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S175: **Inside My Skull:**  
Personal Responsibility and the Moral Lessons Learnt

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A peer reviewed paper by **Craig W.J. Minogue**



S176: **Communicating a Living Faith to Generation Y**

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**Peter Corney**



## Inside My Skull: Personal Responsibility and the Moral Lessons Learnt

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**T**he position from which I write needs to be explicitly stated, and that position, that topography of the inside of my skull if you will, is that I am a prisoner convicted of two murders, five armed robberies and other violent crimes that I committed over two decades ago. I have survived in prison since 1986 and my earliest eligible date for release is 2016 when I will be almost 54 years old; after I am released I will be a prisoner on parole for the rest of my life. I feel as if I have already said enough about my crimes in other places and for this paper I would like to think that naming them as I have done above is enough. The details of my crimes have been gratuitously etched into the public imagination by the seemingly endless repeat screenings of docu-dramas, and I do not know if the details will advance the reader's understanding. Nor do I want the crimes I committed to define me, but if the car bombing of police headquarters and the murder of police officer Angela Taylor, and the murder of a fellow prisoner Alex Tsakmakis and the series of armed robberies are not explicitly acknowledged with regret, and the victims named, they became an elephant in the room which threatens to trample me at any moment, but this is not the only danger I live with.

Being in prison is a marginalising personal and social experience, and the way that many people deal with that is by side-stepping the experience rather than engaging with it and making something out of it. I feel that a fully developed sense of self can be lost by very small increments every time a person takes a side-step away from the realities of their prison sentence. And by 'side-stepping' I do not mean compromising, which one needs to do to a small degree many times every day; I mean side-stepping in terms of

opting-out of what is happening to oneself and others, and not taking any type of response – being inert and 'keeping one's head down' is not a meaningful or moral response to imprisonment. I have opposed the tyranny of a prison which was, in the words of the responsible government minister a 'dehumanizing electronic zoo' (Debelle et al., 1987, p. 1; Carton 2007 p.6). I opposed this tyranny of State crime by physically throwing my body into its cauldron of violence, knowing full well that the fellows who had stood moments before at my side were dying horrible deaths. I refer here to my participation in a barricading, fire and protest in the Jika Jika High Security Unit in Melbourne's Pentridge Prison on 29 October 1987 in which five of my fellow prisoners died; this history and the leading role I took in resisting State crime in Jika is precisely detailed in Bree Carlton's 2007 *Imprisoning Resistance: Life and Death in an Australian Supermax*.

If anything is to be gained by an individual from surviving a prison sentence, if they have made something out of the experience, then it very much depends on what moral lessons are learnt. The strength of the human spirit and survival is not only about overcoming one's external circumstances in terms of the fears and challenges, but it is also about one's personal and internal circumstances, the soul or spirit if you will. The denunciation and condemnation of the sentencing/imprisoning process is a big part of what it is to be in prison, and how one comes back from that, how one finds some type of personal redemption, some type of personal forgiveness of self, needs to be thought about. If thinking about this redemption and personal forgiveness of self is not part of serving one's sentence, then the prisoner will find themselves prostrate, inert, and just allowing the experience to flow over them without any lessons learnt. Survival is more than just being lucky and not dead or badly

damaged, physically or mentally, at the end of one's sentence; survival and learning something along the way is something that is purposefully worked at and achieved. And the way people work at their personal projects is different; they can be good or bad, helpful to others, or destructive. Before I write about how I learnt my moral lesson and how this highlights the conflict between morality and criminal justice, the sentencing law needs to be stated.

The criminal justice system and the law is not generally understood and the least understood aspect of the process is sentencing. The five goals of sentencing are easily stated and understood. They are:

1. the protection of the public from wrong-doing;
2. retribution for the wrong;
3. deterrence from further wrongs;
4. denunciation of the wrong; and
5. the rehabilitation of the offender.

The primary purpose and utilitarian aim of sentencing a person to a term of imprisonment, is the 'protection of the public' from the conduct of an offender by his or her incapacitation of free movement and action in the community; this is a 'reductive justification', an end in and of itself (Walker 1980 p. 26; Walker 1985 pp. 112–113; Walker 1991 p. 11; Warner 2001). In other words, 'criminal sanctions are purposive, and they are not inflicted judicially except for the purpose of protecting society' (*Channon v The Queen* (1978) p.437).

A sentence of imprisonment is the infliction of judicial retribution and vengeance for wrongdoing so as to forestall the public feeling of a need to inflict personal or unofficial retaliation (Warner 2001). This element of a sentence demonstrates to the public that the offender has been judged to be personally and morally responsible and penalized, rather than the process being a

narrow, abstract, legally defined one – which of course it is (Warner 2001). In this way, it is thought that *lex talionis* (the law of retaliation, or an eye for an eye) is avoided as that ‘has no place in the administration of contemporary criminal justice’ (Walker 1991 p.72-87; Warner 2001; *Channon v The Queen* (1978)pp.438-439). The element of retribution is not specifically mentioned very often in the common law canon of the case law as it is thought to have a tendency to confuse the issue if it is read as part of the punishment and being an end in itself. Importantly ‘punishment is not the end which sentencing seeks to achieve’, therefore the terms ‘retribution’ and ‘vengeance’, should not be given too much prominence as they do not in any way mean retribution in the sense of taking of vengeance on an offender as an exchange mechanism of suffering for suffering, but retribution in the sense of denunciation of criminal conduct so as to protect society from the individual and like-minded people (Warner 2001; *Channon v The Queen* (1978) pp.437, 438). An offender is sentenced *as* a punishment, not *for* punishment. The principle of ‘proportionality’ also operates to limit the aim of retribution as ‘a sentence of imprisonment imposed by a court should never exceed that which can be justified as appropriate or proportionate to the gravity of the crime considered in the light of its objective circumstances’ (*Hoare v The Queen* (1989) p.354; see also *Veen v The Queen* [No 1] (1979) and *Veen v The Queen* [No 2] (1988)).

