

The Eddie Koiki Mabo Lecture 2005

Every Community Needs its Places

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It is a great honour to be asked to deliver a lecture that commemorates the life and work of Eddie Mabo and to acknowledge that the name 'Mabo' has become one of the most powerful symbols of our growing (but still incomplete) understanding of how to approach and rectify the errors, injustices and misunderstandings of the past.

We say *Mabo* and we think *land*. And so we should. But many Australians say 'indigenous' and think 'land', as if there is a unique and mysterious relationship between Aborigines and their land – their sense of place – that is not to be found among other, especially urban, Australians.

I beg to differ. While different cultures may have different ways of expressing their sense of place – their tribal grounds – I believe connection to place is fundamental to our sense of identity.

In turn, our sense of identity can't be separated from our sense of community, so that, too, needs to be anchored to places and spaces that help us define who we are and who we are not, and where we belong.

This is not just a passing cultural observation: I want to suggest that it goes to the heart of some of the uneasiness, anxiety and moral uncertainty that characterise contemporary Australia - whether in its urban, suburban, regional or rural settings.

Let me share with you two of the most common themes emerging from my social research program over the past ten years.

1. We don't seem to have the same sense of *community* as we used to. The neighbourhood doesn't seem to work as well as it once did. (Sometimes this is expressed in comments like, 'We don't know our neighbours' or 'We don't feel safe in our own suburb' or 'We don't trust each other'.)
2. We feel as if we don't have the same sense of *morality* as we used to. It seems harder to identify the shared values we might regard as characteristically Australian. Sometimes, this concern is expressed in terms of a 'moral decline' but, more typically, as a feeling of moral uncertainty or ambiguity – a loss of moral clarity. Our research suggests that a common belief in contemporary Australia is the belief that 'We would be better off if we believed in something'. This is a kind of meta-belief: a belief in the value of belief itself ... if only we could work out *what* to believe.

One possible explanation for this loss of moral confidence may be found in our declining respect for institutions that once carried moral authority. The institutional church is an obvious example: in research recently published by Edith Cowan University, it emerged that a mere 36 per cent of Australian adults express confidence in the church, and even fewer report feelings of confidence in political institutions, the legal system and big business. (The media rank even lower on the totem pole of community confidence.)

The reasons for this decline in public levels of trust in institutions are complex but the consequence is that we no longer look to such institutions for moral leadership. (For example, 'All politicians lie' has become part of our folk wisdom.)

Another factor contributing to the erosion of our moral confidence is that the moral universe we inhabit is a more complex and challenging place than it used to be. We are being called upon to make more moral choices – more decisions with ethical dimensions – than our parents' and grandparents' generations ever did. In a sexually permissive society, we are making many more decisions about sexual behaviour. With about 40 per cent of contemporary marriages destined to end in divorce, we are making more frequent decisions about entering and leaving intimate relationships. But we are also being called upon to respond to some of the developments on the frontiers of medical science and technology – especially biotechnology. Last year, for instance, we were caught up in a national debate about the morality of embryonic stem cell research. There is no doubt that human cloning will be perfected in our lifetimes, and that will throw up a fresh set of moral questions about the meaning of human life and the ethics of reproduction. As medical science finds ways to keep us alive for longer, issues around the concept of voluntary and involuntary euthanasia will increasingly preoccupy those responsible for the care of the elderly.

Even war is now subject to new moral imperatives. We have been asked to accept that the so-called 'war on terror' operated within a different moral framework from our previous understanding of war. The invasion of Iraq, for example, was not to be regarded as a conventional military invasion, nor were the conflicts and casualties to be interpreted in the light of traditional war. This meant that prisoners were not to be regarded as prisoners of war, and therefore not subject to the Geneva conventions ... which led to the phenomenon of Guantanamo Bay.

So, at the very time when fresh moral challenges are facing us, we are losing our faith in the authority of traditional institutions to guide us. But I doubt whether that is the most significant explanation of our sense of declining moral confidence and loss of moral clarity. What is perhaps not always appreciated is that the two concerns that I mentioned at the outset – concern for the loss of community, and concern for the loss of morality – are really one and the same. They are two sides of the same coin. Our sense of morality *derives from* our sense of community.

We acquire our 'values' – the ideals we aspire to; the beliefs to which we attach particular significance – from the experience of living in community with others. Morality is the *result* of community. To put it in its most pragmatic terms, you behave differently towards someone you meet today if you know you are going to meet them again tomorrow. It is out of our evolving relationships with each other that we gradually learn the painful lessons about what makes a community work, and finally come to understand that 'right and wrong' are social constructs – and no less significant for that.

This helps to explain why I believe we should approach ethics as situational – recognising that moral frameworks change from time to time and from place to place, even in the journey of one person. Our cultural context shapes the *nuances* of our moral position.

It also helps to explain why our moral *foundations* tend to be remarkably similar from culture to culture. The experience of community is itself a remarkably similar experience from time to time and from place to place, so we should not be surprised by the discovery of common moral threads woven into the traditions of diverse cultures and religions.

