

**CLOSING ADDRESS**  
**BEYOND HOMELESSNESS: REFLECTIONS ON CULTURE, COMMUNITY AND HUMAN SPIRIT.**  
**Reflections from Tim Muirhead**

William Deane – perhaps the Governor General I’m most grateful to for helping us hold our national soul through the early Howard years – once said *“it is my firm belief that the ultimate test of our worth as a democratic nation is how we treat our most disadvantaged and vulnerable.*

So let me begin, as a member of Joe Public, by saying thank you to you, not just for working to support your fellow human beings, but for being at the front line of sustaining our national worth. I’m sorry we don’t pay you better for that!

In this Closing Address, I want to simply offer a few reflections for you to ponder over as you walk back into the busy-ness of your lives and the importance of your work....

***Culture – is something missing?***

I heard a joke the other day: What’s the difference between white Australia and yoghurt? .... Yoghurt has culture.

It’s a bit mean. But, more importantly, I think it’s wrong. Dangerously wrong. It’s dangerous to believe, as we too often do, that we don’t have culture. Our culture is all around us; so ever-present that it disappears to our gaze, like the water that the fish relies on, not knowing of its reliance until it is taken out of it. We have values, assumptions, ways of seeing and ways of doing – all things we take for granted, because they are so common. We have enormous diversity but there is a mainstream, dominant culture that pervades our nation. And there are two enormous dangers in not seeing that.

The first, of course, is ethnocentricity – the idea that the way my lot does things is the normal way of doing things, and so the way others do it must be, at best, strange, or, at worst, wrong. That way lies ethnic, racial, class, gender, heterosexist, or religious superiority and discrimination – often unintended.

The second danger is self destruction: if we don’t remain conscious of where our culture is taking us, we may be blind to the roots of our own demise. We ourselves may suffer if we don’t see that the water we’re swimming in is becoming dangerously polluted.

So I want to speak of culture. And I want to touch on what we might, as a nation, be missing, because I suspect that some of our blindspots within our own culture may be making it more difficult to address homelessness – may be contributing to an environment in which you may feel you’re speaking to brick walls as you try to share your passion for justice, equity, human dignity.

As an aside, I should say that there is much about my culture - my nation even - that I genuinely love. But like all great loves, it’s important that we’re honest, or the love can easily turn toxic in the tepid waters of smiling ignorance or self-deception.

So what’s missing? I have been thinking, for some time, of writing a little article: *“Confessions of a God Loving Atheist”*. See, I’ve been pondering: I don’t believe that the world was made in 7 days, or that God is in charge of things, or, for that matter, that the Wagyl made that biliya, or river, out there. So I may be an atheist. But when I hear the story of the Wagyl, my soul opens, and it connects me more deeply with the river than any talk of geological pressures ever can. When I reflect on many of the biblical stories I feel myself go deeper into the experience of being human in the

universe. They do not explain my world, but they touch – and sometimes even explain, my soul. As do readings from Islam, Buddhism, or the stories of countless other religions. In the normal sense of the word, I don't really believe that God exists, beyond the possibility that It is the profound sum of the parts of our planet or our Universe. But, as much as I don't believe It exists, I love It. It nourishes me.

And while I am incredibly grateful for the advances that we've managed to make through the Enlightenment and the rise of rationalism, I am concerned about the dangers of a culture becoming fixated by the rational, the quantitative, the evidence-based. I fear it can lead to barren places. See, I think the concept of God (or other creation spirits such as the Wagyl), in the best of religion, implants at least 3 ideas that wannabe atheists like me may need to work harder to remember.

1. *That there is something much greater than ourselves in our world and the universe.*

This, it seems to me, is crucial for our culture to remember. My generation has celebrated individualism. I've loved the freedoms enjoyed as a result. But I do think that, when it's all about me, it can all get very lonely and meaningless. And when it's all about me, I may be less interested in the well-being of those around me. Things may splinter.

2. *That miracles happen.*

A seed turns dirt into a beautiful flower, or a glorious tree. That was a miracle before we understood how it happens. And it's a miracle after we've understood how it happens. The Berlin Wall falls, the Ozone layer shrinks, and a child without hope grows to live a rich life. Hope lives. Miracles happen.

3) *That everything, and everyone, is sacred.*

I do feel that our culture has lost its sense of the sacred. We engage in convoluted scientific and economic arguments about whether or not we need to save our natural resources. Of course, when we avoid cutting down a forest, we lesson global warning, and therefore economic risks. This is rational and good. But we also protect the sacred and the beautiful. Would that that were enough. Would that the language of the sacred could guide us through. So that we might commit, for example, to ensuring that everyone is housed, simply because everyone is sacred.

