

When saying Sorry isn't enough.

Play Rudd's Sorry speech.

About a year ago I spoke to Lyndon and asked her whether people might be interested in hearing about the Redress program, from an insider's viewpoint.

Originally I was angry, frustrated and wanted to share the overarching sense of powerlessness I had. But I also didn't want this to be about me complaining, venting anger pointlessly or just 'having a go' at the program. And I didn't want to share my story of the reasons why I'd be eligible for a Redress claim with people, some of you know some of the details, and that's enough for now.

A little history and some facts on the Redress program. It was announced in early 2008 I believe, and as a general overview it was a scheme to allow people who were children in state care to have a voice and be compensated at some level for the abuse they suffered while in care. The target people included children removed from Aboriginal families into state care, migrant children who came from the United Kingdom and state wards from dysfunctional families. I fell into this later category, being a ward of the state, I believe, from six months of age. More than 10,000 people applied to the Redress program, and the original budget was \$114 million. After receiving the applications the government made a statement that more applications had been received than had been expected and the payment limits were reduced dramatically, rather than extending the budget. The original commitment to address claims within a twelve month window was also extended to an indefinite timeframe, leaving applicants hanging.

I could talk about how unfair this was. That people applied for one program and were placed into another. That we were applying as powerless victims of a state government beurocracy and found ourselves mired once again in state governments inability to personalise, care or individualise our experiences. I could talk about the issues with staff who treated me as a case file, reminding me of my rather disasterous attempts to be treated as a person with individual needs as a teenager. I could talk about the delays, and the fact that it took until July of this past year for my own claim to be resolved. I could talk about the fact that the only support offered was three counselling sessions, to unpack, explore, talk to strangers about, document, and then repack down what was for me at least thirteen and a half years in abusive placements. I could talk about all these things and barely scratch the surface.

Instead of that... I've decided to title this talk "when saying Sorry isn't enough".

There is a current fad, a fashion if you will, in governments saying sorry. They have time to sit back and craft a beautiful piece that is evocative, emotive, written with great care and meaning. I talk not just of Kevin Rudd's apology, but of others that have preceded it and followed. Apologies to the Jews from Germany. Apologies to the Japanese. From the Japanese. Apologies to victims of corporate and environmental disasters. Apologies are the new black. And are used to absolve the giver of the apology of a future responsibility, to publicly declare an intention to never act the same way again, and to close the door.

An apology is a pointed, targetted tool. It can also be a form of coercion or abuse. It has the power to heal wounds, and has the power to open them, recausing the original hurt. Apologies are important, and the use of them is not something to be entered lightly into.

I felt deeply dissatisfied, unenchanted. I felt that I wasn't being spoken to, that the apology meant little to me. I started to look for answers and read Lazare's "On Apology". I found that even with my freshly signed apology letter with it's gold embossing and carefully penned words that I was still feeling a sense of disengagement. That I still felt that the 'things that needed to be done weren't done' and that my desire for something more was still ever present.

Aaron Lazare has spent a lot of time explaining what was missing, the key elements in an apology and he talks about apologies in a very frank and honest way. He explains that apologies have a series of conditions to make them valuable. Acknowledgement of the offense, remorse, explanations, appropriate reparations. He talks about the reasons people apologise, the importance of timing, and why they on occasion fail. It's a very thorough and well written book.

When talking about the acknowledgement of the offense Lazare explores the idea that the not only does the offending behaviour have to be covered in detail to the correct parties, but a recognition of the impact of the behaviour is needed, and that offence was a violation of the social or moral contract between the parties.

Kevin Rudd does a marvellous job of acknowledging the offence, and placing before the world his government's desire to make amends with the Aboriginal people. He captures well both the detail of the offence and the longer term impacts.

Sadly I found in this apology a lack of personal connection for myself , as a white middle class girl caught up in a lack of funded or adequately trained family support services this apology didn't talk to my own sense of self. I couldn't identify with it. It was an apology to the Aboriginal people of Australia. There was a significant number of us who were left without a voice, bouncing between abusive homes, institutional care and even at times the streets. The abuses of the system didn't just land on Aboriginal people (although they were singled out for them purely on race), they also landed on migrant children, on kids from families that weren't coping well, and the children of the mentally ill.

