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# **Communities: The Good, The Bad, The Ugly**

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Presentation by

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I want to thank you all for having me and inviting me here today. I have three kids, aged six, seven and 11. They're all boys. Having kids for me was like, "I don't need any more friends, I don't even have time to deal with the ones I have, I'm not going to be part of any community groups, I'll just send money, make cakes and do a shift at the Mother's Day stall." That's what I was thinking.

But before I knew it I was sucked into the mothers' group, the playgroup, the toy library, the kinder committee, the school arts initiative, the fête committee. Don't get me wrong – community is where it's at. As a word it sounds very empty, but to feel community is to feel embraced, loved and safe.

But the pointless meetings! The bitching, the moaning, the backstabbing, the time wasting, the minutes, the passive aggression, the politics – you know what I'm talking about. And now you're thinking, "It's no wonder we drink." No it's not.

Look, I'm not saying Hitler was right, I'm just saying men that were Fascist knew how to get something done. It's just like, "This is what's going on – end of discussion. You shut up. Deal with it." No drawn out symposiums, talk fests and achieving nothing and feedback forms. That's what I like about the Fascists. There's no, "Now what does everyone think?" Everyone gets to have a say and be heard no matter how insane, pointless and counter-productive some people are. Some people seem to get involved in communities so they can annoy, infuriate and be despised by people other than their own family. Is it true? Hands up. They really do.

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And some committee groups are so weighed down with protocol and politics it's almost impossible to get stuff done, which is why you're there, where your passion is and what you want to do.

We need community groups, as you all know (and the people who need them the most are probably the ones who don't even know that they need them). They are the heart and soul of our society. But don't think I don't know how hard at times it is wading through the red tape and bureaucracy to get the stuff done that you're there to do. I know, you know, many of us know.

Life is light and shade. I mean, I can tell jokes about my kids and it all sounds light and lovely and stuff, but it's not always like that. It's not always like that. Like all of us, I live a creatively, intellectually, psychologically and emotionally vivid life, and it's exhausting sometimes.

It's a cycle. There's no running away from grief, sadness, stress, any of those things. We just need to know ways of dealing with it. We need tools for when those things come into our lives.

The Buddhists have a great saying, and it's something I'd probably like on my gravestone. The saying is, "You can't stop the waves but you can learn to surf."

Last year I suffered depression for a little while. The doctors thought that some anti-depressants might help me. I have no problems with anti-depressants but I didn't want something to have to deal with at the end – I didn't want to have to deal with getting off the anti-depressants as well. I file two columns a week and I do a lot of other stuff as well and my

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thought was, “If I can’t file a column, if I get to a day where I can’t file a column, that is the day that I will go in and say, ‘Hook me up, strap me in. Give me a break from this’.”

So there was this one night and I was sitting there and I knew I had to write the next morning and I just thought, “This is the day that I will be calling up the paper and saying, “I am not filing. I am going to the doctor’s instead.” But instead, something happened, and I wrote this. It’s called *Just Keep Going*.

“Every morning I sit on the front deck and drink my coffee, watching people propelling themselves through life and I’m in awe of how people can keep going, what a wonder the human spirit is.

“I watch office workers jolted out of their slumber by their alarm clocks, who have shovelled in their breakfast and thrown on their clothes and rushed to catch the train to a job they hate. I say, ‘Good morning,’ to my elderly neighbours who gingerly walk around the block, trying to get their creaky bones and foggy heads working after a night of constant pain and little sleep.

“I wave to the woman from down the road who’s lost her mother after a long fight with cancer. She is shrouded in grief, yet she gets her kids up and dressed, the lunches made and has, against all odds, got the kids to school on time again.

“And I cheer my mate, overwhelmed by anxiety and depression, who runs every morning. He forces himself out of bed when what he wants is to pull the doona over his head and disappear. Where’s his medal? Where are all of these people’s medals?

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“No-one will ever know the extent of the battles some people among us are fighting and how tough they are finding life. How they find the courage, the bravery and the blind hope to push themselves through the day. When everything is such an effort some people are only able to live by five minute increments, lurching from one coffee to the next, from one mood swing to the next, from one wave of pain to the next.

“These are people whose favourite part of the day is the moment before they fall asleep, because they know they’ll have a break from their pain. These people’s boilers aren’t working and all they’re operating with is the pilot. That’s why these people are my heroes.

“Winston Churchill said, ‘When you find yourself in hell just keep going.’ While many of us have the luxury of spending our time discussing house prices, is it art or is it porn, so many around us are struggling. I saw a postcard last week that reminded me of how tough some people are doing it. ‘Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.’

“You don’t read much about pain in the newspaper but it’s all around us. It’s all politics, sports, terror, business, celebrities, the economy and recipes. For many, gloom and doom is a welcome distraction from the lacerating pain of their broken hearts, the weight of their depression or the terrifying and overwhelming pull of addiction.

“We only have one life. The idea is to make the most of it. Some change could lead you to a better life but how would you know? If so, what change? If only there were

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mortgage brokers for life who could run our stats through a computer program and furnish us with all the best life solutions. 'Option five provides you with the highest level of satisfaction and the lowest level of dissatisfaction. So lose weight, sell your house, stay with your wife, become a dentist, stop eating cheese and buy a new mattress.'

"Not everyone can keep going. Some people's pain is so profound that the only place they find peace is in death. Like many, I've been touched by suicide. As difficult as it is to comprehend deep in my heart, I know my loved ones were just desperate to find peace.

