



Still ‘proud to be a wharfie’

Going back 55 years Jim Beggs had many a long session with his union mates – and even some of his opponents on the Melbourne waterfront – at an unlikely address in Toorak: the IofC centre, Armagh. So it was appropriate that this one-time ‘king of the wharfies’ (as the Melbourne *Herald* once called him) launched his book there on 24 November.

Andrew Dawson was present:



Jim and Tui Beggs at the launch. Photo credit: Jonathan Lancaster

The launch of Jim Beggs’s book, *Proud to be a Wharfie*, drew a diverse crowd of around 180 people. I found myself sitting next to a man who had come to know Jim through their work in prison reform.

We were entertained by Jim’s son, Philip, and another member of his

band, playing original songs inspired by the life of his father, such as “Sunrise over Melbourne”, describing Jim coming off the midnight shift.

Long-time friend Jim Coulter introduced the Beggs family, recalling the words used by Barry Jones, former National President of the ALP, when

launching Jim’s book at an annual dinner of 550 life-members of the Maritime Union of Australia earlier this month. Jones described Jim as a modern day John Bunyan, a Mr Valiant for Truth, who had made a “substantial contribution to the labour movement” through his steadfast and courageous stand.

Jim accepted these compliments modestly and proceeded to read us a few passages from his book. He named the book *Proud to be a Wharfie* “because I am... No other union has received so much adverse publicity.” But, said Jim, the union movement is “a force for good in the world, agents of change not agents of resistance”.

His wife, Tui, prevented Jim from talking for too long and urged us all to enjoy the Windsor-style afternoon tea, served under Armagh’s chandeliers. No alcohol was served but good spirits were in plentiful supply.

‘No place for shrinking violets’

Book review by Andrew Dawson

In the 1950s and 60s Jim Beggs, a Christian activist allied to the Moral Re-Armament (MRA) movement, was engaged in a battle for control of the Melbourne branch of the Waterside Workers Federation (WWF). One of the most militant of Australia’s unions, the WWF had been dominated for decades by Communists with the fierce opposition of right-wing Catholics. It was no place for shrinking violets.

At first Beggs was mocked but he persisted, and helped build an alternative union leadership team that earned the respect and trust of

Melbourne WWF members. How he came to gain the support of such a tough group of men is a remarkable story; one that is told in Jim Beggs’ autobiography, *Proud to be a Wharfie*.

Jim tells his story with modesty and humour. Born in 1930, he grew up on the banks of the Yarra in one of Melbourne’s working class suburbs. His book provides a glimpse of another era; of a Huck Finn life by the river, prior to TV and computers, when kids made their own fun. He describes the family trauma caused by his staunchly Protestant father’s slide into alcoholism, recalls his love-at-first-sight encounter with Tui, the

girl who would later become his wife. He also tells of the fateful encounter with his neighbour, Tom Uren, who inspired him with the philosophy of MRA (now called ‘Initiatives of Change’).

MRA plays a key role in Jim’s story. Like his fellow Labour Party stalwart, Kim Beazley Snr., Jim Beggs tried to introduce the MRA philosophy into the labour movement, not by winning arguments, but by living a quality of life. Beggs lived his message with the team of men that he worked with on the docks, lumping cargo from ship to shore. Jim’s message eventually got across; in the end it’s not what you

say but what you do that speaks the loudest. His fellow wharfies might not have backed the MRA philosophy but they did back Jim, because he walked the walk and became a friend they could trust.

Jim's book provides an intimate insight into the realities of a key Australian trade union. Through the 70s and 80s Jim's devotion to his growing family of three children was matched by his devotion to his union. In 1971 he was elected full-time President of the Melbourne branch of the WWF, hanging up his wharfie's hook. His new career took him into the heart of the labour movement. He went on to become the National President of the WWF and in the 1990s played a key role in implementing the Hawke-Keating industrial reform policy on the waterfront.

