

Rethinking Human Rights in the 21st Century

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We are living at a time when human rights are not only under attack – that has always been the case – but where the very idea of universal human rights is being called into question. No longer can we take it for granted that most people think that human rights are a ‘good thing’ and that the very idea is beyond question; after all, our then Prime Minister said last year that Australians are sick and tired of being lectured by the UN about human rights. And more traditional ideas of human rights are being contested by those on the political right who argue that the right of free expression trumps all other rights, including the right of others to be treated with dignity and respect. Our Attorney-General shocked many of us when he publicly defended the right to be a bigot.

In such a climate, it is important that we look more carefully at the idea of human rights, especially as human rights are blatantly being violated around the world, including in Australia; we only need mention off-shore detention centres, Aboriginal disadvantage, juvenile detention facilities, Aboriginal incarceration rates and deaths in custody, Islamaphobia and other forms of racism, homophobia, homelessness, poverty, domestic violence, pedophilia and child abuse to realise that we have multiple and serious human rights issues in this country, and that we have every right to be outraged. We are required, by our very humanity, to take these and

other issues seriously, and we cannot afford to allow the idea of human rights to be weakened.

So in examining human rights this evening, I want to make it clear at the outset that I believe human rights to be very important, indeed critical for living in a civilised society. The idea that we all have fundamental rights to achieve our full humanity is a powerful one, worth promoting and defending. The struggle to achieve human rights is of critical importance at this stage of human history. And it is likely to become even more important, as we face a future of instability, uncertainty and multiple crises – climate, ecological, economic, social and political – during which human rights are in danger of being further sacrificed in the interests of simple greed and of economic and political power, justified on the basis of ideas of ‘national security’ or ‘economic necessity’.

But I also think we need to acknowledge the importance of some of the critiques of the conventional narrative of human rights – not just the populist ravings of the political right, but some of the more considered and serious critiques of the dominant discourse of human rights that have been articulated in recent years. These are based around the history of modern human rights, as having been defined largely by western white men, mostly lawyers, within the assumptions of Enlightenment modernity with its desire to come up with one rational logical system for everything, trying to stamp out diversity wherever possible in the interests of predictability, order and control. As a result, there have been feminist critiques of human rights: that they have been concerned with rights to civil and political participation in the public sphere – largely men’s human rights – rather than in the domestic sphere where human rights violations against women, and children, predominate. There is also the

postcolonial critique of human rights, that human rights have been defined in a very individualised western way, ignoring other cultural traditions – often more collective – of what counts as ideal humanity. And finally the postmodernist critique, arguing for human rights to embrace difference and to promote diversity, rather than trying to fit them into a single universality imposed on everybody. While I don't have time to go into these in the detail they deserve, I believe these are critiques that need to be taken seriously, in an attempt to achieve a more inclusive understanding of human rights that will make sense not just to academic and legal elites, but which can be embraced by everybody.

Human rights, therefore, are, and should be, contested, but this does not mean they are not valuable and important. Indeed, it is in the contestation of human rights that we can all engage in an on-going journey of dialogue about what it means to be human, and what is necessary to achieve our full humanity; that is, after all, what human rights mean. And this brings me to an important point about human rights, namely the fundamental significance of the idea of the 'human'. Often in debating human rights we argue about what we mean by 'rights' but we leave the 'human' part of the term unexamined as if it is self-evident. This is important at a time when the idea and values of humanity are under threat; the economic and political system treats us increasingly as consumers, customers and economic units, rather than as citizens and human beings. When ideas of citizenship and humanity are reduced, so are our human rights, and a reassertion of the values of humanity is surely a central task for those of us concerned for human rights.

But humanity, and particularly our understanding of an ideal humanity, is understood differently in different contexts. Indigenous Australians, for

example, have a very different understanding from mainstream white Australia of what it means to be truly human: a much less consumerist and more collective understanding, embedded within extended family and community, with a deep sense of the sacred, profound connection to country, valuing of elders, and so on. To simply impose a Eurocentric view of humanity on Indigenous Australians by talking naively about ‘Aboriginal rights’ in the context of ‘close the gap’ (which is at heart assimilationist, trying to help ‘them’ be more like ‘us’), is surely to perpetuate colonialist domination and to seek to subjugate Indigenous Australians to yet more denial of their cultural heritage and values.

