

The Promise of Tomorrow

Jeff McMullen

What a rare event it is to be in a room full of people with every one genuinely thinking about the future, your own future and dare I say it, the future of the world. The Harvard biologist, Edward O. Wilson, suggests in two of my favourite books, *The Future of Life* and *The Social Conquest of Earth*, that humans appear to be programmed by evolution to think mostly about one single place, the place we call home, and about not much more than our immediate family: our partner, children, parents, a mere generation or two. This eminent earth scientist is no doubt right. We are wired for self-interest and this may be the ultimate challenge for humanity. I believe that for the progress of our species and the balance of life itself we are capable of a leap beyond narrow self-interest. Will we be sentient custodians in the Aboriginal sense, like the Gadigal people of the Eora nation who maintained the balance of life here around this glorious harbour for longer than anyone knows? I honour the custodianship of the Ancestors because Aboriginal knowledge, the world's oldest unbroken story of human knowledge, defines for us what it means to be Australian, to be *of this land*. In this sense, every man, woman and child shares a responsibility for the wellbeing of an interconnected, living world. Tonight I want to share with you some experiences, ideas and memorable people who have inspired me to believe in the *promise of tomorrow*.

When I climbed the active volcano, Mt Etna, in Sicily with the late and great volcanologists, Maurice and Katia Kraft, it was one of several exhilarating and life-changing experiences that have allowed me not only to conquer my fear of some of the most awesome natural forces, but also to overcome the idea of fear itself. I learned on this day and others down in Antarctica, high up in the Himalayas or deep in the Amazon, that fear is not always an instinct of self-preservation. It is sometimes a paralysis that holds us back from what is really possible and most deeply pleasing in life. As I climbed the snow-covered slopes of the spectacular Mt Etna, I asked Maurice Kraft about the odds of us filming this exploding mountain without being killed. He laughed and said, "Look, most journalists die in bed. Why worry. If this blows in a big way, you won't even know about it". Then I noticed the boulders as big as a car being flung from the belly of the beast. There was an awesome rumbling beneath our feet and I saw the edge of the crater tremble and collapse into the void, gases billowing and more boulders flying. Katia Kraft said, "You just have to keep your eyes on the sky, spot the big bombs and dance with Mt Etna". And that's what we did. My camera crew pretty soon had had enough dancing with the volcano and wanted to get down the mountain as fast as they could. But it was up there watching this great natural wonder that I understood what Maurice and Katia Kraft had been trying to tell us. The Earth itself has been born from such natural forces four and a half billion years ago and in another four and a half billion, we believe, our blue planet will be engulfed by the sun.

Once you start thinking this way, in geological time, there is little to fear. The most awesome natural forces are part of the reason we exist, because without oceans and atmosphere and volcanos we would not exist in our world. The great challenge of life is

to work out a harmonious way of enjoying it while we are here. Maurice joked, famously in that film we made together, that he would love to make an asbestos canoe and ride a lava flow as the very last thing he ever did. Katia chuckled and said, “Go ahead”, but she would stick to taking the pictures. This wonderful French couple spent their whole lives living dangerously, doing what they loved, and trying to understand the *super plumes* that could cause a massive loss of human life in countries like our neighbour, Indonesia, where so many live on the slopes of active volcanos. In this way the French volcanologists made an extraordinary contribution to human knowledge that countless millions of people now benefit from. A year and a half after our memorable adventure together Maurice and Katia were killed in a catastrophic blast in Japan, an explosion that turned them into stardust. When I look at the stars I think of how much they taught me.

In North-western Australia, when I climbed down inside some of the enormous earth impact craters left by gigantic meteors that have crashed to earth through the ages, I moved on to an even larger calendar, to the idea of astronomical time, to see that we are part of a much bigger story, one beyond our own small planet. Why fear the folly of men, the madness loose in the world right now, when earth and everything and every one on it will be space dust one day? The wonder of life is to appreciate that we have this time to savour it and even to dare to comprehend it. My guide exploring the comet and meteor craters was that brilliant American astronomer and geologist, Gene Shoemaker whose wife had first spotted the massive Shoemaker-Levy Comet. Gene Shoemaker’s research on the danger of near-earth asteroids pioneered that whole new branch of catastrophe theory. He used to wear a T-shirt that had one dinosaur looking at another as the comet comes in and the dinosaur says, ‘ OH SHOOOT!’ It was not a comet that ended Gene’s life. On the Tanami Road north of Alice Springs, a lonely stretch of road through the country he loved the most, his car was in a head on collision. NASA named a space vehicle after him, the one probing the near earth asteroids and Gene is the only human being whose ashes have been scattered on the moon. Now he *is* space dust, part of the great continuum he was fascinated with always. The truth is – and Gene Shoemaker knew it - there is far more chance of humans ending our run on earth by ourselves than us being hit by a giant meteor.

