

Benjamin Law's speech delivered at the Family Relationship Services Australia 2010 conference "Diversity: Everyone Benefits."

Friday, 5 November 2010

Good evening. I'd like to begin the evening by respectfully acknowledging the traditional owners of this land on which we're gather, both past and present, as it's a great pleasure and honour to be speaking to you all here tonight. As you're aware by now, the theme of this year's FRSA conference is "Diversity: Everyone Benefits." Bonnie Montgomery, the Communications Officer of FRSA, told me they were looking for someone to talk about — and represent — diversity. And so, they immediately reached for the nearest young Asian homosexual. Several minority groups, and only one stone.

Bonnie, well done. I hope I represent good value.

When I first started writing this speech, I looked on the internet for some inspiring quote about families. The first one I found that spoke to me was by George Santayana, the Spanish philosopher and writer I've never heard of. He said: *The family is one of nature's masterpieces*. At first, that quote seemed to speak to me. But after I thought about it for a while, I decided that statement needed footnotes. Like, if the family truly *is* indeed a masterpiece, it's probably more like a painting by Monet: something that looks nice from a distance, but when you get up close, you realise is actually a horrific mess.

Some of you may be intimately familiar with the dynamic of that analogy from — well, your own family — but also your line of work. Many of you here work in family, community, social or welfare services and networks. To my slight embarrassment, I'm not here tonight as a peer who works in those of fields — and, despite my family name (Law), I don't work in law, much to the disappointment of Chinese-Australian parents everywhere.

Instead, I'm a writer, and I'm a writer who loves reading *and* writing about what this conference is all about: family, and families in their many forms. If I look back at the things I've written over the years, it often come back to the same topic: the diversity of families, and how they work. In the last couple of years, I've spent a lot of time profiling families you don't often see represented on television or in magazines: such as young parents with physical disabilities raising able-bodied children; children who identify as transgender and their parents; multi-generational Indigenous families living in remote Queensland; and elderly gay and lesbian couples in long-term relationships.

I also write about my own family — and I think some people (like, my own family) would say that I perhaps write a little *too* much about them. Earlier this year, I released a book called *The Family Law*. And while one certain bookstore chain has shelved it in the legal studies section of their shop (I won't name names: let's just say they start with "B" and rhyme with 'rorters'), the book is actually a memoir: a collection of black comedy essays about growing up in my Chinese-Australian family, and also growing up gay in the 90s and early 2000s.

My family -- *The Family Law* — consisted of two parents and five children, living together in a three bedroom house in coastal Queensland. (Let's pause and do some maths here. Two parents. Five children. Three bedroom house. It wasn't going to last.) My parents were two of the first Chinese — or Asian — people in that area of any sort, and out of their five children, I was in the middle. In many ways, our childhood was idyllic, but I always grew up with the acute sense that my family was quite different.

This is an extract from the first story I ever wrote for my book:

My family aren't the outdoors type. Despite being raised on the coast, Mum detested visits to the beach (all the sand it brought into the house), while Dad disapproved of wearing thongs ('It splits the toes'). We never camped. All those things involved in camping — pitching a tent; cooking on open fires; the insects; shitting in the woods; sleeping on rocks; getting murdered and raped in the middle of nowhere — they never appealed to us. 'We were never camping people,' Mum says now. 'Your dad never wanted to camp, and insects eat me alive. See, Asians — we're scared of dying. White people: they like to "live life to the full", and "die happy".' She paused. 'Asians are the opposite.'

So we didn't exactly fit in. Over 90% of the kids who went to my school were white, and my peers were surfers and jocks and motor-heads, and I was the weedy clarinet-playing Chinese kid who couldn't tell football codes apart, had an orthodontic plate lodged into my face and was borderline crippled by a combination of scoliosis and a condition called *Osgood Schlatters Disease*. That's right: I was a diseased child.

As for my family, I had a father I hardly saw because of his epic, seven-day-a-week working schedule, and a mother with a giant clown-like perm who insisted — *insisted* — on regaling me, my friends and their mothers with graphic stories of how each of her children were born, the way other mothers made small talk about their favourite brands of instant coffee. It was embarrassing.

