

Good evening everybody. My thanks to Laraine Toms and your colleagues for the invitation to deliver the Clare Stevenson Memorial Lecture 2008.

However before doing so I would like to acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora nation on whose country we meet today and to pay my respect to their elders.

I also acknowledge Averil Fink, here with us this evening, for the pioneering role she played in the establishment of Carers NSW.

This evening I will chance my arm a little in some of what I want to talk about. I mention this because I have decided to hang part of my remarks around what I consider to be a particularly challenging piece of literature. I find it disturbing every time I read it, and you may too. Although it may be that you will not be perturbed by it at all. However I mention this knowing the effect it has on me and offer this caution, that it also may similarly affect you, in my attempt to make a particular argument which I hope to be of relevance to my remarks.

#### Cares Project

As you know, St James Ethics Centre have been working in partnership with Carers NSW and the Macquarie Group Foundation to undertake what I think has been a particularly interesting project - looking at the question of caring in a good society from which a number of subsidiary questions have emerged. What is caring itself? What constitutes a good society? What is the relationship between the two? As part of the process there has been wide consultation with a diverse group of people across Australia, different focus groups, some qualitative surveys and some quantitative online research (which is currently being analysed), which has provided a vast range of material. Yet I suspect that if Clare Stevenson were with us now, and maybe Averil this is something which occurs to you as you sit here, that it might seem like a kind of curious thing to be doing - that we have found it necessary as a society to embark upon such a national conversation.

#### Long age of forgetting

There may have been a time perhaps in the aftermath of the second world war or at earlier points in history when it would have seemed an unusual question to pose as to whether or not we should have such a concern to try and revisit issues to do with what constitutes caring and to try and forge or explore a link between that and a concept of what a good society happens to be. Unusual perhaps because people understood that there was a deeper sense in which both these concepts could be understood and that there would have been a shared understanding across all measures of society.

However I may be wrong, I am clearly not old enough to answer that question, it is a moment of speculation on my part and perhaps later we may find out what the answer happens to be. However if that is true, then it is not so much of a surprise to me as I think that the context in which we are conducting this particular conversation is one in which more generally we as a society, perhaps it may be true even not just of our society, but of western societies more generally, we find ourselves in the middle of and perhaps hopefully, towards the end of, what I would describe as a 'long age of forgetting'.

What is it that this is about, this notion of being in a long age of forgetting? The idea is that if we look around our recent history and see everything from the role of churches, through the role of parliaments, the courts, universities, all manner of major institutions and now spectacularly, those institutions which are central to the operation of the market.

What we see with an unfortunate degree of consistency is a pattern of behaviour in which those institutions betray the things that they actually say they believe in. They engage in conduct which, if attributed to a single individual, we would label quite properly, as an act of hypocrisy. The consequence of this is that whenever people encounter hypocrisy it generates not just scepticism about what's being said but much more significantly, it generates cynicism which creates a kind of acid which eats away at the bonds of society, which even eats away at the bonds of common understanding about society.

Let me give you perhaps what is the most spectacular example of this phenomenon of this 'age of forgetting' that I can think of in the last maybe fifteen or twenty years. Although I think it has probably been eclipsed by what has happened in the market and the activities of ratings agencies and people who are selling, or flogging probably, mortgages in America, to people who could not afford to pay and the related issues. However the example I had in mind, is the perhaps even more troubling phenomenon of the behaviour of the Christian churches in recent years and their response to allegations to do with the sexual abuse of children and other vulnerable people - particularly by their clergy.

These institutions have, for thousands of years, voluntarily offered the view  
that love is more important than the law;  
that people are more important than property;  
that we should face the truth about ourselves and our place in the world.

Yet when confronted just a few years ago with the allegations that their own clergy had engaged in the kind of conduct I have described, their response, almost universally, was to put the law before love, to put property before their people and to protect their backs rather than face the truth about the situation in which they had found themselves.

Of course what we saw as a consequence of that was a precipitous decline in trust in those particular institutions. I am not singling them out to say they are the only institutions, what I am pointing out is that they are amongst many that have said they believe one thing and have done something else and we have seen the consequences.

The interesting questions which goes to this notion about 'forgetting' and why this conversation is so important is that if you ask me 'why is it that bishops have engaged in that conduct?'; 'why is it that politicians do the same, or business leaders or any one of a number of different people in leadership positions in important institutions in society?' You might expect me to say that they do this because they are bad people. Or that they are in some sense of being compromised by the licenses of greed or selfishness or something like that. In fact that is not the answer I would give at all because in my time, doing the work I do, I have become more and more convinced that many of the things that proceed of this kind, are not so much the product of bad people, as the bad actions of good people - essentially good people.

