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Imagine – Communities with Vibrant Hearts and Souls

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Thank you for that introduction, Rhonda. Just in case you all think I'm getting carried away with all that praise, there's a great line about journalism from Nicholas Tomlin – "The only qualities necessary for real success in journalism are rat like cunning, a plausible manner, and a little literary ability."

I like the interviewing. I don't like cross-examination, even though it provides great theatre – I much prefer asking genuine queries, much as Andrew Denton does. I find that people eventually open up, even if they start out unwillingly, and when they get off they all think "Oooer – what have I said?"

I'm inclined to be a little bit subversive and say that if all of us want to be real contributors to dreaming of communities in the future, we shouldn't keep attending talk fests like this one.

However admirable they are, and however much they buoy up our individual spirits, I've been wondering lately whether when it comes to imagining wonderful new worlds there's too much talk and too little action out on the ground.

I was forced to think about this a year ago, when a very impressive community activist whose work I really admired came to me in Sydney with a proposal. She wanted to set up a new network, and she had great plans for it. It would alert people to lots of the issues, it would conduct good small conferences, it would spread the word, and so on and so forth.

I couldn't fault the plan, and I couldn't fault her aspirations, and I knew that this woman had great zeal, and was very clever, and could get things done, and I really believed in her.

I said no, I wouldn't join this new group. She was quite shocked, and asked "Why wouldn't you?"

I said "I think we'll end up talking to ourselves." Those who join groups like this all live relatively good lives, we're all engaged, we're persuaded of the need for the kind of change we're talking about, and I suspected that we would become more engaged, more involved, more friendly, with greater networking among ourselves, but not necessarily making a real difference to the communities we were talking about, or even our own. So despite all her pleas, and her real look of hurt, and my own diffidence, I

kept to my word and didn't join her group. I had real personal regrets, because I instinctively wanted to join – they were my people, if you know what I mean, a great new group and a great place to make new mates – but when I allowed my head to rule I thought "I have to be honest. It might be a waste of time."

The activist concerned still invites me to the group's events, and they're great, and I occasionally go, and I don't know, to be honest, whether she's done exactly what she set out to do.

I felt the need to break with my established pattern, which is to turn up enthusiastically for more talk, more learning, more equipping myself for action rather than actually doing anything. Underneath it all I feel we do know enough already.

We have lots of research. What we need now is clever, fresh, exuberant ways to apply this research to our communities - to throw ourselves into new-style events and institutions that may take us beyond our comfort zones.

When we talk of innovation – a word that's often bandied around at conferences like this – I believe that that means dreaming up ways to become reabsorbed in our communities, whether or not these are the easiest places to be, rather than opting out of them. I believe that this means getting beyond our worlds of work, and perhaps our own households, and deriving some real fun from the communities we're talking about.

I sometimes get a sense that people think conferences are the way forward. Frankly, I think they're no more than a springboard. Yes, I do want to be here today. Yes, I do believe that of all the conferences around this one least deserves the label of 'talking to each other'. I know, too, that conferences of this kind are often helpful just in keeping each other going. Even so, how we divide up our available energy is still worth talking about.

It's also true that many of you will face another little conundrum. You might become quite frustrated, even indignant, because others are still some way behind the place you've arrived at through your work in the community – which is a great educator. I found this through my years at Life Matters on Radio National.

When you started to genuinely understand the interlocking factors that affect outcomes, particularly for young people, and when you have shifted your perspective, you do want to get down and dirty and fix things. And you run into brick walls.

It is incredibly annoying to run into others who have simply not had a chance to put these issues at the forefront of their minds, who continue to think that these issues are very much a private matter, or who persist in believing that there are tried and true solutions that have worked down through the generations and will work again today. That sort of people can really aggravate you and take away from your finite stocks of energy.

And the thing is that in some ways they're right. That's the conundrum. There are some verities that have to be present in order for our communities, and in particular their young people, to thrive.

