

WHAT PRICE BIGOTRY?

Undermining the rich foundations of humanity
Dorothy McRae-McMahon

My thanks to the Freilich family for all their fine contributions to the creating of a more just and peaceful world and an end to bigotry.

I also acknowledge that I am speaking on the land of the Indigenous peoples of this area, my grave responsibility in knowing that and my debt for their custodianship of the land.

What are the foundations of bigotry?

In my experience, bigotry arises primarily from three sources - a sense of superiority, a desire to control people or from fear.

A sense of superiority

We are all familiar with the evidence in the history of humankind which points to the oppressive activities of various racial and ethnic groups who decide that they are the ultimate examples of human life and therefore have the right to oppress those who are other than their own kind. Quite apart from what we see in historic activities, you only need to read the writings of Ayrian people from as recently as the middle of the 20th Century to see evidence of appalling racism and bigotry.

Let us never forget that we, in this country, refused to count in our census the Indigenous peoples of this land until 1967. I remember, in the early 1970's, personally fighting with the Education Department in New South Wales to have removed from all schools a text book which was then current and which discussed Aboriginal people under the chapter headed "Flora and Fauna of Australia". In my own childhood, people used to shout "Ching-chong Chinaman" in derision as the Chinese bottle-o went past with his horse and cart, not to mention the horrible jingles we Protestant and Catholic children used to exchange. In my adult years we were still fighting to remove the "White Australia Policy". Have no doubt at all – we Anglo-Celts believed we were superior and that we had the right to take this country from its original owners and then keep it to ourselves. When we refer to our country as one which has always stood for a fair go and human rights in general, I cringe with shame at our lack of honesty.

A desire to control people

I am well aware that, in the religious environment, there can be patterns of leadership which hold people into a narrow and bigoted world and that this can be a powerful method of control. The "other" is to be avoided and feared and you are to stay safely within the boundaries given for life and faith.

However, I think that we should never underestimate this element as it is expressed in political and cultural life – the capacity of politicians to control votes and populations if they subtly or unsubtly gather people around them by encouraging fear of difference – the old tactic of divide and rule, joined with the creation of fear and suspicion of others. Obviously Hitler used that as a powerful ploy and he was the extreme example of this type of leadership. However, even in our own country and in our own day, I suggest that we need to analyse and examine what is happening and how it is done.

In the current political and cultural context the aim is achieved more subtly than in the religious environment. It is often hard to pin down at all as leaders and media put out stories and phrases, often immediately afterwards cloaked with statements about their lack of religious bigotry and how certain groups are their dear and respected friends. It is like small triggerings of our bigotry with reassuring noises covering what we are doing.

Of course, bigotry is always present in all of us to some degree. However, as I found rather dramatically in the late 1980's, when respectable people give the nod to racism, it gives permissions for what is hidden and regarded as unacceptable to gain respectability and it gives life to the deathly impulses of extremists.

With all my experience of life, I was still shocked by the immediate and powerful response that the community made to John Howard's few words against Asian immigration. In a flash, there was a rise in expressed bigotry against Asian Australians on the streets and their children in school playgrounds and all over the inner city you saw graffiti saying things like "Kill and Asian a day".

Then we had the activating of a small but dangerous neo-Nazi group, National Action, which began a campaign against people who stood in support of Asians, Jews and homosexual people. This attack lasted for two years and was life-threatening to those of us exposed to it. Many years later, when the Special Branch of the NSW Police Force was disbanded and people could have access to their own files, I collected mine. It was interesting to have my suspicions confirmed – the officers of Special Branch who were allocated to protect those of us being attacked were following me around, noting who I spoke to, what meetings I attended and the car registrations of my friends while National Action proceeded on their violent way.

As you would agree, it is all too easy in our present day to create in the same manner a terrible cloud of bigotry around people of, for example, "Middle Eastern appearance" so that all people like that are viewed with suspicion. They are portrayed as those who are the source of fundamentalism unlike, for example, us Christians. That bigotry can permeate every aspect of society, even our agents for justice and security. It can be used to get a society to accept harsh treatment for desperate refugees and ever more draconian security laws.

What we rarely face in all of this is that, in subtly inviting an upsurge of bigotry often in the name of freedom, those who lead us often take more control of us than they have ever done before.

The foundation of fear

Fear of difference is, I guess, age-old. It is as though the existence of difference is, in itself, a negative comment on our being and lifestyle and thus an attack on us. I must say that nothing prepared me for the demonstration of fear as a foundation of bigotry as much as the experience of being a person of homosexual orientation in the Christian Church.

