

CONFESSIONS OF A DOUBTING LEADER

KEYNOTE ADDRESS FOR
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I have serious doubts that this address is any good. But I understand from yesterday's speakers that this is "a room of Grace." And the fact that I am feeling *not fine*, is fine. So here goes...

Gary Williams gave me a book the other day. And I even read it. The book's called "The Five Dysfunctions Of A Team." Who's read it?

Well, it's a good book. It's worth reading. It can teach us some important principles about team building. But I had one problem with the book.

You see its main character is, for me, just a bit unbelievable. The CEO of the company, the person who has to create a team of collaborating executives from the dysfunctional mire of the company she enters is named Kathryn Petersen. And Kathryn is just a bit too good to be true. She knows what to do. She knows when to talk and when to cease from talking. She knows how teams work, and what makes them not work, and she goes about her task of creating an effective executive team with clarity and certainty that I find rather different from the way I go about my work as a CEO.

I've been in CEO roles since 1981 and I can hardly remember a nanosecond when I felt this certain. My life as a leader seems to have been one long tunnel of doubt, insecurity and uncertainty. What's your life as a leader like?

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I went to a conference about 20 years ago in a State that better remain nameless to protect the innocent. Or the guilty. Or the about to be defamed. The conference was in one of those States to the north of here, but not the one named Queensland.

Like all truly great conferences, this one had keynote speakers. In this case – two keynote speakers.

The first speaker was the boss of a big Christian organisation. Everyone knew him. He was famous already. And he was doing mighty things for God. You didn't have to ask him. He would tell you without you asking. You couldn't stop him.

His address was exciting. Inspirational. It was ... WOW. The things that God was doing through this man. Boyoboy. God was giving him ten world-changing ideas before breakfast every day, and he was getting them done by lunchtime. His vision was clear. His world was ordered, full of rich certainty. He was certain about God, certain about God's blessing on him and God's blessing on HIS ministry (and it was pretty clear we were hearing about HIS ministry). He was certain about everything he was doing.

I went to bed that night pretty depressed. I wasn't nearly that certain about God. I wasn't nearly that certain about God's blessings on me. And I was so deeply enmeshed with 300 other people at our place of ministry, I couldn't begin to think of our work as MY ministry.

However, I could see that God was blessing us. Things were happening. We were kicking goals. Much of it to my constant surprise and amazement.

So next day I dragged myself along to the second keynote speaker expecting to be reminded once again how small my faith was, how many barriers there must be in my life that kept me from enjoying the fullness of God's blessings upon MY ministry (my ministry for HIM, of course). I expected to be challenged to seek out the hidden wretchedness in me that stood between me and God's blessing.

Well, my expectations were not met.

The second keynote speaker turned out to be a bloke like me. Only rather more clear-headed than me. And rather more self-aware than me.

He was the principal of a college. And he spoke about his doubts. How he earnestly tried to discern the right strategies for the college. How he consulted widely. How he listened hard. How he synthesised the great ideas of others from the multitude of conversations, the stack of suggestions and the constant complaints he got. How, out of this maelstrom of messages he felt he discerned a sort of direction. A way forward. Through a glass darkly. But ... well, it seemed right.

How he began to articulate this direction and found support. And found opposition, that made him go back to his doubts.

He knew that the others at his college looked to him to articulate a direction. To have a roadmap and a compass. So he tried, as best as he was able, to appear confident. To inspire. To build a coalition of support for where he thought the college should go. To get the herd generally heading west.

His doubts were never far away. And frankly they helped him to get it right. Because he was always open to listen, always open to discern the wisdom of others.

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I knew from an early age that confidence is a dangerous character trait. My grandmother, my father's mother, was one of the most confident and certain people I knew. She infected her three boys and one girl with her confidence. My Dad, and my Aunt and Uncles, were confident people. But it was my aunt who said with marvellous self-insight, "We are often wrong, but never in doubt."

Well, I can tell you I have often been in doubt as a leader. But I do recognise the great gift of APPARENT confidence that I inherited from that side of the family. Because people do respond to confident leaders. People like certainty.

And sometimes, perhaps, it is necessary to fake certainty. I worked for a few years with students at Deakin University and got to know the Vice-Chancellor, Sally Walker. One time we asked Professor Walker if she would address a group of young student leaders about the topic of leadership. She sub-titled her talk "Faking it". Yes, Sally Walker recognised that sometimes it was important not to appear uncertain. Sometimes, she needed to have the courage to confidently assert a direction, even though she had personal doubts.

