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Reckoning

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Presentation by

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If quoting from this speech, please acknowledge that it was presented to the 2016 Communities in Control Conference

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Hello everyone. I'm really thrilled to be here and to be a part of this. I actually wish that I'd been around for more of the talks because it sounds like you've had a pretty fascinating time and of course this is very relevant to me because I'm a member of a number of different communities – there's the ethnic ones, the Polish/Scottish community, obviously the Australian community, the broader community, part of the comedy community, the film, the television now the book community, via Sharon (vicariously) the netball community and also I think via Sharon the Irish dancing community or the bad Irish dancing community.

I don't want to name drop but I met Gloria Steinem the other day when she presented me an award. I nearly fainted! I said to her when I was a young, radical, lesbian feminist working in a women's refuge she was my hero and that's kind of how I started out very much in the community sector.

So if you wouldn't mind I'm going to read a bit from my book that talks about my experiences as a young volunteer. I know that's a complicated and a problematic position but working in the women's refuge movement which was, of course, created from a need by a group of women back in the days when no-one even really believed that domestic abuse and violence existed, nothing was done about it, the perpetrators really were allowed to go off scot-free and the women were frequently blamed.

And so I started in 1979 and 1980 and this was in the very, very early days of the women's refuge movement and it was because of feminists that this was started.

They had the energy and the dynamism and the politics, yes, little round of applause for the feminists. So I was at Melbourne University and my growing awareness that I was certainly not straight meant that I was gravitating towards an alternative way of looking at the world that I would feel that would include me.

Through that I became increasingly politicised and then I wanted to sort of not just have those ideals but really put my money where my mouth was and really do something to actually try and be a participant in making change happen. So this is from the book describing those early days.

Around the end of first year when I was at uni I had volunteered for the women's refuge referral service which was housed in a women's liberation building in West Melbourne, several times a week I would ride my bike over to the centre and spend a few hours working the phones, taking calls, placing desperate women and their children in refuges and emergency accommodation.

I began to feel my life's work and my heart's desire were aligning but what I really wanted was to work in a refuge.

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The women who worked in the refuges had an aura about them, whenever I saw them it was as though they walked in slow motion. They were uncompromising warriors on the frontline bravely confronting patriarchal violence in its most dangerous domain, the family home.

They were changing the world and it was dangerous work, sometimes the violent husbands would attack the workers. I can never be certain if it was compassion, idealism or recklessness that drew me to it.

I was by now 19 the same age my father was when he joined his unit in the Polish Resistance. Like him I was angry and full of despair but a bright fire of idealism burned within me so intense it felt originary. I felt it was mine and mine alone. In the middle of second year uni I applied and was accepted, I think perhaps I was the youngest worker in the state at that time and I certainly felt it.

I was kind of like a team mascot but at least now I was a refuge worker.

I was still studying part time and my old student diary from 1980 reads like a socialist, feminist, debutante's dance card, it is a whirlwind of rallies for the homeless, squatter's union gatherings, meetings with government ministers, May Day marches, street theatre rehearsals, screen-printing sessions and women's dances organised by an entity known as The Coven, all interspersed with reminders to go to the laundromat.

The refuge was run by a collective, us, lots of the workers were lesbians and they became mentors for me in work and life. I especially loved Barb, she wore fedoras, smoked long, thin Cigarillos and had a great sense of the ridiculous.

Once when a rather earnest worker was complaining of her industrial deafness Barb teased her "Oh, you incurable romantic," and winked at me from beneath the brow of her fedora, the other woman who was very literal didn't get it.

The locations and identities of the refuges were completely secret, the refuge I worked at was called Matilda and its location was never any more specific than the vague designation North West Region.

The large rambling old brick home had, from memory, four bedrooms each of which contained several beds and bunks; there would be one family per room. The women and their families would stay until we could organise a Housing Commission flat for them. We had to find the women new identities, names, driver's licences, schools for the kids. They often had to leave behind everything they knew, home, family, friends.

Every few weeks a new family would arrive at the refuge, the women were bruised and broken, the kids fractious and scared, the worst was when the kids were hurt, that cut deep into your soul.

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The work was confronting and frightening but also a real privilege, seeing these women and children slowly mend made me feel worthwhile, although some of the socialist feminists at the refuge would have considered such talk dangerous, sentimental, victim [saviour] bullshit.

A lot of the work at the refuge was sheer drudgery, shopping for food, buying toilet paper, going down to the Department of Social Security. I struggled with the practical stuff and I was too young to really truly empathise with the women. But I really loved chatting with the residents, getting to know them and their kids and finally I found a way to be useful.

One of the workers had a friend who had a house in the country at Blackwood where we would take the kids on camp. I would do childcare during the day and at night by the open fire I would spin long, nonsense yarns doing all sorts of accents and funny voices.