The problem is, as Edward O. Wilson warns, that we don’t think much beyond the bubble of our own lives. After travelling through so much of the world, through countries of enormously different states of modernity and culture, from Samarkand, the city of the Golden Domes, in Uzbekistan, through Mongolia with the descendants of Genghis Khan, wandering around the ruins of Angkor Wat in Cambodia or the ancient civilisations in Central and South America, I came to see that this self-interest is part of a long historical pattern. Most humans, especially in the wealthier parts of the world, live in a matrix. It is not a cyber world like the Keanu Reeves movie. We live in a Matrix of self-interest, shaped by our own culture, education, information and experience. Even in a digitalized globalized world we often find it hard to understand the individuals in a far off land like Syria or Sudan.

Despite our near- overload of information we struggle to fully comprehend the big picture, to understand that 75 per cent of the world's poor are women and children, that China and India have tens of millions of women 'missing' from their population because of female infanticide, that around 800 million people are struggling to survive because of chronic water shortage, that 34 million people have the HIV virus and about the same number have died of AIDS. Sometimes we don't even realise what is happening here at home, that HIV numbers are rising again or Aboriginal children in the Northern Territory are gripped by a 160% rise in suicide during the first six years of the Intervention in their remote communities. How can we find empathy with all of these strangers?

I remember my mother feeding beggar-women and their children who came to the gates of our house when my family lived on the island of Penang during the Malayan Emergency of the 1950's. My father, who was in the RAAF, fighting what they then called 'terrorism', pointed out to us as children the connection between ethnic conflicts, insurgency, so called wars of liberation and the pressures of overpopulation in lands of limited resources. We watched the poverty walk right up to our door. Old wrinkled men who slept on pieces of cardboard down in the monsoon drains. And the children stared at us as we set out plates for them. "If you keep feeding and clothing them", my father said, "they will keep coming back." My mother would say, "They have young children and they are hungry. We've got plenty." My father, Jack, just smiled as he watched my mother give us all a lesson in true humanity. In her own small ways she so often made a difference. I have carried that lesson with me all my life and tried to live up to her example, by sharing life generously, even with perfect strangers, and along the way I have learned much from them too.

Imagine walking from our modern world into one of the most remote corners of earth, deep into the Amazon jungle to meet a tribe still living as if they were in the Stone Age. The Zoe, in the north of the Amazon rainforest up near Surinam, had never seen a white man with blue eyes before. When I showed them a picture of our German Shepherd, Ned Kelly, their eyes were wide open. My partner Kim seemed even more exotic to them and as they passed that photo around, all of the Amazon women and children smiled broadly at the face that smiled at them. The Zoe women daubed their bodies with red ochre and wore a headdress of white vulture feathers. The men carried blowguns and bows and arrows. They looked at me like a man from another star. I do not want to romanticise their hard life because at the time this small tribe's very existence was threatened by malaria, carried in by missionaries who had contacted them to bring them the Bible. After the weeks I spent living with the Zoe I could see in them ourselves, where we have come from, what we have won and what we have lost. It gave me a very clear view of the human journey. I became friends for that time with one unforgettable Amazon man, Toru and his family. First we had to build up some common language, pointing to the animals, the fire, the sun, the day light filtering through the rainforest canopy or up at the stars at night. Through the art of listening carefully we learn so much faster. Toru and others shared their remarkable world with me. We hunted, fished, ate, swam and celebrated together. As I listened to them sing and chant at night while the jungle rang out with sounds I had never heard, I found that Toru and his people were incredibly aware, true masters of their Amazon rainforest environment. But they also were totally unaware and

unprepared for the intrusion of the wider world around them. There were so many threats that they could not comprehend, like violence and disease that have reduced the Amazon population from about 5 million indigenous at the time of the arrival of the Portuguese to just 200,000 today. Toru and his people reminded me of us at this hour in human history. We are so immersed in our own lives that we can't comprehend how all of humanity is interconnected, that we are part of nature that is under threat and that so much of our world is damaged and changing so rapidly.

