Embracing Our Common Humanity: A Personal Journey

Lecture by Gareth Evans

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There is no mystery about the content of the idea of “our common humanity”. It means to me, and I suspect to just about anyone who has ever thought about and embraced the concept, whether we come at it from a humanist or religious perspective, that whatever may be our differences in terms of nationality, race, ethnicity, religion, language, caste or class, what we have in common is our status as a living, breathing, feeling human beings who can experience pain and suffering and humiliation, and who deserve to have our dignity as persons equally respected. We should be treated not on the basis of what we are as a result of our genes or the circumstances of our upbringing, but on the basis of what we do, and above all on the decency or not with which we behave toward our fellow human beings.

But how many of us are influenced enough by the idea of our common humanity to have it actually shape our personal life choices? Looking back on my own professional and public life – as a long serving Australian politician and international NGO head, and occasional academic, I think I can reasonably claim that this concept is at the heart of everything I have believed, and how I have tried to act over the course of my career. But how did I come to embrace this view, and have it influence so many of my own life choices? It was not, I have to admit, through any particular process of abstract intellectual reasoning, despite my philosophical training at Melbourne and Oxford Universities. And I don’t think it was through anything I was specifically taught at school, or Sunday school, or heard through sermons, or lectures. Rather what most influenced me, and my life choices – and I suspect this is true for most people – was a series of formative experiences in my early life, most of them concentrated in my university student years.

At the risk of self-indulgence, but in the hope that my experiences may resonate a little with others – particularly those who are as young now as I was then – and help them to focus on their own life choices, let me describe five such formative experiences that I had, each of which I can vividly remember many decades later. I will try to describe how each of them, in their different ways, both developed or reinforced in me a strong sense of our common humanity, and definitely influenced the career choices I have made, and the issues I have pursued with most intensity over the course of my public life.
The first such experience was in my early childhood, in the 1950s, so long ago now it seems not only another era, but another country. The prevailing environment of the time in Australia was one of casual, endemic, almost universal racism, and this was part and parcel of my upbringing, including in my own home. My experience was one that those Gen X or Gen Y will find rather hard to even begin to comprehend, but it’s also one that plenty of people of my generation will recall. Mine was a working class family, where all the routine prejudices of the day – and the vocabulary, from which we now recoil, that went with them– were alive and well. I heard, from my father especially, about “wogs”, “wops”, “Balts”, “Chinks”, “boongs” and “nig-nogs”, and about interracial marriage being “like cats mating with dogs”. But – and this was what made the experience not so much a formative one as a transformative one – there was another whole dimension to my father’s behaviour. What was intriguing about him, and I suspect a great many of his contemporaries, was that his fundamental decency kept on getting in the way of his prejudices.

My father was a tram driver whose job required him to train over the years scores of new immigrant arrivals, and I remember him coming home one day early on saying to my mother: ‘I had this fella Angelo today, bloody Italian, practically just off the ship – but y’know, he’s a really nice little bloke”. And then it was Spyrou the Greek, and Bobby who had a “lot of blackfella in him”, and Freddie the Sri Lankan burgher, and a dozen or so others. All, as individuals, bloody good blokes. As was one of my best friends before high school, a Latvian kid named Karlis Bremanis, who dad called “Charley Bananas” and treated as affectionately as his own. My father died a long time ago, back in the mid-’60s, without ever really getting over his prejudices in the abstract. But when you’ve never met a wop or a wog or a boong or a Balt you didn’t actually like, you go a long way towards instilling in your kids a sense of difference between stereotype and individual reality.

