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Restoring hope, rebuilding trust and inspiring optimism

Presentation by
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Communities in Control Conference
Melbourne and online, May 17-18, 2021

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About the presentation

Revolutions never start at the top. If we dare to dream of a more loving country – a kinder, more compassionate, more cooperative, more respectful, more inclusive, more egalitarian, more harmonious, less cynical country – there's only one way to start turning that dream into a reality: each of us must live as if this is already that country. And there is no better time to start the revolution than now, when so many are struggling from the effects of drought, floods, bushfires and the pandemic.

Hugh Mackay

Do you ever find yourself despairing about man's inhumanity to man? Yes. Do you sometimes wonder whether the wearying gender wars will ever end? Are you shocked by the level of violence in our society? Yes. Are you shocked by our failure, after all these years, to effect true reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians? Do you sometimes shake your head in disgust at the behaviour of politicians in our parliaments? Yes. Are you saddened when you hear people abusing each other?

Of course the answer to all those questions is yes, and I could go on with a gloomy list like that for as long as we've got. There is plenty of ugly stuff in the world – it's quite fashionable at the moment to be gloomy, in fact. It's quite fashionable to be cynical about the state of the world and the kind of people humans are. If we paid too much attention to radio, television and print news, we might form a very gloomy impression of the world – because news is about stuff that makes news. What makes news is stuff that is unusual. Stuff that's normal, conventional, routine, doesn't make the news. What makes the news is when people do something that's extremely unusual, and generally unusual in a negative direction.

So why don't we look at the big picture? Why don't we look at the whole story, and remind ourselves that in fact there is much more good stuff happening in the world every day than any of the bad stuff you hear on the news, ugly and dreadful though some of that is? There are everyday acts of kindness, compassion, goodwill, and cooperation going on all around us, all the time, and never making the news, for the very simple reason that humans are just being normal humans.

Just think about some of the examples of what's going on around you, all the time, in a positive way. The people who would stop without a second thought to help strangers out of a jam. The people who will help a frail elderly person cross a busy street or get on or off a bus. The people who give up their own ambitions in order to help their partner satisfy theirs, or to care for a relative living with some

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disability. The people who night after night, week after week, year after year, volunteer their services to help feed the poor and the homeless. The people who – again, without a second thought – rush to the aid of those who've been affected by floods or fires, especially that most dramatic of all bushfire seasons that we lived through from the end of 2019 to the beginning of 2020.

What about the people who devote big chunks of their week to patrolling surf beaches, or training as bushfire fighters, or coaching underprivileged kids' sporting teams, or helping slow readers at the local school, or coaching migrants who are struggling with English? In Victoria, what about the thousands of retired schoolteachers who volunteered their services to help kids who'd been disadvantaged by the so-called home schooling that went on during the pandemic lockdown? Any parents in the room who were trying to be home schoolers at that time probably know what a futile exercise that was for so many – both futile and stressful for most parents involved in it.

What about those people who, quite late in life, plant trees? They know it's going to take a long time. They're never going to pick the fruit, they're never going to sit in the shade of those trees, but they do it as an act of kindness for future generations. What about, at the simplest level, those people who always smile, always say hello, and always give you a wave when they pass you in the street, even though they may not know you and you may never see each other again?

I could go on with that list, because it's a much, much, much longer list than the list of terrible things going on in the world. The good deeds in any human society always outnumber the bad, and that's because the tendency to behave kindly is an inherent part of human nature. We often overlook that spectacular fact. We are, after all, a social species. We are built to connect – that's who we are, that's in our nature. We are designed to cooperate with each other. We're utterly dependant on families, neighbourhoods, groups, communities, workplaces, schools, and organisations of every kind to sustain us and nurture us and provide the emotional security that comes from that all-important sense of belonging.

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Because we need some measure of social harmony if our species is to survive, let alone thrive, our brains are wired for kindness and cooperation. Neuroscientists can now peep into the human brain in a way that psychologists and philosophers could previously only imagine. What they tell us is that there is an identifiable cooperative centre in the brain. That shouldn't surprise anyone. Of course a social species like ours would have evolved with a cooperative centre in the brain, because that's what we need to make the species function. It's probably our most precious asset, and yet it's very easily undervalued or brushed aside in favour of other more ego-driven, more competitive, more self-centred impulses – which also exist. But when we're being true to what Abraham Lincoln described as the better angels of our nature, we're capable of great kindness.

Notice this: we're capable of great kindness even towards people we don't like. We're capable of great kindness even towards people we could never agree with about anything. We're capable – here's perhaps the most sensational bit– we're capable of great kindness even towards total strangers.

