

**Hands for Hope – “The Phantom” Fundraising Dinner, Melbourne 25/10/2013
(By Catherine Fulgoni)**

Hello, my name is Catherine. Thank you for asking me to speak tonight.

I would like to talk to about choices. A choice is “an act of choosing between two or more possibilities.” Let’s think about that for a moment. How much choice do we actually have in our lives?

When we are born we don't have a choice about the country we are born in, we could be born in a country at war, either openly or more covertly. We also do not get to choose the family we were born into: what kind of mother and father we will have, will we have siblings? Will we have sufficient money to meet our basic needs? What value systems will our family have? Will they be open-minded, compassionate, articulate, loving people who can teach us how to be accepting? To be comfortable with who we are? Will we be safe? We didn't get to choose whether our parents are good role models, and help us to thrive, to be the best we can be.

Of course, some people do get these things. Some people are born into stable nations, which are largely peaceful and morally sound in their practice. They have minimal corruption and people are treated respectfully and there is a system of justice operating transparently.

And better yet, within that country, they are born to a family with loving hearts, who are healthy in the broad sense of the term. The parents encourage their children to expand their minds, their experiences, whilst at the same time keeping them safe, teaching them empathy, self-responsibility, and resilience.

As we grow up we do gain more power, greater autonomy. We get to make choices about how we live our lives. And even for people who through chance, get to grow up with all the ‘right stuff’ the ‘healthy stuff’, life events can be challenging. Events outside their control occur and cause crisis: Crisis of confidence. The kind of event that can shake us to our very core. Challenge who we are, what we believe, who matters and what we cherish. Our beloved parent dies, our closest friend develops cancer. Events we didn't choose, events outside our control. So, life can be challenging for people with the best start. The right amount of money, intelligence, skill, opportunity and chance.

What about the other people? The people who get a safe country, but an unsafe family? Or those people with a loving family, though born in a country in conflict?

That is where social justice becomes important. I'm borrowing a quote here from the 1993 *Social Justice Commissioner*, Mick Dodson, (Annual Report of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander), who said:

Social justice is what faces you in the morning. It is awakening in a house with an adequate water supply, cooking facilities and sanitation. It is the ability to nourish your children and send them to a school where their education not only equips them for employment, but reinforces their knowledge and understanding of their cultural inheritance. It is the prospect of genuine employment and good health: a life of choices and opportunity, free from discrimination.

The clients I work with did not get an equal chance. Many were homeless and they had experienced profound traumas – child abuse, sexual assault, neglect, violence, and generational poverty. They had not been validated. They did not get a safe, healthy, functional family. They did not get taught they were worthy and acceptable, and that they were good enough. We need to be valued. We need to be taught we are worthy. We need a sense of love and belonging. We need to know that we are good enough as the imperfect beings we are.

The clients I work with today are also marginalised. They are asylum seekers and refugees. For them social justice, the sense that all people should have their rights considered in a fair and equitable manner, is merely a concept.

People do not all have same opportunities. Through chance they experience inequity & inequality. Everybody does not have sufficient income, or a safe country. Everybody does not have a safe living environment. People in these circumstances do not get the same choices, the same opportunities and, as a consequence, their abilities to make decisions about their everyday lives are diminished.

I am small, one person. These issues are big, global, potentially overwhelming. What difference can I make? Mahatma Ghandi said: *"If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. As a man changes his own nature, so does the attitude of the world change towards him, ... We need not wait to see what others do."*

So I use this wisdom to support clients. Every small act can make a difference. Our ability to make effective choices comes ultimately back to chance: whether we were born into the 'healthy families', in the 'fair countries'.

As a relational therapist I focus on the circumstances the client faces right now. What choices does the client have in front of them and what might get in the way? When I remember that no matter what the circumstance, I have a choice, I feel a sense of calm. When I reconnect with this knowledge, I stop feeling frightened and threatened. I no longer feel backed into a corner. That's what I always try to do with my clients: help them find and navigate their opportunities. The aim is to alleviate distress and to develop self-acceptance. The wisdom of acceptance helps each of us become more tolerant of ourselves and others, which carries over into our communication, decisions and relationships.

My journey comes back to choices. Without knowing it, the choice my father's parents' made way back in 1930's Italy is an integral part of my journey. They fled to England from their home in Italy, to escape the Dictator, Mussolini. My father's parents were refugees. Without that choice, I would not be standing here today.

So as I stand here before you tonight, I remember some wise words: "let go of who you think you should be, to be able to be authentic"; have the "courage to be imperfect"; because "what makes us vulnerable, is necessary for life experiences" (Brené Brown, "*The Power of Vulnerability*" Ted Talks)

Thank you

Catherine Fulgoni