

Betrayal: Well Intentioned
Youth Conference 2003

I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land – Aboriginal people. It is with great privilege that I walk on your beautiful land with your permission– thank you.

I want to talk today about several things: the way good intentions can be deadly, the way we betray young people daily, about the way the system betrayed and failed me and continues to fail many other young people.

But there are some things you aren't going to hear from me, things you might have expected to, if you know that I spent all of my adolescence in and out of youth prison and several years in jail. One of the things you're not going to hear is the word *help*.

That is because the very idea of 'helping' is the start of the betrayal of young people. The word is patronising and condescending, and assumes many things, mainly that you are somehow better, stronger, more able than the person you're out to save.

I'm not here to tell you how I think you should *help* young people. And if you think I should be then you're probably already in the process of betraying the young people you're working with every day.

The core of what I want to say today is in the words of Aboriginal Elder Lilla Watson, some of the most profound words I have heard and words that relate back to the way we live alongside each other:

*If you're coming to help me
You're wasting your time,
But if your liberation is bound up with mine,
Then let us work together.*

In the next 20 minutes or so I'm going to unpack those words in terms of young people and our relationships with them, by telling you my story and the story of *Sisters Inside*.

At the heart of it is my unshakeable belief that no one is better than anyone else, and that we will fail and betray those around us at every turn if we practise a *power over* rather than a *power with* approach to them.

And that the only way to ensure we do that is to work fearlessly on knowing our own values, what they are and what they mean and how they translate personally to the work we do every day.

Systems failed and betrayed me from the time I was 11 or 12. I wasn't engaged by school. I didn't like it and it didn't like me. I couldn't relate to teachers who taught *at* me, rather than engaging in conversations *with me*. It was about *them* controlling *me* – and of course, I did everything to test that rule.

At this stage I would have responded if someone, anyone, had simply asked me some questions, the right questions.

That's where we fail young people in the first place. Not only do we assume they don't know the answers, we don't even ask them the questions.

At school people assumed they knew what was best. A draconian attitude many social workers, youth workers, religious, educational and bureaucratic institutions still have. It underlines a basic lack of respect for young people that young people can pick up a mile away.

The way the education institution dealt with my behaviour was to punish and exclude, to send me to the principal almost daily, where I'd be verbally beaten around the head. What a great way to entice me to behave the way they wanted me to.

Of course I didn't. My whole school experience disintegrated. So did my home life, where my parents were also tearing their hair out as I wagged school, ran away from home, tested everyone to the limit.

Finally, my parents – who also had very good intentions – sought out the advice of the Juvenile Aid Bureau. Sought out the *help* of social workers who were more than happy to oblige and whose advice was, in a nutshell, *lock her up*. She needs *help*.

And that is what they did to *help* me. Locked me up. Locked up a 13 year-old girl – that is, after they'd strip searched me, treated me for nits I didn't have and tied a nit cap on my head, and took away all my possessions – not for being a criminal, but for acting out.

They took me from my home, wearing my school uniform, and locked me up in an institution where I stayed, on and off, until I was 17.

What happened? Why was I locked up for years for acting out? Because I was told I was bad. Shortly after I went to Wilson the youth prison, my father died suddenly of a heart attack. I was a child, and wasn't to know it was a fatal congenital heart condition he shared with other members of his family.

What I did know was told to me by the matron the day my father died. Your father is dead, she said, and you killed him, its your fault he is dead because you are very, very bad.

And that is the message I carried around and acted on until I was 30. From that day on I spiralled further and further out of control, out to prove exactly how bad I was, asking for punishment. All the *help* worked. I was convinced I was bad.

I kept punishing myself until I understood, all those years later, that *I* was not bad, the system was. The words and the attitudes were bad. These sorts of words and attitudes are still around in our dealings with young people, and they carry these messages around for years too. They affect every interaction they have with the world.

My life spiralled into horrific domestic violence, crime and drug dealing. I'm bad, I was telling the world. I need punishment.

It culminated in a prison sentence for drug trafficking that was very nearly a mandatory life sentence. But even that didn't shake me awake.

Months after I went to prison, a woman, my friend, was murdered beside me as we sat in the lunch room at Boggo Road. It was the only murder that has ever happened inside an Australian women's prison.

I was stabbed as well trying to stop the murder, and the whole incident, seeing someone killed in front of me, finally hit a chord. I figured life had to be better than this.

Up until then, none of the people who are supposed to be there for a person like me were there. When I was a child locked up, it was good intentioned people who told me I killed my father, because I was bad, and reinforced that with violent practices like restraining me, sedating me forcefully, all under the guise of good intentions and of 'looking after me', 'sorting me out' helping me'.

I didn't need that violence, but it was assumed I did need those violent reactions to my behaviour. They needed to show me they had *power over* me.