We would all laugh and fall about and the kids would scream, more, more and something in me clicked, something about this felt very right to me. The whole point of the refuges was to empower victims, to give them a voice, to hear them, but it was a delicate balance. Eventually I learnt that it was often the ones who loved to talk who came to rely too heavily on the social life of the refuge and struggled later on, out on their own in a commission flat with just their kids to talk to, the loneliness got to them.

Despite our best efforts some failed to escape the complex emotional hold of their abusive partners; that was gutting. The strain on the workers was tremendous and it was a running joke that every couple of years a worker burned out which is a euphuism for having a breakdown.

I wanted to give that example because very much I think what community is about, it's about courage, it's all the C words, courage, caring, compassion, creativity, connection and certainly I learnt that, even before actually working at the women's refuge.

I went to a Catholic girls' schools and the nuns they're very much led by example and inculcated into us along with our education was a belief in the importance of community and of looking after those less fortunate than yourself so that it's not just about self-interest.

And that's what I see; when I come to a thing like this I see all of you people who are very much committed to those values. But it's also a question isn't it of how you make those values work and then how you get your message across.

So there's two things I want to talk about, one is that interestingly that refuge, we had a policy of consensus, nothing could be done without complete consensus. Except there was one socialist feminist, a woman of great conscience but we got to the point where she couldn't decide what sort of toilet paper we should buy because she didn't want to support various

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multinationals and we had to eventually institute consensus minus one so that we could make some practical decisions.

But also in that story I relate about telling a story and I think that's a very important thing as well because how do you get across, we all speak different languages and the language of the community sector can be very, very different from the language of government or from the language of business and how do we find a common ground and I think a lot of that is through the telling of stories.

If, for example, you look in the transgender community the impact of Caitlyn Jenner completely changed consciousness.

If you look at the number of - this is me speaking from the perspective of the LGBTQI community of which of course I'm also a part - the example of so many shows like *Orange is the New Black* or so many television shows that have had either transgender or non-straight characters in them and that is very much a way for people to be able to identify and for us to broaden out the sense of what a community is and who's included in it.

Because so many of us feel that we are marginalised in our communities and that we don't have any say and it's very important.

I was just talking to Jordan (Nguyen) before, with all the advances that are happening in technology, it was funny, I went to this book club the other day and the book was *Frankenstein* and it's still as relevant as ever.

The point being that *Frankenstein* is about new technology and that if we don't keep rooted in the very important values of community then that's how technologies are abused and we get into a very dangerous place.

But we do all have to work at ways I think to find language so that it's not just - one of frustrations I felt when I was working in the refuge that it becomes its own world and you become your own sort of organism but that thing of actually knowing how to talk to other people in their own language is the way of building bridges but also getting things done.

I mean speaking from the perspective of someone who's been asked to advocate on behalf of Actors Equity I've gone to dinners with the Prime Minister, I can talk, you know, story and hearts and souls and flowers and all that till the cows come home, he's not listening, partly because he's a bit deaf, this was John Howard, but it was when someone spoke to him in percentages he literally sat up in his chair and heard what they were saying because he understands numbers, he understands percentages.

So I think one of the things - I could have very much gone down the path of the social welfare role and I still feel that very much increasingly probably actually the sense of community. I

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mean my local community where I live all those sorts of communities that we're all a part of and they intersect in and through us are enormously important to me.

But one of the things that I've tried to as much as possible hone and finesse has been the communication skills to try and build bridges between communities, so for example, with my book one thing I absolutely agonised over and just to give you a bit of a sense of what the book's about, it isn't a celebrity memoir and it isn't a comedy. The first line of the book is 'if you had ever met my father, you would never thought, not for an instant, that he was an assassin.'

Because my father during the Second World War was an assassin in a top secret counterintelligence unit executing Polish collaborators and traitors and the crimes of which these collaborators and traitors were found guilty was giving secrets to the Nazis and telling the Gestapo where Jewish people were hiding; Poland was the only country where the penalty for hiding a Jew was the death sentence.

But my entire family at enormous risk to themselves chose to be altruistic and to risk their own lives in order to stand up for what they believed in and to protect the rights of others.

But two of the other communities that I'm very strongly connected to are the Polish/Catholic community and the Polish/Jewish community and there's enormous, very acrimonious feeling between those two communities and I wondered if I could at all possibly help to build a bridge of empathy between those two communities because especially when we're hurt we do just sort of devolve into our little own universes and when feelings are running high.

I seriously, I mean I lost sleep, and talking about telling other people stories and what right you have to them, that was one of the things that nearly stopped me writing the book, was that sense of do I have the right to tell stories and it's a tricky one because otherwise stories don't get told and it is very important that we tell the story so that we can all share, that's the way we communicate experience.

