THE 7TH INTERNATIONAL 'LOOKING AFTER CHILDREN' CONFERENCE IS BEING HELD IN AUSTRALIA FOR THE FIRST TIME IN AUGUST 2006. ITS THEME IS 'POSITIVE FUTURES'.

Whither Youth?

BASED ON AN AFTER DINNER ADDRESS GIVEN AT
THE 5TH INTERNATIONAL LOOKING AFTER CHILDREN CONFERENCE
PROMOTING WELLBEING AND MONITORING OUTCOMES FOR VULNERABLE CHILDREN
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PREAMBLE

Whither Youth? was presented as an after dinner address at the biennial international conference for researchers and others involved with the implementation of the 'Looking After Children' system of assessment, case planning and review initially developed for children in out-of-home care. The focus of that system in the UK has now expanded to include a broader system of assessment for vulnerable children. The address was intended as a semi-serious after dinner entertainment and it has a mild shot at the 'boomers' and 'Xers' who are now largely in control of much organisational activity. In addition to being a reflective piece on the author's experience of the care system, it drew on some research activity conducted in the sphere of transnational corporations concerned about the effects of generational attitudes and behaviour on the customer base and the work force.

The address suffered much in its delivery. The author arrived in England recently recovered from a leg fracture to find he was suffering from DVT which required self-administered daily injections of a blood thinner. On the night in question, delivery was required in the cathedral-like historic dining room of Worcester College, Oxford, without technological aids. The combination of table wine and the difficulty some of the European delegates had in coping with an Australian accent led to a minor battle of the sounds. Nonetheless readers might find some of the content interesting.

Attention is drawn to subsequent conferences of this kind. Last year one was held in Ottawa, Canada, and a substantial Australian delegation attended. It was the first to be held outside the United Kingdom. The 7th International Looking After Children Conference will be held in Sydney in August, 2006, with the theme 'Positive Futures'. It will be hosted by the Association of Children's Welfare Agencies (ACWA) in conjunction with the 2006 ACWA conference. The call for papers has been distributed, the closing date being 1 March 2006. Further details are available from ACWA (www.acwa06.com).

WHITHER YOUTH?

I continue to be impressed by the way Looking After Children (LAC) and its encompassing integrated framework rolls on and grows as it goes; how it goes on building on substantial good work, connecting as it goes to myriad research endeavours around the UK and well beyond; linking to institutions of various kinds; and linking to that earthy territory the real world of child, youth and family welfare practice. Also impressive has been the solid commitment to research displayed by a succession of senior officers at the Department of Health (UK).

Here I aim to share a few thoughts about young people and some of the issues and impacts their world presents. My sources include observations from my own fairly accidental career, some of which involves people who were young at some time in the last forty or so years, because it is encounters with them which underpin much of my thinking now, although our concern is with those who are young today. In various ways they continue to lead me to contemporary concerns, although the raw encounters with large numbers of them in their youth occurred mostly in the sixties, seventies and eighties. I have been able to see some of those raising generations X and Y as well. Some more recent grounding has come from a decade or so spent working with University students and seeing my grandchildren working their way toward adolescence. Current work involves youth at risk of homelessness in a local youth accommodation agency.

In the sixties my wife and I fostered two teenagers through a period starting when our son, Anthony, was 8 months old, and our time as direct carers included the birth of our second child, Jane. I recall squirming at the 4th International Looking After Children Conference as Richard Barth, in his after dinner address, outlined his fostering experience, and thinking that there are likely to be more ups and downs to come in the Barth foster family journey. Through the

seventies and into the eighties, I found myself working in, and later managing, a series of institutions for young offenders and children and young people which were part of the State of Victoria's juvenile justice and child and youth welfare systems.

There was a multi-function remand and detention facility for young men up to 16 years of age, with a related secure reception facility for 10-14 year old boys; there were two open custodial centres for young men aged 17-20 (one of these was a farm which, in addition to 90 young offenders, had 10,000 sheep, 5,000 chickens, dairy and beef herds, pigs and a market garden); there was a multi-function facility for young women aged 14-21, including those on protection as well as justice system orders; and after a brief stint with adult prisons, I found myself managing a centralised reception centre for children on protection applications and orders which included a baby nursery and units for girls up to 15 years and boys up to 10 years, give or take some age boundary flexibility.

The later eighties took me off into regional community welfare operations which behaved a bit like English Local Authority Social Services, including child protection, young offender and disability teams.