Beyond the myths that abounded about the wharfies, Jim takes the reader on a fascinating journey across a rapidly changing landscape. From the beginnings of the Cold-War, when horse drawn wagons still greeted the occasional tall ship and human muscle shifted most cargo, to a new era of mechanization and automation that has transformed both the Melbourne wharfie's work and their world, Jim describes the changing situation and the parade of larger-than-life characters that enriched his

42 years in the Union.

The end of this era came for Jim in 1992 when he retired as the last National President of the WWF.

Today the old wharfies are a dying breed, and the WWF, having been swallowed up in a union amalgamation, is a page of union history. However, reading Jim's story it is impossible not to think of the corruption and scandal that has blighted the fortunes of the present day union movement and Labour Party. Most Australians are suspicious of attempts to introduce religion into the political arena. But Jim's story raises the question as to whether, in neglecting faith, we have left something essential out of our public life?

When, in the closing pages of his book, Jim gives thanks for God's inspiration and direction in his life, I am reminded of a story in the *Glasgow Herald* in 1890: "Drowning seaman saved by God". The *Herald* report related that a seaman had fallen overboard into the river Clyde; sobering up rapidly he heard the voice of God, saying "swim for the shore". He obeyed the voice and was saved. A sceptical reader might ask why credit God with what was simple common sense?

A sceptic might likewise say to Jim, "Were not your Union policies simple common sense?"

Jim provides his own answer. Like the Scottish sailor he gives credit to God, and to Tui, his wife. Jim never believed that he had a mortgage on common sense; it was a golden thread visible to the humble – those willing to take the time to listen for God's direction.

"This belief," Jim writes, "has shaped who we are and the journey we have taken together." Jim admits that without this belief he would not have made the distance.

If you enjoy an amusing yarn you will find plenty in Jim's book; but more than that you will find inspiration and much to reflect upon. A great Christmas present!

Book talk

Proud to be a Wharfie by Jim Beggs

260 pages with 50 pages of photos.
Published by Arcadia, 2013
ISBN 978-1-925003-27-7

Available from Jim Beggs at 226 Kooyong Rd, Toorak, VIC 3142.

\$29.95 incl pp, or request it from your nearest bookshop.

'For years I thought otherwise...'

One of the eight Australians who went to Vietnam for a Life Matters course in July (see *Newsbriefs August*) was David Kim Bao Nguyen from Melbourne. He describes it as "life-changing". But the real change started when he came home:

During the first week home, I was told that I had been missed by my family. "The house was very quiet without you", mum said, "too quiet".

But what shocked me was when other family members told me, "Your father missed you." Throughout the course, I had kept thinking of ways to improve my life with my dad. We needed to bond. But it had been years since we had actually had a talk. So the first commitment I gave to myself was to make my dad proud that he

had me as a son.

Mum said that he had been missing me so much that, during a lunch break at work, he had written a quatrain, a four-line poem.

Surprised I asked him, "Is the poem for me?" My dad replied, "No, it's not for you; it's for my son." My brother overheard his answer and added, "You're joking, right, dad? You yell at him and get angry, but you cried (when he was away)." When I heard this, for some reason a tear trickled down my cheek. It was so warming to know that he loved me because for many years I had thought otherwise.

My family has become closer to one another. Everyone is talking to each other more and I have especially been able to connect with my siblings and

mum more than I used to. My dad has begun to have casual conversations and even offer to take me places.

The Life Matters course opened my eyes to reality. I have tried my best to be closer to my siblings. I go to the gym with my brother, even though I am not particularly fond of working out. My relationship with him has strengthened ten-fold. With my sister, I have stopped yelling and telling her off. Now I hardly raise my voice. It is all thanks to the workshop we did about managing anger.

I cannot express how grateful I am for such a magnificent course. It offered new knowledge and skills which I had never been told about; but for me, change within my family was the first step.

