

## GRACE COLLEGE INAUGURAL LEADERSHIP DINNER, GRACE COLLEGE, UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND, WEDNESDAY, 13 OCTOBER 2010

What a pleasure to be here this evening in this well-designed pleasant space. What a joy to break bread with so many delightful, happy young women of fine intellect and good heart. What an honour for me to present this inaugural Grace College Leadership Dinner in the fortieth year of the College's service to women, to the University of Queensland, and to the broader community.

But first, I acknowledge that we are on the traditional lands of the Turrbal people, on this side of Brisbane's brown and, at the moment, fast-flowing river. For tens of thousands of years before European contact, the Turrbal people lived and prospered here in this land of plenty. No doubt the women Elders met with the younger women members of the clan to pass on information and wisdom, perhaps even secret women's business, in essence not so very different from this evening's dinner.

Earlier this year, in preparation for tonight's address, I spoke with your principal, Dr Sue Fairley. She gave me some feel for the 180 or so Grace Collegians of whom she is so proud. I know I am addressing not just Australian women from regional areas (including Indigenous women) but young women from China, Japan, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, Pakistan, Iran, Nigeria, Botswana and Canada studying for degrees ranging from Arts and Education to Architecture and Health Services.

More recently, I have visited your College website. I even had a virtual tour! I was especially impressed with an extremely tidy virtual bedroom! I was also impressed with the emphasis on leading a life which balances learning and striving for excellence academically, with sporting and cultural activities, and spiritual and social aspects. And all in a safe, caring and ethical environment. (Congratulations on the inter-college rowing competition win!) But I have to tell you, I was a little surprised to see under the heading "Cultural" the sub-heading "College Idol"! Your College motto is "My Grace is Sufficient". Although governed by the Uniting & Presbyterian Churches, I was pleased to see the College encourages students of all faiths and cultures. Your website includes an image of a young woman, glowing with intelligence and confidence, her face beaming under a Muslim-style head scarf. And I see purple is the College colour: I knew immediately what to wear tonight! But, best of all, the website depicted happy young women, comfortable in their own skins and in the company of their fellow Collegians.

I could not help thinking that you young women, like those who have come before you, as well as those who will follow you through Grace College, are the fortunate elite. So few of the world's women have access to tertiary education, let alone to an independent life with opportunities to achieve at the highest levels, academically and in extra-curricular fields in a safe, nurturing, just and happy space. But as I learned when I was asked to join you tonight and was then asked to give this speech, there is no such thing as a free dinner! And so, too, in your case, the opportunities and privileges from a Grace College education bring substantial responsibilities as you move into the broader community. I urge you to use your intellect, your education, and the principles you have learned here to assist others less fortunate. You might leave Grace College, but Grace College will not leave you.

The "grace" in Grace College, of course, refers to the Christian theological concept of grace epitomised in the College motto: "My Grace is Sufficient". This is the concept that God bestows divine favour freely upon humanity as a demonstration of divine love and mercy, thereby redeeming and sanctifying men and women. Good works are amongst the chief means of attaining this Christian grace. Similar concepts to the Christian "grace" exist in other world religions. One of the five pillars of Islam is "zakat", the doing of charitable works, a non-negotiable aspect of being a good Muslim. The Buddhist virtues of kindness, compassion, humanity and equality also envisage the doing of good works. So, too, in Hindu where the concept of "karma-yoga" encompasses the unselfish performance of acts for the welfare of others. In Judaism, charitable acts or "tzedakah" are an essential duty. A critical tenet of Indigenous spirituality is sharing with and assisting others in the clan. Even for non-believer humanists, the concept of philanthropy is important: not only does it make utilitarian sense to help the disadvantaged and needy and to correct injustices, including institutional injustices which propagate unfairness and inequity, but helping the less fortunate brings personal satisfaction and wards off the 21st century malaise of depression.

Our world, more than ever, needs clever, educated, energetic, compassionate leaders with a sense of the sufficiency of grace. Young women like you have never been better placed to fill that need, whether your future is here in Australia or elsewhere in the world.

Tonight I want to encourage those of you who make your future lives in Australia to address a particular area of need, injustice and inequity here. Those of you who build your future in other countries will be able to adapt my comments to situations of need, injustice and inequity apposite

in those nations. Unfortunately, I fear you won't have to look hard to find them.

Continuing the mildly religious theme of my address, I wonder whether you, like me, saw last year's superbly crafted, but gravely confronting, Warwick Thornton film "Samson and Delilah". It won accolades in Australia and internationally. There were many powerful cinematic moments: Delilah's unfair beating by the old Indigenous women; her chilling rape by white youths in Alice Springs; and the sickening thud as Delilah, off her tree from petrol-sniffing, was struck by a car. But I especially remember when Delilah, a talented but penniless fringe-dwelling Indigenous artist, entered an Alice Springs coffee shop to sell a painting. The discomfort and embarrassment of the white, prosperous, middle class non-Indigenous clientele was palpable as they tried to ignore the unignorable Delilah until the proprietor removed her from the coffee shop and their lives.

