

# Harmony in a multicultural Society

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Thank you for the opportunity to join you for this lunch today and to share some thoughts on the topic of "Harmony in a multicultural society. In particular I want to thank the Australian Intercultural Society for organizing this lunch and for showing leadership in the area of intercultural and interfaith issues once more. The title that you gave me for this talk made me think carefully about the word "Harmony". The word harmony brings to my mind a sense of happiness, as one might get by listening to a piece of music that blends notes to yield a pleasant, comfortable feeling without any harsh note that "jars" one's body." If I tried to substitute the word "tolerance " for "Harmony", I came up with a different feeling, one of acceptance but not necessarily with "joy" or "happiness". One can legislate for "tolerance" but legislation for "harmony" is far more difficult if not impossible. Nevertheless, tolerance can form a foundation stone to achieve harmony. Perhaps I could pose a question to you in the audience, one that you might think about over lunch, Are we a harmonious multicultural society or one that could best be described as tolerant?

I think we would all agree that Melbourne and Victoria is indeed a tolerant multicultural society on the whole. We indeed live in a State that has a constitution that enshrines the right to freedom of religious expression. Our history is one of migrants entering this country. As I will discuss later, evidence suggests that even our indigenous population migrated to this continent 50-70 million years ago from Africa. European immigration after Cook's discovery of this Great Southern land set the scene for waves of arrivals, many as both migrants and refugees. The gold rush brought adventurers from many countries, including a significant Chinese cohort. Post-war migration, including refugees, predominantly came from European countries but was followed by a greater mix of people after the "White Australia" policy was rescinded. More recently, people from diverse countries have found refuge in Australia, Vietnam, Cambodia, Middle East and many parts of Africa and South America.

This State and this city of Melbourne can truly be called cosmopolitan and multi-cultural and provides an exciting diversity. Nevertheless, at varying times in our history, tolerance has been tested, when old animosities that prevailed in countries of origin have surfaced. Fortunately such episodes are small but yet worrying. It suggests to me that we need to be working hard to move from being tolerant to enjoying harmony and, if you believe that we have harmony, then we need to protect and nurture that harmony. If we achieve the latter throughout this State and our country, our society would be greatly enriched.

What are the issues on which we should concentrate? Perhaps as a start we could consider what might be the issues that can prevent us from being a tolerant multicultural society and could pose a barrier to achieving that state of harmony?

Clearly there are differences in the physical characteristics that each of us inherits on the basis of our genetic status, a theme that I will return to later.

There are language differences and these impact significantly on the capacity of the migrant or refugee to achieve a basic understanding of their new country and to interact with those who are already live in this country. In part, the capacity to learn a new language is dependent on the past education the people concerned. Clearly, if English is read, spoken and understood, a barrier to interaction is immediately removed. The need for assistance in English language education is critical in assisting communication.

Many existing members of our Society have a poor understanding of the often traumatic journey that many new arrivals to Australia have experienced. The trauma and sometimes torture experienced place a heavy emotional burden on the refugee and migrant. In this context the wonderful work undertaken by Foundation House, who service the needs of those people who have been exposed to torture and psychological trauma. Enhancing the education of our populace about these matters is a very important pathway to tolerance an understanding. Regrettably, the incarceration of illegal immigrants will add immensely to the psychological stress to which they are exposed. It is not surprising that reports are emerging of the flow-on consequences that can virtually render individuals unemployable and psychologically “crippled” making them a burden on our society in their requirement of welfare services and also their success in achieving financial compensation for the psychological damage imposed through our legal system.

It is also well recognised that differing religions can be a point of stress in a multicultural society.

Throughout parts of the world there are conflicts that continue between different ethnic groups, often closely tied to beliefs arising from their differing faiths. In some instances these conflicts have arisen between different branches of the same faith such as the long conflict in Northern Ireland between the Catholic and Protestant denominations of the Christian religion and in the Middle East between differing branches of Islam, the Shiite and Sunni muslims.

Sometimes clashes between people of different ethnicities has been blamed on their religious beliefs, when it may be related to many other factors such as prolonged unemployment, a lack of cultural understanding or the frustration of coming to terms with living in a new country with values that are different to those that they held. The terrorist strikes and the subsequent Middle East conflict have led to inter-religious hostility. To taking an inter-faith journey is something that should almost be compulsory for those who are challenged by dealing with people of differing faiths.