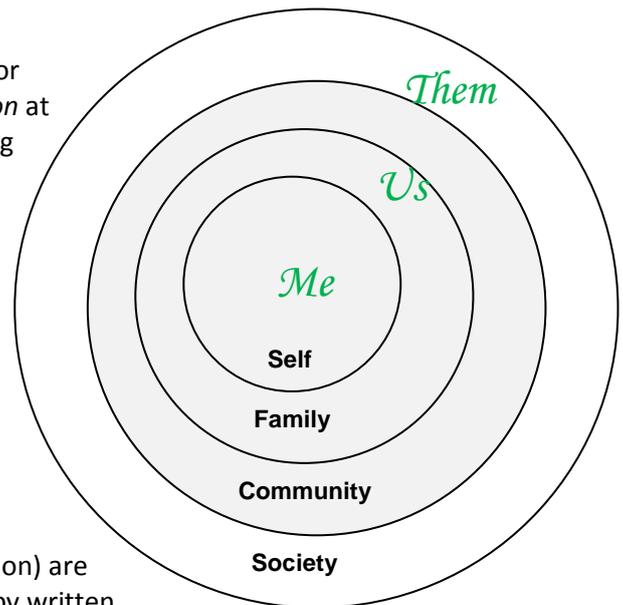
To repeat: rationality, scientific process, evidence based work are essential in a world made complex by the interdependence of 7 billion humans. Accountability is essential in a nation where people commonly contribute 30% of their income to the common good, and thus to our services. I am not arguing against these. Rather I'm arguing that, as we strive for efficiency and effectiveness, we should also strive, unashamedly, for love and wholeness; we should also retain hope in the miraculous; and we should remember beauty and sacredness.

So, acknowledging we live in an increasingly secular world, let me offer a couple of simple frameworks that might help us remember these things, whether or not 'God' is important to us.

***Of me and us.***

As human beings, we all share a range of needs and aspirations. We all have a need for love; we all have a need for appropriate shelter, for information, for food, for mobility, for safety, and so on. What differs between us is not so much our needs and aspirations. What differs between us is our capacity to get those needs and aspirations met. In our work – be it at the level of policy level or personal support - we should be striving to ensure that everyone has the capacity to get their needs and aspirations met. And there are four broad realms of support that can influence our capacity to get our needs and aspirations met; if they are healthy, and in balance, they will help us in our capacity. We need to remember them all....

1. Our self in our complex and rich individuality.
2. Our family: those people we feel related to by blood or contract and in which there are pressures of *obligation* at play. We give or receive because 's/he's family' (along with the human love that pervades, in all its joys and confusion).
3. Our community: those people, beyond our family, who we feel ourselves to be in relationship with, and where pressures of *reciprocity* are at play – a balance of give and take that impacts on the bonds of human connections between us.
4. Our society: those people who we don't know who are slotted into organisations – departments, corporations, governments, and where forces of *regulation* (policy, programs, planning, rules, legislation) are at play. We do what we do because we are required by written statements to do it.



Our self is the world of '*me*'. Our family and community are the world of '*us*'. Our society is the world of '*them*' – people outside our world of relationship.

So...a few things to say about this very simple summary of the human world:

All 4 realms are important. All should be honoured. We should not fall into the trap of simply believing it's 'every person for themselves'. Equally, we must not fall into the trap of believing that it is the responsibility of agencies or governments to make everything OK. The first trap betrays people, leaving them vulnerable, isolated, and/or uncaring. The second trap also betrays people: it is the height of disrespect to believe that people cannot carry responsibility for managing their own world. And it is the height of disrespect to believe that they can do it alone. There is something greater than each of us – That something essential to our well-being and we are vital to its wellbeing.

It seems to me important, then, to work developmentally. 'Develop' means, literally, to un-wrap, It is the opposite to 'envelop'. So in working developmentally we are working to un-wrap the potential within: personal development seeks to un-wrap the potential within a person; family development seeks to un-wrap the potential within a family (be it 5 people or 500); community development seeks to un-wrap the potential within the world of relationships that, together, we create in our lives.

Generally speaking, the more someone is able to get their needs and aspirations genuinely met from within the world of me and us, the more power they have over the circumstances of their lives. Of course, because these worlds break down, we also need the regulated world of 'them'. But if people become dependent on this external world (which a colleague Heather Simmons calls 'Serviceland') they become, increasingly, disempowered. For me, this is a crucial factor to keep in the front of our minds: we must always be working in ways that encourage people back towards genuine self-determination - towards their place of relationship – self, family, community. 'Serviceland' – Society – should be the back-up system of our lives; a place we visit as need arises, not the place we live.