The second experience was in my first ever overseas trip, to Japan, as part of a student group, when I was twenty years old, when I visited Hiroshima. Standing at the epicentre of that first nuclear bomb strike, and getting my first real physical sense of what had happened just two decades earlier, I was overwhelmed by the almost indescribable horror of what had occurred. There was one particular exhibit in the peace park museum that I have never been able to get out of my memory: a granite block, which had been part of the front of an office building, against which someone had been sitting in the sun when the bomb exploded early in that August morning. Starkly visible on the stone was the shadow of that human being, indelibly etched there by the crystallization of the granite around that person’s body as he or she was, in an instant, incinerated by that blast.
I pledged myself then to do whatever I could, when I could, to try to rid the world once and for all of these terrible weapons, the most indiscriminately inhumane ever invented and the only ones capable of destroying life on this planet as we know it. I’m afraid that I have to admit I haven’t much to show for all the efforts I have subsequently made in this respect in my years as Australia’s Foreign Minister and beyond. But it has not been for want of trying. In 1996 I set up with Prime Minister Paul Keating the Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons, which made the first really powerful case for their complete abolition, with its core central argument, repeated endlessly in international debate and writing ever since, that so long as any state has nuclear weapons, others will want them; so long as any nuclear weapons exist they are bound one day to be used, if not deliberately then by accident or miscalculation; and that any such use would be catastrophic for this planet.

More recently, at the invitation of the first Rudd government, I co-chaired with former Japanese foreign minister Yoriko Kawaguchi a big new international commission on nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament which laid out a very clear and practical blueprint as to how real progress could be made on all these fronts if the political will could be harnessed. And to help stimulate that political will on an ongoing base I have worked with colleagues to establish at the ANU a new Centre for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament, which has already produced a globally influential State of Play report documenting the world’s backsliding. This Centre also operates as the secretariat for the Asia Pacific Leadership Network, where we bring together more than thirty former presidents and prime ministers and senior figures from fourteen countries around the region to try to persuade and pressure our respective governments to take effective action.

I have to say that while working for nuclear disarmament is just about the most important thing anyone concerned for the future of our common humanity could be doing, it is also just about the most frustrating, involving very slow grinding through very hard boards. It all reminds me a little of that old story about the man who was told to wait on the walls of the Jerusalem and wait for the coming of the millennium. Asked what he thought of the job, he replied “Well from some standpoints it could be considered boring, but at least the work is steady.”

The third and fourth experiences I want to recount occurred a few years after my Hiroshima visit, in 1968, when I had just finished at Melbourne University and was making my first trip to Europe, to take up a scholarship in Oxford. Determined to see as much as I could of the world along the way, as so many young Australians have been before and since, I spent six months wending my way by plane and
overland through a dozen countries in Asia, and a few more in Africa and the Middle East as well.

One of my early ports of call – after Papua New Guinea and Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand – was Vietnam where, rather crazily, I went to Saigon to try to make some sense of the war that was being waged, and that had mobilized so many of my student generation in protest. The airport when I arrived was chaotic, full of military personnel and departing Vietnamese, and not exactly geared up for backpacking tourists. It took me forever to find a cheap way into town and somewhere cheap to stay. But just as Saigon airport wasn’t geared up for travellers, I rapidly discovered that Saigon hotels cheap enough for me to afford weren’t geared up for those who wanted their beds to actually sleep in. The place I ended up in was horribly squalid, and my enduring memory is being wakened by a shrieking ruckus in the corridor outside, and peering out the door seeing an enormous GI beating a half-naked local girl with a broom handle down the staircase.

I think that experience, and a few others like it that week, helps explains why I have had throughout my adult life a horror not just of nuclear war, but of all war, because of the sheer scale of the human suffering and misery that is always associated with it. I am not a pacifist, I accept that some wars can indeed be just, and I have supported military action in other circumstances – in particular to stop mass atrocity crimes – which I’ll come back to later. But the notion that there is any glory or romance in war, or anything to be said for the kind of nationalist chest-beating – “my country right or wrong” – that has so often led to war in the past, and could so easily again, is not something that I can ever accept, because it does defy every precept of our common humanity.

