

Patty Fawkner's Address at WATAC Luncheon 2004

I wish to acknowledge the Gadigal people, the traditional owners of the land upon which we gather. We honour them for their care of the land over countless generations.

The topic I've been asked to address today is *Women Can Change the World*. How many of you know anything about the Enneagram? There are nine personality types and different patterns of three. There are 3 numbers on the Enneagram who feel larger than the world, ready to take on whatever comes. Three numbers feel that they are on equal pegging with the world, and three numbers that feel smaller than the world. And I happen to be in this last group! So you'll appreciate that it's quite an ask, inviting one such as me to speak about women changing the world. But I do believe that women can change the world – the question for me is how.

Last week I had an experience in which I certainly felt smaller than the world. I'd been appointed to a committee within my congregation whose task seemed to have grown exponentially. And that familiar feeling of being overwhelmed descended upon me. So what does a woman do in such situations? Well this woman prayed and journalled, and confided in friends. One dear friend sent me a story, a piece of writing, from the Irish writer Daniel O'Leary which helped me immensely and which I'd like to share with you now. It's about learning to swim.

I was 50 before I could swim. Even though I lived near enough to the Atlantic I was slow to commit myself to the water. There were two reasons for this. I did not trust it, and I was trying too hard. For decades I struggled around the shallow end of the pool, in the baby part of the beach, fearful of letting go. When I did work up enough courage to take a tiny risk, I would swiftly sink in a hopeless and counter-productive flurry of flailing arms and legs, my mouth filled with water and my heart with panic. Clinging to the safe railing of the pool, gripping the bar for learners at the three-foot-deep limit, how I envied the swimmers.

One May day I slid into the pool and swam. It was effortless - so natural. I was overjoyed. It was so easy. Maybe it was because of a lovely friend who swam beside me. Maybe on that day I was ready to listen to the wisdom of play. Whatever the reason, the graced moment happened and it was a special blessing to me.

There are many wonderful lessons here about what to do and what not to do for women who wish to change the world. We women won't change the world when we try too hard, if we're too earnest, if we don't hold our endeavours lightly enough. We have to be passionate and to care – but not too much. We have to be willing to let go. We have all met intense people, sometimes single-issue people, who are so fixated on their pet project of how the world needs to be changed, that there's no give, no flexibility, no letting go. So don't try too hard to change the world, go with the flow and let the world and life change you, and then you change it in a dynamic reciprocal interplay – just like the swimmer and the water. O'Leary began to swim once he listened “to the wisdom of play”.

Shane Gould was on the 7.30 Report last Monday. Shane described her new swimming style in a similar way – less about her effort but more the interplay between herself and the water. She said that her swimming was now more nuanced, thoughtful, more like dancing.

So this committee I've been appointed to, I want to enjoy it, engaging the tasks with an element of play. The committee is the process team for the next Good Samaritan chapter, so if suddenly you seen any Good Sams you know being somewhat frisky you'll know my commitment to play is catching!

Daniel O'Leary had to learn to trust the water. Women can change the world, if we learn to trust the milieu of our life and world. The Pope has recently cautioned the Australian bishops about the secularism of our Australian society. I haven't read the full text but I think we have to be careful to avoid the constant temptation of separating the secular from the sacred. We have to learn to trust our secular culture, to engage with it. Often it is also committed to human flourishing, which I'd suggest is the heart of God's agenda. We have to not only listen *to* the Word of God as a static reality, rather we need to listen *for* the Word of God in our relationships, in the mundane and also significant events of life. Life is the medium through which the Spirit speaks.

Women can't change the world if we are content to stay in the baby part of the pool. There are many who want to keep us in the baby part of the pool, and of course some women want to stay there too. We must be prepared to dive in at the deep adult end of the pool of life. It's not easy to be an adult – it takes courage. I read a wonderful book years ago which had the engaging title "How to be an adult". The book says that one aspect of adulthood is befriending our shadow. We become adult by doing our inner work, not only the outer work of professional competence. We all project light and dark. If we don't do our inner work we have more chance of projecting darkness and shadow rather than light in our personal and professional relationships.

Women are changing our corporate world according to a report by Adele Horin in this weekend's Herald. Women's style – which is seen as more collaborative and less aggressive – is appreciated by men and women. The subheading to the article read "New research shows women at the top do make a difference."

So, there, it's official – at least in the Herald – women can change the world – easy peasy. But can they change the Church? Now that's a challenge of a different order.

How many women do we know, how many of us in this room have had our hearts broken wanting to change the Church. By the 'official church' I mean that patriarchal, clerical aspect of the institutional Church which continues to exclude women. Trying to change the clerical Church is of the same order as trying to change the macho culture of Rugby League.

