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# **The Art of Belonging**

Communities in Control Conference: “Think Differently”  
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Presentation by

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Good morning, everybody. It's a great honour to be invited back.

I'm sure all of you must be as tired as I am of being told how selfish we all are. This has become such a popular theme, hasn't it? That human beings are genetically programmed to be self-centred – that it's our absolute nature to look out for number one and to think that it's all about me, that in fact this is so deeply ingrained in us that we're capable of being aggressive and even violent towards people who stand between us and our personal goals or the fulfilment of our personal ambition.

We've all heard that over and over again. If you ponder for a moment whether that sounds like you, I suppose if you were to be ruthlessly honest you'd have to say: "Yes, well, sometimes I am a bit like that. I am capable of being selfish. I do know that there are times when I realise what I should do for the common good, but I just want to get my own way this time".

Yes, we're all like that – or if you're not like that, you probably know someone who is.

But that, of course, is not the deep truth about humans. That is a rather unattractive, partial truth about humans.

The deep truth, indeed the deepest truth, about humans is also the sweetest truth about humans, which is that we are, by nature – that is to say, by our genetic programming – not competitive, selfish, look-out-for-number-one types.

Like most of the other species that we share this planet with, we are programmed to be cooperative. It's absolutely of our nature to be part of communities.

If you doubt that, just take a look at how we live. Take a look at the cities and suburbs and towns and villages, not just all around Australia but all around the world, where humans prefer to congregate – not just for economic reasons, but because, in our nature, deep in our psyche, is a sense that you can only make sense of who I am by the community that I belong to.

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We've got caught up in the search for personal identity, an endless quest for the answer to the question "Who am I"?

One of my psychological heroes, American psychotherapist Carl Rogers (now deceased, unfortunately) said towards the end of his working life that when any of his clients came to a full realisation of who they are, it was always to realise that they belonged somewhere – that trying to find out who they were, in isolation, was a fruitless quest.

It's a fruitless quest for any of us. You can only make sense of who you are by the context in which you operate. By the people you belong to; the families, the neighbourhoods, the communities, the workplace, etcetera.

That's our true nature. In fact, neuroscientists – who are now capable of peeping into our brains in a way that we couldn't have imagined even 30 years ago – tell us now they can find the cooperative centre in the brain. They can't find the competitive centre.

Being cooperative, being community creatures is part of our nature genetically. Being competitive, being rampant individuals is something we learn. We learn it quite quickly, and we're quite good learners – but that's not something that's embedded within us.

As Joe Caddy said in his introduction, communities don't just happen. Communities don't necessarily thrive. In the same way that we need communities to make sense of who we are – and that's our natural way of living – communities need us. That is the beautiful symmetry of human nature. We can't survive without communities.

Well, I shouldn't say we can't survive. There are hermits. They're about 0.0001% of the population – and you don't know any, of course, because they're hermits. Some of us say we're hermits, meaning we like to get away occasionally on our own – which is healthy and normal and we should all do it.

But the overwhelming majority of us are not truly hermits, because we know that the community is where we belong. We also know that the community depends on us.

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So it's very sad – and not just sad, but very serious—when you hear people say, as you increasingly do hear people say around the cities and suburbs and even, increasingly, the regional centres of Australia: “I don't know my neighbours”. Whenever I hear someone say that, I feel like shaking them, or saying: “Well, you could knock on the door, and suddenly you *would* know your neighbours.

I've lost count of the number of times I've heard people say I don't know my neighbours. No one ever says it in a triumphant tone of voice. No one ever says: “At last, I've achieved this thing I've been striving for all my life. Finally, I don't know my neighbours”.

No. We always say it a bit sadly, don't we? We say it a bit wistfully, as though this is not how it should be: “I feel a bit like a stranger in my own street,” people sometimes say. “Our local neighbourhood doesn't work like a community the way it used to.”

