ONCE AGAIN, THE AUSTRALIAN AIDS MEMORIAL QUILT

Justice Kirby Collection

Date: 10 April 1999
Author: The Hon Justice Michael Kirby AC CMG
Type: Public Lecture
Organisation: The Quilt Project, Sydney
Event: Australian Aids Memorial Quilt Opening of Display

Once again we have come together for a full display of the Australian AIDS Memorial Quilt. We are the Australian family of those who are remembered in these bright patterns.

In the age of the Internet, of global telecommunications and fast travel, it must seem to some to be an old-fashioned form of communication that we have chosen. Cloth of gold goes back to Biblical times. Quilts are found in ancient societies. Recently I opened, at the High Court Building in Canberra, an exhibition of the masks and quilts of the native Canadians who stare at us across the Pacific from the high mountains of Western Canada. Their quilts are made of bark of trees.

So ours is a deliberately old-fashioned display. It returns to the simplicities of human life. The little bits and pieces of our personal existence. Just for this time, we turn our backs on the busy world and cyberspace. We communicate to the world, to Australia and to each other with very simple human things:

> "Had I the heaven's embroidered cloths
> Enwrought with golden and silver light
> The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
> Of night and of light and of half light
> I would spread those cloths under your feet
> But I being poor have only my dreams
> I spread my dreams under your feet
> Tread softly; because you tread on my dreams"
>
> W B Yeats

Tread softly around these quilts. Here are human spirits and dearly loved memories with us in this room. The love of spouses, lovers and partners. Of parents. Of brothers and sisters. Of grandparents, aunts, uncles and children. Of doctors and nurses. Of brave supporters, strangers and mere acquaintances. Of straights and gays together. We are all here to remember and to think of lost friends.

ONCE AGAIN, THE AUSTRALIAN AIDS MEMORIAL QUILT

Justice Kirby Collection

I think of the friends that I have lost. I go through their names like a Rosary (and this despite a stern Protestant upbringing). A Rosary of much loved human spirits. Of Peter, a school friend. Of Daniel, the artist in Paris. Of another Peter from England. Of Frank, the lawyer. Of Stuart in Melbourne. Of Graham in Sydney. Of Ewen with his golden daughters. Of Brett, who struggled heroically. On and on the list goes. We remember them in our minds. We remember them in the quilts. So long as we draw breath, they are alive in us.

But remembering and thinking is not enough. Celebrating their lives and recalling their strengths and joys and little foibles, recorded in these cloths, is not enough. These quilts, and the people they remember, propel us to action:

- Action to support people living with HIV and AIDS and those who work for them and with them; for their lovers, families and friends who are still on the journey.
- Action to support science. How wonderful it will be if Australia's HIV vaccine can prove in clinical trials to prevent the further spread of HIV and to help people both HIV positive and HIV negative to avoid the assaults of the virus.
- Action to ensure that the best of therapeutic drugs remain available within Australia for more than 11,000 Australians who are living with HIV/AIDS in our country today .
- Action to share our knowledge and the lessons Australians have learned with countries overseas, particularly in our region, where people with HIV and AIDS face barriers of prejudice and ignorance that we have only partly overcome ourselves.
- Action to ensure that vaccines and therapies are extended to brothers and sisters in poorer lands that cannot now afford them. They are just as human. Their suffering is just as real as ours.
- Action to combat prejudice and discrimination. To promote reform of society and its laws.

On this last note we should dedicate ourselves here and now. We should do so in the presence of these quilts and the spirits that they memorialise. We should demand an end to the last vestiges of prejudice and discrimination that still lurk in the hidden, and not so hidden, corners of Australian society. We should press political leaders to accept their moral duty and to stop reducing the democratic process to the banal and shabby auction of competing punishments which marred the recent election in New South Wales. This was unworthy of our leaders. Sadly, it was also a commentary on ourselves, the electors. In the presence of these cloths

we should insist on a higher ethic in politics.

The paltry excuses for postponing and neglecting the removal of continuing legal discrimination against homosexual citizens should be resoundingly rejected. The time for mere talk is past. This is a time for action which suffering has bought a right to expect.

The calls for new approaches to drug laws, respectful of the human rights and the dignity of drug addicted persons and their families should be heard and acted upon in our Parliaments. The same courage which Dr Neal Blewett and Professor Peter Baume, for Government and Opposition, mustered in the early days of HIV/AIDS in the 1980s should now be found again in this generation of politicians. They should respond with courage and compassion, and without further delay, to the recommendations of Justice Wood in the Police Royal Commission, protective of the human rights of injecting drug users to escape infection with HIV. There is no greater human right than the right to life without a threatening and painful illness. The HIV/AIDS epidemic is not over. These quilts are witness to its continuance. Now is not the time for a loss of courage and integrity. These quilts demand that we say nothing less to the leaders who are accountable to us, the people.

And so, in the presence of cloth of gold and humble memories, we proudly speak up for those who are gone. Remembrance is not enough. Sorrow, is not enough. Even courage and integrity are not enough. These are days for action, lest receding memories and apathy and political time-serving take over. We have a dream that all the suffering and pain and grief that is symbolised in this room will not have been in vain. That dream propels us to lift our voices.

Tread softly, because you tread on my dreams.