In their different ways, all 4 realms are important. There is something bigger than ourselves – the collective. The interdependence of the realms is most strongly and beautifully expressed by the Southern African term ‘Ubuntu’. It has many translations, but might be summarised as this: the well being of all of us relies on the well being of each of us. And the well-being of each of us relies on the wellbeing of all of us.

Ubuntu would lead naturally to the idea that if any of us is homeless, we are all diminished; if any of us is homeless then we have a shared responsibility to ensure that individuals, and families and communities and our society become healthier. It would lead us to the idea that everyone of us, in need, is sacred enough to spark our full collective attention.

### **Of Spirit**

All four of the realms can be supportive and nourishing. But they can all be barren and dangerous, too. In working developmentally we aim to ensure they are supportive and nourishing. How do we achieve that?

Let me offer this answer: in everything we do, we should aim to Develop Spirit. Let me explain why<sup>1</sup>.

‘Spirit’ became important to me when I looked it up in the Dictionary. Its etymology – its original meaning – is ‘breath of life’. I was very struck by this. You know what it feels like when your spirit is strong. You can feel your energy and enthusiasm; you can feel true passion and compassion; true joy and true grief; you can care about others and care about yourself. But what struck me when I read this description - ‘the breath of life’ – was what it feels like when we can’t get it. I thought of a person drowning.

A person drowning thinks only of the next moment – just trying to stay alive rather than focusing on the wider picture. A person drowning lashes out – even at people who are trying to help them. A person drowning grasps at anything to try to get that breath back into their lungs. And a person drowning, finally, ceases to care; gives in.

A person who can’t “breathe” their spirit can be like that drowning person. When my spirit is choked I can think only of the next moment, not the greater possibilities of living. When my spirit is choked I lash out at others around me, even those who want to help me; even those who love me. When my spirit is choked I grasp at anything - any distraction, any toy, any excuse - to fill up the hole left by my choked spirit, rather than looking within my heart, my home, my community. And when my spirit is choked I give in, cease to care, get apathetic. Our communities are full of people feeling like this. We often feel like this ourselves.

If we have lives, families, communities and a society where people are thinking only of the next moment, where we are lashing out at each other rather than reaching out, where we believe answers lie beyond our reach rather than within, and where we have ceased to care, then our lives, our families, our communities and our society will not have the capacity to ensure our needs and aspirations are met. We will become de-spirited; despairing; depressed (like a flat tyre – the air crushed out of it).

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<sup>1</sup> Much of this explanation is drawn from previous writings. See, for example *“Social and Cultural Sustainability: Sustaining spirit in our lives, our communities, our cultures and our society”*, available at [www.peoplehelp.com.au/csd/papers.html](http://www.peoplehelp.com.au/csd/papers.html)

(When I say 'develop' spirit, remember, I am speaking of 'unwrapping' – unwrapping the spirit in a person or people – not to teach, or change, or build spirit in that person – simply to un-wrap the spirit that is there waiting.)

So.....what will it take from us, as people and governments; as workers and managers to develop spirit – this breath of healthy lives, families, communities, society?

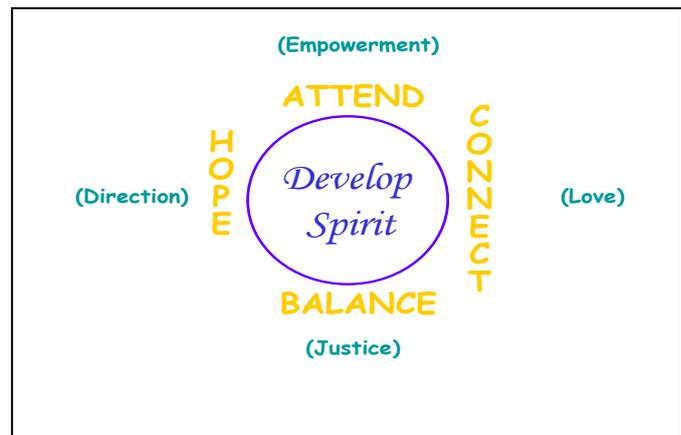
It takes, I think, 4 key elements, as shown in the diagram:

Let me say a few words about each of them.....

### Attend

Miracles can happen when we really pay attention. If everyone is sacred, then we genuinely pay attention to them. We find ways to draw out their spirit to draw out what is sacred within them.