After over fifty years of traveling this world I believe that our species is at war with itself and against the earth. The two things are connected. Of more than thirty wars I have been to, from the dirty little civil wars in Central America, to the grinding trench warfare in Eritrea and Ethiopia, to the slaughterhouse of Rwanda where I saw a schoolhouse stacked with thousands of corpses, there was always an underlying pattern. The most dangerous political pressure came from unsustainable growth in population in vast zones of distress where the most essential life-sustaining resources were run down or gone. In the 1830s when my family were settling in Australia, the whole world had less than one billion people. Suddenly we have seven billion and our world is changing at an unprecedented pace. Human life is plainly out of kilter. The past century has seen the greatest loss of life in human history, with 160-180 million killed in conflict. In the new millennium we continue the fighting over land and lines on the map. Oil, food and precious metals are the spoils now. But by 2025 when it's expected we'll have eight billion people, the danger may be even greater. The amphibious explorer, Jacques Cousteau, warned us of this years ago. I have visited his marvellous institute in Paris where the global research indicates that by 2025 the world will cross a threshold where there will not be enough fresh water for many more people. We are not adequately preparing for this challenge, even when water is our most essential life sustaining resource. After this round of the oil wars, every global strategist and Pentagon hot spot forecaster understands that we run a risk of the water wars.

Drive south from the Horn of Africa down through the Sahara and you follow rolling waves of desertification. In Senegal, you were glimpsing it in my film, whole villages have been buried by the sand dunes, sometimes three levels of houses and even mosques down beneath our feet. In the Eritrean war which ground on for over four decades with primitive trench warfare, two sides who couldn't feed their own populations clawing away for territory, I saw the man-made famine. Coming back from the front line at Nakfa, I stopped our four-wheel drive to hand a box of food to some Eritrean women and children sheltering under the twisted roots of a tree from the Ethiopian Migs that flew overhead. A very beautiful but sad woman just stared at the ground and so I returned with my driver to translate for me. She lifted the veil that fell from her head and there by her side was the tiny day's old baby that had died because she did not have the milk in her breast to feed that child. I have never forgotten that woman or child. The war had created the famine because both sides were destroying their crops, their farmlands and their water supplies. It underscored for me the connection between war, famine and environmental ruin on the whole African continent. Millions of people in warzones are daily on the edge of starvation. In so many other recent conflicts whether it's in

Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Somalia, Sudan, Burundi, Rwanda, the Congo, Zimbabwe or Sri Lanka there is this underlying dangerous pressure where severe unsustainable growth in population has caused critical stress on environments and the most vital life-sustaining resources are running down.

According to the British earth scientist, Norman Meyers, since the end of World War II humans have devoured more raw materials than all our ancestors combined. As a consequence of this exploitation, many species, apart from humans, are being liquidated at an astonishing pace. By the end of our century one third of all living species may be gone. Watch the birds now on the wing because of 10,000 species, 7000 are in drastic decline. When the smoke clears from our skies, take a long walk through our bush and think deeply because up to 50,000 of the world's 250,000 kinds of plants are expected to disappear over the next few decades. After seeing so much of the world I agree with Richard Leakey, Tom Lovejoy and other brilliant scientific minds I have encountered that the evidence is overwhelming – the Earth is going through the Sixth Period of Mass Extinction. We humans are driving this destruction.

Now I understand that perhaps for the first time in the history of life on earth a single species has threatened the very balance of the interconnected systems on which all life depends. We are the *Natural Born Killers*. As bad as it is now, it can get much worse. Our generation must act courageously with a more comprehensive strategy to halt this violence and destruction or future generations may not exist. We simply cannot fully comprehend the consequences of failure.

This will no doubt surprise you after my confronting assessment of the dangers and challenges, but I remain hopeful for humanity. The horror I have seen in so many places is counterbalanced by my strong belief in our better instincts and innate common sense. I do not, like some, believe civilisation is about to end because everywhere I have been I have found brilliant people to inspire this belief that we can change the world for the better. When humanity is facing danger on such a scale, history suggests we may be galvanised to action. I believe it is this common sense and extraordinary resilience of humanity that has seen us survive Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, Idi Amin, Saddam Hussein and Osama Bin Laden. We can survive all of the other madmen of this hour if we can overcome our paralysing fear of those who seem different and break out of this matrix of narrow self-interest. The greatest challenge for us all is to begin an evolution in thinking, to start behaving like a sentient human community.