A number of us in this audience today come from differing faiths, sometimes members of different branches of the same faith. As far as my limited understanding has taken me, all these faiths have a belief in a God, a belief that is based on evidence that, when presented to an atheist, would result in an unproven case.

As a scientist, if I looked closely at the basic tenets of the Christian religion, it would be difficult for me to provide scientific proof to convince colleagues, particularly those with a scientific background that Christianity should be the religion for them. For instance, I accept from the scientific evidence before me, that evolutionary theory represents the most logical explanation of the origin of mankind. The extraordinary complex processes that are involved in the biology of life are a source of wonderment to me. The human

body is an incredibly complex machine with beautifully crafted control systems. Compelling evidence has accumulated to indicate that this complex machine arose by progressive evolution from single cell organisms.

Let me digress for a moment to give you an example. The lining of our nasal passages and the bronchial tree of our lungs contains cells that have processes on their surface that exhibit coordinated movement. These processes are called cilia.

Cilia exhibit directional movement, moving particles such as dust and bacteria to a point where they can be coughed up or sneezed out. Cilia act very like oarsmen whose blades pull in the same direction moving the boat forward but for cilia the boat consists of dust particles or bacteria. Normal ciliary function is also crucial to the survival of algae, single cell organisms that use a cilium as a tail that beats and propels them.

Ciliary function is also important to mankind. If cilia do not function, the lungs and sinuses become infected and may require parts of lungs to be removed. They are also important in determining where your organs are placed. Males with a genetically based failure of ciliary function may have their heart on either the left or right sides and similarly the position of the appendix may be equally affected. These observations indicate that during the development of the foetus, ciliary movement is important in determining the placement of organs. Ciliary movement is also crucial to successful reproduction. If there are defects of ciliary function, sperm do not move as their tail has the identical basic movement core as cilia.

If you look at the structure of cilia under the electron microscope, their basic structure is identical between single cell organisms such as algae and their structure in the ciliated cells of the human lung and nasal passages. It is a highly complex apparatus, one that is a wonderful example of biological engineering. If you looked at its structure you would wonder who designed it. Who was the engineer?

If the structure of a component of a cell is similar and the function is conserved, then the proteins, the building blocks of cellular structures are also likely to be conserved. In turn if the proteins are conserved then the genes, which specify the building blocks of proteins are also conserved. Recent studies have shown that the conservation of genes encoding the proteins in cilia of single cell organisms such as algae and those encoding human ciliary proteins show approximately 70% identity, an incredible degree of conservation between forms of life that were likely separated by billions of years of time in their appearance on earth and this fact provides exceptionally strong evidence for evolutionary conservation.

I use this example to demonstrate the incredibly complex yet beautiful conservation of a scientific process that underlies the phenomenon of cell movement or propulsion. My purpose of taking the time to describe this process is to ask the real question. Who was and is the engineer? Could all of this have arisen by accident? By acts of chance moulded by the environment in which that organism existed at that time, a theory proposed by Dawkins? Alternatively, is this evidence for a higher being, an entity, a creator, a God, behind this all?

I cannot prove either theory. Those of us of the Christian faith would believe in a God Creator who was the engineer. For me this engineer did not complete the job in a week as expressed in the book of Genesis but more over an evolutionary time span. To accept this belief is an act of faith bringing us to that word "faith", defined in the Oxford dictionary as "a firm belief, especially without logical proof". All of our religions or faiths fall into this definition. Faith is also defined as "complete trust or confidence". In essence all of our religions require us to have faith, that is complete trust and confidence in faiths that are, as defined, "firm beliefs, especially without logical proof". In fact all of us who believe in any one of the religions represented here have in fact been called upon to undertake a "faith journey"; To profess a belief in a religion based on writings and information that cannot make a proven case and that requires an affirmation or expression of faith or a belief.

