

"Make Mercy Your Badge of Honour"

Keynote Address

Young Mercy Leaders

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Thank You

Good morning and thank you very much for the invitation to speak today at this Young Mercy Leaders gathering; it is indeed a great honour to be invited to such a significant event. First of all I would like to congratulate each one of you for being here. You clearly have a strong desire to be Mercy Leaders and therefore I suspect that this journey to Baggot Street will represent a significant event in your life, one in which you have the opportunity to seize the moment. As Sr Mary said in the opening ritual yesterday, 'you may be forever changed by this experience'.

The Impact of our Personal Life Course - Experiences, Transitions and Events

I know that each of you have your own personal story as to how you came to be sitting in this space today. In fact, each one of you has your own life experiences, that have influenced and shaped you over the years. These include your family background, your cultural background, your educational story, your relational story, times of transition and significant events. All of this has impacted the way you see and act in the world. This stage in your lives may at times leave you feeling anxious and uncertain, but also excited and energised. This is a time when you can embrace new opportunities and make choices about the person you want to be in this ever changing, dynamic world.

Today, I have divided my presentation into four parts. First, I would like to share with you some reflections on my own personal story which has taken many different turns and has shaped both my personal and professional path. I hope that as you listen to my story, you will recognise points of similarity and of course differences in your story and that you will reflect upon your own experiences, gifts and talents and begin to see where you are being led. Second, I will present the three values that have been significant to me as I have tried to actively pursue justice. Third, I will share with you the story of Cathy, a young woman survivor of human trafficking. Fourth, I would like to share with you a little bit about the justice work I undertake at the United Nations on behalf of the Sisters of Mercy worldwide. Finally, I hope to inspire you to seize

this unique moment in your life and to embrace the opportunity that has been given to each one of you. As my niece recently reminded me 'YOLO' (You Only Live Once!).

My Life Story/Trajectory - The Impact

So, I will begin with sharing aspects of my own life story which has been filled with many experiences, transitions and events. Some of these were expected but most were unplanned, some were distressing, some were challenging, some were exciting and some were pure gift.

I was born in Melbourne Australia and I am the sixth child of seven. We lived in a place called Ferntree Gully which was at the foot of the Dandenong Mountains on the outskirts of Melbourne. Surrounded by trees and many open spaces, I experienced a safe, secure and happy childhood.

My father worked in insurance and my mother's work was mostly home duties. She was indeed a homemaker, treating us to daily afternoon teas after school which often consisted of homemade hot scones, pancakes or slices. She also listened attentively to each of our stories, affirming us for our achievements and dissipating for the most part, any worries and concerns. My parents operated under a tight household budget, ensuring that our family of nine were well fed, clothed and educated. At times we struggled financially, but despite these challenges we were happy. My five older siblings; four older brothers and one older sister were a great joy to me, they loved me and spoilt me but they also challenged me and took great delight in teasing me and filling me with horror stories. As a child the imagination can play wonderful games with your mind and I was forever creating scenarios of horror and disaster which caused me anxiety. Despite my exaggerated imagination, I relished being part of a lively and loving family and was overjoyed when my younger brother was born six years after me. Being part of a large family meant that there were often celebrations; if we weren't celebrating birthdays then we were celebrating baptisms, first communions, confirmations, graduations, sporting achievements, not to mention Easter and Christmas celebrations. Being a member of a large family also meant that I was exposed to issues of fairness and equal distribution early on in life. My parents were very fair to us and I have vivid memories of Mum attempting to give equal time to us all, despite the demands of having seven children. As neither of my parents had had the opportunity for an extended education they valued very much the opportunity for us to be educated and to develop to our full potential. As well as attending to our individual growth and development, my parents very much valued the wider community. This was mostly experienced through our local Church community where we attended mass each Sunday and were part of the many parish activities including parish choir, youth groups, care groups, etc. Beyond the parish experience my parents were models to me of what it meant to reach out to those in need. This was exemplified by the way my parents treated and

engaged with what I would describe today as 'outsiders' or the marginalised. Whether it was through a kind word or a listening ear, offering elderly people a ride, cooking for people who were unwell or offering hospitality in our home, my parents were modelling a life of service to others. I remember my siblings and I giggling at Max, a neighbour who often visited, he used to sway and often stutter. My mother would sit at the kitchen table with him on a weekly basis as he shared his joys and concerns. I remember the guilt I felt at being told that Max suffered from severe epilepsy and due to a chronic fit was no longer able to work. I remember each month my Mum and Dad packing us up in the station wagon with a box of fruit and vegetables to deliver to my aunty and uncle who had eight children and were doing it tough. Despite our own struggles they reached out to others. To this day I believe that their witness of generous hospitality and care impacted the way I see and act in the world today.

