

SPEECH FOR QLD CENTRE FOR DOMESTIC & FAMILY VIOLENCE
RESEARCH

MACKAY MAY 2007

THIS CONFERENCE IS BEING HELD IN A PLACE WHICH WASN'T ALWAYS A TOWNSHIP WITH OFFICE BLOCKS, TOURIST RESORTS, SHOPPING CENTRES AND BITUMEN ROADS.

IT WAS ONCE THE TRUE HOME OF GROUPS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE WHO LIVED RICH LIVES IN THE EXTRAORDINARY BEAUTY OF WILD RAINFOREST AND MANGROVE, HILLS AND RIVERS AND OCEAN.

I WOULD LIKE TO THANK AND ACKNOWLEDGE THE TRADITIONAL OWNERS OF THIS BEAUTIFUL PLACE, TO SAY HOW LUCKY I FEEL TO BE ABLE TO WALK ON LAND AND BEACHES WHERE PEOPLE NURTURED LONG AGO, A PLACE YOU STILL LOVE AND CONTINUE TO NURTURE.

AND I'D LIKE TO START THIS ADDRESS BY SAYING HOW HONOURED AND PLEASED I AM TO BE INVITED HERE AS A NON-INDIGENOUS WOMAN, TO SPEND TIME AMONG YOU AND TO SPEAK TO YOU.

I WANT TO SAY UPFRONT THAT I DO NOT COME HERE WITH ANSWERS. I AM NOT INDIGENOUS. I CANNOT KNOW WHAT YOU KNOW.

BUT YOU ARE HERE TO ADDRESS AND TALK ABOUT ISSUES OF GRAVE IMPORTANCE TO ALL ABORIGINAL AND ISLANDER PEOPLE, AND I FEEL HUMBLED TO BE ASKED TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE COMMUNITY OF THOUGHT AND EFFORT THAT YOU BRING.

I STAND HERE AS A WOMAN WHO WALKS WITH YOU NOT JUST THROUGH MY DEEP CONVICTIONS ABOUT HUMANITY AND EQUALITY AND DIGNITY, BUT THROUGH MY WORK WITH SISTERS INSIDE, AND PERHAPS MOST IMPORTANTLY THROUGH MY FAMILY. I AM MARRIED

TO JOE WHO IS A BACHELOR MAN AND WE HAVE 2 BEAUTIFUL CHILDREN.

I HAVE LONG AND STRONG CONNECTIONS WITH YOUR COMMUNITY, CONNECTIONS THAT ARE AS DEAR TO ME AS ANY I HAVE WITH THE WORLD.

THAT IS WHERE I COME FROM, WHERE MY HEART IS, WHEN I STAND HERE TO SPEAK TO YOU.

DESPITE ALL THAT I AM VERY AWARE THAT I STAND HERE TALKING FROM A POSITION OF WHITENESS AND PRIVILEGE.

I AM NOT SOMEONE WHO HAS TO DEAL WITH THE RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION THAT INDIGENOUS PEOPLE DEAL WITH EVERY DAY, AND ACTIVE AND THE COVERT DISCRIMINATION YOU EXPERIENCE IN JUST ABOUT EVERY AREA OF YOUR LIVES.

BUT I AM NO STRANGER TO DISCRIMINATION EITHER.

I SPENT A LARGE PART OF MY ADOLESCENCE IN JUVENILE DETENTION AND A CHUNK OF MY TWENTIES IN BOGGO ROAD PRISON IN BRISBANE.

A CRIMINAL RECORD IS PROBABLY ENOUGH TO INVITE DISCRIMINATION BUT I SUPPOSE I INVITED MORE THROUGH MY ACTIONS AFTER I LEFT PRISON.

BECAUSE I DIDN'T CHOOSE TO LEAVE THE PRISON EXPERIENCE BEHIND. I COULDN'T.

I DIDN'T CHOOSE TO LEAVE THE WOMEN STILL IN THERE BEHIND. I COULDN'T.

Before I go any further, I would like us all to take a moment to think of all the women who are locked away in prisons today across Australia – approximately 2,000 of them and most appallingly about 600 of these women are Indigenous.

I want you to imagine what they have been doing – what they are doing now. The majority would have been be locked down in their concrete cells till 7am this morning –
Alone –
Isolated –
Distressed –

If they are ‘privileged’ today they may have a family member or friend or their children visit them – they will be able to touch their little faces, stroke their hair, hug them tight, kiss them tenderly on the cheeks – having that special moment that we all here can have daily and when we choose.

At what cost though – after their visit they will be taken into an area where they will be strip searched – let me clarify that – across Australian jurisdictions it is called a dignified strip search – what does that mean you may be thinking - top half of your clothes off, lift your breasts, flick your hair, hold your arms above your head and turn around, then put your bra back on, now remove the bottom half of your clothing, turn raise your feet, squat, spread your cheeks and cough, if you are menstruating remove your tampon or pad and hand it to the prison officer – this is what a dignified strip search is and how many women paid for a visit today from their children, family and friends.

For those whose behaviour was not favourable to prison staff – the women who are not well and have mental health concerns, those who get distressed – they will be left in isolation and if they don’t have a visit or attend a program or go to industry – they are probably hand cuffed and body belted and medically restrained – left in a suicide gown in isolation wondering what is happening to them, thinking of their children, family, and friends. Knowing that they cannot touch them, speak to them as we all have the freedom to do so when we choose.

We ate and drank and socialised over breakfast as we chose this morning they have not so I ask you to remember all of these Indigenous women now as I speak.

I am also remembering Fyodo Dostoyevsky who in 1861 said –

“The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons.”

It is little wonder that his book was entitled *The House of the Dead*.