That's become such a common complaint around Australia that you can't just brush it aside. You can't just say: “Yeah, that's just something people say”. It's obviously a symptom of something that people are experiencing – some kind of fragmentation, some kind of deterioration in the quality of the life of their local neighbourhoods and communities.

So the question is, why might this be true?

You don't have to look far for the answers. It seems to me there are two major influences operating in Australia at the moment, and in western society in general, which are working against the maintenance of stable and cohesive communities.

These influences aren't inevitably going to destroy them. Communities won't inevitably fragment under these influences. But when you add up the influences, you see that the pressure on communities is becoming greater.

The first source of this influence is the absolute bombardment of propaganda that we've been subjected to, particularly over the last 30

years – perhaps even longer – coming from two completely different sources.

One, very obviously, is from the very sophisticated marketing industry; commercial, consumer mass marketing, which we all respond to and we often enjoy. But its relentless cumulative message is that it's all about **you**.

It's not about achieving some kind of common good. It's not about the wellbeing of the community, or even the prosperity of the community. To the extent that it acknowledges the prosperity of the community, it's saying "We live in an affluent society and you'd better get your share. Get out there and buy stuff because that's what will make you feel better. If you've bought a lot of stuff and you're not feeling better, that just means you haven't been trying hard enough. So borrow some more, thrash the plastic, get out there and buy more stuff".

And we've swallowed it.

Without quite understanding what the underlying message is, we're now living in Australia with record levels of personal and household debt because we've borrowed so much money in order to keep buying all this stuff.

That's a pretty seductive argument, isn't it? Who wouldn't like to think it was all about me, just for a moment? That's one source of bombardment.

The other one is a bit more unexpected. That's the bombardment of propaganda coming from what I now think of as the happiness industry – the people who've been selling us the idea that we are entitled to personal happiness, that the pursuit of personal happiness is a suitable goal for your life, and that if you're not feeling happy, there's something wrong with you, because that's the default position for humans.

You're entitled to feel happy, so take a pill, or have another drink, or change your partner, or do something else to restore this sense of happiness that you're entitled to.

I'm not against happiness. I enjoy it when it fleetingly visits me, as it fleetingly visits all of us, in amongst all the other emotions that also visit us.

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One of the crazy things about this relentless emphasis on how we should be happy and we're entitled to happiness is that we've always known that, as human beings, there's a full spectrum of emotions available to us, and they all have something important to teach us.

None of them makes any sense without the context of all the others. You wouldn't even know what happiness was if you hadn't endured periods of sadness. You don't know what success is if you haven't failed. You don't know what disappointment is if you haven't experienced some triumph. It's all part of the deal.

What our folklore has told us over and over – and it's true – is that we tend to learn more from the dark experiences than from the bright ones.

But we now place so much emphasis on happiness that we're raising a generation of young Australians who are actually afraid of sadness – who think that if they're feeling a bit blue, which we all do, perhaps daily, if not weekly, that maybe they're depressed, maybe they need a diagnosis.

Now, of course, some people are really depressed, and they do need a diagnosis. But being depressed, in the everyday sense, is an experience familiar to every one of us, and it does have a lot to teach us about who we are.

But with the happiness bombardment, just like the bombardment from the marketing industry, the subtext is "It's all about you. It's all about how you're feeling and your entitlement to happiness."

Those two bombardments together make up one of the influences that are having a negative effect on the stability and the cohesiveness of communities.

But the other one is much more far reaching. That's the amount of social change that's been reshaping Australia in a particular direction. You're probably sick of the phrase social change.

Everyone's always talking about social change. I'm not going to give you a lecture on social change.

But let me just take a few minutes to remind you of what social change means. Let me just identify just five or six of some of the most significant changes that have been reshaping Australia and then think about what the cumulative effect of these changes might be on communities.

By the way, these are not changes that someone has imposed on us. No one has said: “Thou shalt become a high divorce society” or: “Thou shalt embrace the two-income household” or any of the other things I want to talk about. No, we’ve done all this, and we want to do these things.

All of these changes have been driven by us trying to improve our lives. But we haven’t perhaps yet caught a real glimpse of what the overall effect is.

