A prefacing story: *Ngapartji Ngapartji,* the gift and kindness

There was this beautiful thing that happened, a brief but difficult moment in the project when Trevor broke down during one of the early performances in Melbourne. It happened during one of the first seasons of the work and took cast and audience to a very emotional place, making a huge impression and and helping configure all future performances.

It was at the place in the script when he recounts the death of his grandmother. This is a very personal moment in the play, a moment when Trevor takes us with him to one of the most saddest places in his family's history. It is done with enormous sensitivity and, on Trevor's part, immense generosity.

This thing, this tender and touching little morsel in the history of an epic project seized us all. It happened during a time in the performance when he stood, centre stage, looking back to the rear at a screen where film footage recounts his father's retelling of the death. In this piece of the film Trevor is sitting next to his Dad on a couch. He asks him to describe what had happened. Gently and, clearly pained, his father tells of how *Tjamu* (grandfather), a heroic figure who was much adored for helping rescue other Anangu from the dangers of the atomic tests, had killed his grandmother in a moment of rage.

Trevor had been like a trooper in the previous three weeks, carrying on with five shows despite a period of family crisis and personal exhaustion. He'd been able to retain his composure in the preceeding weeks. But suddenly it had all got too much, tearing at his heart and overcoming him with grief. It was partly the pain of constantly retelling such a heartbreaking story. Partly he felt the responsibility for getting important elements of language and the performance right. It was partly the enormous burden he seemed to carry for the wellbeing of audiences he knew were contending with deep collective and psychological distress from seeing the show.

He lost his lines. He fell silent and sat on the ground. Here he remained in the soil sifting through the ceramic pieces that represented the bones of those taken away from their country for scientific testing. In his hands he held symbols of the systematic death and expatriation of people's remains. The script drifted away and he broke down, quietly sobbing at first and then crying, weeping in front of the whole theatre.

This was one of the most powerful moments of the whole project. People had been treated to a wonderfully colourful show, full of cultural performance, instruction in language, beautiful music, laughter and an introduction to a remarkable and otherwise hidden part of their history. Trevor is masterful at guiding an audience safely through tough and often uncomfortable places. His timing is impeccable, managing to mix intensity and humour, light and shade and confronting people's sensibilities in the most disarming of ways. The subject matter of the show is the history of Anangu dispossession. It is about the country and family of Pitjantjantjara speakers being subject to atomic testing the magnitude of which had never been known in human history. It contends with their experience of unbearably enormous change over a single generation. Ultimately it offers people a remarkable, perhaps once in a lifetime experience, revealing the tenacity of families who insist on holding their language, song and, most importantly, children.

Many Australian's have been moved by Trevor's performance. Many have told us they have been 'lost for words', unable to articulate the depth of their emotional response. People around the country have delivered standing ovations and been swept to the theatre to see, hear and be touched by the show. In a way people have come to be held by Trevor and the story, nurtured by the softness and the disarmament of the show and its story.

Anangu too have been enthused and inspired by the show and the project that sits behind. For five years they have joined us in workshops and made films, music, worked on language, literacy and worked together to give their young people a chance to do new things, learn and, spend time with their older loved ones.

So Trevor had been behind so many great things, offering himself as a wonderful picture of what kids can be if they set their mind to it. He had been like the Pied Piper, followed around in communities and into sound recording studios, in front of cameras and hitting the stage. He had become a symbol of the good that can happen. He had also become the conduit for massive positive energy.

So when he let go like this it all became too much for people to handle. The whole house just burst with grief. You began to hear people whimpering and crying. In the front rows where the light slightly catches the audience you could see tears. You could almost feel the rattling of people's throats, the sudden and uncontrollable expelling of sighs as their attempts at holding back the emotion couldn't be contained. We all began to weep. We cried, men and women, Anangu and non-Anangu, cast and production team.

