

**Les Halliwell Address
CD Conference 2005
Anthony Kelly**

**FLIRTING WITH SPIRITUALITY:
RE-ENCHANTING COMMUNITY**

It is a great honour to be asked to give the Les Halliwell address. I guess I would be one of the few here tonight who knew Les personally. He was a very important figure in my early career and I, along with many others, owe him much. He was a great man who did much to establish the wonderful local tradition of development work here in Queensland. Perhaps his most outstanding attribute was his great love of people and across a lengthy career had an unshakable trust in their capacity to know take the best pathway forward and an undiminished belief that they would care for each other and build community in the process. His faith in people was a source of inspiration to all who knew him.

I must confess as I have struggled with preparing this address I have wondered what Les would have thought about the theme of this conference - *Flirting With Spirituality: Re-Engaging Community*. If I remember correctly Les was an avowed atheist and he wasn't much of a flirt. If my memory of Les is correct, or correct enough, I asked myself would it be reasonable to suggest that his fundamental faith in people was indeed a real spirituality?

I think there would be few, including Les, that would argue that development work requires spirit. We

completely lose the real meaning of development work if we don't touch the spirit and soul of people and the work. We all have stories to tell of how inputs, throughputs and outputs don't touch the real issues in people's lives, just as all the statistics and reports in the world don't capture the thrill of seeing someone grow in confidence and skill to face life anew.

There is a story in the Community Programs Unit of Oxfam that amply illustrates this. Mini Bedi is very experienced development worker who is the Director of Oxfam Australia on the Western side of India. Mini has been a key figure in the development and conduct of the Oxfam exposure program, a program that many of you are familiar with. On one visit to a village Mini discussed with the women their micro-finance program, a program that develops a cooperative finance and credit facility for the women to meet basic needs and financial asset to call upon in times of crisis. The women showed her how they saved their money, how they met, how they made decisions how they kept records and banked the precious money. All very fine...nothing wrong with any of the procedures....but they were all very mechanistic. She was not satisfied that the people development agenda was being met...but every one of her questions was answered with a "correct" answer.

Q: Why do you meet?

A: To save money

Q: Why do you want to save money

A: To help our children and families

In this wonderful and most helpful activity the answers were flat,mechanical and formularised there was no apparent soul.

She then broke across that line of questioning and asked
Q: Why don't you forget about your meetings and just put your money in the money box? Wouldn't this save you time and energy?

The women were horrified.

A: "No! No!" they said.

In an instant they could see beyond the mask of the activity and into its soul, and with that insight grew in understanding of what constituted the fundamental elements of their liberation struggle.

It was a wonderful piece of development work.

I tell this example because we are so often not only captured by the administrivia associated with our work but we are also captured by the activity rather than the soul of the program. But is unlocking the spirit, which is such an undeniable part of good development work, the same as spirituality?

My guess is, and it is only a guess, that Les would wince at the suggestion, as the notion of spirituality was for him, too tied to institutionalised religion. But leaving second guesses about what Les would think aside, for me the word 'spirituality' includes an important element that the word 'spirit' alone does not seem to conjure up. 'Spirituality' enfolds within it, a sense that it is organised into some sort of coherent whole, even if it is not necessarily attached to an institutional religion.

Once I had acknowledged this element of organisation within the concept of spirituality, I then could see, all the great development workers did have a 'spirituality'.

They crafted their core ideas, beliefs and values into a coherent whole from which they could depth wisdom and orchestrate skilled and caring action...we just know them as practice frameworks.

Practice frameworks are, or at least should be, an expression of spirituality. We know we need a framework if we are to survive, if we are to work at the right level and work in ways that nurtures our spirit and the spirit of others. If this connection between practice frameworks and spirituality is true, Les Halliwell like so many of us, certainly did have a “spirituality” but one that he didn’t flirt with, he was committed to it intellectually and emotionally just as he was organised and wholehearted in its practice.