‘Deterrence’, along with protecting the public, is a principle aim of sentencing and it has two elements, one general and one specific. The aim of general deterrence is to dissuade others, perhaps like-minded people, from committing offences of the same kind ‘by demonstrating the consequences of offending’ (Warner 2001). Specific deterrence is aimed at dissuading the individual offender from such conduct being repeated. Deterrence is a central feature of sentencing because it protects ‘the public from the commission of such crimes by making it clear to the offender and to other persons with similar impulses that, if they yield to them, they will meet with severe punishment’ (*R v Radich* (1954) p.87).

‘Denunciation’ is an element of the sentencing process that is, in most States and Territories of Australia, legislated for in their

various *Sentencing Acts*. The aim of denunciation is to make it clear to the offender the condemnation of his or her community for the criminal conduct; followed with a term of imprisonment. Denunciation ‘is the means by which society marks its disapproval of criminal conduct’ (*Channon v The Queen* (1978) p.437; Warner 2001). Denunciation by the Court on behalf of the community promotes the protection of the public by making it clear to every person that such conduct is wrong and it will not be accepted. Denunciation is also a complementary part of retribution which can, as we have seen, be understood as appeasing victims and forestalling vigilante actions (Warner 2001). Denunciation addresses the needs for there to be a ‘sense of the infliction of a just punishment to express the moral outrage of the community’ (*R v Valentini* (1980) p.420). Expressing the moral outrage of the community, however, is not the same as making amoral judgment, it is a rhetorical device and not an ascribing of moral responsibility, as morality and criminality at law do not necessarily cover the same area. If morality is to be part of the law, then it is a matter for the various State and Federal legislatures and not for the Courts who administer the law (*Burton v Honan* (1952)). The role of morality in the criminal law is explained in what is popularly known as the *War Crimes Case*, where it was held that:

Criminal law connotes only the quality of such acts or omissions as are prohibited under appropriate penal provisions by authority of the State. The criminal quality of an act cannot be discerned by intuition; nor can it be discovered by reference to any standard but one: Is the act prohibited with penal consequences? **Morality and criminality are far from co-extensive; nor is the sphere of criminality necessarily part of a more extensive field covered by morality** – unless the moral code necessarily disapproves all acts prohibited by the State, in which case the argument moves in a circle.

(*Polyukhovich v The Commonwealth (War Crimes Act Case)* (1991)172 CLR 610 at p.610, Dean J. (emphasis added)).

In relation to morality and a Constitutional challenge to the legitimacy of other laws, the High Court has held that ‘arguments in relation to justice, fairness,

morality and propriety ... are not matters for the judiciary to decide upon’ (*Burton v Honan* (1952) 86 CLR 169, p.179).

I have taken this aside about the distinction between the law and morality as it needs to be kept in mind so as not to conflate the two in the criminal justice processes of addressing the wrongs done by offenders.

‘Rehabilitation’ is the most problematic of all sentencing considerations in the public understanding because of ‘the overstated claim that nothing works’ (Warner 2001; Walker 1991 p.49). The idea that ‘nothing works’ to rehabilitate offenders comes from the now very much discredited, and in fact recanted, 1974 article ‘What Works: Questions and Answers About Prison Reform’, by Robert Martinson in the journal *Public Interest* (Abramsky 2007 pp.44, 53). The need for rehabilitation and why it should be a central part of the sentencing process is the easiest sentencing principle to state; it is because:

The protection of the community is also contributed to by the successful rehabilitation of offenders. This aspect of sentencing should never be lost sight of ... If a sentence has the effect of turning an offender towards a criminal way of life, the protection of the community is to that extent impaired. If the sentence induces or assists an offender to avoid offending in future, the protection of the community is to that extent enhanced... (*Yardley v Betts*,1979 p.333).

Rehabilitation is controversial because of misrepresentations of its aims and benefits, and ill-informed statement as to if it works or not. However, after putting to one side Robert Martinson’s now withdrawn and discredited claim that nothing works, a considered view of the subject soon arrives at the fact that ‘reformation should be the primary objective of the criminal law. The greater the success that can be achieved in this direction, the greater the benefit to the community’ in the form of reducing re-offending (*R v Williscroft* (1975) pp.303-304).

The torture and execution of criminal offenders is the nadir and we need to touch that low point before we can move on. And the best known execution in the history of crime and punishment is the example given by Michel Foucault in the opening lines of his *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of The*

*Prison.* That execution being in March 1757 when Robert-Francois Damiens the regicide was condemned to be publically tortured, dismembered and incinerated before the main door of the Church of Paris (Foucault 1991 p.3). From the time that Robert-Francois Damiens was executed, the justice systems of the modern world have moved away from physical pain inflicted on the body of the offender as an end in and of itself, to a reformation of the soul of the offender so they can positively contribute to the civil life of the society they come from. By addressing the soul, in a secular sense that is, of the prisoner so that he or she can become rehabilitated as a useful member of the community, the interests of the community are advanced through a complicated scheme of the protection of the public, retribution, deterrence, denunciation, and yes, most importantly, rehabilitation.

