

27th Families and Friends Remembrance Service

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Twenty-seven years is a long time. A long time to hold open a space in which those who have died because of drugs may be remembered and those who mourn may be honoured. It's a long time to bear the tragic knowledge that the very policies and laws purportedly designed to protect our loved ones and communities are contributing directly to further harm. Study after study shows that the criminalisation of drug use makes it more difficult for those struggling with drug dependency to seek support and treatment, and contributes to their profound sense of marginalisation, shame and mental anguish. In the name, ostensibly, of saving people from drugs, our society's approach actually makes it more likely that they and their families will be made to suffer profoundly.

There is the beginning of a shift. In the past year, the ACT Government has acknowledged that public health principles should underpin drug policy and just last week passed legislation decriminalising the possession and use of small quantities of those drugs most closely associated with fatal overdoses. This is a most welcome development. But if this new approach is to be deepened and extended to other jurisdictions, it seems to me that we need to acknowledge what has lain at the roots of resistance to it for so long. Because the resistance isn't really evidence based. It seems to lie deeper than that, at a level beyond the reach of merely 'rational' argument.

Previous speakers at this event have noted the sometimes harsh community attitudes towards those who use drugs, a tendency to judge without seeking to understand and to condemn those who suffer early death almost as having deserved their fate. There's moralism and mercilessness in people's tone. And I wonder if this has something to do with the difficulty we all have in recognising and accepting our own frailty, our own exposure to life's sometimes overwhelming difficulty? If I can blame someone for their struggle and suffering, if I can persuade myself that it's somehow their fault and a result of their culpably poor choices, then I can also

maintain the illusion that it couldn't happen to me; it couldn't happen in my family. Punishing the supposed offender somehow distances me from them; I don't have to face the unpalatable truth that I too could undergo the unravelling of my life through circumstances only partly (at best) under my control. I wonder, in other words, if the societal impulse to punish those dependent on drugs may be serving very different interests than it acknowledges.

And if this is right, then mature drug policy invites a kind of maturity in the community that enacts it and the leadership advocating for it. It requires us to acknowledge the sharedness of our humanity, to see others as like us – vulnerable, complicated, wounded; fellow mortals, children of the same God who in silence is loving to all. This compassionate, essentially merciful solidarity, is what St Augustine all the way back in the 5th century described as 'loving human beings in a human way'. It involves us seeing each other, in the words of Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, as 'fragile fellow creatures held in the love of God'.

Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform acknowledge that 'criminal law will always have a place in the architecture of a good drug policy but not when it is directed at the very people that the existing policy is intended to protect'. Today we remember those members of our families, our friends, who were failed by punitive drug policies, and by the deeper, underlying societal failure to keep them among us in their need. And we honour those of you whose faithful perseverance in the service of drug policy and law reform is now beginning to bear fruit in this jurisdiction. The Australian philosopher, Raimond Gaita, once said that it matters profoundly that prisoners are allowed visits from their family and friends, because then the guards see them through the eyes of those who love them. That's what your faithful witness has done, helped a community learn to see through the eyes of you who love them those who have been subject to stigma and blame. Your love has cultivated the conditions where reform becomes not only imaginable, but imperative. May we continue to stand for the maturing of our common life, for wisdom for those in authority, and the deepening of solidarity with all.