If you'll bear with me I'd like to concentrate on young people, not because they're the only group in the community but because I do think that they represent the future of our communities and I think that they're the area where the best ratio of reward to effort is to be found.

We do know that some things have always needed to be present, and still need to be present, but may need to be rearticulated.

One, stable attachments to at least one adult who palpably cares about the young person and their potential.

Two, good, durable links with peers, friends whom the person themselves feels in their bones will support them in the tough times.

Thirdly, a source of hope about the world they're entering – which is a huge challenge to people like me in the media, who often with the best will in the world think that the best way to help young people is by listing all the shocking things that are going to confront them. It can sometimes be exactly the reverse, and it's a real dilemma.

Fourthly, some mastery over their own lives. There's probably no greater source of self-esteem, but this isn't given the importance it deserves.

Fifthly, the knowledge that someone is in charge – the knowledge that the world around them is not just careering along out of control, and another important but under recognised issue.

Some research has been done on this, and apparently the image in the New Testament that's most attractive and most palatable to young people is the Good Shepherd – a gentle custodial role. I don't think that's something that adults necessarily think about, but it's something that for obvious reasons young people find immensely engaging.

Six, having something asked of them – also something that is often overlooked, even though there's lots of research suggesting that young people want to be part of the community project but are seldom asked to be.

They may not necessarily put their hands up in the way we'd like them to, but that sense of joining in, of being apprentice adults, of being invited in, is apparently most important (a lot of you may know all this already, and forgive me if I'm going over well-trodden ground). I do think, though, that this sometimes needs to be said.

When the Catholic Bishops' Conference back in 1998 looked closely at young peoples' needs it cited "identity' and 'search for meaning' as two of the four areas of special concern, along with 'unemployment' and 'drug and alcohol abuse'.

I would like to quote a good, simple statement from Graham Rossiter, who's the Director of the Cardinal Clancy Centre for Research into the Spiritual, Moral, Religious, and Pastoral Dimensions in Education at the Australian Catholic University, Sydney (I hope he doesn't have to fill that out in full on forms very often) "When young people are strong and somewhat secure in their sense of purpose and sure of who they are, they will be better able to cope with and respond creatively to the psychological pressures of life in modern Western societies."

Rossiter has written a great paper on this that I've mined for insights for my talk today, and has done some marvellous original

thinking. He says that young people, in particular, feel caught in a bind – that the culture in which they live glorifies individualism, and the commercial world does everything it can to make individuality a marketable commodity, and this emphasis on the individual has accompanied the great and steady opening of our societies (which I applaud – as a woman, I have no desire to go back to medieval social hierarchies, thank you very much, I far prefer post-enlightenment times) but, as he says, "individuality should not be allowed to overreach its talents". It should only be part of the repertoire of a well-rounded modern community, rather than as now its revered centre.

Rossiter suggests that one of the major problems with individualism is that it may appear to young people that it is one of the few things left for them to believe in; yet we know from the best psychological research that the individual on its own was, as the great American researcher Martin Seligman says, 'never a good site for contentment'

There's another big related trap here, too. It may be just expecting too much of human beings to expect them to construct this broader sense of meaning by themselves, without the support of some community frame of reference --which is where I believe you fit in.

Rossiter also quotes French psychoanalytic theorist Jean Lacan, who suggested that capitalist society had accelerated the emphasis on the individual to the point where many of us suffered from a form of social psychosis, trying to live out a massive ego fantasy.

The demographic group that has been dubbed 'the D.I.Y. generation' has a do-it-yourself attitude to life, picking and choosing their lifestyle, their code of ethics, and their baseline morality from a variety of sources. That's supposed to be what makes well-rounded people, but that's not necessarily so.

It doesn't provide a solid basis to suggest to a young person who they are - a solid foundation formed within the community in which they live.