"Let's help others in pain to find some sweet relief. Let's start a cheer squad for people overwhelmed by emotional pain, physical pain, exhaustion and insomnia. For parents up with babies night after night, for people caring for the sick and disabled around the clock and for those whose lives have been ripped apart at the seams, let's cheer them on from the sideline. 'You bloody legend. You're a hero. Just keep going. You're almost there.'

"There's a website called Group Hug for anonymous online confessions. Amid all the pain I found this contribution. 'There are two things I've found to always be true in life, no matter what.' And I've found them too. 'Every day the sun will rise. It's a different day with endless possibilities. From the time you wake up in the morning to the time you sleep that night, your life may change profoundly. This too will pass.' These words engraved on an ancient sultan's ring made him solemn in happy times and happy during sad times.

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“Remember this always. You are amazing and you’re doing a great job.

“Just. Keep. Going.”

I think out of everything I’ve written, that’s the thing I’m most proud of. I got a lot of response from people who just felt like the rest of the world didn’t see that they existed. It was really fabulous.

It didn’t feel like my own work, it just kind of felt that it came to me.

So things did get better, things did get better. As for all of us, there are ups and downs, goods and bads, happys and sads, and times you don’t remember. The only thing that we don’t know is in what order they’ll come.

I wrote another article, and it’s in the book if you’d like to read it. It’s just called, “Do something.” It basically says that when you don’t know what to do, do anything.

“When my mother’s house was burnt down she said that it wasn’t the people who did wrong things that upset her, it was the people who did nothing.

“Which taught me that when you don’t know what to do, do anything. Be assertive in your caring but don’t stay long. And don’t expect anything.

“Chances are if you were to say to someone, ‘Call me if you need anything,’ they won’t. So just do something, anything.

“Cook them a meal and tell them to keep the container.

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“Call them, and if you leave a message let them know that they don’t need to call back.

“Lend them your favourite movie and leave a stamped, self-addressed envelope so they can send it back to you. Take them to the library. Buy them some flowers. Walk their dog. Take them a pie for lunch. Organise a massage for them or buy them a pair of red socks.

“If they’re stuck in bed, buy them a new set of sheets and change them if they’ll let you. Do their washing, take their kids to the park and bring them back fed and tired at bedtime.

“And when in doubt, make soup. Just let them know that you’re there, even if they’re not. You’ll be doing far more for them than you’ll ever know and far more for yourself than you’ll ever think possible.

“Be there holding the lamp and you may be the light at someone’s long, dark tunnel.

“We’re all in this together. One moment you’re holding the lamp, the next you’ll find someone’s holding it for you. We all have good times, bad times, happy times, sad times and times we won’t remember. That is certain. The only thing we don’t know is in which order they will come.”

On saying that, I’m looking at this room of people who work with communities. And I’ll have a fair stab at it and say that you guys are probably the ones who are looking after everyone. And

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no-one's looking after you, not nearly as much as they should, or not nearly as much as they can.

I wanted to let you guys know that it's really, really important to say no sometimes. You look at families and often it's the same people who end up doing everything. Looking after Mum, hosting the Christmas dinner, organising the group present, organising the holidays, and probably it's you. You need to learn to say no.

We're going to do it now. On the count of three I want you to respond to these things with the word, "no".

Let's have Christmas dinner at your place this year. [Audience – "No."] Can you look after my children? [Audience – "No."] I need you to come around. I'm depressed. [Audience – "No."]

Good. Well done. It's not that hard is it? It's really not that hard. You have to find time for yourself and the way to do it is by saying no. The more you do, the more people will expect of you. And the less you do, the more other people will do and they will learn how to do. Take that away with you. Find something that makes you feel that you are having a break.

Don't go, "I know what I'll do. I've got a break. I'll get that other work done." Take a moment. Get in the bath. Read a book. Lie on the bed and think about nothing. Whatever it is, you have to find stuff to keep yourself an emotionally nourished being.

Because I'm sure for many of you, you walk out the door and you feel like you are being devoured. Hands up who's had that feeling? Absolutely devoured. "*He's doing this.*" "*Where*

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*did I put my thing?" "Have you seen that?" "I asked you to do that." "Have you called that person?"* You just have to let the other people around you do more.

Do you know one thing that always strikes me and I find quite fascinating? When people split up, so often I hear people say, "You know what? He's not paying me. He's rude to me on the phone. But I've got to say he's become a better father." I've heard this a lot of times. Suddenly there are things that mothers would have thought these blokes were incapable of doing that they can actually do. Do you know why? Because there's no-one there to pick up the pieces. They really come into their own as fathers when the family is split apart, which is a real shame.

I think sometimes women just jump in and do stuff too quickly. And particularly with blokes I think the more they do, the more they do. They deserve to be a part of that, and they deserve to be able to father in the way that they want to and the way that they should, not necessarily the way that you do it.

The kids mightn't be wearing the same clothes you'd put them in, they mightn't be even eating the same food. But just back off, let them do it themselves.

And here's a kind of a tip. From very early days, breastfeeding is the way to go, absolutely. If you can, fabulous. But people will often say, "No, don't give them a bottle at all, it will cause nipple confusion." I think that's very anti-bloke. A kid won't die if they have two bottles a week of formula or breast milk. And do you know what happens? The blokes really get to bond with those kids.

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You have to let them do the whole thing – wake, feed, change, bath, settle, the whole thing. The earlier they do it and the more they do it, the more at the end you'll be able to both be parenting together. Because looking after children is not the mother's job. You are parents. You're parents together.

Having children is fabulous, but not only does it take a village to raise a child, it takes a village to raise an adult.

Thank you.

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