A focus on the human side of human rights refocuses the debate around our understandings of humanity and human ideals. These are both universal – aspirations we share with all humans – and also contextual – with meaning created in people’s own lived reality and cultural norms. Hence human rights are both universal and contextual, and it is in the interplay between the universal and the contextual that the complexity and also the beauty of human rights become apparent. We have tried to establish the universal side of rights by using the law, which is a good mechanism for universal ‘one size fits all’ rights but far less useful for understandings of rights that are grounded in more localised and cultural contexts. These require community-based processes where people can actively engage in dialogue about what humanity means for them, and what are the rights that guarantee the realisation of their humanity. Here lawyers are of less use, but community workers become of critical importance as human rights professionals.

But I would like to look at the issue of law and lawyers in more detail, because I believe the concentration on human rights as law, defined in the

law and protected by the law, has resulted in a seriously deficient understanding of human rights and their potential. I need to emphasise that I am not against human rights law, and human rights lawyers; both have done a great job of protecting human rights, and society would undoubtedly be worse off without the legal human rights regime. However I do want to argue that an exclusively legal approach to human rights has important limitations.

In a liberal society such as ours, where freedom and liberty are highly valued, the law tends to be negative. We value our freedom, and we like to think we are free to do whatever we want to, except where the law says we can't. Laws largely tell us what we mustn't do, rather than what we should do and how we should live our lives. So locating human rights within the law means that we have a negative approach to rights; the law seeks to prevent human rights from being abused, violated or denied, which is very important of course, but it is largely silent on what we should do if we are to help people to realise their rights. The law may tell us that non-Muslims should not discriminate against Muslims, for example, but it does not tell us what we have to do to affirm their humanity, and include them in a society that values diversity. The emphasis is on the prevention of abuse, rather than the achievement of our humanity. The more positive aspect of what we should do is left to the fields of morality, ethics, philosophy or religion, none of which have anything like the power or respect of the law, the legal profession and legal institutions. And even ethics, in our freedom-loving society, are often more concerned with preventing unethical behavior than with encouraging ethical responses to human experience, as a quick reference to professional codes of ethics will confirm. We are more concerned with ethical misconduct than we are with ethical conduct. So I think it is

important for there to be another human rights narrative beside the legal one, namely a narrative of morality and ethical behavior towards each other. These are areas where the law is largely unable to reach.

If we think of human rights as being both achieved and violated in our everyday lives, we quickly realise the limitations of the law. I recall a discussion with an Indigenous colleague, who said that, for her, the experience of racism was taking her seat on the bus each morning, and knowing that every day the seat next to her would be the last to be occupied. This kind of violation of her right to be treated with dignity and respect can never be protected through the law. Similarly, the law has been less than adequate at protecting human rights in the domestic sphere, as feminist critics have strongly argued. The law can deal with serious cases of domestic violence or child abuse (though often with difficulty), but what about the woman in a relationship who suffers long-term low-level abuse – being marginalised, talked over, devalued and not really listened to – for years. This is also a serious violation of her human rights, but it cannot be effectively dealt with through the law. The rights to freedom of expression, to adequate income, to self-determination, to be treated with respect, and so on surely are important in the family home as well as in civil society, and here the law is largely ineffective. Those who so strongly advocate the right of free expression tend to be talking about that freedom for journalists or politicians such as Andrew Bolt and Derryn Hinch, rather than for people, usually women or children, who are silenced over the family dinner table. These examples show the importance of establishing not just a legal regime of human rights, but also a culture of human rights.