But there is a big difference between knowingly faking it, and self-delusion. Sally knew when she was pretending. She knew when she had doubts, even if she didn't reveal them in that moment.

Trouble is, I reckon some leaders start to believe their own press releases. Some leaders start to believe their own game. And therein lies the trouble. Because the capacity of human beings for self-delusion is very great. We are very good at fooling ourselves.

I suppose I could stand up here and tell you all what a great ministry I have been personally responsible for.

At this point, when I was writing the first draft of this address, I began to write a little I-AM-A-TERRIFIC-LEADER spoof. My idea was to try to say that I COULD, if I wanted to, write a peon of praise to my own career. You know, rather like St Paul writing to the Philippians. St Paul had reasons for putting confidence in his own CV. And he lets his hubris run away with him just for a moment, before demolishing the whole tower of personal pride he builds.

He says “we can list what many might think are pretty impressive credentials. Legitimate birth. Circumcised on the eighth day. An Israelite from the elite tribe of Benjamin. A Pharisee.” And so on.

He waves this around for a moment, and then throws it in the bin. Because compared with knowing Christ firsthand, this stuff isn't worth a thing.

So I thought I would write the same. And I started. I actually wrote “At World Vision...” and then I stopped. Because, even as a rhetorical device, even as something just for effect, it seemed so utterly insincere and unworthy.

Because the truth about this leader that stands before you is that I am seriously uncertain about a lot of stuff.

Maybe a few stories will illustrate.

THE TRAIN STORY

In November 1977, armed with a brand new passport, I was the self-appointed World Vision fixer with a Willesee At Seven film crew. I had somehow persuaded Mike Willesee to send this film crew to India to cover the story of a tsunami that had swept over the East Coast of India.

Remember this was 1977. The only way you could get video of something that happened in India was to film it in a movie camera and then physically carry the film back to Australia.

Well, we had all sorts of problems getting the story. Cars broke down. Accommodation was non-existent. Anything you put in your mouth turned into Montezuma's Revenge.

And, of course, I had no idea. No idea about how to be a news crew fixer. No idea about how to get around in India. No idea even about what World Vision was doing in response to the tsunami. The best I could do was stay one minute ahead of Howard Gipps who was the reporter.

Fortunately, we all treated the experience as if it were a huge adventure. Which was pretty sensible, because it was a huge adventure.

After a few days we had enough film in the can. In those days it was *literally* in a film can. So we headed for the nearest railway station to try catch a train the 250 kilometres back to Madras (as they called it in 1977).

I went up to the station master and asked him about the train.

"Can you tell me what time the Hyderabad-Madras express is coming through?" I asked him.

And he replied "Oh, Sir, we are not knowing. But if you are waiting on the station, it is coming."

(I apologise to all present of Indian descent for my poor impersonation.)

So, presuming that the stationmaster's advice meant we should wait here for the train, we piled up our gear and prepared to pass the time of day. We played cards. We were accompanied by the teenage daughter of a local missionary family who was on holiday home in India. We listened as she unloaded about life for a missionary kid at an English boarding school, and the crushing boredom of being a foreign teenager here in India during her holidays.

I decided to check regularly on progress.

At 9:30 in the morning I again asked the station master. "Can you tell me what time the Hyderabad-Madras express is coming through?"

"Oh, Sir, we are not knowing. But if you are waiting on the station, it is coming."

I was to have this conversation about a dozen times during the day. Each time the same question. Each time the same answer.

"Can you tell me what time the Hyderabad-Madras express is coming through?"

"Oh, Sir, we are not knowing. But if you are waiting on the station, it is coming."

Meanwhile, the day passed slowly. A few trains came through and we filmed them. None was going our way.

Finally, at five in the evening I asked the station master again. This time, for some reason, I asked the question differently.

"Can you tell me what time the Hyderabad-Madras express stops here?"

"Oh, Sir," replied the station master with surprise, "it does not stop here."

Well, of course, from one point of view this trip to India was a marvellous success. We ended up with coverage on national television and we raised a stack of dollars for relief work that helped lots of people.

But the reality on the ground in India was very different. I was the alleged leader of the documentary team. And I was, at best, just muddling through.

At every decision point I had serious doubts about whether I was making the right choice. And sometimes, clearly, I was not.

HOW I GOT TO HONG KONG

Early in the 1980s I got the invitation to go and lead a new work in Hong Kong. The invitation came as a real surprise to me.

You see, I had doubted (there's that word again) that whatever gifts or experience I had would never be any use outside of Australia, outside of my own culture.