FEW PEOPLE WILLINGLY SEEK OUT KNOWLEDGE OF HOW PRISONS REALLY WORK, AND I BECAME DETERMINED TO TAKE THAT KNOWLEDGE TO THEM, TO THE FREE WORLD AND TO ANYONE WHO WOULD LISTEN.

THIS IS HOW SISTERS INSIDE WAS BORN.

IT BEGAN WITH PRISONERS, IT GREW FROM WITHIN, AND IT IS AND ALWAYS HAS BEEN OF, BY AND FOR WOMEN INSIDE.

APART FROM SERVICES DELIVERED INSIDE THE PRISON, LIKE SEXUAL ASSAULT AND DRUG AND ALCOHOL COUNSELLING, LINK-UP PROGRAMS FOR WOMEN WITH CHILDREN, INDIGENOUS SUPPORT SERVICES, PRE AND POST RELEASE SUPPORT - SISTERS MANAGEMENT ARM LOBBIES AND ADVOCATES FOR WOMEN AND FOR THEIR HUMAN RIGHTS.

THAT MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE CONSISTS OF WOMEN ON THE OUTSIDE WITH SKILLS AND BACKGROUNDS IN GOVERNMENT, THE LAW, EDUCATION AND MEDIA, INDIGENOUS AND NON INDIGENOUS, WOMEN WITH AND WITHOUT LIVED PRISON EXPERIENCE, BUT MOST IMPORTANTLY THEY ARE WOMEN WHO SHARE MY PASSION FOR A WORLD WITHOUT PRISONS.

WHAT MAKES SISTERS TRULY UNIQUE IS THAT WOMEN ON THE INSIDE MAKE UP THE SENIOR MEMBERS OF THAT MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE.

THIS COMMITTEE IS THE BEATING HEART OF SISTERS INSIDE. WE ARE LED AND GUIDED BY WOMEN INSIDE. IT IS THEIR ORGANISATION. COMMUNITY OWNED ABSOLUTELY.

THIS CRUCIAL FACT INFORMS EVERYTHING WE DO AND HOW WE DO IT. IT MAKES US UNIQUE THROUGHOUT THE WORLD.

THIS IS THE REAL POWER OF THE ORGANISATION: THAT IT IS TRULY IN THE HANDS OF THOSE IT SERVES. THIS IS THE WAY IT STAYS TRUE TO ITS VISION.

IT IS AUTHENTIC: IT REFLECTS THE REAL EXPERIENCE OF WOMEN, AND IS TRUE TO THEM. THIS IS ITS ABIDING STRENGTH.

OF COURSE TO BE TRUE TO WOMEN IN PRISON WE HAVE TO REFLECT THEM IN EVERY WAY.

YOU HERE ARE NO STRANGERS TO THE NUMBERS OF INDIGENOUS WOMEN IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM.

TO REFLECT THAT, AND TO ENSURE SISTERS IS A CULTURALLY SAFE ORGANISATION FOR INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND FAMILIES, FIVE OF OUR STAFF MEMBERS ARE INDIGENOUS.

WE ALSO HAVE A SENIOR INDIGENOUS PRACTITIONER IN A POSITION OF AUTHORITY, SOMEONE OUR NON-INDIGENOUS WORKERS CAN CONSULT FOR GUIDANCE, NOT ONLY ABOUT ENSURING WE ARE SUPPORTING INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND THEIR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES APPROPRIATELY BUT TO ENSURE THAT ALL THE NON INDIGNEOUS STAFF ARE ADDRESSING THEIR RACISM AND UNDERSTANDING THEIR POSITION OF WHITENESS AND PRIVILIDGE.

THIS IS A CRUCIAL PART OF OUR WORK WITH ALL INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES AND COMMUNITY.

IT'S ABOUT WALKING OUR TALK. IF WE DIDN'T OPERATE AS A CULTURALLY SAFE ORGANISATION THEN INDIGENOUS WOMEN WOULDN'T COME TO OUR DOOR.

ONE OF THE KEYS TO THIS IS THAT WE COME FROM A FRAMEWORK OF 'POWER WITH', NOT 'POWER OVER'.

INDIGENOUS WOMEN HAVE BEEN TREATED WITH A POWER OVER APPROACH FOR OVER 200 YEARS BY GOVERNMENTS, SYSTEMS, AND THROUGH COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS, WHO OFTEN TURN THEM AWAY, I WOULD SAY OUT OF RACISM.

AT SISTERS WHAT WE DO IS WALK WITH AND WORK WITH, AND A FUNDAMENTAL VALUE AND PRACTICE IS OUR FRAMEWORK OF

'EACH ONE – TEACH ONE', ESPECIALLY WITH INDIGENOUS WOMEN.

AND THAT'S BECAUSE THEY KNOW WHAT THEY NEED; IT'S ALL ABOUT THEM. THEY CAN ACHIEVE BY TEACHING THEIR OWN. THEY ARE THE ONLY ONES WHO KNOW THE ANSWERS FOR THEMSELVER AND THEIR COMMUNITIES.

BUT THERE ARE PLENTY OF PROGRAMS AROUND THE COUNTRY WHERE THIS ATTITUDE IS MISSING.

WHERE THE SERVICES AREN'T BEING ACCESSED BY INDIGENOUS PEOPLE. WHY AREN'T THEY ACCESSING THESE SERVICES ???

YOU AND I KNOW THE NUMBERS INVOLVED HERE.

WE AS NON INDIGENOUS PEOPLE HAVE TO ADDRESS THIS. WE HAVE TO ADDRESS OUR RACISM.