My South East Asian experience was certainly was a core motivation during the long and gruelling years that I worked in the late 1980s and early 1990s as Australian Foreign Minister, with my regional and Chinese and American and UN colleagues, to find and implement a sustainable basis for peace in Cambodia. It was a recurring motif as I watched, impotently and from a distance, the horrific events in Rwanda, Bosnia and Kosovo work themselves out through the mid to late 1990s. And it sustained my focus, in my life after Australian politics, based in Brussels for nearly a decade, leading the International Crisis Group, the global conflict prevention and resolution organization, which by the time I left was doing field-based research, analysis and advocacy in some 60 fragile countries and situations around the world, in environments where the most common drivers of violence are ethnocentric arrogance or grievance, and where the risks of deterioration into catastrophe are forever real.
The fourth story I want to recount occurred a few days after that night in Saigon, when I flew across the border to Cambodia, which was still then at peace, and where I was able to repeat the much happier experiences I had had in previous weeks, and was to have in the weeks ahead, in other countries of the region. Right across Asia, I spent many hours and days on student campuses and in student hangouts, and in hard-class cross-country trains and ramshackle rural buses and share taxis, getting to know in the process scores of some of the liveliest and brightest people of their generation. Those encounters were usually fleeting, but some of them resulted in friendships which have endured to this day.

In the years that followed I have in fact kept running into Indonesians, Singaporeans, Malaysians, Thai, Burmese, Vietnamese, Indians, Pakistanis, Nepalese and Afghans who I either met on the road on that trip, or who were there at the time and had a store of common experiences to exchange. But among all the countries in Asia I visited then, there was just one from which I never again, in later years, saw any of those students whom I had met and befriended, or anyone exactly like them. And that country was Cambodia.

The reason, I am sadly certain, is that every last one of them died a few years later in Pol Pot’s genocide – either targeted for execution in the killing fields as a middle-class intellectual enemy of the state, or dying, as more than a million did, from starvation and disease following forced displacement to labour in the countryside. The knowledge, and the memory, of what must have happened to those vivacious and engaging young men and women with whom I drank beer, ate noodles and careered up and down the road from Phnom Penh to Siem Reap in child, chicken and pig-scattering share-taxis, is something that haunts me to this day.

I think that explains why it is that I grabbed the opportunity that I did, when I became Australia’s Foreign Minister twenty years later, to play a key role in developing the UN peace plan for Cambodia, as I have already mentioned, to break the country out of the cycle of genocidal violence and civil war in which it had been trapped since the mid-’70s. But above all it was the memory of Cambodia that made me take on later, as one of the central ongoing projects of my life, when the opportunity arose after I left Australian politics, the ambitious role of trying to change the way the world thinks and acts in response to genocide and other major crimes against humanity.

The issue of global indifference to mass atrocity crimes had long been hovering, unresolved. For centuries there was no generally accepted principle in law, morality or state practice to challenge the core notion that it was no-one’s business but their
own if states murdered or forcibly displaced large numbers of their own citizens, or allowed atrocity crimes to be committed by one group against another on their soil.

Even after World War II, with the awful experience of Hitler’s Holocaust encouraging the embrace of new legal norms – the recognition of individual and group human rights in the UN Charter and, more grandly, in the Universal Declaration; the recognition by the Nuremberg Tribunal Charter in 1945 of the concept of “crimes against humanity”, and the signing of the Genocide Convention in 1948 – things did not fundamentally change.

The issue burst back into life in the 1990s with the series of terrible situations which unfolded in Central Africa and the Balkans, with the catastrophe of Rwandan genocide in 1994, in which 800,000 men, women and children were hacked to death in a few short weeks; the almost unbelievable default in Srebrenica in Bosnia just a year later, in 1995, when 8,000 men and boys were led out to their slaughter by Serbian gunmen under the unprotesting noses of UN peacekeepers; and the failure of the Security Council to agree on a response to the threatened genocide in Kosovo in 1999. Through all of this the world remained a consensus free zone. Those in the global North tended to rally behind the rallying cry of “humanitarian intervention”, or the “right to intervene” militarily, but in the global South the prevailing mood was, not surprisingly given so many countries’ unhappy colonial history, defence of state sovereignty at almost any price.