There was no end to the lessons from these experiences, but the profound one was the humanity one found in the vast majority of these young people when they were treated with respect and given a chance to succeed.

... in contrast to the situation of wealthier, older westerners, we know that life expectancy is considerably shorter for many of our own aboriginal people, as well as for the poor in rich countries and for the majority of people in poorer countries.

I wish we had had the advantage of the evidence-based work now available about working with involuntary clients. There were also lessons in how hard it is to keep large organisations operating humanely, creatively and proactively, with adequate structure and the kind of positive culture which is enhancing and motivating for both staff and clients.

The nineties took me back to university as a teacher of social workers, but also as a facilitator/researcher in a fascinating array of international and local projects concerning women labour migrants from Sri Lanka to the Middle East displaced by the Gulf War, youth in Papua New Guinea, people with disabilities moving from institutions into the community, and parents with substance abuse problems, as well as some ongoing care system and juvenile justice involvement.

Lessons about culture, disadvantage, global economics and exploitation were myriad. In Sri Lanka I was introduced to the export of women as a source of cheap domestic labour as well as the impact of terrorism and poverty. The market

place often exploits, then abandons, vulnerable people. In PNG there was much evidence of the aftermath of first world cultural ignorance, economic exploitation and the effects of poor transition management on health, education and individual and collective public safety. Law and order is a significant and sensitive issue.

I have the advantage of surviving six decades so far, though some would say that's no qualification for talking about youth today. However, to some extent it now seems that youth is a consumer commodity which, like other goods in the market place, we can buy if we can afford it, or we might be given some of more enduring quality if we are lucky.

We have a social researcher in Australia, Hugh Mackay, who is about my age and who has spent his life talking to samples of Australians in each age group. He claims that those now in their sixties see themselves as people in their fifties saw themselves a few years ago, likewise the new fifties are the new forties, and the new forties are the new thirties, the new thirties are the new twenties (CWAV 2002). Increasingly it is in people's thirties that marriage, parenthood, mortgage and make or break career moves are occurring at the wealthier end of western post-industrial societies. Those in their twenties are now seen as an extension of 'youth' – the time for having fun, studying, taking time out and only gradually approaching the idea of adulthood. He quotes an informant, 'The worst thing about turning 30 is discovering you're the oldest person in the nightclub' (CWAV 2000). But, says Hugh, there is one striking exception to all this subtraction of age. He can't find a single 20-year-old who insists that 20 is the new 10. Somewhere now between the ages of 10 and 30, the state we have constructed in relatively recent history as the extended transitional period of youth, happens (CWAV 2002).

Of course, in contrast to the situation of wealthier, older westerners, we know that life expectancy is considerably shorter for many of our own aboriginal people, as well as for the poor in rich countries and for the majority of people in poorer countries. Morbid conditions are more prevalent throughout life, and adult responsibilities in work, primary caring and often parenthood can occur very early. Sadly, too, many youth in affluent societies expect calamity before longevity.

At the end of June in 2002, I was at the 50th birthday of our aboriginal foster daughter, Helen, sharing the occasion among others with two of our birth children (the other lives

in England), their partners and children (my six grandchildren), and Helen's family, including her two surviving children, their partners and children (her four grandchildren).

We now laugh together about her tumultuous teenage years and our efforts to survive them and deal with them, but we also note the pleasure and pain of events in the succeeding years -- teenage pregnancy, and an immense effort in spite of limited finances between us to have a memorable wedding; the bringing together of a group of young adult siblings who had been scattered without communication into different parts of the care system[1]; a bout of public psychiatric care; the death of a child, and confronting legal and mental health issues; managing family anger and aggression; managing the risks of seeking solace from alcohol to escape from frustration and marital and parenting ups and downs; dealing with an array of health problems – all set in a context of rippling intergenerational effects of Australia's shameful and vexing history with our aboriginal people – our stolen generation. I guess you could say our relationship is a kind of outcome study, though she once said to me, 'Don't treat me like a case, I'm a person'. The good things we still have are love, trust and solid mutual respect. Among all this we have discovered some of the hidden wealth to be found within a proud aboriginal cultural heritage.

Just where do we belong? I have known quite a few who only felt belonging in an institution, in prison or on the street.

Here it might be useful to think a bit about things which might contribute to livelihood and futures for the *now* young, acknowledging my ongoing interest in the more troublesome variety of vulnerable youth. To structure that thinking, I've chosen to use the notions of *lifespace, lifecourse* and *lifestyle* as a guide. I found these to be useful ideas to help make sense of the complex forces at work in everyday life when I was running institutions, but have also found them at work in recent events and literature.

