

Towards a more forgiving and giving culture in which everyone feels safe and hopeful, including as they worship.

A Reflection for I 4give Week: 1-8 February 2023

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With profound love and respect for the example of Daniel and Leïa Abdallah



...speak joyously about one student who is now flourishing. This student had come from another school where she was bullied and humiliated on the basis of distinguishing factors about which she could do nothing. Now safe, she was embracing her education with visible delight.

These kinds of stories make you weep, all at once, tears of sorrow, relief and joy. Tears of sorrow for the many innocent young ones who face bewildering suffering in unsafe cultures; tears of relief and joy for every story of every person who finds a safer place.

The other school, no doubt, had strategies and policies to prevent discrimination but the pervasive culture was eating them remorselessly. 'Culture eats strategy for breakfast', as the saying goes.

In coming days some educational experts and I are running a retreat for leaders of two schools, using the lens of forgiveness and gratitude in a meditative setting. Drawing on the wisdom of Desmond Tutu, "forgiveness gives us the capacity to make a new start", we will offer insights into how the conscious practice of forgiveness is essential to the development of quality relationships in a safe and resilient school culture.

We will also explore how resentment can undermine our capacity to forgive. Resentment is described by experts as 'the emotion of injustice' because of how we can feel justified in our resentments and therefore will tend to hold on to them. That is, even while recognising how, to paraphrase Nelson Mandela, 'resenting or hating others is a bit like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die'. Public discourse in Australia currently is noisy with voices of various resentments. The practice of gratitude can give us a better perspective.

Other recent visitors to our Australia came from a place where it is not safe to practice their faith. During their visit they just wanted to sit in our place of worship and absorb the feeling of being safe from intimidation and attack. As first-time visitors to Australia there was, of course, an interest in seeing koalas and clean beaches. But nothing was as attractive to these tourists as just quietly sitting in places of worship to offer their prayers and meditations, feeling safe. Their poignant telling of this reminded us of a relative treasure of life in Australia that needs our practiced gratitude and our vigilance.

Overseas, in the past week, we have seen people killed as they worshipped in their synagogue in Israel; their mosque in Pakistan and their church in Myanmar. No doubt there have been other sufferings too. Places of worship mean everything to people of faith. Places of worship are where we seek illumination, belonging and comfort. They gather the memories of our families and friends. They are the places from where loved ones may be raised and nurtured, married, and buried. Places of worship nurture our deepest yearnings and our highest hopes. To be and feel safe in our place of worship is beautiful.

It is the essence of civilised living and accords with the high purposes of the UN Declaration on Human Rights, specifically those Articles pertaining to religious freedom. Some Australians have come from places where that freedom to worship safely has been violated. We have also seen, many times, the anguish overseas when other people's safety in worship has been violated.

Even in recent times, multi faith leaders have gathered in prayerful Vigil and

I am optimistic that Australia can be a 'Continent of Compassion', embodying the essence of our wisdom traditions and offering to others only what we would be grateful to receive ourselves. My optimism is drawn from the blessings of meeting many people of different backgrounds. They teach me gratitude for much that we share in Australia and strengthen my resolve regarding matters that are troublesome. Particularly as regards the cultivation of a compassionately giving and forgiving culture.

Here are some recent experiences:

We took some international visitors to the cricket after Christmas. They kept saying how wonderful it was to be in a place where they felt safe. They couldn't stop saying this, referring sadly to the real fear of violence they live with at home.

Former UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld once reflected that the whole point of the United Nations and its various agencies is so that people feel safe. Safe from violence, war, disease, discrimination... safe.

Another story: Just prior to Christmas I listened to a wonderful School Principal

solidarity after such sufferings.

For example, after the Christchurch mosque in March 2019 which killed 51 people. Ensuring that we feel and are safe in our place of worship is a fundamental purpose of multi faith meetings and events.

Over time, these gatherings build relationships of trust and affection between faith leaders. Then, if and when there is tension, this culture of healthy relationships can be drawn upon to prevent further trouble. This truth was reaffirmed recently when Victorian faith leaders met on Friday 20 January after deeply distressing incidents at Hindu Temples.

<https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/this-was-hate-speech-hindu-community-alarmed-by-temple-attacks-20230127-p5cfwg.html>

Even in recent times, multi faith leaders have gathered in prayerful Vigil and solidarity after such sufferings.

I was asked to draft a Statement reflecting our common mind. The sentiments above were part of my draft. Our honest and gracious conversation produced new ideas and positive initiatives which we will take together in the period ahead. These are now being developed through further consultation.

One of the graffiti attacks was at the Hare Krishna Temple near the Anglican Church I look after in Port Melbourne. Taking rose petals and incense, I made a loving visit. A dear friend, Rev Bhakta Das, is the Communications and Interfaith Director in Australasia for ISKCON, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, serving the local Vaisnava Hindu community. I have invited him and folk from that Temple to our Church this Sunday.

Such initiatives are possible because of our relatively positive culture, based on a history of affectionate, friendly relationships, nurtured by our predecessors and now by us. But I think we are all aware

that there are risks to manage in the digital age. Especially, given all the unreconciled matters of history which can be reignited by divisive, clever propagandists who trade in resentment.

To counter some of this, imagine if there were billboards on freeways and near shopping centers which pictured people who are safe and happy in the distinctive colours and symbols of their places of worship. Pictures placed alongside each other of people worshipping in Australia's mosques, synagogues, temples and churches. Imagine how such images would bring delight and gratitude. A visual reminder of what is so precious to sustain in our relatively peaceful Australian culture.

Perhaps too, we might seek billboards and social media which remind people of what religious freedom really is - the freedom to practice or not practice one's religion; the freedom to change one's religion; to change again, even to change back again, as the journey of life unfolds.

Australia has the capacity to be a 'Continent of Compassion'. There is much to be grateful for but plenty of care still needed.