

EVERY BREATH IS A NEW BEGINNING

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There's something both exhilarating and impossible about making a new beginning. It is initiated by mustering a mixture of magic and blood.

A friend told me about his visit to a bloke in prison. His cell was total chaos. 'I need to get my shit together' he told my friend, 'but where do I start?' My friend picked a stained coffee mug up from the floor and said, 'With this. Let's start with this.' He did, and in a matter of days the impossible happened, and his cell was habitable.

'You,' they are warned, 'are responsible for your own situation. You need to get up off your backsides. You need to make a new beginning. Then you will have something to be proud of.'

No. They do not need to make a new beginning. We need to make a new beginning. As Brecht put it:

You can make a fresh start with your final breath.

Firstly, the problem does not lie with individuals needing to get their shit together. It lies with society needing to be re-organised, turned upside-down, changed. Secondly, this can never be the lone act of a determined individual. It needs to be collective. The problem can only be solved by means of a solution that finds its makings in the heart of the problem. The problem is social. It must have a social, a collective, a political solution.

Kathy Edin, a sociologist from the United States, described something to an Australian Conference audience that still shocks me when I think about it. She described the U.S. welfare reform programme, as targeting single mothers. Picture this:

A large billboard poster depicts a black single mother on her way to work. Her young daughter, who is being dropped off somewhere, looks up at her and says: 'At least now I can be proud of you.'

And this from the country where the minimum wage took 10 years (between 1997 and 2007) to be adjusted!

The ever-increasing intoxication of the State with market-oriented policies coincides with a decline in the application of policies that focus on outcomes of inclusion and greater equality. Instead, we are witnessing the wielding of policies that are blunt tools as far as the achievement of their purported ends, but sharp weapons when plunged into the hearts of the households of the marginalised.

As life is privatised the individual who stands accused of having failed to make it in the market is subjected not only to new heights of intrusive surveillance but also to a veritable theology of damnation. As the late Milton Friedman put it in *Capitalism and Freedom*:

“The major aim of the liberal is to leave the ethical problem to the individual to wrestle with.”

The abstract individual is, under the banner of neo-liberalism, endowed with the ability to wrestle with the ethical problem. This abstract individual is as free as an angel to move in and out of the market, buying and selling, working and resting, praying and philosophising.

The people on the margins, however, are made to feel wretched, not because they don't have a body but because they are made to feel like they are nothing more than bodies. They are bodies that are under the control of the State, which in turn is acting as an agent for the interests of the market.

People are forced underground because they will not beg from charities. They resurface in our prisons, or on our streets. They're forced to hock their furnishings, their personal possessions. They seek consolation in the arms of loan sharks and payday lenders.

But let us not treat this merely as an 'Americanisation' of welfare. It is true that the social policies peddled here, as being bright and new, are the re-hashed doctrines preached by the priests of Washington's Cato Institute and their acolytes there and abroad.

The longer-term reality, however, the social fact of critical concern for us, is that neo-liberalism doesn't turn many countries into one country. Rather, and more frighteningly, it turns each country into many countries. I don't mean this in the sense of being more diverse. I mean it in the sense of being more divided.

Which is why we should fight for the people; which is why we should stand in solidarity with the people; which is why we should do everything to ensure that public resources are used to arm the people with knowledge, with literacy, with numeracy, with the tools to analyse social conditions and the building blocks for creating a fairer society; which is why the provision of the highest quality public education at primary, secondary and post-secondary levels is essential for our nation's future.

There was a liberal use of corporal punishment in my high school. It was in Blacktown in the late Seventies. We were seen as a loutish bunch of lads who needed a firm hand. Most of us copped a taste of the strap or the cane from time to time, even running a bit of a competition to see how many cuts we could notch up from any one teacher. It never seemed unusual to any of us even though at times the violence was brutal and gratuitous. I don't feel the least bit of pain in remembering any of this but one thing is clear: it did absolutely nothing to help my education.

