Joan Kirner Social Justice Oration 2016

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Presentation by

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Thank you for that introduction. Thank you for being here. Actually, do you have a choice about being here? You do. In that case, thank you for being here.

It's really nice to be on this stage again. As was alluded to, I have been on this stage once before. Joan was here at the time. It was a debate. I can't even remember the topic, although I'm pretty sure we won. Anyway, my one memory of it is – and this is actually my only personal interaction with Joan Kirner – was how she effortlessly and really humorously humiliated me in that debate without saying a single word.

I was delivering the speech, the bell rang, indicating my time was up, and so I thought, "but I'm in the middle of this sentence, I'll just get through this sentence." And she just glared at me and then did it again. And I just looked at her and shrivelled into a corner and walked away. And as I recall, it was mid-sentence.

How we won that debate I don't know. It must have been the force of everything that I'd said up to that point. But that was pretty much it.

And I thought it was remarkable that – I mean, she was moderating that debate and was incredibly entertaining all the way through. But I thought it was the mark of a remarkable person that she could do that to you and you would like her more as a result of it.

So it's great to be here and to be asked to do this. It's very flattering. And also a connection with Our Community, which goes back - I was trying to figure it out just backstage - I think it goes back to about 2002 when I was a uni student and I was asked to write the first draft of a book on directors duties, which I understand it still available, so go out and grab yourself a copy. I don't know – should I sign it? I don't know, I don't know what – it seems like a weird thing to sign, but anyway.

I won a Logie recently, so it's probably worth thousands of dollars. Actually, just on that, I've been told we've got to be out of here by 12:30pm and I was told you're going to have lots of questions and, at the same time, I've been given a topic that's actually quite weighty and nuanced, so I don't know how we're going to fit all this in.

So what I'll do is I'm going to answer the three questions that I know are going to arise in Q&A now and that should save a bit of time. No, it's not made of gold. It's currently on the top of a bookshelf in my room well above eye level so that I can't see it most of the time, and that was my wife's decision. And it weighs about 1.5 kilograms. That's it, all right? All those questions are handled. Thank you for your tepid applause.

Now, what I've been asked to do today is speak about what makes a decent society, and I think it's a wonderful question to be asked because it's a question that at least, more broadly, society doesn't ask - certainly not enough, if at all.

I'm not sure the last time I heard it. I'm aware of works that have been written on the subject, but as far as a public conversation goes, we just don't have that. And so I'm really glad to have the opportunity to talk to you about that.

And I'm going to try, as briefly as I can, not to answer that question in full excruciating detail, but just to try to throw a couple of theoretical ideas out there that you, in your own work, can then latch onto or discard as the case demands.

Because what I hate doing in these sorts of things is telling you how you should go about doing your jobs. Because your jobs will all be very varied anyway, but also because it's not my job, and so you understand your job a lot better than me and there's a reason you have your job and I don't.

And so there's no point in me pretending that I know more about your work in the community sector than you do. Although I've done some stuff in the community sector, it's very different when you are doing this every day.

So I'm not going to try to do that, but I'm going to try to crunch through some of the ideas that we have used as a species, certainly recently, to try to figure out what a society should look like.

And if I had to try to describe what, in the last hundred or two hundred years, have really been the dominant ideas that would describe this, there would probably be two ideas that would sit in tandem with one another.

One is that a decent society or a good society is built upon a foundation of freedom. So a good society is that which delivers or confers the maximum amount of freedom upon its people, from its citizens. That's one idea.

The other idea is that a good society is built upon the pillar of equality. Now, if you're French, you'd probably say well both and you'd add fraternity. But the problem is that these two things actually very often sit in contradiction.

I don't want to state it as an absolute rule, but the more freedom you have, the more inequality you are likely to generate. And so we're kind of caught between these two ideals, neither of which is terribly realisable without doing terrible things.