My apology letter is short. It is about ten sentences long. And the promised individualisation of it was lost somewhere in the bureaucratic process. My apology letter is a form letter mail merged, which uses more words to support Rudd's apology than actually apologising to me from the government responsible for my abuse. My letter is identical to the more than 6,000 other 'successful applicants'. You'll notice I use 'quotes' a lot in this talk.

Lazare talks about the apology needing to match the crime. That to be sincere an apology must adequately, in the mind of the person receiving the apology, fit the extent and depth of the injustice and hurt experienced. The difficult part of an apology is not just that the person offering it must humble and reduce themselves, but that it needs to be carefully balanced to meet the receivers perceptions. Too much and the apology could be lost in an unrealistic and unbelievable sea of hyperbole. Too little and the person will feel that it is inadequate. Lazare also talks about the timing of apologies, the planning of them, and that they are at times also best negotiated.

The other thing in an effective apology is to recognise the reason for the apology. Some parties apologise to appease their internal guilt or dischordance. Some apologise for external social pressures. And to remember that this will almost always be conveyed in the apology. Boxer Mike Tyson might well have apologised for biting off a chunk of Holyfield's ear, but he barely mentioned Holyfield, and spent a considerable amount of time reminding people that he was the predicted winner before he was disqualified. The fact that he was on probation and heading back to jail can only be seen as the primary reason for his very public apology. In many of the examples of apologies that we talk about, the ones that we remember we often are looking for ulterior motives, for reasons for the apology, beyond the act of the apology. When we look for these it is clear that the apology itself has fallen short and is ineffective. If it was genuine we wouldn't be looking for something, we wouldn't feel that another reason for the apology existed.

The concept of remorse, explanation and repatriation is difficult. In order to fulfill this the apology needs to come from a party that genuinely feels the remorse. And that balance between dramatic flair and sincerity cannot be easily faked. How many of you when you were young were told to apologise and

then marched somewhere by a parent, only to be forced to do it again, with the comment through gritted teeth “and mean it this time”?

Kevin's speech is a magnificent piece of personal and professional remorse. I'd say Kevin is one of the better speech writers we've had in our parliament for a long time. I would like to say that I believe Kevin genuinely feels personally this remorse as well.

It is actually fairly easy to sit in our chairs and nod along with Kevin. We can feel a great sense of personal support for what he is saying. We can feel the emotion and the power of the words he speaks. But have we said them ourselves? If we were to actually sit and write an apology for a wrong doing would we actually be able to effectively convey our sense of remorse.

What action do we take as a group, as individuals to convey our sense of remorse? If you agree with his apology what have you personally done to mark it, to actually spread that apology into your own lives? Is it even fair of me to ask you this... Why should you apologise personally? Did you commit the crimes? Is there a day that you may have once contributed to the feelings of isolation, institutionalisation or compounded the damage of an individual who was in care?

I have had encounters with people in my every day life that has done this. Here at church on rare occasions, at school, with friends. People are unaware of the impact of their comments or thoughts or behaviours and the effect this has on others. To ask an apology here where there was no ill intent is pointless, a person cannot feel remorse if hurt wasn't intended. However if the hurt was deeply wounding, then I might say something. Or I might not. And that sadly is a part of the damage of my abusive childhood – speaking up on such matters isn't something that many of us do.

I cannot ask Kevin to apologise to me. He cannot apologise adequately. He didn't abuse me. He cannot apologise with sincerity. He cannot explain the behaviours of the people who did. It is in this that I feel saying Sorry isn't enough. It isn't enough for a government to say sorry, because they aren't the people who caused the pain. Ultimately, at some procedural or policy level they enabled certain abuses to happen, and for that they can apologise. And that is what I read into Kevin's apology. A defacto apology for the defacto nature of the abuse. It is in this defacto nature that my first abusive home does not count towards the total years of my living in an abusive environment. Technically my ward status wasn't the 'right kind' to afford me protection for the first four years of my life, even though I was a “Care and Protection Ward”.

God raises the idea of compensation, in Exodus 21 he indicates a series of acts “ **22** “If people are fighting and hit a pregnant woman and she gives birth prematurely[e] but there is no serious injury, the offender must be fined whatever the woman’s husband demands and the court allows. **23** But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, **24** eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, **25** burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.