The monastic like experience of prison can, for many people, simply be a pointless torment, but for me it has helped me to gain insights into my situation. One of many such insights came to me in October 1994 via a news report about a Coroner's Court hearing into a police shooting at which they played a tape recording of the shooting. Locked in the cell, my prison day having ended at 4:20pm, the TV news report helped me realize something that had been dwelling below the surface for some time.

In January 1994, Edward Hulsman was twenty-three years old, the same age as I was when arrested in 1986. Edward, who suffered from schizophrenia, was the father of three children. On 3 January 1994 he inexplicably leapt up after a Sunday family dinner at his parents home and started to stab himself with a small vegetable knife. His family called the police for help. Edward's mother Alma was still on the phone to police when two uniformed officers arrived, and what took place was recorded by the police telephone operator. They recorded no conversation as such; all I heard was the distressing consequences of the use of violence.

'No! No!' we can hear Edward's father, Keith Hulsman, imploring. He begs the police to: 'Put them [the guns] away!'

'Close the door and move out of the way! Move out of the way!' the police were barking at him.

'No! No!' Keith repeated, and then we can hear many gunshots. The shots are punctuated by the Keith shrieking, 'No!

No, don't!' Alma Hulsman's tortured voice wails into the phone: 'Oh my God they have killed my son! They have killed my son!'

'Oh no, no, no...' we can hear Keith Hulsman lamenting in the background.

'Get on the ground!' police scream, as they order at gunpoint the shot man's family to lie on the floor a short distance from their dead son. 'Police, get on the ground!' they continue to scream.'<sup>1</sup>

Hearing this quite distressed and upset me. I wondered why I would be so upset at hearing such a thing, because in the past I have been the person holding the gun. I have heard my victims' pleas as I ordered them to the floor at the point of a loaded gun. I have inflicted pain and suffering and heard my victims' screams of horror without concern in the past, so why would I be upset at a news report?

My criminal activities in the early 1980s were mostly crimes of violence like armed robberies, and when I committed these crimes I did not think of the people involved as real people; they were obstacles to be overcome through the exercise of my will. I did not consciously set out to dehumanize the people who were victims of my crimes. However, the dehumanizing of people is a part of the criminal act. How else can one behave so badly towards other people? I could not hit someone about the head with a gun if I thought of them as a father, a mother, a brother or a sister. So, I dehumanised my victims through not considering their interests as relevant to me satisfying my desires for financial gain and an acceptance that material wealth and hyper-consumerism could buy me, at least superficially, in the community, and for acceptance that the use of violence brings in the criminal underworld.

At the time, the consequences for my victims did not consciously register with me in a personal way. Hearing the tape-recorded consequences of violent action by the police, which was not unlike the way in which I operated as criminal, brought home the personal reality of my violent acts. The methodology of the use of force is indistinguishable from the criminal world to that of the police/prison/military authorities, only one is lawful and the other is not (Minogue 2005).

I have thought about the actions of my past and I can plainly see the wrongness of the crimes I committed from an objective point of view. However, the humanness of

my victims really came home to me in the anguished voices of a family whose son was a victim of a fatal police shooting. In that moment of hearing the pain and suffering of the Hulsman family, I saw myself and my actions in a new and not very pleasant light.

Having lived most of life locked in a prison cell, my path into the world has run along the printed page as the late Joseph Campbell said, so in a self initiated biblio-therapy I projected myself into the situations I read about and I wondered what my response would be (Tage & Grubin 1988). Two texts which had an impact on me were *Country of My Skull* where Antjie Krog explores the harrowing Truth and Reconciliation process in South Africa after Apartheid, and 'In The Full Glare of English Politics', where Phil Scraton questions the effectiveness of official enquires into State crime and how community based initiatives centred around moral responsibility are more satisfying for those who been the victims of State crime. These seemingly disparate works came together for me when considering my own situation; that of a person who has been convicted of murder and other serious crimes, and who has, and is, suffering the personal denunciation of a very long prison sentence.

As part of my reflecting on these issues I have asked myself some threshold questions, like: What do victims of crime want? Justice? But how is justice defined? Morally or legally? Can justice only be thought about within the processes of the law as they now stand?

Phil Scraton makes the point about the difference between official inquiries that have a *chance* of impacting upon the political and legal systems, and community inquiries that do not, but which are appreciated by the community in a way that an official injury is not. Perhaps a truth *and reconciliation*, or a restorative justice process, would fall in between these two extremes. The English common law legal system is predicated on the right of an accused wrongdoer to resist that process in their defence, and it should not be forgotten that it is a rule of law that the civil and criminal justice systems are *not* about truth, but proof to the prerequisite standard. Truth and justice in a legal sense is one thing, but truth and justice in a moral sense as understood by the community and people not trained in the law, is quite another thing altogether.

If there were a process where there would

be no criminal or civil liability if one were found to have been totally honest and to have fully disclosed what is within one's knowledge before a truth *and reconciliation* or restorative justice process, then it seems to me that an accused wrongdoer would have very little solid moral ground on which to resist that form of accountability. (I have emphasised reconciliation here because the truth on its own does not always lead to reconciliation). What *reconciliation* would include is difficult to say and would have to be worked through under broad guidelines in each case. And when I use the term reconciliation I am not talking about 'drawing a line' under an event and moving on; see Phil Scraton (p.561-562).