You either have a completely unfettered freedom that allows people to exploit one another and therefore means that there will be certain people who either were not privileged to have access to great education or don't start with a fortune that they can then use to try to generate more money or, in Donald Trump's case, lose most of it. But you have these inequalities that will naturally emerge as a result of everyone being free.

Or you can try to force equality which was, in some ways, the communist experiment. And what that usually means is that people's freedom is stifled to such a degree that it becomes hugely oppressive.

So whichever totem pole you wish to attach yourself to, it's a flawed one and this is a problem that we face. So over the past century or so, there's been a lot of effort to try to figure out exactly how this plays out.

And perhaps the most famous example, in trying to reconcile this, was a philosopher by the name of John Rawls who came up with the idea that this was a balance, but really what you need to do is maximise freedom, but only to the extent that it generates an amount of inequality where the worst-off people in your society are still better-off than they otherwise would have been.

So freedom ends at the point where inequality becomes harmful to the people of the lowest rung of society was his idea. How you figure that out is difficult and I'm not going to go into that now, but that was his basic idea.

But I think one of the most interesting arguments about this - and I think this is interesting particularly for people in this room and the kind of work you do - was written, it was only about 20 years ago I think, by Avishai Margalit who wrote a book that I think was actually called "The Decent Society" and the argument there was that a decent society is one where the institutions within that society do not humiliate the people in that society.

So there are all sorts of ideas that can tie into that to do with inequality or with freedom and so on.

But what is interesting is this idea of humiliation being like the cornerstone of this. I thought it was a really, really profound insight. Because we don't talk about it a lot as a community or as a society, we don't talk about a lot as a nation the idea that people become humiliated as a result of things that happen, but we live with the consequences of it all the time.

Whenever we have conversations about deeply impoverished communities, for example, where there's inter-generational illiteracy or drug use or even abuse or violence, what we are looking at in many, many cases is a phenomenon of humiliation where a community or a group of people feel deeply emasculated and feel humiliated and, as a result of that, they tend to pay that forward and the next generation suffers as a result of that.

And you can engage in all kinds of analysis about who bears the brunt of that, right down to the way animals are treated within societies. It's not hard to construct an argument about a relationship between the treatment of animals and the level of humiliation that people who are meeting out that treatment feel.

It's actually a really, really deep idea that goes so underexplored in our society.

One of the most alarming things I've read - I came across this early on when I was at, and I still am, at Monash Uni, but when I started at Monash, I came across this early on in some of the terrorism studies subjects I was teaching – and this was not about terrorism, but this was a book that was written by a guy by the name of James Gilligan, who was a prison psychiatrist, that's what he was, for like 25 years or something in America.

And he used to, in his day-to-day work, he was dealing with the most horrifically violent criminals in American society – like, the people who do the kind of stuff that you read about in the paper, because it's that sensational, or who become the basis of a television series, dramatized or otherwise.

Really horrific stuff. For me to describe the kinds of things they were doing would be probably too graphic for this forum. And so this was his day-to-day life.

And he eventually decided he had had enough of that. I mean, God knows why, but anyway, he decided he had enough of that and he moved into academia and he started writing about this.

But he said – and what I was struck by was how absolute his statement was – he said every single case of violence that he had seen, in every single case, when he sat down to talk to them clinically, he had come to the conclusion that in every single case, it began with some kind of feeling or experience of humiliation in every case, which is why, when you see particularly ultraviolence, there's often a lot of symbolism involved. So again, I'm not going to go into some of the more gory things, but you'll see people who kill other people and then they will go on and mutilate their bodies, for example.

The things that they will do to them are highly symbolic, even if they don't necessarily understand it. So they'll deface their eyes or their tongues or these things that are used to perceive and judge and then to speak about. There's a symbolic language that goes on with all of these acts of violence.

And we've seen, I think over the weekend in this city, not ultraviolence, but I think what you've seen in a contest of humiliation. I mean, you don't even need to look at violence.