When I began my journey with the church in relation to my sexuality, I was fortunate to be of mature age and wide experience. If I say that nothing prepared me for the

experience, it was because I expected to be attacked by people who disagreed with me and to be the recipient of hate. I did experience all that, of course. However, as time went on and I became more confident in my own decisions and within my own life, I was able to step back just a little and watch my opponents.

I gradually came to see that, there was I, debating the issues with conviction but with a certain peacefulness and there were they often absolutely feverish with their anxiety and fear. I remember sitting down beside one of my opponents and she literally shrank away from me in alarm. I began to look at these people more closely – not those whose who simply disagreed but those whom I would class as almost certainly homophobic. By definition, they were, of course, responding with fear.

Who can tell what lies beneath that fear? I would never presume to determine what lies there – fear of sexuality in general or in particular? Issues around bodiliness overall, perhaps? I could give a whole lecture on the Christian Church and its responses to the human body, but I won't do that tonight. Suffice to say that I wish, among other things, that we had taken to ourselves the healthy and integrated view of human being of the Jewish people, rather than the dualism of the Greek thinking of the day. Not that this implies that any of the great religions set an example of acceptance of difference in sexual preference, but at least in the Jewish tradition as I understand it, body, mind, heart and souls are not arranged in order of worth but are held together as the nature of wholeness.

Of course, there is a natural human impulse to be anxious in the presence of the unpredictable. We like others to fit into what we regard as our norms of response, life-style and behaviour as that feels much more comfortable. I have a severely brain-damaged son but that still doesn't prevent me feeling a little anxious when I enter the facility where he lives. What will his companions do? How will they look? When I get there I find that, of course, I can cope perfectly well but it never stops a level of anxiety. I suggest that any form of disability is threatening to us to some degree, as is the presence of those with a mental illness.

Is this, too, a form of bigotry? I suggest that it may well be that, as we tend to prefer that people who are mentally ill or people with disabilities are not housed too close to us and are kept hidden from us in general.

What are the consequences of bigotry?

The consequences for individuals

If I simply focussed on the consequences of bigotry in the lives of people of homosexual orientation that would almost be enough, so I will begin there. It is estimated that around one third of youth suicides in this country are related to issues of sexuality. The cost of bigotry is sometimes life itself.

I am the Patron of an agency which supports young gay and lesbian people who are at risk. I will, forever, remember one young person. I will call him John because that is not his name. I was at the agency's Christmas lunch and while I was talking to some of the young people, John approached. He was small with a sensitive face and had made a real effort to look good for the Christmas Party. He was wearing large shorts and big boots and had borrowed a tie from someone in his youth refuge and tied it around his waste. Then he had added a small black velvet hat to look really cool. He

sat quietly beside me and when I asked him about his plans, he said that he guessed he should try hard to get back to school.

When we moved into the party lunch and present-giving, John disappeared. I asked the staff where he had gone. They took me aside and told me that they had found him curled in a foetal position at the bottom of the stairs, sobbing his heart out. He was 15 years old, he had run away from his home after being thrashed in the name of Jesus Christ by a family member when he had shared that he thought he might be gay. He made it to the streets of Sydney and was picked up and put in a youth refuge. He was inconsolable because it was his first Christmas away from home. The staff knew that we would be fighting for the life of that young person. He was paying the heavy price of religious bigotry when he simply tried to share who he thought he might be.

As I looked at him, I hoped that one day his family might recognise that if this very young and vulnerable man had chosen to leave every security he had in life, his sexual orientation must be something other than bad behaviour. The cost of bigotry, in relation to sexual identity in particular, is often that parents and indeed communities of people betray their children and those children sometimes die or enter a life and death struggle for survival.

Bigotry powerfully distorts and disturbs the perception that people have of who they are and whether they have any worth. I will always remember attending my very first international conference in Cyprus in 1972 and being in a small group with a black South African woman. Unlike me, she had significant international experience and several degrees but, when asked to role-play a white woman, she told us she couldn't do it because she would not have the confidence to do so.

On the other hand, I saw the same level of false self-perception in a white woman in Kenya who had invited me to dinner. She was a fine Christian woman in her cultural environment. Yet, as we sat at the table, her black servant stood beside us and she said to me, "Look at him, Dorothy. They often have very fine physical features, don't they – quite nice body types." I watched the man stand there impassively and I wondered whether he wanted to kill that woman or whether he had been so damaged by racism that he thought he was due for such humiliating treatment.