Unfortunately, the hard data about Indigenous Australian disadvantage is hardly less confronting than Thornton's film. The health of Indigenous Australians is generally poorer than non-Indigenous Australians. In 2003, Indigenous life expectancy was 17 years less than the general Australian population.<sup>1</sup> Indigenous Australians have life expectancies more than 10 per cent less than Indigenous peoples in Canada, New Zealand and the United States of America.<sup>2</sup> The gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous life expectancy in Australia is higher than that of many poorer countries such as Panama, Mexico and Guatemala.<sup>3</sup> Indigenous infant mortality between 2001 and 2005 was 6 per cent of total Indigenous deaths, compared to 1 per cent of total deaths in the general population.<sup>4</sup>

In 2006, the average equivalised income for Indigenous Australians was 69 per cent of the corresponding income for non-Indigenous Australians,

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and Australian Bureau of Statistics, *The Health and Welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples 2008*, ABS cat no 4704.0 (2008) at 154.

<sup>2</sup> Above; I Ring and D Firman, 'Reducing Indigenous mortality in Australia: lessons from other countries' (1998) 169 *Medical Journal of Australia* 528-533.

<sup>3</sup> *The State of the World's Indigenous Peoples*, Report published by the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, UN Doc No ST/ESA/328 (2009), Ch 5 at 159.

<sup>4</sup> Above at 156-7.

and this declined to about 40 per cent in remote areas.<sup>5</sup> Indigenous Australians are twice as likely to work part-time and are more likely to work in low skilled occupations without tertiary qualifications.<sup>6</sup> A much greater proportion of Indigenous Australians are not in the labour force at all: 43 per cent compared to 24 per cent of the general population.

Education is the key to social mobility. But Indigenous retention rates at school remain lower than for non-Indigenous students, although the disparity is lessening. In 2007, Indigenous Australians were only half as likely as non-Indigenous Australians to complete year 12.<sup>7</sup> Whilst 69 per cent of the general Australian population own or are buying their homes, this falls to 34 per cent for Indigenous home owner households.

The bleakest data is in my patch: the criminal justice system. Almost 20 years ago, the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody reported that Aboriginal people made up 14 per cent of the total prison population and were 15 times more likely to be in prison than non-Aboriginal Australians.<sup>8</sup> Remember, Indigenous Australians comprise a mere 2.3 per cent of the Australian population. Despite the implementation of many of the recommendations of that ground-breaking report, Indigenous prisoner numbers have continued to increase. Indigenous prisoners now represent 24 per cent of prisoners.<sup>9</sup> The Indigenous female imprisonment rate increased by a shocking 34 per cent between 2002 and 2006 while the imprisonment rate for Indigenous men increased by 22 per cent.<sup>10</sup> Indigenous Australian women are 23 times more likely to be imprisoned than non-Indigenous women. Indigenous Australian men are 16 times more likely to be imprisoned than non-Indigenous men.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Population Characteristics, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples 2006*, ABS cat no 4713.0 (2008) at 103.

<sup>6</sup> Above.

<sup>7</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and Australian Bureau of Statistics, *The Health and Welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples 2008*, ABS cat no 4704.0 (2008) at 16-17.

<sup>8</sup> *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, National Report* (1991) Vol 1 at [9.3.1].

<sup>9</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Prisoners in Australia 2008*, ABS cat no 4517.0 (2008) at 22, Table 8.

<sup>10</sup> Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2007*, Productivity Commission (2007) at 128.

<sup>11</sup> Above at 129.

These dreadful statistics are not because Indigenous Australians are more sickly, less thrifty, less clever or more wicked than non-Indigenous Australians. They are the result of the disempowerment of Indigenous Australians by the colonisation process. Sadly, they are typical of problems faced by First Nation peoples throughout the world.

The Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission (HREOC) emphasises the economic benefit to all Australians in improving the quality of life of Indigenous Australians. It will result in increased real GDP through more Indigenous Australians in higher skilled and better paid jobs, with less economic burden on the health and social security system.<sup>12</sup> My lifetime experience suggests that it would also result in a significant fall in Indigenous representation in the notoriously costly criminal justice system.

These statistics support only one conclusion: Australia must do much better in terms of our Indigenous citizens. But for generations, many good-hearted Australians did strive to improve Indigenous quality of life. Despite their best intentions, efforts, and very considerable government funding, any progress has been glacial. Worse, there have been monumental mistakes causing heart-wrenching setbacks. Australia's past child removal practices are probably the starkest of these mistakes. The after-effects remain with us.