WE HAVE TO BE HONEST ENOUGH TO LOOK AT WHY A LOT OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE WILL NOT USE PROGRAMS OFFERED BY NON INDIGENOUS PEOPLE.

AT SISTERS WE KNOW THAT IF WE CAN'T CONNECT WITH INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND HAVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH THEM AND THE WIDER INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY, OUR MISSION WILL FAIL. WE HAVE FAILED INDIGENOUS WOMEN.

AT A WIDER LEVEL, I TRY TO WALK MY TALK TO THE BEST OF MY CONSCIOUS BEING – I DO THIS PERSONALLY BY MAKING AND KEEPING CLOSE TO STRONG WOMEN, BOTH INDIGENOUS AND NON INDIGENOUS.

I CHECK IN REGULARLY WITH THEM, NETWORKING, TALKING, GATHERING AND SWAPPING INFORMATION, AND SOME TIMES GETTING GROWLED AT FOR MISTAKES I MAKE, AND WE ALL CONTINUE TO WIDEN THAT SUPPORTIVE NETWORK OF WOMEN.

BUT IT SEEMS TO ME THAT OUR GOVERNMENTS AND SOME AGENCIES ARE MAKING IT HARDER BY THE DAY TO BREAK DOWN THE BARRIERS – THEY SEEM TO WANT TO THROW UP BARRIERS TO US WORKING WITH CRIMINALISED INDIGENOUS WOMEN.

THE FAMILY VIOLENCE AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE LEGISLATION, I BELIEVE, IS ONE OF THOSE BARRIERS.

TO THOSE UNACQUAINTED WITH THE WAYS OUR GOVERNMENTS WORK, THIS LEGISLATION LOOKS QUITE BENIGN. DOESN'T IT?

IN FACT THE LEGISLATION IS WIDENING THE NET TO CAPTURE AND CRIMINALISE MORE INDIGENOUS WOMEN.

IN THE COUPLE OF YEARS AFTER THE LEGISLATION WAS ENACTED, THE NUMBERS OF INDIGENOUS WOMEN GOING THROUGH THE COURTS AND PRISON SYSTEM ACTUALLY WENT UP – AS WOMEN WHO WERE FORCED TO DEFEND THEMSELVES OR THEIR CHILDREN FROM VIOLENCE WERE CAUGHT UP IN THE SAME NET AS THE PERPETRATORS OF THE VIOLENCE.

IT BEGS THE QUESTION: IS IT REALLY MEANT TO PROTECT WOMEN AND CHILDREN?

THE SAME GOES FOR MURRI COURTS, HOMELESS COURTS, AND SO ON. THEY'RE FRAMED UP AS DIVERSIONARY BUT THEY ARE IN TRUTH WIDENING THE NET.

TRUE DIVERSION GETS PEOPLE OUT AND AWAY FROM THE COURTS, WHERE THEY HAVE NO CONTACT WITH COURTS.

INSTEAD WE ARE CAPTURING MORE PEOPLE, CRIMINALISING MORE PEOPLE.

ALL CRIME HAPPENS IN A CONTEXT.

INDIGENOUS WOMEN DO NOT WAKE UP ONE MORNING AND DECIDE TO BE CRIMINALS.

IT'S ALL ABOUT WHAT HAPPENS TO YOU AND HOW THAT PLAYS OUT. AND IF IT PLAYS OUT BADLY, YOU BECOME CRIMINALISED. THAT BECOMES YOUR STORYLINE.

SO WE'RE DEALING WITH A SYSTEM THAT PULLS MORE AND MORE INDIGENOUS PEOPLE INTO PRISON AND KEEPS THEM THERE.

IT DOES NOT ADDRESS THE VIOLENCE THAT IS OFTEN A HUGE FACTOR IN THAT, ESPECIALLY FOR CHILDREN.

SO MORE AND MORE CHILDREN ARE BEING SUCKED INTO DETENTION CENTRES – WHERE OFTEN THEY SAY THEY WANT TO STAY – BECAUSE IT'S SAFE THERE.

WHAT HAPPENS THEN? THEY BECOME CRIMINALISED, OF COURSE, AND THEN END UP IN ADULT PRISON – THEY DON'T EVEN REALISE THE DAMAGE THAT'S BEING DONE.

THEY DON'T REALISE BECAUSE THEY'RE AT LEAST GETTING FED AND NOT GETTING BELTED EVERY DAY.

SIMILARLY ON MANY REMOTE COMMUNITIES WOMEN ARE DELIBERATELY COMMITTING CRIMES SO THAT THEY ARE SHOVED INTO PRISON WHERE IT'S 'SAFE'.

I AM HERE TO TELL YOU: PRISON IS NEVER SAFE.

AS WE SAY AT SISTERS, IF PRISON IS THE ANSWER, IT MUST HAVE BEEN A BLOODY STUPID QUESTION.

BUT IT'S GETTING INCREASINGLY HARD IN THIS STATE TO ASK ANY QUESTIONS AT ALL.

WE HERE IN QUEENSLAND ARE LIVING IN A PLACE WHERE IT HAS ALWAYS BEEN DANGEROUS TO SPEAK OUT.

IT STILL IS.

I THINK FOR A WHILE WE GOT COMPLACENT ABOUT THAT.

THE BAD OLD DAYS OF CONSERVATIVE RULE WHEN THE SPECIAL BRANCH RECORDED EVERY VOICE OF DISSENT, WHEN POLICE BASHINGS WERE COMMONPLACE AT EVERY PROTEST RALLY – THOSE DAYS SEEMED TO DISAPPEAR WHEN WE GOT A LABOUR GOVERNMENT IN 1989 AFTER MORE THAN 30 YEARS.