But my acting out behaviour was a *test* to see who would walk with me. It was a test to see who would let go of the *power over* me.

Whilst in prison and then after my release I worked as a youth worker at Centre Education Program at Woodridge and we did some good work with a number of young people who were homeless, who were slashing up, who were being criminalised.

We did some good work because we had a definite framework of *power with*. That framework involved four things: respect, safety and legality, participation and honesty.

If a young person broke one of those principles, we had a meeting at which everyone, that person included, came up with a consequence as a group.

That worked very well because they owned it, they took responsibility for their actions. They were having a say, they got to talk about what they did and why and what the consequences were.

But what broke that was the staff. The well-intentioned staff. Who didn't want to have that structure for themselves. It was all right for the young people, but not for many of them.

Young people as some of you might know very soon work out for themselves who is walking their talk and who isn't. They worked out that the majority of the staff members weren't.

I'd run a very strong line there about racist and sexist language. I stayed on young people's cases about it. It wasn't about swearing, I don't mind swearing, I swear myself, but if someone adds 'black' to 'slut', that's different.

It worked. Whenever a new young person came along and used that language, the group would say, you can't use that language. So *they* took it on board themselves, *they* ensured there was no sexist or racist language there.

But then some staff would use the language themselves and that's what killed it – adults saying one thing and doing another. It kills trust and it proves to young people what they suspect: that relationships with adults are based on hypocrisy. Do as I say, not as I do.

It's another form of betrayal. Youth workers with the best intentions.

Like those who go to the authorities to inform them about abuse or whatever without consulting the young person first. How dare they?

If you're going to give young people up, don't tell them it's in their best interests, because it's not, it's about betrayal. If you have a case of sexual abuse, for instance, don't go running off to the authorities, because that's not what most young people want.

They want the abuse to stop, that's what they want. Not the involvement of bureaucrats and the removal to foster care.

I had a young woman come to me at that time, a young woman who had been raped. The story affected me hard. I said to her, what do you want me to do? I said, this has really rocked me; I'd like to take you to a sexual assault counsellor, if that's ok by you.

It's got to be ok by them. Not what you think is best for them. If I stood here and told every person in this audience that I knew what was the best answer

was to every one of their problems, you wouldn't believe me and you wouldn't go there.

Why should young people?

Young people need to be given the power to identify what they need to support them. You may not agree with what they come up with and so what? What makes you judge and jury? What gives you the right?

So how do you go about ensuring you use a *power with* approach? Well it depends on what your values are.

I believe organisations need to clearly articulate their values before they can be effective, and I know of only three in this State – Sisters Inside, YANQ, and the Deception Bay Youth and Community Service, which have spent years with facilitators to articulate those values, to come up with policies and procedures and practices and a framework to work within. These processes included the young people they work with and the staff.

Then you can get on with implementing those policies in a way which respects everyone involved in delivering the services and fighting the fights. How can you do that unless you know fundamentally what you believe in?

For instance, at Sisters Inside, we never turn a woman away. Staff are clear about that. We support every woman to the end.

We recently had an experience with a woman who had been diagnosed with a with mental disability. She experienced horrific torture in the women's prison and after we succeeded to get Supreme Court bail for her to be released until her court date she was traumatised trying to survive in the community. She was suicidal – self harming and highly demanding. The staff person working with, lets say her name is Mary, was finding it difficult working around the clock with her. She came to me and we had a conversation about not turning women away. She understood that was a strong value of Sister Inside however was finding it difficult to cope with the constant bombardment of abuse from Mary. We agreed the we could not turn Mary away as this was never an option. We decided to meet with Mary and talk about the difficulties we were having in relation to supporting her whilst she was so abusive. She knew what we were talking about and then explained to us what happens for her because of her diagnosis of the mental

disability. Mary knows she gets highly abusive and spirals out of control but we are the only ones there for her. We now have a plan to support Mary and the staff person and all is going well.

And another experience where property was stolen at the office: we don't call the police, and we don't take it personally. We were worried about the person who stole it, worried what was going on in their lives that brought them to do this. We value people over property.

We believe no one is better than anyone else. People are neither 'good' nor 'bad'.

We believe there is no 'absolute truth' – but we all live in a society where 'truth', 'right' and 'wrong' are determined by a small minority of people.

We believe prisons are an irrational social response. They do not achieve their intended outcomes – they neither 'correct' nor 'deter' law breaking. They generate alienation and further criminal behaviour.

People who have been through the prison system are best placed to generate realistic solutions to the problems of the criminal justice system. There is no simple solution, but alternative means must be found for protecting society against destructive behaviour, and those inside our prisons need involvement in the process of finding them.

This is why we established Sisters Inside *with* a steering committee of women inside prison which is a legal part of the organisation's constitution. They drive it. They know what they need and our values ensure they are empowered to express this and have the power to make decisions.

