

Good afternoon everybody. Taking the lead from my teacher Gary Bouma, I too pay my respects to the traditional custodians of the land, the Boonerwung People of the Kulin Nation and pay my respects to their elders, past and present. Having been the person to deliver for the Dept of Premier and Cabinet, Victoria's Multi-Faith Celebration of the Centenary of Federation in 2001, I had the obligation of meeting the indigenous faith leaders to put to them the proposition that they celebrate the Centenary of Federation, the very thing which deprived them of their citizenship in this nation in 1901. When I was given the task of placing before them the plan for that multi-faith event, it was probably the most crucial experience I'd had as an Australian.

It focussed me, not least on the opening paradox of standing here before you as a Jewish person whose family roots required a place of refuge, in order for me to grow up in any kind of democratic safety and security. Anyone of Jewish sensibility can't fail to take notice of the price of the dispossession of others, whose very stability and security had been put at risk by the arrival of those settlers (of whom we are a range of representatives of various layers of immigration) and for whom this country provided their life lines to safety. If that's not a gentle enough entree into the question of paradox, I don't know what is, but I hope that all of us now feel included in the conundrum of paradox.

Now this matter of the paradox of role modelling progressive faith from an interfaith standpoint is an extremely complex issue to try and explain and share in the few minutes immediately after the luncheon session, given that the breakout groups have been so demanding. I had a chance to briefly skirt the discussions that were going on around the building and I know that, having worked so hard immediately after lunch, the temptation for all of you will be to sleep now. So can I only say if you are going to do so, please do it very gently.....

I find myself in the happy position of following on from the launch presentations at this conference. Yesterday I found myself sitting at lunch next to Greta Vosper and Scott Kearns on one side and Peter Kennedy on the other side. To say that I had an absolutely wonderful, nourishing experience of my own is an understatement. But having been in the room last night gave me a sense of what the landscape of Common Dreams has the potential to be and I hope that I don't scuttle that too much. Having all been invited by Greta to be open, passionate, creative and intellectually rigorous as the precursor to the condition of enabling the progressive position on religion to make a difference – which requires an additional honesty, courage, respect and balance – I didn't think that was going to be too hard to knock off in the session after lunch. (Laughter).

On the other hand, this morning we heard part of the practical challenge of how to put in place progressive frameworks, even if we *have* the necessary personal qualities, academic credentials and discipline so to do. The story of the young woman quoted by Fred Plumer who wanted to know “why the TCPC grant application had to fund a “Christian” approach to anything good” and wondered aloud “whether or not an inter-faith grant application” wouldn't be a more desirable position to occupy, made me smile, wryly. Many of you have long been occupied in the conversation between Christian denominations in the ecumenical endeavour and know that cross-boundary discussions aren't all they're cracked up to be. If the challenge of dialogue *within* the *οκουμένη* is not sufficiently difficult, then the solution delivered by diverting into conversation with people *beyond* your own faith tradition is also no panacea for what ails you. Yet, I am a guest at the conference precisely because of my difference from you. Yet we may have processes and appreciations in common, even though our faiths are very (or maybe not so very) different. So I heartily recommend that you treat everything that follows with a good degree of intelligent scrutiny, which you were charged last night to do.

The Paradox of Role Modelling: the place of interfaith sharing in our spiritual journeys. Moderator: Jim Carter

There is an upside to all of this. I did recognise and experience (albeit from a Jewish position) more or less everything that our speakers up till now have shared with us. I can assure those of you Christians who are experiencing the challenge of empty pews, that the same challenge exists in synagogues. The following of many stories I hope to tell this afternoon at my own expense, is included, because I think to be authentic I have to tell you something about my experience rather than just things that you could get off the internet and read in your own time. You don't need me to be in the room for that. To be in the room for the experience of sharing an hour with 350 people simultaneously, I have to submit to another paradox. It is that whatever happens now, is whatever it is that happens. I am simply not going to be able to debrief most of your questions, difficulties, problems, objections or even receive your loving feedback, if you should be gracious enough to give me any, so thank you in advance. (Chortles)