Initially there was an uncertain pause. This was a stage production that relied heavily on the main actor, who impressively held most of the lines for over two hours. Any idea that 'the show must go on' was suddenly on hold. Not to be unnerved, the Anangu women took on their part. Quietly and softly the ladies began to sing that beautiful song, 'Tjituru tjituru', a PItjantjantjara rendition of the 80s song 'Sorrow, Sorrow'. If there had been a dry eye in the house it was exorcised at this moment. As they sang, two of the women slowly walked over the where Trevor sat and took him in their arms, stroking his hair and gently, rocking him to the soft momentum of the music. Tenderly they took Trevor's hands and rubbed irmangka irmangka (bush medicine) in to his skin. As they sat and sang the words of such a magnificent song of grief, a number of the other ladies headed out to the audience. They saw the distress amongst people and generously offered their consolation, hugging and stroking the hair of those most troubled, sharing bush medicine as well. The sweet smell of the medicine filled the small ACMI theatre space. In this heartrending moment for non-Anangu, when people let their own anguish be released, it was the senior women who offered the strength. As others sobbed at the sight of Trevor's pain and in response to their own remorse and heartache, the ladies walked amongst people, gently and tenderly caring for the sorrow and grief of non-Anangu. After this most poignant of moments, the show went on ... it continued, kind of like the way Anangu have kept on going in in life and in history.

This was an instance of unadulterated kindness that truly and accurately represents how the show moved us all and how it relied so much on the absolute generosity of the Anangu ladies.

We often expect that this project will somehow bring strength to and make changes for

Anangu, help contend with the horrors, the traumas and the tough times they experience. Yet sometimes I recollect events like this and I realize just how much Anangu who, through acts of kindness such as these, are those who often hold the strength.

On ‘ngapartji *ngapartji’* and kindness

In the English language there appears to be no adequate translation for the Pitjantjatjara concept, “ngapartji *ngapartji’*. Many suggest that its closest equivalent in the Australian vernacular is something like, “I give ... you give in return.” Unfortunately, most tend to draw upon modernist ideals and mistakenly assume a kind of market driven exchange in people’s social worlds where one needs to immediately return a favour for a favour, or immediately reciprocate a good turn, responding to a gesture or action by making a corresponding one. As with many attempts at direct translation, this appears to be a most unsatisfactory one. Mostly this is because modern Australians take for granted the need for immediacy in exchange, assuming that, just like in the market economy, exchange is premised upon instant reciprocity (so that the exchange draws to a close quickly) and comparative equality (so that we get precisely equivalent to what we deserve from the exchange). As Sennett (2003) points out, this kind of arrangement causes the termination of social connections. The symmetry of exchange (with its obsessions with equality and immediacy) results in people lacking any means of being socially bound to each other.

Perhaps the English idea of the ‘gift’ takes us a little closer to the Pitjantjatjara concept of ‘ngapartji *ngapartji.’* In contrast to market exchange, a gift economy obligates people to one another, producing conditions that see people reciprocating their debt. According to Mauss (2002), the gift creates an economy not of altruism but of debt so that gifts must be eventually returned and their value matched. However, the key here is that the gift may not return precisely to the original giver. Rather a gift moves in a circle, with at least three people needed for the gift economy to work. In a classic gift economy the gift exchange moves in complex direction, moving “from one hand to another with no assurance of anything in return” (Hyde 2007, p. 11). In this way, the gift draws us into a mutual dependence upon those involved in the exchange, a formal give-and-take that forces us to acknowledge our participation in and dependence upon each other. It also forces us to respond to those around us, those who are ‘other’ but with whom we are bound, as part of ourselves, not as a stranger or alien. In this way, the gift brings with it both a built-in check and creates the seeds of what I shall call the practice of ‘kindness’.

Kindness is so much a part of our everyday lives that we take it for granted and don’t try and think about how it is done and what are its consequences. In part this is because kindness is often associated with human quality rather than human practice, assumed that it is something possessed by some people and treated as a commodity to be used in the private domain. As a consequence, the practice of kindness is rarely associated with matters of public concern, something for business of government or that which an organization should seek to do as part of its plans, ‘outcomes’ or programmes. Indeed, it would seem to many an oddity if a group or organization were to seek public funds to ‘deliver’ kindness or set out as part of their methodology to practice the act of kindness.

This is because for some time kindness has been considered to be an act that gets in the way of those who seek to be successful or achieve things. It has become that which is considered to be, as Philips and Taylor (2010, p. 2) put it, “a saboteur of the successful life.” Kindness has

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come to be treated with suspicion, often dismissed or avoided as moralistic, sentimental and a mark of weakness. Its opposite, that of being self-interested and selfish, has come to be associated with human nature (Philips and Taylor 2010, p. 6). At its worst attitudes to kindness have it as a virtue of losers, unfortunately disallowing those who deliver it from the spoils of success.