FOR A WHILE IT SEEMED YOU COULD SPEAK OUT WITHOUT PUNISHMENT.

BUT AS THE ELECTORATE BECAME MORE VOLATILE AND LEFT WING GOVERNMENTS BECAME NERVOUS - THE FEAR CAMPAIGNS BEGAN AGAIN. THIS GOVERNMENT THEN JUMPED ON THE BAN WAGON OF LAW AND ORDER.

SUDDENLY WE WERE GETTING THE TOUGH ON DRUGS AND TOUGH ON CRIME CAMPAIGNS AND THE MARGINALISATION OF ANYONE WHO DARED TO DISAGREE.

AT SISTERS WE'VE BEEN MAKING A LOT OF NOISE ABOUT CRIME AND ABOUT DISADVANTAGE AND THE LINKS BETWEEN THEM FOR A LONG TIME.

WE'VE SPOKEN OUT LOUDLY AGAINST ANY GOVERNMENT OR INSTITUTION WE SAW WAS INCITING FEAR, WHETHER THAT WAS THROUGH LOCK 'EM UP AND THROW AWAY THE KEY POLICIES, TOUGH ON CRIME CAMPAIGNS, OR THE INCREASED CRIMINALISATION OF PEOPLE WITH BACKGROUNDS OF POVERTY, ABUSE, MENTAL ILLNESS AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLE.

IN THAT SENSE THE ORGANISATION HAS ALWAYS BEEN BEYOND POLITICS, BEYOND FACTIONALISM. ITS HEART IS THE PEOPLE IT WORKS WITH AND FOR. WE TRULY BELIEVE IT IS THE ONLY WAY TO ACHIEVE CHANGE.

BUT IT IS ALSO WHAT INTIMIDATES AND TERRIFIES GOVERNMENTS AND WHAT HAS EXERCISED THE MINDS OF POLITICIANS RECENTLY.

DESPITE OPERATING ON THIS BASIS FOR 14 YEARS, WITH SPECTACULAR SUCCESS – REDUCING THE NUMBERS OF WOMEN RETURNING TO PRISON AND THE NUMBERS OF WOMEN DYING WHEN RELEASED. EVEN AWARDS SUCH AS NATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS MEDAL; NAMED THE BEST COMMUNITY ORGANISATION IN AUSTRALIA; AND WINNING A NUMBER OF CRIME PREVENTION AWARDS.

DESPITE THAT, THE CURRENT MINISTER BELIEVES THAT OUR MANAGEMENT STRUCTURE IS UNSUITABLE.

THAT IT CANNOT IN FACT BE ALLOWED TO OPERATE.

THIS DESPITE THE FACT THIS MODEL IS LAUDED AS THE BEST IN THE WORLD BY PEOPLE LIKE ANGELA DAVIS, HERSELF AN ICONIC LEADER FOR DECADES IN THE FIGHT FOR JUSTICE, AND AN ARDENT SUPPORTER OF SISTERS INSIDE.

DESPITE THE FACT THAT ORGANISATIONS LIKE SISTERS KEEP WOMEN OUT OF PRISON, BY SUPPORTING THEM, HELPING THEM REBUILD THEIR LIVES WHEN THEY EMERGE, TO FIND HOMES, GET THEIR CHILDREN BACK, GET TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT.

THIS IS THE SAME MINISTER, MIND YOU, WHO RECENTLY BOASTED ABOUT HOW WELL POLICED WE ARE, PARTICULARLY HOW WELL POLICED INDIGENOUS PEOPLE ARE:

ONE OFFICER TO 440 PEOPLE IN NON INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES, ONE TO 120 IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES.

FOUR TIMES MORE. AND SHE WAS BOASTING ABOUT THAT. THEN THE GOVERNMENT PRETEND TO SCRATCH ITS HEAD ABOUT WHY INDIGENOUS PEOPLE ARE BEING INCARCERATED AT ALARMING RATES. A FRAMEWORK TO FURTHER CRIMINALISE, ENDORSED BY THE GOVERNMENT.

THESE DAYS, WHEN WE REPLY TO SUCH STATEMENTS, OR OBJECT TO CERTAIN GOVERNMENT ACTIONS OR INACTIONS, IT DOESN'T GO UNNOTICED.

UP UNTIL TWO YEARS AGO THE WORST WE SUFFERED FOR THAT WAS A BACKLASH IN THE MEDIA, OR A SUMMONS TO A HIGH LEVEL MEETING ORDERED BY A MINISTER.

THAT ALL CHANGED TWO YEARS AGO AFTER SISTERS LODGED A FORMAL COMPLAINT AGAINST THE QLD GOVERNMENT ABOUT THE ABUSE OF HUMAN RIGHTS OF ALL WOMEN IN QLD PRISONS.

THE REPORT BACK FROM THE ANTI-DISCRIMINATION COMMISSION VINDICATED, WE BELIEVE, EVERYTHING WE STAND FOR AS AN ORGANISATION AND WHAT WOMEN ARE EXPERINCING ON A DAY TO DAY BASIS IN PRISON.

IT URGES THE STATE GOVERNMENT TO ADDRESS SUCH ISSUES AS MANDATORY STRIP-SEARCHING, THE SHOCKING EFFECTS ON THE CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED MOTHERS, THE TERRIBLE PLIGHT OF WOMEN WITH MENTAL ILLNESS AND SYSTEMIC DISCRIMINATION OF INDIGENOUS WOMEN.

AND THE LUDICROUS CLAIMS MADE ON BEHALF OF PRISONS BY THOSE WHO BUILD AND RUN THEM, WORK IN THEM AND FOR THEM

THAT IS, THAT THEY WORK.