The single cataclysmic, catastrophic event of my childhood was when my parents split up when I was 12 years old. I was 17 when they legally divorced, so my entire high school experience (from 12 to 17) was bookended by this incredibly painful and protracted splitting up process — which was, of course, a big deal in the local Chinese community at the time. As I write in my book:

The separation made our family the subject of gossip amongst the local Chinese community, whose members were mildly scandalised. Elderly Chinese women who smelled like mothballs and grease would corner my siblings and me in the shopping centre, pulling us to one side, shaking their heads and clicking their tongues, lecturing us in Cantonese as they raised their tattooed eyebrows, telling us—us!—that no marriage was a walk in the park.

I think most of us have gone through a period in our lives—perhaps some of us are still in it now — where we feel an acute embarrassment and horror about our families. I don't think I'll ever shake that sensation, but it was especially pronounced in my teen years where I was ashamed — not only of myself, but the people who shared my gene pool. As a teenager, I was convinced I was the only child who belonged to a family as freakish as mine, and I was completely mortified.

Now that I'm in my late 20s, all of this stuff is actually funny. Of course, it makes for great material. If I'd written some of these stories as a teenager, when most of this stuff was still happening, the book would have been crushingly sad, angry, viscous and possibly written in my own blood and tears. (It was the '90s, after all, and I was listening to a lot of Tori Amos.) But as Woody Allen once famously said: "Tragedy plus time equals comedy." Eventually, I got to the stage where I could not only laugh, but feel some pride in my family and our shared history.

In the weeks leading up to the book's publication though, I started to fret a lot: this book was about such a specific life experience: growing up gay and Asian amongst a large family with divorced parents, and I thought, "Really, who would identify with this story, whatsoever?" It seemed like an incredibly small potential readership, and I thought my publishers had made a terrible mistake.

After the book had been out for a few weeks though, I started getting some emails from people who had read the book, whose lives and upbringings were completely different to my own, and yet, told me stories about their own families that were completely familiar to me. And at the time, they found themselves in my stories of my family.

On the surface, a teenager in Melbourne (who we'll call Rhys) didn't have much in common with me: his parents were still married, his mother tongue was Maltese, and we grew up in completely different regions of Australia. He was also an entire decade younger than me as well, which was both lovely and horrifying. But still, he recognised the family dynamic that I'd laid out in my book: the stresses and fractures, what it felt like to grow up gay. Rhys, in his email, said: "A lot of it was close to home; your home was like mine, you were like me."

Stephen, after reading a story about how my mother started hoarding things after her separation, emailed me to say our mothers were completely alike. He wrote: "I once took a day off to clean out my mum's garage, so she could actually get her car into it. When she got home, she recovered all the junk from the bin and put it straight back into the garage." That was familiar to me.

And finally, a guy we'll call Bill wrote: "Up until recently I'd distanced myself from my family, after my parent's divorce when I was 18. I pretty much kept out of contact with my parents and my three brothers. The day I finished your book it was my youngest brother's 18th, which I wasn't going to go to. It was also the first time in seven years that my whole family were together in the same room. And I went. You helped remind me of the importance of family, no matter how fucked up they can be. I'm not ashamed or embarrassed by them any more."

I wish I'd heard all of those things when I was growing up.

Apart from personal emails from readers, it's been interesting getting responses from critics. Most reviews have described the book as a collection of stories about a dysfunctional family, which I find funny. Not because it's inaccurate, as such — you only have to come to a Law Family Christmas, where Christmas is counted as a roaring success if no one bursts into tears or tells someone to *Shut the F*&* up*. I find it the description of a "dysfunctional family" funny because, now that I'm older, I realise a few things:

1. No family is what you'd call "functional";
2. No parent is completely perfect, because who can be, when you're charged with such an impossible task like raising a child?
3. Families that seem visibly "functional" give me the creeps. I'm always wondering: "What are you hiding?"

