

Never-ending Transitions: From Odd to Ordinary**

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This keynote address invites readers and listeners to go on a journey seeking out 'sacred cows', observing their habits, understanding their context and their effect on family therapists, families, individuals and communities. It may not be a comfortable journey because it is possibly about your family and certainly about your community. Australian society is being constructed from pieces of families. Families dismembered by war and other socio-political events as well as personal catastrophes. In general, we skirt over the imprints of such events as these, preferring to keep them at a distance by calling them courageous or heroic stories or pathologies and by prescribing treatments that may have little practical use or meaning.

A plenary is an opportunity to be self indulgent, to allow myself to explore and to articulate my own thoughts about particular kinds of transitions, and to reflect about political correctness. But therein lies a great risk, that if I say aloud what I am thinking, some of you may be offended. It does not worry me that you may disagree—in fact I welcome discussion. But I was brought up neither to offend nor to be disrespectful of others, and not to deny others their right to a point of view. I know that I am not unique in this respect because this is a very powerful family tradition for many of us in the helping professions. And knowing this, I have been thinking about some of the consequences of such a family tradition and how difficult it becomes to speak out about one's passionately held differences whilst not offending those on the other side of those differences. I wonder whether perhaps we all have an urge to retreat and recoil from talking across the gap caused by our differences and talking about what we find offensive. It makes sense that we prefer to talk with our own, those who don't offend or challenge but rather agree with us and see the world as we see it. From personal experience, I know that this kind of conversation brings comfort, intimacy and an experience of safety, while the other type of conversation thrusts us into uncomfortable, uncertain and dangerous situations. This raises for me one of the grand dilemmas of life: how to talk honestly and with integrity about things that are not nice, and about subjects and experiences which will bring discomfort to those I have come to like and respect? I won-

der, is it better to say nothing and to continue with life as it has always been, familiar and predictable, or to take the risk, and face the change and uncertainty that speaking up may bring?

On this occasion, I have decided to leap in and explore some uncertain territory, and to speak about some parts of life that are neither nice nor simple. But before I begin such a daunting exploration, I want to equip myself and those of you interested to pursue this journey, with a few possibly useful ideas which are to do with the ways and means of transitions. Why this particular set of ideas? Well, it is because you (if you choose to come along with me) and I will undertake a form of transition. At the end you will know more about me and my own, and I wonder what that will be like, for you, for me, and for what I call my own. My hope is that if we know a little of what to expect and what needs to be done, in the transition from silent safety to outspoken risk, we may find benefit in facing these parts of life.

EQUIPMENT FOR THE JOURNEY

So I digress, and draw your attention to the possibility that by stopping for a moment and reflecting, we are actually at what could be called a cusp of transition. Not moving forward into the story nor moving back into silence, but standing still, thinking, not reacting in any way, but just holding on. I believe such reflection to be rare and very useful. I realise also that I have been thinking about this for quite a while so that for me, this transition began a long time ago and this public description is only one point in a much longer process. Transitions are like that. They begin imperceptibly with a single small event or a single thought and move along with small steps, or a leap now and then. Looking back now on my progress, I realise that the thinking and discussion processes have slowly moved forward irrespec-

** Keynote address, originally titled "Never Ending Transitions: A sacred cow meets the politically incorrect", originally presented at the Australian Family Therapy Conference, Hobart, 1996.

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tive of the effects they may have had on me or on others. Again transitions are like that: they are not controllable by any one individual and move on regardless. So transitions are risky, not just in the move from the familiar to the uncertain, but in the effects they have on those around us.

Let's say that I do take this risk, cast myself over to the uncertain, and honestly say what I have been thinking about! What then? Is the transition over? Not so! If we are to respect our need for integrity and the need of those close to us to know where they stand with us, it becomes central to give some meaning to the steps and leaps associated with the process of the transition. It is often difficult to ask ourselves: how does this change affect me? How does it affect those dear to me? At times it is simpler to avoid thinking about it altogether, but it is even more difficult to make an honest story of the uncertainty of the event. This is partly because making such a story involves acknowledging the shortcomings of the experience, particularly acknowledging that everything was not as we would have liked and recognising that successes are often unexpected and therefore invisible to a first reflection. Hence to give meaning to, and share our understanding of, a process of transition is difficult and at times easily corrupted into a politically expedient story.

The process of coming to understand what has happened in a transition contributes to our sense of identity and integrity, and allows us to move on to the next step in the process. But one note of caution: resist, at all cost, creating the story about the transition that others may wish us to create. When a transition has been riddled with intensity and pain, some of those around us like to encourage the composition of a heroic or a nice positive neat story, the kind that Hollywood script writers make from human chaos. Such stories are created to please others and offer false comfort. If we succumb to the pressure to create a uni-dimensional neat story of our transitional struggles we may leave ourselves uneasy and incomplete. If today, I create such a story and offer it to you, instead of contributing to my integrity, it depletes it. It will not enable me to do and be according to my own sense of correctness. Instead I risk becoming entangled in political or social expediency.