LIFESPACE

It seems to me that positive attachments to places, or perhaps a series of places, and positive attachments to a variety of relationships are fundamentally important for our sense of identity and for practical support and lifecourse opportunities. The spiritual significance of place for our aboriginal people is now better understood and a number of contemporary wars are being fought at least in part over cathected territory and belief in exclusive right to it.

Rob White, a criminologist in Australia, has written extensively on the significance of access to space for young people and how many forces at work in modern society deny them access to public space – security guards in shopping malls and calls for curfews on the street (Wyn & White 1997). Displacement is a major concern, border incursion is another. I picture some now who developed a habit of throwing bricks through police station windows to get brought home and others who absconded as release loomed in order to stay.

The changing nature of the space we inhabit and the relationships we have has been described by Mackay as four recent revolutions. His descriptions also overlap with some trends described elsewhere.

Mackay (2001; CWAV 2002) suggests that in recent decades in Australia we have been living through four socio-cultural revolutions, largely simultaneously:

- The **gender revolution** which has encouraged women toward more financial and emotional independence, reshaping status and roles, with a somewhat later and less clear reassessment of male status and roles. Its impact embraces marriage, family, neighbourhood life, the nature of shopping, the political landscape and workplace dynamics (Mackay 2001; CWAV 2002).

- The **information revolution** has changed much in the way human encounters occur and the way we live and work. As electronic transfers replace much direct human contact, our sense of connection suffers or takes a markedly different form (Mackay 2001; CWAV 2002).

- A **cultural-identity revolution** has spawned new meanings such as more confidence in multiculturalism though, less happily, some challenge to 'the traditional embrace of egalitarianism' (Mackay 2001; CWAV 2002).

- Alongside the other three, we have the **economic revolution** (also know in Australia as 'economic rationalism'). This promotes freedom for market forces and users paying for getting their needs met. Within the large national agenda of change this has driven, comes some disengagement and a tendency to focus on a local, immediate, personal and manageable agenda. In some measure there is a retreat to escapist fare (Mackay 2001; CWAV 2002).

Similar views are proposed in a trend analysis I came across in an encounter with some human resource specialists doing workforce and market planning in the transnational business

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[1] The story of Helen and her siblings finding each other and tracing the experience of her mother was the subject of an ABC Radio Program, 'Honouring Mother: The Nellie Darby Story', produced by Jan Wositzky (ABC National Radio Australia 2004).

sphere (Consumer Trends Discussion 2002). They suggested that there are eight trends which are working their way around the globe. Different countries and cultures may experience them a bit differently and with differing time frames, but nevertheless they are there at work in some way in all countries:

- increased levels of choice

- increased perception of risk

- a decline of trust in traditional authorities

- a focus inward

- a return to family – albeit of evolving form

- the changing roles of women

- increased pressure on time and the value attached to time

- consideration for health in a more holistic, balanced way.

Focus turns inward

To point up just one of these trends, it is suggested that the focus turning inward, apparent first in the US and now evident in all regions, is largely created by the pull of the first two trends, ie, increases in levels of choice and perception of risk. This inward focus, referred to as 'cocooning' in the US and 'insulation' in Australia, entails an increase of focus on the home. It also assumes an elevation of the role of consumer.

My World ... is the world of home, family and key friends. ... Importantly some elements of it at least can be subject to individual control.

The consumers' world involves three spheres:

The World – the outside world is seen as 'riskier, crazier and more frightening than ever.' Events, including global disasters, are delivered live, in real time, into homes via the media. 'It is large, dramatic and outside an individual's control' (Consumer Trends Discussion 2002).

Our World – the society of town or village in which an individual lives is increasingly remote. Mobility destroys traditional support networks and there is loss of trust in key local figures, and fears for physical security may mean less time spent socially.

Increasingly people know more about what is happening at a global level than they do about what is happening in their own town or village. It is 'Our World' which is being squeezed in terms of its importance in consumers' lives (Consumer Trends Discussion 2002).

My World – this is the world of home, family and key friends. It has much to do with the individual's definition and expression of self. Significant elements include comfort,

reassurance and degrees of choice. Importantly some elements of it at least can be subject to individual control.

Turning the focus inward toward 'My World' is influenced by a wide range of factors. Some are reactions to the range of 'frightening, stressful elements which consumers perceive may affect them but over which they have no control'. More focus is placed on the elements of life which they can control, ie, 'My World'. Home or garden improvement and entertainment are examples (Consumer Trends Discussion 2002).