It is not all bad news. I am encouraged that Australia is at last shouldering its international obligations under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People. Australia is developing policy in consultation with the many responsible Indigenous leaders to "close the gap" between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

But you, individually, can also help close the gap.

Even if you do not become a legislator, policy-maker or activist, as an Australian you will have a vote and a voice. I encourage you to use it to achieve better outcomes for our Indigenous Australians. Sound government policy is clearly critical to success. But opportunities to

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<sup>12</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission, *A statistical overview of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia* (2008)  
<[http://www.hreoc.gov.au/social\\_justice/sj\\_report/sjreport08/downloads/appendix2.pdf](http://www.hreoc.gov.au/social_justice/sj_report/sjreport08/downloads/appendix2.pdf)> at 298.

achieve positive outcomes for Indigenous Australians abound in the community: in our universities, including university colleges like Grace; in our workplaces; in our professional organisations; and individually. I congratulate Grace on its regular provision of bursaries to Indigenous students. I am optimistic that there will be increasing numbers of Indigenous students eligible for such bursaries in the future. By way of example, the *Yalari* initiative,<sup>13</sup> founded by Indigenous educator Waverley Stanley and his wife Llew Mullins, allows corporate partners, individuals and community organisations to financially support or mentor Indigenous students attending some of Australia's leading boarding schools.

And there is more good news in this area. Together with respected Brisbane Indigenous Elder, Uncle Bob Anderson, I am a member of the Council of Griffith University which, like many other leading Australian universities, including UQ, encourages and supports Indigenous students. At Griffith, the rate of Indigenous student participation, retention and success is not just above the national average; in fact, the success rates of Indigenous students at Griffith now surpass those of non-Indigenous students.<sup>14</sup>

But perhaps it is at an individual level where you can effect the greatest change and where Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians might all do more. One positive note in the data to which I referred earlier is that most Indigenous people identify with a clan, tribal or language group.<sup>15</sup> Culture and language remain significant to Indigenous Australians. In the spirit of reconciliation, non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians should get to know each other better, share good and generous hearts and wise and open minds and support and mentor each other. In the process, the lives of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians will be enriched by the resulting human symbiosis. Non-Indigenous Australians

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<sup>13</sup> See <http://www.yalari.org/>. See also Department of Education and Training (Qld), Indigenous Students Scholarships Database (2010) <<http://education.qld.gov.au/students/grants/scholarships/docs/scholarship-database.doc>>.

<sup>14</sup> *Visiting scholar shares strategies for retaining Indigenous students* (2007) <<https://www.usq.edu.au/newsevents/usqnews/USQ%20News%202007/newsitems/news/pfalk>>

<sup>15</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey 1994 – Detailed Findings*, ABS cat no 4190.0 (1995) at 4; Australian Bureau of Statistics, *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey 2004-05*, ABS cat no 4715.0 (2005).

will learn more of Indigenous culture and language.<sup>16</sup> And how special is that? In an increasingly globalised, standardised and homogenised world, the fact that our Indigenous Australians are part of the world's oldest continuing living culture is what makes Australia unique. And as Indigenous Australians gain confidence through the genuine acceptance of non-Indigenous Australians, they will be empowered to at last fully contribute to the mainstream Australian community. Encourage your Indigenous and non-Indigenous friends and relations to join in this human synergetic symbiosis.

Indigenous Australians need to know that non-Indigenous Australians value them individually and collectively. They need to know non-Indigenous Australians value Indigenous culture and language. They need to have autonomy and control over Indigenous policy issues. If mainstream non-Indigenous Australians can open these tributaries of friendship to capable Indigenous Australians, the mainstream will be broadened. If good-hearted Indigenous Australians can open these tributaries of friendship to non-Indigenous Australians, the mainstream will be enriched. When enough Australians, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike, take this approach, I am confident that there will be resulting remarkable improvements in the economic, education, health and justice outcomes of Australia's Indigenous citizens. And the quality of life of Australia's non-Indigenous citizens will also be symbiotically and synergetically enriched.

That is my vision of how, when you graduate and leave Grace College, you can lead the broader community with the grace you have gained at Grace. Wherever your path in life leads, with your intellect, your education, your energy, your compassion, your sense of justice, and your love of life, be sure it includes goods works, "zakat", "karma-yoga", "tzedakah", philanthropy, whatever you choose to call it. In the words adapted from your College motto: live a life in which your grace is sufficient to lead your community into a less imperfect world.

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<sup>16</sup> For example, Bill Yidumduma Harney, senior lawman of the Wardaman People, recently painted a new work of art sharing the Law of the Wardaman People with Bond University law students and staff.