

CELEBRATING CONNECTEDNESS

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Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you all today. This comes about because my good friend Steve Biddulph, author of "Manhood" a bestselling book about setting men free, was unable to be here and suggested to your organisers that I take his place. Steve has been doing a great job around Australia and overseas raising people's awareness of the need to balance the attention given to women's issues by addressing the real needs of males, particularly young boys, in our rapidly changing society.

I intend to expand this topic to address the problem of people's lack of connectedness and increasing alienation, which is not a gender specific issue, but one which is having an increasingly unhealthy impact for all of us as well as creating some special problems for males in our society.

The theme of this conference, one of celebration, implies some sort of proclamation, something to rejoice about. Unfortunately this alienated society is not a subject for celebration at the moment. So my challenge is for us all is to think of ways personally and institutionally that we can be involved in celebrating the death of alienation and the rebirth of connections between people. Connections which involve, Security, Empathy, Affirmation and Protection. Where the individual can feel unique, can experience the impact they make on others and be moved by that impact, to love and be loved. Connections between country and city, between black and white, male and female, school and community, teacher and learner, boss and worker, parent and child.

All warm and fuzzy stuff but as I hope to demonstrate, terribly important for our future well being. I hope to leave some time at the end for comment and/ or question.

My experiences over the years working in juvenile welfare and adult corrections with both the privileged and disadvantaged youth and families has brought me into contact with the widest range of behaviours including hopelessness, depression, child abuse homelessness, addiction, violence, suicide, and murder. My 40 years with Scouting has exposed me to some of these issues as well as to kids who are achieving, ambitious, happy, creative, resourceful, responsible and self disciplined. As the middle class shrinks and the gap between the haves and the have nots widens the situation at first glance looks ominous.

Of concern to most thinking people is the increase in violence in our community, the difficulty in keeping up with the pace of change, and for those who are lucky enough to work, then the problem exists of being expected to do so much more with a whole lot less whilst there are so many people, particularly young ones, out of full time employment.

Hugh Mackay a social researcher with the Commission for the future says we have an "epidemic of insecurity". He cites two reasons for this. First; Parents of today grew up in a cold war era where they lived with fear of there being no future. A fear that someone, somewhere will push the button. At the same time they felt that economic prosperity was available to everyone who wanted it. These two conflicting views, one where everything is financially rosy, the other that tomorrow might not exist- produced a generation of people who believed that "we better have a good time now and have it fast". I can remember the motto of some adolescents "live fast die young and have a good looking corpse". The real tragedy being that many did just that.

Secondly: In the early seventies Mackay believes that the character of our society changed to one where everything was able to be questioned, many traditional beliefs and landmarks were challenged and rebelled against by young people. for example:-

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Attitudes to Family and Marriage have changed dramatically.

The divorce rate grows from 6% to 35% and may reach the American 55% of marriages ending in divorce.

One parent families Over 1 million children living with only one parent

No typical family any more. Many models accepted by a large part of society

Parenting practices. Many more demands placed on parents to do the right thing.

One of the issues that we are trying to deal with is Change. The rate of change is faster than at any other time. eg. The amount of information in a single issue of a quality newspaper today is approximately equal to the amount of information that a person in the 16th century would have assimilated in a lifetime.

Recently a visiting Information technology professor used the term "infoquake to measure change. Like the Richter scale to measure earthquakes each point on the scale increases by the power of 10 the amount of change. Stone tablets to paper measured 2; Paper to CD ROMs 7 ;Telephone lines to optic fibre 8. In the next 5 years the amount of change is predicted to be as much as has occurred in the last 50 years.

Add to these social changes, the pressures of unemployment for young people, expectations of a multicultural society, technological revolution, restructuring and redundancies, a global economy, and it is no wonder we have an epidemic of insecurity.

Our population is ageing and is increasingly fearful for their safety, at least in cities. In the 1900s there were 4 times the number of children than people over the age of 55. In the mid 80s there were more 55 yr olds and over than children and by the year 2000 there will be 11% more and by 2021 it is predicted that there will be 66% more 55 year olds than children.

Mackay believes that in trying to cope with this epidemic we have demanded more regulation, more controls and structures; eg gun laws, media censorship, anti smoking laws, environmental laws, Dog laws, racial anti vilification laws compulsory super to mention a few. A lawyer's smorgasbord.

