

A RETURN TO THE HEART-RECLAIMING VALUES , ETHICS AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY .

I'd like to begin with one of Leunig's drawings , done at the time of the debate over the Republic but still to the point today . Mr Curly is sitting in his canoe -- which looks as if it is on the rocks -- , sighing to himself ; ' If only I had a new figurehead and a new flag and a new canoe and a new me ; if only ...' I suspect that your Conference organisers felt like this when they asked me to reflect on ' heart-reclaiming values , ethics and social responsibility ' because , whatever these words may mean -- and we will try and define them -- they are in short supply at the moment . Unlike Mr Curly , however , who does not seem to have much hope of finding them I want to argue that we can and must . But first , what are they ?

If you look up the word heart , which I think is the key word here in the Dictionary , you will find first of all that it refers to a 'hollow muscular organ' . But then it moves into the word's wider meanings ; the ' seat of life ' , the ' vital or essential part ' , the 'core ' , the 'heart of the matter ' , meanings which Pascal implied when he wrote that ' the heart has reasons which reason knows not of'. The implication of our title then seems to be that our culture , the way we live has lost its centre , its vital and essential part .

I agree . Consider what the ' money-making passion '-- significantly the phrase the economist J.M. Keynes uses -- has done to us and our world -- , the social disasters of unemployment , the growing gap between rich and poor nationally and internationally , the increase in violence , addictions of all kinds - - not least to money-making , -having and -spending -- and the environmental crises facing us . That is a grim picture I know . But ' riding the rapids of change ' in this Conference you are clearly looking for open water ahead . Moreover as professionals involved in that level of government closest to the local community you know how badly we need to do so . People are hurting and if we are to remain a decent and civilised society , to give reality rather than lip-service to the idea of a 'fair go ' , then we need to reflect on the saying in the Talmud that ' to save one life is to save humanity'. This , I suggest , is the heart of the matter . We put too much weight on abstractions -- Baudrillard says that we live in a culture which rests on ' the exaltation of signs at the expense of the reality of things ' and , I would add , of people . The essential is experience , our loves , hopes , fears and joys .

To some this will sound woolly , sentimental (that is , working off in words what is not really the case) . But the evidence is against them . By and large the crises facing us locally , nationally and internationally are the consequence of our choices and values , our surrender to abstractions which rob us of our humanity and threaten the life of the planet . Judith Wright puts it this way -- and I warn you that I intend to invoke the poetic quite often -- in a poem lamenting the loss of the passenger pigeon :

The voice of water as it flows and falls
the noise air makes against earth's surfaces
have changed ; are changing to the tunes we choose.

What wooed and echoed in the pigeon's voice ?

We have not heard the bird . How reinvent
that passenger , its million wings and hues ,

when we have lost the bird , the thing itself ,
the sheen of life on flashing long migrations ?

(' Lament For Passenger Pigeons ').

Her conclusion is that ' [w]e have not asked the meaning but the use . Keynes puts it more prosaically but just as accurately ; we have confused the task of transmuting human nature and learning to live with the natural world with the task of managing it . In other words we have begged the crucial question of value , to which we now turn .

' Value ' has to do with what we believe to be essential in life , the heart of the matter if you like . But what is that ? There are various ways of seeing this . But if the evidence is mounting to suggest that it is not money . Nor is it power as a way of dominating people or things , or mere pleasure . They may in fact represent a way of death rather than of life . In any case they are only partial values . The great challenge isto discover the meaning of life the whole . That might sound ambitious . But it really isn't . Nor is it a matter of mere theory . An image will do , the image offered by an astronmer , Fred Hoyle when he wrote in 1948 when space travel was first becoming possible : ' Once a photograph of the earth , taken from outside , is available --- once the sheer isolation of the earth becomes plain , a new idea , as powerful as any in history will be let loose ' . That idea , or fact rather , is that all human beings , all the animals , birds, fishes and insects , all the plants , the waters , the air and the earth itself all share the one life on and of a very small and fragile planet suspended in infinite space . What this means is that the law of life is community . Unless the rapids of change draw us together we will all be shipwrecked .

This means that your level of government , local government , is far more important than we usually think because it is here that people relate to one another and to their local environment , here , that is , that the basic logic of life can be lived out , the obligation to give , to receive and to give back . Here let me draw on an essay by an anthropologist , Ghassan Hage , (*Meanjin* , 4 , 2000 ,pp 27-38) , on the significance of the pedestrian crossing .

His essay begins with an account of an interview with a Lebanese migrant , deeply traumatised by his experinces during the civil war there, who used to spend hours crossing and recrossing the pedestrian crossing at the end of his street . For him it was a magical experience , a moment of recognition . Cars stopped for him , he feels important , and not because of any social status but because he is a human being and because he feels he belongs now to a society in which human beings matter and are protected , an honourable society in which people defer to others and their needs and are faithful to their obligations to them , recognising the importance of giving as well as receiving .

Many would say that this is foolishly idealistic-- especially if you witness the behaviour of many motorists -- and that the operative factor is not courtesy but fear of the law . But the law rests on the premise that people matter and that we have

obligations to one another , and our migrant is a refugee from a society which rests on the opposite premise , that might equals right . Indeed in my darker moments it sometimes seems to me that this is the direction in which our world is moving today , nationally and internationally . Certainly we seem to be losing a sense of generosity , of gift . As Hage puts it , for example ;

The fact that we might give the unemployed some benefits but dishonour them in the very process of giving it to them , treat them as if they do not deserve what they are getting , as if they are a lesser breed of humanity , is immaterial to the ... economic mind that has colonised our governmental institutions : we've given , we want something back .

But you can make a difference . The heart of local government is relationships between people , their specific local and material needs , collection of rubbish , parks and gardens , housing and so on . It is here that people meet face to face , and this may be the crucial area in the age of globalisation . As Hage points out in exchanging recognition with one another we are reproducing our basic humanity . Community is the gift we offer each other and make together .

Is this an impossible ideal ? If it is , I suggest , there is not much hope for us or for the planet . Ruthless competition , mindless consumption of the earth's resources and indifference to the sufferings of others is a recipe for disaster . No one is an island . We are all part of the fabric of life on our fragile and overcrowded planet and must respect one another or destroy ourselves . To return to where we began , to Mr Curly's longing for a new canoe and a new world , I suggest that , like many of us , he has got it wrong . What we need to recover what we used to know and what many so-called 'primitive' people have never forgotten , that we all, human beings but also the living world around us depend on one another, must give to and receive from one another .

This is all very general , I know , but I have neither the time nor the expertise to talk about the practical implications for you in local government . But you may want to reflect , for instance , on the contribution you may make to human dignity in your provision of facilities for leisure , sport and the arts , to a deepening of an understanding of our identity and possibilities as a people through reconciliation with the First Peoples of our district and paying more attention to the experience of older people in our community , and so on . In the long run the world depends not on what we call ' facts ' but on our dreams . They are not , as Clifford Geertz argues , ' a simple turning of one's back on ' reality ' but a way , however devious , strange , and explosive , of coming in contact with it ; indeed , in part constructing it'.

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