Well, that is the collection of thoughts I wish to take as equipment for myself and my co-travellers as we traverse some potentially offensive territory. How do you, the audience, become co-travellers on such a journey, and how can you and I both benefit from a self indulgent exploration of what may be difficult terrain? Perhaps we can use the idea that since we are connected by common interests, friendships and the myriad social sinews that link a community, then my thoughts will evoke something in you. We cannot avoid creating a response in each other. It is only a question of whether or not we notice our response, and then reflect on it. You may notice something in common, or something different to my thoughts, and then fold in your meanings and create something for yourself. And by keeping in mind that I am not here to train or educate or convince you of any-

thing, then all you will have left is to listen to what these ideas evoke in you.

So I come to the position that if you are listening and we have now equipped ourselves with some potentially useful ideas for the journey, I may as well get on with it. So let me tell you about how my thoughts about differences and transitions have led me into some really deep water.

REFUGEES AND THEIR PROGENY

At first it looked simple, as deep water often does. I was speaking with one of my closest friends and had told her of the task I had set myself. Her response was: 'So you are finally going to talk about us, the children of refugees. They won't like it, you know'. Her use of the word 'refugees' took me by surprise. It was a word which our parents had worked hard to put aside many years ago, along with that first new suit or teapot purchased after the war. I was intending to use words such as 'migrant', 'wog', or 'ethnic', and had been thinking about how deeply we knew that we were out of fashion when we were children. Then, as we finished our university degrees, something had changed either in us, society or maybe both, and we were positively all the rage. This change was most noticeable in the use of words to describe us. In the 1940s and early 50s the term was 'refugee' or officially D.P. (Displaced Person), while in the 60s it was 'migrant'. The word 'refugee' in the early fifties carried intense pain, and many who were described as 'refugee', or 'reffo' in the vernacular, still recoil from it. Others were so offended that they denied it with a passion or became silent at the mention of the word.

On the other hand, the words 'migrant', 'ethnic' or even 'wog', came from a different time, a time years on when we were well established and no longer vulnerable to being wiped off the face of the earth, and hence these new words were not so offensive. These three words, 'ethnic', 'migrant' and 'wog', are also part of a time when we were all the rage. Our food, our traditions and our languages, once offensive and called 'un-Australian', had become the flavour of the month and were chic. It had become politically expedient to be like us and to be with us, and we were now politically correct. (I discovered the phrase 'politically correct' at about the same time!) I had just graduated with my honours degree in Political Science and was about to launch into a very generously funded research project on interpreter services in Education and Industry. I was in a privileged position because of my 'ethnic' background and the senior researcher was advantaged in the process of applying for the grant because of my presence on her team. Others wanted to be involved in the research but had no 'ethnic background'. It felt rather odd and uncomfortable to be 'in' instead of 'out'.

Being different and being an oddity had become advantageous by the late 60s, but when I was a child and adolescent it was a source of pride, shame, fear and numerous other contradictory feelings. We were all

odd—my family, family friends, my close friends, my own. This is less so today in the 90s but even now it is still quite pronounced. But in general it has been a slow and continuous process of movement from oddity to ordinariness as we become more comfortable and self assured in who and what we are. So what is the oddity, the self assurance and the transition?

Well, there are some very obvious markers. They, the older generation, are foreigners, mostly from Eastern Europe and particularly from Poland. They came after the war. All had survived extraordinary circumstances and their children, my generation, have a quite unusual bond linking us. I used to think this was based on some common experience of being first generation Australians. Perhaps this is partly the case, but I have come to realise that there also is much more. We all come from dismembered families. Families torn apart by war and intense suffering, and this has left an unmistakable imprint. This imprint needs to be understood by us as family therapists, not as a dysfunction in a family or an individual, but as a way of being. This way of being is part of these families' survival of terrible circumstances before, during and after the war, and is a testimony to the transition they are living. Mind you, this phenomenon is not just confined to those reffos who are part of my history. It goes on today, in the lives of Cambodian, Lebanese, Chilean, Croatian, Vietnamese, Chinese, Irish, Serbian families that are the most recent additions to Australian society. In fact, I wonder what proportion of Australians are part of such dismembered families? Are you part of such a family?