In his extraordinary work *At The Mind's Limits*, Jean Amery wrote that victims of crime need to maintain resentment in order that the criminal does not escape the moral reality of the crime, and that the social pressure to forgive and forget is immoral (Amery 1980). I understand this, but I don't know if the ongoing resentment of victims is needed to remind me of the moral reality of crimes like murder. I see reconciliation as a way that victims can free themselves from being re-victimised every moment of every day through feelings of resentment. I am not saying that such reconciliation or restorative justice process would be easy, in fact, thinking about it from my personal point of view, I think it would be much harder to deal with than the formulaic legal processes where one can hide behind the legal abstractions of the Crown proving its case and it not being about the truth.

At the start of the legal process on my arrest, denying guilt was a practical necessity as I was facing trial and in our system of law and criminal justice it is for the Crown to prove its case and everyone is entitled to a defence as a matter of law and fairness. Then of course there were appeals, and even after they have been heard and dismissed, (the final appeal in my case was in 1992) there was always a chance of a fresh evidence appeal; the possibility of which was raised in July 1997 when the lead forensic investigator who aided in convicting me was found to have submitted fraudulent reports and to have given false and misleading evidence in another case. This man was the leading forensic scientist in the country, but in late 1997 the Victorian Forensic Science Centre said that it would no longer guarantee any of the work of its then former Deputy Director;

*in every case except mine*. As this man's evidence was instrumental in convicting me, I decided to look at a fresh evidence appeal to challenge my conviction and sentence. I obtained all the documentary evidence in the case against me, but the prison authorities deliberately frustrated my efforts to prepare a fresh evidence appeal and I sought redress in relation to that from the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. This situation then turned into the human rights test cases that I personally litigated in the Federal Court and High Court between 1998 – 2000 (*Minogue v HREOC* [1998] Vol.54 ALD p.389; *Minogue v HREOC* (1998) Vol. 166 ALR p.29; *Minogue v Williams* (2000) Vol.60 ALD p.366).

However, when I returned to the documents of the bombing/murder conviction in 1997 with the view to a fresh evidence appeal, I found a picture emerged that was not as rosy as the one that had grown in my mind in the ten years up to that point. Put simply I really did not like what I saw about myself in those documents. I then became deliberately distracted with the human rights test cases and I also started university study in 1998. Towards the end of 1999 I knew that I had to decide whether to continue with a fresh evidence appeal. The reality was that in 1997, not long after revisiting the facts and circumstances of my past as they were recorded in the Court papers, I knew that I had to move on from the person I was in the past and to do that I needed to act in a more responsible way and stop fighting the conviction and accept the sentence, but it took some time for me to admit that to myself, and even longer to admit it to others. So I abandoned the thought of an appeal, sent all of the documents out of the prison and decided to accept responsibility and to try to work towards rehabilitating myself and making the second half of my life meaningful.

Putting away the Court documents and accepting the sentence also brought up the issue of my guilt. At first I loudly proclaimed my innocence; I would shout slogans at the media as I came and went in the police prison van from Court, and I even criticized the judge and justice system in a speech from the dock after I was sentenced. As the years went on, however, my claims of innocence grew quieter. As funny as it sounds people generally just do not ask, but when a loved one has asked, I have lied until recently, that is until 2007. I wonder if this

is so surprising. I do not feel good about admitting wrong doing, especially not on the scale that I committed it, and I wonder how many others would admit it. It is one thing to admit something when caught red-handed, but who wants to admit that they are a violent criminal and murderer to their parents? Not me. I am sure my parents wanted to believe their son was not as bad as people were saying, and I wanted to reassure them, and create a moral excuse for myself that the criminal justice system was unjustly dealing with me.

Capitalism, the criminal justice system – the life I have led has been an adversarial one; when life is conceptualised as a competition, why give anything away to a competitor? Adversarial systems are not conducive to truth and justice, so I protected my interests and I maintained my innocence. With over twenty years of introspection from a prison cell, I can now see that my interests are linked much more closely with the interests of others and with the ideals of a humanist sense of truth and justice; all of this however, *takes time*. I can see now that selfish individualism and hubris do not serve my interests. Nor does a false denial of guilt or an adversarial world view where I am competing *against* others to maintain a view of myself that is not true. So in 2007 after a long introspective journey, at first I privately and then publicly admitted my guilt for the bombing and murder and the other crimes I committed.

I have reached a state of moral responsibility, but here I am in a state of punitive responsibility. So I am now caused to wonder why retributive justice system should be the only way of dealing with violent crime? Perhaps if the idea of people being morally accountable was re-embraced the idea of justice could be extend from its abstract legal confines? Perhaps then the question should be seriously asked: 'Why it is that prosecution, conviction and imprisonment are understood as delivering justice?'

I should say that I really do not think that a truth and reconciliation or a restorative justice process should be added as a layer on top of a retributive justice system as there are enough hurdles to jump as it is. But this is happening when people are dissatisfied with the retributive justice system and they start calling for justice in a personal and moral sense. For me, this feels like the rules are being changed after the event to add a new hurdle and then harshly judge me if don't

jump high enough. I think it is obvious why victims feel dissatisfied with retributive justice and try to add a new layer of moral justice, the reason being that the current system is not understood by the community nor effective in addressing the needs of the community for moral responsibility.

Antjie Krog and Phil Scraton are concerned with State crime, but in the above I have really taken a step to the side and dealt with this issue from the personal perspective of a person who has murdered others in criminal acts. I have also, however, been the victim of State crime in my time as a prisoner. In the case of State crime, I wonder why people continue to look towards the State system to deliver justice when they already have misunderstandings and doubts about the system as it applies to non State actors like myself. Why look for truth when one of the cornerstone rules of the system they are looking to is that it is not about truth, but proof to the prerequisite standard as arrived at via the rules of evidence? People look and wonder what has happened in sentencing because they do not understand the realities; just as they seek a generally understood personal and moral accountability when that is not really to be found in the criminal justice system.