Many of you may have heard me talk of Gandhi’s framework but I would like to explore it here in this context, with a focus on spirituality. Like all great frameworks he gave it a name that indicated to everyone what his fundamental analysis was. He called his framework “**My Experiments With Truth**”. This title reveals some very important lessons for those who seek a development spirituality. The word “**Experiments**” indicates a lack of certainty, of trial and error, and a position of fundamental humility. As the years have rolled by, I have come to appreciate how wise this title really is.

One of the greatest blights to the capacity of the human mind to be thoughtful and caring is the problem of ideology. I use ideology to mean a closed circuit application of ideas, values and beliefs, an application

that claims a certainty and even at times a pompous self righteousness that knows no boundaries. ‘The market rules’, ‘competition is good’, ‘small government is necessary’ and of course one close to our hearts at this time... “the jihad of holy war’ to mention but a few.

But we must look at this problem of ideology closer to home. We recognise other people’s ideology and often enough fail to see our own. Unfortunately in development work we have had more than our fair share of ideologues. The following are just a few examples but I am sure you could think of many more examples from your own work places:

‘bottom up is right, top down wrong’(which contains the coded message and really means...bottom up is **always** right and top down **always** wrong),

or.....

‘we are so busy you know’(which is code for and really means, look, I am so **needed** and so **important**)

‘we are practical’(which is code for and really means, we don’t want to use our brains too much or threaten established patterns of behaviour that privilege us)

or another common one

‘development work, you know, takes a long time’(said in a very knowing patronising tone, but really meaning, we don’t want to get out now out from behind the computer, away from the air conditioning, into the streets and slums, into remote communities away from the coffee bars and do the hard slog work)

or another

‘...and what do you expect, we were not consulted’(oh! ...we can say this one with a wounded pathetic precious

petals voice and give a response that bears no relationship to the merit or otherwise of the action taken).

What ideology does is to take ideas, sometimes very important and good ideas and make them into untouchable absolutes. Certainly if we are to have a genuine development spirituality we must leave ideology, proselytising and self-righteous pomposity behind. Development work is a humble contribution and but one of many that makes our world a little better. I am sure Les would agree and would begin to feel more comfortable if we put Gandhi's notion of humility and experimentation central to notions of a development spirituality.

Gandhi had four central ideas, beliefs and values that related one to the other and laid the foundation of many other ideas that went to make up the fabric of his whole framework. This organised whole made his framework and this whole I would argue, moved his thinking from being just tools of the spirit to a tool of spirituality.

SATYAGRAHA THE FORCE OF TRUTH	SARVODAYA AVAILABILITY TO OTHERS
AHIMSA SELF DISCIPLINE	BRAHMACHARYA FACING ONE'S TRUE DEMONS

Gandhi's fundamental analysis was that if he pursued the truth of the matter (satyagraha), then this would unleash the most powerful moral, social and economic forces to rectify matters. But, in order to unleash that force for good, he had to live in a way that he made himself truly available for the service of others (sarvodaya), conduct himself in all he did with self-discipline (ahimsa), so that at no stage could his actions be confused with selfishness or self-interest. The fourth concept (brahmacharya), was about the conduct of his life in ways that faced his most fundamental human weakness, which in Gandhi's case was a very troubled sexuality, probably borne from the tragedy of his child marriage and the unspeakably tragic early marriage rape of his wife Kasturba. In my opinion these four fundamental and profoundly challenging ideas form the basis of a very powerful development spirituality.

The other great development figure in my life was of course Martin Buber. His analysis suggested that a life-lived was not a fixed quantum, that if we opened ourselves to life, life would be the richer for it and if we closed ourselves off and away, our life would be the poorer. He explained this in this very famous quote:

“The reality of the experienced world is so much the more powerful, the more powerfully I experience it and realise it. Reality is no fixed condition, but a quantity which can be heightened. Its magnitude is functionally dependent upon the intensity of our experiencing. There is an ordinary reality which suffices as a common denominator for the comparison and ordering of things. But the great

reality is another. And how can I give this reality to my world except by seeing the seen with all the strength of my life, hearing the heard with the strength of my life, tasting the tasted with all the strength of my life? Except by bending over the experienced thing with fervour and power and by melting the shell of passivity with the fire of my being until the confronting, the shaping, the bestowing side of things springs up to meet me and embraces me so that I know the world in it?" (Pointing, 28)

His framework for full life was built around four concepts, or as he called them four potencies.

