

# **ACTING NOW TO CHANGE THE FUTURE**

## **Rosemary Breen**

### **2012 WATAC Luncheon Address**

It is a special privilege to be speaking at this luncheon because it has been the WATAC women who have always been ready to speak out and act to change the future.

As I see it: "Life doesn't have a remote. So get up and change it:"

We have many examples of women down the ages who have spoken out - I think of those poor fellows who were running off to Emmaus in great trepidation and were met by Jesus on the road. "What has happened? Why are you running away?" and you remember the answer "The women have affrighted us". I fear women have been affrighting the leaders of the Church down the last two thousand years! (And it was not as if they were asking for anything dangerous like inclusive language in the liturgy or the ordination of women - no, they were simply announcing that the Lord had risen!)

It is as if we are at a time of Reformation once again - a time when the church has to change and in spite of the kicking and screaming from Rome, something significant is happening in our times. More than twenty years ago, WATAC groups were speaking about the dearth of male, celibate priests in the coming years and preparing themselves in different ways. Groups have been formed by spiritual nourishment and we have wonderful liturgies at conferences and in the smaller groups. Now we have the Austrian priests with their "Call to Disobedience" and the Irish priests catching up with WATAC - it is as if a pathway has already been beaten and more and more Catholics are searching for new ways of being Church.

Every day there seems to be a call for action. At present we are learning about the results of the Vatican investigation into women religious in the USA. Many of you will have signed the petition of support for the sisters <http://www.change.org/petitions/support-the-sisters> - the religious of Australia have sent a strong letter of support too. I have been encouraging people to sign the petition and my sister in the US was telling me the other day how their Emmaus group has made postcards with the words "My conscience tells me to stand with the Catholic sisters" and they have sent them to all the bishops in California. (One reply so far and it was very encouraging) They are also making a guard of honour outside a church where the sisters are having a celebration and are going to carry banners with "Thank you for teaching me to read", "Thank you for visiting me in prison", "Thank you for caring for me in hospital" and so on.

I think of the apocryphal story of Judith and Holofernes (if you don't know it, look it up in the Bible) - just before she chopped off his head, she prayed "Your strength does not lie in numbers, nor your might in violent men. Make me strong, Lord God of Israel". With that she gave a mighty chop and took his head back to the Israelites in her food bag. Nice touch! Mind you, this is only figurative language - so no Vatican heads in food bags, please! But it is a reminder that sometimes desperate measures are called for in the struggle for justice.

One of the significant moments in the past was in the area of Reconciliation at a time when our government refused to apologise to the first Australians for past injustices. Some of you would have walked over Sydney Harbour Bridge under the WATAC banner with the many thousands of supporters of Reconciliation. And there in the clear blue sky we suddenly saw the letters S.....O.....R.....R.....Y appearing - what a moment that was! Slowly but surely public opinion changed and we remember that wonderful occasion when at last indigenous Australians received the apology which meant so much to them.

A good teacher always has a visual aid or two - today I have invited to our Luncheon a woman who is surely acting to change the future in Zambia. Elke Kroeger-Radcliffe went over to a remote part of Zambia as a nurse a number of years ago, realised that education was the great need and started a community called Tikondane (it means "Let us love one another") which now has hundreds of children being educated, AIDS education, water projects, agriculture to name a few. Forty-seven villages around Tikondane are now being mentored by Elke. I'm going over again in a month and know that there will be many new ventures. Tikondane is now in the Lonely Planet guide so anyone who is after an African adventure (the REAL Africa), keep it in mind and you'll see what one person's vision can accomplish. [www.tikondane.org](http://www.tikondane.org)

It was from a visit to a slum outside Nairobi that I was inspired to start Sanctuary Inverell for the resettlement of refugees here in Australia. In the 1980s we had the Inverell Refugee Resettlement Group which ran for a number of years when there was a great need to settle refugees from S.E.Asia. The inspiration came from a little thirteen year old girl called Nebiat, a refugee from Eritrea. She lived with her mother and brother in a slum area outside Nairobi. Because of the false belief that sex with a virgin cures AIDS, this young girl was in grave danger every day as she went to school. Nebiat was the face of so many refugees waiting for countries in the West to accept them. In the event, Nebiat's request was refused but she is getting an education thanks to kind friends in the US. and because of her, a number of families have been settled in Inverell in recent years. We have heard so many stories from refugee families - one mother told us the leader of a group helping them escape told her that if her tiny daughter cried which could have alerted the soldiers, she had to kill her. Another mother could not stop weeping and we learned that while they were escaping with their children, they found that they had their two little daughters but their four year old son was somehow left behind on the bank. It took our group four years to finally unite that child with his parents here in Australia but we did! I met him for the first time as an adult when we had a reunion of those refugees settled in the 1980s and he told me he had just graduated as a doctor!

I find that there are so many areas of need in our world, so many injustices which need fixing that we have to focus on the ones that are under our particular spotlight. For me, in recent years I have been involved in Myanmar (Burma) having been asked to go out in 2004 with a sister from an international congregation to investigate the possibility of them starting a community there. Well, the community has been under way for some years and I go out to help with the young trainee teachers. However, in recent times, I have been made aware of the need for clean water in impoverished villages and with the help of many friends have so far been able to finance the building of ten water-tanks with more on the way when it gets a bit cooler in June. For the first time, I was able to visit the villages as there has been a relaxation in the repressive atmosphere in this country which for years has been under a strict military regime. I'm hoping for one hundred tanks before I die. If any school or group would like more information, I'm really happy to come, bring a power-point and tell you more about these wonderful people who until recently were virtually cut off from the rest of the world. If you get a chance to see the film "The Lady" about Aung San Suu Kyi, don't miss it!

I sometimes feel as if I've been in a relay race for many years and it is so good to see younger folk here who will perhaps be the ones to receive the batons from those of us who are getting old and grey. Think what you are passionate about - remember there is "no remote" in life, you must get up and act NOW if you hope to change our world, and you can

If you want a feisty patron, St Catherine of Siena might fit the bill. In the fourteenth century, when the papal officials were busy misgoverning the church, she worked to bring peace and stability. When the poor Pope didn't seem to know which end was which, she said "Be who God means you to be and you will set the world on fire". So let's hope for a few conflagrations around our world.

I leave you with my mission statement: (it speaks about "women" but just as we've been told down the years that "men" includes all of us as in "For us men and our salvation", so when I say women, perhaps the men here present would similarly feel that the word is inclusive and it speaks to them too!)

"To the powerful women in my life:

Live your life in such a way that when you wake in the morning,  
even before your feet touch the ground,  
Satan shudders and says, "Oh shit! she's awake!"

*If you would like to contact Rosemary Breen to speak with a group, school or individuals or if you would like to help her with her 'water tanks for Burma' project she can be contacted by email at [lrbreen@northnet.com.au](mailto:lrbreen@northnet.com.au) or phone 02 6722 1537*