No longer do we live in a village where it might be easier to deal with these changes and the insecurity they bring. A community where there is a sense of belonging, where we share space, values and concerns for each other. Some have said that we now live in a Global Village. Mackay believes that the Global Village is a misnomer. The new computer technology which heralds the Global village, the Internet, Email, faxes, mobile phones may mislead us to believe that the transfer of data between people all over the planet is the same as communication. It is not. Data transfer is just shifting bits of information. Communication is something you do in a relationship with others.

The more time we spend with machines at the expense of time spent with others the more we threaten our sense of belonging to a community. We will start to feel fragmented - more alienated and lose a common sense of morality, of right and wrong. Our most precious resource is each other. Maybe it is time to have not only TV free days but also computer free ones as well.

Another observer, John Naisbitt in his book "Megatrends" explores a contrary and optimistic view of the technological revolution. He claims that there is a natural balancing High Tech - High touch phenomena. The more high tech - the more high touch we become.

I believe that people need people stimulation and recognition to survive and it seems that we will forego high tech for a while to get it. A famous psychiatrist and prolific writer Eric Berne author of one of his books "Games People Play" called this need Recognition Hunger and conceived the term "strokes" to describe this most basic of human hungers. Others have called these pleasant strokes, warm fuzzies and the unpleasant ones cold pricklies and show how people will go to any length to get either of them, for to be ignored is crippling, physically and emotionally. I am sure that you all can identify a student in your school that everyone knows about. It is probably because of his or her inappropriate behaviour that all staff recognise that student. See how street smart kids can be to get their daily intake of life giving strokes. If there are no fuzzies available then they will set you up to give them pricklies as these are better than being ignored.

Naisbitt cites examples where the introduction of high tech leads at the same time to more people oriented activities, eg. TV with Group Therapy; heart transplants with home births; the Video recorder with an explosion of cinemas, (30 new cinemas at the Marion Westfield shopping complex about to open); electronic shopping with shopping malls; computers in schools with demands on teachers to deal with values (perhaps the dramatic increase in Christian private schools is a part of this balancing process in the educational arena)

Unfortunately our society still exhibits the symptoms of this alienation - violence - dependence upon prescription drugs - child abuse - homelessness - suicide - road rage - and family breakdown. We have full time workers working flat out doing their job even though the number of overtime hours they work would account for 1/2 a million more jobs in a population where there are more than a million people who would like to work but can't. These workers find their connections at work rather than with those who matter most.

It is not only these society influences which break the connections between people. Psychologists have long known about the dramatic impact that much earlier influences from parenting and educational processes can have.

Before the age of 12, young people develop a lifelong script about who they are and how they will relate to others as a result of the recognition (or lack of it) that they get. On the one hand they need closeness and connections with others to be able to grow and develop in a healthy way, to work out who they are and how they should behave. On the other hand because of the parenting they receive may be unwilling or unable to behave in a way that will satisfy their recognition hunger in a positive way. So we get the misfits, the dropouts, the trouble makers, the truants, the shy and frightened ones, those who are rebellious or overly compliant as well as those who keep their feelings closed, and avoid closeness.

Young children who suffer trauma from being abandoned, or who find that getting close to a carer leads to pain or discomfort soon learn to adapt to that uncaring environment and to shut down on their natural desire to be close. They lose their trust in others and to protect themselves from further hurt behave in ways to reinforce others to continue hurting them. To reverse this process they need strong doses of consistent and unconditional caring and closeness. Strong permission that to be close can be safe and even pleasurable.

One researcher - James Prescott - wrote about this phenomena over 20 years ago. He stated that "the principal cause of human violence is a lack of bodily pleasure during the formative years of life. Laboratory experiments and cross cultural surveys demonstrated that individuals and societies which experience and promote physical pleasure are also peaceful....."

He believes that a nation can reduce crime and violence in the future by providing more pleasure for its infants and young people. "...Unless the causes of violence are isolated and treated we will continue to live in a world of fear and apprehension. Many advocate get tough policies as

the best way to reduce crime, but because the causes of violence lie in our basic values and the way we bring up children this will not solve the problem...."

"Physically affectionate human societies are unlikely to be physically violent.".....

"Pleasure and violence have a reciprocal relationship. The presence of one inhibits the other."

A few years ago I talked with a woman Jean Liedloff who had lived for several years with stone age Indians deep in the South American jungle. Jean wrote a book called the "Continuum Concept". She reported that the children in this tribe were uniformly well behaved, never fought, were never punished, always obeyed happily and instantly. Babies in the tribe were carried around full time by their mothers for their first 6 - 8 months. The older infant was always present but rarely the centre of attention. Simply just there, constantly experiencing things, safely being held. The parenting process expected the child to evolve on a natural continuum and in a very close relationship with its caretakers in the first years of life.