How do we create a culture of human rights? Laws have an important role to play, of course, but we need much more than law to achieve cultural change. Here, the usual response is “education is the answer” – true enough, but it has to be more than what is usually meant by the term “human rights education”. Such programs are commonly focused on teaching people their rights, usually based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which, despite its limitations, remains one of the great achievements of the 20th century – it is inconceivable that the nations of the world would all sign up to such a document today. But rather than simply teaching the Universal Declaration, I think we need to take an approach to human rights education that draws on Paolo Freire’s methods of pedagogy, and help people to talk about human rights starting with their own experience of humanity and the ways in which they feel their own rights may be violated and need to be expressed, validated and protected. This is, perhaps, why political candidates such as Pauline Hanson and Donald Trump have been so appealing for so many – mainstream political processes and educational institutions have not validated the frustrations and dilemmas that many people have been feeling, but have instead concentrated on telling them what they ‘should’ say and think, and on making them feel marginalised, irrelevant and ignorant. It is elements of the mainstream media – right-wing shock-jocks and tabloid newspapers – together with Trump and Hanson, that have taken those people and their fears seriously, respected them, and provided them with a language and a narrative for expression of their anger and frustration, which includes re-defining traditional views of human rights as ‘political correctness’. The conventional approach to human rights education, with lawyers, teachers, action plans and colourful posters of the Universal Declaration, is surely not the way to establish a culture of human rights, and of respect for the dignity of others. It is ‘human rights

from above', from the perspective and world view of dominant elites, and it is little wonder that such views of human rights are regarded with suspicion, if not downright hostility, by those who feel marginalised by the actions of those same elites. Instead, I believe we need to concentrate on ideas of human rights from below, and what that means. Even the most ardent Hanson or Trump supporter is a human being who is capable of warmth, generosity and goodwill. Hanson and Trump supporters, and others who oppose many conventional ideas of human rights, will be kind to their relatives, generous to their friends, caring of their children, supportive of their local community as they see it, and want nothing more than to create a better and more secure life for themselves and their families. In this they are remarkably similar to the refugees that they often demonise and see as a threat. Surely it is from these common human feelings and aspirations that we can start to build a culture of human rights that begins to look beyond people's immediate horizons, validating their humanity and finding ways to reinforce those positive human characteristics so that people can begin to see the other as a fellow human being rather than as a threat. To quote Vaclav Havel:

We must not be ashamed that we are capable of love, friendship, solidarity, sympathy and tolerance, but just the opposite: we must set these fundamental dimensions of our humanity free from their 'private' exile and accept them as the only genuine starting point of meaningful human community.

And this is as true for Trump and Hanson supporters as it is for others.

So when someone says "I'm not racist, but . . .", rather than immediately criticising whatever comes after the "but", instead we could congratulate them on not being racist and ask them for their ideas on how we might be

able to help combat racism in their community. A simple but powerful reframing.

This of course is not an easy or quick process. But that does not mean we shouldn't try. And from my perspective it is what good positive community development is all about. In my view, community development is essential for the promotion of human rights, as important as the work of lawyers and advocates, as it is in community – importantly in *diverse* community – that we realise our humanity and hence achieve our human rights. And this takes us away from the individualism that so dominates human rights discourse. The individual marooned on a desert island has no rights; there is nobody to meet the obligations that go with any claim of rights, and rights to free speech, to housing, to health care, to education, and to political participation become meaningless. To achieve rights we need to have others around us, as human rights imply a network, or community, of rights and responsibilities towards each other. In not realizing that simple fact, and treating rights as if they only belong to isolated individuals, we are creating a perversion of human rights. Let's talk more about *our* rights, rather than just *my* rights.