250 years ago, Samuel Johnson wrote very wisely (I don't agree with everything Samuel Johnson wrote, but he was certainly wise about this) "Kindness is in our power, even when fondness is not". In other words, you don't have to like someone in order to be kind to them. In fact, isn't the kindness of strangers, and of people who we might think of as enemies, one of the loveliest things you've ever experienced? Isn't it one of the most encouraging and hopeful aspects of human nature?

Well, think about 2020 (it's hard not to). During the pandemic, and the bushfires that preceded it, we in Australia (and, most especially, in Victoria) drew on our capacity for kindness on a massive scale. I would say we'd never previously witnessed an outpouring of love like the one we saw during the pandemic. The empty carparks, the deserted school playgrounds, pubs and restaurants closed, people keeping a respectful distance from each other when they had to mingle at the supermarket or in a coffee line or at a bus stop. People wearing masks when asked to do so, but going way beyond what

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they were asked to do. Neighbours looking out for each other, doing each other's shopping, paying more attention to the frail aged who risked social isolation in their neighbourhoods and communities.

Not everyone would interpret it as positively as I just have. Some people found it all a bit spooky. Some people said "Isn't it sad to see the school playground empty"? Some people, of course, tried to carry on as if nothing had happened, and they were putting their own and other people's health at risk. Most of us, though, accepted the seriousness of the situation and responded accordingly, as humans always do when there's a crisis or a catastrophe to be dealt with. I was talking to a journalist recently who said "Yes, but people were fighting over toilet rolls in supermarket aisles," and I said "Yes, but how many?" We heard all about them on the news, we saw the same footage played endlessly, but something like six people in Australia fought over toilet rolls in a supermarket aisle and 25 million didn't.

We behaved as we usually do, whether it's a societal crisis or a personal crisis –perhaps a life-threatening illness, perhaps a bereavement, perhaps a relationship breakdown or a retrenchment, or on a societal scale floods, fires or pandemics. How do we typically respond? Not universally, but typically, how do we respond?

In the case of the pandemic, by modifying our behaviour – by modifying our behaviour so radically, in response to that threat, that we showed our care and concern for each other and our willingness to make personal sacrifices for the common good. That sounds grandiose, doesn't it, "Our willingness to make personal sacrifices for the common good"? But that's what humans do, because we belong to a social species, a cooperative species. We make personal sacrifices for the common good routinely – not as something to make a song and dance about, or to fuss about, or to seek praise for, but simply as the way it is for people who understand fully what it means to be human.

Those are all signs of what I regard as the purest form of human love. That's why I described our behaviour during the pandemic as an

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outpouring of love. Of course I'm not talking about romantic love, which is exciting, or familial love, which, remarkably, allows us to love people we don't always particularly like. Companionate love, too, is absolutely fundamental to our mental and emotional health, and we need those circles of friendship. Still, there is this other, and, I think, purer form of love, the love that has – this sounds like a contradiction, but stay with me for a moment – absolutely nothing to do with emotion. The love that has absolutely nothing to do with affection. The love that says we are going to treat each other kindly and respectfully, regardless of how we happen to feel about each other, because we know that's the only way a human community can survive.

One of the most impressive things about humans is not only our capacity to cope with life's inevitable disruptions, upheavals, and catastrophes, whether personal or societal. Not only do we cope with them, generally speaking, in the way I've described, but we also learn from them and even benefit from them. I was talking just a few days ago to a retired American academic who'd worked in London during the 1950s. He said that he was initially shocked by the number of people he ran into in London who were saying to him "We really miss the war.' He said, "How could you possibly miss the war?" Of course they weren't saying we miss the bombs, we miss the rubble, we miss the destruction and the death. What they were saying was we miss the sense of people who were pulling together, and that we miss communities that were strongly bonded with each other.

The generation of Australians who lived through the Great Depression of the late '20s and early '30s are mostly dead by now, but I spoke to a lot of them during my research career and there was a very, very typical narrative that they told about the experience of living through those times. Number one, it was appalling, horrendous, a time of terrible hardship and deprivation for many people. Unemployment was at levels that we can't even imagine today, and was sustained over years, and there were virtually no social security provisions to support those in the unemployment queues. People genuinely wondered from day to day whether they were going to be able to put food on the table. Neighbours were

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looking out for each other and pooling their resources, but life was really tough.

Decades later, by the time I was talking to these people about that experience, they were still able to describe what it was like, and again – not universally, but typically – what they said was "You know, that was the making of us." What did they mean? They meant under the pressure of hardship, under the pressure of having to cope with a crisis, having to deal with being disrupted and disadvantaged by their circumstances, they thought deeply about what really mattered to them. They thought about the values that were worth hanging on to. They reordered their priorities in the face of the hardship that they were facing – not just for a few months, but for years. And they said those learnings never left them. They became a bit of a laughing-stock in their own families, and their children and grandchildren often laughed at them, because they'd never throw out a piece of string or a rubber band, but they were the people who when someone new moved into the street would always bake a cake to go and welcome them.