If we want to cut to the chase, "It's connection, stupid" – to parody Bill Clinton's 1992 election mantra, "It's the economy, stupid". Connections – modelled by us as adults, practically, not just by

talk, and handed on to our children – that's what will cause people to thrive, connections that give people a chance of knowing who they are both individually and within their community.

These are the constants. The way they're applied will shift depending on the time and the setting and the peculiarities of your own community, and this is where the up-to-date knowledge you can provide us with today is so vital in knowing who you are and what your community is. It's identity we have to struggle for now to equip both ourselves and our young people with a sense that life is worth going on with and committing ourselves to.

At this point I'd like to ask you all to talk to each other for about three minutes relating all this to your own communities. Do your experiences lead you to agree, or disagree? And then I'll ask you for some feedback.

Adam Blake, National Association For Prevention Of Child Abuse And Neglect Foundation; We're on exactly that journey, and I'd just like to feed that back to you; It's an issue we've been kicking around for two or three years, ironically culminating in an international conference we organised last year – and, meaning no disrespect to the four years of work involved or the 1200 people from 80 countries who came, the professionals furthering their professional development and their professional networks spent a lot of time blowing their own trumpets.
The key stakeholders in Prevention of Child Abuse And Neglect are children – and where were they, and where was their vision? The most beautiful part of that conference was that there was a youth stream, which had almost a parallel conference running. I went and spent half a day with them, and that was extraordinary and inspiring. They were putting up ways forward that weren't necessarily bound by existing organisational structures or paradigms or politics.
What we're trying to do now is bridge the two streams, to bring the networks to the fire to engage directly with children and youth and be challenged by their vision and their articulation of the future. The other thing that we find goes with this is that we're trying to articulate a positive vision of what you're striving for, whereas the bulk of the history of the sector has focused on the problem and a problem alleviation approach that looks to some kind of benign country where there's no abuse and no neglect but is otherwise a bizarre vacuum. We're now saying "What if we look at a positive

vision of the value of children, the contribution they make to our community and our economy, all those things?"
And what's confronting is that we don't know the answer; we don't know what that kind of society would look like. We've spent so much time researching and developing a competency around problem that we can't see a solution. We're copping a lot of aggression and anger for this, saying "Your vision doesn't exist, so why pursue that? It's not real."
And so I'd just like to confirm our support of the direction you're heading in.

That's a very interesting idea. The social sciences have been having this debate among themselves, feeling that there hasn't been nearly enough curiosity about competence. I determined to pursue that in my own journalism – not to lose my scepticism, because you have to be usefully sceptical (not cynical) about all claims, but not to be obsessed by listing everything that's going wrong.

That bedevils a lot of reporting about, for instance, Aboriginal issues. It's very, very, hard. As a journalist, my job is to be an auditor of society – but not to be someone who gets their rocks off by saying "Now, who can we blame for all these things going wrong?"

As Mick Dodson said to me, "Geraldine, for the next twenty-five years the good statistics will come in small, isolated groups, and you will have to find them out." That's real reporting -- getting on the phone and finding out that there's a little dental group in Coffs Harbour that's got fantastic results, are a marvellous medical centre in South Perth that has fantastic client return rates and follow-through. "Oh, how are we going to get up there? Can we get that person? Can they talk?" etcetera. They're all small, and they don't make big headlines, and that's a real issue for the media as much as it is for you activists.

Martin Bass, Sydney. What you're saying has a particular resonance for me not only in my work with young people but balancing family with work responsibilities in my own life. I will probably be offered opportunities to advance my career as time goes on, but I feel I really have to look at myself as an individual versus my role in the family and to some extent give away my individual development to ensure the wellbeing of my own family.

Our families are like little communities, and I think it's very important to see it in that context rather than limiting the significance of the individualism/connection debate to young people only. It's relevant also to the middle-aged, like me, who are faced with these choices because families have changed so radically – my wife now works full-time, we have two young children – and I may feel it's better not to advance in my career because the responsibilities outside my family will be too great.