We, as professionals, need to be knowledgeable about the imprint of major socio-political tragedy on families and individuals, not oblivious as many are. That is why I am telling you about the markers of the war on my family and my own. These markers need to be understood and not ridiculed or pathologised. Large scale tragedy and pain are naturally accompanied by, and translated into, intensity of relationship between the generations, including in particular the older generations' past, our common present and the future as will be lived by the grandchildren. These three—the past, the present and the future—are intertwined and often experienced as inseparable. At various times, we reffos or migrants have been told by very well meaning people, 'all you need to do is to resolve the grief and leave the past behind', or 'you need to reduce the enmeshment between the generations'. But there are good reasons not to reduce the enmeshment, and perhaps this business of 'resolving the grief and leaving the past behind' is not as simple as it appears in the textbooks. Are we reffos being offensive to our new country or to our well meaning neighbours or friends by not leaving the past behind? Many of my and my parents' generation still fear that we are being offensive by holding onto the past and onto other troublesome characteristics, and consequently keep quiet about it—we keep it between our own.

Let me illustrate. One of my close friends is not in a good way at present: her children are leaving home. Of

course she knows that children grow up and get on with their lives. But she has been breathlessly anxious and quite agitated about it. To someone who doesn't know her, she is a neurotic mother and is having difficulty with a normal life transition. She openly states that she feels crazy and is confused. 'Why should I be feeling this way?' she says in tears. We have been friends for about twelve years or so, and quite a while ago we recognised that we shared a similar oddity. She recognised it in me and I in her. Since then we have talked about our parental history, about how her mother was imprisoned in Siberia and nearly died of starvation and tuberculosis while trying to keep her teenage child alive. And about how her older brother finally died in Africa of malaria and about how she was born two years later. We have laughed about how her mother and father still watch over her, a woman in her mid forties, as if she were a child five years old. And as we talk, laugh and cry about the intense involvement, something for a moment at least changes, it becomes easier inside her and her agitation recedes. We finally throw our arms around each other and just hold on to another human being who understands, and as we let go she says, 'you know, I don't feel so crazy any more'.

Another friend has an elderly mother, and the moment something goes wrong, such as an accident or ill health, for her it is like walking across a chasm on a plank one foot in front of the other, fearing that at any moment you may fall. For us, children, parents, siblings and close friends are our life blood in a very literal way. The best food in the house goes to the children and the elderly, while the children's education, their health, and well being are intensely important, often to excess. A lot of things are often to excess by certain standards, with intensity, panic, drama, and laughter. So what is this all about? Why does it make these life transitions so difficult, and why not just leave the past behind? The answers to such questions are hard to put into words and very different for each family. For some families it is more about maintaining connections no matter what the cost. For others it is coming to terms with having felt defeated, about pride, courage, shame, bloody mindedness, or a hundred entangled feelings.

Amongst my own circle, there is an acute awareness that we are refugees, the children of refugees and the grandchildren of refugees. We are refugees not from discomfort or an economically constrained future, but from torture and persecution for political and religious beliefs, and for our ethnic origins. What happened to our parents was 50 years ago but for some recent refugees from South East Asia, South East Europe, South America or Africa to name a few, it is still going on. Justice and injustice are big issues for some, while intimacy and loyalty are the issues for others. Tolerance and intolerance of conflict among our own comes up all the time. One of our parents does something unreasonable towards their adult child, and the child's close friend will speak to him or her and propose tolerance and patience because the parent has suffered so extremely in the past. Oddly enough this is calming, it eases the con-

flict and things move on in a continuous transition. Many of our parents could be regarded as having a modern condition called post traumatic stress disorder and they really do behave in very odd ways.

Recently, researchers have become very interested in my aunt's war experiences and a young psychologist also came to interview my mother. I was most interested in these research projects, wondering how the experience of these women would be turned into research data. The researchers were searching for patterns and correlations and one of them told me about studies which examined 'the benefits of having suffered from severe emotional trauma'. I was taken aback. What in heaven's name could be the benefits of having survived hell? I couldn't imagine. She promised to send me the articles. While I was thinking about what such studies could possibly conclude, I realised that I'm so immersed in all their lives that I have no way to see what an outsider would see. Living and belonging within this (or possibly any) intensely held experience or world view actually blinds us to an examination of that way of being. No matter how much I want to, it is a struggle to step outside, just for a moment, to reflect on it. How can you 'resolve' or 'leave behind' something you are so immersed in? How can a fish contemplate walking on land when it can only draw oxygen from water and not from this strange substance called air? How does it develop the new capacity to breathe in a different medium? Does it take one generation, two generations or multiple generations? What do you think as family therapists? I have begun to take a much longer term view of change in such dismembered, 'severe emotional trauma' families.