Well, are we going to see a COVID effect in contemporary Australia? Are we going to be changed by the experience of living through the disruptions – fire, pandemic – of 2020? Almost certainly we are, and have already been, changed by those experiences, but the question I want to ask you to address now and into the future, is “Are the lessons that we learned from the experience of 2020, lessons that are going to endure? Are we going to take the ways we changed during 2020 as an example of how we could change, even when there isn't a crisis, even when we're not dealing with a catastrophe? When we went through months of lockdown, and, in the case of Victoria, repeated lockdowns, did we ask ourselves more deeply the question “What really matters to us?” Did we ask what values are worth clinging to? Did we reorder our priorities in the face of all of this?

The answer is yes, we did, on a huge scale. Typically we became, during those months, more caring of each other, because that's the inevitable consequence of realising, as we always do when there's a crisis or a catastrophe to deal with, that we are not simply

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individuals, unique, separate, independent. We are that. But the deeper truth about us, the real story about us, likes beneath all that. The real story is that we are all part of a shimmering vibrating web of interconnectedness and interdependency. Think about some of the ways the pandemic has already changed us. I've already mentioned the impact on local neighbourhoods. I'm sure you're aware of what happened in your street or suburb or town, and you can multiply that up all over Australia. I'll just give you a couple of very quick examples of cases I'm aware of.

Early in the pandemic I found myself trapped in a webinar. I'm sure you've all participated in webinars (a word, incidentally that I think should have been strangled at birth). Inevitably, we were siphoned off into chat rooms, and I found myself in a chat room just with two other people, both young men in their early 30's – one in Melbourne, one in Sydney, they didn't know each other. By coincidence, they'd each moved into new accommodation just before the lockdown, so they found themselves in a street and a suburb where they knew no one. So what did they do?

Quite independently, they each did exactly the same thing. They wrote little notes in which they said "I'm new to the street, I don't know anyone here, but here's my phone number. If you need anything, shopping, mowing, prescriptions collected, anything, just give us a call". A question – would those young men have done that if they'd moved into their new accommodation without a lockdown? Almost certainly not. Almost certainly they would have moved in and just got on with their lives. Maybe they would eventually have got to know the neighbours, maybe not. Maybe the neighbours would have noticed them, maybe not. But the crisis, the disruption, brought out the best in them, and I have no doubt in the neighbours that they left those notes with.

Another quick example; in Melbourne a friend of mine during the lockdown developed the habit of going to the local farmers market every Saturday morning with her daughter and two-year-old granddaughter, getting a bag of oranges, walking up and down the street and having the two-year-old offer an orange to everyone in

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the street. "Would you like an orange?" Of course, everyone wanted an orange if it was offered to them by a two-year-old girl with mum and grandma standing behind, and they did that every week during the lockdown. They stopped once the lockdown stopped, but they said the street has been transformed. People are much more inclined to greet each other, to smile and wave and so on. Would they have spontaneously thought of distributing oranges in their street if there hadn't been a crisis? No.

Other things changed. We became more aware of the risks of social isolation, didn't we? Because we all got a tiny taste. We've heard about social isolation, and we've perhaps theoretically thought "Yes, it wouldn't be good for people – it's not good for members of a social species to be socially isolated." In our criminal justice system, in fact, solitary confinement is the worst punishment we can think of, because it's the worst punishment for members of a social species like ours. But now we got a little taste of it, particularly if you lived alone – a little taste of what it's like for people who are constantly at risk of social isolation. You might have sensed the long and daunting list of health hazards associated with social isolation, over and above even anxiety and depression and loneliness – that triple epidemic that we were suffering from long before the pandemic hit us.

Before the pandemic, 25 per cent of Australians were reporting that they felt lonely for most of every week. So loneliness was a problem pre-lockdown, and much more of a problem during lockdown, and it also had health consequences such as hypertension, inflammation, disturbed sleep, and greater vulnerability to addictions (all of these things are associated with social isolation). Now that we're not all forcibly socially isolated any more, perhaps we're thinking a little more about the people who still are – the people who still need us to contribute to minimising their risk of all those things happening to them.

During lockdown many of us revised the need for travel, we revised the need for buying all that stuff that we typically buy. Many people who worked from home realised that they could lead a more flexible life, even when they were permitted to go back to the workplace.

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Life could be a little simpler, and everyone found, to their amazement, that productivity actually rose when people were working for home. Not very surprising – take away two hours of commuter stress from your day, and you're much more likely to be productive.

We discovered that IT is brilliant. We all learned about Zoom (and webinars). Many of us become Zoombies from too much time on Zoom, and we all thought “Isn't that brilliant?” It's a lifesaving technology when we can't see each other. But didn't it also remind us vividly and powerfully of just how inadequate the technology is, and of how different it is from this talk today? How different it is when you're gazing at a two-dimensional picture while your brain is trying to process it as if it's three dimensional, which it isn't, and then switching back into two-dimensional? People described how much tireder they got from having a Zoom meeting than a three-dimensional meeting, and that was proof. There is a form of brain fatigue that actually follows from the business of trying to process what you're thinking of as three dimensions in two dimensions.