Anyone who has met, or has spent anytime with someone like Peter Hollingworth - the former Governor-General - will know that he is in essence a good man who made some very bad decisions for which he paid a terrible price.

Why do good men and good women, make bad decisions? I think it is because they lose touch with, they forget, the purpose for which the institutions they lead, were established. Instead of seeing those things which lay at the core of their institution and recalling them whenever a decision is being made, they are enthralled (as all of us are from time to time) by the outward manifestation of the institution, by its doctrines, by its architecture, by whatever glorious symbols it is able to deploy as evidence of its power and authority in the world - and so it was.

'Ah ha!' moment

If you take something like our courts - magnificent things that they have been and the institution of the rule of law - where did they come from? They come from a very simple insight - they are basically derived from what in essence is a repudiation of the bully. There would have been some person, somewhere, who had just had enough of those who came and took what they wanted, simply by force, invoking their principle as might being right, who said: "No that is not right, that is not just". From that simple insight there grew an inclination towards developing the rule of law. It was in that kind of 'Ah ha!' moment as Jung would refer to it, that something so simple, so immediate that it even escapes language on occasions, that the particular institution would have found its origin.

And so it is with most institutions, there are moments of clarity in simple events in human affairs which give rise to these institutions. It is those things which over time we tend to forget, instead, shifting our gaze to those external elements and while doing so the internal core can wither away for lack of attention and so we find ourselves at a time when I think many of our institutions still look alright on the outside, are however empty at their core.

It is a bit like imagining a table in which somebody has erected a series of cardboard cutouts - there is a cardboard cutout of a magnificent cathedral, or a bank, or a university, or a parliament - they are fine when they sit on a table which remains stable but the moment the table begins to shake, which is equivalent to having a more complex facet of the changing environment in which we live, then you see those institutions, those models, fall over for the absence of the central core.

That is the context in which I would suggest it becomes necessary for us to have a conversation about caring in a good society. It is not as if it is a novelty, or a luxury to ask a question of this kind. It is an essential way to replenish our understanding of something which may lie very deep within our understanding but is part of those things which many people has been forgotten. For those of you who are cared for, or who are caring, it is an immediate issue but for others it is part of that world of 'forgetting'. So part of the work associated with the project is a reawakening. It may be at the end of this process that the conclusions which emerge from it are no different from those that originally sparked the creation of institutions like Carers NSW. It may be that our answers are the same as those like Clare Stevenson and Averil Fink gave, that they may be distinctly different in one respect only - that they will be refreshed, they will be alive, they will be our answers to the question and in that sense they will have a vitality.

## Caring

So what do we think about the question of what constitutes a caring society. How do I think about it is probably more to the point? What issues go through my mind when I ask about this? Firstly I suppose it is to think about caring principally as an orientation towards the other. That could be deemed too generic in this particular environment because I can care for nature, for the landscape, for trees, for animals and I can demonstrate that as part of the generic way in which I talk about caring. However that is not what we have in mind. While I would attribute an intrinsic value to other forms of life and to nature itself, I do not attribute to it a value equal to that of human beings. This notion about caring as an orientation towards the other is, in a sense, an invitation in this context to think about why it is that we might care, in a slightly different manner for human beings, than we do for animals or for the natural world itself? I think the answer to that question might be found in the fact that there are particularly distinct ways in which we as human beings are able to suffer. It is not that we are alone in our ability to suffer, I mean the capacity to cause pain to other creatures is evident before us on almost any day.

## Indifference

There are particular kinds of hurt that we suffer and the hurt that I have in mind, which I think is so distinctive and relates to this question, is I suppose best captured in a phrase which I thought that I had invented myself - however like any good phrase I have found somebody had come up with it a long time before. What I had thought I had cleverly deduced was about love and its opposites. I remember thinking that the opposite of love is not hate but rather it is indifference. It may have been Eli Wiesel who first made this observation, that the opposite of love is not hate, it is indifference. This is a particular kind of hurt that I think human beings can suffer, not from the experience of pain of the physical kind, or even of hatred, but the hurt that comes from indifference and that is where the notion of care and its relationship to human beings becomes so important.

We tend in these debates to focus on the kind of indifference which is often showed by our society to those who are in need of care. You can understand how they become invisible, how they become marginalised, how society can turn away. I think that is a really important question to explore however what I thought I might do this evening is to talk about a different kind of indifference, which is related but distinct, and that is the indifference that we can show in relation to carers. What is our approach to the people who offer to care and why do we do so?