In that spirit, I have offered some ideas in my book, *A Life of Extremes*, some interconnected approaches from minds far greater than my own, to try to solve our human problems. I am not worried about scepticism. So many inspiring people I have met through the years always recognized that there would be naysayers, telling us there is no hope for change. John Lennon dared to tell the world to “*give peace a chance*”. He imagined a better world and used every breath to make it happen. We need to give ourselves the deep thinking time, the silence and reflection to imagine what we can do. Your 21st Century education is a vital part of this process, as we now have the greatest accumulation of human knowledge in history and the immense possibilities of our new

technology. Learning can be lifelong and shared. We can't close off our universities or even our pre-schools only for a wealthier few. The greatest potential in our fast growing world is to tap the enormous intellectual capacity of all seven billion people, especially the impoverished majority, women and children.

Australia, I am convinced, can show the way. For the third year in a row the OECD has ranked Australia as a world leader in quality of life. This version of the health and happiness index is broad and deep and should be a cause of national celebration. Yet at the same time younger Australians are warned that they risk being the first generation to have a shorter life expectancy than their parents. The obesity epidemic of lifestyle illnesses challenges our complacency. So does the sorry state of Indigenous health, which is the full time focus of my work. In most of the remote Aboriginal communities I work with I am often the oldest man in the red dirt streets. The key to change the Aboriginal life expectancy gap and also to reduce the risk of the younger generation having a shorter life expectancy is to empower the individual, family and whole communities with essential life-changing education. For instance, for every extra year of education provided to a whole community of young teenage girls we will add up to four years life expectancy to their first baby. For every additional year of education we will reduce by seven to ten per cent the chance of that young woman losing her baby through infant mortality. Through this process Australia can lead the world by example. As recently as 1990 some twelve million infants died before they reached the age of five. Medicines, vaccines and even the availability of water have helped reduce infant mortality to around 6 million babies a year. Aboriginal infant mortality was once five times the rate of others, but today it is down to two times higher. I think of the mother in Eritrea and I know that's still too many families losing their children. So how can we improve the health of the human family as a whole?

The starting point is to understand that for all of us between 70 and 80 per cent of our health will be shaped by social determinants, the quality of our education, work, living environment and health care? Ending poverty is the overall challenge.

If you are going to contribute here at home or on a global scale you will need to be healthy yourself. To respond to your generational threat of reduced life expectancy you can first use your own life-skill education to reduce intake of sugar, fat, salt, tobacco and excessive alcohol. Whatever way you look at it, knowledge is the key to self-empowerment. When you step back and look at the big picture of Australian health, however, despite our top of the world ranking, even 58% of doctors are overweight or obese, compared with 64% of the rest of us. Why does the profession with arguably the greatest scientific knowledge of the threat of the obesity epidemic still struggle to change behaviour? The answer is almost certainly the work/life balance, or more bluntly it's overwork.

A new *Beyondblue* survey indicates that many medical students at University are working and studying over 50 hours a week and too many full-time GPs are driven by overwork and trauma towards much higher levels of stress, self harm and even suicidal thoughts. In my work with Aboriginal people who have demonstrated extraordinary resiliency through thousands of years of changes to their living environment, I am constantly

reminded that fundamentally as a species we have become sedentary when clearly we evolved to move, to walk the country. We all need to walk in the right spirit and when you do you will hear the country sing to you. Health, I believe, is a state of mind and body. Give yourself the time for peace.