Look at the Trump phenomenon, for example, in the United States. What is ultimately driving that? What is it that's the lifeblood of this political movement that, by the way, in an average of polls now puts Trump ahead of Hilary Clinton for the US presidency. It's only .2%, but it's a lead, and nobody thought that was going to happen.

So what is it that's the lifeblood of this sort of movement? And when you look at the demographics largely of the people who are voting, they are people who have, for decades

now, as a result of the growing inequality within society, begun to feel deeply humiliated. And when people feel humiliated, what do they do? Well, they tend to find some kind of scapegoat to explain it.

Every seriously repressive movement in the modern world has followed something like this. Nazism in Germany followed the Depression. Fascism in Italy followed what they referred to as the mutilated victory of World War 1 – they were on the winning side in World War 1 and they didn't get any of the benefits of that that they were expecting to get.

So that became a source of national humiliation and then that got refracted through a kind of national aggression. Examples of this go on and on and on. You can keep coming up with this. But the idea of humiliation being actually a central element in what we do or in what drives us as human-beings, that when our self-esteem or our social status is wounded to such an extent that we no longer feel like we can be part of the social family, that we're not part of the social fabric, we've been somehow rejected from it, that's when horrific things happen, and even things that are not horrific, but are antisocial or counterproductive.

That's when that stuff happens. And we don't talk about it anywhere near enough.

But I want to draw a distinction, and this is, I think, an important distinction to draw. I think for a lot of people when you start talking about humiliation and people feeling excluded from society and so on or feeling rejected by society, which is even bigger – I mean, that's a really serious horrible feeling – when you talk about those things, I think for a lot of people it becomes equated with inequality.

So the way to deal with humiliation is simply to create equality. And that's kind of true, but it's not the full story.

What I want to put before you to think about, and then reject if you like, is that really what humiliation is about, and what a sense of belonging within a society is about, is not really about material equality so much as it is some kind of grander narrative of meaning within your society.

It is possible to be something other than wealthy, but feel that your life has serious significant meaning. In fact, I would say – and this is just a guess – I don't know what they're paying in the community sector these days, but I mean most of you would at least be on like what $1 million a year – two, wow, okay.

So I would say many people in this room have made that kind of decision. There'd probably be a lot of people in this room for whom a more lucrative career was a possibility, but you made a decision to work within this sector, or maybe even work unpaid in this sector, like volunteer within the sector, and one of the reasons why you've done that is that there's a really

clear, strong, compelling story of meaning that you can tell yourself about what it is you're doing.

And if one day you wake up and that story no longer adds up, that's when you have your breakdown; that's when you decide it's all been for nothing and it's a big waste of time and whatever.

But until that moment, and none of you are in that position, because those people are not in this conference, but until that moment, where you sit exactly in a scale of equality and inequality in our society is not actually the predominant driver.

There's a minimum level, like there's a subsistence level. There's poverty, and poverty is always coupled with humiliation, or almost always coupled with humiliation. But not because poverty makes it difficult for you to get things that you want, but because poverty is also coupled with a social status. The experience of poverty is an experience of exclusion from society. So while there is a relationship between equality or inequality and humiliation, they're not exactly the same thing.

And so what I want to put before you is the idea that the goal here is not – and this is true for the community sector as well as for government policies even in the private sector – the goal here is not simply about trying to create a more equal society, although I think that would be a good idea, particularly as our society becomes more and more unequal.

That's not simply the goal. The goal, I think, is to see if we can find a way to develop narratives of meaning within people's lives so that people have a meaningful story to tell about who they are and where they sit in relation to other people. That's actually a more powerful thing.

There's this very full-on abstract philosophical and psychoanalytical concept which is often used in this context, which is the idea of ontological security, which is fancy and it's jargon and that's why academics have jobs – because they can make up words like that.

