

NEW HOPE

AN ADDRESS AT THE OPENING OF NEW HOPE CARE, BLACKBURN NORTH
5TH SEPTEMBER 2008

What a joy to be the last speaker.

So much is hoped for. So little is possible.

It's been a long, and stimulating night already. And a longer day for some of us who got up early to go to the Melbourne Prayer Breakfast. What can I do to add rather than subtract?

How about some poetry?

*James James Morrison Morrison Weatherby George Dupree
Took great care of his Mother, Though he was only three.
James James said to his Mother, "Mother," he said, said he;
"You must never go down to the end of the town, if you don't go down with me."*

*James James Morrison's Mother put on a golden gown.
James James Morrison's Mother drove to the end of the town.
James James Morrison's Mother said to herself, said she:
"I can get right down to the end of the town and be back in time for tea."*

*King John put up a notice, "LOST or STOLEN or STRAYED!
JAMES JAMES MORRISON'S MOTHER SEEMS TO HAVE BEEN MISLAID.
LAST SEEN WANDERING VAGUELY: QUITE OF HER OWN ACCORD,
SHE TRIED TO GET DOWN TO THE END OF THE TOWN -
FORTY SHILLINGS REWARD!"*

*James James Morrison Morrison (Commonly known as Jim)
Told his other relations not to go blaming him.
James James said to his Mother, "Mother," he said, said he:
"You must never go down to the end of the town without consulting me."*

*James James Morrison's mother hasn't been heard of since.
King John said he was sorry, so did the Queen and Prince.
King John (Somebody told me) said to a man he knew:
"If people go down to the end of the town, well, what can anyone do?"*

*James James Morrison Morrison Weatherby George Dupree
Took great care of his Mother, Though he was only three.
James James said to his Mother, "Mother," he said, said he;
"You must never go down to the end of the town, if you don't go down with me."*

After all that we've heard and seen tonight, I just want to talk a bit about stereotypes. And the dangers of stereotypes.

This week I have been in Adelaide. While I was there, I caught an episode of the South Australian version of Channel Seven's "Today Tonight" program. There was a story about homeless people being accommodated in motels as temporary accommodation.

The way the program discussed homeless persons was typically, dangerously, stereotypical. With an almost hysterical and breathless voice over, the homeless people were portrayed as dangerous, murderous, thieving monsters ready to break through the walls into the rooms of unprepared, innocent tourists.

Would you like to rent a room next to a homeless person? Would you feel safe to know that lingering in the next motel room, there is a person without a home? A person who is therefore, apparently, very dangerous, probably mentally deranged, probably going to do you an injury as quick as look at you?

You see, James James Morrison's mother had a stereotypical view of the other end of the town. The other end of the town stands for all things unknown. Foreign places. Foreign cultures. People not like James James Morrison's mother. People not like us.

So the other end of the town, all things unknown, are, by definition, dangerous. Right?

Well no.

How many of us have travelled outside of the culture we were born into?

Keep your hand up if you have actually lived outside of the culture you were born into?

Keep your hand up if you are today living in a culture other than the one you were born into?

You are certainly going to understand what I am trying to say.

If you go and live in a foreign country, you quickly discover that things are different. Even uncomfortable.

Over more than two decades with World Vision I visited more countries than I could count. Every new country visit felt uncomfortable, even threatening.

Man, have you seen the way they drive in Bangkok?

Everyone hates you in the streets in Austria, they avoid eye contact all the time.

In India, people never give you the information you want.

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.

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."

And, by the way, why do people in Austria avoid eye contact? In Australia, when we are walking down the street and someone comes towards us, we usual at least nod a hello to them. Often, we'll say G'Day.

But in Austria, they look away. They never even make eye contact for a second. It's like you're not there. Why is this?

Really, it is quite simple. In traditional Austrian culture, it is considered rude to speak with someone to whom you have not been formally introduced, unless that person is offering you a service, like a shop assistant or a tradesman. For everyone else, it would be considered

impertinent and rude to say Hello to someone you hadn't met. So avoiding eye contact is actually a consideration, not rudeness.

Yet, our initial reaction as Australians to these moments of cross-cultural awkwardness is bemusement, or even anger.