One of the most significant events in my life and the life of my family was the sudden death of my mother when I was 14 years old. This event along with the earlier experiences I have just described has largely shaped the person I am today. Mum was taken to hospital very suddenly one evening as she was feeling unwell and despite all efforts to treat her she died from internal bleeding. She was 46 years old. Our family was totally unprepared for this event, this tragedy. We had no warning, no goodbyes, it was unimaginable. Filled with grief and overwhelming shock we began to build a life without Mum who was so much the lynchpin of the family.

It was not long after this event that I began to ask serious questions about suffering, injustice and why bad things can happen to good people. I yearned to know the meaning of life. I questioned the existence of God; I questioned the goodness of people. I questioned the value of my own life. I sought answers through reading many many books. During this time I was attending school and not doing very well. I was rebellious, apathetic and totally lacking in motivation. I argued with my father and found some solace with my friends, but I found it hard for them to really understand what was happening inside me; the feelings of loss, isolation and grief overwhelmed me and I questioned who and what I was to do in this unpredictable world.

Slowly, I moved out of this time of depression. I began to engage more readily with life, I began to embrace opportunities. I let down my umbrella and the sun began to shine again!

I could see that life was providing me with opportunities to grow, to move beyond the present, to imagine a meaningful future in which all of life events had prepared me for. With great companionship and solidarity with friends and family, I began to dream of a life in which I seized opportunity, embraced hope and practiced Mercy and Justice which had been instilled in me from such an

early age. I finished my high schooling, attended university, got a teaching qualification, taught in inner city schools in Melbourne, joined the Sisters of Mercy, worked with homeless women, trained as a social worker, managed a safe house for women and children, studied theology, lived and worked with formerly trafficked women in the Philippines, and now find myself representing the Sisters of Mercy at our NGO office at the UN in New York. It's a life of opportunity and grace, and indeed a great privilege, one that I could never have imagined! However, it didn't just happen through chance, despite the setbacks I have described, I made a choice to seize the opportunity.

Seizing the Opportunity - Hope, Critical Thinking and a Mercy Heart = Justice

So what does it mean to seize the opportunity? Well I believe that I have seized this opportunity in three ways. First, through developing and maintaining a sense of *hope* about the future and our world; Second, through *critical thinking* in which I have developed skills over the years to challenge my own bias and presuppositions, to ask big questions, to interrogate my own motivations and to seek new knowledge; Third, through developing and yearning for a *merciful heart* in which justice reigns. I will elaborate on these three points.

Hope

Let's begin with hope. I recently read a book entitled "Hope in the Dark" by Rebecca Solnit.

The crux of the book is basically that to have hope without critical thinking is to be naïve and blissfully ignorant, but to have critical thinking without hope is to be cynical and depressed. It is hope that has enabled me to move forward in life, to embrace new opportunities, to become a Sister of Mercy in order to make justice a life pursuit. In fact, I believe that to live without hope is to eliminate the element of surprise, the unexpected gifts, and the joyful encounters with people. Hope enables us to overcome the hardest of obstacles, the deepest pains and our greatest challenges.

To symbolise hope I would display a lit candle. I now invite X to bring forward the candle. Of course this is part of the Christian faith tradition and for me represents light, love, warmth and the presence of God. Later in this presentation I will illustrate how Hope has reigned in my specific work with formerly trafficked women (Place a lit candle on the stand). As the candle is being lit I invite you to reflect on your own experience of Hope.

Critical Thinking

The Second way in which we can seize life opportunities is through a commitment to critical thinking.

