

13th Friendship and Dialogue Iftar Dinner

Affinity Intercultural Foundation

NSW Parliament House

Wednesday 13 April 2020

Emeritus Professor Rosalind Croucher AM

As-salamu alaykum: may peace be upon you.

Acknowledgments

Our Parliamentary hosts, distinguished guests, of whom there are indeed many, friends.

Thank you to Ahmet Polat and his team at Affinity Intercultural Foundation for organising this year's Friendship & Dialogue Iftar Dinner, which once again has brought together a wonderfully diverse cross-section of the community.

As a mark of true 'affinity', Ahmet dubs all of us his 'cousins'.

We share this evening on the traditional lands of the Gadigal people of the Eora nation and I pay respects to elders past, present and emerging, and any First Nations people sharing this wonderful evening.

Affinity

We come together tonight in the spirit of understanding and dialogue from all walks of life — from different religious, professional and cultural backgrounds – and we gather as one.

As the theme of my speech this evening, I want to reflect on what 'walking together in the spirit of understanding and dialogue' means?

It means *listening with our hearts*.

Welcoming Ramadan, the Affinity Intercultural Foundation home page has a beautiful quote from the 13th century Persian poet and Islamic scholar, Jalal al-Din Muhammad Rumi.

'There is a window from one heart to another heart'.

If we listen with our hearts, we learn not to see difference, but to feel empathy, to feel true affinity.

I want to tell you a story that has stayed with me: it is a tale of a Cambodian taxi driver. It happened in 1989, thirty-three years ago.

I don't even know the driver's name. I will call him 'Ponleak', a Cambodian name which means 'strength and endurance'.

I was catching a plane to the airport and was stuck in a traffic jam. I had a plane to catch to present a seminar paper somewhere in New South Wales. Important new wills legislation had been passed and I was doing Continuing Legal Education presentations all around the state — as this was my then area of academic expertise.

I am an excessively, even obsessively, punctual person. And here I was *really* stuck. I could see the hands on my watch going round and round before my eyes. To allay the sick feeling in my stomach, I turned to Ponleak and asked him his story — something my dear late mother always did and so I followed her example.

I started to listen from my heart.

This is Ponleak's story.

Cambodia lies to the north of Malaysia and is bordered by Vietnam to the east, Thailand to the west and Laos to the north.

Ponleak's family had been small businesspeople in Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital city. They ran a little shop. To the Khmer Rouge — the extreme Communist regime that ruled the country from 1975 to 1979 — Ponleak's family were capitalists. As the Khmer Rouge worked to create a new society, capitalists were the enemy and families and religion were rivals in loyalty to the state. An estimated 1.5 million people in a population of only 7 million people were killed.

Ponleak was 14 at that time. His family, the little family of shop owners, and many others, were put on trucks and driven out of the city. Ponleak's parents pushed him and another boy out of the truck. "Run away!", they said.

He never saw his family again. Their graves — as undoubtedly, they are dead — are not marked, nor will ever be known. They lie with so many of their countrymen and women in the mass graves of the 'killing fields'.

The boys hid in trees and fields and eventually found their way to a refugee camp on the Vietnamese border. It was there Ponleak befriended an Australian soldier and, through his support, Ponleak came to Australia. In the Cambodian community in Sydney, Ponleak found love, marrying a woman who had also escaped.

He changed my whole perspective on life — making my concerns about being late seem utterly trivial.

How many of you here today have stories like these to tell? What would you do, what would I do, if our world ended up like Ponleak's? If instead of sitting here, breaking our fast, we were fleeing for your lives?

On occasions like this evening, it is about seeing what joins us — as part of humanity — and this is true *affinity*. It is that window from one heart to another.

There have been moments of great affinity shown in recent years. During the bushfires of the summer of 2019–2020; during the floods of past months; and during the lockdowns we have all endured as part of the public health measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

There have been other moments when great affinity was sorely needed.