THAT WOMEN WHO COMMIT CRIMES NEED TO BE LOCKED UP, DE-HUMANISED, DEGRADED, FURTHER DEPRIVED; THAT THEY WILL BE **MADE INTO BETTER PEOPLE INSIDE PRISON**, THAT THEY WILL EMERGE BETTER EQUIPPED WITH TRAINING AND WORK EXPERIENCE AND REHABILITATED.

THE STATEMENTS WE AS AN ORGANISATION HAVE MADE FOLLOWING THAT REPORT HAVE SEEN US LOCKED OUT OF PRISONS – MYSELF PERSONALLY, AND THE MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE – AND THE CURTAILING OF MANY OF OUR SERVICES.

THIS HAS BEEN DEVASTATING FOR US AND FOR ME PERSONALLY.

AND FOR THE WOMEN INSIDE WHO ARE NOW LARGELY WITHOUT ANY VOICE AT ALL.

YOU KNOW AS WELL AS I DO THAT THESE ARE WOMEN WHO HAVE BEEN SILENCED AND MARGINALISED BY LIFE BEFORE PRISON.

THE TRUTH IS THAT PRISON REPEATS ALL THE EXPERIENCE OF ABUSE AND DEPRIVATION AND HUMILIATION THAT MOST WOMEN WHO GO INSIDE HAVE EXPERIENCED THEIR WHOLE LIVES.

IN FACT, TO THE GREAT MAJORITY OF WOMEN IN PRISON, THE TERM **HUMAN RIGHTS** IS A CONTRADICTION.

THEIR HUMAN RIGHTS HAVE BEEN COMPROMISED WELL BEFORE THEY HIT THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM.

PRIOR TO GOING TO PRISON, 98% OF WOMEN HAVE EXPERIENCED PHYSICAL ABUSE.

89% HAVE EXPERIENCED SEXUAL ABUSE OR ASSAULT.

A GREAT MANY OF THEM HAVE EXPERIENCED POVERTY, IN FAMILIES THAT ARE ABUSIVE, IN WHICH THEY ARE NOT VALUED.

THE EFFECTS OF POVERTY AND ABUSE MEAN MOST HAVE A LOW LEVEL OF EDUCATION, LOW LEVELS OF SELF ESTEEM AND FEW SKILLS.

THE ATTEMPTS THAT MANY MAKE TO SELF-MEDICATE, TO DEAL WITH THE PAIN OF LIFE, MEAN A GREAT PROPORTION HAVE ADDICTIONS TO DRUGS OR ALCOHOL.

THEIR HEALTH IS CHARACTERISTICALLY POOR, AND MANY HAVE MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES WHICH HAVE NOT BEEN ADDRESSED.

IN THE PAST TWO YEARS WE HAVE SEEN ABUNDANT AND HEART-BREAKING EVIDENCE OF THAT.

PRISONS HAVE BECOME THE DEFACTO PSYCHIATRIC INSTITUTIONS OF OUR COMMUNITIES, WHERE ILLNESSES ARE NOT TREATED BUT PUNISHED, WHERE PEOPLE ARE NOT JUST CHEMICALLY RESTRAINED BUT PHYSICALLY RESTRAINED AND ABUSED.

A HIGH PROPORTION OF INCARCERATED WOMEN ARE OF COURSE INDIGENOUS.

AND FOR THEM, ALL OF THOSE THINGS ARE MULTIPLIED.

MULTIPLIED, EXACERBATED, AND GETTING WORSE ALL THE TIME.

SOME ARE FROM CULTURALLY DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS, AND FOR THEM THOSE THINGS ARE ALSO MULTIPLIED.

SO WHEN WE AT SISTERS INSIDE TALK ABOUT THE HUMAN RIGHTS OF WOMEN IN PRISON, WE ARE TALKING ABOUT A VERY DELICATE THING.

IT'S A NOTION MOST OF THESE WOMEN HAVE GIVEN UP ON.

HUMAN RIGHTS ARE THINGS OTHER PEOPLE HAVE.

LIFE – AND THE EXPERIENCE OF BEING A PRISONER – DOES THAT TO YOU.

SO WHAT IS THE LINK BETWEEN WHAT I'M SAYING HERE AND INDIGENOUS WOMEN WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED VIOLENCE IN THEIR OWN FAMILIES AND ARE THEN CRIMINALISED THEMSELVES?

I BELIEVE THERE IS A STRONG LINK. THE ABSOLUTE LOSS OF DIGNITY AND SELF-ESTEEM THAT GOES WITH BEING IN PRISON CUTS VERY DEEP FOR INDIGENOUS WOMEN, WHO ARE NOT JUST TRAUMATISED BY THE SYSTEM BUT THEN MUST SUFFER THE SHAME THEY FEEL THAT BRINGS TO THEM AND THEIR FAMILY.

FOR MANY THIS MEANS NOT JUST BEING OSTRACISED BY FAMILY AND FRIENDS BUT BY THEIR ENTIRE COMMUNITY.

A HOPELESS CYCLE SOON BEGINS. CONVINCED OF THEIR OWN WORTHLESSNESS, MANY SELF-MEDICATE OR DEVELOP ADDICTIONS TO DEAL WITH THE PAIN OF THE ONGOING LOSS IN THEIR LIVES.

AT SISTERS WE SEE THIS ALL THE TIME. AT SOME POINT IN THAT ONGOING CYCLE OTHER AGENCIES BEGIN TO TURN THESE INDIGENOUS WOMEN AWAY.

IF THEY HAVE IN THE MEANTIME DEVELOPED ANY KIND OF MENTAL ILLNESS THAT CYCLE BECOMES A VERY SAVAGE AND SAD ONE.

