

Faith in refugees

PROFILE

PETER SHERGOLD AC, who has been the Chancellor of Western Sydney University since 2011, gave this speech at the International Peace Day service at Parramatta Mission on September 21 last year.



Photo: Sally Tsoutas, Western Sydney University.

In September 2015, in a brave political decision, the then NSW Premier, Mike Baird, publicly called for the Australian government to be more generous in its response to the human tragedy being played out so brutally in Syria and Iraq. Partly as a result, then prime minister Tony Abbot agreed to accept an additional 12,000 refugees on top of the 13,750 places allocated annually. Premier Baird committed NSW to doing more than its fair share in settling the growing number of arrivals and it did, taking more than 60 per cent of the increase.

The Premier asked me to take on the role of organising the provision of government services that would be made

available to the newcomers. In the almost four years since my appointment as coordinator-general for Refugee Resettlement, NSW has provided a new home and a safer life to around 25,000 refugees. Most have come from Syria and Iraq. Their ethnic and religious diversity provides a graphic representation of the devastating impact of war on innocent civilian communities: unspeakable violence, terror and torture. The refugees identify themselves as Christians and Moslems, Chaldeans, Assyrians and Mandeans, Kurds, Armenians and Yazidis.

Now, for most of my time I go about my work as the consummate public servant. I try to ensure that government agencies work with each other in a collaborative fashion. I encourage them to build genuine partnerships with the frontline not-for-profit organisations that deliver so many government programs under contract. I've focused my attention on the delivery of settlement services, education, health and legal aid. I've given a particular emphasis to employment and training, establishing in the state a new Refugee Employment Support Program. It's helping newcomers to find pathways into work and, through that achievement, allowing them to rebuild their families' sense of self-worth and independence. In recent months I've taken a particular interest in talking to young refugees about the challenges they face.

It is worthwhile work undertaken in a rather boring fashion. Behind the scenes, I talk the dry evaluative language of outcomes, results and value-for-money. I am a bureaucrat. That means that I am not the sort of guy who prays for refugees. But, although I rarely discuss it, I do have faith in refugees. When on occasion I get tired and frustrated by the slow pace of political change, it is that motivating sense of purpose that sustains me. So what exactly is it?

My faith in refugees has three dimensions. The first

is the one I talk about most openly. It is, if you will, a secular expression of faith founded on informed reason and economic rationality. Some unfair critics would characterise it as neo-liberal persuasion. It is the belief, based on hard-nosed experience, that refugees from oppression collectively make a significantly economic contribution to their host society over time. Their experience of survival and escape often creates psychic trauma and distress that, if not addressed, can eat away at the soul and undermine a refugee's hopes of starting over.

Yet that same experience also produces many people who are risk-takers and utterly driven to build new lives. That desire to succeed, together with their firsthand experience of prejudice, creates entrepreneurship: running family businesses was often a way of manoeuvring around discriminatory barriers in their old country and remains for many refugees a means to achieve economic security in the new land.

This typical refugee background helps to explain why humanitarian migrants rather than skilled migrants are the most likely group in Australia to derive income from family enterprise and self-employment. Indeed, it is why so many of Australia's self-made business leaders are of refugee origin – people like Frank Lowy, Nathan Werdiger and Huy Truong. I have faith, based on solid empirical evidence, that many refugees will make a valuable contribution to our national prosperity. Most will work for others. A substantial minority will work for themselves. Some will end up employing others.

But there is a second element of my faith, of which I speak less frequently. It is an inner voice, but all the more important because it speaks quietly to myself. It is the faith that in acting in a humanitarian way we can commune with the 'better angels' of our nature. I take this splendidly evocative term not from some holy book but from the wonderfully liberating language of William Shakespeare (in *Othello*), Charles Dickens (in *Barnaby Rudge*) and – most uplifting – from Abraham Lincoln (in his inaugural address). I have faith that on occasion, we can rise above our normal selves and find our humanity in helping others. I hope and trust that my lesser angels are rarely so evil that they "would corrupt my saint to be a devil". Far more often they are simply mundane creatures, taking up too much of my short life. It is easy for all of us to find ourselves overwhelmed by the multitude concerns of the commonplace. Quite simply, we forget that each of us has within us a better self.

As Dickens put it: "The thoughts of worldly man are forever regulated by a moral law of gravitation [that] holds us down to earth." Our better angels become lost in the shadows of our everyday desires. I have a quiet hope that in acting in a generous fashion, by choosing kindness over

meanness, altruism over self-interest, that we can discover a part of our common humanity that is too often hidden by the apparent ordinariness of our lived experience.

Some 50 years ago at school I was required to read Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies*. At 12 I did not fully comprehend Kingsley's theme of Christian redemption. Today I remember only two things about the book. First, that in the Victorian age young boys with brushes were forced to climb up chimneys to clean them of soot: truthfully, I understood even then that it was exploitative of child labour but secretly found the prospect of being a teenage sweep rather exciting. Second, I still know the names of the two fairies. I enjoyed rolling them off my tongue – Mrs Doasyouwouldbedoneby and Mrs Bedonebyasyoudid. Their names were, of course, juvenile expressions of the Golden Rule central to so many belief systems. Christians find its clearest expression at Matthew 7 which, in the glorious English of King James, exhorts us that "all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you: do ye even so to them". At Brockhurst Baptist Sunday School I used to sing lustily: "The best book to read is the Bible." In all honesty I have to admit that, 65 years on, I had to ask Dr Google to help me find the reference.

So I have faith that in helping refugees to escape their personal hells, by extending a welcoming hand, we can ourselves glimpse a sort of heaven. And there, perhaps, I should leave my sermon, genuflecting to the words of the great 20th-century spiritual leader, John Lennon: "All you need is love"; "Give peace a chance"; "Imagine".

But I am too much of the dull empiricist to leave my story there. For I have a third element of faith, which is that in helping refugees we actually help ourselves. There is plenty of evidence that doing good for others does good for us. Indeed, the mental and physical benefits to the volunteer can be greater even than for the person who is assisted. I do not believe that is what motivates most acts of generosity, but I do have faith in the statistical evidence that carrying out worthy deeds improves one's mood, increases one's self-esteem and lifts one's spirits. There is plenty of data that suggests that helping others reduces one's own blood pressure and lowers the risk of early death. Sometimes we actually feel better, experiencing what is sometimes referred to as the "helper's high".

These, then, are the three foundations of my faith in refugees: that our humanitarian impulse has real benefits to our future economic and social well-being as a nation; that in acting generously we can discover our better selves; and that by doing so we are able to live healthier and more purposeful lives.

The Chinese government would call this a win-win-win situation. To me it is a form of holy trinity. So be it. Amen. 卐