Joan Chittister says that women in the Church continue to be left out of the theological loop, out of the sanctuary, out of the language. And we're told that this is God's doing, God's will, but we shouldn't be concerned because our work, our contribution, even our feminine genius is very special. When I hear such talk the image that comes to mind is being permanently put on hold on an ecclesiastical phone with an endless recorded, mechanical voice saying, "Please hold, your call is very important to us". You can scream, rant and rave but you can never seem to get your voice heard.

Women won't change the world for good if we join in the most popular game on the planet – the game that's the stuff of history, social life and international geo-political realities. And that's the scapegoating game. René Gîrard, a famous French Anthropologist says it's the central dynamic of human history. If I'm suffering then someone else is to blame. Obviously my neurosis is the fault of my parents. When something happens globally or locally we look at someone to blame – suddenly all the ills on the planet was Saddam Hussein's fault. I find I want to blame my boss, my parents, my spouse, the Church – especially those conservative Catholics, who in turn blame those radical feminists. I can blame the whole male species, Muslims, the Principal, John Howard, George W Bush, America, and when all else fails, blame the schools for not doing their job, or the media. The blame-game is the biggest game in town. But scapegoating keeps us at the baby end of the pool. I blame, I scapegoat, or I look to sue, because my fragile ego is momentarily inflated when I self-righteously feel superior to the person I'm putting down. Scapegoating is, to paraphrase O'Leary a “hopeless and counter-productive flurry of flailing arms and legs, my mouth filled with water and venom and my heart with panic, insecurity and hatred”.

I have been very taken by a quote from Irish lay theologian and writer, Anne Thurston. She writes:

If you persist in your efforts to influence the official church, to become part of its decision-making, you will only break your heart and lose hope. What you must do is go around to the back and CREATE A GARDEN. Some day they will look out and see its beauty and marvel at its life.

Isn't this exactly what WATAC has done – gone around to the back and created a beautiful garden of colour, nourishment, connection, and stimulation for women?

Women's wisdom, Buddhist and Zen wisdom, knows that it's no use fighting evil head on – and the sexism and clericalism in the Church is evil. You have to do, what Anne Thurston advises. You have to step aside and do something good, create something beautiful. I was speaking to a Buddhist woman yesterday about this talk and the Thurston quote. She said that this is exactly what Diane Perry did. Diane was the woman from London's East End who became a Buddhist nun. Known as Tenzin Palmo she joined an all male monastery and experienced first hand acute discrimination. She tried but couldn't change the monastery. She left and lived alone in a cave for 12 years. Her experience is recorded in the best-selling book, *Cave in the Snow*. Tenzin Palmo now travels the world raising money for her convent in Northern India and sharing the enlightenment she received in the cave. She is described as a torchbearer in the last frontier of women's liberation – that of equal spiritual rights.

I heard a talk recently about Islam in which the image of the garden was central. Traditional Islamic gardens are spaces created for life, for growth, and, the speaker said, for conversations which aren't alienating.

I agreed to be nominated for the Commission for Australian Catholic Women because of their plan to do something around the back. It is futile trying to change the Parish Priest, the local bishop or Cardinal. CACW, in its wisdom decided to embark on a project of interfaith dialogue with young women from different faith traditions, creating a garden of inclusive conversations, creating a space for life and growth.

There are many students from a number of secondary colleges here. I'd like to say a special word to you. You are a source of encouragement and hope to all of us. We change the world by finding our mission in life. How do we do that? A wonderful book with the unlikely title *What Colour is your Parachute?* says that our mission in life is the intersection between the world's deep need and my own deep gladness. I might get a buzz out of writing deodorant commercials, but this hardly meets the first criteria of responding to the world's deep need.

Then again, I might work in a leper colony – but if I'm frustrated and unhappy all the time, I'm not honouring my own deep gladness. The world's deep need, may not be heroic, front-page headline stuff. But it will be about bringing more love into the world. Our world is aching for love. Just make sure it's in line with your own deep gladness. Sometimes it's easier to recognise the deep need of the world, rather than our own deep gladness. May you young women find good mentors to help you discern your own deepest heart's desire, for this is God's desire for you as well.

I won't change anything; I won't be adult, if I believe that changing the world is dependent on me. You can be sure that anyone with a highly developed saviour complex won't change the world for good. God changes the world by working through us, with us, at times in spite of us. Instead of wearing tee-shirts that say "Shit happens". We wear a belief that "Grace happens", and that miracles occur. A colleague once told me to expect three miracles a day. She was right. All we have to do is to expect them and to open our hearts and eyes to see them. We live in a grace-charged world. Women change the world when they truly believe the words of Ephesians which confidently proclaim that God's power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Women will change the world if we but believed the life-giving words of St. Ambrose of Milan, "See how beautiful God's grace has made you." If we but believed, truly believed this we couldn't but help change the world.

May the gift of this Holy Week and this Easter be that you believe with every fibre of your being how beautiful God's grace has made you.