



‘The sound of sheer silence’

One of the joys of working with people on the margins of society is to see social conventions overturned; sometimes disturbingly, sometimes delightfully.

At the Halcyon Men’s Group, we begin each week by sharing any personal news from the week. At our last meeting, one of men was up on his feet, acting out the story of the tree that nearly fell on his house. One of the other men sat there expressionless, not in any way compelled to even appear interested. If we can be guilty by association, I hope we can be liberated by association too!

Last month I accepted a role with the Northern Territory Government as Chaplain to the Police, Fire and Emergency Services based in Alice Springs, starting in January. This reflection will be my final one. Over the past seven years, it has been my challenge and joy to be part of a world that creates pathways to social inclusion; to overcome the gap between us and them; for making room at the table. I’ve found that standing together in times of sorrow and laughter is one of the best ways of doing this.

As a secular NGO, EACH relies heavily on government funding to deliver its services. Attached to that funding is a particular narrative that we’re expected to perform; a narrative about who we are, who our clients are, and the best way to work with them. There is always a dominant narrative. At the moment we are speaking of ‘customer experience’ and using many of the terms and symbols of the free market. But this is not the only narrative at EACH. One of the privileges of my role has been to encounter the diversity within this organization. From our engagement with the local Indigenous communities to mental health settings; from AOD services to disability; primary health care to child and family services; and employment services, each one is influenced by the people they seek to serve.

There will always be loud voices that seek to tell us how we should think and live. But there are other, less obvious teachers too – the clients themselves. In their marginalization they challenge us to see our world differently. These ragged gurus found in forgotten places do not have the means of meeting their own needs. Trusting in God, or in something greater than themselves, they cry out in their distress. I am very grateful to these ones, who have taught me that no matter where we are located within the recovery model, and no matter our own effectiveness in our roles or success as employees, or managers, we are sacred. We are loved. We are not abandoned. This is pretty good news I reckon.

One of my favorite stories from the Bible is about Elijah. He was a Jewish prophet who wanted to personally encounter God. He waited in a cave, in the side of a mountain. A great wind blew that broke rocks. But Elijah did not encounter God in the wind. Then an earthquake. But again, he did not encounter God in the earthquake. And then a fire. But Elijah did not encounter God in the fire. Then, finally, there was *the sound of sheer silence*. And in this silence – unremarkable, as if nothing at all – Elijah encountered the presence of God. It is often surprising where we find our source of life.

Friends, be blessed as you keep up this great work. On the days when exhaustion and disillusionment follow closely on your heels, remember that lives are transformed through small acts of love and mercy.

Thank you for all the ways you have challenged and encouraged me over these years. Thank you for your friendship.

James.