Do we assume for example, that in relation to carers, that their familial ties create an automatic obligation? That because we might be tied to people by blood or marriage or something of that kind that the rest of us can just be indifferent to what the carer does because they just do that? They are locked in because of their relationship of a particular kind. Does that make it possible for us to be indifferent? Do we assume perhaps that the carers are saints or beyond any concern for our good thoughts or our engagement in the challenges they face? Do we think that all carers are somehow or other super human, that they do not suffer from doubt, loneliness, abandonment, that they are not touched by our indifference, that somehow or other they are beyond all of this and that we can just leave them to it and they will find their own reward in this life or the next?

Do we assume, and this is where we start to get to the slightly darker possibilities in my thoughts, do we assume that carers are part of the condition that they care for themselves? In other words that they are in some sense 'tainted' (I emphasise the parentheses) by the aged, or by the frail, for whom they care? That therefore we look away, that we are indifferent to them? Do we have imbedded in our notion of humanity

some view that the fully human condition is that of the entirely autonomous person? That in some sense what we encounter amongst those who are in need of care is somebody who has fallen below the standard we normally recognise as the fully human and therefore the carers themselves have become compromised by their association, their voluntary association, with the vulnerable which therefore prompts our indifference.

Or do we encounter the carer as a silent rebuke, a silent rebuke to those who either do not actively care themselves for anybody else, or are presumed not to care? Are they a silent rebuke to our sense of a loss of community? A loss of a time when we might have otherwise assumed that those in need of care and support would have enjoyed it freely, - not just from a group of people called carers - separated and distinct from all of us - because that is what communities did. They marshalled together for those in need of support.

rebuke

That is where the dark thought emerges about this notion of rebuke. The dark thought which is in some sense offset by a more noble idea which I will address later but I want to plumb some of the depths to read to you from an excerpt from a story written by the writer Ursula Le Guin. Now some of you may be familiar with this, I think it's under the title *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*. In this story Ursula Le Guin describes an almost unbelievably good society in the sense that it is replete with beauty, nobility, music, science - all of the finest attributes of human beings are manifest in the outward life of this community of Omelas. However then she asks do we believe this, do you accept the festival, the city, the joy? No, then let me describe one more thing - a warning this may trouble you as it does me. I quote ...

In a basement under one of the beautiful public buildings of Omelas, or perhaps in the cellar of one of its spacious private homes, there is a room. It has one locked door and no window. A little light seeps in dustily between cracks in the boards secondhand from a cobwebbed window somewhere across the cellar. In one corner of the little room a couple of mops with stiff-clotted foul-smelling heads stand near a rusty bucket. The floor is dirt, a little damp to the touch, as cellar dirt usually is. The room is about three paces long and two wide. A mere broom closet or disused tool room. In the room a child is sitting. It could be a boy or a girl. It looks about six but actually is nearly ten. It's feeble-minded, perhaps it was born defective or perhaps it has become imbecile through fear, malnutrition and neglect. It picks its nose and occasionally fumbles vaguely with its toes or genitals, as it sits hunched in the corner farthest from the bucket with the two mops. It's afraid of the mops and finds them horrible and shuts its eyes but it knows the mops are still standing there. The door is locked and nobody will come. The door is always locked and nobody ever comes except that sometimes, the child has no understanding of time or interval, sometimes the door rattles terribly and opens and a person or several people are there. One of them may come in and kick the child to make it stand up. The others never come close, but peer in at it with frightened and disgusted eyes. The food bowl and the water jug are hastily filled the door is locked the eyes disappear. The people at the door never say anything but the child who has not always lived in the tool room and can remember sunlight and its mother's voice sometimes says "I will be good" it says. "Please let me out. I will be good". They never answer. The child used to scream for help at night and cry a good deal, but now it only makes a kind of whining, "eh-haa, eh-haa", and it speaks less and less often. It is so thin there are no calves to its legs, its belly protrudes, it lives on a bowl of cornmeal and grease a day. It is naked. Its buttocks and thighs are a mass of festered sores, as it sits in its own excrement continually.

They all know it is there all the people of Omelas. Some of them have come to see it, others are content merely to know it is there. They all know that it has to be there. Some of

them understand why and some do not but they all understand that their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weathers of their skies, depend wholly on this child's abominable misery.