COGNITION POTENCY	ART POTENCY
LOVE POTENCY	FAITH POTENCY

The first human potency according to Buber was our power of knowing made infinitely more potent because we are conscious of our knowing, we know that we know. "Knowing that we know" drives knowledge to a deeper level of understanding and makes possible a morality and with a sense morality comes the human possibility of doing good or evil. The second potency In Buber's framework was the human capacity for art. Art

of course opens us to the world of beauty and imagination but also opens the possibility to externalise our reality in a way that we can look at it differently. His third potency was the human capacity to love. Need more be said about this wonderful capacity. Buber's fourth potency was our capacity to have faith, to believe in ourselves and each other and indeed the very meaning of life itself. Buber considered faith to be the most fundamental of all four potencies.

Two other greats who helped lay the foundations of community development were Paulo Friere and more recently Amartya Sen. Paulo analysis basically premised development on the increased capacity of consciousness crafted through the dialogue using people's own stories and an affirmation and honouring of their own capacity. Amartya Sen with not a dis-similar analysis, likening true development to the increased capacity to have and to exercise freedoms of all kinds.

Certainly, in my view, the frameworks of these great foundational figures of development work, constitute a spirituality. But what the frameworks of lesser mortals, like you and me. I thought I would explore albeit very briefly, some of the major frameworks that have been developed by workers here in Australia. There are many such frameworks now available but I can only mention a few here.

Penny Saile that wonderful development worker based in the Hobart City Council based her analysis on that core of human life, the capacity to nurture; nurture life, nurture nature and of course nurture people in times of

trouble and hardship. She built her framework around her fundamental capacity to give life as a woman, a mother, a partner and a worker.

Moving from the south of our country to the far north-west we could examine that great indigenous development worker Carol Martin. As a Yamatji woman she can see no future for herself, her family, her people and her land without a wholehearted commitment to deep healing. The deep wounds of our colonial past need to be acknowledged and tended and her pathway of healing herself and others has been the base of an extraordinary career.

But what about other development workers, especially our colleagues from Queensland? One framework that struck me deeply when I heard it was Lynda Shevaller's. As many of you would know, Lynda works with CRU, an organisation providing support, information and training for individuals and families who live with both the strengths and limitations that come with disability. One of the most constant themes emerging from the voice of people in this part of our amazing world is their isolation, their loneliness and aloneness in their struggle. What better analysis then to have for a practice framework than to update the age-old wisdom of hospitality. Hospitality meaning the sum of those activities that would make people welcomed, included and contributing to the journey of life. Lynda then constructed the major dimensions of her framework around the courses of French high cuisine meal. The warmth and inclusion of sharing a meal symbolising the dream of inclusion.

Another framework that struck a fundamental chord with me is one developed by Nicola Jelinic. Nicola grew up on a boat, largely educated in home schooling style by her mother. She travelled the world, in the boat with her parents in her younger years and then in her own right as an adventurer in her early adult life.. In her adventures she climbed mountains, biked across countries and walked the cities and deserts of the world with an unquenchable curiosity, but above all as a master diver, she swam the seas. Nicola's framework belongs to this our global age. She was fascinated by the turtle, the turtle that swims right across the world's great oceans and returns home sometimes decades later to give birth to its young. For Nicola the turtle summed up the struggle to survive, the wonder of life and nature, the freedom to experience life to the full and the importance of home. Nicola's spirit has been transformed into a spirituality by this wondrous animal that can live up to a thousand years.

Still other of our colleagues have built their frameworks around the beauty of sound and the ability of music to transcend the isolating impact of culture and its capacity to speak all languages and while crossing those boundaries touch the deepest parts of our hearts and souls. The work of Brian Procopis and his colleagues is in my opinion world class. Their work such as the *Scattered People* cd and the continuing work they do now putting voice and music to the sounds and stories of refugee children is a source of great inspiration.

