

## Capturing an Australian Voice

Madam Chair and fellow pilgrims on our shared journey towards a more just and loving world.

I am delighted to add a few words to the celebration this evening as the co-author of the memoir *Bonded through Tragedy: United in Hope*. The other co-author is my husband, Dr Jim D’Orsa. We two have worked with Bishop Hilton to make available an Australian witness to important events in this country’s history and in the history of Timor L’Este. I have entitled my thoughts “Capturing an Australian Voice”.

Tonight is a celebration firstly of the East Timorese, both the living and those who gave their lives, and for all who have supported them through the long and bitter struggle they have endured since the Indonesian military invaded their country in 1975. The memoir is dedicated to them. This occasion is also a celebration of a person whose voice was raised very significantly within Church and society in support of them. It reminds us that there are spiritually gifted and talented people in our midst. They play a role in our human and spiritual lives which can prove to be more significant than anyone, and certainly they themselves, could ever have imagined as they put their foot in the water, and took those vital first steps in a long and demanding journey.

Where do Jim and I come in? I like to think of our role as that of, metaphorically speaking, capturing Hilton’s voice, and ensuring it can speak to people not only in the present, but long into the future.

Hilton has a very special gift of being able to communicate with a range of people – in Australian society, internationally, in the Church and in the academy. He has done so, with positive effect, in the past and continues to do so. The issue for us came to be: what can we do to ensure that the justice story his life has told, and continues to tell, remains part of Australia’s story and of the Catholic story now and into the future? How well this particular story and others are told determines the quality of the identity we create for ourselves as Australians, and Australian Christians.

When Fr Bruce Duncan, the Director of the Yarra Institute for Religion and Social Policy, asked would we take on the project of producing an account of Hilton’s involvement in the East Timorese struggle for self-determination, we listened to his reasons. He said that Hilton’s involvement had been significant, and that Hilton had many documents which should be accessed and utilized in weaving the threads of a story which Bruce believed to be of importance to the wider Australian society and to members of the Christian churches, many of whom have played a role in supporting the East Timorese struggle for self-determination. Having known Bruce for many decades and admired his own persistent work for justice, we trusted his judgment and took the plunge, not realizing what an

extraordinary journey we ourselves had embarked on as we began mixing with the heroes and heroines of East Timor.

Because of his special personal gifts and commitment, Hilton became an effective participant-observer in many aspects of the East Timorese struggle, as it interfaced with Government, Church and society in Australia, Indonesia and across the world. His voice was to be raised strongly in cathedrals, churches, off the back of trucks at rallies, and in the lecture halls of academia. It was to be used softly as Hilton became a confidante of guerilla fighters and their champions, in the mountains and in private places as people sought his counsel. He became a friend to the clergy and the people of the East Timorese Church – people joining the Church in great numbers during their time of terrible trial. He was supported by many at home and abroad including the Salesians and other generous allies.

As we engaged with the potential of what was before us, Hilton's voice could, we became convinced, continue to speak to people now and into the future, if someone could capture authentically both the "voice", and the fearless commitment that drove him on. Time and again since we finished the task of research and writing – and it was a long one – I have asked myself: what if no one had taken up the challenge of committing this legacy to writing? We could only imagine that, not only would we two be so very much the poorer, but the Australian society and Church would be as well.

As we moved more deeply into the work, we realized that we would need to scaffold this story with a depth of research so that it could be meaningful in a variety of forums. It needed to speak not only to those who trusted that the account was authentic because they were already well attuned to the song which was being sung and trusted both the singer and his offsidiers. Others, whether in government, academia, or the educated public, also needed to see that it was a reliable and challenging piece of work.

Hilton did not ask us to try to capture his voice – he was simply pleased that a particular aspect of the East Timor story not told before was being picked up. He was clear, however, that he wanted us to bring forward the angle of a churchman who is also a cultural anthropologist, the latter being a special gift his post-graduate education has given him. Unusually for a diocesan priest at the time, and thanks to Cardinal Knox who wanted him and the Melbourne Church to be involved with Aboriginal Australians in an intelligent, respectful and meaningful way, Hilton was given the opportunity for advanced studies in cultural anthropology, and was very aware that his gifts and his education were given for particular service.

We made the choice early on to record and re-record Hilton speaking about issues, so that we had the best chance possible of capturing his feeling, his thinking, his "voice". We returned draft material to him many times and as a result of the ensuing discussions uncovered more and more layers of his own

understanding and feeling each time we did so. We created a shape to the story and he gave it his approval.