MANY PLACES JUST WILL NOT ACCEPT THESE WOMEN. AT SISTERS WE ARE SEEING MORE AND MORE INDIGENOUS WOMEN COMING TO US WITH SEVERE MENTAL ILLNESS.

WE ARE THE LAST PORT OF CALL FOR MANY. HOSPITALS, GOVERNMENT AGENCIES AND OTHER COMMUNITY GROUPS HAVE TURNED THEM AWAY.

IN SOME CASES THEIR FAMILIES HAVE TURNED THEM AWAY.

AND THE SYSTEM AS IT WORKS NOW ENSURES THEY STAY ON THAT TERRIBLE TREADMILL OF ILLNESS, OF ISOLATION, OF DESPAIR AND LONELINESS.

BUT THERE ARE THINGS THAT CAN BE DONE.

WE NEED TO WORK WITH INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND MEN TO ESTABLISH AND MAINTAIN HEALING PROCESSES THAT ARE REAL TO **THEM**, HEALING PROCESSES THAT MEAN SOMETHING TO **THEM**.

THIS WORK NEEDS TO BE UNDER-PINNED BY A **POWER WITH**, NOT A POWER OVER, APPROACH.

THE FAMILY VIOLENCE LEGISLATION IS STILL, FOR ALL IT'S TRUMPETED, COMING FROM A POWER OVER APPROACH. IT ONLY EMPOWERS THE LAW ENFORCERS NOT INDIGENOUS PEOPLE IN THEIR COMMUNITIES.

IT'S ABOUT WHITE FELLAS IMPOSING LAWS **THEY** THINK WILL BE GOOD FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLE. IT IS SIMPLISTIC – LOCK HIM UP AND ALL WILL BE SAFE – NO ANALYSIS THAT PRISONS ARE BASED ON VIOLENCE AND WHEN HE IS RELEASED THE VIOLENCE WILL BE WORSE BECAUSE HE HAS HAD TO USE THOSE SKILLS IN PRISON TO SURVIVE.

THIS IS UNJUST.

YOU'VE ONLY GOT TO LOOK AT THE TRAGEDY OF MURINDJI TO SEE THAT. HOW MUCH TIME HAD TO PASS BEFORE JUSTICE STARTED TO TRICKLE THROUGH ALL THE BARRIERS SET UP TO PREVENT IT?

HOW MUCH TIME UNTIL WE SEE INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES SUPPORTED TO BE REALLY EMPOWERED FROM WITHIN TO USE THEIR OWN SOLUTIONS, TO MAKE SURE FAMILIES ARE SAFE HAVENS AND THAT CHILDREN ARE WELL, HAPPY, AND GIVEN THE SAME ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND OTHER SERVICES AND ALL THE OPPORTUNITIES THEIR WHITE BROTHERS AND SISTERS ENJOY?

I SEE VERY CLEARLY THAT IT IS ONE SYSTEM FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLE AND ANOTHER FOR NON INDIGENOUS PEOPLE.

AND UNLESS WE – WHITE FELLA - ADDRESS THE FUNDAMENTAL RACISM INHERENT IN OUR SOCIETY THIS WILL NOT CHANGE AND WE WILL CONTINUE TO SEE THE OVERT AND COVERT CRIMINALISATION OF INDIGENOUS WOMEN, MEN AND CHILDREN.

THIS IS OUR PROBLEM, THE PROBLEM OF NON-INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIA. IT IS NOT AN INDIGENOUS PROBLEM.

OURS IS A SOCIETY THAT HAS ALWAYS BEEN UNEASY WITH ITS COLONIAL PAST AND THE DECIMATION WE CAUSED AMONG THE FIRST PEOPLES OF THIS LAND.

YET IT IS ALSO A SOCIETY THAT CLAIMS TO CHAMPION THE UNDERDOG.

IT IS AN EXTRAORDINARY IRONY THAT, WHILE WE CLAIM TO BE ON THE SIDE OF THE BATTLER, WE ARE ALSO BUSY KEEPING THE BATTLER, THE UNDER-DOG, THE **UNDER-CLASS**, IN THEIR PLACE.

BECAUSE IF THOSE PEOPLE ARE ALLOWED TO MOVE OUT OF THAT PLACE OF DISADVANTAGE AND DEPRIVATION – WHAT BECOMES OF THE REST OF US?

WHAT HAPPENS TO **OUR** PLACE, THE RUNG ON THE LADDER WE'VE FOUGHT SO HARD FOR?

PRISONS FIT NEATLY INTO THIS SCHEME OF THINKING.

PRISONS UNDERSCORE THE SOCIAL, POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND JUDICIAL SYSTEM THAT WE HAVE ALL CREATED TO KEEP OUR OWN ADVANTAGED HEADS ABOVE WATER.

THEY ENSURE THERE IS ALWAYS SOMEONE TO BLAME.

THEY ENSURE THERE IS ALWAYS SOMEONE PUNISHED – ON BEHALF OF US ALL.

I BELIEVE THAT WE, THE ADVANTAGED, THE PRIVILEGED, THE WHITE ARE KEPT IN OUR SAFE PLACES BY THE VERY FACT THAT OTHERS ARE CARRYING OUR COLLECTIVE BLAME FOR THE ILLS OF SOCIETY AND OF THE WHOLE WORLD.

MOST PEOPLE WHO SUSPECT THIS DO WHAT THEY CAN TO FORGET THEY KNOW IT.

THEY DO THIS BY VARIOUS METHODS: WE MAKE THESE OTHERS INVISIBLE – AND PRISONS ARE JUST ONE WAY OF DOING THIS.