That's because the stereotypes we carry around in our heads about how people should behave are very strong.

What does it take to break down and correct our stereotypes?

Well, we have to get up, put on our golden gowns, and go to the end of the town. We have to go meet real people and find out how valid our stereotypes are.

When I worked in World Vision we were constantly bumping into people's stereotypes. I used to constantly find people who presumed poor people were lazy.

"Why don't they work harder? Then they wouldn't be poor."

Well, of course, when you meet poor people you realise they do work harder. Hard work is required just to stay alive. But in many societies, even including our own, working harder does not bring results in a society in which CHOICE has been eliminated.

Or people would say "Why don't they have fewer children?"

Yet, poor people need to have more children to ensure that enough will survive to generate income for the family. More hands to work, are more important than more mouths to feed.

Let's come back to the homeless person for a moment. Channel 7 could not have been more wrong about most homeless people.

A few weeks ago, I sat with a young punk who had been helped by the Melbourne Citymission's youth homeless program.

This guy had more metal on his face than I have in my Volkswagen. I didn't want to know, and I certainly didn't ask, where else on his body he was carrying piercing.

His hair was cut into a vivid green and yellow Mohawk. Shaved to his skull on the sides, and sticking up like a toilet brush on top.

He had chains around his shoulders. He was wearing a T-shirt with an in-your-face slogan on it. He was wearing braces attached to jeans that hovered within millimetres of dropping to his knees.

And big Doc Marten boots, all the better for kicking you with.

My stereotypes all clicked into place. He looked like a neo-Nazi and I was cautious saying hello to him.

But, you know, he was wanting to make a point. And he made it startlingly effectively. It turned out that he was the guest speaker at the breakfast. And his story may have been typical of many homeless people, but his story did not fit the stereotypes that were triggered in my head.

At 14 years of age, this guy had been left as the primary carer for his bipolar mother, and a 7 year old sister.

When the mother was on a frantic high, she would shop. Seriously shop. With money she didn't have. Running up bills of thousands of dollars that she could not repay. Extravagant furniture and appliances would arrive from the stores, only to be repossessed weeks later when reality kicked in at Harvey Norman.

But worse, when she was in the black hole of depression, the mother would turn violent. She'd beat the children with murderous intent. At these times, the 14 year old punk boy would escape into the streets with his little sister. Soon homelessness became a pattern until the pattern became more comfortable, more safe, than the reality at home.

He was a homeless youth. He was not dangerous: that was his mum. He was not mentally disturbed: that was his mum. But he was the homeless one.

When I met him last month, he was telling me about how he was almost finished his social work degree and hoped that Melbourne Citymission would offer him the chance to work with homeless youth.

Friends, it said on the invitation that I would regale you with stories to inspire you about what the gospel has to say about justice and caring.

Nice idea, Don. But the truth is that justice and caring can't be told. Justice and caring has to be practised. And, I believe, we start to learn it when we have the courage to step out of our comfort zones. When we have the courage to go to the end of the town.

In the days when I was just one of the young turks at World Vision, I heard a speech by the then international President of World Vision, Stan Mooneyham. It became famous in World Vision as the "marching off the map" speech.

Stan wanted to challenge World Vision to boldly go into unexplored territories of ministry. He recalled how he had seen an map of the world drawn by some ancient European cartographer. The map showed the whole world as was then known. On the edge of the map, which represented points beyond human knowledge, the map maker had written "Here there be dragons."

Stan's exhortation to World Vision was to face the dragons. To march off the map. To go to the end of the town.

I was inspired by that speech. Not that it told me anything about justice and caring. But that it moved me to go find out. To walk the world. To meet the poor. To be challenged about who I was, about what I knew, about what God was doing in the world, about what God wanted me to do for him.

And that's another story. A life story.

What is happening here at New Hope Community Care is a journey. Today you take some new steps. Nothing will teach you more about God's justice, and God's compassion, than being on that journey. Taking those steps of learning and discovery.

Learning and discovering what God is doing in his mission in the world. Learning and discovering by meeting the people with whom, and in whom, God is working his purpose out.

I commend the journey to you all. May God bless you as you follow Him into His mission of showing compassion and bringing justice.