

The Spirit of Friendship

Last Wednesday night I returned to the Ferntree Gully Community Meal Night after a few months absence. In a rented hall in the outer suburbs, among this bunch of misfits and do-gooders and strugglers brought together over a free hot dinner, I found myself welcomed back as someone genuinely missed. Over six years many of the regulars had come to know my wife and children, we had shared Christmas' together; many knew my story and I theirs. I left the meal uplifted and encouraged and changed in a small and significant way by the power of friendship.

The next day I was visiting a colleague who works out of the St.Kilda Drop-In centre. We arranged to meet in the dining hall. As I waited for him I fell into conversation with an old man who had moved down there since the drop-in at Prahan Mission had closed. I asked him why he came to this drop-in centre?

"Well, you've gotta have somewhere where people know ya, don't ya, eh?"

I thought about my experience in Ferntree Gully the night before.

"You sure do, I reckon"

At the Halcyon Men's Group last week one of the men became particularly excited about remembering the name of an Aussie rock album from the nineties. He was so thrilled that as he was trying to tell us the name all that was coming out of his mouth was stuttered, garbled nonsense! One of the more 'low energy' fellas looked over at me and said,

"I have no idea what he's saying, but I'll have whatever he's having!"

There was belly laughter all around. In this moment friends were together, laughing and being healed.

These experiences show that the spirit of friendship is not only among those who would go to one another's homes, share hobbies and history. It's much simpler than that. Friendship celebrates the other person for who they are. It says,

'I'm happy that you exist. It's good that you are here'.

In the 'recovery' and 'outcome orientated' culture of current funding agreements, community based mental health services will work hard to provide the 'whole of person response'.¹ If it is to be this it must include frameworks for friendships.

Last week I visited a young man who has suffered years of crippling mental illness. Despite repeated hospitalizations and a variety of medications he lives most of days and nights harassed by delusional fears. As I listened to him I realized how little I could offer. So I gave him what had been given to me at the community meal night the week earlier.

"John, I care about you"

He paused and smiled and after a few moments turned and looking at me directly said

"Thank you"

As we continued to sit in the late afternoon sunshine we both knew something had happened; something good.

¹ EACH Strategic Plan 2011 – 2015, see *The Next Five Years: Challenges and Opportunities*