I return to my earlier question, which is how many of us family therapists come from families 'torn apart by war' or suffering 'severe emotional trauma'? And how many of us see such families, or individuals who come from such families? Or have you noticed that at times it is very difficult for you, as a therapist, to 'step outside' an experience, a family or a group which offers you a sense of close and emotional belonging? Have you noticed that an intense sense of belonging to a group makes it very difficult to tolerate listening to a different perspective? I particularly noticed this when the research articles about 'the benefits of having suffered from severe emotional trauma' arrived and sat on my desk for two weeks. I walked around them, avoiding them. Slowly I calmed. Curiosity worked its spell and I wanted to know the conclusions of these dispassionately researched articles. And in summary they said 'there is often a significant developmental change towards greater self direction, confidence and assertiveness'. So that was the other side of what I grew up with, and that is how my own people look to outsiders. I thought about it. My mother, my aunt, my grandmother, my father and our friends, you would certainly use those words about them if you see them only from the outside, although not all the time. But it is true, they are all very clear about their priorities. They are survivors in the full meaning of the word. They are not the

ones who are in ashes in Poland or buried in Siberia. And when I thought about others who were part of our circle, there was certainly determination to find some way to survive in this new place. Indeed, sometimes very abnormal ways to survive, which worked very well but were perceived by helping professionals as serious pathologies. Abnormal solutions to very abnormal problems were, and possibly still are, intolerable in an Anglo-scientific community which values restraint and propriety.

I thought about my mother's friend Veronica, who has been in and out of psychiatric hospital ever since she arrived in Australia. She is now permanently on anti-psychotic medication, she doesn't speak English and she has brought up two sons. She has mostly been, as my grandmother would say, 'picking violets' or 'has violets in her head' but she was always included in our social gatherings as well as dropping in regularly for a cup of lemon tea and cake. Her conversation has mostly been focused on devils and angels doing things to her and her loved ones. But both of Veronica's sons have families of their own now. They are fine and attentive fathers, have now been married for 20 years or so, and while I know that life is not perfect for them, as they also have their fears, they have found ways of making life better for themselves and their families. Veronica had inside her an intense drive to make an ordinary life for her children as much as possible. She and her boys were a part of a few families, including ours. Both boys married daughters of this same circle—one was my closest friend during university years. And I am godmother to their eldest daughter, who is about to complete her studies to be a psychologist. It is nothing new in family therapy circles to note that one generation's distress is reflected in the life of the next, but it is unusual to note that one generation has a limitation on what it can resolve, so that the next generation takes up the next step in the process of moving from odd to ordinary. And it does not go down well to say that the younger generation of such families, through its intense connection to the older generation, can do new things which provide healing for the older generation. Veronica's symptoms have eased over the years as her sons have had children and the children have grown. She loves to be at the children's birthday celebrations and other social gatherings. My mother has often remarked that it has been very important to Veronica's well being that her sons are not ashamed of her and that her son's friends include her in their lives.

But don't assume that Veronica's or my mother's 'greater self direction' is comfortable or polite, especially when you are on the receiving end. Veronica was a very difficult and demanding client at the psychiatric hospital, particularly when she had my mother as her advocate. My mother knows nothing else but how to get what she wants, and what she wants is not always reasonable. I don't need to describe the scenes that faced the medical and nursing staff when my mother wanted the medication adjusted because the side effects were destroying Veronica's capacity to be with people.

At home, I recall the incidents being discussed in detail and the conclusion being drawn that the doctors were well meaning but were really very limited and only to be approached for the prescription of pills. There was no awareness of what it might have been like for the hospital staff to be faced with the drama that they as a duo delivered.

Things change, and as I think about all this, I am in awe of the extraordinary capacity which we possess as human beings to change and to adapt to changes. So why the drama, the panic and the agitation? Can't these changes and adaptation to change take place quietly, without provocation, and without all this attention getting behaviour? I would like to suggest that there is a long answer to that question and a short answer. Let's look at the short answer since it takes a lifetime to cover the long answer! It is obvious that part of the panic and agitation come from a different time and place and remain as a familial legacy. Just as our parents give us the colour of our eyes and hair, they hand on emotions which are felt at certain transitional points. By being agitated at the thought of her son leaving to work in another city, my friend is declaring her part in what happened at another time and place 50 years ago. The past and the present come together in her emotions. 'That is just the way it is in our family' she says. That past, and what happened then, is held in trust in the full spectrum of her feelings about her family. So, she holds the past inside, in the emotions she has towards her parents or her children, and it exacts a toll on her. As far as she is concerned, it is a small price to pay for the generations that have been and are to come. 'Resolving the grief' is a somewhat simplistic notion to offer her.

The other part of panic, agitation and provocation, is to do with hurt and anger. It is in the nature of things that when we humans are hurt and hurt and hurt, we will be angry. It is because what has happened is important and it needs acknowledgment as such. This is not a quiet, reasonable or neat process, as we are discovering while we go about reconciliation with Australia's indigenous people. Remember they are part of very dismembered families!

CONFORMITY

We all have our herd of sacred cows. The only trouble is that yours and mine are different.