It is for this reason that the linking of rights and freedoms is, in my view, unhelpful, even though the two words are often used together. It is commonly thought that to have a right means the freedom to exercise it whenever we choose, however we choose, wherever we choose, and as much as we choose, even if this involves denying the rights of others, such as freedom of expression sometimes denying others the right to be treated with dignity and respect. One of the duties that goes with having rights is surely the duty to exercise our rights responsibly, taking into account the multiple rights of others and our responsibilities to them. For

example, with the right to freedom of expression go two important responsibilities. The first is the responsibility to be well-informed about the topic; we should only express strong feelings about Islam, for example, if we have taken the trouble to inform ourselves about Islam: its history, its different traditions, the teachings of the Prophet, the Q'ran, what actually happens in a mosque, and so on. To sound off without such a background is to spread ignorance and xenophobia. The second responsibility is to share our opinions in such a way that shows respect for other humans, for diversity, and that recognises the deep hurt and offence that unthinking and uninformed rhetoric can cause. We have a clear responsibility to respect the right of others, and especially those from racial and cultural minorities, to be treated with dignity and respect. We have to apply restraint in the way we exercise our rights, and in reality human rights do not make us 'free', at least in the individual autonomous meaning of the term. Rather they bind us to others, in a community of rights and responsibilities, as after all it is largely in community, rather than in splendid isolation, that we realise our humanity. This necessary connection between human rights and human community is something that surely needs much more attention in the 21st century, with its threats of multiple crises and instability; as many writers have pointed out, it is strong communities that are likely to save us from the worst ravages of the turbulent times that surely lie ahead. And it is in strong communities that our human rights can most effectively be realised.

There is another level at which human rights will face a major challenge in the years ahead. Up until now I have been talking about 'humanity' as if it exists in isolation, but that of course is not the case. With multiple environmental crises facing us over the coming years, largely caused by

humanity's disregard for what we call 'nature', we are now finally coming to realise what Indigenous People have known all along, namely that we are a part of, and interconnected with, the rest of the natural world. The essentially Western Enlightenment view with its origins in the early Judeo-Christian tradition that emphasises humanity as 'having dominion' over the natural world, has resulted in global warming, devastating consequences for the environment, mass extinction of species, pollution, land degradation, and so on. We simply cannot continue down this disastrous path much longer, and many commentators now emphasise that we have reached, or are reaching, the effective limits to growth. The designation of the Anthropocene – a new geological epoch characterised by critical and permanent human impacts on the physical world – reminds us that human civilization has reached a crisis point; we may never return to the conditions of the Holocene, with its remarkably stable climate over the last 10,000 years which made possible farming, human settlements, and what we like to call 'civilization'. In order for something like human civilization to survive into the next century, we will need to abandon the traditional anthropocentric world view, where humans are paramount and the rest of the world is simply 'resources' for us to use as we wish, and replace it with an ecocentric world view, respecting the non-human world, where our interconnection and interdependence with the rest of the natural world is paramount in our thinking. Sadly, the mainstream media remain largely silent about this serious threat to our future, as is seen in their limited and superficial coverage of climate change and its implications.

But what does this mean for human rights? It means that we can no longer only think of human welfare in our policy calculations, legislation and world views, but must take a broader view, which sees the non-

human world as being worthy of moral consideration in its own right, and which recognises that the future welfare of humanity depends not on us alone, but on the health and abundance of the non-human world. In short, we need to re-conceive the idea of 'human' in a way that defines our humanity in terms of our relationships with other species and the physical world, not in splendid isolation or even only in relation to other humans. This is, of course, not a new idea. Indeed it is a very old idea, central to Indigenous world views, and here I include not only Australian Indigenous people, but Indigenous groups around the world, for whom connection and interdependence with the natural world is fundamental. It has been at the centre of pagan and pantheistic religious traditions, and more recently has also been argued by deep ecologists such as Arne Naess, who recognise that it is only through such an ecocentric world view that a future humanity can thrive. We cannot think simply about the human, and hence we cannot think simply about 'human' rights.

This is surely a major challenge for those of us concerned with human rights, and suggests that to continue to emphasise *human* rights in isolation we are reinforcing the anthropocentric world view which is bringing us all down. There is a need, therefore, to take *non-human* rights seriously, including both animal rights and the rights of the earth, and to see our human rights as simply an extension of the rights of all living and non-living beings, as part of our interconnection and interdependence. This has been perhaps most strongly articulated in the Pachamama movements in Bolivia and Ecuador, where legislation has been passed to protect the rights of mother earth, in the same way as we have human rights legislation. This applies not only to animals, but to the earth itself, which is seen as having rights which must be respected and safeguarded. This may seem a long way off for Australia, but closer to home in

Aotearoa/New Zealand, a national park was recently given the status of a legal person, with corresponding rights attached. Allocating rights to the natural world is beginning to resonate, and is being taken seriously, though so far not in mainstream media and dominant narratives of western civilisation.