With the younger Aboriginal boys and girls I work with on better health and nutrition I never make arguments of prohibition. I know that many of their medical conditions like anaemia and otitis media are related to their poverty. But about half of young teenage Aboriginal girls still smoke even while pregnant. This, combined with our modern junk food diet, gives them a highly elevated chance of a dangerously low birth-weight baby whose kidneys have too few nephrons, setting up the risk of renal illness and reduced life expectancy. So I make a positive case that good nutrition and not smoking or drinking during pregnancy can gift your baby the chance of health and a longer life. I put it this way. Tobacco was an introduced drug, one of the white man's poisons. So was sugar and it became a commodity driving the global slave trade. Who wants to be part of the legacy of the global slave trade? People are consuming on average 20 teaspoons of additional sugar, usually corn syrup high in fructose. So push back the white man's poison. We don't need it. With this kind of thinking most Australians have already turned away from cigarette smoking. We lead the world in plain packaging and explicit warnings on the dangers of that health threat. The next steps to wellness instead of the sickness industry involve reducing all of the lifestyle related illnesses. Why shouldn't the food industry be taxed or even penalized for pushing sugar, salt and fat when this adds so much to the nation's medical bills? In a country of binge drinkers where we organise most social occasions around alcohol use (cheers) can we also take the lead and establish celebratory drinking that is not harmful to yourself or others? I believe we can. If you become truly fit for the 21st Century challenges then you just might become the first generation to live to 100.

As almost all nations now continue to stretch their longevity, clearly a Population Plan for the world is needed to help improve the health of all seven billion members of our human family. The world's richest nations have reneged on most of their promises at the UN Conference on Population back in 1994. For about one cent a day, or the cost of a glass of wine or a cold beer per year, those of us in the developed world could fund the birth planning we promised the undeveloped nations. Without it, we are in far worse trouble because the global population is likely to reach ten billion around 2050 before a possible slowing of the birth rate gives us a chance to stabilise our dangerous and unsustainable growth. Without action now, the worst-case projections would see our species swarm like locusts, with the most extreme catastrophe theorists talking of fourteen billion human beings next century. I think that is unlikely.

A sign of great hope for our species is the clear trend by impoverished women when they make economic progress to usually opt to have just one or two children, instead of four or more. This could turn out to be a life-saving action for our species, a change that helps to stabilise the loss of other creatures as well. On a visit to Nepal with the late Anita Roddick, founder of *The Body Shop*, and once one of the richest women in Britain, I saw her relating wonderfully to some of the poorest women on earth. She knew that we could

change this world for the better. In Bangladesh filming another wealthy woman from America they called the Angel of Bengal, I discovered that as infant mortality is steadily reduced, women tend to have fewer babies. Bangladeshi women now average 2.2 births, which proves that through literacy, technology and improved birthing care we can stabilise our crowded world.

I would urge all of you to become involved in some way in the global effort to eliminate poverty in the human family. That's right, not to *reduce* poverty, that's been the focus in my lifetime. Your generation should help *eliminate* poverty. Over the last thirty years we have seen global poverty reduced from about one in two to today's far more hopeful rate of about one in five. Now these are just numbers. Instead of numbers, I think of my mother, standing at our door in Penang, talking with those other mothers about their children. In this way, perhaps, each person you meet in life can be an unforgettable stranger. Empathy with others will be one of your greatest sources of joy and it will deepen the love for those you love the most.

A Real Health Plan for the developing world and sustaining this through foreign aid is probably our best investment in the future longevity of our species. The truth is that many of our most charming creatures like the kangaroo have been around for over twenty million years, the great whales passing our coast again for even longer. You may have heard on the news today of the mother whale circling its calf that had become trapped in the shark net on one of Sydney's northern beaches? Compared with these creatures we are a relatively young species. We are a complex predator whose behaviour, especially our fondness for clustering in overcrowded settlements, living in environments where viruses breed and mutate, and traveling on aircraft that swiftly connect us, threatening pandemics, all of this shapes our own vulnerability to certain threats. The mighty intellect of Stephen Hawking has posited that a mutant virus is the most likely threat to wipe out the human species. So rather than cutting Australian foreign aid, we need to boost it, especially in neighbouring countries, to help lift lifestyle education and combat preventable illnesses and diseases. It is encouraging that polio is close to eradication and some first rate Australian minds have worked hard on that front. There has also been great progress towards preventing malaria and cholera, diseases that have claimed hundreds of millions of lives. I believe that Stephen Hawking is right. Global viruses do not stop at borders and each global plague is humanity's problem.

The health of our world is also clearly dependent on how we manage the uncertain and controversial impacts of our collective lifestyle. There is now man-made, polluting technology on every continent. The land, rivers, oceans, reefs and atmosphere are significantly impacted by this no matter how much some stubbornly deny it. Macquarie University's relentless advocate for environmental awareness, Professor Tim Flannery, has always argued that we need to understand the most ancient patterns of life on earth to gauge the extraordinary scale of the measurable changes now underway around the world. This came home to me down in Antarctica as I watched a Chinese glaciologist measuring radioactive fallout even there in that last great white wilderness.