That's a conversation that's growing. I could have spoken happily for another hour and a half on time management, because it's such a fascinating story.

One of the things I realise is that one of the joys of middle age is that you become a Catherine wheel of ideas, and you persuade yourself that you're terribly smart, isn't it marvellous at this stage of life – and then you realise, as I did the other day when a moment of humility settled on me, that the real gift is problem-solving.

Yes, it's a joy to have so many ideas and to see so much -- and all of you in this room, I'm sure, are engaged and active and energetic and dynamic – but more and more you come to respect the people who focus down and get bone or two things done. It's so hard to do that.

I'm the patron of the Newcastle Family Action Centre, a marvellous New South Wales group that began by working with caravan families and gradually expanded its scope. It had received a great long-term grant from the Bernard Van Leer Foundation, who have the interesting idea of granting a group money for seven to ten years while insisting that the group associates itself with another major partner in the community. Funding is phased out gradually over the seven years. It's a very impressive, very thorough, typically Dutch approach.

Now the Van Leer money is coming to an end, and they're now deciding that they can't keep on doing what they have been doing and are facing the terrible dilemma of what to drop off. Perhaps, I said to them, you just have to focus down and turn up. You come up with this great idea, but in fact the challenge is not to do it once but to repeat it, and to be well enough organised to be able to persuade others in the community that it is repeatable.

Anything that's an amazing miraculous one-off event hasn't achieved a lot. The real magic is in the durability – and being able to do that and still keep our own families durable, well, that's the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. But at least we're talking.

I'm from the Physical Disability Council of Australia, and I was very interested to hear what you had to say about 'our youth' or 'our young people – we can see what they are and how they can contribute, and this helps them believe in themselves. Now, people with disabilities are always dismissed as useless. Yesterday I asked a friend if I could carry her bags. Yes, I said, but when I was a wobbly walker I couldn't carry very much, and now I'm in an electric wheelchair it's one of my greatest pleasures in life to carry heavy things for people – and no, my legs don't break.
The other point is 'recognising competencies.' People with disabilities have amazing competencies – I can do all sorts of things that I shouldn't be able to do, yet society still treats me as if I was a fragile lump of nothing
We need to be used, and our competencies need to be recognised. We need to be allowed in. We are, after all, 20% of the population.

Very true, yes. You've hit on something really clever. When someone's dubbed 'brittle' it's hard to throw off that tag. I have to say that's not a problem for me – people generally overestimate my competence, not underplay it – but of course it's a privilege to have things asked of you, because then you lift your game.

We sometimes have those moments of understanding. Students come through the door to do work experience with the ABC and in their look you can see that spark. You say to them "Can you do this – and this, and this, and this…." and you can seem them growing before your very eyes.

I think that for about five years now some of the very best American work on self-esteem from people like Seligman has been debunking the idea.

Seligman thinks it's become out of control, and has had to look at some of the false distortions around the terminology – in particular, the idea that it was just about being valued and affirmed whatever you did. That's just not so.

If they have to step up to the plate and can see they've achieved something, there's simply no greater way to confer on people a sense of belonging.

And I think that this is where – see what I mean about conferences? – the people we might want to talk about, the people we might want to draw in, we know only through our own stereotypes, which means that we don't know how to engage them.

It's a real issue for community work, because it often cuts across your own perceptions of what it's reasonable to ask of another person. The whole transaction is sobering and humbling.

We say "Well, I've got my limits, and I need to ask someone else to do something – but are they up to it?" which means that you have a hierarchy there right from the start. And you still do have to know what's too much to ask. It's a conundrum, but it's a creative conundrum.