So let me just quickly run through some of these.

Our patterns of marriage and divorce have changed radically. Go back 40 years and we were one of the world’s low divorce societies – only about 7% or 8% of Australian marriages ever ended in divorce. Today, between 35% and 40% of contemporary marriages will end in divorce.

I’m not going to start wringing my hands about the divorce rate. This is how it is. It’s remained high for three decades. There’s no sign of slackening. No one who’s been divorced wants to get the divorce rate down. People who’ve been divorced are pleased that it was easy for them to get divorced, of course. But the effect of divorce on the wider communities that those people belong to – the extended family, the friendship circles, the community neighbourhood groups that they belonged to as a couple – are all impacted by the fact that the couple splits.

If there are children involved, of course, the impact is even more far reaching. We have now reached the situation in Australia where we have 1 million dependent kids living with just one of their natural parents.

Half of them – half a million kids – are involved in a weekly or fortnightly mass migration from the home of the custodial parent to the home of the non-custodial parent. Many families manage that brilliantly. Many kids take that in their stride. Many families don’t manage it brilliantly and many kids don’t take it in their stride.

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In the early stages, it's fairly traumatic –typically, traumatic for all concerned.

But think of the effect of that not just on the families that are being dislocated by this, but on the micro-communities that this mass migration of half a million kids is having.

While we're talking about kids, let's look at another profound change in the character of our society brought about by the plummeting birth rate.

We are currently producing—relative to total population – the smallest generation of kids Australia has ever produced. People at the moment are talking about a mini baby boom. Let me put that 'boom' in perspective for you.

The birth rate had got down to 1.7 babies per woman – by the way, replacement level is 2.1 – but in the last couple of years it's staggered up from 1.7 to 1.8 babies per woman.

I personally wouldn't call that a boom, especially when we know what a boom is. We had one for 15 years after the end of World War II, when the birth rate was 3.6 babies per woman. **That's** a baby boom. We're currently operating at half that level.

Why do I mention kids so often in the context of this presentation? Well, as most of you will recall, kids are often the social lubricant that facilitates relationships and networks being established in the community.

The kids get to know each other playing in the park or on the school bus or in the school playground. They visit each other; the families get to know each other. Community networks are often driven by kids.

So when kids are in shorter supply than ever in our history, obviously that social lubricant is in shorter supply and we have to do something about it.

We are doing something about it. If you want to amuse yourself sometime, take a look at two quite symmetrical graphs. One is the graph of the falling birth rate. The other is the graph of the rising level of dog ownership in Australia.

More and more people are saying: “Yes, our dog is a child substitute.” They’re quite shameless about that. You know it’s a child substitute because they’re giving it a human name. So people say: “Well, you go to the dog walking park now, and the dogs play with each other, and that’s how we get to know our neighbours.”

The problem is you can never remember whether Nigel was the dog or the owner. So you turn up at the park and say good morning, Wendy and you don’t know whether—you can’t remember—will you get a woof or hello. Well maybe dogs work for some people, but they’re not quite the same as kids.

That’s a huge change in the character of our local neighbourhoods and communities. As is the rise of the two income household.

Now once again, I’m not talking about whether this is good or bad. I’m just acknowledging that, in a society like ours, we have decided that the standard of living we require for a middle class household requires two incomes.

Many people in the room would agree with that, I’m sure. Most Australians agree with it. So that’s fine. We’re doing that.

But it has consequences. It means that people are typically busier – in total, busier than ever before. By the end of the working week, if both adults in a household are working, they’re tireder than used to be the case.

So it comes to the weekend and there isn’t the time or the energy for nurturing local neighbourhood contacts, spending time just being a neighbour, because we’re frantically catching up with all the things that we might have done differently before this became the norm.

While we’re talking about households, here’s another big change which is, again, changing the character of local Australian neighbourhoods. It’s something that’s been happening gradually for 100 years, but accelerating, like so many of these trends, over the last 30 years.