Jean evolved the Continuum Concept which explained that the design of each individual was a reflection of the experience it expected to encounter. Lungs expect air, eyes - light when best needed, ears - vibrations that make sense, one sex expects there to be another. When the expected does not take place, corrective or compensatory tendencies make an effort to restore stability. Western society has interrupted this continuum in it's child rearing practices to it's detriment.

I remember an obedience experiment when studying psychology. Milgram's experiment I think it was called. It involved students being paid to administer an electric shock to subjects in an adjoining room. The experiment was rigged so that no actual shock was given but the accomplice acted as though it was. One of the surprising results was that the further away the student was from the victim, ie could not see or hear them, the more voltage they were willing to apply. Even sufficient to seriously hurt or kill. The closer the victim eg. the student able to see or to touch the victim the less they were willing to inflict pain or be involved. The student was even more unwilling if they had some sort of group support alongside of them during the experiment. Closeness negates or makes it harder to hurt others.

So to me it seems logical to conclude that if we want a non harmful family, community, institution or society that we need to address the issues of closeness at the time of child rearing as well as in the ways we structure our institutions to function. When I established the two project centres in Adelaide for young adolescent offenders and for children with severe school behavioural problems the staff were trained to re-parent the young people to attempt to overcome the past very negative parental and teacher influences. They modelled with each other the importance of close contact, of not reinforcing negative inappropriate behaviour. Kids were hugged, physically touched in non intrusive ways, were taught how to get positive attention physically and verbally. At one stage one of the groups even felt comfortable enough to give each other body massages. Their violent and disruptive behaviour stopped. In a Kids shelter, we obtained the same results with severely abused and suicidal street kids who responded to strong caring confrontation, intensive and continual physical touching. They stopped running, stopped hurting themselves and ceased their suicidal behaviour. Similar reports from a variety of places around the world showed the therapeutic value of physical closeness in undoing past trauma with these damaged young people.

Outdoor adventure camps for troubled youth have for years shown the beneficial effects of programs where challenge, stimulation and caring closeness is present. The most serious drug addicts have been most successfully treated in programs like Synanon where closeness and confrontation have been key elements. I have visited prison programs overseas for the most violent dangerous offenders. Programs which have inmates caring and holding each other, where trust can be established.

Unfortunately in many of our social institutions, schools, clubs, work places there is a fear of closeness. We regulate or forbid touch for fear of recrimination, of being labelled harassing or abusive. It is as though we can't understand or teach the difference between harmful contact and caring and non intrusive contact and so to be on the safe side we prohibit all but the most superficial.

There is a growing awareness in the literature and in management about the need to develop a people oriented culture where relationship skills are seen as paramount for the success of the business and for the happiness of the individual. Writers like Stephen Covey, author of several books - one best seller being "The 7 habits of Highly Effective people", almost make a religion about this issue.

I have even had fathers come to me for counselling and in the process inquire about whether it is safe to hug their teenage daughters. They are unsure and insecure about this. They get sexuality mixed up with sensuality and so keep their distance. So the daughter goes without or produces a behaviour either sexually provocative, rebellious or overly compliant to get some attention from dad.

Steve Biddulph in his book "Manhood" claims that men have some special burdens that have not been acknowledged. Feminism has brought the possibility of opening up the sensitive side of men. They have become more thoughtful, more caring. They are not interested in starting wars or harming the earth and will sleep in the damp patch. (Although in my business contacts as a management consultant I don't see any Movement as strong as the Women's' movement to feel that this enlightenment has spread very far yet.)

Something's wrong. These feminised men are life preserving not life giving. Some have become wimps, stuck trying to be more sensitive but only having female models to copy from. Females can't teach men about male's feelings. This is not to denigrate the important part and tremendous influence that mothers have on young boys. One can see this influence still playing a part with many of our violent adult prisoners who can be calmed down by a mother or mother substitute when they are acting out.

Robert Bly in his book "Iron John" describes the fifties man as loyal hardworking, supported his wife and children, and admired discipline, likes football, is aggressive and will fight for his country. What was lacking were actions without feelings. "Do you love me dear?" she asks "Define Love" he responds.

They didn't know how to feel because feelings come from the inside.

Men put on a tough exterior and act out a role- Women act from the inside. Men feel that there must be more but don't know how to get to it except for brief tastes of passion and glory in being alive eg, alone on the top of a mountain, surviving a life threatening trauma, being with a woman in a certain kind of way.

