

Initiatives of Change Conference:

"AUSTRALIA AS A NEIGHBOUR"

International House, Melbourne, Australia, 12-16 January 2007

Session: "Healing journeys", 14 January 2007

"MORE ALIKE THAN I EVER IMAGINED..."

Mick and Laura Vertigan (transcript):

Mick: We've got six children, my wife and I; Laura's one of them. Families can be a rough training ground.

I've spent nearly 35 years teaching in a range of secondary schools, both government and non-government. Most recently I've spent 10 years in a Catholic College in Albany which is in the deep south of West Australia.

When you spend years observing the life consequences of choices that students make you can become a bit fatalistic about the whole education process. Twenty to 30 pupils in one room with one teacher: do people learn best in this situation?

I also found that I became very agitated when I saw my own kids making some of those same poor decisions. On top of that there's the stress of keeping a lid on the natural exuberance of students, and particularly if you're in a position of authority as I was, relied on by other teachers for help when they experience difficulties in their classes, that stress sharpens. You can't afford to let yourself to be having problems with the same kid.

So it calls for you to exert massive amounts of love and goodwill and attempt at wisdom and justice.

The effect it had on me at home at the end of a long day was that I had little goodwill or love left in me when it came to my own children. Consequently discipline at home was tight and often harsh. I just could not see why I had to put up with the same rubbish at home that I had to put a lid on at school. So my style of discipline took an outward appearance of peace that in fact generated fear and resentment in my children which they have had to deal with each in their own way. It was only when I became aware of this that I stopped to look at my motivations and how I dealt with them. And since that time I've taken time with each one of them individually to apologise for that time and try and explain where it came from. Each of them have responded in their own way, each has to approach their own feelings on their own terms and deal with them. I can't affect that, they make their own decisions. And as I said earlier there are six of them, six very different people. Two of my daughters have written to me to apologise for making me feel guilty, as they have re-evaluated those early years. Others of the children have said "Leave it behind. Don't stress over it." Some others have got massive issues of their own to deal with and they keep their feelings firmly to themselves. I can't remake those early years, I can't change the influences that took me personally close to a nervous breakdown. I can only make honest apology for my wrong doing, and love them and pray each of them will find some independent touch with God and put it all somehow into a healthier perspective.

And now my daughter Laura of whom I am immensely proud.

Laura: Well that was my Dad, of whom I am also immensely proud. I think of him now more as a good mate than as a dad. We've worked through some really tough things together, and he's been there for me even when I needed to tell him that I hated his guts.

I have a history of depression but I found that dealing with problems at their source I was able gradually to pull out of it. I am third generation IofC and having been raised with an

lofC focus I was very aware of the world. Having been told that if one person changes the world changes, and taught about absolute moral standards as a child, I understood this to mean that if I was good enough the world would be better. Somehow that made me culpable for the state of the world. It was all my fault. I generally felt hopeless about the state of the world and could only focus on the bad things. More than this though, I also developed a deep-seated hatred of myself.

Underneath my hatred of my parents, actually underneath everything that I did or said or thought, was the simple fact that I despised myself more than anything else. Mum and Dad made mistakes of course. All parents do. I used to think Dad's biggest mistake was the times he was violent towards me or my brothers and sisters. Now I think his biggest mistake was something he didn't even understand himself at that time. He suffered from his own depression, and he passed on his self hatred without even knowing it.

My healing began when I realised that I was also not perfect, and asked for forgiveness for my part in the fighting. But what has been really powerful for me has been a process that has taken the last decade and is still ongoing; it is acknowledging the past, acknowledging my own pain, and acknowledging my parents' pain. Recognising that in fact we were more alike than I ever imagined. Allowing myself to be angry and hurt and to cry buckets of tears, and then forgiving them and forgiving myself.

Mick Vertigan is a secondary school teacher in Albany, WA. He is an accomplished singer and actor. Laura Vertigan is a student of theology.