That’s the shrinkage of the Australian household.

In the last 100 years, the Australian population has increased five-fold. The number of households in Australia has increased ten-fold. So we've been creating households at twice the rate we've been growing the population, which simply means our households are getting smaller and smaller.

The houses are getting bigger and bigger, but the households are getting smaller and smaller.

The average Australian household now is 2.5 people. The biggest single household category in Australia now is the single person household. Twenty-seven per cent of all households contain just one person. If you put the single person and two person households together, you've got about 53% of all Australian households. So if you live alone or with just one other person, you're now mainstream.

We used to think that the typical Australian household was mum, dad and three kids. That's ancient history now. In fact, people who live in that kind of household are now the eccentric fringe, especially if the parents are actually married to each other and have never been married to anyone else. That's a really peculiar household.

This is not just an Australian phenomenon. It's happening in North America and Western Europe as well. The fastest growing household type – single person.

What can we say about this and its effect on communities? Well first of all, we have to acknowledge that single person households are not a category. There are completely different types of single person households – those who want to be living alone, and those who don't.

There's a very large number in both categories. For the first, particularly younger people who want to live alone for a while and use solo living as a symbol of independence and freedom. They love it. You can eat baked beans out of a can, no-one's there to criticise you, you can stay in your PJs all weekend if you want to, you can watch daytime television without being criticised. If you want to socialise, you can go out. Terrific.

But there are also people who, through bereavement or divorce or some other changed circumstance, find themselves involuntarily living alone and say they don't experience this as freedom and independence but rather as loneliness.

Loneliness can very easily morph into feelings of social isolation, which can easily morph, as you know, into feelings of social exclusion. Which can easily morph into feelings of alienation.

None of that is inevitable, especially if the rest of us are paying close attention to the people in our street who live alone and making sure they're being included in the life of the street and the community, but the risk is greater than it's every been.

In most western societies now, including Australia, when you look at the list of major social concerns loneliness appears in the top three. Loneliness? Living cheek by jowl in these communities that we create? It's a tragic reality.

The increasing mobility of the population is taking its toll on local neighbourhoods. Australians move house now, on average, once every six years – exactly the same as Americans, by the way.

So if you've been living in the same house for 20 or 30 years, just imagine how often everyone else has been moving to get the national average up to once every six years. Of course, we're mobile in another sense as well, aren't we?

Almost universal car ownership means, particularly in our outer suburbs, that people are just coming and going by car. Many of those suburbs don't even have footpaths, because there's virtually no footpath traffic.

Where people previously might have just run into each other and had a neighbourly conversation, now you wave at your neighbour's car and you assume your neighbour is driving it.

But it's not quite the same as chatting over the front fence.

You could add, I'm sure, another 10 things to this list. But one thing I want to mention that's so obvious you might perhaps think I should have

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mentioned it first. That's the information technology revolution. It's a huge blessing in many, many ways. It's clever, it's convenient, it's sophisticated. It's transforming the way we live. It's a revolution at least as significant – perhaps more significant – than the industrial revolution. We don't yet know what its long term consequences will be, but we do know it's a paradoxical revolution.

Because these new media brought to us by the information technology revolution seem, on the one hand, to be all about connection. They seem to be bringing us together. On the other hand, they make it easier than ever for us to stay apart.

We can fall into the trap of using Facebook posts or Tweets or emails or texts as a way of keeping in touch at the expense of the time we might previously have spent keeping in touch face to face. That's not inevitable, but the temptation is very considerable.

You now do often hear young people saying “When we get together, there's actually no news to exchange, because we've already said it all. You know, I saw that on Facebook or yeah, you sent me a text about that.” So while they're, theoretically, spending time together they spend that time on their phones talking to other people.

It has great advantages. It does mean we can maintain linkages with people we can't see – extended families, for example, scattered around the country or around the world. A friend of mine has grandchildren in the UK. He Skypes them once a week. They call him flat grandpa because they only ever see him on a screen. They're going to get a terrible shock if he ever turns up in three-dimensional reality. We all know what that looks like.