And stories are a very powerful way of doing it, apart from just giving information there's a feeling component in stories and an empathy and an identifying component in stories that means that people are taken along on the journey. So I was incredibly nervous first of all, I literally, I can't tell you how many nights I lost in sleep at worrying about if I was going to hurt someone or offend them, even by leaving them out.

And one of the things I was most concerned about was because of those incredibly inflamed feelings between the Polish and Jewish communities, I thought the worst thing I could do would be to make that worse and so I agonised and agonised and fretted and annoyed my publishers worrying over every word that I put into that book.

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I mean I spent eight years on and off writing that book, I really spent a long time on it. The upshot of it is much to my great relief that what's happened with the book is that, in fact, both of those communities, the Jewish community and the Polish/Catholic community feel a real sense of ownership of the one book.

And that's why I think stories, and stories, I can't think of a better word to use because that's from my sort of world, a real bit of lingo and I think jargon is one of the things that we really need to free ourselves from as much as possible because that is what shuts people out and that is what keeps people separate, when we use jargon from our own words, from our own worlds, and I know it's easy and it makes communication amongst us a lot simpler but for anyone else it really is a way of having a fence around you and keeping them out.

And so one of the greatest, most extraordinary moments of my life was when I was invited to talk for Courage to Care, which is a Jewish organisation that acknowledges people who helped Jewish people during the war but also who help in all sorts of other circumstances. And at the end of the Q and A these two elderly Jewish women who were in their mid '90s who'd been helped by Jewish/Catholics got up, one of them read the most beautiful poem and then they gave me a certificate honouring my father and his family, there wasn't a dry eye in the whole room.

And my family didn't do what they did for acknowledgement at all and, in fact, they lost everything as my father said because of their activities in the Resistance they were cattle trucked out of Warsaw, my father was cattle trucked to a POW camp, he never saw his parents again from the age of 20.

So I grew up very much with a sense of what doing the right thing can cost you but I also grew up with a sense of watching people from the various communities of what not doing the right thing can cost you as well.

And I think ultimately that weighs more heavily on your soul, certainly I mean it seems sort of obvious doesn't it, but the risks that you take in standing up for what you believe in and for the values of your community I think it has a sort of a feedback loop where it actually makes you feel so much more congruous with your own values.

I know for me when I came out in 2012 the very act of that courage of coming out because it was, you know, I'm a very open, transparent kind of person living in a world that doesn't always allow for that.

But that very act of coming out, the courage that was involved in that and I struggle with the word courage because I mean, my God, coming from the family that I come from, my Grandmother was a 45-year-old fat middle-aged, and I use the word fat very deliberately by the way, I use the word fat very deliberately because we certainly, when we think of heroes, don't think of fat women, do we, a middle-aged, upper middle-class Polish, fat matron who hid

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Jewish people in her house and who slept with a folded up Polish flag under her head and a pistol in her pocket, most likely for use on herself and her own children had they been caught, for me that's the image of courage that I grew up with.

I had a very long journey to go on to discover my own courage and realising, I have to be careful how I say this, but you might understand what I'm saying, that in a way from my situation as a gay person I was the minority group and one of the things I talk about in the book is that the difference between LGBTQI people and other minorities is that with other minority groups the family shares the minority status.

If you're Greek or Vietnamese your whole family is Greek and Vietnamese unless you're adopted out, but generally speaking you know what I'm talking about, and you learn from the collective wisdom and you can share with your family how to negotiate the world as one of that minority.

But if you're an LGBTQI person you're a minority of one within your own family, within that very primal unit of survival and safety, you're an alien. And many of us, I knew from the age of five or six that I was not like the rest of my family and that is a form of trauma in itself, that realisation that you're not the same and that the world doesn't welcome you. Don't get me started on the marriage equality issue.

But I think all of what I'm driving at here is that the importance of community and the values that we have and the values that we share and the ability to tell stories and communicate, but also to come together in moments like this when we find that our values align and we discover more and more of what we have in common rather than what separates us are enormously important.

The communities in my life have made me able to keep going on, to be really honest, at times when I've struggled with anxiety and depression, any of you who saw *A Current Affair* will know that now, but that sense of a community can sometimes be an absolute lifeline but it also is very much how we'll change things.

And it was interesting talking to Jordan earlier about the changes in technology and I've been going on all this week about the challenges to copyright in this country. But it's something that we really as communities we do need to be in control and we need to know that we have the power and that we're not just battery-fed hens like consumers just being force-fed stuff by people who want to sell things to us.

We do need to have a sense of our own agency and we do need to have a sense that we can actually change things and that that I think ultimately really is the only reason we're here is to just add whatever it is, bring whatever it is that we feel that we can give uniquely and put our shoulders to the wheel and then together we will all change the wheels of history.

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