Our heavy footprint on eco systems cannot be disputed but it remains the behaviour most vulnerable to manipulation and disinformation inside that information Matrix we all live in. Look at the extraordinary political retreat here in Australia from the scientific consensus on the best way to face the challenge of global warming. Where are you getting your information? Are you testing it by reading widely? Like most of you, I have learned to question and assess carefully partisan political views. You need more than night-vision goggles to detect the truth. So let me say that among all of the memorable conversations with great scientists I have sat and listened to at length around the world, the best and brightest of these minds have been possessed by the daunting and complex threat of greenhouse gases and global warming.

Overwhelmingly most earth scientists believe that the six billion metric tonnes of carbon dioxide humans add to the atmosphere every year could and should be substantially reduced. Putting a price on carbon pollution, taxing it or trading it, requires leadership but in Australia we are clearly afraid of that. The Coalition Government's so called Direct Action Plan, as far as we can tell, puts no cap on carbon. Instead it is a costly attempt to pay industry to pollute less. There is a slow timetable to retire the most-polluting coal fired plants and a proposal to pay farmers to attempt to sequester carbon in soil capture. The CSIRO says we need far more research to know whether this will work. Canada has had a nightmare trying to use reforestation to address one third of its carbon reduction target because of a Mountain Pine Beetle that may have reached plague proportions at least in part because of the warming climate. As most of Australia's old growth forest in the eastern states was clear felled years ago, reforestation and carbon capture on vast unsettled lands should be part of the solution. Having Aboriginal people manage their lands for carbon capture could also reduce poverty and welfare dependence in some regions. But look at the big picture. The global devastation of rainforest, that pattern I saw on so many trips to the Amazon and forests in Southeast Asia, suggests our investment in other nation's efforts ultimately might help the world capture more carbon.

First we have to return to reason and common sense on Australia's responsibility to use our cutting edge in earth science to change the pattern of carbon pollution. This is difficult when politicians and vested interests like the fossil fuel industry cloud the facts that will determine Australia's vital national interests, the genuine common good. Over a decade ago I chaired a West Australian parliamentary forum on Climate Change and I watched the politicians eyes glaze over as our brightest CSIRO scientists warned about the future threat to the south-western wheat belt because of rising temperatures. Do you know when they woke up that day? When somebody mentioned that if the climate keeps heating up, the finest red wines from the Margaret River district would no longer be grown. Perhaps more of those MPs billing the public for overseas study tours, bike rides and weddings, should be staying at home and taking a closer look in their own backyard?

The Intergovernmental Panel of Climate Scientists essentially follows the precautionary principle, establishing that human caused carbon-pollution is a significant factor in the almost one degree rise in temperature we have seen in Australia since about 1960. Australia's commitment to a 5% reduction in Carbon (from the 2000 level) by 2020 is too little because if the rest of the world follows that timid approach the science predicts a

strong risk that temperatures will rise by more than two degrees by mid century. It is that age-old human tendency to postpone the necessary action that will increase the burden for future generations.

When some Australians in the line of this current bushfire threat even dared suggest the possibility that the intensity of these fires may have some link to the drier fuel and hotter climate, our federal government squealed that this had nothing to do with its head in the sand by moving to abandon a barely noticeable carbon tax. Climate science has many uncertainties but there is a growing body of evidence from the CSIRO, the Intergovernmental Panel and the World Meteorological Organisation that the intensity of bushfires, storms and floods is likely to increase because of global warming.

My main conclusion on climate change is that instead of sheer ignorance and political retreat from the strongest, prudent science based on the precautionary principle, we need politicians prepared to do some serious climate study and then display some leadership. We need to demonstrate individually and collectively that Australians are clever enough to invest in the new alternative technologies, creating incentive to modify our damaging behaviour.