From Sydney to Syria by Skype,
Creators of Peace women send
a 'wave of love and support'.
Photo credit: Alan Bassal



Lao Buddhist community hosts Annual Creators of Peace event

Tanya Fox, an International Coordinator for Creators of Peace, reports from Sydney:

An air of gentle intrigue greeted each guest entering the Lao Temple in Edensor Park, Sydney – a mix of the camaraderie among the Sydney Creators of Peace (CoP) organising team and the welcoming spirit of our hosts, the Lao Buddhist community.

“You managed to create a truly engaging atmosphere of peace, connection and inspiration,” commented one of the 80 attending the Annual CoP Celebration event on 3 November, 2013.

Luncheon was an abundance of shared foods of many nations brought by guests and embellished by Lao dishes made by members of the temple community. As guests were seated they were warmly welcomed by the President of the Temple community and his wife, and by founding members Ramphay and Nith Chittasy, followed by a performance of Lao dancing. Very quickly new friendships started forming and a buzz filled the air in anticipation of the rest of the program.

The two competent MCs, Kim Honor and Zohra Aly, spoke about the many peace-building initiatives of Sydney CoP women over the past 12 months, both locally and globally. Three women shared personal experiences of joining a Creators of Peace Circle, working through the ten ‘gathering points’. Then several spoke who have gone on to become Peace Circle facilitators. A highlight was

connecting online to Iman, a Creator of Peace Coordinator in Syria. As we listened to her tell of Peace Circles she is running in Damascus, our hearts and minds were opened to what it means to be a peace-maker in such a conflict. Overwhelmed by a sudden urge, we sent a “wave” of love and support to her.

Jean Brown, another international coordinator of Creators of Peace, took us on a journey from its launch in 1991 through to 2001, when she drafted the first Creators of Peace Circle for a conference in India. Since then Creators of Peace Circles have been conducted in over 40 countries, the key message being that all real social transformation starts in the hearts and lives of individuals – “and that individual could be me” (you)! She quoted Franciscan monk Richard Rohr: “We cannot think ourselves into a new way of living; we have to live ourselves into a new way of thinking.” And paraphrased Gandhi: “Let us therefore live the peace we want to see in the world.”

A short clip of an award-winning documentary from South Africa, *Beyond Forgiving*, depicted the courage, power and value of forgiveness. Everyone was moved as we engaged in small group discussions on “What more could ‘I’ do -- be it in family, a relationship, or community -- that would be about me being a peacemaker.” Heads nodded as one woman shared her “ah-ha” message gleaned from the video: “We need to drop our (so called) right to revenge.”

Invited to take multi-coloured

pieces of ribbon, we walked in silence to the sacred Bodhi Tree at the back of the Temple and tied on our ribbons, signifying all nations of the world coming together. Forming a circle, holding hands and silently saying personal prayers for peace, we acknowledged the connectedness of all beings and the bridge that was formed that day between Creators of Peace and the Lao community.

A warm breeze gently blew around us, giving us a sense that our prayers were being delivered across the world. Ramphay thanked us and said that hosting this event was like a “gift” to the Lao community. As most of them don’t speak English, this was an opportunity to build trust with people from other walks of life and be of service, in keeping with the Buddhist tradition. Watching her community unite and open their hearts in this way, seeing the glow on their faces as women prepared gifts of food, and a man dusted down the chairs and handed out bottles of water, gave her such joy. “It was like a miracle, the whole day’s experience offered us a multi-dimensional experience for our community,” she said.

As the day drew to an end with an afternoon tea served by the Lao community, a sense of reflective gratitude and connection radiated throughout the hall. One guest voiced her tribute for this truly memorable day: “I didn’t want the day to end.”

Getting comfortable with uncertainty

YOLD – A Year of Living Differently – is a new IofC program currently being piloted. And Athalia Zwartz from Melbourne is its first participant. She writes from India:

Spending time in Switzerland, Serbia, Greece and India creates a year of living differently. Combined with my intention to explore more deeply how to care, share and serve, how to let go and be fully myself in different environments, it all makes for living *very* differently.



