

FOR WORLD VISION AUSTRALIA – 3RD FEBRUARY 2009

What a joy to be a CEO returning long after his triumphs.

So much is hoped for. So little is possible.

It's 32 years since I came to work at World Vision Australia. It's almost exactly 20 years since I started as your chief executive. It's 8 years since I stopped working for World Vision altogether.

Since then I've had a 5 year stint managing the Student Association at Deakin Uni. Now there's an unconventional career choice. But what an experience.

And just over a year ago I began as CEO of VicRelief Foodbank, an organisation which gets and delivers over \$20 million worth of donated food to emergency relief agencies in Victoria every year.

It's been a long time since I stood here. What can one do to add rather than subtract?

Of course, all leaders would like to be able to repeat what St Paul said to the Philippians:

Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

St Paul was nothing if not certain of his own influence. I'm not so certain.

So, 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."*

I thought I'd like to talk a bit about stereotypes today. And the dangers of stereotypes.

I had the back luck recently to catch an episode 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 for more than two years?

Keep your hand up if you are today living in a culture other 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?

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

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

Just over 30 years ago, with my brand new passport, I went to India. I accompanied a reporter and crew from a current affairs program that was called *Willesee at Seven* which, it may surprise you to hear, was hosted by Mike Willesee on Channel 7 at 7pm.

There had been a cyclone and a tsunami that had devastated the east coast of India north of Chennai. We went there, got our story in the can. Literally, in the film can because there were no satellite links in those days.

Job done, we had to catch the train from a town called Vijayawada back to Chennai. Naturally, the tsunami had thrown transport into chaos. We had no idea when the train would come. We only knew we had to catch the Hyderabad-Madras express.

So, at eight o'clock in the morning, we went to the station and I went up to the station master and asked him "Can you tell me what time the Hyderabad-Madras express comes through?"

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

Armed with this information, we sat on the station platform and waited. And a little ritual began.

After about an hour I went back to the station master and asked him, "Can you tell me what time the Hyderabad-Madras express comes through?"

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

And then at 10.30, at Noon, at 1 o'clock, at 3.15 I went back to the station master and asked him, "Can you tell me what time the Hyderabad-Madras express comes through?"

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

Then at 4.30pm I went back to the station master and asked him what I thought was the same question, but phrased in a different way.

I asked, "Can you tell me what time the Hyderabad-Madras express stops here?"\

And he replied, "Oh sir, it does not stop here."

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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. You will find that indigenous Australians understand this perfectly.

Yet, our initial reaction as Anglo-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.

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

I have the privilege of serving on the board of Melbourne CityMission and late last year 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.

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 year, 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.

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Friends, when Robin rang me she mentioned that you were looking at your core values. And *We Are Christian* in particular.

I thought long and hard about what I could say on the topic. The problem is not what to say, but what, in particular to say.

So my topic is narrow. I really only want to say one small thing about what I think it means to be a Christian.

And it is that I can't say it. We have to live it.

The Christian life can't be told. The Justice and caring we need to learn and demonstrate as Christians 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. Indeed, it's my life story. If you've got a few decades, I'll be happy to tell it.

What is happening here at World Vision Australia is a journey. It's always been a journey. Not our journey, but God's journey. We are just on the bus.

Nothing will teach us 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.

And be certain that God is the bus driver, the coach captain. He knows where we are going and whatever happens he'll make sure we get there.

If there's a global financial crisis, God is bigger and will see us through.

If donations dry up, God is bigger and will see us through. I remember the euphoria of our first 50% income growth year. It was the Live Aid year. 1985? And I remember the next year. We planned for greatness. We got a lesson in humility.

And finally, one little story that showed me that God knows what he is doing, and that he's got a sense of humour.

About 20 years ago I was driving to work over there along Burwood Highway. Each day I watched the first building being built just on the highway.

This whole area was a big, empty paddock. From Burwood Highway down Springvale Road and up around Highbury Road. And, this was the first building going up on the estate next door to us now. There was nothing but paddock where we are today.

At the time, we were trying to find a new home for World Vision Australia. We had occupied a series of buildings. From 343 Little Collins Street. To 29 Coventry Street. Which was too small the day we moved in. So we doubled its size by building a 3 storey extension on the back. Which was also too small the day we moved in.

Then we bought a building at 161 Sturt Street which we only half filled on day one. See, we were a learning organisation.

Interestingly, this building was called "Philips House." We renamed it World Vision Australia.

Well, by the time that this first building was being built over there, we were overflowing 161 Sturt Street.

One day the building looked finished, so I took a left and parked in front, got out of my Subaru, and walked around the outside of the building, peering in through the windows.

I reckoned the building was about the right size and style for us. So I walked up to the front door, put my hands on the door and, as a little joke between me and God, I said "I claim this building."

And I went to work.

The next day I passed the building again. They had put a name on the building.

It was called "Philips".