

# Things that matter- The 'P' words.

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Last Friday evening my husband and I were channel surfing, looking for something to watch that wasn't full of violence, swearing and sex. A tall order these days, but we clicked onto one of the ABC channels, and happened upon the movie *The King's Speech*. It's the true story of how an Australian speech therapist with no formal qualifications worked with King George VI to help cure his stammer. The speech in question was the famous one where the king spoke about the declaration of war with Germany in 1939, and he discussed the need for all right thinking nations and peoples to oppose Nazism and protect the countries of Europe from Hitler's trespass into Poland. It was a matter of principle, said the king, that we must uphold the rights of freedom and democracy for all, and so we come to my first 'P' word: principles.

Principles are those guiding beliefs that confirm the moral standards of the population. I wondered aloud whether the Australia of today would be so quick to go to war in defence of the rights of foreign countries; if we would sit back and say, 'not my problem, mate'. In my lifetime, I have seen Australia demonstrate the highest principles, such as when we supported the waves of refugees from Vietnam, when we voted for equal rights to vote for all Australians, when Kevin Rudd stood up in parliament and said 'Sorry' to our much-abused Indigenous peoples for the past traumas they have suffered, when we legalised same-sex marriage, and so many other times.

But I have also seen appalling principles from our politicians, such as closing our borders to boat people, ignoring the science of climate change, and refusing to take action, allowing mining magnates to dictate policy, treating our first female prime minister with bullying tactics that would appal any child in the school yard, just to name a few.

Is the principle of a fair go for all upheld today? Can we truthfully say that it is when so many are denied a safe place to sleep, a decent education and a stable and loving family? Is there not much truth in the 'Me' generation being considerably more self-centred than the generations who lived through both those terrible world wars? I do wonder whether the first world of today, with people focused on self-fulfilment and their belief that they are entitled to live a life full of buying and consuming, with money worshipped, and economic growth and prosperity (another 'P') seen as the goal of society, have any insight into the things that really matter.

I want to move onto my next 'P' word: procrastination. A sin that every person on the planet is guilty of, as we blithely continue with business as usual and the planet warms and warms. I curse and swear at the general ignorance of the average person, when I know that nobody can really be ignorant of the reality of the facts about climate change. And yet, I sit in local cafes listening to people deriding the attempts to increase the amount of renewable energy by building wind and solar farms. 'Not in my backyard, or on my farm, or anywhere that they might interrupt my view,' they say. 'No, we need nuclear power stations, and more coal and gas.' That's truly what some think, and I go home and despair for my children and grandchildren. We have had fifty years or more of government procrastination. It stalks the corridors of power, which is my next 'P' word. Power; the power of heads of governments, the power of members of parliament, the power held by corporate CEO's and entrepreneurs, the power that rich people hold over the rest of the population. Who can look at the unravelling of American democracy by the current president and his acolytes, and not believe that power corrupts principles?

How have we allowed the tech giants to become the arbiters of our society, with their algorithms and AI tools, gathering, always gathering information? How can we have freely given away our rights to privacy, and the right to determine what we view? Tim Berners Lee, who created the internet with the belief that it would make the world better, giving knowledge to all and facilitating social connections, is aghast at the monster it has morphed into; a slaving beast intent on spreading every kind of misinformation and disinformation to the world at large. We are only presented with what some tech algorithm deems appropriate for us, based on the things we look at. We only see what serves their interests, not ours. Then there is the insidious and

constant advertising, tailored to the individual by the data collected about them. One could almost call it propaganda (a 'P' again) and it is just as toxic, spreading expectations that you must have this or that, that you must look a certain way or you won't be happy.

How did we let it get like this? I may be one of the few people who has actually read Meta's (once Facebook's) privacy policy, in full, and with such a sense of horror at what they collect about you that I, to this day, do not have any social media accounts at all. I read an article a few weeks ago about some research done about the ways young people prefer to communicate. It was staggering to read that nearly 2/3rds of 18-30 year olds experience anxiety when they have to make a telephone call. They prefer to text or use social media to communicating face to face, or voice to voice, with other people. Humans are primates, with a very deep need to be connected to others and not isolated. Could it be perhaps, that there is a link here between the loss of face to face contact and the explosion in mental health problems among young people?

Which brings me to my next 'P': parenting. The hardest job in the world, and even more so now, when it is impossible to curate what your children see. When I was growing up, you could turn off the TV, avoid the papers, and be fairly sure that you would not see pornography when you picked up a telephone! Now, with their phones an extended hand, youngsters are constantly bombarded with information, carefully tailored by social influencers to make them think and feel particular ways, and parents are fighting a battle on their doorsteps to regulate what their children are exposed to. There is the lovely concept of 'gentle parenting – being your child's friend and never saying anything negative to them. A parent's job is not being friends with your child; it is to guide them and teach them the importance of these 'P' words, so that they have values and moral standards to live by. It is the most challenging, frustrating, and wonderful role a person can have, and yet parents today are incredibly time poor, both working long hours as they try to provide for their children all the things advertising has convinced them they need to be happy. Kids do not need tons of things; they need parental time and attention. They need to sit down at mealtimes and talk together about the things that matter. They need to learn how to see other points of view than their own; to understand that there are far more

similarities between people than differences. This is the real job of parents, to prepare their children to be good citizens of the world, who can help to make it a better place for everyone, not just for the privileged few who are lucky enough to be born in the right place.