In other words, the moral sense is a social sense, since it is based on the recognition of our mutual obligations: that's what makes communities work, which is why communities demand some moral conformity from us. At the heart of every moral code lies a willingness to take the rights, the needs and the wellbeing of others into account ... and the inescapable implication of that statement is that we must first understand and appreciate what those needs might be. We need a sense of familiarity and connectedness

with other people before we can discern their needs, and develop a sense of moral responsibility towards them. Indeed, that sense of connectedness – of belonging to the same community – seems to be the prerequisite for humans to accept responsibility for each other's wellbeing.

Listening to Australians talking about their lives, there seems no doubt that our sense of community *is* under threat: communities are becoming less stable and less cohesive than they once were.

Upheavals in our patterns of *marriage and divorce* - with implications for the dynamics of family life - have fractured many extended family groupings and have caused us to re-think the family as a more diverse, complex and transient institution than it used to be. With more than 40 per cent of contemporary marriages failing, many friendship circles and neighbourhoods are destabilised by marriage breakdown and family dislocation. There are now roughly 500,000 dependent children regularly migrating from the home of the custodial parent to the home of the non-custodial parent for their 'access' visit: this, too, disrupts the micro-communities between which they move.

The rate of divorce also means that almost a quarter of households containing dependent children are *single-parent households*, and about million dependent children now live with only one of their natural parents. All of these things contribute to the dislocation of communities.

The plummeting birthrate makes its own contribution. With the birth rate down to 1.7 babies per woman and falling, we are in the process of producing – relative to total population size – the smallest generation of children Australia has ever seen. In most communities, children act as a kind of social lubricant: parents and families often get to know each other as a consequence of contacts made between children on the bus, in the street, in the playground. As children become more of a rarity, that social lubricant is in shorter supply.

The shrinking household further contributes to the erosion of stable and cohesive communities. More than a 25 per cent of Australian households now contain only one person; about half of all Australian households are either one- or two-person households. Although many people who live alone choose to live alone and experience their aloneness as freedom and independence, others experience their aloneness as loneliness, isolation and even alienation. In the long term, the phenomenon of the shrinking household may well stimulate involvement in community activities but, in the short term, it seems to have reduced our sense of connectedness within local neighbourhoods and heightened the risk of social exclusion. ('I don't know my neighbours' is now a common cry in cities like Sydney and Melbourne.)

The mobility of the population also disrupts local neighbourhoods: on average, Australians are now moving house once every five or six years. And the increasing ethnic diversity of our communities increases feelings of uncertainty and mistrust: the Edith Cowan survey I mentioned reports that only 35 per cent of us trust our neighbours, and we are most distrustful of those who come from different ethnic groups from our own.

Even *the widening gap between rich and poor*, accelerated by upheavals in the labour market, makes some contribution to the loss of a sense of ourselves as a broadly homogenous, middle-class society. It is beginning to look as if Australia's egalitarian dream is turning sour; many Australians now accept the idea of social stratification based on income levels.

New electronic technology poses a further threat to the neighbourhood. The smarter electronic communications technology becomes, the more we will be tempted to spend time with machines rather than each other, and the more we will be inclined to confuse data-transfer with human communication. The effect of that would be to further erode our sense of being part of a human community and, in turn, our willingness to accept some responsibility towards those with whom we share our neighbourhoods (as opposed to our computer networks).

So there seems to be plenty of justification for the proposition that our sense of community is under threat and, by implication, that our moral clarity has been dulled. The question is: how should we respond?

It's already clear how some Australians are responding: **'Let's regulate!'**

When we feel as if the social fabric is unravelling, it is tempting to believe that the correct solution is to impose a kind of 'regulated morality' on society. This has led to the spate of so-called 'educative laws' that take matters previously thought to be the province of private consciences and individual moral choice, and put them squarely into the province of the law.

Everything from anti-vilification laws or tougher regulation of corporate boards all the way down to dog-walking laws, can be seen as a sign of our emerging vulnerability to the idea that we can't trust each other to acquire a sufficient degree of moral sensitivity, or to teach our children to act responsibly. No, we must take the short cut to 'good' behaviour: we must ban; we must regulate; we must legislate; we must control.

The pro-regulation mentality is perfectly understandable as a response to insecurity and uncertainty. Other responses to the same feeling show up in the rise of fundamentalism in religion, environmentalism, feminism and economic rationalism, in the dramatic increase in the number of Australians professing to believe in astrology, and in those wanting more mandatory sentencing of criminals or tougher censorship of the media.

While the pro-regulation response might be easy to understand, it exposes us to the risk of limiting our freedoms: it also means we might actually be stifling the very consciences we are trying to stimulate. After all, the essence of morality lies in our freedom to make moral choices ... including the freedom to choose to act badly. If we impose too many regulations in areas previously left to the dictates of our consciences, we may discourage people from thinking that moral choices have to be made. Obedience is a very different thing from moral sensitivity (as justice is not necessarily the same thing as fairness).