However, the original idea of kindness was connected with the act of looking after members of one's own kin. Kindness in earlier times was associated with allied practices such as philanthropia (love of humanity) and caritas (love of one's siblings and neighbours) (Philips and Taylor 2010, p. 4). It also encompassed practices such as sympathy, generosity, altruism, benevolence, humanity, compassion, pity, empathy and the act of being outward looking and 'open-hearted. In essence kindness involved action that has as its goal the wellbeing of the 'Other'. In particular, it involved taking on, bearing or helping relieve the vulnerability and burden of others.

The virtues and values of kindness have roots well established in ancient times. According to the ancient Roman philosopher Marcus Aurelius, kindness is human's 'greatest delight', (Philips and Taylor 2010, p. 2). The Stoics in the first century understood this and preached the social and polutical benefits of kindness. The Stoic emperor Marcus Aurelius understood the world as a single city, a great "community of reason" where all belonged and were precious to each other because of the need for companionship, support in hard times, trade and to fulfill their need for what they called oikeiðsis, or attachment of self to other' (Philips and Taylor 2010, p. 17). "A man's true delight", said Aurelius, "is to do the things he was made for. He was made to show goodwill to his kind." (cited in Philips and Taylor 2010, p. 18).

Some in more recent times have maintained the recognition that kindness has value. During the early Enlightenment period philosophers and economists such as David Hume and Adam Smith insisted that kindness had utilitarian value as it made people feel more human, capable and important, more satisfied and happy with their lives (cited in Philips and Taylor 2010, p. 18). Since the Enlightenment, philosophers and social scientists have observed that kindness can act as a solution to a number of problems. It can served as a bridge between those who are in conflict, modifying the claims of self in favour of the other, and thereby promoting goodwill and social solidarity (Philips and Taylor 2010, p. 28)

Since Freud, the act of kindness has been recognized for its usefulnees as a remedy for pain and suffering. Following Rousseau's claim that, " we are never able to enjoy oneself well without another" Freud wrote that, "we are never so defenceless against suffering as when we are in love." (cited in Philips and Taylor 2010, p. 31). Later day psychoanalytic practitioners observe the value of kindness noting its capacity to heal the soul of individuals and create those who are more "porous, less insulated and separated from others" (cited in Philips and Taylor 2010, p. 31). Once the practice of kindness is mastered there can be no such thing as the isolated self, the sociopath and the socially deficit. Modern psychology also tells us that kindness makes us feel better and creates a healthy mind. A sign in this regard, wrote Winnicott (cited in Philips and Taylor 2010, p. 97), "is the ability of one individual to enter imaginatively and accurately into the thoughts and feelings and hopes and fears of another person; also to allow the other person to do the same to us." Unkindness or failure to imagine the life of the other, therefore not only limits the capacity for happiness, it threatens our sanity and mental health (Philips and Taylor 2010, p. 97).

Using a metaphor with considerable resonance, philosopher David Hume, in his *Treatise of* 5

Human Nature (1739-1740) likened the practice of kindness, where people transfer feelings of goodwill towards one another, to the “vibration of violin strings, with each individual resonating with the pains and pleasures of others as if they were there own.”

In this way kindness’s magic comes from its ability to change people in the doing of it, thereby exercising and reproducing itself. In remarkable and unpredictable ways those who are touched by kindness are caught up in its infectiousness, regard for the other in turn producing more regard for the other. It creates what economist Adam Smith calls an, ‘expansive self’ and a replication of itself. To put it another way, the kind self is more inclined to look further afield, more able to consider how their actions may produce happiness or wellbeing in others. This in turn creates opportunities for more contact with others, thereby increasing the likelihood of kindness. According to Smith, this is the touchstone of any healthy community, always looking towards contact with its other, as a means of creating the conditions for more contact and more trade (Philips and Taylor 2010, p. 30).

What follows is a report of the consequences of the practice of kindness. It is a practical piece of writing in two ways. It has the function of serving the purpose of reviewing a social programme that, during the course of its five years, received significant public funding. It is also practical in that its subject matter is what happens when a group of people practice the ancient art of kindness to build a bridge that brings together Anangu and Anangu, Anangu and non- Anangu, young people and seniors, artists and audiences. It is a report about the business of practicing ‘ngapartji *ngapartji’,* offering the gift of kindness, learning how to receive graciously, learning about indebtedness and looking outward towards others.