

On lifelong learning and family: the lady who wrote history essays

**Central Queensland University Graduation Ceremony
Address by Dr Brian Babington, Chief Executive Officer, Families Australia
Sydney, 15 September 2016**

Chancellor, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, the Gadagal people of the Eora nation, and to also pay respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander elders both past and present, as well as to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples here today.

Let me also start by offering my hearty congratulations to each and every one of you on your achievement. You have so much to be proud of.

As a parent who—with my wife Rhonda—have the delight of seeing our two sons complete Masters and Bachelor degrees this year, and move toward the land of employment, I know a little of the thrill that you, as parents, family, educators and supporters, enjoy today as you take part in this important ceremony.

To all those supporters, I wish to say thank you.

I would like to talk briefly about lifelong learning, and illustrate my message by drawing on a couple of extraordinary things that have happened to me this year.

First, and please forgive my personal indulgence here, I turned 60 earlier this year. This was a clearly outrageous turn of events and I certainly won't be repeating that mistake.

On my birthday I didn't find myself blowing out candles on a cake at home—as perhaps I should have done with my family—but at Harvard University in Boston doing an extremely challenging leadership program.

One of the things I noticed while there was a quote written on a wall in very big, very bold letters.

It wasn't graffiti. But it might well have been because it had a blasting impact that stood in stark contrast to the *apparent* privilege and elitism of that university.

It read as follows:

Never work just for money or for power. They won't save your soul or build a decent family or help you sleep at night.

Those are the words of one of America's most influential children's rights activists, Marian Wright Edelman.

Edelman was born in 1939. She studied law at Yale, and was the first African-American woman to be admitted to the Mississippi Bar.

More than 40 years ago, she founded, and today continues to lead, the Children's Defense Fund in Washington DC which works to end childhood poverty, abuse and neglect.

As an advocate for children's rights and community development, I truly admire people like Edelman who stand against inequality and the exercise of power that so often brings or adds to repression, vulnerability and marginalisation amongst society's least powerful.

The other thing to highlight about Edelman's story is how, as her father was dying when she was aged 14, his last words to her were: 'don't let anything get in the way of your education'.

My other memorable Harvard experience had something to do with dancing.

In 2002, Harvard Business School Professors Heifetz and Linsky published a superb book called *Leadership on the Line*. They argued that one of the greatest traps for leaders is to keep doing things in traditional, 'business-as-usual' ways long after these technical approaches are proven to be ineffective.

Instead of old ways of thinking and doing, they say that leaders need to apply transformative or 'adaptive' responses.

To illustrate, in my professional world, a standard technical response to child welfare problems has been to remove children from their family setting. This very often leads to poor outcomes for children.

We keep failing many children and families largely because we don't envision new ways of working, let alone take collective action to bring about truly transformative change.

So, how can we avoid these leadership traps?

Heifetz and Linsky argue that we need to get off the 'dance floor' of everyday life and get ourselves onto the balcony above to see how the dance is being performed.

In other words, we need to stop getting caught up in the whirl of the everyday to take time to see the bigger picture and to imagine brand new ways of doing things.

For me, this is a skill that is best cultivated by being open to, and actively seeking out, learning opportunities throughout life.

That takes me to the second significant thing that happened to me this year: gaining a doctorate on children's rights in Indonesia.

Children's rights, not just in Indonesia but in all countries, matter greatly to me.

What *also* matters to me—and is represented by my doctorate—is my deep commitment to lifelong learning and the thrill of seeing it embraced by others.

For Edelman, the pro-education words of her father clearly drove her onwards.

In my life, my pro-education grandmother inspired me by her love of learning.

Though she didn't have much formal education, she always made a strong point of learning throughout her life; even up to her last few years she'd write essays on her beloved topic of Australian history for her own enjoyment, not for any particular audience.

When I look back it's unsurprising that I drank in her quietly practised struggle with, and joy arising from, learning.

It's hardly news that we live in an age of extraordinary change. To roughly paraphrase one of my favourite historians, Simon Schama, there are times when history meanders along gently, and then there are times when history happens with an almighty rush.

Now is clearly one of those times of almighty rush.

The case for unrelenting lifelong learning has, in my view, never been more compelling as we face the need to think in new ways, in other words, to take time to get off the dance floor and get onto the balcony.

One expert in this field, Hildebrand, talks about five key benefits of lifelong learning as sharpening our mind, confidence, interpersonal skills, career opportunities, and our ability to communicate.

To me, unless we cultivate the habit of stepping back from our day-to-day world, we can't effectively meet the adaptive personal, societal and global challenges we face now more than ever.

So, finally, where do we start and how do we sustain ourselves in the journey?

I think we can begin by being open to ongoing learning as both formal and informal, expected and unexpected.

As well as saying that 'old professors never die, they just lose their faculties', British comedian Stephen Fry said that 'education is the sum of what students teach each other *between* lectures and seminars'.

While perhaps being too tough on professional educators, I think he is also saying that we gain insights in lots of ways.

When I look back, I can think of hardly anything more important than the opportunity to study and learn, and then keep doing it over and over again. I've been fortunate to do this in a formal sense several times, including through management studies at this university.

To me, it's not just about getting a better pay packet and promotion but, to paraphrase Marian Wright Edelman, to challenge us about what truly matters and to improve our confidence to meet the new.

It is also, I think, to be open to the risk, and near certainty, that we will often not meet our goals. On reflection, my best learnings and directional changes have come ultimately through the pain of 'getting it wrong'.

Experience shows that we become better for our attempts at the dance, by risking failure, and by taking ourselves off the dance floor from time to time.

By being open to new perspectives we stand a better chance of re-joining the dance wiser and better skilled.

Finally, I believe that we can find support for this purposeful journey by relying on, and giving back to, our families, friends and supporters.

After all, families—whatever form they take and however we define them—are our most time-honoured settings for giving and receiving love, understanding and nurturing. Our families, like our other supporters, want the best for us and we should reach out for their help when we need it, as well as reciprocate of course.

I congratulate you all on your achievements which we honour here today and wish you all the very best in your future learning.