My name is Winsome Mathews, from the community of Mount Druitt in New South Wales. I'm the project manager of the Hebersham Aboriginal Youth Service, and we're working with a large group of Aboriginal young people – we have the highest concentration of Aborigines in the whole country, and I work with a potential client base of 1400 young Aboriginal people, 82% of whom come from a juvenile justice order of some sort. The points you raise about identity are very powerful.
One of our prime philosophies in working with young people is about re-empowerment through cultural and spiritual identity.
The other elements you described, belonging and mastery, are derived from empowering young people around their identity – and I'm saying this not just about Aboriginal young people but about all young people. While we're an Aboriginal-specific service, the reality is that our young people run with everybody, and in that area we have a multicultural mix of one hundred and eighty-six world cultures.
The other thing that we need to remember when working with young people is facilitating joy. On a short, medium and long-term basis.

Were you at the opening of the Men's Shed out at Mount Druitt? I do quite a bit of work with the Catholic Church – well, sorry, theoretically I do – well, I do if I've got the time – well, I try to -- well, just don't quote me, because in fact I don't do nearly as much work for the Church as I should, but in any case they have this fantastic project designed to get the men in to try, among other things, to do something about the terrible suicide rate out there.

An Aboriginal man did the smoking ceremony, with the official party being terribly proper and the Aboriginals laughing irreverently as the smoke blew in our faces and made us cough…. It was gorgeous. A lovely atmosphere.

My name's David McLaughlin –

My, I've never had the cameraman asking questions before.

- and as well as being cameraman here I'm a community television producer with Channel 31 here in Melbourne, and I was wondering what your perspective was on community television and how that relates to helping the community.
I'd also like to ask how you as a professional broadcaster see community television, and how you'd see it interacting with professionals and the community in the future.

I see community television as very much a niche thing, wonderful for those who are close to it but – even by comparison with community radio -- very narrowcast.

I started off in newspapers and have worked in both radio and television. Radio is just so intimate and so immediate, while television constantly struggles to achieve that same rapport with the audience.

I sit on the Board of the St. James Ethics Centre, and it was recently offered a certain number of hours each week on a new cable channel. I'll admit that I recommended against taking up that offer, because I felt it would gobble up the staff's time. I don't know what happens, but television just claims people, and becomes cumbersome and complex before you know where you are.

People start talking about lighting and production values and forget about content. I said "Look, this is going to divert us.

Furthermore, for it to work it will require the kind of viewer behaviour that doesn't really fit with the way television works. To catch us people will have to pick our show out of everything that's available and turn on their TVs at ten-thirty in the morning or eight in the evening especially to watch the show, and what people generally do is turn on the TV at whatever time they're free and only then pick from what's available.

In radio they're looking at new delivery methods. Everybody's now going to pod casting, so that people can have their radio programs at the time they want to listen to them, and I'm sure that's the way of the future. There will probably still be broad strands of mass delivery – that's what's happening in the US, where they're a few years ahead of us in these developments. There ate thousands of cable channels, but if you're a major national advertiser you still have to go to one of the three big networks.

These days you'll reach only 60% of the audience rather than 75% as before, but nothing else will give you even 60%. I think we'll be looking at an interesting mix as people pick and choose.

Rob Salter, from Crossroads Youth and Community Services. One of the people I was talking to in my small group was from Centacare, where she counsels young couples. She had observed that they don't know much about any of the organisations in their community that could support them.
We don't put nearly enough effort into informing young people about civil society through the education system. Professor Mark Lyons talks about 700,000 different community organisations of the kind we represent, but even in those numbers we can't get enough attention.
We spend a lot of time educating young people about work options, but what about community organisations they could belong to?
And in fact we should go much further than this, engaging them as well as informing them as a part of their education, so that when they move beyond school they know there is this range of organisations that they can contribute to or benefit from.

School-to-work transition – you could have another whole conference just on that. I'd like to write a book on it, because it's been my observation that the majority of kids struggle in ways that you as a parent cannot rehearse in advance.

I've had three children move on after school, and all of them in different ways have really found it tough. We don't talk about these problems nearly enough – and one of the things that matters is connections to something that isn't just the school, some bigger entity.

And in my experience you have the devil's own job getting them to reach out and tap what resources might be there. Some of them are seen as daggy, with some of them they just haven't got the habit of joining.