When I saw its consequences for these two beautiful human beings – the South African woman and the Kenyan man, I determined to fight racism for the rest of my life.

In so many cases, bigotry defines people, diminishes their chances to be who they truly are and to express their life and its talents in all their fullness. I can testify to that in my own journey. It is only when you are able to claim the ground of your own being that you realise what you had lost before. It is like finding yourself and coming alive in ways which are impossible to describe. It is like at last fitting within your own skin.

When I finally came out publicly as a lesbian, I bought myself a brooch depicting a flock of birds flying high because that is how I felt. I was flying free in the universe and claiming my real place in it. I was soaring into the clouds in joy and peace and moving into my future as a whole person at last. I felt as though everything wheeled

into integration within myself and my being was settling down into a serene peacefulness. Nothing could touch that, no matter what lay ahead, and I have never had a single moment of regret that I chose my life as I believed it was truly meant to be.

If I share that with you, it is to try to, however inadequately, give you not only a picture of what it is like to be fully alive at last and to defy the bigotry around you, but to give you a glimpse of what is lost to those whose lives are overwhelmed by bigotry. We lose our very being, often never to discover it or really live from it.

I was one of the fortunate ones as I was surrounded by enough love and support to challenge the bigotry which would deny my life and to defeat that in my own person. Many others are not in that position. As I write this paper, I am listening to the theme music from the movie about Oscar Wilde and tears fill my eyes as I think of the pain and stifling of life in so many gifted people.

The cost to the community

In describing my own journey, I am really also describing what the community loses as a result of bigotry. It surrenders so much of the life gifts and skills of its members or it forces those gifts and skills to be offered in ways which demean the person offering them.

Obviously, unlike those who are the targets of racial, religious and political bigotry, homosexual people can often hide themselves and simply live out their lives. We do offer what we can do and be into the community but are never able to be honest. We reluctantly collude with a society's deceptions and self-delusions and, by implication, support ongoing bigotry. Not that I am, for one moment criticising those who stay hidden in that situation as they, too, are the victims of bigotry and I was for a while in that place myself. I am suggesting that any aspect of its life which is not honest is a cost to a society. It is not living with reality.

As an aside I must say that, once I revealed my own sexual orientation, I found myself admitted to a mostly hidden club of priests, ministers and other clerics around the world. What a lie we live in many of the great religions when we do not own that so much of our religious leadership comes out of the homosexual community. That lie, rather than the prevalence of homosexual clerics, is like a deathly reality that takes from our life. It cannot be otherwise. And how dare the Catholic Church enjoy every day its beautiful sculpture of the Pieta and the incredible art on the walls and ceiling of its Sistine Chapel and then refer to people who are of the same orientation as its artist as depraved and not worthy of acceptance.

Of course, the loss to the community at large is far greater than that which comes from living with lies. Many people of different sexual orientation are unable to offer their gifts into the community at all or in diminished form.

They are so oppressed and demeaned by bigotry that they are blocked from full participation.

Then, as I have worked internationally, if there is one thing that hits me whenever I have moved into countries of different races and cultures which are the source of many of our own immigrant communities, it is how much we have lost because of our

bigotry. I especially remember my first trip into Middle Eastern and Mediterranean countries at a time when there had been large immigrations into Australia from those areas. I remember sometimes simply standing still in a street or café in wonder and feeling and listening to the riches of the life of the people there – their music and song, their dance and passionate joy or grief, their very liveliness and hospitality.

I faced the reality that we had muted and diminished all that with our comments about “loud Italians or Greeks who smelt of garlic” or “men who cried or danced and women who wore black”. I felt overwhelmed with grief when I realised what we had done and how much we had missed in not receiving all they had to give and allowing it to enrich our life together. Of course, after a while, we did at least realise that garlic might be a good addition to our life!

We have so often been critical of the way newly arrived immigrant groups cluster together in particular areas and take a while to learn English. On this last, point, how hypocritical we are as possibly one of the most monolingual societies in the world! And how fortunate that people did cluster together and add to the chances of retaining more of their own characteristics than they may otherwise have done in the face of the prevailing bigotry.

It is my view that the end aim of universal life is a harmony of mutual existence and the complementary engagement of all that each has to offer into vibrant and diverse life.