I came to believe that large numbers of people can be aroused to action when I saw an Indian hydrologist known to all as Mahantji, the late Professor V.B. Mishra, struggling to implement scientific schemes to clean up the massively polluted Ganges River, a river basin where over 600 million people live. That man inspired me because he demonstrated with his sewage treatment plant on the sacred river that no human challenge is beyond us. On the Hudson River in New York I watched Bobby Kennedy Junior, son of the assassinated Robert Kennedy, working with a river-keeper called John Cronin to enlist the talents of university students to help bring that dead river back to life. Together they sued the polluters into submission. I once flew from the source of the Murray Darling river all the way down to that choking mouth in South Australia and I found it confronting that we have all of the scientific wisdom needed to manage this stressed eco system but the real challenge is to overcome the narrow self-interest that divides people up and down that melancholy stream. This is a vast and beautiful land but it is telling us in so many places that we must change our ways. Our living coral reefs have a complexity and life force probably unequalled. When you plunge with the whale sharks at Ningaloo or swim with the turtles on the Great Barrier Reef, the wonder and miracle of life is all around you. With my son, Will, bobbing on a surfboard, on a blue-sky day somewhere on this glorious coastline, he would say, "these are the dolphin days"...the moment when the gleam on the water says life is in balance.

If we are to shape a healthy and stable world, we need to care about the fate of all of those now adrift on the ocean, the 40 million forcibly displaced people. I discovered traveling inside China that there are over seven million people internally displaced there. They can't find work permits to survive in their own country. This is the other side of the Asian Century and one we must appreciate to understand China's enormous challenge to maintain social stability as that nation continues to grow. Sitting with those poorest,

displaced people in China who had no chance of enjoining the growing prosperity of hundreds of millions of other Chinese, I knew that if I were in their shoes I too would try to find a way across the seas to a place where my children would be safe and happy.

Across most borders we are now seeing the greatest movement of people in human history. Conflict and overpopulation provides the pressure. Syrian refugees are pouring out of that warzone at 4000 or more a day. Over 2 million Syrians are now camped in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and in Turkey as some of you Global Leadership Students discussed on your recent trip. The pattern of resettlement clearly is inadequate as Western Nations have agreed to accept a mere 10,000 or so of the Syrian refugees. While it is true that Australia has resettled over 750,000 refugees and displaced people since World War Two, our current political climate has shamefully exploited our fear of difference and cultures and countries we do not fully understand. The far greatest burden of refugees now falls on poorer countries especially Pakistan and Lebanon that are near overwhelmed, while Australia becomes near hysterical about a relatively small number of asylum seekers.. It is not only unjust but in a geo-political sense it is counterproductive to burden developing nations in this way when over the longer term that approach will guarantee an even more unstable world. It is also morally wrong to hold so many people, especially children, in harsh conditions. It is important to remember asylum seekers are not “illegals” as branded by our new Immigration Minister. Under Article 31 of the Refugee Convention people have a legal right to seek asylum, whether or not they have passports or visas. When the rest of the world is not responding to resettlement, again I say, Australia should help show the way. Look at the vast camps spread across so many African nations. I can tell you that when you walk among fleeing thousands like I did in Rwanda or the Sudan, you can easily put yourself in their shoes. What if you were trapped in a war zone or a refugee camp? As Aboriginal people like to cheerfully point out, in Australia most of us were ‘boat people’ at one point or another. Our Prime Minister came here as a child. He’s just one of our extraordinary mix from over 200 different nations.

This diversity is one of our greatest strengths today. The many shades of difference are expressed in different types of creativity, problem solving and even beauty. While racism persists and we have no constitutional bar on discrimination, we need to work individually and collectively on the daily effort of living together respectfully. A first step is to affirm the best in the other person, rather than to immediately switch to a negative. It’s the secret of all good relationships. As we demonstrate personally our role, our own act of leadership in creating life in balance, the world’s healthiest and most harmonious multicultural society, we will create knowledge of how to reduce social conflict and ultimately how to avoid war.

To achieve social harmony we need to use the language of the common good and overcome the discourse of suspicion and hate. Religion continues to be the most profound cultural difference dividing humanity and so it’s frequently exploited, not necessarily as the cause, but as the rhetoric of conflict. We could look at any nation in the world to observe this pattern, but surely Syria is a striking example. Sectarian warfare includes various factions of Muslims fighting Muslims. The world is not nearly as simple

as Samuel Huntington's dramatic portrayal in *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order*. Within the world's one billion Muslims there is a struggle between different stages of modernity, different perspectives on moral ascendancy, different degrees of alienation or even humiliation and rage. There are also hundreds of millions of Muslim people longing for peace and stability. Put yourself in their shoes. For very progressive Australian Muslim organisations such as the Affinity Foundation promoting inter-cultural dialogue in our society, it is distressing for many here to see religion exploited in flashpoints of violence. We need to work hard at conflict resolution, grass roots community efforts to ensure that people understand that war is irrational, whether it's a jihad or a crusade.