I think you're absolutely right, and good community needs good organisation, and good, clever, competent organisers. People don't want to front up for Dimboola-like functions any more, they want well-run (I won't say 'professional') competent organisations with an element of durability that don't look as if they'll fall over tomorrow.

If you're on the edge of your energy because the organisation you're in is on the edge of its energy that's incredibly debilitating. I've been there. To get to your concentric circles of activity needs good leadership, and it often needs core staff who are paid – and then you have to work out how to fund that.

I'd like to see good, competent, exuberant organisations doing much more clever community service advertising on television. I'd like to see a whole different way of positioning those activities so they're not seen as being for victims only, so they're seen as being about constructive ways of enjoying life. They're not often presented like that.

Everything we know about volunteering suggests that people, especially young people, will volunteer if they have a boundary task asked of the. They won't turn up for ever and ever being the pink lady at the local hospital, but they will turn up for a project – and if that's run well, they'll turn up again, and it's not, they're why bother?

Kevin Waugh from the Wendouree West Renewal Project. Geraldine, Thank you for saying we've had too many conferences and too much talk. I've been to conferences that talked about taking disabilities back into the mainstream but don't have anybody

there with a disability - and that's my question: how many people here today are health care card holders? Put your hands up. About ten percent.
We need more people from the disadvantaged communities we're talking about. There's a lot of knowledge out there in the wider community, but we need that knowledge to be put back with the people who can actually act on it. We've talked and talked – now let's do something.

Ten percent isn't a bad turnout -- you wouldn't get that in most conferences – but I take your point. And these unrepresented groups might not want to turn up to a two-day conference, but may wish to come to something entirely different.

We all have to put our thinking caps on. I'm also involved with Sustainability Street, and interesting venture that's going very well down here with some really clever strategic thinking that's certainly equal to anything you'd see from one of the big corporates – thinking through who you tap, how you listen, what you ask of people, what groups do you set up, what are reasonable aims and what aren't, how to do long-term thinking – really sophisticated.

I'm Anne Horrigan-Dixon from the Fitzroy Learning Network, a Melbourne organisation that's been receiving housing, and caring for people who come out of immigration detention centres. We've been doing it for four years and ten months.
We work opposite the high-rise flats in Fitzroy, and working at the coalface you can never plan who's going to walk in your door from one day to the next. You can be working away happily when you're suddenly hit by an influx of people.
We began in August 2000 when the Immigration Department decided to stave off bankruptcy by releasing people from the Woomera Detention Centre.
We had to deal with a rush of people suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder from their persecution in their own countries, their journeys, their detention, and the vilification that was going on around them.
Now, five years down the track, the grass-roots Australian community has turned this vilification on its head and realises what valuable members of the community they can be. When you talk about connectedness, we at the Learning Network had six hundred people on temporary protection visas come through our doors in eighteen months.

We're a tiny organisation, and the only thing we have going for us is our success rate- 85% of our TPBs are working or studying. We have people who will finish university this year.
When you ask 'How can that happen?' it's really very simple. It's connectedness.
But how do we build connectedness in the community at a grassroots level? It's drinking a cup of tea with somebody. It's sitting down and giving somebody time (and it's something bureaucrats should take notice of – it'd be easier if we had better statistics).
When you're really stressed at work and are praying nobody else comes in so you can get through the paperwork, then you have to stop and think; "No, they've come, it's so hard for them to walk through the door, show them you think they're worth the time to have a cup of tea."
The most important thing is for there to be two-way connectedness. It's easy for Network staff to see these people as victims, because they have been terribly victimised by the structures of our society, but if they are to have a way forward the key is a reciprocal relationship -- one where you say to them "Can you make <u>me</u> a cup of tea? I have it this way…"
Another great way of building connectedness with people is dishwashing. When new volunteers come in with their fancy CVs, my first question is "Can you wash dishes?"
And if they don't look very happy at the prospect, they're not going to fit in, because in this community everybody needs to be able to do the most basic things.
The Learning Network has developed a simple replicatable model for building social capital, a model that's about giving people opportunities to rise above their situation – and what situations! We're getting two people from Nauru on Saturday and I already know they'll be destitute, short of clothes, without shoes that fit, and totally traumatised by four years of never knowing whether the next day would bring detention, deportation, or more of the same. And I already know that two weeks later they'll be completely different people. Our volunteers sit with them, walk them up the street, give them time, and listen to them.
We celebrate our successes – we run the learning network on parties, thanks to a grant we got from Jack Brockhoff, a marvellous man who not only made the biscuits we have with our cups of tea but gives money to groups like ours to build communities.
Last year we had eight parties for seventy people who came off Nauru, and if you look at that group now and ask them what made