Whether you believe that is the plan of a Creator as I do or is simply inherent in universal reality is irrelevant. Bigotry, in my opinion, is a serious stumbling block in the path of universal life.

It prevents the wonder of the swirling energy of endless imagination and variety as each aspect of life enhances the other or challenges the other in evolving the grander existence.

I can only say that, as one who has been unbelievably privileged in meeting and working with people from all over the world, I believe that the dream for the universe is far great than we have ever seen or will ever know because we will never see enough of it.

I will always remember with emotion one small glimpse of that when I chaired the Worship Committee of the World Council of Churches for five years. We were only about 25 people but we came from as many cultures and all races. For those five years of work, we tried hard to hold open to the insights and imaginations of each other in producing the 13 great worship services for the Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Harare. We grew to love and respect each other, to laugh and cry together and to set free the beauty of each culture present. All I can say is that, in that time with those 25 people, I saw before me a vision of human life which I find hard to articulate.

This is not simply about what we add to each other as today’s communities. It is, if you like, about a different heaven and a different earth – one where everything is changed as it grows and adapts and gives and receives. It is not about the muting of difference but about something far more exciting and beautiful than that and which produces creativity for survival together beyond where we have ever been. I will

strive for that forever and, in doing so, will see myself as part of the evolving harmony of all people and all things.

What can we do?

I have heard people give the view that, if bigotry is present, it should be owned rather than hidden. Certainly we should name bigotry where we find it. However, the reality is that, in each of us, are shadowy places of prejudice and other less than noble convictions and qualities. That is the nature of human being. However, as a community, we can give affirmation to these parts of ourselves or not. We can lift them up by example so that our children regard them as normal and appropriate, or make it very clear that there are good and bad in every race and culture and in those of the diverse lifestyles among us, but that goodness or badness is about being human, rather than linked with those who are different.

I think the first principle in creatively working with difference is one I learned from my Jewish friends. I was chairing the national dialogue between the Uniting Church and the Jewish community at the time. We Christians were treading very respectfully and carefully around in the dialogue, concentrating on where we thought there might be agreement and we would watch in astonishment and anxiety as the Rabbis and lay Jewish leaders would go into this vigorous engagement with each other as they disagreed on issues. At one stage, I said something like, “Well, that was a very brave discussion. Thank you so much for your honesty!” A Rabbi replied, “Oh that’s nothing to what we do to each other usually. How else do you have a real dialogue?”

I thought about that and talked with him about it afterwards. He told me that he was not worried by passionate disagreement – that it was not personal but rather a high level interchange of genuine ideas. I thought of the Hebrew Bible and realised that part of its attraction is the capacity of the ancient Hebrew people to have an honest encounter, not only with each other but with their God. Thus they leave us, not a pious account of their splendid journeying, but an authentic picture of extreme and frail humanness alongside glorious insights and actions for truth.

In saying all this I am suggesting that the diminishing of bigotry is not about tippy-toeing around each other and carefully avoiding discussion of our differences in views on life or the living of life. It is far removed from reducing our life to a common denominator. On the contrary it is about daring to trust each other with our realities and seeing what emerges from that – to put out the vivid and the significant and invite expansion rather than a narrower world.

It is about, if you like, growing up and finding with surprise that we can live even better with ambiguities, complexities and unanswered questions. This is not about being wishy washy. It is about the courage to be curious, to find difference stimulating and interesting rather than threatening. An absence of doubt, the stuff of fundamentalisms of any variety, is in my view, the most dangerous force in the world today and in any generation.

Creating the new world is about daring to put away our labels for each other, like “red-necks” or “the latte and chardonnay drinking set”. Labels are about avoiding the real discussion, indeed stopping it before it begins. This is very, very hard to do.

People like me rarely label other people out loud but I undoubtedly have the names for them in my head and heart.

I will always remember one day when I was on the national staff of the church. I was speaking at the Queensland Synod meeting of our church and I observed that the state head of the Queensland Church, the Moderator, was not wearing the usual blue moderatorial stole of the Uniting Church but a maroon coloured stole.

Why not begin my speech with a joke, I thought? So I opened by saying, "I see that the Moderator is wearing a maroon stole. I suppose it's for the Broncos!" To my amazement, the people in front of me nodded their heads. "Good heavens," I thought, "How corny can you get? Only in Queensland could you find a football team honoured in a liturgical stole of office." However, I said to the audience, "Really! It is for the Broncos. Maybe over morning tea you might like to share with me why you feel you are an opposing football team to the rest of the church?"