We don't talk very much about our families, especially when they fall outside the "norm". The stupid thing is: the "norm" is changing anyway. Right now, in 2010, we've got the lowest rates of marriage in Australian history and the highest rates of divorce. There are more of us out there now who are part of a sole parent family and it's common for couples — whether through choice or circumstance — not to have children at all. We've also experienced a massive increase in the number of cohabitation households, and there are more blended and step-families now, and same-sex couples and parents. Approximately a fifth of all adult lesbian Australian couples are raising children, and there are fewer — but some — gay male couples doing exactly the same thing. Where our families come from is also changing, with a quarter of all Australian residents originally born overseas.

No one has exclusive rights over the definition of family — what it is, or it should be like. But our image of family — in broadcast; in advertising — is still largely the white, heterosexual, double-parent, cereal packet family. Many of us here belong to that exact model of family, and many of us don't, and that includes me.

So it bugs me now when politicians and advocacy groups use the term "family values" as shorthand for an incredibly narrow set of political views, and a very particular model of the modern family. By throwing around the term "family values", they're implying that people who don't share their vision, don't also put their Family First. All decent people make their family a priority, and that's what they've all got in common, whatever their family is like.

We often talk about what kids deserve, and kids do deserve certain things, like being loved, protected and educated. They are entitled to a good diet, occasional junk food, semi-regular tantrums and lots of naps — especially in their teen years. But the structure and look of a family doesn't guarantee any of these things. The proposition that some families are more capable or equipped to provide those things, by simple virtue of its structure, is weird, and implies that every other family must be a compromise.

Kids deserve to be supported in whatever family they belong to, whatever their family looks like. When we lobby for legislation or create community networks to support — or legalise — particular kinds of families, we're not doing it to socially engineer what families look like. We do it to give these families legal protections and proper support — *because these families already exist*.

One of the best things about conferences like this, is that we get to discuss these ideas. But another wonderful side effect is that you get to meet new people and make new friends. And I'm guessing that many of you, by this stage, already have. We start our conversations in the conventional ways: "What do you do for a living? Where do you come from? What sort of underwear are you wearing?" (No, just kidding; that comes later. Please: drink more wine.) Because I'm a journalist, or maybe it's because I'm a writer—or maybe it's

because I'm a complete and shameless busybody — for me, the far more interesting conversation starter is this: *Tell me about your family.*

For some of us, talking about our families will make for joyous conversation. For others, it could very well be difficult; nearly impossible. Actually, let me rephrase that: for most of us, it will be both of those things: joyous and difficult. Because belonging to any family is simultaneously sublime and hard. Belonging to a family is what we all yearn for, but what no one tells us is that it's also a lot of work and involves maintenance.

Nonetheless, when I get off this lectern, I'd really like you to turn to the people at your table, and ask about each other's families. During the main course, it's likely that we will find remarkable and surprising similarities between our families. Maybe our fathers shared the same job; maybe our mothers had exactly the same amount of children, with the girls and boys born in the same order. Maybe some of us don't have parents any more.

Maybe we'll find other similarities, like the girl I recently met in Tokyo, who, after discussing our families, I discovered was Australian and born in the same year and hospital as me. What were the chances? Or maybe we'll find that our older siblings victimised us in exactly the same way — like my brother, whose favourite attack involved wrestling me down, pinning my limbs to the floor with his legs and tickling me until I would actually cry from laughter and pain. My defence mechanism was an incredibly manly combination of scratching and spitting in his face. Maybe your younger brother did that too.

By discussing our families, we will find much in common. And, at the same time, we also understand that none of our families are exactly the same. Our families are like fingerprints, all containing similar elements, yet completely and utterly unique. Some of us grew up in money and a bought home; others of us had welfare and rentals. Some of us had siblings; while others of us faced the world solo and found allies elsewhere. Some of us talked over the dinner table in English, while others of us spoke in Cantonese, Greek or AUSLAN, but hey: all families occasionally share a universal language, and that's one that combines hostile silence with passive aggression.

Whatever your family looks like, take pride in its difference, because our differences are what makes us diverse. Because if the family is truly a masterpiece, we also know that every masterpiece is defined by having pride in its singular vision, its courage to stand apart, and its idiosyncratic and original design.

Thank you.