

Our Time is Now

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I am very honoured to be speaking to you today. I have long admired the work of Women and the Australian Church. They have maintained a strong, unyielding focus on issues of social justice and, through their work, embody the principle of always thinking about how we can improve the lives of those who are less fortunate than ourselves.

I am also honoured to be speaking with such a dynamic group of young people. You have your futures before you. There is every promise of every opportunity in the pathway ahead of you. So I want to share some reflections from my journey in the hope that some of the things I have learnt along the way may be of interest to you.

I was born into an Aboriginal family. My father grew up in a home and my grandmother was taken from her family when she was only twelve. She never returned home. My father did not find our Aboriginal family until I was about the same age as my grandmother was when she became a member of the stolen generations.

And while I saw the difference it made to my father to know who he was and where he was from and had watched fascinated as he changed from an insecure and self-conscious person to someone who was confident and felt he had much to give, it was my grandmother's story – at least what I knew of it – that haunted me the most.

What must it have been like for a girl of twelve years old to have been taken from her family and, not put into a home with other girls, but sent to work with a family? It cannot have been a pleasant experience because the archival record shows that she became pregnant, the child taken from her and she was sent to work in the hospital at Parkes.

My family's experience with the policy of removing Aboriginal women from their families was what interested me in social justice. How a policy that inflicted such cruelty could operate for so long and with such devastating impact over generations seemed outrageous to me. And even as a child, I knew that there was something about the way the laws were set up that allowed such a policy to exist – giving no ability to parents to appeal or question or reclaim children that they loved and had looked after. And it was the removal policy that made me first want to be a lawyer.

While my father struggled with his identity until his family, I never did. I did not even know there was anything negative about being Aboriginal until I went to school and I was teased by other children about it. My father was raised in an orphanage where he was told over and over again that he was inferior because he was Aboriginal. I grew up in a family and my mother, who is white, constantly referred to my Aboriginal heritage in positive ways.

And when I first asked her about what the children had said at school about Aboriginal people being lazy and like monkeys she had told me that I should feel sorry for children who say such things as they are just jealous that they do not have a cultural heritage as rich as mine. I am not sure now that this was the truth but at the time, of course it reassured me and reaffirmed my pride in my heritage. I can never recall a time when I felt ashamed of who I was.

I share this with you on this occasion for a couple of reasons. The story of my white mother raising two Aboriginal children who were part of their Aboriginal community and proud of their heritage is the kind of story that reflects the most important type of reconciliation: the one that occurs at the personal level, between people in their personal relationships.

And it shows the important role that the support of other women plays in our success. There is a saying I love because it captures my own experiences: Behind every successful man is a good woman; behind every successful woman is a good mother.

I grew up with a strong sense of political activism and social justice. I also had a strong pride in my Aboriginality and I knew all about the history of Aboriginal people in New South Wales. I must have seemed unhappy as I tried to fit in at high school. My favourite teacher, Miss O'Sullivan, once said to me, "Larissa, you might not like high school but you are going to love University." Her comment struck a chord with me and since she said that I thought it was the most natural thing that I would go from high school to university even though I hadn't thought about it until Miss O'Sullivan mentioned it. Miss O'Sullivan highlighted the role that a good mentor plays. She allowed me to see beyond the world that I knew, to see further down the path I could travel than I could see myself.

Miss O'Sullivan was right and I loved University. I wasn't a star student. In fact, I failed the first semester of my commerce degree so I switched to another degree! But I got into the pattern of study and I worked hard. I became involved with student activities and spent most of my time at the Aboriginal student centre. I met some great people there and they are still some of my closest friends and most supportive colleagues. It was during this time that the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody was taking place and I co-wrote an article with my brother (my first published article) in the University newspaper about police racism. It was called 'Bad apples or rotten fruit.' It was a small place to start but I've been writing and publishing my thoughts ever since.

I had wanted to do a law degree because I wanted to change the world. When I graduated from Law School, I worked in the Family Law Section of the Legal Aid Commission. As I was processing maintenance applications through the Local Court, I felt more like a cog in a wheel rather than working on the issues that I thought were pressing. I was feeling frustrated and I went and spoke to Roberta Sykes, a family friend and an Aboriginal person who had been involved with Aboriginal affairs all her life, about the fact that I thought I would go back to do some more study and work in the University. I had been teaching general studies classes – Aboriginal history, culture and contemporary issues – and I really enjoyed the experience. Education became an area that I saw as increasingly important if there were to be greater understanding the Australian society about Indigenous issues.