What does this convoluted discussion of logic have to do with the purpose of today's theme. I would like to propose to you that all of us belong to faiths or religions that profess a belief in a God although the pathways to reach that God vary. Let us recognise that commonality and respect the beliefs of each other removing any prejudice or intolerance, recognizing that each faith is a belief without logical proof. Organisations such as the Australian Inter-cultural Society is one organisation that through it's efforts attempts to bring Muslims and those of other- faiths to meeting places that enhance our understanding of each other and our religions.

If those of us in Society who have a religion could accept the logic that I have just discussed with you and agree to respect each others beliefs and proceeded to emphasize the commonality between our faiths, we would move forward in removing differences in religious beliefs from the list of factors that prevent us from achieving harmony and also enhance tolerance.

Such approaches assist Government in rolling out policies and actions that emphasize respect for all citizens regardless of their religion or ethnicity, a government that provides justice for all and a government that seeks to support all in their desire for happiness, employment and an environment that allows everyone the opportunity to develop fully their intellectual capacity. I can certainly confirm that both Governments who served during my term as Governor were absolutely unanimous in support for the multicultural and multiethnic society in which we live.

It is important that we educate our population about the commonality of mankind and the common desires that each of us has. We need to recognise how and where we acquire the principles that enable us to live harmoniously.

I started life as a single celled embryo formed by the egg from my mother and the sperm from my father. The genetic background in this single cell embryo did not have the values that made me tolerant and happy to live in harmony with my fellow members of Society. I received those values from my parents and grandparents, all Christians and belonging to the Dutch Burger community in Sri Lanka, which at that time, was part of the British Empire. Being of European descent in a multi-ethnic society placed us in a position

of privilege. Yes, there were members of that community who held a view that they were some what superior to the Sinhala and Tamil communities but placed them in conflict with their Christian faith. However, as a young boy it was not a subject that was discussed with me. It is also interesting that in the Singalese and Tamil communities there was a caste system in place, preventing young people from marrying across such boundaries.

These are important issues as young children, left to themselves know no barriers to a free a free and happy interaction from those of many ethnicities and religions. Ultimately, it is their parents and extended family that must recognise their role in the development of prejudice.

Let me again digress to some science. Of course I was told by my family that I was a Dutch Burger and was shown the family genealogy and that a de Kretser migrated from a small village near Amsterdam in ~1670 to Sri Lanka. Today, by participating in a program run by National Geographic, I was able to provide some confirmation that the information given to me was true. The program called Genographic allowed me to send them a sample of cells taken from the inside of my cheek to provide a source of my DNA. I was able to trace my paternal inheritance through DNA contained on my Y chromosome, the chromosome that establishes the male sex and is therefore DNA that can only be inherited from father to son. Large studies of the DNA in the Y chromosome have established patterns characteristic of certain ethnic origins. Further from ancient DNA isolated from skeletons found by archaeologists have shown “marks” on Y chromosome DNA that enable a man to trace his ethnic origins throughout the history of mankind. So what did I learn? My DNA links me to the African “Adam” when due to some catastrophe, the total human population was reduced to a few thousand people. From this African ancestry, my ancestors migrated from Africa, through the Middle East, along the Western edge of what was the former Soviet-Union, into Europe as the ice retreated after the last Ice- Age. Here my paper genealogy and DNA history meet and today, my Y chromosome type is found in about 80% of men in the UK, Ireland, Southern Spain and other parts of Northern Europe.

My journey and really all of yours will take you back to that African Adam. My reason for bringing this to our attention is to emphasize that science tells us that we all came from a “common” root and thus effectively establishes a “brotherhood “of man.

Further, through a similar type of approach using what is called “mitochondrial DNA” women can trace their ancestry. Further, as the entire DNA many human genomes are being collected, what is emerging is that we are all more similar than we are different. Thus if you believe that your DNA makes you racially superior to someone else, be aware that there is no scientific basis to your claim.

The more we can bring these points out in education and through human face-to-face interaction of one with another, that we rapidly realise that we are all human and have very similar needs and desires. We can also see that the DNA that constitutes each and everyone of us, carries the DNA that creates a person

who is then moulded, for better or for worse, by our family, or society, our education and the health care that we experience.

I hope this gives you some personal insights regarding this important topic and a framework upon which one could develop a set of actions. Let's all continue to work hard to take a tolerant multicultural society to one that is truly harmonious. Each of us can make a difference.