**26** “An owner who hits a male or female slave in the eye and destroys it must let the slave go free to compensate for the eye. **27** And an owner who knocks out the tooth of a male or female slave must let the slave go free to compensate for the tooth.

The idea of repatriation is complex. If a person isn't going to repair, replace, compensate for an offense, then does that make the apology invalid? Lazare says 'often'. Remembering that an apology is a personal device, to heal wounds and is based on the emotions and individual's own sense of self, means that the apologising party needs to say more than pretty words.

In the case of a broken window or a stained book repatriation is simple enough – but in the case of lives that are damaged and the psychological impacts of the abuse that we suffered as children there isn't any easy way to fix, repair, compensate, repatriate.

The placement in care dehumanises and reduces children to chattels. Their goods are packed in temporary furniture in temporary rooms. Often they do not have suitcases to move houses with. If they have things it's always bought with a very short term view – there is little point buying good quality or long life items if a child is not going to remain with you long enough to see the item through it's lifespan. Or the items are hand me downs, furniture, clothes, school equipment often handed down. Finances are incredibly limited, and the amount a child is expected to be raised on is far less than each of you spend on your own children. Toss in the fact that due to their disjointed lives these children often come with very little at the outset, and have higher financial demands through things like tutoring to cover for skipped educational experiences, increased dental and medical costs due to extended periods of neglect, dysfunctional family issues that include security, contact and safety issues.

A child under the age of three will take about two years to view a new family as a safe permanent placement. Over the age of three or four and the time taken increases dramatically, if the attachment is possible at all. Very few children stay with one family, and the vast majority are placed in care with a clear objective to ensure the placement is considered temporary. Even if the child lives there a number of years there is frequent reminders that this isn't permanent, so a child cannot 'forget' and attach safely.

People who are abused have their behaviours modified by the abusers. A 'visible' version of this is the grooming of people for particular abuses. But this sort of grooming exists on a more basic level too, a person who has experienced mostly abusive relationships has only learnt how to interact with abusers, and not how to interact with people who are not abusive. What hope do these people have to form secure, safe and healthy attachments? Attachment disorders affect people their entire lives and take a LOT of work to slowly unwind. Trust isn't an easy commodity to acquire.

Once a foster kid, always a foster kid. I live in fear that one day I might be tarred with the same feathers that my mother was, and that Sam might be subjected to a system that is intractably mired in s41t. It's a pointless fear, because I know I am a good mother, and that Troy is a great father. But this is a fear many of us have – that we are not good enough, that we aren't capable enough, that we don't know enough, that 'once a foster kid, always a foster kid' stench. Some of this stench relates to how the community we live in cannot forget, they can nod along with Kevin, but they cannot forget that this adult was once a child that came from a dysfunctional family, and fruit never falls far from its tree.

And this is why Kevin's apology can't help me. It can't help me because he can't fix any of that. He didn't cause it. He cannot change the community's attitudes. He cannot even get government departments to work with us in a sensitive and caring way a lot of the time. He doesn't fund them to care.

I could name names, I could say "this person should apologise to me for X". But to be honest. I never want to see that person again. A social worker who was too busy to remember me. A fellow foster child who abused me like he'd been abused himself. A mentally ill mother who couldn't bear to like me. None of these people are people I want explanations from. There is no adequate explanation – the explanation exists already. And maybe the remorse does too. Maybe they are remorseful for their actions.

This is where I say an apology is a targeted tool. An apology demands a response. I am forced to acknowledge the efforts of the apologisee, and if I am a 'decent human being' accept the apology. From this point there is an expectation of forgiveness, a reconciliation and ultimately life goes on. In this way I have had apologies from people that I see as an extension of the abuses I have suffered.

Apologies offered as a way forward for the person, without care for my own needs. Apologies as gas lighting, placing the blame and shame back on my own shoulders. I have a bone to pick with the Alcoholics Anonymous' 9<sup>th</sup> step "Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others" which often is shortened to "apologise to the people you have hurt". What if your face in theirs is just a reminder of the abuse, what if your apology is only for your own needs, and serves little purpose for them. In fact, what have they done to invite the apology? And what are you expecting in response?