the difference they'll say that it was the fact that the person who met them at the airport and gave them a hug came back with them to have a cup of tea and listen.
It's that connectedness that builds it up. If you look at how we all make our own friends, it's over tea coffee, and I think that at the bottom of these forms where we log our contact hours and our project hours there should be a slot for the number of quality cups of tea you've given out.

A lecturer -- whose name I unfortunately can't remember – said recently that we have arguably emerged from a fairly depressing eight years in which we've had to acknowledge that Australian society as a whole is very wary of outsiders – people it doesn't know and can't control.

That hasn't been easy to watch, but, equally, when Australians can meet people over a cup of tea we do make huge advances. I found that quite helpful, because it has been depressing watching Australia parade its neuroses.

All nations have this primal fear of outsiders, but because of our origins and because we're an island ours is a fear of people in boats. We've also, though, seen disproportionately good behaviour from the most unlikely people when they've actually had a chance to meet the newcomers. Perhaps that should be added to your cup-of-tea index.

My name's Paul Randall, I'm a high school youth worker, and looking at the points you make on what young people need and the search for meaning and all that stuff, in my years as a youth worker I've seen a lot of money and energy poured into government programs youth groups and stuff but haven't seem a lot of long-term sustainable models of youth work and that kind of thing, we're still seeing a lot of the kids I work with leaving year 12 struggling with who they are in the world and that kind of stuff, and I sort of wanted to get your perspective on, you know, what is it that makes these things work, because a lot of people are doing a lot of things trying to sort through these issues with young people and trying to help them ask those questions….

Can I ask you a question back? Have you seen any <u>competent</u> models? What's the pattern in the kids who do make that transition well?

That's a good question. I guess it's similar to the lady before, with the kids at my own school and in my own church youth group the successful ones are probably the kids I've invested the time and energy in and invited round to my house and asked "Do you want to hang out and watch telly with us" kind of stuff and going on all the school camps and trips, and I guess it's kind of funny, I was just sort of thinking as I was getting up here to ask the question like that it's we always want a model but it's probably as simple as the relationship stuff.
You know, it's sort of hard when that's long-term work, you get to know three or four kids in your whole year at the school or whatever.

The trouble is that this also means that if good outcomes do in fact come down to individual relationships, as this young man seems to be suggesting, then by definition you can't do as much as you gloriously aim to do.

You can't have mass individual relationships. I've been struggling with that too. It would mean that you had to aim lower, but deeper, because once you get engaged in this sort of work you see so much real need that you can bedevil yourself by seeing too much.

It's amazingly clarifying to focus right down on what does work. I'm involved in a Catholic renewal group that's set up 'Spirituality in the Pub' programs that have grown like Topsy, and we really try to stress the relationship thing.

Father Michael Whelan, the wise priest who's at the core of it, says that if the churches don't model relationships they've got no reason to be. It's fundamentally about relating – and that comes off the tongue very easily, but if you really apply that it just grounds you.