I used to think critical thinking was all about the abstract and about a special skill that people have that seeks to outsmart others. But I now see it differently; I recognise critical thinking as a crucial way of understanding and unpacking the complexity of our world, a way of scrutinizing our world view ie the way we understand the world and analysing how this shapes our actions. If we fail to critically think through the big issues of our time then we diminish our capacity to contribute to our world in a fruitful way. I am not suggesting for one moment that Critical thinking is easy, it's definitely not. It requires from us a commitment to stretch our thinking beyond what is sometimes comfortable, it requires perseverance and hard work, but is a responsibility that our education requires of us. Without critical thinking there is a tendency to see the world in simple terms. We sometimes refer to this as seeing things in black and white. The challenge that critical thinking offers us is to view the world through multiple lenses. To live with the grey; To live with paradox and uncertainty recognising that not all issues can be put in simple, populist terms. To recognise that solving complex social problems can involve multiple solutions and an array of strategies. This could be symbolised through a Magnifying Glass which provides a clearer focus and can break through barriers that we often cannot see.

As I place the magnifying glass on the stand I invite you to think about a time in which your thinking has been challenged, where maybe you have been encouraged to approach an issue from a different angle, to look at an issue a little more closely. Maybe this was a moment of uncomfortableness, a time when you were confronted to think about something differently.

A Mercy Heart - Justice at its core

Finally, I seek to embrace life with a Merciful heart.

I say seek because it is an ever challenging way of life. One in which I need to learn more and more about but nevertheless desire to live; A way of life that has been nurtured since my birth, first in family and then as a Sister of Mercy over the past 20+ years. To live with a merciful heart is to thirst for justice, to offer compassion and understanding and seek alternatives to violence and oppression. It is to live with and embrace difference and to seek peace.

During the time that I was working in Cebu, Philippines I experienced an 'awakening' in myself. The experience of listening to the life stories of these women was one of shock and horror. I was overwhelmed by the deprivation, marginalisation and abuse they had experienced. I felt deeply saddened and

disillusioned and I was forced to ask 'Why'. It is only now that on reflection, I can describe my experience as a movement of Mercy.

Last year, Pope Francis proclaimed the year, as the Year of Mercy. In making Mercy so significant he called all of us to adopt a Mercy stance, one in which we are invited to encounter the Mercy of God and to show deep Mercy to not only humans but our fragile earth. My third symbol is the Mercy Cross. As a Sister of Mercy this particular cross represents the Paschal mystery, the dying and rising of Jesus. It is a symbol of hope which Sisters of Mercy throughout the world wear to signify our commitment to a Mercy way of life. As I place this symbol of Mercy on the stand I invite you to reflect upon a situation in which you have received Mercy and then situations either locally or globally where you believe Mercy is needed?

So, we can all seize the opportunities given to us by maintaining a sense of hope about the future and our world, adopting a commitment to critical thinking and nurturing a desire to live a life of Mercy in which Justice is at its core.

A Justice Example: Uncovering the Voices of Human Trafficking

Today I would like to share with you how these three values have influenced my work in the trafficking arena. How many of you here are familiar with the term human trafficking? As I suspected many of you are. I first became aware of the term in the late 90's when I was working in women's homeless refuges. For me, at that time, it represented women being traded for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Of course we know today that the term trafficking encapsulates much more than the trade of women for sexual exploitation, it also includes men, women, and children being exploited in the agricultural industry, the fishing industry, sweatshop work, the construction industry, organ transplants and more.

My particular interest in the experience of women being trafficked for sexual exploitation stems from my meeting women in the refuge I ran in Melbourne. The refuge was founded by the Sisters of Mercy in 1988.

The significance of sharing story and personal narratives has been an important part of my work over the last few years. I believe that if we listen to one another's stories we have much to learn. The wisdom of both individual and collective experiences over time can often reveal subtle injustices. For me the notion of narrative justice, particularly in my work with formerly trafficked women speaks of opportunities to bring to the surface past wrongs and to ensure that such advocacy leads to change.

I spent 12 months living and working with trafficking survivors in Cebu city in the Philippines and have continued to work with them over the past eight years. During that time I heard the stories of many women who had been trafficked.

I would like now to share with you the story of Cathy. A survivor of human trafficking. As you listen to her story I invite you to notice the times of transition and significant events in her life.