I knew a social worker - Sue C. - who, in the 80s, worked in vain to find a suitable foster placement for a young, troubled girl. She failed, left the position, and thus lost track of 'the case'. Any Departmental review or evaluation of the case would not have been complimentary.



More than 10 years later, she received a phone call. 'Is that Sue C.?' asked the caller. 'Yes'. 'I just wanted to call to say that I'm alive, and I think I'm alive because of you'. 'But I did nothing!' Sue said, surprised. The reply was powerful: 'You were the one person who believed in me!'.

Miracles can happen when we really pay attention. Miracles can happen when we believe in a person - maybe believe in them more than they believe in their self. They begin to find their own spirit. They begin to feel powerful.

So as we work with people who are homeless, we constantly pay attention to their experiences, their potential, their wisdom, and thus help them unwrap their spirit.

### Connect

In developing Spirit, even as we pay attention to the individual, we need to foster connection between them and others - to meld the 'me' into 'us'. We strive to link people to places of family and community support – not just connections to serviceland. This connection is important to each of us.

I was talking to a colleague, Kathy Alkasi, about my fears around a project I was undertaking. 'Tim', she said sternly: 'Everything is scary when you do it alone'. I wrote it down, and put it on my wall. If we feel connected, we become more courageous.

But we also become more compassionate.... I used to work with Travellers ('Gypsies') in England. Many of them felt deeply alienated from the surrounding community. One day my girlfriend of the time walked, for the first time, on to the site and up to my van – about 50 metres – and started chatting to me. A young lad came up to us: 'Timmy – is this your girlfriend?' 'Yes'. He ran off, and,

about 20 seconds later arrived back with my girlfriend's wallet. "Sorry miss: the lads took it. *We didn't know we knew you*". If we feel separate to others, we can ignore or hurt them. If we feel connected, we are much more likely to treat them with respect.

The connection is not just important to each of us, it's important to all of us. It is the work of love. By 'love', in this sense, I mean that force which draws things towards wholeness – nature's preference for biodiversity, the parents desire to help their child grow, the work of a person who wants to connect people, one to the other.

This is the sense I make of a phrase that I used to see on those brightly painted trucks in India – 'God is Love'. I'm fascinated that the word 'whole' comes from exactly the same root as the word 'health', and the word 'holy'. When we connect the parts we are contributing to the whole - or holy - spirit! Maybe that's what those truck drivers meant – when we connect with love, we draw things towards wholeness, and help create 'the holy spirit' amongst and around us. Ubuntu emerges. We don't just help the individual through connection, we help build family, community, a compassionate society, a holy spirit amongst us. We create something much bigger than ourselves. We touch the sacred.

So as we work with people who are homeless, let's constantly connect. And thus unwrap the spirit of community around them and around us.

### **Hope.**

Hope. Or, as the acronym goes 'Help Other Possibilities Emerge'. This begins by helping people, and ourselves, to see that other possibilities exist. When our spirit is choked we can be blind to hope, blind to other possibilities. When our spirit is choked we think only of the next moment. We sometimes need help to see beyond that. We humans can help each other in that. Hope gives us something to move towards – it can give us a sense of direction or, at least, a reason to get out of bed in the morning.

So as we work with people who are homeless, we constantly dwell in the realm of new possibilities, believing in hope for someone who may have become blinded to it. We strive to avoid the trap of being the person or service that they become dependent on. We gently encourage them back to self determination.

And we continue to speak and work, with William Deane, for the possibility of our democratic nation genuinely caring about the most disadvantaged and vulnerable. And to notice when that possibility emerges, through all the madness and distraction, in a thousand ways each day.

### **Balance - Justice.**

Living in a populist democracy, where many have ceased to care, the interests of the vulnerable, the minority, the voiceless can be forgotten.

So as we work with the homeless, we will insist on being the voice not so much for those individuals but for justice, for diversity, for listening to those who have been silenced in the past.

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So anyway.... as you finish your time here, and turn back towards the joys and challenges of your lives, let me just farewell you with a sort of secular, atheist, yet possibly 'God-influenced' affirmation:

Thank you for the profoundly important work that you do – whether it's directly supporting a homeless young person or keeping taxpayers happy through lines of accountability.

As you go back into the world, stay strong in the knowledge:

- There is a force for wholeness amongst us – we are not alone, we are together – you here are together.
- Miracles happen. All they need is our attention, like a seed in soil needs water.
- Everything, everyone is sacred, and worthy of our attention.
- When we pay attention, connect, hope and, strive for equity and justice we genuinely develop spirit within and around us. We create, together, a strong, resilient world of 'me and us'; a world where the human spirit can thrive and dance.

Thank you.