This is all the more important because the system deprives women inside of any sense of power at all, or any sense that they themselves might know what they need. The prison system works on the reverse: on the edict that certain women have failed to live properly in this society we have constructed and so all their rights to keep doing so are removed.

After the murder in prison, community workers came rushing in to 'help' us. And that's exactly why they failed. 'Help' is so patronising, it's laden with the implication that *they* know more than us, *they* can help because somehow *they* are superior and have superior knowledge.

They *told* us things. But at no time did anyone *ask* us anything, and in 12 months they were gone. Some needs were met at a superficial level, but not the trauma.

One thing that did happen was that a window of reform was opened up when the Director General Keith Hamburger decided we should set up groups of prisoners to look at certain issues, and to meet with the General Manager of the prison to get resolutions. We had committees on things like health, and a long termers committee, and we had one on street kids, which I convened.

My biggest worry was those in youth prisons going on to adult systems, and I wanted to find a way with young people to break that cycle.

Now I go into the youth detention centres and I see me as a 14 year-old kid. Nothing has changed. Last week I witnessed a situation where girls were unsettled and it took 12 screws to settle the situation – all that was missing for me was the dripping syringe. It was made worse for the screws because I was able to calm the girls down with eye contact and conversation and the touch of a hand.

But what those groups in the old Boggo Road did was to identify our own issues and our own solutions, and they were fed into the system, and it worked.

That's what Sisters Inside does. Women in prison have to be on the steering committee and part of all the decision making, it's grass roots stuff. There is no Sisters Inside without that. Women inside direct us, right down to selecting who the outside members will be and who the staff will be. That's how you survive long term.

And it isn't tokenism. Some youth groups have one young person for advice or a 'focus group' for a day to raise issues. But essentially it's an adult driven process.

What they should have is the power and resources to support them to do it, not our 'help'.

That's the sort of thing that gives Sisters Inside credibility. I travel widely these days, nationally and internationally, Canada, the united states, all

jurisdictions across the country, and I meet and connect with women inside. When I do I ask the staff to leave. They don't like it. But only then can we have a discussion.

At first when I talk about setting up a group similar to Sisters Inside there are negatives, it won't work, they won't let us, but they always ask me to come back. The big question – do you know you're legal rights? – is always answered *no*. In reality they're being trampled all over. Its part of the disempowerment that keeps prisons going, the kind of disempowerment many groups on the outside work by as well. Even those that try to '*help*'.

So where do we go from here?

Of course, resources need to be distributed. We need to make sure people do have access to real education, employment, accommodation and health. These rights are slowly being stripped away, and where once these services were free, like health services, they no longer are.

My real fear is we are going to end up looking like Thatcher's England, handing young people cardboard boxes to sleep in at night.

But for young people it goes further than this. Those dealing with young people are in a unique position; you can contribute to effecting change. But I believe the first thing you have to do is to ask yourselves the question: in whose interest are you acting?

Before you make a think about making decision for a young person, a decision that isn't theirs and doesn't involve them, a decision that will betray them, ask yourself some of these questions about why you are involved in this particular situation:

Are you automatically exhibiting a learned response, ability to stand up for others that you might have learned through your own experience of injustice and inequality?

Are you trying to be for others the person who wasn't there for you when you needed it?

Are you proving that not all human beings are liars, that some people do walk their talk?

Having survived injustice yourself, and learned how to fight hard, are you passing that on to others?

Are you continuing a pattern of rebellion? Are you continuing to be a fighter?

Are you continuing a pattern of rescuing? Are you seeing the young person as a victim?

Are you being voyeuristic – living your fears and doubts through young people's experiences? Getting a bit of excitement and drama in life through responding to high risk situations rather than living them yourself?

Are you reassuring yourself that you are making a social contribution? Affirming your own ok-ness as a human being? Legitimizing your own existence?

Are you reassuring yourself that you're sane, in comparison with those young people you're working with?

It's really easy to project your own fears onto the young person you work with.

When I was a youth worker I knew I was healing myself. I'd identified that. Knowing your own shit, your own passion, your own damage is important in this. It's ok to be healing yourself but be aware of it.

For me, so many other women's experiences dove-tailed into mine that I couldn't and cannot walk away from it. And that includes young women.

Now, at Sisters Inside, we distinguish ourselves from other services within the prison by our women-centred approach. We are committed to *believing* women in the criminal injustice system, *treating their experiences as valid* and working from *what they say they want*.

We are guided by them. We are driven by their needs, rather than the expectations of others – prison authorities, the criminal injustice system, governments or the wider society.

That's what I believe young people need from you. The assurance that you will walk with them as equals, believing them, treating their experiences as valid and giving them the power to work alongside you.

That's what Lilla Watson is talking about.

Thank you