I won't go on and on about it, but underneath all that I think it's fair to say that as a general point we learned to value each other more. We learned to appreciate just how crucial our personal connections, our personal contacts, really are. Even the tone of our emails changed during the pandemic. The first and last paragraphs were often more personal, more caring, than the normal cut-to-the-chase kind of email.

Well, don't you think in fact it would be rather pathetic if we forgot all those lessons and just went back to the way things had been before we had that formative learning experience in the face of that disruption? Don't you think it would be a tragedy?

Not everyone is hoping that we'll internalise these lessons. I saw a wonderful cartoon last week – two women talking to each other about the experience of the pandemic. One was saying to the other "I’m looking forward to the time when I can forget all the stuff I learned about myself while we were on lockdown." Well, my hope is

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exactly the opposite – that we're not going to forget all that stuff we learned about ourselves, and about each other, during the lockdown.

What about if we don't just do something personal about this, we don't just express in our personal relationships the learnings that we learned through that disruption, but what if we multiply it up? Is it conceivable that we could apply those lessons more generally to our society? Here's a little thing to dream of. Could we dream of Australia based on what happened in 2020? Could we dream of Australia becoming known not just as the lucky country, but as a loving country?

A loving country would certainly be what would result from a kindness revolution. We'd make a more energetic commitment to reconciliation with the peoples of our first nations. We'd have a far more humane response to people who come here as refugees and those seeking asylum. We'd make a more determined effort to eradicate poverty and homelessness. There'd be much more urgent action about minimising the impact of climate change.

How about this? We might finally grow out of racism, sexism, and ageism. A more loving country would certainly be more generous to those for whom we have no work, and to those struggling with mental illness, disabilities, or other debilitating conditions. A more loving country would take much better care of its frail aged. A more loving country would tackle the problem of educational inequality with more imagination – perhaps, for a start, by cutting back on the 12 to 15 billion dollars of public money we give to non-public schools every year, resulting in many public schools being under-resourced. A more loving country would insist on far more civility in the conduct of our politics and industrial relations and so on.

Well, do we really need crisis and catastrophes? Do we have to wait for a war, let alone a pandemic, to jolt us into resetting our personal and national agendas? I think it would be a bit sad if that were the case. Haven't we had enough of a learning in 2020 to go on with?

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To wrap up, let me suggest this. If there was just one thing you were going to take away from today as a thing you could change in the way you operate, as a symbol of the fact that you've decided to join the kindness revolution, and to contribute to Australia becoming a kinder, more compassionate, more tolerant place characterised by more good will, what would be the one thing I'd suggest?

I'd suggest that you might sharpen up your listening skills. The deepest social need that human beings have is the need to be taken seriously, the need to be heard, to be appreciated, to be noticed, to be understood. For most people, the most potent symbol of the fact that someone is taking them seriously is that they listen, attentively and empathetically. When you consider the deep human need that it's addressing, it’s no wonder being listened to is such a therapeutic experience.

The converse is also true, of course: if you don't listen to someone, or if you only half listen, or pretend to listen, the message you're conveying – without having to say a single word – is "I'm sorry, I don't take you seriously enough to bother listening to you." Would you ever say that to a partner or to a child or to a friend or a neighbour or a colleague? Of course you wouldn't, and yet that's what we’re saying every time we fail to listen. When we fail to listen, we jeopardise people's sense of self-worth.

When we listen attentively and with empathy, we provide a safe haven for another person's thoughts. Now I'm not suggesting that if we all became better listeners that would be enough. It'd be a brilliant start, but there are various other steps that I'd suggest (and that I do suggest, in the book). For those of you who want your books signed, or even if you don't, I'm handing out cards that suggest four very simple steps. The CARE Program; Connect, Accept, Respect, Engage.

But let me wrap this up by simply saying that if we dare to dream of a kinder, more compassionate, more cooperative, more respectful, more inclusive, more egalitarian, more harmonious, and less cynical society, wouldn't you dare to dream of that? Do you ever wake up in

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the morning saying "I just wish Australia was a bit less kind. I just wish there was a bit more violence around. I just wish people could be ruder to each other". No? The dream is universal, isn't it; a less violent, a more compassionate, a kinder, more tolerant, more mutually respectful society. Well, if you do dream of that, don't wait for the government to wave a magic wand and make it happen. There's only one way to turn that dream into reality, and that is for each of us to start living as if that is the kind of society we live in. When enough of us live as if it's that kind of society, that's the kind of society it will become.

Thank you.

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