But when we think about it, a deeper connection to the non-human world is not such an unusual idea. The animal rights movement has many followers, and most Australians will give some level of support to the rights of animals, as is seen in the public reactions to abuse in the greyhound racing industry, the ill-treatment of animals in the live export industry, and the advocacy of genuinely free-range conditions for poultry; these tap into an instinctive, though largely latent, sense of connection to other species. Many people have a close relationship with animals through their pets, with whom they develop important connections nurturing to both human and animal, and the continuing popularity of gardening demonstrates a natural affinity with plants and the soil. The destruction of native forests or of coral reefs brings out a strong human response wishing to protect these aspects of the natural world, recognising that when they are gone we lose something of ourselves. Bushwalking, mountain climbing, bush camping, surfing and sailing are all popular human pastimes demonstrating our continuing connection to the natural world, even in the era of material consumption, smartphones and the Internet. Can these latent feelings for nature be used to develop a more eco-centric understanding of rights, demanding that morality and responsibility for others extend to the non-human world? Seen in this light, a more eco-centric world view becomes more possible, and with it a new conceptualisation of our rights and what they might mean in a world where humans are seen as less central and dominant.

This means drawing on other philosophies and world views for our understanding of rights, recognising that the great Enlightenment philosophers of humanism and human rights (Hobbes, Locke, Kant, Rousseau, Mill, Tom Paine, Thomas Jefferson, Mary Wollstonecraft and the rest) were all firmly embedded in Western modernity, with its anthropocentric humanist assumptions. It is that humanism, with its assumption of the centrality of the human as the basis for our morality, which now needs to be questioned. But there are other traditions on which we can draw. Buddhism and Hinduism, for example, are readily compatible with a more ecocentric world view, and this is reflected in their ideas of rights. There are certainly strands within the Christian tradition that do not emphasise ‘man having dominion’ but rather which seek to understand a connection with nature – after all, Jesus said “Consider the lillies of the field, how they grow. They toil not, neither do they spin. Yet I say unto you, Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these”. The tradition of St Francis is another example of a more ecocentric world view within Christianity. The larger institutional religions have multiple traditions within them, and it is common for some of these traditions to be valued more than others to suit the needs of the time. ‘Man having dominion’ certainly suited the world of Enlightenment modernity with its associated humanism, but if we are to move towards another perspective we can discover different themes and traditions that may have been largely dormant, but which resonate with a newly emerging consciousness, as I understand certain Christian ‘green faith’ groups are doing.

We also need to remember that the European Enlightenment, the birthplace of modern human rights, spawned a counter-narrative, namely

Romanticism. The Romantic poets, novelists, composers and artists reacted against the sterile empiricism of the Enlightenment, with its exclusive focus on science and rationality, by emphasising and exploring human emotions, feelings, passion, love, loss, death and beauty. An important part of the Romantic movement was a love of, and connection to, nature. The poetry of Wordsworth perhaps epitomises this best, when he writes:

Therefore am I still
 A lover of the meadows and the woods,
 And mountains; and of all that we behold
 From this green earth; of all the mighty world
 Of eye and ear, both what they half-create,
 And what perceive; well pleased to recognise
 In nature and the language of the sense,
 The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
 The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
 Of all my moral being.

Those lines, from Tintern Abbey, written in 1798, at the peak of the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, show a true understanding of an eco-centric perspective; Wordsworth recognised that he could only understand his humanity in terms of the natural world, and that nature represented ‘the soul of all his moral being’. Eco-centrism is not new in the Western world, but again it is a tradition that we have not chosen to emphasise; perhaps it is time we did. This theme was also taken up by Richard Bronk, in his book *The Romantic Economist: Imagination in Economics* in which he suggests that if economists took romanticism seriously, and read writers like Wordsworth, we would have a much better world. Wordsworth after all wrote perhaps the most devastating critique of conventional economics:

The world is too much with us, late and soon
 Getting and spending we lay waste our powers.