Ask me about the murder of the young police officer who was killed in the car bombing of Police Headquarters, and I can easily defend myself with arguments about the flawed and unfair trial process and the logically inconsistent verdicts. Say however: 'All right Craig, there are no more legal consequences for you, but we want to know the truth of your involvement in this crime so we can bring some resolution to this matter for the sake of the victims and their families, and so those involved can publicly accept their moral culpability. And if you tell us the truth we will cut the remaining years off your sentence.' Even now after almost twenty-four years, a moral expectation of truth would be a much more difficult test to meet than the narrowly defined test of legal culpability. It would be difficult for a number of reasons: firstly who is to say what the truth is in my case, as the whole truth and nothing but the truth was lost a very long time ago in the contest of the criminal trial and the logically inconsistent jury verdicts. But I do have a truth in me about the circumstances, but is it possible for that to come out? And is it possible for it to be accepted by the people who matter?

Judges try to tack on moral culpability as part of the sentencing process, but these comments are seen by people who know how the legal system works as window dressing designed to give the legal system a cloak of 'popular justice', that allows people to feel reconciled to some extent that things have been set right. Morality, however, is clearly not part of the English common law system.

I come back to asking 'What is it that aggrieved people want?' If they are looking to the English common law legal system for truth and justice they are looking in the wrong place. A common law criminal justice process is not required to consider 'where the truth lies' (*R v Towner* (1991)). It is the English common law rule that 'it is plainly wrong to tell the jury, even in a civil case, but certainly in a criminal one, that it is for them to decide where the truth lies' (Heydon 2001 para. 9020). So, people without legal training are going to be disappointed with such a process when they fully expect it to deliver what it cannot. They may hear the judicial officer explain the rules during the process, but on what level are the rules understood after being filtered through the entrenched expectations of truth and justice? It is no wonder people are not satisfied.

The start of my personal redemption came, I hope, in the moment that I connected my response to the death of Edward Hulsman and the suffering of his family, to the deaths and the suffering I had caused. This personal truth and reconciliation process, even if it is not known until now, or accepted in the wider community, is a start for me. A more general truth and reconciliation process, or a restorative justice process, is much more difficult than a legal process. Given the choice when I was arrested I would probably have gone with the legal system and its depersonalised abstractions, and taken the prison sentence. Twenty-four years later however, I think there would be more value for everyone in a process that dealt with crime in humanistic and moral terms rather than abstracted legal ones. This position has taken me some years to come to, and I am by no means all the way there yet. That I am coming to this position is not because of my imprisonment as such, it is because of my education, a broadened world view and living an examined life. I am coming to this moral position in spite of the system I am in rather than because of it; and these are the lessons I have learnt.

*Craig Minogue.*

*Somewhere in the carceral archipelago.*

*Craig Minogue has survived in prison since 1986. His earliest release date is in 2016. Awarded a BA(Hons) in 2005, he is now completing his PhD in Applied Ethics. Craig assists fellow prisoners with equitable access to the courts, educational programs and health services. He is a regular contributor to peer reviewed journals.*

## Endnote

- 1 The Victoria Police and the State Government were sued by Edward Hulsman's family over the death. The civil trial opened on 3 November 1998 with counsel for the defendants, denying that the Police or the State were liable and that they would be arguing the Police shot Edward Hulsman in self-defence; then the tape was played. On 4 November 1998, the Police and State Government reached a confidential out-of-court settlement with Edward's family which included his mother and father, his brothers and sisters, his wife Joanna and their three children.

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## Communicating a Living Faith to Generation Y

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### Peter Corney

*Delivered to the Australian Anglican Schools Network National Conference 17-19 August 2007.*

‘A culture not dedicated to the sacred has only itself to take as object.’

**Robert Coles**

‘The blizzard of the world has crossed the threshold...and has overturned the order of the soul.’

**Leonard Cohen**

‘All that we know is nothing, we are merely crammed waste-paper baskets unless we are in touch with that which laughs at all our knowing.’

**D.H.Lawrence**

‘How do you communicate with a culture that hears with its eyes and thinks with its feelings?’

**Ravi Zacharias**

‘The root of all evil is not money its boredom’

**Paris Hilton**

‘The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.’

**John 1:14**

### 1. LEADERSHIP:

**I**BEGIN WITH leadership because to develop a school that can assist and support the communication of a living Christian faith to Gen Y requires the creation of a particular kind of culture in the school – and that flows from the top down, from the senior leadership of the school.

**There are three key areas** that I believe the senior leadership has to address if it wants to create such a culture:

- (i) The leadership has to decide what sort of Anglican school they will be – and the senior staff need to be on the same page in answer to this question.
- (ii) The selection of staff.
- (iii) The allocation of resources.  
Let me develop these further:

#### (i) **What sort of Anglican school will you be?**

There are two general approaches to this question: (a) The nominally Anglican, nominally Christian school with some traditional cultural attachments like a chapel and a chaplain but where in reality the religious life of the school is compartmentalized. (b) The other is the distinctively Christian school where there is a conscious and deliberate policy to create a learning community that is based on and marked by Christian ideas, beliefs and values and a policy of integrating these into the whole life of the school. Where, in addition to a serious Christian education and religious studies curriculum, there is a real attempt to create an ‘integrated curriculum’; where a Christian world view and historical perspective is brought to the study of key cultural subjects and so to an understanding of the development of Western culture.