I find new relationships are quite a responsibility, and one of the reason I wouldn't join that woman's group I spoke of earlier is that I thought "If I join that group, I'll have to make a number of new relationships, and if I want to do them well I'll have to give lots, and I just don't want to. I've got enough relationships involved in what I'm already doing. That may be part of a new debate.

Modern research shows that if kids have a passion – something they care about outside their family – they're much better equipped for life.

I have a boy of eleven, and I'm really working hard to find something that will capture his attention. In those unglamorous middle years you do the real work that equips them for the world. They'll leave a lot of it behind, of course, but it's incredibly important at that stage. Parents tend to obsess over marks and that sort of stuff, but that's not really where it's at.

I'm Lena Beridet and I work at Centacare with the Horn of Africa community. The majority of these are from refugee camps, and it was very interesting to hear you talking about how you are struggling to try and create a sense of connection with your children and to understand what they want and what their future will be.
In terms of Horn of Africa settlers, what is your view of parenting by parents who have never been to school?
This is a new system, a new culture, and when kids arrive in Australian schools they're classified not according to their knowledge but by age – which puts a sixteen-year-old who has never been to school in his life and who's only had only six months English language instruction into year ten
The community is really struggling, and we've been trying to raise this issue with government organisations, Kids are blamed for not fitting into the system, but the system is not catering for them. How do we convey the message to our government that 'Your system does not work?

This may sound a bit glib, but I have found that most of the bureaucrats and managers I know are overwrought and overstretched. If you want change, you have to come up with the solutions and articular them.

You have to do the hard work to be able to say: "This is what I'm proposing" – even if you have to give them both an ambit claim and what's modestly achievable, with a budget estimate (and, preferably, have a source of funds that will meet the government halfway).

One of the great mistakes I see people make with bureaucracies – and women often fall into this trap – is that they go to government with a beautifully articulated whinge.

As a general rule, a legitimate complaint is only half the story. For goodness' sake, give them the solution as well. Actually, the culture of the Horn of Africa is so strong that many of your kids have been surprisingly well-equipped with a sense of who they are – even though what you say may be true academically, there's a cultural strength that leaves a lot of other kids behind (though there, admittedly and unfortunately, I'm drawing on American rather than Australian sources).

My name's Sue Egan, I'm the Executive Officer of the Physical Disability Council of Australia, and I've had a physical disability for more years than I can remember.
I've worked in the disability centre for over twenty years, and in that time I've attended a lot of disability conferences and many community conferences. The one thing that comes through in all those conferences is the need to be included, and that comes through in just about every single sector I've come across.
I want to focus that issue of inclusion on the disability sector, where though all of those years our cry for inclusion has been ignored. Just when we think we're getting somewhere with inclusion the Federal government separates us out again, from the community and now from each other – because now we have a tier of grandfathered people on disability pensions, and a new generation of people coming along who are put on Newstart and will probably never get a DSP.
We've suddenly changed around again so that we're once again people who have a problem but aren't included in society, and in a very negative context. We're trying to look at how we can be included in the community, and one of the things that I've been enlightened by at this conference is that there are so many areas which have similar issues of exclusion.
This conference is an opportunity to share that and to start networking among ourselves to find allies and supporters. I've already made a lot of new contacts. These conferences are invaluable as a training mechanism for those of us who are otherwise just burnt out by the work we do.

You're probably right, and I accept that. The mental health people have a lot of similar observations to make. Last year they asked

me to compere a small breakfast, 7.30 to 9.00, that they held in Parliament House in Canberra.

They had about sixty people, 20% of them mental health professionals, who were thus able to get right up close to politicians, who couldn't afford not to come to something on their patch – there were two or three speakers, I was asked to keep the show moving, and it really helped them.

After the breakfast quite a lot of the pollies stayed around and chatted to people, and it made a difference. They went right into the belly of the beast. You could think about trying something like that.

That was great – I only had to do half the work. If you'll allow me one final cliché, the first President Bush used to talk about "the vision thing'. I always thing that the real vision, and the hardest vision, is to know what to do next. Good luck.