I could not let this occasion go without referring as to the incredibly creative work of Ingrid Burkett. Ingrid's work, of course with her colleagues is an inspiration in both its extent and depth. Her work with colleagues such as myself on global issues, her work with Morrie O'Connor and others on microfinance and micro credit and her work with her fellow community members with puppets which I understand will be on display during this conference is just wonderful.

Last but not least, here in Maleny, one could not pass without honoring the co-operative work of Jill Jordan and her colleagues. Remarkable achievements that would make Les Halliwell so proud.

We have just so much to celebrate if we don't allow the dominance of those important government funded programs to be the only purpose of our work and the boundaries we use to frame what is possible.

I do not want to suggest these few frameworks that I have so briefly mentioned are mentioned because they are better than others. Marvellous as they are, they are but a sample, a handful of the many that are among us. I could truly spend the rest of the night describing frameworks of colleagues just here from Queensland that I know of and I know the ones I know, are but a fraction of the reality.

I created a small list of some of the major ideas that have influenced me because they refer to the realities of centrally important life experiences. Some of these ideas have inspired me, others puzzled me and yet others

provoke in me profound sadness. I can only guess how similar or different this list may be from one that you may write what favourites you would add or what ones listed that you would take away because they didn't resonate.

LOVE , PEACE, BIRTH, CHILDREN, PLAY, FAMILY, COMMUNITY, MYSTERY, HOPE, UNDERSTANDING, HEALTH, SICKNESS, DEATH, HAPPINESS, SADNESS, SUCCESS, FAILURE, POVERTY,JUSTICE, WELLBEING, SHARING, WAR, REST, WORK, SIMPLICITY, PARTNER, TRUST, NATURE, MAN, WOMAN, DIVINE

When I looked at the titles of the sessions of this Conference, I sampled these words.

CREATE, DREAM, INSPIRE,IMAGINE. COURAGE, STAMINA, SUSTAIN, CHALLENGE, REFLECT, COMMIT, COMFORT, ENERGISE, COMMUNICATE, HEAVEN.

These are the type of words we use to describe those important realities of our lives. They describe for better or worse what we think to be important and why and what we must do as we travel the central highway of our life. They even describe our byways and gulches when we get lost in our journeys for they too go to make up our individual stories, the sum of which is the totality of our life.

In my view then it is about our frameworks that organise our central influences and our practice that breathes our

life into them that constitutes our spirituality. With such important matters I think it is not a flirtation that is called for but a full-on affair.

I guess what I really want to say is that if we truly want inspiration we must spend time with our colleagues and listen to what they have to say and how they organise what they say and do, and it is precisely this idea that is a fundamental principle of this Conference.

I would like to finish with a spirituality story and just to add a mysterious and whimsical elements to our theme, a story that I will all too readily confess that I don't understand.

I was returning from a trip to a remote Indian village in a small four wheel drive. It was very dark and late at night. As is the custom in the Oxfam Leadership Program, there were seven or eight of us packed into this tiny vehicle as we very slowly bumped along poorly constructed remote rural roads on our journey back to where we were staying. We were all very tired after full day in the village but peering into the darkness ahead with the help of the headlights we could see a figure on the road in the distance. As we got closer we could see, gradually taking shape a human shape, a holy man....right in the middle of the road, stark naked, standing on his head in full lotus position. We were spell-bound. He didn't move. Our vehicle almost came to a stop as we navigated our way around him but there he remained as we lost sight of him in the closing darkness. Our hosts were confused as we as to what he was doing. Perhaps he was casting a spell? Perhaps he used the

road for his prayer mat as the road generously shares its heat at night? Perhaps he was mad? Perhaps he was indeed flirting with spirituality..perhaps ..perhaps...perhaps...we will never really know.

That sense of mystery just maybe what **flirting with spirituality** is all about.

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