So let me tell you a wonderful story about the challenges of inter-faith work. It's of course the story about the 3 ministers of religion, we can call them arbitrarily the Protestant, the Catholic and the Jew or we can attribute any names we like to them, so long as a rabbi is one. The problem they had in common was a mouse infestation. The churches and the synagogue were all experiencing the mouse plague and the 3 clergy colleagues, good and trusting friends, all met to deal with the dilemma. The first of the ministers said, "we called the pest control people and they came and put down the baits and the traps and it didn't really work and it cost us a fortune." The second clergy friend said "we called the Council because we pay our rates on time, we invited the pest catcher to come and catch the pests and it didn't really work, but it didn't cost much." The rabbi said "no, nope, wrong approach altogether. In our synagogue we gave them bar and bat mitzvah lessons and they haven't been seen since." (Laughter)

I think it's really important for us to smile at the challenge of this paradox, because if we were not to smile occasionally and lighten the load that we have chosen to shoulder with each other, there would be the entitlement to feel that the burden might just possibly creep towards the overwhelming. Greta commented in the breakout session, as to the price we might all yet have to pay for making the kind of progress, which this conference itself represents and aims to encourage and support. We know that we don't actually start out with any of the answers. Our experience alone will tell us how we are going to cope with the consequence of the shifts we are all seeking to make as progressives. So in this shared task, the place of the personal is unavoidable and a little humour is a welcome tonic.

I stand before you clearly as a sample of what progress might look like in Judaism, but certainly not the only example of what progress looks like in Judaism. I dressed deliberately this morning to accentuate my feminine gender. Most often in cool weather I will choose to wear trousers and invariably in the cemetery when it's windy I do so, as do all my rabbinic colleagues. Today it was very important that the medium and the message be congruent and that I not speak, as Greta pointed out last night "in outrageous allusions but to evidence them in truth." I label myself very clearly in addition to my gender, which is self evident, as a rabbi of progressive position. I am not attempting to fudge the issue and say anything to qualify that, despite my orthodox upbringing and education and my own orthodox bat mitzvah at the Toorak Road Synagogue not very far from here.

My only entitlement that Bat Mitzvah day, together with 4 other girls, was to walk downstairs from the Ladies Gallery wearing a white dress (for which my mother objected paying a cent more than \$19.99 at Portman's) in order to be able to read the 10 Commandments in English translation as a group and receive our virginal - white - bound edition of the Orthodox daily prayer book. That was my original programming. I complied with that requirement. My parents didn't give me any opportunity to wriggle out of it.

But it had a really unexpected series of consequences. I left that synagogue, aged 12 and moved my Saturday morning worship to another orthodox synagogue, just up the hill from here. At that point there were still women singing in its choir, in flagrant defiance of a Talmudic injunction that women's voices in song not be heard in the public domain, lest they be sexually erotic and distract men from their prayers. (Great hilarity) I sang second soprano and learned the Jewish classical choral repertoire during those happy years and still lament the passing of that mixed-gender choir at the St Kilda Orthodox Synagogue.

I suppose I have been moving to the religious left ever since and that story of personal transition was included in my entry essays to rabbinical school many years later. As a result, I am ordained as a Rabbi of the World Union of Progressive Judaism, I serve the Regional Australian Asian and New Zealand body of the World Union and I am a Constituent Rabbi of the Victorian Union of Progressive Judaism and somewhere in the room is another VUPJ colleague, Rabbi Jonathan Keren Black, who addressed the first Common Dreams conference and whom I am sure many of you will remember. Jonathan, thanks for joining us this afternoon.

So what is it that we do when we evidently manage to find some way to live the contradictions, which our faiths tell us, are unbridgeable? I simply am here am I not? I am a rabbi and a woman. I am a committed Jew and a flagrant defier against much of what others choose to allow themselves to be bound. Yet, I do not consider myself in any way a radical. What a paradox. Here are actions and statements seemingly impossible to reconcile and yet a bridging of a gap that I find not just essential, but obligatory. So what must now be added to this catalogue of qualities that Greta elucidated for us yesterday? How can we claim our common voice in the separate grounds of the traditions that Val Webb so eloquently and delicately, but firmly, provided for us this morning? Val, I could not have asked for a more appropriate introduction to the challenge of coming from beyond Christian faith and yet standing in a room full of committed Christians to speak about the shared endeavour of trying to make progress together.

Well, the task is nothing less than living The Dream. For those of us who live the dream daily, who are not flippant, who don't seek to make political capital, for whom this is nothing less than what God asks us to do, our task demands the journey of a lifetime. For each of us the expense of that lifetime will look different. Therefore there is plenty in common, despite what separates us. As a Jewish woman who does not seek to be a Christian, there is always the explicit acknowledgement that what I am trying to achieve as a Jewish woman might, in general terms, take me to the same terrain as what it is that those of you who are Christian wish to attain. There is also the implicit acknowledgement

that, even if we should all succeed in progress together, the results will be nuanced and different and must stand alongside each other in an attempt to comfortably buttress what each of our communities and faiths is in the process of trying to achieve.

