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Words Have Meaning (a creative interlude)

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Presentation by

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Abe Nouk

Let's talk about Tony Abbott. No, no, let's not.

Let's not.

Let's not.

As a matter of fact, by show of hands, who here voted for Tony Abbott? That's how you know you have an authentic audience. See? We still haven't come to terms with that yet. So I'm just going to let that go before I turn the whole crowd against me.

Usually, the first impressions last longer. There goes mine.

There goes mine.

But the title says it. Communities in Control. People are what it's about. Who here pressed the snooze button once this morning? Look at that authenticity.

Twice? Your hand went up twice. Did I set the ground rules? No, okay.

Who here pressed the snooze button four times? Five? Going up to ten?

Who took the phone and smashed it against the wall? Nah, those phones are too precious these days. Okay. All right.

My mother has this habit..... I'm one of eight children. The reason why I'm sitting down is because if I stand up, you'll have a sore neck by the time I'm finished. So I'm going to recline. And I used to be short, for those who are wondering. It's a true story.

We've been in Australia for about twelve years now and it feels like twelve days. Our mother has the same habits. She kicks it into our room every single morning and says the same thing – “You guys live in a country where the only morning disturbance is the sound of the alarm clock. Even with that, you still press the snooze button.”

I'm thinking, Mum, this is too early for philosophical talks. It's six in the morning. You've got to be kidding.

But it's as simple as this. Do not gamble with your time. Your dreams and ambitions aren't just about you anymore. The fact that we have communities to take care of goes to show that we can

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either continue to play small, or be mindful. Life is too little, too short to play small. I mean, I pressed the snooze button more than once this morning, but then I figured if I don't get myself here, I'm going to be in trouble. Nah, nah, nah. Mum woke me up again. Same story. I'm one of eight children. The best part about growing up in a household of eight children is that I'm innocent until proven guilty. There are seven more suspects.

If you asked me to name an Indigenous language, I would have no clue. I'm sorry. If you asked me to recite in an Indigenous tongue, I wouldn't know what to say. I'm sorry. If you asked me what constitutes an Indigenous mob, I would have no clue. I'm sorry. If you ask me to speak about Indigenous tradition, my knowledge in that department is as far as knowing about the didgeridoo. It's shameful. I'm sorry. I only know of Captain Cook, recent prime ministers, upcoming elections and the fact that we will continue to have prime ministers who don't understand what it's about yet. So if you asked me to name an Indigenous public figure, I would have no clue. I'm sorry. That's my shame.

And may that soon change so the next time someone asks you and me about Indigenous language, we could at least say a few words of greetings, the same way we do with other languages. If you asked me about Indigenous tradition, I have no clue. I'm sorry.

Except that these days, whenever I speak to my mum about this art of spoken word, she says "People want to hear you talk?"

I said, "Thanks Mum. Home support. I appreciate it."

"Whatever you choose to say," she says, "don't forget you stand on the land whose ancestors you now have to uphold." May we be forgiven. The next time you ask me about Indigenous tradition, I'm gearing up to learn about as much as I possibly can. I've taken the time to learn the English language, but not their language. I'm sorry.

I'm sorry.

That's the thing about words, though. As much as we have an idea of where we stand as people and communities, we have no clue about the people that are hurting around us. We have no idea of the magnitude of our negligence. I'm not going to speak about you guys, but I'm going to speak about myself. When we first got the citizenship, what was going through our minds was aren't we Africans anymore? Are we Australians anymore?

Then you start to look in the media and you realise wait, we're still being labelled. You start to understand that communities can't exist if we can't stand in for each other and speak on behalf of those people who are being bullied. Speak on behalf of the people who really don't have a voice for themselves.

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People are trickling away. People are just passing on without any regard in terms of what it means to be individuals within the community. I mean, look at you guys. Look at you bunch. This is numbers. This is what it means when we get to understand that communities are the foundation for children to inherit futures that have been prepared for them, but have not been made for them. Because every single one of us has got to put in the effort.

Because I speak loudly about it, but you've got to understand how. My father was not the most educated man, but every choice he made kept my family alive. So to me, he was wise. Despite not having academic credentials, he knew the basics of life. An honest man really has nothing to fear. My mum? Well, we still refer to her as the uneducated philosopher. Both of them had no formal education, but it was this realisation that, for their children's sake, they had to muster up the courage to be dreamers. To foresee a future that they've never lived.

My dad never made it here, which goes to show that there will be certain sacrifices that you will get to make that will not be accounted for. But it is known life is one of two things. Faith and fear cannot occupy your mind space together. One of them pushes out the other. So what are you making room for?

Here's a little story. I hope you find your way through it. My little niece, a girl turned about seven years old. We had no idea about what she was going through. She was about three months premature. My whole family lost their minds. I'm thinking my goodness, she's that excited, she came three months ahead to see us. Mum is like "Can you not make fun of this thing?" But I'm like "No?" - but seriously, she's an honest little girl. She's growing up fast. She's turning seven. Her first birthday was a disaster. My family had no clue about the birthday song. But thanks to YouTube, we got that figured out real fast.

The other week, I was at the post office and I'm standing in line and the lady said, next up. I'm excited. I'm getting my passport. She says, can we please get your real birth certificate? So I went home and asked Mum. I said, "Mum, I need my real birth certificate. They need it." She said, "Well, here's a bunch of papers. Look through them and figure it out from there." I'm going through the papers. I'm one of eight children, four boys and four girls, and my mum, of course. That makes us about ten. I'm not good at math, but there you go. My mum was born on 1 January. My brothers were born on 1 January. I was born on 1 January. Now I'm not an expert, but my dad couldn't have been that precise. I sort it right out.

Went back to the post office and realised in that instant that we both existed in worlds that are far apart. This is how I came to be here. This is how my family came to be here.

I grew up in a household of eight children. The best part about it, whenever something broke at home, I'm still innocent until proven guilty. There's a new niece now. I can blame anything on her. Everything on her. We make ways these days and talk about the fate that could have been.

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An understanding that God does not compromise and fate is a cruel business. In 1999, my mother made a decision. In 2000, she executed it. At around 3:00am one morning, we found ourselves packing suitcases that did not contain much and we were jammed into a van. I wanted to stuff my childhood belongings and all of my friends into mine. Impossible. I know. I tried. Some things, regardless of how far back we stretch our arms to reach, will always get left behind. I learnt children learn to let go.

We found ourselves in Cairo. A pretty decent temporary place, considering we were refugees. Cairo was hot. Cairo was so hot, I got a permanent tan. Nothing could have prepared us for the odds. Sometimes, it isn't the challenges faced. It's whether you choose to follow through. Those with parachutes hesitate to fly and those without take a leap of faith. My mother, she leapt. She always talks about if you are not aiming for the stars don't bother looking up. By the time we looked up, it was too late. On March 30, 2004, we landed in Melbourne, Australia. My brother and I walked into Hungry Jack's for the first time and they had free refills. It was a long day. Life as we knew it was never the same since.

Eight siblings and a single mother. We are not the hero of this story. Far from it. At the Australian Embassy in Cairo where Mum sought asylum on our behalf, an Australian valued my mother's efforts. It's the only reason I'm granted this platform and a home where my siblings and I could break things that we would never have to worry about breaking up for survival. At the landing of a pen stroke, someone sealed my family's fate.

It's only fitting to take this moment and say thank you Australia. You used to be kind and I know you still can. It takes courage to be kind. Words don't mean much. So how brave are we? Thank you so very much for listening.

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