Let's move onto my next 'P' word: prevention. In a country as rich as Australia, it is simply obscene that anyone should be unable to access a home, enough food, education and employment. Yet barely any funding is channelled into preventing problems before they manifest. Who is looking at the underlying reasons why there is intergenerational poverty and disadvantage? I know, we all know, about the reports generated by every government that cite statistics and propose solutions to various issues. The Closing the Gap reports are a classic example, with minor gains made in some areas, but so many not improving at all.

Just this week I have been reading about the continued failure of authorities to act on urgent recommendations from the Royal Commission on Aboriginal deaths in custody, which was released in 1991. Yes, that's correct, those urgent recommendations to remove potential hanging points from cells have still not been implemented 34 years later! This is an extraordinary lack of responsibility from those involved, and there must be a better way to improve the systems. Maybe we need deep and meaningful 'P'artnerships with local communities, with responses aimed squarely at solving the dysfunctional family and/or community situations, led by the people who know, not the government, be it state or federal.

We need to be using the local 'Voice' of each community, wherever that community may be, and whoever lives there, no matter what cultural group they belong to. Socioeconomic disadvantage should not exist in this country. Every Australian should have access to what they need to lead a productive and healthy life. A miniscule proportion of the health budget is given to preventative health care. Instead we put the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff to catch those who fall, rather than building a fence along the cliff top. Our toxic addiction to bad habits, especially dietary ones, is making us ill. Sedentary lifestyles, junk food, alcohol, smoking, our brainwashing goes on every time we see an ad for ways to improve our selves. We

are being sold a lie. False eyelashes will not make you happy, nor will huge wardrobes, a new iPhone or the latest X-Box game.

I suspect by now you will have gathered that I am a person full of passion, which is my penultimate 'P' word. Passion is a trait that is sadly lacking among the world's organisations, and it is needed now more than ever before. As we watch the conflicts raging in so many places, Ukraine (actually I don't believe the Ukrainians lack passion!), Gaza, Sudan, Yemen, Myanmar, the list goes on, wreaking pain and destruction to everybody involved. I cannot watch the news anymore – seeing with my eyes the traumas inflicted is more than I can cope with. Even reading news elicits grief, and I feel so powerless to help in the face of government inaction, and world intransigence in dealing with the rogue nations and factions stalking their adversaries in search of more power and land. My sense of outrage at the behaviour of some often drives me to tears, and I wonder if there is any hope at all?

Peace, my final 'P' word.

Peace.

Such a little word, but such a big meaning

What is peace?

Is it the knowledge that you have a roof over your head, enough food to eat, clean water to drink?

Is it having friends who care for you, or a mother to hold you in her arms?

Is it a feeling of wellbeing within ones self- a sort of inner calm to quench your trepidation about life's troubles?'

Does it come from within, or without?

Can an individual still find peace when the world is falling apart around them?

How can you reconcile the love and goodwill that abounds in the world with all this hate?

We sit here, in a country where you can walk down the street without fear of being shot by a sniper.

Where you can sit at the table eating dinner and be fairly sure that your roof will not collapse on top of you from a bomb strike, sharing music and laughter, stories and fun.

We have no real concept of how it feels to be living in a war zone.

One song has been running through my brain for weeks now:

*Imagine there's no countries*

*Imagine all the people*

*Sharing all the world*

Just imagine if this could be- a world where all people were equal, with the same rights to freedom?

So, what are the things that really matter?

They are the things that have always mattered – a safe place to shelter from the weather and the world, enough food to nourish your body and mind, clean water to drink.

The love of people who care about your welfare, no matter who those people are. As I said earlier, humans need social connection – it is one of the four basic needs defined by the United Nations. Love takes many forms, and can be found in many places.

It may be the fellowship of the crowd, cheering on their football team, or the touch of a nurse's hand as she closes the eyes of a patient who has died. It may be the friendship of sisters, or the play fighting engaged in by unruly children. It may be the

endless love that parents hold for their offspring, even when they may not like their behaviour at all! It can be the enduring friendships that make each contact, even if there has been years between them, seem like you saw that person yesterday. Then there is romantic love, which can endure immense suffering and just grows stronger for each day that passes.

Or it may be the greatest love there can be; the love for humanity, in all its dirty glory and amazing creativity. It is this love that must be called on to eradicate prejudice and xenophobia, to stop war by acknowledging the humanity of all peoples. Love is what matters. I'm sorry it is not a 'P' word though!

*With acknowledgement to John Lennon's immortal song 'Imagine'.*