Chapter 3 of the memoir begins with a passage of Chaim Potok's book entitled *In the Beginning*, when the main character, speaking about a new way of studying the Torah says to his students: "All beginnings are hard...Especially a beginning you make by yourself. That's the hardest beginning of all". Actually, for us the beginning was not too hard, but things got considerably more difficult as we advanced and realized the complexity of our task in dealing with a life which was touched by and touched so many others over a long period of time. We had to try to identify the events which provided the main contours of what needed to be told, realizing that a person's journey into justice does not come from nowhere.

The first chapters of the memoir are important because they help the reader to see the origins of a generous self-giving life. From his early days Hilton responded to life in such a way that when God visited him in the guise of a group of East Timorese in 1991, he was attuned like Abraham of old who welcomed the three travellers to his tent, to see little by little, who it really was who visited him that day.

One publisher to whom our manuscript was taken was happy to have a book which dealt with the politics of the East Timorese struggle, the intrigues of governments, the Vatican etc, - all the controversies, conflicts and dramas which are not unimportant, but which can overpower the deeper significance of things. The same publisher was not so interested in the life events which shaped the character of the person who responded to the horrors and trauma which unfolded to our north in recent decades. However, we stood firm in the matter of what we deemed to be foundational. We were dealing with a faith journey and its first chapter occurred in a small country town, Finley, during the Great Depression.

So we have a young child born during the Depression, growing up and meeting men with little hope in their hearts, humping their swags from town to town, a child who makes friends with Aboriginal people living in a state of great poverty in a nearby cowshed, a child privileged to be brought up in a loving family who, while they had little, in truth possessed all that is important – this childhood was of crucial importance to what transpired later in Hilton's life. In terms of faith, Hilton was heir to strong Catholicism from his father's side and Methodism and Judaism from his mother's – a privileged heritage indeed!

Having left Finley for Melbourne it was not surprising to see the trajectory set in early years already coming to fruition, with the youthful Hilton joining the St. Vincent de Paul group at Parade College, helping Fr O'Rourke distribute food on Saturday afternoons, bringing delight to the kids at the Eye and Ear Hospital by playing Santa, and coming into contact with the *Catholic Worker* people and being challenged by them. When Hilton became a priest, the service dimension of

priesthood and the cultic dimension were a naturally integrated whole for him, supporting and giving meaning to each other.

God speaks to us in the circumstances of our lives, and as new opportunities presented themselves, Hilton was well positioned to respond because he had been responding all his life. When you read the book you will trace key “moments of destiny” as they unfolded. At one stage, Hilton suffered a life-threatening illness and his vocal chords were seriously injured as doctors thrust a breathing tube down his throat in order to keep him alive. The voice faltered, it seemed likely he would lose it, but eventually, through excellent treatment, it returned and strengthened. From then on, Hilton made even better use of his voice on behalf of others.

Often we hear people speak gratefully and proudly of Catholic social teaching. It is indeed a wonderful and living tradition, continually being brought to life in concrete circumstances by faith-filled people. In truth, however, Catholic social teaching provides inspiration and direction; it does not give ready answers. Justice is a messy virtue, and a long, hard slog. It requires that people try to make sense of murky situations in the light of the inspiration and guidance it provides, and do what they can to act for justice, oftentimes in the public square – public forums, the press, advocacy etc. are all part of the work. Hilton learned much about all of these through his commitment to the East Timorese. Being intelligent and very well educated, generous and well disposed, he was able to meet some of the demands of justice and keep going hoping against hope, like the Timorese themselves, even during the years when it seemed nothing was happening and the situation appeared hopeless.

We were very pleased that, as it progressed, the work allowed small segments of some other important overlapping stories to be told. I am thinking particularly of the Caritas story. Caritas Australia was the lead agency of Caritas Internationalis in responding to the terrible crisis which unfolded in East Timor in 1999. Hilton was the Chair of CA at that time. The work which Caritas did then, and has done since, is something we Catholics can be very proud of. During our work we also gained a glimpse into the horror of genocide in Rwanda and the magnificent response of Australians through Caritas and other agencies.

Our special thanks go to David Hughan CEO of Garratt Publishing and to Charmaine Peach who were a delight to work with. If researching and writing the book was a demanding experience, the publication process proved to be much easier than I anticipated, thanks particularly to Charmaine’s competence.

Our thanks also to Bruce Duncan for encouraging us along the way. Bruce’s support for us and others working with the Yarra Institute for Religion and Social Policy has been absolutely exceptional. Special thanks too to Br Ben Boonen for working skilfully and generously to bring so many photos to the best possible version of the original for reproduction in the book.

Finally, congratulations Hilton for your wholehearted witness and for your trust in us as your fellow workers. To be instrumental in bringing forward such a significant story as yours has been a privilege beyond anything we ever expected, and I feel sure will prove a great blessing for many as the history of Australian Christianity unfolds.

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1 June 2017.