But the basic meaning of it is that understanding that every human being has about where they sit in the cosmos; who they are in relation to something much grander and how it works. And, broadly speaking, if you have an understanding of that that works for you and you feel like your existence is in tune with that kind of understanding, generally speaking, you'll be content.

When that falls out of alignment, that's when problems start; that's when humiliation really starts to set in, which is why, for example, that people who belong to privileged social groups – so let's say they're white male heterosexual baby-boomers – they can still feel humiliated because even though they belong to all of those privileged groups, where they wake up to a world where that privilege is under constant assault, what's happening is that suddenly the universe doesn't make sense the way that they thought it did.

It's not that their station in society is necessarily lower than other people's, but it's that it no longer fits the story that they'd understood their entire lives. And as that story changes, particularly if it changes rapidly, as that story changes, then their ability to hold themselves together as a human being in the context of society, with a full understanding of what it means to be that human being, that begins to fall apart.

And when that begins to fall apart, that's when you see resistance.

Now, that's not to say that there should never be social change and all privileges should be preserved. That's not what I'm saying. But it is to say that when you go through those kinds of significant structural changes in society, you will see backlash.

And the reason you'll see backlash is because of this concept of ontological security. So what we're after really, if it's about humiliation being the cornerstone, or the removal of humiliation being the cornerstone of a decent society, then I would argue that the flipside of that is really to ask the following question, and that is: What tools do we have, in what ways can we confer dignity upon people?

Because if I had to think of the opposite of humiliation, that's probably what it would be. Now, dignity can be related to material status and equality, but in the same way that humiliation and inequality are not exactly the same thing, dignity and equality are not exactly the same thing either.

So I think what we're trying to do now is come up with some way of dignifying those around us and dignifying every element of our society. And here we ran into a massive problem that I haven't sold, and I'm hoping you can solve.

And that is, if we're going to try to give people a sense of dignity or if we're going to see others and confer dignity upon them in our own minds, which is actually half the battle, it's not that hard for people to attribute dignity to themselves, it's sometimes harder to attribute it to other people.

If we're going to do that, if we're going to come up with some kind of way of dignifying society, then we kind of need a basis on which to confer it, don't we? This is one of the big problems I've been trying to get my head around - and I'm going to confess to you, I haven't got my head around it yet - when we say every human being has dignity or every human being has something sacred about that human being, my question for the contemporary age is why and on what basis? What makes a human being sacred now? Like, what's the value system?

Apart from it being a nice thing to say, why do I have to believe that you have dignity? What's the story that we are telling ourselves as a society about what it is that gives a human being dignity?

And I ask this question in the context of I would say probably 30, 40 years where we have been transforming society and the stories we tell about society as being about really competition and individual entrepreneurship maximising freedom, I guess, where we are being trained to think of ourselves not as members of a greater society, but as consumers and producers and people who can get things out of society.

We see this every year, sadly - and I can't excuse myself from being part of this process – we see this every year when the federal government gets up and delivers a budget and every single headline begins "What's in it for you?" Right, are you familiar with this coverage? Every single year. And there's tables, if you're this person with this many kids and that much income or whatever, you get an extra $38 a year. Good budget. Or if you're this person, then you lose this much a year. Bad budget.

And then it just becomes a contest of different kinds of interest groups. But those interest groups are based upon a very strange thin understanding of what a human being is, which is that a human being is effectively just a repository for things like money. So it's just kind of a game – we're all pitted against each other and, at the end of it all, the one with the most toys wins. That seems to be the story that we've begun to tell ourselves.

What effectively I'm saying is the idea of a society where everybody is somehow invaluable, everyone plays a role in the context of that society, that mythology is kind of disappearing.

And what goes along with that is a mythology that has grander or greater meaning. And what goes along with losing that meaning is losing the basis on which we can very easily point to what it is that gives a person dignity.

It's one of the things that, I guess, is really bothering me at the moment. When I think about, for example, take a really serious issue that needs really serious action. So let's go with something like domestic violence.