AND WE DO IT WITH WORDS, BY LABELLING THEM. WE CALL THEM 'BAD', WE CALL THEM 'LAZY', 'WEAK' OR 'VIOLENT', 'CRIMINALS'.

IN THIS WAY WE MAKE THEM LESS THAN HUMAN. IN THIS WAY WE CAN ALL GET OUT OF BED IN THE MORNINGS AND FACE OUR DAYS WITHOUT WEeping.

WELL, SOME OF US.

INSIDE PRISONS THIS IS TAKEN A STEP FURTHER. AN INDIGENOUS WOMAN INSIDE PRISON IS NO LONGER SOMEONE'S DAUGHTER, MOTHER, GRANDMOTHER, SISTER, WIFE OR PARTNER. SHE HAS NO PARTICULAR HISTORY EXCEPT A PRISON OR CRIMINAL HISTORY.

THERE IS NO SUCH CLASSIFICATION AS **BAG-SNATCHER BUT GOOD MOTHER; OR DRUG RUNNER BUT FANTASTIC BUSINESSWOMAN/CHEF/WRITER; OR PROSTITUTE BUT LOYAL CARER OF DISABLED SON OR GRANDMOTHER.**

TO CONCEDE QUALITIES OTHER THAN THE BAD ONES WOULD BE TO RISK TREATING SUCH WOMEN AS HUMAN BEINGS WITH HUMAN RIGHTS.

IN PRISON YOU ARE YOUR CRIME. THEY MAKE A SHAPE FOR YOU AND MOULD YOU TO IT.

A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO SISTERS INSIDE WAS PUNISHED BY THE GOVERNMENT FOR SPEAKING OUT ABOUT THESE EXACT THINGS.

THE COMPLAINT WE TOOK TO THE ANTI-DISCRIMINATION COMMISSION CLAIMING THERE WAS SYSTEMIC DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN IN PRISON.

A MAJOR SECTION OF THAT COMPLAINT DEALT WITH ABORIGINAL WOMEN WHICH INCLUDES HOW CORRECTIONS CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM WAS DICRIMINATORY; THAT INDIGENOUS WOMEN WERE

NOT AFFORDED THE SAME ACCES TO SERVICES AND PROGRAMS AS OTHER WOMEN, HOW THE SYSTEM IS FUNDAMENTLY BASED ON RACISM.

THEY THREW ALL KINDS OF ALLEGATIONS AT US BUT THE REAL REASON THEY HAVE LOCKED ME OUT OF THE PRISON, LOCKED THE MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE OUT OF THE PRISON, IS THAT WE KEEP POINTING OUT THIS OBVIOUS FACT: **PRISONS DON'T WORK.**

HOW CAN GOVERNMENTS KEEP FEEDING US THE LINE THAT PRISONS WORK WHEN OVER 60% OF WOMEN WHO GO TO PRISON WILL RETURN TO PRISON?

THAT APPLIES ESPECIALLY TO INDIGENOUS WOMEN AS WE KNOW 77% RETURN.

WE MUST CHALLENGE THE CLASSIFICATION, ASSESSMENT AND CORRECTIONAL TOOLS THAT PRETEND THAT THE INDIVIDUAL MEMBERS OF THOSE VERY GROUPS OF PEOPLE WHO ARE GRABBED, SUCKED OR THROWN INTO THE CRIMINAL AND CORRECTIONAL SYSTEMS ARE THERE BECAUSE OF THEIR PLANNED, VOLUNTARY AND CRIMINALLY INTENDED ACTIONS.

WHAT DO WE DO INSTEAD?

IN THE UNITED KINGDOM NOTED POLICY LEADERS ARE CALLING FOR DECARCERATION AND SOCIAL REINVESTMENT.

IN THE UNITED STATES, SOME HAVE BEEN CALLING FOR THE ABOLITION OF JUVENILE PRISON FOR A LONG TIME, AND THOSE SAME VOICES ARE NOW CALLING FOR PENAL ABOLITION.

IN CANADA, CAEFS CONTINUES ITS ADVOCACY AND LEGAL CHALLENGES FOR DECARCERATION AND ABOLITION.

IN THE UNITED STATES TOO, ANGELA DAVIS CONTINUES TO INFLUENCE DEBATE WITH HER ARGUMENT AND WRITING, MOST RECENTLY HER BOOK, **ARE PRISONS OBSOLETE?**

ANGELA HAS LONG MADE THE POINT, AS WE DO, THAT CALLS FOR THE ABOLITION OF PRISONS ARE NOT SO RADICAL.

WHEN PEOPLE BEGAN TO TALK ABOUT THE ABOLITION OF SLAVERY IN THE 19TH CENTURY, THEY TOO WERE MET WITH CRIES OF HORROR AND FEARS OF ANARCHY AND VIOLENCE.

THESE DAYS WE LOOK BACK UPON THE SYSTEM OF SLAVERY AS INHUMAN, AS CRUEL, AS A TERRIBLE BLIGHT UPON THE SOCIETIES THAT PRACTISED IT.

HOW OFTEN DO WE AS A SOCIETY LOOK BACK AT SOCIAL PRACTICES OF DECADES AGO AND SHAKE OUR HEADS THAT WE COULD HAVE MADE THOSE MISTAKES AND MISJUDGEMENTS?

MAKE NO MISTAKE: IT WILL BE SAME WITH THE PRISON SYSTEM. SOME TIME IN THE FUTURE – SOONER RATHER THAN LATER, WE THINK – PEOPLE SEE THAT PRISONS **MAKE EVERYTHING WORSE.**

THEY DO NOT REHABILITATE, THEY PUNISH.

THEY DO NOT EDUCATE, THEY CRIMINALISE, THEY DE-HUMANISE, THEY AGGRAVATE THE WOUNDS THAT HAVE PUT PEOPLE THERE IN THE FIRST PLACE.