It may not sound like it, but this is also a presentation about conformity. About conformity to a way of living or being as a person, and to a collection of ideas about life. We all have an essential need to belong, to have roots, to have a psychological and emotional place that is our own and that we share with others we like and respect. I have often wondered whether I or you conform because we're convinced about the inherent value of the views we hold, or because we simply want to belong. Without thinking about it, without examining it, just to belong. I wonder whether my conviction and justification about the value of my ideas or way of living is really secondary, because first and foremost, they

offer me an identity and a sense of belonging. Amongst this loosely knit collection of my own kind, among these children of reffos, there is an intense sense of belonging that gives enormous comfort and peace. But at times there is also intense discomfort, particularly if by chance or intention, you question or examine too closely one of the sacred cows.

So what are the ways and means of identifying and questioning sacred cows from within our conformities? I have watched with intense interest as colleagues and friends do exactly that. My idea is that it begins by clearly and comfortably naming who and what I am and with whom I belong, so that somehow a genuine examination of that way of living, that way of being and the ideas behind them, can begin. So instead of saying that these reffo families, these families suffering 'severe emotional trauma' need to 'resolve their grief', let's consider saying 'name who and what you are and where you belong, and I am interested to hear what happened to you'. For my parents, being a refugee was and still is an attempt at wholesale destruction of their identity, their belonging. For some years they became non-people. Indeed some of the people in my parents' circle are still invisible people, non-people. They are as if absent, and they were the easiest for the Australians who were around them to accept.

My family were much more difficult to come to terms with for outsiders and they not unique in that respect. In such families with self assurance and no inclination to apologise for their existence, perhaps even arrogance, the older generation's and my generation's struggle with belonging is intense because what is being negotiated is extremely serious. There is no question that I belong with my family, and the way I show my intensity of connection to my family is to feel agitation and sometimes panic at being parted from them. Just like how my grandmother felt when her son was taken by the NKVD to prison, or how my aunt felt when her children died of starvation one after another. It is all part of my identity—who I am. But I am also born in Australia and my family's experience is not my direct experience. So my direct personal experiences are different but related. In many ways the children of reffos feel a kinship and comfort with each other because there is no need to explain or apologise for the oddity, and there is no need to pretend at ordinariness.

Things are complicated by the experience of being on the outer of this new wider community within which our parents want us to be in the centre, as they were in their place, 50 years ago. It is also complicated by the fact that what we and our families have lived through is at times beyond spoken words, and indeed is very difficult to communicate to those 'others' whom our parents want us to join. So in summary the task is not 'to resolve the past' but to incorporate our parents' and our own past experience into the present here in Australia. And perhaps we will be able to move past conformity for the sake of belonging, and begin to examine what we are and how we might like to be, in this new place.

THE NEXT STEP

How do I and my friends come to feel comfortable enough to bring such different worlds together and to say what it was really like to be the ones who didn't fit into the wider community? My friend who described us as 'the children of refugees' pointed out as we talked, that if I was to talk about being a refugee and a child of refugees I had to talk about how we grew up, and the legacy of emotions it has left with us. As with most refugees, be they post World War II, post Vietnam war or post Chilean revolution, our emotions are a continuation of our parents' experience but are also quite different to our parents' experience and mostly incomprehensible to them. The legacy of being 'the reffos' kids' contained firstly, the pain, the loss and the dislocation of the war lived out in our daily lives. Secondly, we lived double lives—one amongst ourselves at home with anxious, crazy, humorous, histrionic, hard working, depressed, fun loving, suicidal, laughing, hugging or kissing parents, and the other life at school. At school, we were outsiders. The teachers consistently misinterpreted us and our parents, as they now do with Moslem or Vietnamese kids. Mrs. Lyons, my form 1 teacher, thought that my mother had come to complain about me—something my mother never did. As I translated, Mrs. Lyons decided what my mother was complaining about, and she recommended that my parents could solve all their difficulties with me by sending me to boarding school. My mother was shocked and made a few choice comments which I did not translate for Mrs. Lyons. Was she on the wrong tram! But there continue to be teachers like Mrs Lyons in the lives of the new reffo kids, and now psychologists, welfare workers, social workers, psychiatrists and family therapists have joined them. Can you or I honestly say that we have never lined up with them, climbing aboard the same wrong tram?

We were ridiculed, bullied, and sometimes scared to go home the usual way because Neil Harty and his friends were waiting to beat up the wogs. Some of us were much more skilful than others at blending in. My friend Janina wore mini skirts and carried a round basket just as Jan White did, and told me not to talk with her at school. And if I did need to talk to her, I must call her Jan. Outside school, we were good friends, I called her Jancia² and we played all weekend. There were no recriminations or bitterness between us, partly because I knew that I couldn't blend in anyway, because my mother with her long dark hair wound around her head would come to school regularly and want to talk with the teacher, while I translated. Alan couldn't blend in either, because his mother and mine brought us hot food at lunch time, and his Dad wore funny clothes. We had a loose knit group that lasted us all through primary school, secondary school and university. We were Italians, Poles, Czechs, Russians, Greeks, Slovenians, some were Jewish and some were orthodox Christian. We were all outsiders and all our parents were 'reffo'. We ate reffo food, we smelt bad, some of our parents were

in and out of Royal Park Psychiatric Hospital, and the majority of us went to university, as will the children of the new wave of refugees.

