his initiatives promoting equality and human rights by the Financial Times in 2015 ranking him No. 1 Future Global Business Leader in an outstanding list which included Mark Zuckerberg. He has advised the British Government on using British business to promote human rights abroad, and has contested British Government to recognise non-gendered persons. In 2017, Attitude Magazine ranked Aritha as the 15th most eligible bachelor in the world, ahead of well-known celebrities Sam Smith, Adam Lambert, Wentworth Miller and Sir Ian McKellen. In a world where history books are filled with changing the world, Aritha is adding on with history that matters.

**Tell us a bit about your childhood and family.**

I was born and brought up in Sri Lanka. I am one of three boys – the middle one actually. Most of our lives we lived in Mount Lavinia and I am very much a lover of the beach. I had a wonderful childhood. My mother was 1 of 11 and my father 1 of 10 – all their siblings had children. We are a very close family and I love them all very much. My interests were always very varied. I loved music and actually kept a weekly record of my favourite songs. I was and still am, a big fan of the Spice Girls! I am very proud of that fact and sort of wear it as a badge of honour. I think it's important to be proud of our

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## **Did you always know you wanted to make a difference in the world and worked towards it, or did it become clearer as you went through life?**

When I was young, I always wanted to be an astronomer. I was fascinated by Space and I still am. But, when I was about 13 years old, I started reading the daily newspapers on the advice of my Sinhala language teacher. During that time, there was a lot of press around increasing incidences of child sexual and physical abuse in Sri Lanka. As a child myself, I was quite alarmed by this but more so, there arose a determination in me that I should do something about it. I convinced a friend of mine to join me in forming a child rights group in school whose purpose was to

determination in me that I should do something about it. I convinced a friend of mine to join me in forming a child rights group in school whose purpose was to educate children and adults on child rights. We became a group of children that took our own destiny into our hands by visiting various schools conducting child rights education programmes. It was quite empowering actually to be this bunch of children going from school to school educating other children about things clearly the adults were failing at.

The laws of Sri Lanka had just changed to increase the age of sexual consent from 12 to 16 but its implementation was pretty poor. Our organisation teamed up with other child rights groups to raise awareness and press on the Government to strengthen child protection. The positive responses we experienced were what really convinced me of the power of the law to change society, for the better.

### **What was the driving force behind ‘Think Equal’?**

Think Equal was really inspired through the film India’s Daughter, which was directed and produced by the movement’s founder, Leslee Udwin. When you watch the film, what is quite obvious is that rape and any forms of violence and prejudice are actually due to the mind-set. It’s very easy for us to write off the perpetrators of these horrendous crimes as monsters. But, in actuality, they are perfectly normal human beings. What we need to understand and what you see so clearly in Leslee’s film is that people are not born monsters but are actually made into them.

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The only way we can stop people from becoming these monsters is education. Not just by improving their access to education, but by changing the content of education. You see, our education system takes prides in teaching our children maths, sciences and literacy. But, it fails to teach children on how to be human beings.

As a Sri Lankan who grew up my entire life in the middle of an awful civil war – a senseless war that was really the result of our inability to treat others the same way we would like to be treated. Violence, prejudice, discrimination – these all stem from the simple failures of our education system to teach us basic values such as empathy, compassion and kindness and basic skills such as critical thinking and peaceful conflict resolution. Just imagine if we took the simple step to teach every child entering school these values and skills? We would have solved many of the world's problems in about 15 years' time.

So it was the coming together of these various passions that became the driving force behind Think Equal. It brought together people who were tired of the never-ending cycle of violence and mediocrity in hope of something new and better and something, which our pilot programme is showing – works.

**Do you ever look at your life, and truly be proud of what you have achieved?**

I am proud of what I have managed to achieve. But I am also fully conscious that I didn't achieve any of this by myself. I had a very privileged upbringing and parents who always supported me in what I wanted to do. I had friends who always encouraged me to keep going when I wanted to give up and I had mentors who always guided

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## **How important is it that the younger generation truly understand what the world is going through, and to be active?**

It's critically important. The world, as you know, is going through a challenging period in its history. Soon after World War 2, the world experienced a wave of liberalisation – the expansion of freedoms, markets and trade. Today, we are part of a world that is connected and informed like never before. The burst of freedom has resulted in the biggest expansion of trade, innovation and wealth in human history. But more importantly, it has created humanity's longest period of relative peace.

However, as the generation of those who suffered terrible global wars die, we are increasingly left with a newer generation that feels disillusioned and

However, as the generation of those who suffered terrible global wars die, we are increasingly left with a newer generation that feels disillusioned and disconnected. Those who have much more to benefit from conflict than peace are sadly preying upon this generation. They are selling bigotry, isolationism, prejudice and even violence. They are trying to build a new world order – one that dismantles the order of peace to replace it with the order of chaos packaged as patriotism and nationalism.

If the younger generations are not made to understand our histories and be informed on the rapidly changing political environment, it is they who will lose out on everything that peace brings. They will become another lost generation – just like the generation that had endured global wars in Europe and Asia and generations like mine, who were born into war here in Sri Lanka and grew up in a climate of fear and hopelessness.

**From your experience, how does one decide between saving Mother Nature/animals and saving humans?**

Nature, animal and humans – we are all interconnected and we all share the same planet. Harming one eventually harms the other. Think Equal teaches children to value all life and to be kind and compassionate to all beings. It also teaches children to care for the environment. If we are going to protect our planet, then we need to educate humanity on why it is important first. Until we do that, we are not going to get anywhere much.