Because of the magnitude of the task of communicating a living Christian faith to this generation I believe the only effective

way forward is the second approach. But I am very aware of the difficulty of the task. For example there is the difficulty of developing a distinctively Christian culture but one that is also open. For some non government schools distinctively Christian can mean sectarian and closed.

In my limited experience most Anglican heads I know genuinely struggle with this issue in the midst of many competing pressures. Here are just two such pressures I have observed:

- (a) **The pressure to conform;** to conform to the aspirational values of our clientele or the narrow instrumentalist pressure on schools from government and business – ‘just prepare them for the market!’ We all want our students to have the best possible education they can get but how do we manage the tension between achieving high TER scores and a truly holistic education?
- (b) **Another pressure arises from our present cultural context of pluralism.** We live in a multi cultural, multi faith society. Students need to be equipped to live constructively and tolerantly in this context. The current global situation makes us very sensitive to inter-cultural and inter-faith tensions. But in this climate it is easy for religious studies departments to develop curricula and approaches that, on faith issues, become overly inclusivist, reductionist or just neutral. You can only engage meaningfully with and usefully evaluate other world views and values systems if you properly understand your own tradition.

Some religious studies programs are taught in such away that the world view with



which students emerge is completely relativistic or syncretistic. Instead of challenging postmodern subjectivism and extreme perspectivism we end up reinforcing it! (Peter Vardy's discussion of this issue in his book *What is truth* is very helpful.)<sup>1</sup>

The current discussion about values in education illustrates the importance of world views. Sadly it often fails to acknowledge or understand that values always have a foundation in a world view or belief system. Many of the values we hold as important in Australian society derive from the Judeo / Christian world view. Many of these values will eventually completely collapse once their underpinning world view is lost. The values hollow out. This of course is part of the crisis in contemporary Western culture. (The La Trobe University academic John Carroll has illustrated this very clearly in his insightful cultural studies *Humanism – The Wreck of Western Culture and Ego and Soul*.)<sup>2</sup>

If you want to be a transformational school rather than a conformist one, if you want to influence your society through the students you produce then I believe you have only one option – to be a distinctively Christian school, but one that preserves that delicate balance of distinctiveness and openness, clarity of conviction and generosity.

**(ii) The second key area for the school leadership is staff selection. In over 40 years of leading or supervising youth ministry my clear observation is that the people who were able to switch young people on to faith all had the following characteristics:**

- (a) Clear, intelligent and strong Christian convictions.
- (b) The ability to relate to young people and get inside their culture.
- (c) Enthusiasm and passion.
- (d) Character – a life worthy of respect.

In addition to educational competence if you recruit these kinds of people you will have impact.

**(iii) The third key area is the allocation of resources.** If you are serious about this task then that will be reflected in the allocation of staffing, equipment, time-tabling and space.

So my first major point is that these three areas must be addressed by the leadership of the school if it wants to create a culture that will assist and support the communication of a living faith to its students and become a transformational school.

## **2. MY SECOND MAJOR POINT IS TO EMPHASIZE THE MAGNITUDE OF THE CHALLENGE IN OUR PRESENT CULTURE.**

If we want to have some impact on this generation then we are going to have to throw some serious resources and creativity at the task.

We have heard in our conference about some of the effects of technology and popular culture on Gen Y and their attitudes. I would like to develop that a little further and in particular how this impacts on their interior world – their attitudes towards truth, reality, faith, spirituality, values, the future.

First let me outline a framework which explains a fundamental change in our world. For hundreds of years three of the basic forces that have influenced the shape of people's cultures have been:

- (a) The family / the tribe / the clan.
- (b) Religion.
- (c) Commerce.

The balance of influence between these three shifted and changed from time to time but in our time, in contemporary Western culture, a massive shift has taken place. The third force, commerce, has joined up with the new electronic communications, mass media, advertising and popular entertainment to create a ubiquitous juggernaut that saturates the whole of life. This has now overpowered the other two forces. This new force is now the dominant shaper of culture, values, beliefs, attitudes, world views and perceptions of reality. (Al Gores new book *Assault on Reason* is a powerful exposition of this.)<sup>3</sup>

Let me illustrate just a few aspects of Gen Y's interior world and of how this new force is reshaping the landscape of their minds and values:

**The Paris Hilton factor or hyper reality.** Hyper reality is a construction of the media juggernaut through advertising and the creation of desirable but artificial images. You can be this if you buy this, wear this, drive this, etc. A hyper reality is

constructed and then commodified and marketed. The message is – there is a perfect life and it's attainable by all. This myth is reinforced by 'Reality' TV shows like *Big Brother* and *Australian Idol* where the 'stars' are deliberately chosen from very ordinary people. Anyone can be a star, a celebrity and of course everyone can have their five minutes of fame on My Space and U Tube! Gen Y is a big consumer of hyper reality.

**My second illustration is about hyper perspectivism.** The UK film director Mike Figgis, best known for *Leaving Las Vegas* and *The Sopranos*, also created a quirky film called *Time Code*. Instead of watching just one screen as you do in a normal film he divides the screen into four. Every scene is shot from four different angles or perspectives. All four are shown on the screen together – four perspectives on the one story. Figgis comments, 'the audience can make it's own editing choice'. The viewer creates their own interpretation by consciously or unconsciously selecting or editing the perspectives in their own mind.

As you might expect the film wasn't a great box office hit! But what Figgis was expressing about contemporary thought was very perceptive.