This is usually explained to children when they are between eight and twelve whenever they seem capable of understanding as most of those who come and see the child are young people, though often enough an adult comes, or comes back to see the child. No matter how well the matter has been explained to them these young spectators are always shocked and sickened at the sight, they feel disgust which they had thought themselves superior to. They feel anger, outrage, impotence despite all the explanations. They would like to do something for the child. But there is nothing they can do. If the child were brought up into the sunlight out of that vile place, if it were cleaned and fed and comforted that would be a good thing indeed; but if it were done, in that day and hour all the prosperity and beauty and delight of Omelas would wither and be destroyed. Those are the terms. To exchange all the goodness and grace of every life in Omelas for that single small improvement, to throw away the happiness of thousands to the chance of the happiness of one, that would be to let guilt within the walls indeed.

The terms are strict and absolute there may not even be a kind word spoken to the child.

And so it goes on. It is a terrible image. It is an extreme image. However I wonder whether or not there is part of what we do as a society in which we too are content to have people who suffer indifference, whether they are carers or cared, because we cannot stand the rebuke of their gaze so it is sometimes easier to look away only to reinforce the very wrong which has been done in the first place.

Not everybody looks away. Some people in the story of Omelas cannot bear it - they leave. Of course there are others who do not just stay, in our own world, our real world, this world, this society - there is the carer. There is the person who chooses to stay even if it is the young woman who at the age of eighteen (I heard of her when this project was launched) who does not have the opportunity to go out because she must stay to care. What others take for granted as the life of an ordinary teenager in Australia, she has not enjoyed. Or an elderly woman, who chose to speak publicly about this at the launch of the project, said she feared when it came time for her, when she is growing frail, that she may very well seek to take her own life rather than be left to die alone.

What of those people? What of those who choose to care, who choose to stay, who choose to address these things?

#### Heroes

From that rather bleak picture, I want to suggest that there is also something noble that we might capture, which we might actually look at, which we might find fascinating in what carers do. If we are going to see it, if we are going to look at it and not just feel that silent rebuke, there is probably a need to return to an older idea which again we had forgotten.

I remember attending a session that was conducted in Switzerland I think, at which one of the speakers was a famous European - the Italian novelist, Umberto Eco who made a really profound observation during his presentation in which he noted that the principal distinction to be made between the ancient world and the modern world, is that the ancient world is populated by heroes, whereas we are condemned only to enjoy celebrities.

The principal distinction that Umberto Eco said exists between the world of the hero and the world of the celebrity, is that the world of the hero is one in which there is a depth in which the character of the person matters in your assessment of their virtue, of their worthiness. Whereas a world, content with celebrity, is quite happy to just see bright shiny surfaces that might glitter, sparkle, attract our attention - even though beneath the surface there is nothing of substance to regard. You might think about it in terms of my model of the 'long age of forgetting' in which our institutions have glorious exteriors, but the core has withered away.

During Umberto Eco's address I recalled what little I know of the ancient Greek language - something fascinating - the word for beauty is the same word for honour, *kalos*, and the word for ugliness, *ieshron*, is the same word for shame. There used to be a time, embedded in our own language, or one of its precursors, when we were able to recognise that what was beautiful was also honourable, what was ugly was also a source of shame. In other words the depth of character, the depth of things was what was still available for us to observe which is why we could then speak of the kind of heroism which goes beyond that which is simply that of the celebrity. A place to which we retreat when we must look away, when we want to be distracted by it, things we do not want to see that challenge our views of what should be good or right.

It is in that sense that I think there is a nobility that we might embrace in the life choices and actions of those who choose to care, who choose not to be indifferent - not to cause that particular hurt to which human beings are so susceptible.

Carers are heroic figures in that older sense of the word. They may not be celebrities who have been interviewed or appeared on television, which a celebrity might expect, but nonetheless they still have that deep kind of heroism and I think Clare Stevenson (I would be interested to know if it were true) would have recognised that word. That is the word that may have been lost which makes this conversation necessary.

Some years ago I was called upon to think about what constitutes a hero. I would like to conclude by reading something of my own, indulgent though it may be I hope it will capture what I want to do - to salute those who care, challenge the rest of us about this conversation as we try to find the honest answer as to what it is that might make us be indifferent but then give us something better to turn back, to look and to engage.

Some think that heroes are forged in the white heat of the dangerous moment, but there's another kind of hero, the person of quiet decency whose achievement is only built over an entire career. We're struck by the intensity of lightning yet fail to mention the thunder that rolls on into the distance long after the lightning's moment is passed. We're captured by the tumultuous extent of the waterfall while the steady progress of the river is ignored, and we marvel at the ocean's power unaware of the fact that we stand upon ground claimed for us by silent witness of the ancient cliff.

Thank you.

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