As men struggled on we began to discover in men's groups, after the facade of anger and hate was lifted, that men were lonely and sad. Tears of grief not angry outbursts predominated. Just as women had to overcome oppression, and to learn to use their anger in productive ways. Males had to learn to grieve, to deal with their isolation and loneliness, their compulsive competition and their lifelong emotional illiteracy. Competition has its roots in the belief that there isn't enough to go around. Their angry facade covered their scare that there wouldn't be enough love to go around.

Bly found that many males were "father hungry". There was a deep biological need for strong, humorous, hairy, sweaty, caring, intelligent masculine input. The average time spend by fathers and sons together is 6 mins a day. So how can this need be satisfied?

Steve recommends "fixing it with your father" seeking that reconciliation, that sense of connectedness, and in his book discusses ways to go about this.

In any process of reconciliation though there are two issues which must be faced for a successful resolution. One of "Apology" and one of "Forgiveness". In our nation's struggle with the Aboriginal Reconciliation process we hear lots about apology and nothing about forgiveness. To move on both issues will need to be addressed in personal as well as national conflict situations.

Steve claims that boys are grossly under-fathered. They often have no mentor figures to help them grow into mature men. Male networks are awkward and lacking in intimacy. Women learn to network to get close to each other. Boys never find out the inner world of older men and so copy the image they see on the outside which they then act out to prove they are a man. The John Wayne type.

Boys who are under-fathered come in two types. Macho with aggressive clothes, violent toys, carrying weapons, highly competitive and with low quality relationships. Or a "mummy's boy, under confident, depressed often bedwetting, picked on and having irrational fears.

Bly states "A boy cannot change into a man without the intervention of the older men". Even the best fathers cannot raise their sons alone. They need help from other men. In tribal situations the whole male community gets involved.

One of the most important issues for a boy to deal with is to be able to separate emotionally from his mother. When men stopped working alongside of wives and children in their villages and farms and went to work in factories, mines and offices, boys began being raised by women.

A boy needs to needs to experience himself as profoundly independent of his mother's emotional states, her needs and her sexual identity. He has more possibility to accomplish these tasks when he has a strong, and present father or some other significant male in his life. He needs far more than 6 mins a day.

I wonder if rural communities where sons and fathers might see each other a lot more have some advantages in this area. I also wonder about the impact of young adolescents being sent away to boarding school at such a critical time in the development of their personality.

Steve describes some statistics about being a man in the 90s to show that maybe it is not a man's world after all.

Males live on average 6 years less than women

Women initiate divorce in 4 out 5 cases

90% of convicted violent acts will be carried out by men

70% of victims of violent acts will be men

90% of children in schools with behaviour problems are boys

Males comprise over 90% of inmates in gaols

One in seven boys will experience sexual assault before 18 yrs

Adolescent suicide rates have doubled in the past 10 yrs and men and boys commit suicide 5 times more frequently than women.

Males have unique health problems with Mondays being the most common time for heart attacks to occur.

Futurist, Dr Peter Ellyard talks about our "emerging spaceship culture". A new planetary culture. One within which we are becoming more interdependent and co-operative globally. Whilst there will still be tribal wars within the planet, global trading, fear of global ecological disasters and a new planetary security system will demand that we see ourselves as a spaceship within which individuals will cease to identify themselves nationally eg. as Australian, English American or European. Six year olds of today who will take on jobs in 2010 that haven't yet been invented, will identify themselves with their planet as much as their nation.

Peter Ellyard describes the characteristics of this spaceship culture as Interdependent, Communitarian, Democratic, with humanity a part of nature, sustainable lifestyles, Gender equality, intercultural and interracial tolerance, conflicts resolved through negotiation and a reliance on security rather than defence.

This emerging spaceship culture will force all of us to review what it means to be male and to make some changes to our education and learning. Incidents like the Pt Arthur massacre is where the cowboy has gone rampant in the spaceship.

Males will need to change from Cowboys to Cosmonauts and learn to develop the characteristics mentioned above. We need a new model of spaceship masculinity. Peter Singer in his book "The Expanding Circle" suggests we develop "Circles of Concern" and Robert Bly proposes that we reinvent male Initiation as two ways to bring about this change..

Singer's Circle of Concern expands the ancient act of embracing and caring for one kind of humanity. This act, in the past, has led to racial and cultural intolerance. This new Circle of Concern needs to embrace all of humanity and cross the boundaries around our species. We are already witnessing this with programs like whale watch. Schools should encourage students to map their own Circles of Concern and to have individuals work on increasing these.