Gen Y is deeply affected by the idea that the creation of meaning is primarily not with the author, the film director, the teacher, but with the viewer, the hearer. There is no absolute or objective truth or meaning, there is no one overarching story and everything that claims to be is just a construct by a particular group or an individual trying to oppress others.

Of course the ultimate place of personal choice and multiple perspectives is the 'wild, wild Web' – the internet. Another perspective is just a Google away!

James Sire in his book 'Why should anyone believe anything at all?' describes our contemporary Western culture in this way. It is

...individualistic, pluralist, and culturally relativist; almost any thought or action is allowable; all standards all values are equal... we have open to us a vast panorama of mutually conflicting values, dreams agendas, hopes, aspirations. None of us can rely on our culture to justify our beliefs. Our chaotic culture justifies any and all beliefs, thereby justifying none.<sup>4</sup>

Now a year ten student doesn't understand either the philosophical or the cultural forces that produce this world view but they have absorbed it through popular culture.

Much has been said about Gen Y's approach to spirituality. My own view is that it is essentially pagan subjectivism. C. S. Lewis pointed out many years ago that the default religious setting for fallen humanity is paganism. Gen Y's only authority is their interior world of feelings, impressions and intuitions. Now that is perfectly understandable because that is where extreme perspectivism drives you – inside, into your own internal world of subjective feelings. Ethical decisions, questions of truth and meaning are shrunk into this murky and often dysfunctional space with no objective or external moderating criteria.

Among the latest tribes in the youth culture are those who term themselves 'Emo's' – emotionals. They dress a bit like the Goths and have a fairly nihilistic attitude to life. The themes of last year's Venice Biennale, the international exhibition of cutting edge contemporary art, was 'Think with the senses – feel with the mind.' This reminds one of the Christian apologist Ravi Zacharias's important question for all Christian educators: 'How do you communicate with a culture that hears with its eyes and thinks with its feelings?'<sup>25</sup>

This loss of any objective authority is partly why they place so much weight on relationships. When all objective meaning dissolves in the acid of relativism and extreme perspectivism all you are left with is relationships.

There is a song by Paul Simon called 'Cathy's Song' that expresses this sentiment very clearly. A young man is musing on his girlfriend's departure. It's a rainy day and he's watching the rain run down the window pane. He says:

'I have come to doubt all that I once held  
as true.  
I stand alone without beliefs,  
The only truth I know is you.  
And as I watch the drops of rain  
Weave their weary paths and die,  
I know that I am like the rain,  
There but for the grace of you go I.'

The tragedy of course is that human relationships that are not framed by a larger reality, a relationship with God, cannot

bear all the weight we place upon them. Those we love die, they leave us; they may also disappoint us, hurt us or betray us.

### **My third example illustrates a shadow that is lurking in the background of their lives – a loss of hope.**

Most secondary students in our schools are so secure and comfortable that they can usually avoid pessimism and the GenY research does not show much overt pessimism, but it is waiting for them just around the corner; at university or when they enter the adult world of work or when some tragedy shatters their current world, like the accidental death of a fellow student.

The background anxiety about international terrorism, large scale people movements that bring a clash of cultures and global warming all feed into this shadow lurking in the background.

A recent British film called *The Children of Men* explored this theme of the loss of hope. The film is set in Britain in the near future. Britain is now one of the last of the world's functioning communities. Thousands of illegal immigrants pour in for some form of safety. The government has herded them into vast holding camps, cities behind barbed wire and armed patrols. The towns of much of the country are in decay, armed police patrol the streets, terrorist car bombs are regularly exploded. Pessimism and loss of hope fill the air. In the midst of this despair a strange thing has happened. The loss of hope seems to have flipped a biological switch and women are no longer able to become pregnant. There have been no children born for eighteen years. The schools are empty. As the camera pans across a bleak streetscape it picks up a piece of graffiti on a wall 'THE FUTURE IS A THING OF THE PAST'.

Eventually the plot takes an interesting twist when a young girl is discovered who is pregnant. She of course becomes a symbol of hope but there are also dark forces at work to destroy or control her and the child. The child is finally born in one of the holding camps in a scene that is set up to be deliberately reminiscent of the nativity...but I can't tell you how it ends!

The theme of the impact of the loss of hope is powerfully presented in this film – 'The future is a thing of the past!' That is the shadow lurking in the background of our contemporary culture.

To summarize my second major point; to penetrate this background cultural noise

requires a very powerful alternative. As one religious studies teacher put it to me 'How can I turn on the spiritual light bulb? How can I break through their skeptical cynicism.'

### **3. MY THIRD MAJOR POINT CONTAINS SIX PRACTICAL CLUES FOR COMMUNICATING A LIVING CHRISTIAN FAITH TO GEN Y.**

They are only 'clues' because we are all in uncharted territory here. Teachers, Chaplains, Youth Workers are all trying to reinvent the way we communicate with this generation. That leads me to my first clue:

**Clue one:** Experiment! Be creative, try new things. Use the creative arts, simulation games, multi-media, make films, vox-pop interviews, digital game based learning (Video games), etc.

**Clue two:** Where you can use the communication medium of their culture, not just the technology, the DVDs, internet, etc., but the imagery, the icons, the 'style', this is their language. They are a highly visually literate culture.