There is a predominance of psychologists and social workers among us, although there are also teachers, engineers, accountants, doctors, dentists, architects, economists. We don't see each other as much now, but we did when our children were small. Yet whenever this collection gets together we talk about our intense concerns for our parents and their illnesses. We celebrate our children's successes openly and with excessive pride, and we can go on and on about some bee we have in our bonnet. Some of our children are close friends in spite of not seeing each other every day or every week. Together is the place we call home—the place where we can be ourselves, where we don't need to explain why I'm worried about my mother or that your father is in the psych hospital again or why Veronica's hands are shaking uncontrollably. This is how we have been able to go home, into the past, and this is how we have been able find some belonging elsewhere. 'You can't leave home until you have been home emotionally', said another friend as we drove around the Huon Valley yesterday.

While I was thinking about these gatherings, I realised that for most of us 'reffos' and 'reffos' kids' the big task is to become familiar with this entity I have called home. It is a complex entity because it is not entirely within our own families nor in our common experience as reffo kids, but also in the very different ways our parents managed their transition from their existence during the war to life in Australia. At times it's very confusing, and some of us are working very hard at physically and emotionally bridging the gap between our children and our parents. Above all, it involves dealing with the difference between the life of the family before coming to Australia and the life of the family in Australia. Some of our parents feel free to talk about what they lived through and also to reflect on it with some sense of peace, while others are silent, saying nothing and leaving their children to guess. Some of our parents have very limited capacity for reflection and only offer dogmatic prescriptions about what was then, and is now. So we, their children, offer each other another perspective that comes from within the circle of safety, among our own. We can make comments about each other's lives and parents that an outsider never could. In some way we know that without another compassionate human being's assistance to help us know our past well and recognise its imprint on the present, the future remains in shadow. I can feel it in myself and in my relationships with my friends. They and I often feel absorbed in this refugee world and way of thinking, and it is extremely hard to examine and scrutinise the sacred cows of our micro-community.

The past, the present and the future for these families and individuals are inextricably interwoven. In many ways it has been a great benefit to me as a family therapist as I know about being drawn into a fabric of cultural context in a particularly intimate way. I can recognise

when a family or individual have taken me into the interior of their life. I can also tolerate quite high levels of chaos and distress without making it my own. I know about being patient and tolerant of things that feel intolerable to them. I have had excellent training. Mind you, it is also a disadvantage because as I begin to step into the inside of a family world, I lose what an outsider can see. Similarly the researcher saw my mother as having great self direction, warmth, optimism, capacity to deal with uncertainty, my aunt as altruistic, confident, assertive and my father as entirely devoted to family and his grandchildren; while on the inside I saw worry, intensity, distress and great anxiety around ordinary events of life. But when I name these inside and outside perspectives and consider them in combination, it is a move forward towards something new. So how to keep alive the outside view and the inside experience? How to keep yourself as therapist doing both at once? How to offer such clients a perspective that stretches me and them into a different time and place? These are my constant questions as a therapist!

SACRED COWS AND POLITICAL INCORRECTNESS

The next step was to open the subject of 'Sacred Cows', 'Political Correctness', Family Therapy and what I call the "misery business". Why the misery business? Well, while I was at university I decided that I would have a wider circle of friends—this is code for Australian friends. So I went out of my way to meet them. The 'others', the ones whose families had lived in Australia for many generations. The ones who ate roast lamb with peas, potato and cauliflower in white sauce, mostly on Sunday. Whose mothers made cup cakes and lamingtons and whose sandwiches were never thicker than ten mm with the crust cut off. And when I met them, the conversation sooner or later got to the point of what course were you doing, and what did your father do.

So, to cut a long story short, I was at a party being displayed by my future in-laws and regular as clockwork that collection of questions came up. In response, I declared that my family and I were in 'the misery business'. I didn't make myself popular with my future in-laws! They did forgive me for it but never a truer word was spoken. The reply did the job it was meant to, exceptionally well. It was meant to give a terse prod to the metaphorical sacred cow of 'Anglo Protestant Upper Middle Class restraint and understatement'. I was on display. I was a 'wog' and 'ethnic' and about to be engaged to the middle son of a Riverina grazier's daughter and the great grandson of the Moderator General of the Methodist Church in Australia. I was to be the first Non-Anglo-Saxon-Celtic, Non-Protestant member of the family and I was being examined. They were very nice people, kind, and also sort of welcoming, in a restrained Anglo way. But I was not about to accept the sacred cow of my new milieu. I was being perverse because I was annoyed. They were full of misconceptions. In each interaction, they exuded well intentioned but ignorant

certainty, and in response I took a position that was familiar to me and to a number of my reffo friends, that of political incorrectness.