A particular example was in the wake of reactions to the lone gunman of the Lindt café siege — just down the road from here, in Martin Place. It sparked concerns about anti-Muslim attacks in its wake. One evening a young woman was sitting on a train and quietly removing her hijab before she got off the train. She was sitting next to another woman, Rachael Jacobs. Rachael wrote on her facebook page about what she did: "I ran after her at the train station. I said, 'put it back on. I'll walk with you'. She started to cry and hugged me for about a minute - then walked off alone." This inspired a movement under the hashtag "#illridewithyou". There were 40,000 tweets using this hashtag in two hours; 150,000 in four hours.

In our own work, the Commission is strongly committed to addressing stereotypes and discrimination affecting Muslim communities. For example, the Race Discrimination Commissioner, Chin Tan, recently released a report entitled 'Sharing the Stories of Australian Muslims'. This report gave Australian Muslims an opportunity to share their stories of successful community initiatives, and ideas about how they can be supported to fully enjoy their human rights.

Muslim consultees identified important solutions. These include ensuring effective engagement with the Muslim community to drive policy action, providing early inter-faith education and public awareness education, and introducing robust legislative protection against Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hate. The report shows the importance of both listening to the stories of Muslims, and actively adopting community-driven solutions, to addressing ongoing discrimination in Australia.

Each year the Commission honours people in our Human Rights Awards. At the end of 2020, we knew that we could not do it in the same way as past years, with a lunch in a room full of people. So we did it differently. We asked for nominations of 'Human Rights Heroes'.

One of the Heroes for 2020 was the group, Sikh Volunteers Australia.

Sikh Volunteers Australia started the year by expanding their service, which provides free meals to people experiencing homelessness in Melbourne, to travel hundreds of kilometres delivering free meals for bushfire-stricken communities in regional Victoria. Since the start of the COVID19 pandemic, they have also prepared and delivered 400 meals a day to people in need across Melbourne — totalling an astonishing 127,400 free meals (as of 26 November last year).

In 2021, we had only three categories, including an award from Community Human Rights Champion. This was awarded to 'PlateitForward'.

PlateitForward launched in July 2020 as an immediate solution during the COVID-19 pandemic. This has evolved into long-term programs to support marginalised communities, and have proudly donated 120,000+ meals, delivered 6,500+ hours of training and employed 25 community members, provided 1,000+ donated Uber trips for newly arrived refugees to attend medical and vaccination appointments and seek housing, and rescued 15 tonnes of food destined for landfill.

PlateitForward use the power of this hospitality to create a long-term connection that allows people to be connected with the wraparound services they need to have a more equal opportunity.

These are wonderful examples of walking together in the spirit of understanding and dialogue.

They are both examples that focus on food. Which is also a focus of this evening — and the breaking of the fast through the consumption of food.

Fasting is a practice in a number of religions — the period of Lent for some Christian denominations; Yom Kippur, in the Jewish calendar of holy days.

From my Muslim friends I have come to appreciate how Iftar is celebrated and how each family has its own distinct and special ways of celebrating. How fasting and breaking the fast together brings families, brings people, together.

My former colleague, Human Rights Commissioner, now Professor, Ed Santow, pointed me to some of the Ramadan 'memes' out there. It is extraordinary what

Google will turn up — like the one of the koala with gum leaves in its mouth, saying 'what do you mean it's not iftar time yet?'. Or Donald Sutherland (one of my favourite actors) saying 'Ramadan Kareem! Let the Hunger Games Begin!'.

What religious periods of fasting require us to do is to re-focus, to appreciate each other, and good things like food (and other things that are avoided, at least during the daytime of the month of Ramadan).

Sharing the joy of the range of religious traditions that now make up our wonderfully diverse Australian community is part of what makes Australia a land of rich possibility for affinity.

Acknowledging our differences and listening with our hearts brings us closer to together. There is indeed *a window from one heart to another heart*.

Thank you, 'cousin' Ahmet and all your wonderful helpers for tonight.

Ramadan Mubarak!