**Clue three:** The RE learning context needs to have the following elements present in various combinations:

- (a) Intellectual depth in the presentation of the Christian faith and world view; an intelligent presentation of classical / orthodox Christianity.
- (b) Experience. A post modern generation values experience highly. In contrast to modernity's cold rationalism Gen Y sees subjective experience as a valid way of knowing. So an experience of vital and exciting worship or silence and guided meditation can be a powerful learning experience. Camps and retreats that build in experiential components. A discussion around a campfire may achieve what could never be achieved in a classroom. Hearing the personal stories of people's journey to faith. Truth conveyed through art and music.

Education is not the filling of a vessel  
But the kindling of a flame (W.B. Yeats)

- (c) A challenge and stimulation to question. To be probed and disturbed

on the issues of meaning and a basis for right and wrong. To question the media-constructed view of reality and to deconstruct their virtual 'screen' reality.<sup>6</sup>

- (d) A challenge to risk and reach out beyond the economic pragmatism and self-interest of their culture for a life of service and self sacrifice – to live for others.<sup>7</sup>

**Clue four:** Some schools are expanding their RE staff by employing a youth worker in addition to teachers. Their role is a highly relational one, involved in camps and retreats and informal lunch time groups. Part of their value is that they sit somewhat apart from the formal teaching structure. They are not constrained by curriculum, timetables and classrooms. They can also liaise with families, local church youth ministries and community groups.<sup>8</sup>

**Clue five:** This task cannot be done by the school alone.

- (a) As 'The Spirit of Generation Y' research project shows, families are a critical influence.<sup>9</sup> We need to find ways of supporting and assisting Christian families.
- (b) Links should be established with local Churches that have vital youth ministries and youth worship. An Anglican school is part of the wider Church.
- (c) External Christian groups that work in schools, like ISCF and Crusaders, can provide helpful assistance. In Melbourne we have an organization called 'Mustard' that works in Church schools. Its origin and base is in a large Anglican Church's youth ministry but it is now an independent and interdenominational organization working in many independent schools. They resource and run lunch time groups, offer seminars to RE departments, Missions, Retreats, and they train Christian student leaders. Voluntary Christian peer groups run by such organizations can have a very effective supportive ministry in schools.

**My final clue** is found in a theological proposition and a story.

There is an experience that is universal among human beings – it is the experience of longing. Throughout our life, often when we least expect it, we have these longings for something beyond ourselves: for beauty, for goodness, for meaning and purpose, for justice, for love beyond passion, for something to fill the emptiness we sometimes feel. They are often triggered by what at first seems odd or random. We are walking along a beach alone and the cry of a bird stirs something deep inside us. It might be a piece of music so beautiful that our heart aches. It might be the innocent face of a small child. It might be that we hear of some deep injustice and alongside our indignation there rises a longing for justice.

These longings are really a longing for God, for the source of beauty, love, innocence, justice, goodness, ultimate meaning. In theological language they are part of God's General Revelation of himself to us.

But the frame work and world view for understanding them has been largely lost in Western culture and so people do not easily make the connection any more. Our task is to help people make the God connection to their longings and then to eventually assist them to find the very specific focus and fulfilment of their longings in Jesus – God's Special Revelation of himself, or as St. John puts it; the eternal 'Word of God made flesh...the one in whom there is life, life that is the light of all people.'<sup>10</sup>

Christian education could be described as helping young people recognize these longings and their source in God and then to build bridges of understanding and faith to their ultimate fulfilment in the message of Jesus – the end of all our longings.

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## Endnotes:

1. Peter Vardy *What is Truth?* (John Hunt Pub. 2003) See also Peter Vardy's *Being Human, The puzzle of God, The Puzzle of Ethics* (Harper Collins).
2. John Carroll Humanism – *The Wreck of Western Culture* (Fontana 1993); *Ego and Soul* (Harper Collins 1998).
3. Al Gore *The Assault on Reason* (Bloomsbury 2007).
4. James Sire *Why should anyone believe anything at all?* page 46 (IVP 1994).
5. Ravi Zacharias – in an address at the Amsterdam 2000 Conference on Evangelism (See conference papers Amsterdam 2000).
6. Mark Sayers *The Trouble with Paris* DVD discussion guide. (Room 3 productions 2007).
7. See The Oak Tree Foundation Youth aid and development program: <[www.theoaktree.org/splash.aspx](http://www.theoaktree.org/splash.aspx) >
8. Tim Corney Youth Work in Schools – Should Youth Workers also be Teachers? (*Youth Studies Australia* Vol. 25 Number 3. 2006).
9. Mason, Singleton, Webber, *The Spirit of Generation Y* (John Garratt Publishing 2007)
10. John's Gospel 1:1-18.

## Other resources consulted:

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Peter Sheahan *Generation Y* (Hardie Grant Books 2005).

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'Generation Youth and Social Change in Australia' J. Wyn and D. Woodman (*Journal of Youth Studies* Vol.9 No 5 Nov. 2006 pages 495-514.)

'National Survey of Young Australians 2006' (Mission Australia.)

'How Young People are Faring 2006' (Dusseldorp Skills Forum Nov 2006)

*The Flip Side of Gen Y.* Mike Long (ACER – Monash Uni. Center for the Economics of Education and Training Oct 2006)

'Generation Y –attracting, engaging and leading a new generation at work' (Drake White Paper Vol. 3 No 1. 2006)

The start of my personal redemption came, I hope, in the moment that I connected my response to the death of Edward Hulsman and the suffering of his family, to the deaths and the suffering I had caused. This personal truth and reconciliation process, even if it is not known until now, or accepted in the wider community, is a start for me. A more general truth and reconciliation process, or a restorative justice process, is much more difficult than a legal process.

**Craig W.J. Minogue**

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