Cathy was born in the Northern part of the Philippines. She was a twin and she and her twin sister were adopted out at birth. Cathy was adopted locally and later found out that her sister had died as a young infant. When she was five, Cathy was placed in the care of her paternal grandmother who struggled to make ends meet, but offered love and affection to Cathy. Her father, who was addicted to drugs, made intermittent visits to Cathy and sometimes gave money for her schooling, but the financial burdens were mainly placed on her grandmother. Cathy's aunties were cruel to her, they resented the attention she received from her grandmother and they called her names and told her that she would end up just like her own mother. At the age of ten, Cathy attended the funeral of her mother, whom she had never met. Although she did not know her mother, she grieved her absence in her life and longed for her mother's love. She was told that her mother was pregnant when she died and had been beaten up by her live in partner. She remembers seeing the bruises on her mother's face and although she did not feel sad at the time she was haunted by the memory of seeing her mother's battered body. Cathy however, experienced success in her schooling; she was a good student and loved to succeed. She completed elementary level schooling and moved confidently into high school, but the burden of debt on her grandmother became too much and Cathy made the decision to leave school and look for work. As she was only fourteen she was only able to find a job as a waitress. During this time, she was able to earn money to pay for her ageing grandmother's medical assistance and to buy herself a few treats. But she still was finding it difficult to earn enough money for her and her grandmother's needs. The opportunity to move was afforded to her through an acquaintance who offered her the chance to move to Cebu where she would have a decent and well paid job as a guest relations officer. She and two other girls at the age of sixteen departed their hometown for a better life in Cebu. But when they arrived, they were quickly transported into a van where they were taken to an apartment. Two days later they were taken to a bar, were made up heavily with makeup and ordered to wear transparent clothing. Cathy realised that she was being set up to be sexually exploited. Her auntie's prediction was true; she too would end up like her mother. For nearly two years she survived these trafficking conditions, she endured abuse, debt bondage, control and violence but at the same time she maintained a sense of hope that one day she would be freed from such circumstances. Her freedom came about through an organised rescue operation. She experienced the rescue as traumatising as once again she felt exposed and stigmatised. Today, she is

aware that the intentions of the 'rescuers' were good but still argues that their approach was not helpful or supportive to her.. Cathy has been through an extensive recovery program which involved being provided with safe housing, psycho-social support and education in preparation for work. Today she is an overseas foreign worker, her children are in the care of others and she aspires to build a better life for them.

So what do we learn from Cathy's account of the trafficking experience?

Cathy's story, along with many other stories, highlighted my own privileged background in which I experienced childhood as a time of opportunity to grow and develop through the experience of safe, secure family, schooling and community connectedness. In contrast, these women experienced mostly unsafe, neglected and marginalised childhoods, with systemic abuse and deprivation, poverty, and violence, leading to their vulnerability to human trafficking. Unless we address these underlying causes of vulnerability to trafficking we will continue to fall short of finding a solution.

I was overwhelmed by the experiences of exploitation and abuse that young women shared with me during that time. It caused me once again to question the meaning of life, the value of life. But I was determined that this must stop. Confronted with the reality of childhood that was in such contrast to my own, I resolved to find out more in order to seek ways in which such abuse and exploitation could end. Some people would call me idealistic, but I believe that my commitment to Hope, to critical thinking and to Mercy and Justice was fully alive. It felt like I was being called to respond.

What I witnessed in Cebu during my time living at the Welcome House contrasted greatly with what was being reported in the media and written about in regards to human trafficking. Most media reports presented trafficked women as being kidnapped, chained up, tortured, raped and held captive. The women who I encountered were indeed trafficked women but they did not share such experiences. I was determined that their voices be heard, that their experiences be recognised and given attention.

As part of my commitment to critical thinking I began a thorough analysis of the academic literature on human trafficking. I started to look at how the issue of human trafficking was being 'framed' i.e how the problem was being viewed. For those of you who are interested in or want to study political science, Australian Social Policy Professor Carol Bacchi argues that the way an issue is framed has a huge influence on the way we go about solving the problem.. I discovered that what was missing from the trafficking discussions was the voices and firsthand accounts of the trafficking experience from women and girls. I decided to make this the core work of my research; To reveal the stories of women who had been trafficked as they described it and to analyse their stories in the light of service responses and global policy.

Share Upstream/Downstream Analogy

When I listened to these women's narratives I was moved by their attitude of perseverance and hope that they displayed. Some of the images speak of hope, that someday they would be freed from brutal exploitation. On no occasion did they describe themselves solely as victims. Striking examples of human agency, resilience and survival emerged in the narratives of these young women. One of the most powerful and striking learning experiences for me was that, for the most part, the participants were women of hope, wanting to share their experiences with others as a way of illustrating that childhood abuse and disadvantage can be overcome when supportive community structures are put in place and relationships of trust are built. This is not to deny in anyway the ongoing struggle that past experiences evoke.