Little we see in nature that is ours.
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon.

So, can we think of Wordsworth's idea of nature as

The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being.

as the basis for what we might call post-human rights? Surely it is possible to think of rights in such an ecocentric way, that defines our rights and our duties not just to each other, but also to the natural world, which is not separate from us, but of which we are a part? One of the most important inspirations for this is the world view of Indigenous People, as I mentioned before. One of the most significant developments in Australia has been the way in which, at last, non-Indigenous Australians are recognising that Indigenous People are not just a 'problem' to be managed, or victims to be helped, but actually have very important things to contribute to the future for all of us. What started with mainstream recognition of Indigenous skills in art and football is now also including an understanding that Indigenous People can teach other Australians how to live sustainably and respectfully in this land. It is important to look at what, for Indigenous People, counts as the achievement of our full humanity, and to use this as a basis for new understandings of rights. This includes a sense of the sacred in all things, a deep connection to land or country, responsibility for the non-human world through the idea of totem, the importance of community collective rights, the wisdom of elders, and so on.

Developing such ecocentric rights is surely a major challenge this century, for those of us committed to human rights who at the same time

recognise the need to decenter the human from our world view. It is an on-going project, which we have only just begun, but as I have tried to point out these ideas are not really new, and there are sources to inspire such thinking not only outside mainstream Western culture, but also within it.

There is, of course, a potential problem with such exploration. How can we possibly indulge ourselves in quoting Wordsworth and exploring deep ecology when there are serious human rights abuses that need to be addressed. While we read Wordsworth, asylum seekers are detained and abused on Manus and Nauru, people are dying in Syria, refugees are being turned back and vilified in Europe, women and children are being abused, violated, and trafficked, workers are being exploited, Islamophobia is thriving, other forms of racism and xenophobia are alive and well, Indigenous People continue to suffer something we have euphemistically labeled 'disadvantage', and so on. Surely in such a world Wordsworth is a luxury? Such a concern is obviously justified, given the awfulness of the world we inhabit, and our almost limitless capacity to harm each other. But I would argue that this betrays a false dichotomy. Yes, these problems are real and urgent, and demand our action, but this does not mean we shouldn't also be thinking, analysing, and envisioning. There has, in the human rights field, often been a gulf of mistrust between the theoreticians and the activists, each regarding the other with some disdain, seeing the other as irrelevant to the 'real' issues. That has not served us well. We need both the thinkers/dreamers and the activists: as well as acknowledging William Wordsworth we need also to acknowledge his contemporary with the same initials, William Wilberforce, surely one of the greatest human rights activists. We need both the romantic poets and the political activists. We need activists who

are thinkers and thinkers who are activists, recognising that good human rights work will inevitably involve both. This evening I have spent more time on the thinking than on the doing, but that is not because I do not value the doing and the activism.

We know the multiple and serious human rights issues we face, and we can speculate on the future of these. We can say with some certainty that in the coming decades refugees will increase in numbers, including more climate refugees as well as those fleeing conflict, oppression and war. We can say with equal certainty that the nation state will be unable to address this issue – it is a global issue, and can only be addressed globally rather than by the actions of individual states. We can also predict deepening political crises, as governments struggle to achieve the impossible, juggling the demands of their electors and their paymasters, which will result in more surveillance and infringements on our political rights and civil liberties, and more coups, all in the name of something called ‘national security’. Yes, acts of terror may well increase, and they will be a perfect justification for governments to curtail our democratic freedoms still further, even though most citizens will be far more at risk from other forces within their own society; police brutality as we see in the US, abuse of power by private security firms, vigilante groups and domestic violence, for example, represent statistically far more serious threats than does international terrorism. As we experience increasing instability and crisis we may well see more xenophobia and racism, as disempowered people look for scapegoats for their problems and media outlets and cynical politicians happily provide them. Economic crisis, which seems inevitable, will mean that governments will have to reduce or withdraw human services such as social security, legal aid, health care, and quality education, all in the name of ‘austerity’ and proclaiming that it is