Uncertainty and contradictions

A number of writers suggest that we live in an age of heightened uncertainty, often associated with ideas about rapid change, an explosion of competing demands in respect to many aspects of life, and some pessimism about future well being. To a considerable degree we are obsessed with risk to the point where some call today 'the risk society' (see, for example, *The risk society: What's in a name*), governments and enterprise look for ways to regulate away their exposure to it, and some fundamentalist groups seek radical answers and extremes of behaviour for their followers to impose their view of order on all.

Hugh Mackay (2001; CWAV 2002) discusses some of the changes which are taking place in Australia while trying to hang on to a positive view. As he put it:

... it is possible to resist the widespread temptation to assume that change inevitably means degeneration.

He acknowledged that some statistics:

... (like the high and rising rate of youth suicide, or the record level of tranquilliser and anti-depressant use) are a bit hard to interpret in anything other than a negative way.

But he also pointed to the complexity of some of the stories which underlie some statistics about radical change, marriage and family.

He points to a cultural shift entailing the prevailing view of marriage changing from it being seen as **an institution**, which older Australians entered with a commitment to its stability, to it being seen as **a relationship**, which younger Australians enter (if they enter it at all) with an expectation that it will be evaluated regularly in terms of its quality as a relationship. Thus marriage has become, in this process, more transient. In part this is effected by the generation of young people who have grown up with accelerating change and, for many, with divorce, making them more wary and more inclined to keep their options open, including the

postponement of marriage and parenthood (Mackay 2001; CWAV 2002).

He also touched on our record levels of personal debt, reflecting the baby boomer influence with the habits of the sixties embracing debt as the pathway to instant gratification. Acknowledging such trends leads some social analysts to 'whimsically suggest that if you're not on anti-depressants, that it's because you are not fully aware of what's happening to you' (Mackay 2001; CWAV 2002).

With many other countries and regions, we appear to have joined the trend toward greater inequalities of wealth and income. Contradictions are apparent as record levels of personal wealth for those at the top of the economic heap stand beside the ACOSS estimate of 2 million Australians who could be classified as 'poor' – in about 30% of households the combined annual income is less than $20,000. The distribution of work is also a contradiction, full-time work force members work overtime equivalent to 500,000 extra full time jobs. Among the 2 million unemployed and underemployed work force aspirants, youth unemployment has crept back up to 25% (Mackay 2001; CWAV 2002).

Says Mackay (2001; CWAV 2002):

> Most of us are walking contradictions: we experience great optimism about Australia's future combined with persistent pessimism about the state of contemporary society. We are experiencing a surge of confidence, yet we continue to feel deeply insecure.

Perhaps the two biggest concerns impinging on the nature of our lifespace are this burgeoning inequality in the distribution of wealth, and the level of violence and fear endemic in so many cultures.

LIFECOURSE

The trends we have just been talking about emerge from the impact of events on people and from the impact of people's beliefs, aspirations and actions on events. I won't talk about careers, pathways, trajectories or risk and resilience because that is familiar territory for people involved with LAC. I thought it might be interesting to share some of the thinking concerning different generations exercising the minds of the market strategists (Consumer Trends Discussion 2002) about the influence of 'seniors', the 'boomers' and 'generation X'. To this are added some observations from other sources about 'generation Y'.

It is suggested that generations are typified and defined by sets of attitudes formed under the influence of family and other societal experiences. Two life phases are especially influential – early teenage and the period of entering the work-force. Generational cohorts are generally seen to span 15-20 years (before a new set of influences and attitudes predominate).

> Cohort separation is not distinct, the two merge into each other over a number of years (Consumer Trends Discussion 2002).

Three main generational cohorts are currently influencing the workplace. Their attitudes differ considerably.

Seniors

Born during the 1930s and early 1940s, they experienced post-war austerity in their early teen years and experienced work-force entry during the later 1950s/early 1960s 'at the beginning of the boom years'. According to the market analysts:

> Seniors conform – they are typified by trust and respect. They value being part of society and know their place in society. They are polite and place great value on the family. Nearing the end of their working life, many senior positions in companies are occupied by Seniors (Consumer Trends Discussion 2002).

Boomers

This generation was born in the second half of the 1940s and during the 1950s – they are now in middle-age and senior management. Their early teen years occurred during the 'Swinging Sixties' and work-force entry was in the boom years of the later 1960s and through the 1970s.

