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Has the Individual Run Out of Power? The Power of One in the Community

Summary of the Address to the Communities in Control Conference
Melbourne, 20 June, 2006

Bryce Courtenay AM

Internationally acclaimed bestselling author,
business person, speaker and storyteller

*If quoting from this summary, please acknowledge that it was presented to the

**2006 Communities in Control conference
convened by Our Community & Centacare Catholic Family Services**

Bryce Courtenay speech summary
Communities in Control conference, June 2006.
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Mr Courtenay began by saying he wanted to talk about change – changing back, rather than changing forward.

As we go along in life, he said, we lose things – compassion, energy, spirit, intelligence – things that we needed to get back.

The biggest loss, he said, was the ability to dream.

“Can you remember when you lay on your back as a kid and you watched the clouds scuttling by and you said, ‘One day I’m gonna’,” Mr Courtenay said.

“What happened to the gonna? What happened to the dream?”

“Somebody came along and said, ‘Stop dreaming! Get yourself a qualification! Get yourself a job! Get out there kid and be responsible!’ And that’s exactly what you do.”

Mr Courtenay said that as adults, people became distracted by new dreams – of a new kitchen, a swimming pool, a weekender on the coast.

“Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear. Did you dream any of that stuff when you lay on your back and watching the clouds go by? None of that stuff happened! None of it happened!”

Mr Courtenay said human beings had a deep need to be unique, to be wonderful. What made the difference to how wonderful or not a person became was how they thought about themselves, and what they did with that thinking.

He said people needed to believe in their own uniqueness, their own wonder, their own power to achieve their dreams – and this had nothing to do with salaries.

“What we’re talking about here is *you*, your spirit, your sense,” he said.

“I’m asking you today to dare your genius, to walk in the wildest unknown way.”

Mr Courtenay urged people to declare their dream and commit themselves to it.

He said there would be obstacles along the way but these would probably never be as difficult to overcome as we imagined.

“The terrifying thing about the human imagination is that we can imagine disaster far better than we imagine success,” he said.

“Disaster, disaster: We always see it. We see it clearly. If we could use the same imagery for success, we’d all be hugely successful.”

Mr Courtenay said he was born illegitimately and placed in an orphanage in the deep north of South African – a small boy with an English name in a place where people spoke Afrikaans and had a deep hatred of the English.

He developed his storytelling abilities as a means of survival.

Mr Courtenay described how as a boy he had found a book, in English, and asked a teacher to teach him to read it. After two terms the teacher left the school, but Mr Courtenay, aged seven, could now read quite well.

“Every month from then on until I was 11 years old she would send me two books and an exam paper. And a letter.”

In one of those letters, the teacher said there was a scholarship going at South Africa’s most important private school and urged him to apply, even if just as a practice run for later scholarship attempts.

“I won the scholarship with an average mark of 98%. Eleven years old, barefoot and I’m going to the poshest school in the country,” Mr Courtenay said.

“Kids, you’ve got to have a dream. You’ve got to dream it’s possible.”

Mr Courtenay said that this one teacher changed his life.

“But for her it would never have been possible for me to dream,” he said.

“When you teach somebody to read you open up the whole world. Anything becomes possible. When they can’t read, they are doomed. They are absolutely doomed.”

Mr Courtenay said there was an appalling rate of illiteracy among Australians graduating from high school.

“When you give a child a book and make them read you give them life, sustenance and a future. When they haven’t got it, they’re dead,” he said.

Mr Courtenay said dreamers were the true leaders in society.

“All the other people are street sweepers. They’re keeping everything nice and tidy, the status quo. Everything is beautifully done. Don’t rock the boat.

“When you dream you can look over the far horizon. You can pull focus from anywhere.”