somehow for our own good; resultant human suffering, and rights violation, will be massive. Climate change will almost certainly lead to food and water shortages, with inevitable hunger and starvation, and also to food and water wars with equally inevitable loss of life and even more refugees. We can, with some certainty, forecast a bleak future for human rights, and the need for more and stronger human rights activism.

My point this evening is that we need to find a way to break the cycle, and to think of ourselves, our rights, and our relationship to the earth, in different ways. Not only do we need human rights activism, but we need to discover what might be better ways to think about our collective humanity, our rights and our responsibilities. And I remain cautiously optimistic about that, because of the rather hackneyed but still very important saying that times of crisis are times of opportunity. The crises to come will also open up opportunities for significant change, and it is important that we start thinking about this.

Finally, I want to say a few things about social work. I have been invited here partly to help celebrate the 20th anniversary of the establishment of the social work program at Latrobe University here, a program with which I had some contact in its earlier years. So it is important to tie these ideas to social work, as social workers are very important human rights workers, at least as important as lawyers in helping people's human rights to be protected and realised. The issues I have discussed tonight are of central concern for social workers, whose aim after all is to help people achieve their full humanity. I am suggesting that we need to redefine that humanity, to include both the collective and the interdependence of humans with the rest of the natural world.

If social work is concerned with achieving humanity, then it is almost tautological to say that the humanities – history, philosophy, literature, art, poetry, and so on – should be central to social work education. It is the humanities that explore what it means to be human, and that break the boundaries of our limited world view. Yet universities, tragically for our future, are busy downsizing their humanities departments, and humanities sadly have little place in most social work education programs, which are much more concerned with the social sciences. And we need not only the humanities, but also a creative connection to the ecologically-based physical sciences, if we are to move to a more ecocentric world view as a basis for practice.

In this time of neo-liberal dominance, threat to human rights, and the inevitability of multiple crises in the near future, social work becomes a critically important occupation, but only as long as it can maintain its focus and not be seduced by privatisation and individualism, but can stand against the neo-liberal narrative, and emphasise the centrality of the social, not just the individual therapeutic. Social work, after all, is social work. It is about the social, about relationship, and as I argued earlier, we can only achieve our human rights in social interaction with others – in community – rather than in splendid isolation. In the future, as many writers have pointed out, our humanity and indeed our survival will be dependent on the ideology of interdependence, not independence, and on strong vibrant and inclusive communities. For this reason, social workers, with a community development perspective, become absolutely central.

Social work, unlike many other occupations, has always held a strong value base for its work, usually described in terms of social justice and human rights. It has refused to see itself as a value-free technical activity,

despite the dominance of managerialism in our human service organisations. This has led social workers to be particularly strong when it comes to ethics. In my experience, social workers have a deep and consistent understanding of ethics matched by few other groups, and this is a concentration not just on constraining unethical conduct, but on positively acting ethically at all times, consistent with social work's value base. This has often led social workers to taking risky or unpopular stances in the name of social justice, and is at the basis of a long tradition of social work activism going back to the founders of the profession such as Jane Addams, the great feminist, social activist, philosopher and Nobel Peace Prize winner. Like all professions, social work has its problems and its challenges, and given its role in society of supporting the most vulnerable it often cops unfair criticism. But it also has amazing strengths, and as I indicated earlier social workers have been strong and effective human rights workers, even before the language of human rights became popular. A profession that stands unequivocally for social justice and human rights, that takes ethical practice very seriously, and that focuses on the social rather than the individual, is surely the kind of profession we will need in the future, and I want to congratulate Fiona Gardner and her team on the 20th anniversary of the social work program, of educating students to work for social justice and human rights, and to wish the program continued success in the future.