In the Guatemalan genocide around 1982 in which some 250,000 Maya Quiche were slaughtered, I reported for *Four Corners* on soldiers who wore crucifixes around their necks smashing the skulls of babies and impaling heads on stakes of those they considered a sub-human devil caste, beyond their own sense of humanity. When I showed that film and testified to the American Congress, the House Armed Services Committee suspended the shipment of helicopters to the genocidal Christian army. Sometimes the truth has great power. Of all the wars I have witnessed, not one made any real sense. Civil wars, religious wars, genocides, anarchy or terrorism, violence is a contagion.

Instead of stalking the earth like a natural born killer, I come back to my main theme; we need to evolve to a higher order of human thinking. Here in Australia some religious leaders have shown great courage and conviction to try to eliminate social tensions between faiths. It would help if all religions abandoned their central dogma of exclusivity, that notion of being the Chosen Ones. Then all people, including non-believers, could appreciate the values shared by peaceful philosophies. It is a terrible irony that Christians, Jews and Muslims believe they are descended from Abraham, so why not acknowledge this common humanity? As simple as this sounds the violence circling Syria, Iraq and Iran, the calls for Jihad or Christian campaigns with that hopeless cry that God is on *our side*, shows that religious leaders have not yet displayed the true leadership humanity requires. Instead of assuming that in the 21st Century we must have never ending clashes between Islamic groups, or between Muslims and Christians, or Hindus and Muslims, we need to see that this earth, this sky full of stars, is a cathedral, a mosque, a temple for us all.

It is time to stop being afraid of people we do not understand and to really believe that there is more to unite us than divide us. The greatest inspiration should come from the men and women of war who changed course and showed what could be gained by peace. I once flew to Aswan in Egypt as Jimmy Carter pleaded with the great Egyptian war hero, Anwar Sadat to find the wisdom to change the course of history. In a magnificent act of human courage and true greatness, we watched Sadat walk the extra mile for peace by going to Israel. It took another man of war, Israel's Menachem Begin, a man so often described by his enemies as a terrorist, by his supporters as a freedom fighter, yes, another man of war had to meet Sadat half way. Jimmy Carter, mocked by the American media, reviled by so many of his own, had the conviction, the core values, to patiently

steer these two traditional antagonists into an historic peace agreement. Sadat paid the price for his courage, when he was slain by his own people. The Camp David Treaty did not bring peace to the whole Middle East. God knows we can see that. But it did greatly reduce the chances of Israel feeling it had to use nuclear weapons against its greatest rival of so many years. It is an extraordinary example of how ingrained hatred and deep-seated historical patterns can be altered by the behaviour of individuals. These are the humans who impress me. We need more of them at this hour.

Now more than ever we need women like Ireland's Mary Robinson who dared to speak of peace, of *enlightened* self-interest as she put it. Such belief can transcend the futility of war. The slow march of women towards equality is a powerful change in itself that in the long run is essential for the survival of our species. Will we ever see another man like Nelson Mandela who so clearly recognized the futility of racial conflict? I am inspired by true Australian leaders like the Aboriginal elders, Rosalie Kunoth-Monks and Dr. Djinyini Gondarra, who travelled to Geneva to testify before the Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination on the oppression of Aboriginal people in the remote communities of the Northern Territory. I always remember too that when the NAZIs were murdering millions of Jews it was an Aboriginal man in this country, William Cooper, a man who was not even considered a citizen in his own land, who walked into the German consulate and raised his voice to oppose what was happening to other human beings across the world. In this way we shatter the Matrix. In this way we think and behave like a human family.

There is much work to do. But use every breath, treat every day as a precious opportunity and we can make progress to a brighter world in your lifetime. Everyday, we each face choices. Base them on reason and plain common sense and together we will recognise that we have come to a point in human life where even out of enlightened self-interest, the survival of our species, we have to reach out and do something to address the needs of others in our human family. This is the promise of tomorrow. This is what it means to be human. Let us make it our strongest instinct.

Address to the Global leadership Program of Macquarie University.
Crystal Palace. Milsons Point. Sydney. October 22nd 2013.