My opportunity to play a role in finding a way through this nightmare came when the Canadian government in 2000 asked me to jointly lead, with the Algerian diplomat Mohamed Sahnoun, a distinguished international commission charged with the task of finding an answer to the challenge put to the international community by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan in his Millennium address to the General Assembly, when he squarely invoked the theme of my address here this evening:

If humanitarian intervention is indeed an unacceptable assault on sovereignty, how should we respond to a Rwanda, to a Srebrenica – to gross and systematic violations of human rights that offend every precept of our common humanity?

I can’t pretend that my Commission came up with all the answers, or that the world is now close to ending mass atrocity crimes once and for all: the terrible continuing tragedy in Syria is demonstration enough of that. But I think we can claim to be much closer to a solution now than we were a decade ago, as a result of the Commission’s conceptual breakthrough in replacing the concept of the “right to
intervene” with that of the “responsibility to protect”, and the unanimous embrace of this new concept by the world’s heads of state and government at the 2005 UN World Summit, in what has been described by the British historian Martin Gilbert as “the most significant adjustment to national sovereignty in 360 years”.

The core idea of “R2P” is that the primary responsibility for protecting its citizens from man-made catastrophe remains with each sovereign state itself; but that there is a secondary responsibility for other states to assist them to so act; and that in the event of a state failing to discharge that responsibility, as a result of either incapacity or ill-will, the wider international community is obliged to act, as persuasively or as coercively as ultimately proves necessary, to halt or avert the harm in question.

Since 2005 there have been two high water marks in the application of the doctrine. One was the international response to the catastrophic events unfolding in Kenya at the beginning of 2008, where diplomatic, not military, intervention secured an early end to what looked like rapidly deteriorating into a Rwanda-style genocide. The other was the authorization by the Security Council in 2011 of the use of military force to avert a genocidal catastrophe in Libya: if the international community had acted anything like as quickly and robustly in the 1990s as it did in Libya two years ago, 8,000 of our fellow human beings would still be alive in Srebrenica today, and 800,000 in Rwanda.

Unhappily I have to report that since then, because of strong disagreements about the way the Libyan mandate was subsequently applied by the intervening NATO-led forces – pursuing regime change through full-scale warfighting, when others on the Security Council believed that civilian protection could have been achieved without going so far – consensus on the Security Council has completely broken down when it has come to dealing with the very similar, and now much worse, situation in Syria.

But while recreating global consensus on how to deal with the hardest of cases – when military action of one kind or another really does seem to be the only way of halting or averting mass atrocity crimes – is going to be very difficult, all the evidence is that the basic principles of R2P are now very broadly accepted by the international community. There will always be differences about how those principles should be applied in particular cases, but I don’t believe that we are in any real danger of slipping back to the bad old days when genocide and major crimes against humanity perpetrated behind state borders were regarded as simply no-one else’s business.

My final story goes back to the early 1970s when, after returning to Australia from Oxford, I took up a lectureship in the Law School at Melbourne University. I was
becoming involved by then in a whole variety of public policy issues, including trying to make sense on the ground, and in legal terms, of the first Aboriginal land rights claims that were starting to be made, and helping to establish around the country a network of Aboriginal Legal Services, working in particular on ensuring decent representation in criminal cases to try to break the cycle of conviction, incarceration and recidivism into which generations of Aboriginal youngsters had been drawn.

That work was exciting and constructive, but it also led to one of the most heartbreaking experience that I – and my family – have ever had. It involved a young man called Brian Kamara Willis, then in his early 20s, born somewhere in the Northern Territory – he never quite knew where – of an Aboriginal mother and a white father. He was, as the full bloods called him, and he called himself, a “yella fella”. And he was one of the stolen generation, snatched from his mother as a very young child, taken to Adelaide to a childhood of institutions and foster homes where he never settled.