> Challenge is the main trait of the Boomers. Their key drive is to be an individual, to confront, doubt, ask questions and change. They will fight for their rights and are vocal in their views. Work is extremely important to the Boomers, it is one of the things which defines them as an individual. They are motivated by money and success (Consumer Trends Discussion 2002).

Generation X

Born in the 1960s and 1970s, this generation has begun to form a large part of adult society and occupy positions in junior, middle and sometimes senior management. Their early teen years were the boom years of the 1970s and early 1980s,

> ... but they entered the work-force just as the recession began to bite and there were large scale redundancies and down-sizing throughout industry (Consumer Trends Discussion 2002).

Perhaps the two biggest concerns impinging on the nature of our lifespace are this burgeoning inequality in the distribution of wealth, and the level of violence and fear endemic in so many cultures.

Coming after the Boomers, Gen X members have experienced a more difficult time.

> They have seen the Boomers 'have it all' only to find nothing for them as they entered the work-force. This has created a strong sense of cynicism and a rejection of many Boomer traits. Generation X is typified by a contractual attitude to life – they will 'play the game' only as long as the game is giving them what they want. If not, they will simply not play. Where Boomers will fight for their views, Generation X is non-confrontational. They will state their views and then leave if they are not accepted - there is no second chance or time to argue. Whereas Boomers will doubt and challenge, Generation X will deny and ignore (Consumer Trends Discussion 2002).

It is claimed that balance between the component parts of life, friends and family, work and play is important to them. They live by their rules:

> ... accepting that this may differ from others (this is not important) and live in a world defined, built and controlled by themselves. Other people interact with this world at the invitation of Generation X and only as long as the contract holds true and is delivering what is required (Consumer Trends Discussion 2002).

The market analysts also suggest that this generation tend not to accept being told who they are or should be. However, they are tolerant of others with different views – mainly because they see them as irrelevant to Generation X as long as they do not impact upon them. The key driver is to live life as they want to without interference.

> Work and success is less important to Generation X – there is less emphasis on money and possessions and more emphasis on time and other elements of life. They are more closed, more secretive, more elusive than the Boomers. They will be moving in to become the bulk of the work-force in the next 10 years (Consumer Trends Discussion 2002).

The Rising Generation Y

For this generation, I have to abandon the market strategists and revert to the insights gleaned by Hugh Mackay (2002; CWAV 2002). Born in the eighties and nineties, this group has only known rapid change and a technologically enhanced world. They have experienced their parents being more demanding of relationships, wary of entering them, and in the private sphere less likely to put up with them impinging on rights and freedoms. The 2001 Australian Census (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001) showed trends toward fewer marriages and fewer children, and increases in single parent households (530,000 – one in five families

with children under 15), in households without children, and in computer use:

> 70% of teenagers now have a computer at home but 20% no longer have two parents there (Colebatch 2002).

For those who do decide to follow the path of marriage, it appears that when they hit turbulence, they are more likely to bail out. In Australia the bail out rate is now roughly 1 in 3.

Let me pause a moment, though, and note the 800,000 families headed by a child in Malawi, meaning usually a child under 18 caring for siblings with no parents – a generation of casualties of HIV/AIDS. I heard a story of one such family of siblings caring for each other and concentrating great effort on keeping on with their schooling. They saw education as a source of hope and future. (Drawn from newspaper articles in the *Age*, Melbourne, by journalist Pamela Bone in 2002.)

LIFESTYLE

Steven Miles (2000), in his book *Youth lifestyles in a changing world*, suggests that consumption has become the arena within which young people express their creativity. It is the main stage on which young people combine the capacity for agency, their freedom to act, with the structures of society (with opportunities and constraints) in the forging of their identity.

Technologically enhanced opportunities for mobility and communication have been thoroughly embraced by our young people as routine in the ecology of everyday life.

I think it was Rupert Murdoch who talked of mass education, mass communication and mass entertainment as the way of the future. Another writer, Beryl Langer (1994), talks of a socialisation process shaping children who are born to shop but being raised with feelings of dissatisfaction. At the moment the unwrapped present is revealed, the message is given of incompleteness. You need the other five robots in the series.

Is this really the age of triumphant consumer capitalism, competition and capital accumulation which will raise the living standards of all? I suspect the cracks are appearing in this simplistic set of ideas under the pressure of maldistribution of resources and opportunities.

We are increasingly seeing the flaws in reliance on escapism as the easily entered, but hard to leave, options of alcohol, drugs and gambling take hold of more people.