It wasn't that I *doubted* my ability to manage in a Chinese culture. I hadn't even thought about it enough to get so far as having doubts. But when the invitation came, I certainly did have doubts.

What did I know about Hong Kong? I had been there two or three times for a day or two. I knew maybe three people who lived there. I got the gig largely because I had annoyed enough people in the International office about the desirability of raising funds in these emerging Asian tigers. And the dudes in the International Office, I reckon, asked me to go and do it, just to shut me up.

But I had serious doubts about whether I knew enough to pull off the assignment. I had no experience with negotiating with Chinese people, and I was soon to discover that I had no idea how to do it. I discovered that all my Australian skills of persuasion were the WORST grounding for engaging with the Chinese.

From one point of view, our time there was a success. We established World Vision Hong Kong. The beginning was small and humble, but the organisation has grown and prospered from those good foundations.

We were in Hong Kong for nearly four years. And I reckon my first two years was spent just making mistakes. And building up my stock of doubts about whether I was doing any good at all.

I spent the time trying to learn Cantonese. Boy, did I learn to be impressed by Chinese people who can speak English fluently.

A NEW VISION FOR WORLD VISION AUSTRALIA

A few years later I found myself applying for the job of CEO at World Vision Australia. And after I got the job I realised we needed more clarity about our organisational purpose. Why did World Vision Australia exist? Was it just to raise money? Did we have a role beyond fundraising?

I looked around at others in the overseas aid world and didn't like what I saw about World Vision's competitive, and even arrogant, spirit. We were half the sector in dollar terms. And we collaborated with nobody.

Other agencies were clearly much better than us at some things. Oxfam (then known as Community Aid Abroad) was much better at articulating an approach and practice of community development. Could World Vision be better at this than we were?

TEAR Australia was much better than us at articulating the link between faith and works. Could World Vision be better at the theology of mission?

I realised World Vision Australia's purpose statement needed work. And fortunately, I didn't really know how to go about it. All I had were the doubts that we were not doing all the right things. I doubted that our organisational balance was right. I doubted that we had our priorities right.

It turned out these doubts were the best ground from which to develop a new sense of organisational purpose. Something that was more than a few cute words on paper. Because I simply kept asking questions. I encouraged a conversation. I took part in discussions. With anyone who wanted to join in.

It took a year and a half. In the end we came up with a set of words. The words were "fighting poverty by empowering people to transform their worlds." You may notice that Tabor College later adopted a similar phrase. I know from Cheryl Catford that this is entirely a coincidence. But it's a nice, affirming coincidence about the usefulness of the words.

But the important thing here wasn't the words, but what they evoked in the heads and hearts of all those people who had talked and talked.

Each word represented hundreds of ideas. What was our understanding of poverty? We discovered that the Bible talks of seven kinds of poverty. We were once again impressed, lest we had any doubts, about how relevant the Bible could be. What did we mean by empowering? Who were the people we engaged with?

I was beginning to understand that having faith enough to doubt, and the willingness to share and explore those doubts with my colleagues, could result in something amazing. Synergy. Two plus two equals five. Or sometimes fifty-five.

HOW I GOT TO VIENNA

I was entering my 8th year as CEO of World Vision Australia when I found myself sitting with the President of World Vision International at a hotel in South Carolina. He was telling me about some changes he was making to his team. He was proposing to ask the guy who was running the Middle East and Eastern Europe region to come into the international office in a chief operating officer role.

So I asked the President, "Do you have someone in mind to replace him?"

And the President said, "I thought I'd offer it to you."

Frankly, I thought he was joking. And I treated it like a joke until I saw he was serious.

But I had so many doubts. For one, I had just gone through a difficult and incomplete strategic change process at World Vision Australia. It had been derailed, mostly because of the way I had handled, or perhaps mishandled, the Board. But we'd worked our way through the difficulties and it was beginning to feel like plain sailing at last.

Just an aside. Be afraid if you feel you are in your comfort zone. When sailing is plain, look out for what God has in mind next. Well, to stretch the metaphor, the idea of managing a World Vision region, rather rocked my boat.

I mean, I was experienced on the other side of the business. It was like taking a marketing manager and getting him to run the factory.

Anyway, I said, no thanks without really saying "Are you CRAZY?" and I went home and told Judy (that's Mrs Hunt) about this conversation. She said nothing for a few days.

And then about a week later, Judy said, "You know that job that Dean offered you?"

"Yes, what about it?"

"If you took it, where would have to live?"