But he was a bright kid, who wanted to change things: he went back to the Territory, won a job as a field officer for the new Alice Springs Aboriginal Legal Service, where he did so well he was picked for an Aboriginal study grant, came to a Melbourne school to prepare for University and was admitted the following year to the Law School here. It’s in this context that I and my family came to know him, and he often stayed or visited – with his partner and two young kids – at our home. But Brian felt hemmed in by the big city, with a constant sense that he just didn’t belong. So he deferred his degree and returned to the Territory, where he blossomed again – becoming not much later Director of the Legal Service, and an outspoken champion of his people speaking and writing in fierce and moving terms about, in particular, the plight of the stolen generation.

So far so good, but the story does not have a happy ending. Brian just couldn’t fight the pressures, shrug off the prejudices and sustain the struggle for long enough. One night in Alice Springs, he went to a political gathering, drank too much as he often now did, and became very distressed, bursting out at one stage “The urban black, the part-Aboriginal, is the man in between. He has nothing”. Then he went home, took out a shotgun, and at the age of 26 or 27, in front of his horrified wife and children, blew out his brains. The memory of that brilliant young man, and his family, and what happened to them, in a society which just couldn’t cope with the kind of diversity he represented – which just couldn’t recognize that we are just one common human family – haunts me still.
And it should haunt any of us who think that the task is easily or readily completed of making those in our society who feel racially or culturally different believe that they are genuinely wanted. Earlier generations of Australians failed their indigenous neighbours, and in many ways we are failing them still. And – unless we constantly remind ourselves of what needs to be done as a community and at an individual level – we are at risk of failing the new generations of more recently arrived Australians who desperately need our support.

The experience I have just described certainly reinforced my determination as a Parliamentarian and Cabinet Minister to do everything I possibly could to win for indigenous Australians the respect and dignity they deserved, and above all ensure their recognition not only as the prior occupants but the prior owners of the land that we white settlers tore from them. My greatest opportunity to do so came in 1993, when I found myself as government Senate leader, in a chamber we did not control, negotiating, cajoling and shepherding the Native Title Bill, through some 50 hours and 238 amendments worth of intense debate – to that point the longest single national parliamentary debate ever held. I said when I left Parliament that when that Bill was finally voted through – just a few days before Christmas, close to midnight, with the Senate gallery packed full of wildly cheering indigenous Australians and their supporters – this was the single most exhilarating moment of my twenty-one year parliamentary career, and I can still feel that tingle now.

What can be taken away by others – particularly those still at university and just beginning to set out on life’s long journey – from these stories? I can’t have your formative experiences for you, but perhaps by describing mine I can encourage two responses, First, think about what you may already have learned about our common humanity from your own life experiences to date, perhaps until now without focusing on any of this very much, and think about what this might mean for how you prioritise your future life and career choices.

Second, get out into the wider world as early and as often as you can, break out of your comfort zone and try to create the circumstances in which you can have formative experiences while you are still young enough for them to be able to influence the future life choices you will make. If you are a student, do reach out with an open mind to subject areas and disciplines other than the ones you are immediately committed to studying, because you may find windows opening into infinitely fascinating landscapes you never really knew existed. Do reach out to other students, of other cultures and nationalities, who may be just a little beyond your immediate comfort zone, because in doing so you will make some wonderful friendships that will last the rest of your life.
And do, above all, find ways to travel, even if you pile up some pretty large debt in the process, because the intensity of the experiences you are bound to have out there on the road, just about anywhere in the world you go, are bound, again, to stay with you the rest of your life, and profoundly influence the way you approach it. They will tell you more about the reality of our common humanity – and how profoundly important it is that we embrace and respect that in each other across all the human divides that exist – than almost anything else you could do.