“Co-operation without unity” is the notion of the Parliament to which so many of us contributed in December of last year. It is, to be sure, not a competition between faiths. We are not trying to work out who has “the supreme answer” or whose theology is “right”. In fact there is no word in Hebrew for theology. We simply live our faith in the form of progress. The risk is huge, but more of that later. So what must we do? Many people know that the rabbi is teacher. But the rabbi is the teacher using the title *Moreh* or *Morah*, from the Hebrew word to show, to put on display, to demonstrate. You cannot do show-and-tell unless you know your stuff. The *rabbi* tag comes from the Hebrew word of *rov*, a large amount of something, a bounteous quantity of something. Hopefully it’s a large quantity of knowledge and all of our ordaining institutions, regardless of the religion they represent, set a high standard on the repertoire that ordinands are supposed to have.

My own study journey (here is an excursion into one of those personal stories) has been complex and I have many trainings. When I came back to Australia in 1995, I thought perhaps it was time for me to embark on the next one and I went to see the then Director of Post Graduate Studies at Melbourne College of Divinity. At the time it was Dr. Colleen O’Rilley, now the Rev. Canon Dr. Colleen O’Rilley, a woman colleague now at St Georges Malvern, but someone who then was unknown to me and I was a lot younger than I am now and much more in awe of her position. I rang the College and they made an appointment for me to see Colleen. I arrived with the necessary transcripts, she interviewed me for about three and half minutes, asked about my academic background, gave me a form to fill in and told me that my application to do a Doctor of Ministry Studies Degree would be discussed at the next Academic Board Meeting. “When will that be?” I asked, assuming that I had months before having to make good on the commitment to start the degree. “About 9 weeks from now” she replied. But just as I was breathing a sigh of relief at not having to do anything for a couple of months, she added “on Monday at 9:00 go to Charles Sherlock’s workshop at Trinity College. Be on time.” I was gob-smacked! Somehow or other the Melbourne College of Divinity had decided to take a risk on the local woman rabbi and I began what has proved to be a very long, disjointed but ultimately now well-embarked-upon process and sometime soon I might even finish....”

But the punch-line of the story is not about what happened in the academic process of my wondering whether or not it was time to update my skills, given that I was back in Australia and things had largely changed in the 17 years in which I had then been gone. Rather the experience that I want to relate came as a result of stepping out of Colleen’s office into the general office to fill in

the enrolment paperwork and to encounter another staff member. I was so excited by what had just happened to me, I said to her “I can’t believe it, they’ve just admitted to the College; I am not even a Christian”. To which she replied, with no degree of amusement whatever “Oh, we’ve got plenty of those!” (Laughter)

I invite you to remind yourselves from time to time, when the interpersonal journey is getting particularly difficult, that if we don't laugh at our condition we might cry much of the time. So we must study and we must role-model our studies to others. In this I must take issue with Greta's wonderful images that she invited us to choose between last night. I don't know anything about the esteemed 14th century Bishop's statue and I suspect that regardless of his name he would have been towing the Christian – universally catholic at that time – party line. He was being contrasted against our good friend Jeeves from search engine Ask Jeeves. But as an object of role modelling, I am sure that Greta would be the last to suggest that Jeeves is a suitable role model for any of us. Because Jeeves, apart from his male-ness and apart from his trans-Atlantic shift from his role in the Bertie Wooster novels to being a colonised icon of American search engine technology, is “a man who knows everything”. (Chuckles begin to ripple through the room) *I am not even going to go there and... to the person who chuckled the most – let your wife deal with it later. (Laughter)* I think it's telling, isn't it, that some of us recall what it was like to grow up in churches, synagogues, citadels, where there was a knowable truth and the minister had it. And if you wanted access to the tennis courts in the weekly tennis club fixture, you'd better not push your own objections too hard.