I think we may also be seeing the flaws in aggressive attempts to impose order. Where violence is sanctioned as a solution to problems, especially the use of lethal force, we

give an unhealthy message to the disadvantaged and disenfranchised.·

In general, at the local level, we do not live in an exceptionally violent society. We do, however, have much violence in our culture and there only needs to be small amounts of actual domestic violence, child abuse and bullying occurring for them to be matters of serious concern. Rewarded macho cultures still condone much aggressive behaviour. Fear can exacerbate the problem. It may constrain social connection and promote vigilantism and pre-emptive strikes. I suspect we have seen too much of it in top-down management in recent years and increased calls for punitive sanctions on a variety of fronts.

In my view there is never a case for aggression which goes beyond restraint. It seems we have a problem with quite a few of our men and some of our women. Prior to the conference, I had lunch with a friend who is a black man, recently retired as chaplain of an English prison. He spoke of the hatred many young black men have of authority, and of the high levels of anger that groups within the prison often displayed toward each other.

CONCLUSIONS

What of a reshaping turning point as we look forward? Mackay (2001; CWAV 2002) suggests a growing number of

Australians will be looking for ways to close the gap between espoused values and the way we actually live. Increasingly there is talk of the need to restore balance. This quiet revolution, he says, will be led by women increasingly reaching authority in business and professions, though many men are pursuing such questions too.

A second, less attractive, concern is the reaction to uncertainty which calls for more rules and regulation. With this are the fundamentalist tendencies seeking to impose adopted certainties on the lives of others (Mackay 2001; CWAV 2002). The risk in these attempts to abolish risk and agency is the potential loss of avenues for moral choice, important freedoms and, might I add, justice, tolerance and a compassionate society.

A hopeful note, though, comes with a rising generation whose coping strategies, according to Mackay (2001; CWAV 2001), entail incorporation of realistic uncertainty in their world view ('keep your options open'); their quest for spiritual frameworks for exploring post material values; and, their tribalism – the realisation that 'the most precious resource they have for coping with life in an uncertain world is each other'. Technologically enhanced opportunities for mobility and communication have been thoroughly embraced by our young people as routine in the ecology of everyday life. ❖

POSTSCRIPT

In the three years since the 2002 conference, much of my time has been spent contemplating the needs of some local generation 'Yers' who seek service from the supported accommodation assistance program. As I watch their struggles for identity and acceptance by peers, the battles in which they become engaged with their parents, the resort to the quick fix of alcohol or drugs, the attractive power of anarchic, angry and despairing music and lyrics, and their struggles with commitment and the rights of others, I can't help wondering about much of our cultural climate and scene setting policies.

A recent newsletter of the University of Melbourne's Youth Research Centre was reporting on the end of the life patterns study which has followed a sample of young Australians born in the early 1970s. At age 30, most were married and in full-time career jobs, and a third were raising children of their own. The researchers suggest that evidence about their progress into adulthood questions many of the media stereotypes and research assumptions about the generation. The transitions have been complex and varied as they realise that the changing nature of the labour market within a global economy suggests that flexibility is replacing permanency as a determining factor of career success.

Their own assessments of their lives suggest that they are shaping new ways of becoming adult. Our research suggests that it is the traditional models of transition held by academics and policy-makers that may be now called into question.

Most believe they have been faced with a new adulthood characterised by an increase in the positive value placed on personal autonomy and on attaining a balance across life spheres of work, education, leisure and personal relationships with family and friends. They see that this demands greater flexibility on their part to cope with uncertainty and achieve a genuine balance between their top priorities in life. ...

Not yet married or parents or homeowners by their late twenties, they were however the most highly qualified generation of Australians and already established in their careers. In this sense they were *immigrants in time* who were confronted with an on-going mismatch between present-day realities and the established 'time-line' of youth transition into adulthood idealised by their parents.

It is paramount for them to display a readiness to reflect on their own life circumstances so that they can face and negotiate the uncertainties of life and be ready to change in the face of changing life circumstances rather than insist on what 'ought to be'.
(*Youth Research News* 2005)

I have to confess to a measure of tongue-in-cheek attitude and scepticism in the discussion of the generations. Adopting stereotypes is a risky business. It is far more important to recognise the strengths of people of all ages and to find ways of enlisting collective energy to make the world a better place for all. How do we construct a workable approach to personal autonomy and self-interest alongside relationships and commitment? This is a vital question for the youth of today and those who work with them.

Lloyd Owen
November 2005

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