

Good afternoon,

I would like to add to the acknowledgement of Country that has been given by others and pay my respects to the past elders and current Kuarna community on whose land we meet.

Thank you Tony for the invitation to be here today and for the welcome and introduction Tony has given.

I am also honoured to be asked to launch this book by

Ryszard Szablicki

Beyond the Orphanage Years

As Tony mentioned in my introduction, I did have in my mind being a social worker from early in my teenage years. I have often reflected on why that might have been. What formed this idea in my head?

I can see that in my experience of growing up in my family, there were arguments, strained relationships, failed hopes and disappointments which affected me. I ended up being a mediator of some kind within the family and became interested in why people behaved as they did.

I also experienced an awareness of snobbery of people who looked down on those who did not have as much money or live in the wealthier areas, and this I think this must have contributed to my lifelong belief in equality of opportunity and a commitment to respect for each person for who they are.

Oh, but when I read Richard's book, it is clear once again, how the family in which I grew up was so positively helpful and nurturing compared to what he experienced. Although there were some difficulties and frustrations in my childhood, I was provided with a bedrock of acceptance as part of a family, and there was interest in what I did and achieved from those around me.

In the childhood Richard writes about (in Catholic orphanages until he was 10 years old, then back to a family whose primary attitude towards him was resentment for the expense he caused), Richard had no one interested in him as a child, as a person, no one provided any acceptance, let alone welcome, of him as part of a group or family or particularly wanted him in their presence.

Many of people around Richard in the orphanages were totally self-interested and used and abused him dreadfully for their own self-gratification. He mentions this but does not dwell on it. And he does not dwell on it because for much of his life he did not know how to feel.

As a very small child he did what humans do when faced with such hostile environments. In self-defense he adapted to this harsh and cruel world by shutting down emotionally, by not having feelings, by his body completely separating the mind from any emotion.

What strikes me so clearly and forcefully when reading Richard's experience is that because he did not experience any care and concern from others in his early life, he did not know it existed, he did not know that care and concern was possible and therefore he had no expectation of getting anything positive from any interaction with other people in his adolescence and early adulthood.

Richard recognised later in his life that he had a Lack of empathy because he had never experienced empathy. During moments of emotional intensity in others Richard felt he was "looking through a bullet proof glass pane".

"There was a gap of nothingness between my body and my mind".

It is wonderful that Richard has written this book and that People's Voice has published it.

There are a number of reasons for this.

First, speaking as a person who did provide therapy for children and adults who have experienced emotional neglect and abuse, it gives such a powerful demonstration of the effects of his early emotional neglect on who he was as an adult, on how he functioned and experienced things as an adult. One of the saddest things about Richard's early experience is that he rarely experienced joy or fun or laughter. The book provides such a clear description of what happens to humans in those environments and therefore gives information about how a therapist might start to try and address that. We all have an absolute need to be accepted, to be included, to have our voice heard, to be shown some kindness, to have our achievements noticed; at the very least. Its impact is all the stronger because it is told so dispassionately.

I think all therapists, psychologists, and psychiatrists should read Richard's book to book to be clearly shown how this works.

Secondly, speaking as a person interested in social justice, it is an important account of how the institutions set up by our society (in this particular case the Catholic church) abused their power so dreadfully. For so many years the experience of the thousands of children in institutional care were ignored and then minimized. Richard's story is so detailed, so impactful, he adds a powerful weight to the pressure for society to fully recognise, accept and apologise for the harm that was caused.

It has been satisfying to see with the current Enquiry into Institutional Child Sexual Abuse, that finally the heads of the churches that ran these children's homes have had to take responsibility for what happened and have been so much less able to slide out from this with evasions. At present, society does seem to be more fully facing the truth of the awful cruelty that occurred. Let us hope we remember this and stay aware and vigilant, to find ways of preventing such situations from developing again.

The third reason this is an important book to have been written is because it provides information for social workers and families who are making decisions about the care of children. Some of the questions are;

If a family is unable to care for their child, what are the conditions we as a society need to provide for that child, in order that they may grow up into a well-functioning adult?

OR

When should a child not stay within a family? Richard says, it would have been better for his mother to put him up for adoption. Who was looking and noticing that he got no emotional care in that family?

What are the basic minimum needs a child has for acceptance, identity, concern in order they experience those emotions and then can show them to others?

These are important and difficult questions.

Something we need to remember when making these decisions To quote from Richard.....

The missing link was feeling. A human being is not truly human without it.

Once again, I think all social workers and child protection staff should read the book.

I hope very much that writing the book has been a helpful process for Richard.

It was good to read that he has found security in his adult life and the space to reflect about how it all occurred for him; to make some sense of it all for himself.

I want to warmly thank and congratulate Richard for writing the book.

It is my very great pleasure to launch its publication today.