The trafficking experience leaves an indelible mark on the lives of those affected by it. Women often felt depressed and deep feelings of worthlessness; some even indicated suicidal inclinations, echoing emotional states that they had experienced in childhood. Yet, their stories show that despite the experienced deprivation, abuse and objectification, they showed great resilience, concentrated on their survival and maintained an attitude of hope that someday they would live a different life.

We started again but for me the pain is still here inside my heart, just like a tattoo. Even if you erase it, it will leave a scar. We were happy, even if we are not complete. [Emerita]

The gift for me has been in the encounters with those women. The hope has been seeing women who have been so badly deceived begin to trust again. To dream about a future, to be given a new way forward through the opportunity of education. The hope has been in witnessing a young formerly trafficked woman graduate as a social worker. It has indeed been a privilege to witness these young women share their stories and in doing so become advocates for the human rights of all young women and girls. It is through the information gleaned from their narratives and their unique interpretations of the experience that global policy can be shaped.

So what claim do trafficked women and children have on people like us? People who make the gospel claim of mercy? What are the challenges/strengths we have as people of mercy to address the issue of human trafficking?

And what does it mean to employ these energies on behalf of Mercy justice at the UN?

I recently heard someone say that ' if we are not at the table then we are more than likely to be on the menu '. So first of all its essential that Sisters of Mercy are at the table and present in order that those we work with, those rendered poor are not on the menu!!

A major part of my research and my ongoing work at the UN has been to raise awareness of the voices of trafficked women in order to impact global policy. These women challenge the common understanding that trafficking is a random act of victimisation, instead they point to a life course of cumulative disadvantage, exploitation and marginalisation. Trafficking is one of many exploitative experiences in their life, therefore we need to look at the environmental circumstances that render them vulnerable to exploitation. If we fail to hear and respond to these women's accounts of lifetime disadvantage then attempts to eradicate human trafficking will be largely futile.

This key insight, discovered through listening and responding to women's stories of trafficking has formed part of my work at the UN in which I along with other non-government organisations seek to point out underlying causes of human trafficking. This means that globally we need to stop presenting human trafficking as a random act of victimisation and instead address issues of systemic oppression such as gendered violence, lack of educational opportunities, rural isolation and lack of infrastructure to name a few. Vulnerability to human trafficking is reflected through a life course of victimisation.

One way in which I use my advocacy skills at the UN is to make interventions at important meetings.

Last July, I made an intervention on behalf of the Sisters of Mercy at the Human Rights Council in Geneva. This involved a 3 minute statement in which I called upon nation states to recognise trafficking firstly as a human rights issue and one that involves a process of cumulative disadvantage over the life course.

Other ways are through contributing as a panellist on events focused on human trafficking, hosting events that highlight women's stories, producing materials that give voice to the experience of trafficked women and meeting with representatives from nation states such as ambassadors, ministers and other representatives.

Sometimes it's a matter of making tiny steps forward for justice, change can be slow and incremental. In Conclusion, I am encouraged by the words of the late American Professor Howard Zinn, social historian and activist. He said;

"We don't have to engage in grand, heroic actions to participate in the process to change the world. Small acts, when multiplied by each of us, can make a difference. We need the kind of hope based on that fact that human history is a story not only of cruelty and war but of compassion, sacrifice, courage and kindness. What we choose to emphasise in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction. And, if we do act, in however small a way, in defiance of all that is bad around us, that in itself is a marvellous victory.' Howard Zinn

My final symbol is a globe of the world. As I place this symbol on the stand my challenge to you is to seize this opportunity, to be a people of hope, to think critically and last but not least to be a person of Mercy.

To conclude I would like to leave you all, students and staff, with these three questions to ponder

1. Despite the critical concerns of our time how will you maintain a sense of Hope in this world of ours?
2. In what way will you use your intellectual, religious, creative and scientific energies to make a difference in the world?
3. Finally how will you make mercy real as you encounter an ever changing world?

I hope that in my presentation today I have inspired you to seize the opportunities that come your way, to accept the challenges and to be the best person that you can be. I wish each one of you the very best in all your pursuits throughout your life.

Thank you