But, of course, the other thing we know about all this is it is profoundly different to be making contacts in cyberspace from the contacts we make when we're in the same place at the same time.

People say: “I'm not so interested in the neighbours anymore. I've got these online communities that I belong to.” Well, there are online communities. People do get a sense of belonging from them. But it

doesn't take much imagination to see what the difference is between an online community and an offline community.

Offline, we have all the richness of a face-to-face encounter – not just the words, but the rate of speech, the tone of voice, the facial expression, the posture, the gestures, the ambiance of the situation in which this encounter is taking place. All these things contribute rich meaning to the encounter.

We go online and almost all of that is stripped away. Unless emoticons turn you on, all we have are the words. If it's Facebook or Instagram, you might be posting pictures – but it could hardly be more different from the subtlety, the nuanced character of face-to-face communication.

In fact, I think one of the most brilliantly creative things we humans ever do is interpret what someone is saying to us in a face-to-face conversation because we take so many different messages into account.

The tone of voice can contradict the words. The facial expression can contradict or enrich the words. It's a very significant, creative act, but none of that happens when we're online and on the screen.

The other thing, of course, that the IT revolution is doing is blurring our sense of what identity means because, particularly among young heavy users of the internet, multiple online identities are now commonplace. Between five and ten different online identities.

It's also changing our concept of privacy. Talk to young people about the privacy implications of online messaging in these various platforms and they'll say: "Yeah, well we don't really like the fact that it's out there, but it's out there for everyone."

When their parents say you shouldn't really be posting this stuff: "Well, everyone else is. So if I'm going to be victimised by this, then so is the entire world." It is changing our notion of privacy.

Some very recent research has been published in Western Europe about young adolescents and young adults' use of social media. There's been a mass exodus from Facebook. Facebook is virtually dead in the 16-24 age

group. You might say “Good., well, they’ve finally woken up they need to spend more time together.” No, that’s not what it’s about. They’re leaving it because their parents are on it. So that’s one privacy issue that’s still alive. The author of this research report said “There comes that dreadful day when your mother says ‘Can I be your Facebook friend?’ That’s the time to leave Facebook.”

Add together everything that I’ve been talking about and just see where it takes us. It doesn’t inevitably take us anywhere. But the pressure built up from all of those social changes, supplemented by the propaganda that I was talking about earlier, clearly does point us in a particular direction, which is the probability that communities will fragment.

Sociologists now talk about atomisation—the sense people have of themselves as individual dots. Not joining the dots, but just the dots. The cumulative effect of this is obvious.

Another piece of sad research was published by Edith Cowan University in Perth a couple of years ago, a national survey in which they reported that only 35% of Australians say they trust their neighbours. Just ponder that.

That could not possibly mean that only 35% of Australians have trustworthy neighbours. Obviously, what it means is that only 35% of Australians know their neighbours well enough to trust them – to have come to an arrangement where they’ll take in each other’s washing if rain is threatened or pick up their mail when they’re on holidays or take their bins in, all the things that neighbours typically do.

It’s not happening if you don’t trust your neighbours. And if you don’t trust your neighbours it almost certainly means you don’t know them.

We know that’s not the way we humans are meant to live. That’s not what’s in our DNA.

What’s in our DNA is not that we should be on best friend terms with our neighbours, but that they would be neighbours. We know what neighbours are. We know what the role of neighbour is. We certainly know it when there’s a crisis, don’t we? When there’s a flood or a fire or a storm or a

bereavement or something happens in the street, everyone's out playing the part of neighbour, because it's perfectly obvious what that involves.

But we so often forget that role. We forget to put in the investment in neighbour relationships that make it easier for us to help each other when the time comes when that's needed.

Well how will we deal with all of this? What this says to me is obvious. We will have to work harder at maintaining communities than we would have needed to work in the past, especially neighbourhood communities.