I spoke to Roberta about this and she asked what I was thinking about doing and I told her I thought I would like to do a Masters. She encouraged me but added, "You should apply to Harvard." I didn't take it seriously because I thought Harvard was out of my league. When Roberta handed me the forms to fill in, I was too frightened of her to say "No" so I dutifully filled them in and sent them off. I never expected to get in and I couldn't have been more surprised when I found myself on a plane to Boston. I was worried for the first few weeks that I would be told that there had been a mistake and I had not been accepted. In the years since I have often been asked how I got to Harvard and I think that the expectation is that I will talk about goal setting and ambition but the truth is I never saw myself as having as much potential as Roberta thought I had. She was the best mentor that I could have ever had.

People often ask me what my greatest achievement is and I would have to say that it would be a tie between supervising Indigenous doctoral students and writing. My first novel was published in 2004.

I have always loved writing but only resumed creative writing when I was in Boston with the encouragement of my closet friends and the writing group we established. The story is about the impact of the removal policy on three generations of an Aboriginal family. It sought to explore how pervasive and psychological the impact was and to show that Indigenous people and families still live with the effects of that policy today. It was a very personal story and I felt that there was an increasing need to continue to tell those stories because I feel that we are living in an era in Australia that is becoming increasingly disinterested in Indigenous issues.

I had always thought that if people knew the human cost of policies like the removal of children on Aboriginal people that there would be increased understanding as to why our communities and families face the issues that we do. I was shocked that some sectors of the Australian community responded to personal accounts from the stolen generations by attempting to deny their experience and trivialise their hurt and suffering. I felt it was really important to continue to tell those stories so they would not be marginalised or forgotten.

Writing *Home* and getting it published was something I feel very proud of and although it got mostly rave reviews, there was one that trashed it by saying that it was too political and not well edited. I was crushed at first, despite all the wonderful and positive things that were said about the novel. I made the mistake of listening to only the bad review, not all the good ones. But the more I thought about it I did feel proud that, even if there was a negative reaction, I had taken the brave step of putting a story I believe in out there. You can't expect to make a contribution to public life without getting criticism. But that doesn't mean that it is easy and at these times, more than ever, that network of peer and mentor support is valuable beyond words.

I want to finish my remarks today with a reflection on some of the other wisdom that has helped me on my journey. And this is wisdom that comes from my Aboriginal culture. There are three things from this I want to share with you.

The first is that we are all connected to our environment and we have a responsibility to protect it. There are heated debates about climate change and while I am personally persuaded by the science, it has always puzzled me that people require scientific proof before they feel there is a need to protect our environment. We have that responsibility because we need to ensure that the air we breathe and the water we drink are clean. We need to make sure that our ecosystems are strong. Whether we live in the country or live in the city, everything we eat comes from nature and we owe it, when we take from it to sustain ourselves, the respect to work to make sure ecosystems are vibrant, strong and cared for.

The second lesson is to listen to the wisdom of our elders. We are often focused on what we learn at school or university. We are tested on that, graded on it and those grades determine our future. Aboriginal people understand that older people are the custodians of our culture and through their life experience have wisdom that can be invaluable as we take our own journeys.

The third lesson is that women are not inferior. Despite the popular accounts in the press of Aboriginal culture as violent and tolerant of violence against women, that does not reflect my experience within the Aboriginal community or of the values in my traditional

culture. Where violence is endemic in the Aboriginal community it is usually because the traditional values have been undermined, the traditional role of women has been ignored and the social fabric has unravelled leaving in its place the dysfunction that stains some Aboriginal communities today.

But in the Eualayai and Gamillaroi nations, women had separate roles to men but these were not subordinate in the way they are in western culture. There was women's business and men's business but, while these were separate, one was not seen as inferior to the other. In our culture, women had the primary control over the spiritual life of people in the community.

Women decided where a child would be conceived and born – decision that would affect the child's spiritual responsibilities throughout their lives. In our culture, the creation spirit was female so god really was a woman. And decision making was not gendered. Greater weight was given to the wisest elders, whether they were male or female.

My final note today is this. I chose a path in which my work would focus on issues of social justice. Of course, I do not expect that this will be the pathway for everyone. But I do believe that, whatever role we take, whatever profession we do, however we decide to resolve the work/family balance, we, as women, have a responsibility to at least have an informed opinion about the kind of society we live in. We have the ability to influence our families, workplaces and communities with our moral authority as women – as mothers, sisters, daughters, partners, friends, bosses and colleagues.

So even if your view of the kind of community we live in is not the same as mine, we are all invested in the issue of what values our society should embody, in the way we treat those who are more disadvantaged, marginalised and vulnerable than we are. Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "Do what you feel in your heart to be right – for you'll be criticized anyway. You'll be damned if you do, and damned if you don't." It is a sage reminder about being true to yourself.

She also wisely said, "No one can make you feel inferior without your consent" and I have to say that I can think of no better advice to pass on to other women than that.