Thankfully, a huge amount of attention is now being directed towards it and a lot of money now coming from governments, perhaps not as much as there needs to be, but a lot more than I could have imagined there being five years ago. Rosie Batty has a huge amount to do with that, clearly.

But it's becoming a massive issue; a politically resonant issue. That's all fantastic. But when it comes to us talking about it publicly, I feel like we have a very strange habit of collapsing back onto well the solution to dealing with domestic violence is ultimately for men to respect women. So okay, well great, that would be a good thing. And that doesn't happen very much, or nowhere near as much as it should. That's great.

But here's my question that's far more confronting, I think, and that is: How are we meant to convince, in this particular instance, men to respect women when we've spent the last 30 years of our social lives training ourselves not to respect anybody?

As we've been teaching ourselves to see each other as competition, what comes with that is maybe a begrudging competitive respect, but nothing deeper than that. And I think this is one of the reasons that we now live in an age where even in developed politically successful democracies like ours, concepts like human rights become really tradable.

We see this in the asylum seeker debate all the time. Why? Because the people that we're talking about are no longer people that carry some kind of inalienable dignity with them.

They're kind of chattels that we can use to deter other people. This is a really strange way to think about it, but I would argue, or what I'm asking you to think about anyway, is that this is a consequence of decades of us training ourselves to think this way; not to think in terms of society; not to think in terms of community.

And I think that one of the reasons that's happened is that the institutions of civil society have just been eroded. And there are lots of signs of that. One of the signs of that is that our solution to every problem now is like more regulation by the government or more codes of conduct by whatever – because we don't have a strong civil society that just kind of allows basic ethics of decency to pervade within society. Once upon a time, I suppose, the church played that role. The church doesn't play that role now.

And depending on the church, it's in all kinds of straits at the moment and it's public reputation is collapsing. So fine, but then what? What replaces it?

And so I've decided that even though my most pessimistic moments I feel like it's all a bit too far gone and it's all hopeless, but bear in mind, I'm a pessimistic person by nature, I'm trained as a lawyer, I'm a Richmond supporter. Everything goes badly in my life in that way.

But I've decided that really the answer to this question about where it is that we come up with the stories that give people dignity because they're human beings; where are those stories coming from; where are those ideas coming from; where is that ethic coming from? Then, for better or worse, it comes from this room.

Like, I'm sorry to put the weight of the entire species upon you, but I believe that's ultimately what it is. Because if we don't have strong civil society institutions in the form of, say, the church any longer, then we're trying to rely on government to kind of police our conduct in every social situation so that we can remove things like discrimination or whatever.

Then, the only place I can think of that's left for us to inject those really essential things that are much bigger than what we ever talk about in public interaction, but we need to talk about -

those things like meaning and dignity, giving people some kind of way of avoiding that feeling of humiliation, that kind of ethic of civility and dignity - the only place I can think of where that's coming is the community sector. That's it. Like, you're it. It's all on you.

Thank you for clapping, but I detect it as a bit nervous.

Because if there's one thing that can get in the way of that kind of narrative we've created for ourselves about thinking of ourselves as consumers and entrepreneurs and all of that, if there's one thing that can get in the way of that, it's having the increasingly alien experience of actually spending time with human beings, having to interact with them and having to get involved in their lives and engage with them around services that are essential to them or activities that bring joy, even if they don't bring financial recompense or whatever it is. That's all I can think of.

And what community allows you to do, and I'm sure you hear a lot about, you know, the assault on community and the disintegration of community and all this sort of stuff - and you can have that conversation better than me - but what community does allow you to do is make sure that other people that you would never otherwise have anything to do with get in your face at some point; that you get to understand what they are.

And if we don't have an overarching narrative from an institution telling us how we should view other human beings in the way that the church used to do, if we don't have that, then we may as well have one that isn't very clearly articulated, but is deeply experiential.

And the only source of that that I can think of is from the community sector.