When we were children we were obliged to behave in a socially and politically expedient way. We had to accept being rebuked for what we were. Now as a young adult I had an opportunity to at least challenge the misconceptions, although not to clarify or correct them. They were not aware of how much they were on the wrong tram, they were not interested to listen and a party is not the place to do it anyway. So all that was left to me was to be perverse and to restate my belonging with my reffo family and friends. Now there was a choice, between conforming because it made some political or personal sense, and non-conforming because it felt loyal to my family. The choice was clear, non-conforming won hands down, and I ended up as a consequence not belonging very well to this new milieu. But when you have been knocked about or been excluded by a group for a long time, it is very hard not to be perverse. So there is another dilemma in a nut shell. How to be true to yourself and your collective identity while learning about and listening to the other side, without perversity entering into the action? It took some time before I learnt to subdue my perversity and to accommodate the rules of polite Anglo-Saxon conversation, to steer myself around the sacred cows called 'the done thing and the proper way'.

Today many Australians are of refugee background either as a first generation or a second generation. That is how Australian society is being constructed—from these pieces of families. My story and experience is not exceptional nor unique but it is, essentially, an invisible story. If you have refugee or migrant or wog background you need to understand how it is rippling through your life patterns, and if you have clients like this you need to be sensitive to this dimension of their lives. You cannot transplant a bush or a tree without trauma, and if it is ripped out of its soil with the deliberate intention of destruction, then establishing roots in new soil is a long and sensitive process. So where do we get the idea that human beings are not going to struggle to find belonging, and where do we get the idea that the unusual, perverse, intense and 'over the top' process of finding new roots can be achieved without respect for the past? We, as therapists, need to know that we don't know many things. We need to know that well intentioned but ignorant certainty abounds in the therapeutic community and that we are no different. We get a perverse prod from family members and individuals, and we don't recognise it as a signal that they are annoyed with us because we are on the wrong tram. We dismiss their 'political incorrectness' as resistance rather than inquiring further into something which is invisible to us. If we don't learn to listen then they will not bother saying what needs to be told.

The task of dealing firstly with our own perversity, and then assisting our clients to quiet theirs, is essential to transition of any kind, because with perversity in the picture, reflection on past experience will be restricted.

So what helps to subdue it, to deal with it and to quieten it? And does it have to be subdued altogether? I noticed that sometimes, someone in this new milieu that I've been telling you about expressed an interest in what happened to my father or my mother and grandmother, or to others. So I would tell the story; the highly abridged, low emotion and 'highlights only' version. At first I was not aware that I was selecting and structuring the story in this fashion, but in the last ten years or so I have noticed that the pieces I told were very much to do with whom I was telling. And I often wonder how many of our clients do exactly that, tell an abridged version. Sometimes I found myself miscalculating how much to tell. I would see a particular look in the eyes of my listener or a comment would be made and I would have this terrible feeling of discomfort and the realisation that the story was too long or too specific. This was my signal that the story had been indigestible. The listener might express admiration or horror or amazement or say how courageous or just be overwhelmed and I would pull back, do a quick wrap up and move on to something easy. The most usual response is 'Oh how heroic to survive!' But there is nothing heroic about these experiences, not from my parents' perspective, not from my grandmother's perspective and not from the perspective of any refugees I have known. In fact this response is the most effective way of protecting the sacred cow of 'Don't say what you think, or feel, and don't explain what you have been through, as it will embarrass me, I will be left floundering, and it will show that I am unable to respond to you'.

But there is a dilemma because you cannot belong with people until they know about your past as well as your present. Your experiences need to shift from the odd to the ordinary in order to belong, in order for that unique history be woven into the history of the wider community. You may have noticed that at present we are going through a period where threads of Aboriginal history in particular are being woven together with the threads of settlers' history. You may have also noticed that there are some who cannot tolerate that process. They have to face and tolerate the thought that they, and their past generations, inflicted sometimes ill-intentioned and sometimes well-intentioned serious harm. So not only do they have to overcome their ignorant certainty that they know what happened, but also they have to accept responsibility. No wonder they deny the validity of the process, but if their views predominate, the price for the community will be very high. The option to remain patient and silent no longer exists for many groups, such as our indigenous people and our recently arrived people. The transition in the Aboriginal community and other communities from silence to outspoken self assurance is growing, particularly in the new generations. Previously venerated sacred cows are being seriously threatened.