I also have an issue with the frequently touted position that a person apologise for the hurt that has been caused in that nice 'politico speak' that says something like "I am sorry you feel that way about my actions". This neatly places the blame and shame back on the person who is aggrieved. And it isn't a real apology. There is no ownership of the original behaviour that led to the hurt, there is no indication of an intention to sincerely and genuinely desist from it in the future, the implication is that the way the hurt party feels is the issue, not the original behaviour. These I call clayton apologies, and sadly are a mainstay of some of the 'pop psychology' and 'cheaper' conflict resolution models. They serve only to remind the injured party that the hurt was caused, and it is in these that a person can absolve themselves technically of an injury, and swan off into the sunset without actually having any intention of improving their relationship.

The final issue I have with cheap apologies is the concept that one cannot foster the way another party feels about something – that the emotions and hurts they have around something is their own to deal with, and that if they are hurt or there is a misunderstanding that that then is their own issue, and that they should find a way to reframe, revisit it in their own mind. This is a helpful tool when you cannot reconcile, and cannot face the cause of the issue. But if the cause of the issue uses this as a defense, if it is part of why they feel they should not apologise, or not apologise sincerely, then it's frankly an unjust accusation on the injured party, and a cowardly defense tactic.

Seven times seventy. Present the other cheek. The prodigal son. We are taught to remember the love of God and forgive. Today I am not talking about forgiveness, and I'm not even really talking about apology. I know, I know, I've just chattered on about it for twenty minutes or more. Today I'm talking about the power of people to reconcile in their own hearts the damage of their childhood, to unpack and repack the abuses that graphically, momentarily, searingly revisit them here, there, everywhere. And that the act of saying Sorry isn't enough. Kevin Rudd said it beautifully, but left it unfinished.

We need to look at repatriation. Money isn't an answer. Money can buy you counselling. The WA State Government recommends we access the Medicare services, which are limited not just in number of sessions, but who you can see, and are at the whim of the purse of the Federal Government (and recently drastically reduced). As a community we need to forget what the abused want us to forget, and we need to remember what they want us to remember.

Remember that those of us raised in care have different experiences of the world. That for many of us we'll cave to authority, that we are painted with the grey walls of institutionalisation and are unfamiliar outside of those walls, that we have inbuilt patterns that make us susceptible to abusers. That we've been forgotten, treated as a file note, and that we were rarely if ever afforded individual care. And even those of us who rise above these issues are reminded regularly of them.

These factors need to be placed first in government and social programs working with us, the Redress Program failed on this front spectacularly. Hospitals need to remember this when we go in for medical care, professionals working in every field need to understand that we don't know how to deprogram this,

and at times of stress this is where we can revert to. Even people who haven't been in care, but have been abused will have some of these issues. And as a professional, in a caring role, it's not enough to treat just the person in front of you, we need to remember to work with them, in the way that best works FOR them at the time.

We need to think through our apologies. To apologise isn't enough. There has to be a genuine self examination, and thought filled response. A person who has genuinely examined their behaviour, found it lacking, apologised and indicated their intention to repair... that person is very unlikely to re-enact the original behaviour that caused the hurt. This is the true repatriation that a person who was abused would like to see. That it never happens again. In that there would be healing, relief. For me at least, and for many others.

Many people saw Kevin's apology as a changing point in their lives. It was viewed very favourably. However I'm one of the few or the many who say "it's not enough", because the repatriation has still to come. I've already asked my Member of Parliament what he's going to say about Redress 2. What he thinks the taxpayers should do about it... But that's another talk, another story, another day.

I'd like to finish with a few words from 1 Samuel, where he is, admittedly talking about the placement of a the king Saul, and as part of this closing the door on his own leadership provides us with a lesson our own leaders would well be served by:

2 Now you have a king as your leader. As for me, I am old and gray, and my sons are here with you. I have been your leader from my youth until this day. 3 Here I stand. Testify against me in the presence of the LORD and his anointed. Whose ox have I taken? Whose donkey have I taken? Whom have I cheated? Whom have I oppressed? From whose hand have I accepted a bribe to make me shut my eyes? If I have done any of these things, I will make it right."

4 "You have not cheated or oppressed us," they replied. "You have not taken anything from anyone's hand."