Bly says that by abandoning initiation for males into adulthood we have incurred an enormous social cost. We have a society full of men running around in boy's bodies. Women at puberty have a biological milestone. Males have nothing. Most indigenous cultures chose puberty as the educational step into adulthood. The need is still there and can be seen in some of the rites and rituals of street gangs. Our big wars in the past provided an opportunity for young men to become adults. They drove big tanks, ships, vehicles and aeroplanes whilst still in their teens. They became leaders and heroes and killed their enemies. Today's youth tries to do the same on our local streets in hot cars and motor bikes, terrorising others and becoming a big man. The final initiation for many young offenders is to get locked up then they have made it. Only by then, they are well and truly into the ever engulfing and mind destroying correctional system.

Young Indians in some American gaols have been allowed to develop "Sweat Lodges" where they undergo traditional initiation rites of passage. We have nothing to equal this.

Initiation serves to teach cultural values and myths to prepare boys for responsible adulthood. It channels youthful aggressiveness into useful and productive pursuits. It creates men who as warriors use their physical strength for noble purposes rather than for self gratification. It teaches respect for self and others and develops self esteem and an understanding of the richness of culture and human experience. It includes significant tests of skill, self reliance and achievement.

How to bring all of this to some ending? Perhaps by offering a few thoughts for future action that have arisen in my mind as I have been writing this speech.

Looking at Institutional possibilities.

I am aware of the important role that an organisation like SPERA has in breaking down the barriers and isolation of the workers in Rural settings. Even more important when so many great achievements are accomplished by these workers and not often given the recognition that they deserve. You are doing a great job in increasing connectedness.

In my current work, at the South Australian Training and Education centre and in co-operation with your department I have been working with an ex Principal Polly Eckert providing a Leadership and Management course for country staff. Our first course is almost completed with a large waiting list for the next one. It has been great to see how these teachers from isolated places have bonded so rapidly together in their learning groups. Almost like an inoculation against the alienation of distance. For a few years there will be some Federal money to continue these programs.

In another organisation, Scouting, I see tremendous opportunities for young people and their adult leaders to break down barriers not only in their personal local relationships but at events like national and world jamborees where 16,000 people from all walks of life, from all religions and cultures, live, eat, work and play together in peaceful co-operation. Scouting breaks down political barriers and gives young people opportunities for real sharing experiences in far away places like Bangladesh where Aussie kids work alongside of local young people building roads and bridges, installing toilets, carrying out rehydration of infants life saving programs. Or where young survivors from the Chernobyl disaster are hosted for a healthy holiday in Adelaide. Scouting and Rotary Student exchange programs are another excellent way of bringing understanding of other cultures and being able to appreciate individual differences and so break down imagined and real barriers.

Schools, by their very nature play a significant role in either establishing or breaking down barriers to connectedness. I know that the poor old teacher gets landed with every social ill to fix. I am reluctant to heap more on those existing pressures. However schools could look at their systems and see how change can be introduced so that a caring environment is a part of the culture children are exposed to continually. eg., Does your school have a published set of values and principles that staff and kids have developed together and are encouraged to live by? I understand that establishing Collaborative Learning Environments is one system which demands close working relationships. Introducing a Mentoring system for staff and students is another. In all our Management courses we teach participants how to find and use a mentor and where possible provide some basic skills for their Mentors. I know that physical touch is unfortunately a No No in the school other than on the footy field. However in younger classrooms I have seen some very creative ways of getting around this safely for child and teacher. I am sure some of the very many creative staff could find safe ways to provide this most basic of human needs for mutual benefit.

With kids showing difficult behaviour, "Catch them doing something right" for a change.

Personally.

Find ways to give strokes - fuzzies to others. It is a great motivator and healer and you get more back. The higher up the hierarchy the more important this is to deal with the alienation of command. Learn to forgive and to heal old wounds. Work less and play more. Invent ways to spend more quality time with those close to you. If you are a dad check how many minutes a day you spend with your kids in quality time. Not lecturing or questioning but listening and being with. If you have a family check how much time you have alone in quality time with your partner. Do little unexpected things for them. Be a good Scout and do a good turn for somebody every day. Invent new ways to have more. I like one bumper sticker I saw a while

ago "Have you hugged your kid today?" Set some goals to increase this time before it's too late and they leave home to become independent.

Who knows maybe one of your students will one day help us move out of the technological and into a humanities revolution.

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About the author

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