So I told her "Vienna, Austria" and Judy thought about this for a moment and said, "That'd be nice wouldn't it?"

And so we ended up in Vienna for four years. Incidentally, the reason the office was there, by the way, was not just because you can go to a concert every day of the week, but because you can catch a flight to every part of Europe and the Middle East every day. It was then the only place in Europe with good connections east and west. Things are different these days. The office is now in Cyprus.

Can you imagine my doubts about this assignment? I was moving from managing a fundraising business in Australia to managing ten programs spread across thousands of kilometres, across ten or more cultures, employing over a thousand people, and ranging from dealing with nuclear fallout problems in Belarus, to rebuilding bombed houses and shattered communities in Bosnia and in Palestine, to micro-finance projects in Azerbaijan and so-called orphanages in Romania.

Well, not because I was smart, but because there wasn't any sensible choice, I relied on the colleagues I inherited to explain the work to me. And I created conversations by asking questions that led to doubts being surfaced and many minds being drawn towards solutions.

THE MONTY PYTHON EXPERIENCE

There's a lot more to this story. Even how we came back to Australia at a time related to the educational needs of our youngest son. How I decided to be a consultant and discovered I didn't like it.

The truth is that I was unemployed for two years. Sure, I had work in those two years, but it wasn't like anything I really wanted to do. I began to wonder if my working life really had peaked at 50.

And it was doubts about things like career and position that led me to an assignment managing the student association at Deakin University. I describe this as my Monty Python management experience. It was both challenging and wonderful. And it lasted five years.

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I've talked a lot about doubts this morning. But maybe, this is really a statement about faith.

A couple of years ago there was an article in TIME magazine. It was titled “Mother Theresa’s Crisis of Faith” and it demonstrated to me how little TIME magazine understood about faith itself.

The article put two statements alongside one another. On the one hand there was Mother Theresa’s public statements about Christ’s presence everywhere “Christ in our hearts, Christ in the poor we meet, Christ in the smile we give and in the smile we receive.”

On the other hand, there were her private writings to her confessor, “As for me,” Mother Theresa wrote, “the silence and emptiness is so great, that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear, the tongue moves in prayer but does not speak.”

The TIME writer called this a “crisis of faith.” Well sorry. I think he’s got it completely the wrong way round. It’s a victory of faith. Despite the hard times, despite the dryness, some of it, apparently extending into years, Mother Theresa NEVER lost her faith. Always, she had faith enough to doubt.

As Paul Tournier said, “He who claims never to have doubted does not know what faith is, for faith is forged through doubt.” Faith is *forged* through doubt. I think he used the word forged quite deliberately. You know what a forge is, don’t you. It’s a red-hot oven in which metal is heated. And it’s also a machine that hammers pieces of metal into new shapes.

That’s what doubt does to faith. It hammers our faith into new, stronger shapes.

I think it is nicely ironic that this alleged crisis of faith story was also told about another great Christian saint, also called Theresa.

St Therese lived in the late 19th century in France. She was a Carmelite nun and she became famous for a book called “Story of a Soul.” After she died it was revealed that, like Mother Theresa a hundred years later, this spiritual giant had experienced long times of spiritual dryness despite always seeming to be the most contented Christian in the world.

Sceptics, of course, interpret this as spiritual dishonesty or hypocrisy. But people of faith just know it as the true condition of all who are prepared to be sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.

Do you have doubts? You’re in good company.

Do you have faith? You’re in the same company.

We are in the company of Martin Luther who famously spoke a prayer that has become known as the doubter’s prayer:

Dear Lord,
Although I am sure of my position,
I am unable to sustain it without You.
Help me, or I am lost.

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One last story. About doubt. About faith.

The fields were parched and brown from lack of rain, and the crops lay wilting from thirst.

People were anxious and irritable as they searched the sky for any sign of relief. Days turned into arid weeks. No rain came.

The ministers of the local churches called for an hour of prayer in the town square the following Saturday. They asked that everyone bring with them an object of faith for inspiration.

At midday on the next Saturday the people of the town all turned out, filling the square with anxious faces and hopeful hearts. The ministers were touched to see the variety of inspirational objects clutched in prayerful hands – Bibles, crosses, rosary beads.

When the hour ended, as if on a magical command, a soft rain began to fall. Cheers swept through the crowd as they held their treasured inspirational objects high in gratitude and praise.

Bibles, crosses, rosary beads, all held high.

But there was one sign of faith that overshadowed them all. In the middle of the crowd, a nine year old child, held up what he had brought. He brought an umbrella.