It was the libraries, both school and municipal, where I did most of my learning. I had a deeply enriching time there and feel a great debt of gratitude to the librarians and to those who championed the cause of public libraries. I really don't know what drove me to the libraries, but I am certain it was not the stick.

Why, I wonder, in these more enlightened times, do we continue to see a class-based approach to the education and training of people who are living on the edges of the economy; class-based approach that begins, moreover, with the assumption that the more disadvantaged you are classified as being, the more you need to be controlled and coerced?

A strong, flexible social security system, one that actually delivers social security rather than insecurity and vilification, is essential if we are to build a fairer Australia. A good social security system, however, is not, in itself the answer. It should be a means to social, economic and political inclusion rather than an end in itself. 'Welfare', as North Americans like to call it, is neither the problem nor the solution any more than hospitals are the primary cause of illness or, indeed, the creators of good health for society. But you wouldn't want to be without them, would you? And neither should we acquiesce to the whittling away of a robust social security system, especially not under the guise of forcing people to learn and 'be trained'.

The government can threaten with all the sticks under the sun but this will not lead people to learning. They can suspend a young mother's entire income if they want. This will cause hardship for both mother and child and it will mean that the young woman will need to get assistance from her extended family or friends or neighbours or from a charity. But will it instil a desire to learn? It will not. It will, on the other hand, teach the young woman a little bit about society. It will teach her that she is of little value and that she is able to be controlled and disciplined and made to ask for charity. It will teach her perhaps how to develop innovative ways of survival; how to work within, or around, the social security system. It will teach her many things about where she sits in the social order; things that I fervently hope she will one day challenge, critique and, with others, undo.

You don't create a smart and confident Australia by taking to people with the stick or keeping them below the poverty line. This might have sat well with the moral prescriptions of the mid to late nineteenth century and it might be a clever way of scoring political points, but it will not build a stronger, smarter economy or a fairer society.

But let us, with unabashed 'nerdiness', return to my beloved library. One of the great attractions of the library was its diversity. All sorts of books sat next to each other, offering all sorts of windows onto the world. When, one time, I asked the school librarian to explain the torn-out page from *Children of Albion: Poetry of the Underground in Britain*, she told me that one of the Brothers performed this act of censorship because there was a rude word in one of the poems. Of course I had no choice then but to save up and buy a copy and, yes, it is still on my shelf.

How welcome it would be to see a greater diversity of responses to the diversity of stories that bring people into the social security system and the labour market. How good it would be to see no more pages torn out of people's stories; no more pretence about the conditions in which people are struggling. Sadly, it's sometimes a matter of one stick fits all. Some of the most innovative attempts at social policy involve creating different sizes and shapes of sticks. Not the kind of diversity we were hoping for!

Disability advocacy groups have been particularly good at explaining the concept of the social relations of disability, whereby the negative impact of disability is very much constructed and exacerbated by the barriers our socio-economic formation erects, especially in regard to economic and social participation.

This is a useful conceptual framework and it is profoundly applicable to all who are the targets of condemnation for the sin of un-productivity.

Our problem is not the 'idleness of the poor', as perniciously proposed in the welfare-bashing wisdom of the dominant discourse. Our problem is inequality. When we deny that this is the problem we end up looking for solutions in all the wrong places. We also end up re-framing the question incorrectly, so that it becomes a question of participation, or productivity, or compliance, or aspiration.

So we end up with solutions that worsen the problem of inequality. As if compulsory income inadequacy, or its accursed cousin compulsory income management, could actually help create the space for dignity and liberation!

When we ask the social question, we find the seeds of the social, and, therefore, political, solution.

How can we know the guts of the social problem except by listening to those who are forced to live in the guts of the social problem?

Living in the guts of the social problem does not produce silence. There is a rich and constant flow of exchanges between the people who share in the same experience and who are fighting to stay strong.

Living in the guts of the social problem we know that cuts in the areas of education and equity are the very causes of entrenching exclusion and misery.

Which is why we do not give up our struggle!

In the words of Pablo Neruda:

*"Rise up with me
against the organisation of misery."*