Well, I never did get back into the conference hall that morning. One after the other, the people came to me and with tears in their eyes told me how they will never forget how the rest of Australia drew the Brisbane Line during the Second World War – the line past which we would not defend this country. They told me stories of going south and, when they shared they were from Queensland, people laughing at them and saying demeaning things about them and their state. This was one of the many times during which I learned that, underneath many an attacking or defending stance, lies a broken heart or a wounded spirit.

Over and over again, I have been taught that, it is all too easy to be bigoted about a person or groups of people when you never look them in the face or make a gentle enough space for them to tell you who they really are and what their life is like. We so often construct images of each other that have little bearing in reality. I don't know how many times I have heard a normally kindly person say something like, "I hate those Asians/Muslims/Aborigines/etc." and then you say, "But I thought that particular Asian/Muslim/Aboriginal person was your friend?" and the person says, "Oh, but that's different."

But, of course, it is mostly only different because you have come to know the other, looked in the human face, heard that their human journey is much like yours and received the gifts of their friendship. Every time we help ourselves and each other to cross the barrier of the labelling we give ourselves a chance to move from bigotry.

Towards the end of my work with the World Council of Churches Worship Committee, I made public my sexual orientation and I knew that the news went around the world and that I would have to face my international friends in a new way. I went to our next meeting in fear and trembling as I faced bishops, ministers and priests from across the churches. We arrived in Harare and I took the chair. I could see that they were all looking at me intently as though they had never seen me before. I waited anxiously, then saw them all relax and they participated in the meeting with even more enthusiasm. During the next days, almost all of them shared with me the fact that they knew who I was and that their view of that had not changed apart from inviting me to tell them more about my journey.

I suggest that, if we will free them to be so, our children may be among our best assets in relation to overcoming bigotry. I will not romanticise them because I know that children can often be the foremost in bullying others who are different. However, if gently guided and not taught bigotry in the first place, they can often be a moving example to us all. I remember one of my sons aged, about 6 years old, telling me that his class had been set a special project to study Chinese people. He asked me what Chinese people looked like and I pointed out that his long-term best friend was Chinese. “Ah” he said, “I will look at my face in the mirror tonight and tomorrow I will have a look and see if he is different from me.” He had not even noticed that his friend was different.

I watch the marvellous and quite intentional work being done for cross-cultural respect and enjoyment in the Public School my granddaughter attends. When I hear of Education Minister, Brendan Nelson, speak of the need to teach Australian values in our Public Schools, I feel like inviting him to this school and suggest that his own Government could match by example what is being taught and enacted there.

Which brings me to my final point:

The cost of bigotry in our day is all too clear. We are now facing the consequences of many forms of injustice, hate, colonialism, religious and racial hatreds and prejudice - partly the terrifying fruits of world history and partly the fruits of bigotries which arise from economic, religious and political fundamentalisms, the ultimate sources of bigotry in our day.

Now we are all at risk as we look terrorist activities and threats of that in the face. So, what will we choose as our response? I guess that we will need some security activities, but surely, deep down, we know that the only defence against those who choose to kill us and die themselves because they see us as the ultimate enemy, is to try in every way to make our peace with each other – in effect to strengthen the bonds between all humankind. We will need to do that intentionally, bravely and faithfully.

I am sure that some people would hear me say this and mark me down as a left-wing softie. In response, I would say that I see nothing but more violence and fear from the policies espoused by those who I imagine would be my critics. It is they who are impractical and, if you like, romantic in their refusal to face the realities. Who, for example, could imagine that having earnest conversations about solutions with those who you like best in the Muslim community and excluding the others would lead to better relationships in general?

This is not to say that the transformation of today’s threatening world is as easy as having nice talks together. It will cost more than that. It may mean that we all grieve our histories and weep for what we did in a spirit of humble confession. It may mean acknowledging serious bigotry and extreme views on every side rather than one. It may mean that that some of us will have to lay down some of our privileged lifestyles and some of us will die trying to build the bridges between hostile forces so that others may be our more equal friends.

Perhaps, alongside all our efforts, the greatest thing we have to offer and sustain is hope so that people of goodwill will never give up and sink into apathy. We will need around us those who lift our spirits – the musicians, artists and actors and their work

from the past. We will each need to discover what it is that renews our energy for good, whether it be religion or some other source.

In my very small life experience, I can only say that nothing worth gaining in the ending of bigotry comes without some cost, but that cost is worth paying.