Sacred cows and the politically incorrect don't get on well. They perturb each other. This perturbation can very easily lead to antagonism and polarisation and I am sure that this is unhelpful. People lose their sense of

humour, their flexibility of thought and often their good judgment. Lines are drawn based on group loyalty, and these lines cannot be crossed by ordinary bystanders. The perspective of the 'other' cannot be explored or even thought about, because when we feel belonging, the ideas of that group sound so correct to our ear that we simply don't give them a second thought. There is no reflection. All card carrying, bona fide sacred cows unquestioningly believe that they have security of tenure and power. Sacred cows are not to be questioned, and above all must never publicly be brought to account for their destructiveness or thoughtlessness.

And we also, as a profession, have sacred cows and political incorrectness. We are all prone to unquestioning acceptance of the helping profession's sacred cows of practice, ideas and ways of being because of our desire to belong. Can you name the sacred cows strolling the dusty thoroughfares of your daily life? Do you want to name your sacred cows and blessed bulls? Is it worth the effort? What benefits, if any, does it bring? Well, for a therapist, I believe the benefit is that you can be significantly more helpful to the families and individuals you see by not imposing your sacred cows on them. It is also more demanding of you as a therapist because you give up corralling them into your venerated solutions. But you may be better equipped to persist with difficult families through complex struggles and transitions that don't turn out the way every one had hoped. However, this is not easily achieved, as it is fraught with uncertainty, incompleteness, discomfort and disapproval.

All of us encounter and challenge sacred cows, perhaps at the moment when we contemplate seeing families instead of seeing only the identified patient, or when we work with a family of an individual according to our clinical judgement rather than using the text books and theories. Or when on an ordinary day we have an urge to ask a question at a meeting or make a comment, instinct restrains us (perhaps to our surprise), but nevertheless we proceed against the old survival sense which says 'I will be taken apart, I will be attacked'. This is an encounter with something not subject to scrutiny, questions or examination. So how will we find the language to speak up and manage the attack?

We need to also recognise that all of us have been or still are in some way protectors of sacred cows. When you notice yourself holding the high ground and consider your ideas beyond question, you are clearing the path for a sacred cow. So how can we be with each other without getting trapped into being on the side of either the sacred cows or those who perversely prod the sacred cow? To be neither perverse nor smug? And are there principles or ideas or ways of being that are worth protecting and not just sacred cows? How can we tell the difference? Declaration of human rights, anti-violence, anti-discrimination, reconciliation legislation—all these things are the outcome of talking, listening, reflection and a genuine examination of the consequences of ignorant and self righteous action. When we personally, professionally and as members of

a community, begin to speak openly about the uncomfortable things that need to be said and heard without recoiling, we will bring about a change in the ecology of ideas and in our relationships with each other. This is a very simple way of not enshrining sacred cows, preventing perverse prods and politically expedient alignments.

We family therapists, practitioners in the misery business, are particularly prone to enshrine sacred cows. We work with one of the most complex phenomena in existence, a family or a group of people. And in order to generate some certainty for ourselves in our work with such complexity, we have created a number of theories. First there were the mechanical theories which many for a time took to be truth. Then we found the biological metaphors of Maturana, and now we are drawn to language and narrative as our props. And many take re-storying as a truth which takes precedence over what our clients make of their lives. But if the theory takes precedence, then we are back to the well intentioned ignorance of the party conversation that I described earlier. It seems that at times we collect bundles of ideas, make them our identity, and consequently we feel good because we have a sense of belonging and certainty. However, we also stop listening to contrary perspectives and don't examine the limitations of our view, or at least not in public. Do you bother to notice your habits of thought and interactions with your clients? Consider your sacred cows, and how you rise to their defence when someone questions or

perhaps gives a perverse prod. How do we generate the skills not to treat the lives of our clients, particularly those who have survived and come here as refugees, as if they were action packed movies with heroes and heroines and everything coming to a satisfactory and resolved end? How can we be interested enough to be allowed in on the family's inner world to be part of it, and also to be outside it? How to help in the process of finding belonging without clinging to or hiding behind sacred cows?

So now we come close to the end of our journey together. I warned you that it was not an easy journey, that we would need to be well equipped, that we would touch on things that are offensive and that you might be offended. I have told you about some of the things I have found offensive, as well as the things I have done which have offended others. The most offensive thing you can do at this point is to comment on how courageous all this self disclosure is. If that is the sum total of your thoughts, you have missed the point and you will persist in the well intentioned ignorance of a large proportion of the Australian community, including possibly a significant proportion of your clients. Your sacred cows will be safe. But I don't believe that will be the outcome.

Notes

1. From the beginning of the Stalinist purges of the 1930s, to the end of the Second World War, the Soviet Secret Police were called the NKVD.
2. Jancia is a diminutive of Janina.