LET'S LOOK AT THE REALITY OF PRISONS: WE IMPRISON INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND GIRLS FOR THE BEHAVIOURS THEY HAVE ADOPTED TO SURVIVE POVERTY, ABUSE, COLONISATION, RACISM AND DISABILITIES...

WE TELL THEM THEY MUST STOP THIS.

WE LOCK THEM UP AND REPEAT THE ABUSE THEY HAVE SUFFERED ALL THEIR LIVES.

WE TELL THEM WHAT BAD WOMEN THEY ARE, AND THAT DESPITE THEIR LACK OF OPTIONS – NO INCOME, NO HOUSING, NO MEDICAL, EDUCATIONAL OR OFTEN FAMILY SUPPORT; CHILDREN REMOVED BY THE STATE – THAT THEY MUST REFORM THEMSELVES.

THEN WE RELEASE THEM TO THE STREET WITH LITTLE OR NO SUPPORT OR HEALING OR COUNSELLING, DRUG REHAB, NO SKILLS TO REBUILD THEIR LIVES, NO MONEY TO EVEN PAY A BOND, FILL A FRIDGE WITH FOOD – LET ALONE SURVIVE UNTIL THEY CAN GET A JOB, GET THEIR KIDS BACK...

WE TELL THEM THEY ARE IN CHARGE OF THEIR DESTINIES.

WHAT A JOKE.

BUT WHAT IF WE TOOK A DIFFERENT TACK? WHAT IF WE PROVIDED EVERYONE WITH ENOUGH RESOURCES, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL, SO THAT EVERY CHILD **TRULY** HAD AN EQUAL CHANCE OF PROSPERING.

IF WE PROVIDED A GOOD BASE-LEVEL OF CARE FOR EVERYONE AND A SAFETY NET THAT TRULY DID STOP PEOPLE, PARTICULARLY CHILDREN, FROM FALLING THROUGH THE CRACKS.

WHAT IF EVERY CHILD HAD ACCESS TO HIGH QUALITY EDUCATION AND WAS SUPPORTED TO ACCESS IT AND TO ACCESS EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES AND A DECENT STANDARD OF LIVING.

WHAT IF EVERY INSTANCE OF CHILD ABUSE OR POTENTIAL ABUSE WAS CAUGHT AND STOPPED BEFORE IT FLOWERED INTO A MONSTER?

WHAT IF THERE WAS A SUDDEN AND NATIONAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF RACISM AND ITS TERRIBLE EFFECTS AND A TRUE AND REAL EFFORT TO MAKE AMENDS? WHAT IF NON INDIGNEOUS AUSTRALIANS ADDRESSED THEIR WHITENSS AND OWNED AND ACKNOWLEDGES THE PRIVILGE WE REALLY HAVE OVER INDIGNEOUS AUSTRALIANS.

IT'S EASY FOR GOVERNMENTS TO WAX LYRICAL ABOUT THESE ISSUES. THE REALITY IS THAT THE HUMAN BEINGS WHO ARE AT THE REAL END RESULT OF RACISM AND CHILD ABUSE IN OUR COMMUNITIES ARE THE HUMAN BEINGS FILLING UP OUR PRISONS.

DESPITE CLAIMS TO THE CONTRARY, THE GREAT MAJORITY OF WOMEN IN OUR PRISONS ARE IN THERE FOR NON-VIOLENT OFFENCES.

THEY DO NOT NEED TO BE THERE AND WE AS A COMMUNITY DO NOT NEED THEM TO BE THERE.

THEIR CHILDREN DO NOT NEED THEM TO BE THERE.

THERE ARE MANY OPTIONS – LONG TERM ONES AS I'VE ALREADY MENTIONED – A MORE EQUITABLE SOCIETY.

ONE IN WHICH EVERY NEW BABY TRULY HAS AN EQUAL CHANCE AND EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES.

SOCIAL POLICY WHERE RESOURCES ARE DISTRIBUTED EQUITABLY
THROUGHOUT SOCIETY.

NONE OF THESE OPTIONS ARE IMPOSSIBLE. NONE OF THEM ARE
DREAMS.

BUT THEY WILL REMAIN SO WHILE WE INSIST ON THE CURRENT
SYSTEM OF SELECTIVE RETRIBUTION AND BLAME

WHILE WE INSIST THAT SOME WILL HAVE AND SOME WILL NOT HAVE.

IN THE MEANTIME I WILL, AND SISTERS INSIDE WILL, CONTINUE TO
SPEAK OUT, TO ARGUE, TO PROVOKE, TO INVITE PEOPLE TO CONSIDER
A WORLD IN WHICH NOT ONLY PRISONS BUT POVERTY AND PREJUDICE
AND DEPRIVATION AND VIOLENCE AND RACISM ARE ABOLISHED.

A WORLD IN WHICH ALL PEOPLE EXPERIENCE FREEDOM FROM
DISCRIMINATION AND WANT AS BASIC HUMAN RIGHTS.

A WORLD, IN FACT, IN WHICH THOSE TWO WORDS MEAN SOMETHING
TO EVERYONE.

I WOULD LIKE TO LEAVE YOU WITH THE WORDS OF A BEAUTIFUL
ABORIGINAL WOMAN FROM BRISBANE – LILLA WATSON

AND SHE SAID

- IF YOU HAVE COME TO HELP ME
 - YOU ARE WASTING YOUR TIME
 - BUT IF YOU HAVE COME BECAUSE YOUR LIBERATION IS
BOUND UP WITH MINE
 - THEN LET US WALK TOGETHER
- THANK YOU