Like every other form of human relationship – marriage, friendship – we know we have to work at it or it doesn't survive. We have to see our friends. We have to work at friendship or the friendship will fizzle out. In the same way, neighbourhoods, communities, are relationships. Those relationships have to be worked on as well.

We rely particularly on local government to facilitate the operation of local communities. We want the infrastructure – the parks, the walking tracks, the libraries, the shopping precincts that provide coffee shops and bars and other places where people will easily congregate and run into their neighbours.

There is, happily, something of a revival in local, traditional, strip shopping centres as a kind of counter-revolution against the shopping mall which, by contrast, is rather impersonal. Yes, we rely on local government and commercial people to provide for us. And yes, obviously, we need to join, we need to engage, we need to participate. Get into the community garden, the community choir, the book clubs, the adult education classes, the sports clubs, the service clubs; all these things that enrich the life of a neighbourhood.

It's so obvious, you hardly need to say it.

What is perhaps a bit less obvious is something that is the simplest response to what I've been describing of all.

We hear a lot about social capital, don't we? How we have to invest in social capital in order to make communities strong, in order to make a

society strong. Investing in social capital sounds like some grandiose scheme that would need a committee to get it organised.

No, investing in social capital means remember to smile, to make eye contact, to say hello when you pass someone in the street.

Don't stand at a bus stop for ten minutes with someone that you don't know without saying hello or discussing the weather, or the bus timetable, or whatever else might acknowledge that there's another human being sharing this little space on the planet with you.

Since I wrote this new book, I've been changing my own behaviour in this respect a bit, trying to be a bit more eye-contacty and a bit more likely to talk to strangers.

I even talk to strangers in lifts now, which takes people by surprise. Imagine talking to a stranger in a lift.

But when you stand back for a minute and look at it, imagine **not** talking to a stranger in a lift. Here we are, herded into this little space for no more than 10 or 15 seconds at the very most – why wouldn't we say hello or say something? "Nice coat" ... anything that establishes that we are humans in the same space.

In our major cities, Sydney and Melbourne most particularly, people from other parts of Australia typically say of us that the avoidance of eye contact is now an art form in those places. They just never look at you. I've heard immigrants say the same thing. We're training our kids to be good Australians, but one thing we train them to do that isn't very Australian – we ask them to smile and say hello to people they pass in the street.

Australians don't do that. They won't look at you. I hope that isn't going to become the norm for Australia, but we do seem to be heading that way.

Surely we do need to acknowledge that we are bound together by our mutual sense of community, and we ought to show it in ways large and small.

Let me just read a short paragraph from the end of the new book.

“Every community has its differences of opinion, its social divisions and its cultural tensions. Which is simply to say that every community is both diverse and inescapably human.

“If you want to master the art of belonging, you’ll need to accept the imperfections and deal with them. And the best way of dealing with them is to overlook them. There’s a lot of tolerance, a lot of forgiveness in the art of belonging.”

So why would you want to master the art of belonging? There are three reasons.

One is perfectly obvious from what I’ve said so far; human beings feel physically safer and emotionally more secure when they feel as if they belong in a recognisable community.

Second, as we get older and fear the onset of dementia, psychiatrists can now tell us the best way of keeping dementia at bay is to have unplanned, spontaneous social interaction with people. A crossword a day won’t do it. If you enjoy a crossword, go ahead and do it, but it’s not doing much for your dementia.

What’s really keeping dementia at bay is the unplanned conversation. Especially with someone you don’t know, someone in a shop or at a bus stop, particularly a young person.

Someone that will challenge you, someone that will take the conversation in a direction that you didn’t expect it to go in. That is extremely good for you, in terms of your mental health.

But finally, surely, the main reason why we would want to maintain the stability and the cohesiveness of our communities, especially our local neighbourhood communities, is this.

We complain all the time about the state of the nation, about what’s happening to society, and we forget that society starts in our own street and in our own workplace.

It seems to me the thing to do is dream of the kind of society you want to live in and then start living in your street as if it's that kind of society; and very soon, it will be. Thank you.