Athalia (centre) with the current Panchgani interns. Photo credit: Jayang Dorjee

The program is for individuals aiming to deepen their understanding of how IofC works in different places by working alongside different teams. Equally, it aims to enable the YOLDer to act on the changes they want to make in their lives. It starts with writing a commitment to oneself about what a year of living differently looks like. This can be while living at home, continuing with work or study; or, as in my case, can involve travel overseas and working alongside other teams.

The YOLDer has two mentors to hold one to account, to ask the right questions, to push and support; and a coordinator, responsible for logistics and helping to organise roles and responsibilities in different places.

I'll share a few learnings thus far:

You can take the girl out of Aussie, but you can't take the Aussie out of the girl – even though I am in a totally different world, the same personal issues, thoughts and struggles are

there. But I am starting to sense that compassion and unselfishness are very closely related; that unselfishness is a consequence of compassion, and it is possible to deepen compassion by practising unselfishness in practical ways.

One little story about learning to listen and trust:

In Caux, Switzerland, I loved the Taize quiet reflections and prayers in the little church at the end of each day. Sitting there one evening, I felt strongly that I needed to pray and to pray out loud. That's not me. I didn't feel comfortable with this idea at all. Who am I praying to? I'm there for the songs in Latin and for the quiet. But I had "that" feeling, and I knew I had to. So I did. Listening to my own voice in the church like that, it was hard to feel it was authentically me. I went to bed and forgot all about it.

Next day, at 9:50 pm, ten minutes before the Taize was due to begin, I was asked if I could lead it as David and Rob, the two who take responsibility for Taize each evening, had another commitment. "No," was my reaction, "I don't know what to do, ahhhhh... oh, alright." So I did. It was no big deal really, but for me it was. And there is no way I could have done it if I hadn't prayed out loud in the church for the first time ever, the night before. For me it was another little experience of knowing when it is "that feeling" urging you to say or do something, for reasons not yet clear.

When things don't go according to plan.

After my time in Caux, where I was a trainer with the Interns program, I did a three week yoga and meditation workshop in Greece: a time of much reflection, quiet and learning. There I started to get a little more comfortable with uncertainty. We know, intellectually, nothing

is ever certain – that life can turn upside down and inside out in a heartbeat. But I am often surprised and affronted when things don't go according to plan. This year nothing is certain – where I'll go next or what I'll be doing – and I'm learning, in real terms, to get comfortable with uncertainty.

Action-packed India

Now I'm in Asia Plateau (the IofC centre in India), helping with training and coordinating the interns. It is action-packed here, but with three months of committed time for me (five for the interns) we find space for the learning, doing and being. I'm really enjoying meeting a whole new chapter of IofC and all the inspiring folks here.

Things I love here: the trees and flowers, the gum trees, monkeys and squirrels, the tableland and its majestic beauty, eating papaya, guava, banana, coconut and chikoos, not being a solo vegetarian. I've been learning all the IofC songs, performing them with the interns pretty much daily.

I marvel at the volume of the automobile horns, the size of peoples' smiles, the horses and donkeys that roam the streets aimlessly, the quantity of sugar that gets put into tea, and the openness of people to the spiritual.

Asia Plateau has just said goodbye to a number of international delegates who came for an excellent Caux Initiatives of Business Conference (exploring whether one can remain ethical in business and still succeed); and the first international Heart of Effective Leadership with 10 from Uganda joining the Indian participants.

If you would like to ask any questions about YOLD, email me: athaliacz@gmail.com

Newsbriefs is published by *Initiatives of Change* (Moral Re-Armament ABN 22 004 350 789) www.au.iofc.org

Newsbriefs can also be read online at: www.au.iofc.org/newsbriefs

This issue edited by Mike Brown. Contributions, news and comments welcome.

Next deadline Monday 27 January 2014. To The Editor, NEWSBRIEFS, 58 Broadsmith Street, Scullin, ACT 2614 E-mail: prthwaites@gmail.com

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