If we continue down the path of increasing regulation, we may well order our society in ways currently thought to be desirable, but at what cost?

Another response to life in an age of discontinuity and uncertainty can be seen in the **'back-to-basics'** movement, which is often an expression of nothing more complicated than nostalgia. Sometimes it emerges in explicitly nostalgic statements like, 'I wish I could turn the clock back' or in the call for a return to so-called 'traditional values', sometimes described as 'family values'.

When people talk about 'family values', what do they mean? They are usually referring to things like *loyalty*, *acceptance* and *mutual obligation*. Families are places where people learn some of the most fundamental of social values: indeed, it could be argued that if we don't learn about loyalty, acceptance and mutual obligation in the context of family life, we may never acquire those values. If we are not going to be accepted, unconditionally, for who we are in the context of our own families, where will we be accepted? And if we are not accepted, unconditionally, somewhere, how will we ever learn the value of acceptance?

A key implication of what I am saying is that, if Australians wish to recapture some of those 'traditional values' which we believe enrich our society, we are unlikely to do this by preaching about ethics, or by vaguely hoping that the divorce rate might come down, or by hand-wringing of any kind. The only way we are likely to re-develop our sense of morality is by re-developing our sense of community. The relationship between morality and community may be somewhat chicken-and-egg but, to my mind, we had better start with the community.

- We need to attend to the problem of *urban design*, so that we create spaces in which ‘village life’ can happen in suburban areas. Is the regional shopping mall really the best we can do?
- We need to encourage the provision of places where people can eat together, walk together, sit and talk together, or play together. At last we seem to be taking our first tentative steps towards an Australian version of a ‘cafe society’: ‘grazing with the herd’ is one of the easiest ways of connecting with the herd.
- We need to place less emphasis on private space and more on public space, bearing in mind that two-income households have less time to maintain a traditional house-and-garden, and many poorer Australians would be happy with smaller houses at lower prices.
- We need to stimulate the creative arts, because artistic expression often has a clarifying and unifying effect on us, showing us ways in which we are deeply connected to each other. Creative artists are also especially valuable at times of uncertainty because they send us messages from our future, which may alert us to what may become of us if we proceed as we are going.
- We need to encourage people to re-establish ‘tribal connections’ by offering more communal activities (everything from clean-up campaigns to drama groups, book clubs, adult education classes and bushwalking clubs) which reassure people that ‘the tribe’ exists and that they belong to it.

The *life of the community* is the key to its moral sensitivity, and its moral sensitivity is the key to its values. The challenge is not to teach people ‘values’: the challenge is to put people back together. In particular, the challenge is to foster the local, immediate, *geographical* sense of belonging to a community.

At work, for example, we need to foster the sense of collegiality, and to minimise our reliance on impersonal means of communication. (Remember that Bill Gates himself once said that emails are a great preparation for a meeting, and a great way of recording the outcome of a meeting, but they are no substitute for a meeting.)

On our university campuses, we need to place more emphasis on small group interactions, via tutorials and other strategies that foster the sense of collegiality and connectedness. But, above all, in our neighbourhoods – our streets, suburbs, villages and towns – we need to reconnect. ‘We don’t know our neighbours’ is a disgraceful admission about us, not them.

I believe that the most significant communities – significant, that is, in building our values and our moral health – are our local neighbourhoods. Getting along with like-minded colleagues in a book club, with drinking companions or with our friends is easy. That doesn’t test our moral fibre or our capacity to connect in ways that foster a sense of community. The real test or the civilising power of community is when we need to get along with people we don’t choose to be with, or don’t even especially like. That miracle of connection with strangers happens in streets all around Australia where people manage to get along with neighbours they never chose to live beside. It happens when people discover a sense of connectedness with colleagues in a workplace where the connections are accidental rather than made by choice. It happens when students enrol at a university and learn to make connections with people that they might not otherwise not have chosen to spend their time with.

It is these accidental, unplanned connections that play the most significant role in our moral and social development, and they all depend on place: they all depend on being in the same place at the same time. Perhaps that’s one of the reasons why we feel so attached to those places we associate with our sense of community – in the present and in the past. (Perhaps that’s also why, if I had to pick the person most likely to restore our sense of community, I’d pick the urban planner ahead of the ethicist!)

So, if you want to restore the health of your community, knock on the door of someone in your street you don't know; invite the neighbours in for a drink (but put a limit on the time of your first encounter!); organise a street party; get a few neighbours together to mow the lawn of the elderly person on the corner, or to do the shopping for a harassed carer or a single mother. Leave the car in the garage and walk along the street occasionally, allowing time to stop and greet anyone you encounter in their front garden.

Most of us will never change the world, but all of us can shape the character of the places where we live and the places where we work. To ignore our yearning for community, and our need to be connected with the people with whom we share these places, is to deny one of our most basic instincts.