So what does this tell us? That we have to surrender “the monopoly on knowledge and truth” and we have to be prepared to invite into our role modelling, the act of learning. That demands of those who join us in the progressive journey that they come learn with us, that we learn together. By demonstrating our readily discernable lack of total knowledge, we will demonstrate that the teaching ministry of the pastors is not the total answer to anything. For those of us who are now feeling extremely uncomfortable, I can only reassure you that the blood pressure reading that your doctor has been so concerned about, will drop 25 points, the minute you acknowledge that we don't know and don't have to know everything. And by the way, your congregation knows it already. (Laughter)

So “we must learn in order to do, we must learn in order to teach” to quote from our synagogues in the progressive movement. We learn and study and share the learning experience with others, in order to be able to act properly in the world. That includes sharing the journeys of the faiths of others, not just our own, not least because it's very lonely *out there*. I've had conversations just today with people who have said, about other registrants whom they have encountered at this conference, in hushed whispers of disclosure to me “I didn't know she/he was a progressive!” Further, unless you identify yourselves on the board up the back, or have given permission for your names to be circulated, others may not be able to find you again, because often you will go back into parishes and communities which do not label themselves, as mine do, “Progressive”.

You may be the hopeful progressive seeking to move, coax or push your community along, but you may actually know that to declare it would make you vulnerable and might even, as Greta implied, somehow make your congregation vulnerable. Don't tell me that your blood pressure isn't paying a price for that. We have to survive the paradoxes of role modelling what it is we want our faiths to achieve. Those of us who are on the ground, doing the work, have to equip ourselves with the means by which to do so. Be honest: how many people have got more than 2 weeks annual leave sitting in

their account at work? Look around the room..... yeah, yeah now the hands are really going up... come on 'fess up... who doesn't take their holidays? Who rings their minister on their day off? (Laughter) You don't have to put your hand up. The laughter around the room confirms for me that no matter how progressive you want your community to be, you're prepared to tax your minister on their day off, despite the fact that she/he works 24/6 and it's not enough for you.

Well, I recommend that all of us who are professional ministers in the room join with our lay-leaderships to agree that the entire task will not be fulfilled in our lifetimes. As a result, our real achievement will be to vaccinate hundreds of followers and supporters not to die in the effort of what will still be required, after our own contribution has been made. (Laughter) In other words, the paradox of having great faith is to know one's limitations and live one's life accordingly.

Last week I conducted the funeral of a 26 year old profoundly handicapped young woman. Her family sat before me to prepare the funeral and her older sister had declined to attend. I knew from that absence how burdened the life of the family had become when her baby sister arrived. With the permission of the parents, I spoke to her for nearly half an hour in their presence, using her father's mobile phone because she wasn't picking up the house phone. She answered the call on the mobile because she could see that it was her dad calling. They listened as I said, "it's not Dad, I am the rabbi who is conducting your sister's funeral and I need to speak to you."

By all accounts I did a fine job caring for the family and bringing the burdened young woman to her final resting place. My task was to care for her parents, her bereaved nearly 90 year old grandmother who had been her primary caregiver on the weekends, her older sister and all of the staffs of the institutions in which she was cared for, where she was currently a resident, and where she went for day activities. By the time I had concluded the funeral and the evening memorial service, I was shattered. I took my emotions to clinical supervision. I shared and worked on them with someone who knows me well and whom I can trust. I had not told the family that my tears at the outset of the service, were tears of recognition for my own firstborn who, had she survived her infancy, would have been similarly disabled.

We live the demand of faith every day, but we must understand profoundly the responsibility that we accept when we step into the lives of others who put their care into our hands and who rely on us to be intellectually scrupulous in carrying their burdens. And so I add the following pairs of qualities to the challenge and the paradox of living a faith that we wish to push to the 21st century and one that will bring us an articulation of what we know in the depths of our being is the encounter with the Divine, but for which there is as yet, no unified language or experience. Those of us who dare the journey, alongside others of alternative faith, are the ones who experience the paradox of security in their own faith as it is and still allow themselves to feel the fear that is demanded to push it into a new terrain. We feel the fear and do the work of progress anyway. Our faiths affirm for us that the anxiety demanded by that work is entirely worthwhile.

The Paradox of Role Modelling: the place of interfaith sharing in our spiritual journeys. Moderator: Jim Carter

When I was sitting next to Peter Kennedy at lunch, he told me that he has a very strong understanding of leadership and that someone in his parish in the last several months of exile from St Mary's had voiced a frustration. I don't need to know the circumstance and I don't need to know the person who said it, but the way the frustration was voiced was "Peter there's no process!" I think the translation of this concern is 'I don't understand and I am too frightened to ask and I don't know how to voice my fear'. How many of us have sat in community experiences where resistance around the committee or the board-room table has been in direct proportion to fear and therefore the heels dig in, in equal and opposite measure to the significance of the issue on the table. And let's face it, often that digging in response is about the really large issues of faith communities: "shall we change the organ this year?" "Shall we reconfigure the worship space and move the chairs" and finally the one that really runs the show "but the pew sheet has already been printed!" (Laughter) Yes folks there is enormous risk involved in making even the smallest change and we know that often the small things capture us because they provide such a magnificent camouflage for the real work of the large things. (Applause)

I can tell you it's exactly the same in synagogues. We have to feel the fears, our own and those of our communities, and do strong leadership anyway. In order to do it, we are entitled to have around us professionally nourished, intellectually prepared, thoroughly trained, humble and open clergy and lay leaderships that will take us together to the place of trust. Trust will have to sit paradoxically side by side with the experience of risk, because without risk there can be no change.

Finally, we have to accept the pain of loss as part of the experience of moving from place to place. We have to understand that when we invite people to join us on the journey that moves us, that we may hurt others, even inadvertently. We the leaders who want to help others join us in the journey towards progress, must come to be comfortable with understanding that hurt will need to be attended to and we had better get really good at apologising for things. Some people are really bad at apologising. I recommend that you test your "apology barometer" by apologising to your children. How many, don't tell me but you'll know, how many people don't apologise to their children when they get things wrong? Well some parents never get anything wrong, so they don't have to apologise, ever! The rest of us learned to do it very, very early and put our shortcomings on display to our children, the very people whose progress we care about the most. We have to acknowledge that in helping others to move, even to the place that they declare they wish to move to; will require that we succour those who are finding it difficult to make the journey. As I did with the bereaved family last week, we will have to learn to grieve with them, as we shoulder the burdens that they entrust to us on the journey towards progress, in order that we might bear them together.

It's dangerous to live in the real world! It asks a great deal of us. But if we are not prepared to act in the real world, travesties unfortunately will be perpetuated in our name. The following came across my email screen yesterday (I hasten to add it is one of several examples I could have chosen at random): a website has quoted Giacomo Babini the Emeritus Bishop of Grosseto as saying he believed "a Zionist attack was behind the criticism about how the Catholic Church has handled allegations of sexual abuse". The evidence for that attack having been "Zionist", which is an anti-Semitic feint which substitutes "anti-Zionist" for "anti-Jewish" was, and I quote, "that the criticism of the church was both powerful and refined" (uncomfortable laughter) clearly both uniquely Jewish traits. (Further laughter) Unfortunately, whilst we have to laugh because, otherwise we would weep together, this is no laughing matter. Sadly, it is only one of many similar examples.

I once went to Queensland for a holiday. I went to a health spa that did not advertise itself as being of 7th Day Adventist alignment. I have no objection to that alignment, but I do have an enormous objection to the fact that part of the health retreat programme was the most excruciating anti-Catholic vitriol, which was delivered alongside lectures on health, rest and sunlight.

The Paradox of Role Modelling: the place of interfaith sharing in our spiritual journeys. Moderator: Jim Carter

If we do not begin to speak up about these kinds of matters (and we can't do it alone so we must bring into our learned circle of co-workers in the endeavour, others who will do this kind of work for us) then all the progress we make, will be counterbalanced by insidious prejudice, by lack of honesty and by a use of the faiths which is nothing short of blasphemous.

And so with my time nearly up I return to a wonderful image that Greta gave us yesterday. She hoped that we would be “light that cast no shadow in our world”. Sadly we know that we will cast shadows, for which we will try to apologise and improve ourselves. But it’s a wonderful mixed metaphor that she offered us, because the light itself is pure and it is only the solid objects that produce the shadows. Implicit in us not causing too much damage, even in the name of what it is we hold sacred - this obligation to make progress, is the requirement to acknowledge our own solidity. When we are genuinely aware, we will be prepared to move out of the way of the light, if it is we, ourselves who cause the shadow.

I end with a text from a short book of aphorisms, known as *Pirkei Avot*, which finds itself buried inside the Talmud. It reminds us that we are all locked in the journey of the paradox: we are each other’s allies, but each one of us has our individual obligation. “You are not required to finish the work, but neither are you entitled to desist from it.” Avot 2:16

THANK YOU

(APPLAUSE)