



# Dr Kevin Fagan Lecture, Tuesday 12 March 2024

**The Honorable Dr Brendan Nelson AO:** Thank you very much Gerrard, for your generous introduction. I appreciate it very much. Thank you. John Coorey, Chairman of the Council of St. John's College. To you, Mark Schembri, the Rector. I won't recognise all of the official guests VIPs that are here other than my friend and former ministerial colleague, Peter, McGuaran. Wonderful to see you again Peter and April Palmerlee, who is the Chief Executive Officer of the American Chamber of Commerce in Australia. And April was the CEO suffered for three years me as Chairman of M chairman, Australia, to all of you that are here, members and leaders and medical profession Professor Christine Bennet with whom I work to during my service to the Australian Medical Association.

But most importantly, any members of the Fagan family that are here, and my remarks, in particular, I intend to address to the young people that are here.

At my age, everybody's young. So that's, that includes all of you. It was in June 1992. On his deathbed, that the Australian Medical Association bestowed on Kevin Fagan, its highest honor, the Gold Medal of the AMA, for services to medicine, and to humanity. And it is for those two towering contributions of this extraordinary man, Kevin Fagan, we come here in humility. And it means admiration deceiving, to pay tribute not only to him, but to everything that we should hold dear. I have learned many things throughout my life. And one of them is that the most important things that you learn, you learn when you least expect often in random moments of quiet revelation. When you don't really think you're going to learn anything at all. And often from the most surprising sources.

It may seem a paradox to you, given there's an entire industry that's dedicated to it. But leadership, in my experience, is not something that can be taught, but it can be learned and the qualities that inform leadership can be discovered. They can be revealed, through observation of reflection upon and absorption of the leadership qualities and experiences that we see in others. And the power is in the story. Australians all let us rejoice, for we are one and free. The first line of our national anthem. We sing it often. We hear it sung often. But far less often do we pause to reflect on what that really means? And therein lies one of life's great paradox. It is often those things that are most important to us in our lives.

Human beings that we are, we have a tendency to take for granted. The magic and vitality of your youth. You won't fully appreciate until it's gone forever. Physical good health, emotional resilience. Families who love us give meaning and context and architecture to our lives. Australian citizenship whether conferred by birth or by choice of 40 affording us as it does

political, economic and religious freedoms to live in this country, where faith coexist with reason. Free academic inquiry, an independent judiciary and a free press. We seldom ask ourselves the question, the answer to which you would think would be self-evident.

What is it that makes us Australians It is not our flag, nor our Constitution, or the machinery of democracy given us by the British, as critically important as they are for the foundation of our nationhood. What makes us Australian instead, are our values, our beliefs, the way we relate to one another and say our place in the world. We are defined as a people by our triumphs and our failures. Those who choose to lead and those, like Kevin Fagan, whom we choose to honor. Our heroes are villains, the ways of people we've been shaped by adversity, how we will respond to the adversities that are upon us. And those that are coming in our response to emerging, unseen and increasingly threatening harasses. It's tempting human beings that we are to allow the past to become a distant stranger, to settle for the broad brushstrokes, the popular imagery in history of our history, and the mythology that goes with it. Our comfortable lives Breathe Easy indifference to individual sacrifices made in our name, devotion to duty into our country. Get a sense of history of never forgetting those who gave us what we have, and made us who we are, is critical to any understanding of the future. When little else in the world makes sense, history is the guiding discipline. It demolishes prejudice. It reminds us that hard decisions have to be made. And the consequences of making. It reminds us of those people, as I said, who made us who we are. And it also has the capacity to inspire particularly to a new generation of leaders that are looking to take us to where in our best selves we know. We need to go.

Kevin Fagan was born on the fifth of February 1909, one of five children to Kevin Fagan, and then Brainy in Launceston in northern Tasmania. He was awarded a scholarship to Riverview and under the tutelage of the Jesuits, he excelled in drama, and academia. And as many of you will know, he was dux of the school in 1925 and also in 1926. In the latter year, also being the Captain of the school. He came on to Sydney University to study medicine. He was a member of this university rowing team, and captain of the football team. He graduated in 1933 with first class honors. He was the Deputy Superintendent of the Royal Hobart hospital, and then he came back to Sydney as a surgical Fellow at Prince Henry hospital. The war, of course, was declared in September 1939. And early the following year, Kevin Fagan enlisted into the Australian Army. He was posted into the second 10th Australian General Hospital, a part of the eighth division posted in Malaya on the Day of Infamy the seventh of December 1941.

When imperialist, nationalist expansionist Japan attacked and bombed the Americans of Pearl Harbor. On the same day they landed on the Malay Peninsula. And then in a sweeping series of stunning and crushing victories, took fortress Singapore on the 15th of February 1942. Over a five-week period 22,000 Australians, including Kevin Fagan went into captivity 15,000 of them in the Cheney prison in Singapore 8000 Australians would not survive their incarceration at the hands of the Japanese.

In May 1943, Kevin Fagan was drafted into what was called H force. He was drafted as a surgical specialist along with 10 other Australian doctors. He was one of 800 Australians in a force of three and a half 1000 British and Commonwealth soldiers who were then taken by train in June 1943 to ban Pong in Thailand. And then They undertook a 240km march through the jungle and

many men died on the march. And when they arrived at the Hellfire pass cutting. Fagan was then drafted into defaults. And the first thing he faced was a severe outbreak of cholera, dysentery. In severely emaciated, frail, malnourished men, and of course, many of whom were beset with tropical disease. The average Australian spent 15 hours a day, toiling on the Burma Thai railway. Kevin Fagan spent 18 hours a day providing his medical and surgical care. I have extracts from his own words, when he wrote of this the Medical Journal of Australia in June 1946 are worth remembering. He said "the returned prisoner of war knows man for what he is his courage, his cowardice, his limitless generosity, his gross selfishness, his nobility and his other meanness. He is robbed of all business by the memory of the heights to which he has seen some men rise in spite of starvation, of illness, and of every degradation". He wrote that another epidemic of acute Phaedra Denic ulcer emerged. Conservative treatment was slow and troublesome. The best treatment he wrote was early excision of the necrotic tissue. Operation in these cases was followed, he said by immediate cessation of pain. In advanced cases, amputation was the only possible treatment. But the mortality rate was very high. The Association of Chronic diarrhea was a particularly lethal factor. However, he said amputation enabled many of these unfortunate men to die and greater comfort and dignity.

In year 2000, I was the Federal member for the seat of Bradfield on the upper north shore of Sydney and it was Anzac Day. And I had one of those experiences where I learned something I didn't think I was going to learn. I attended the Roseville RSL Memorial club for the afternoon Anzac service. And the guest speaker was a man called Gordon Nelson, a man by definition of advancing years of slender build. And he described how he had joined the Australian Army, how he had served in Malaya. How he had ended up at the Hellfire pass cutting as a member of D-

force, and how he volunteered to work in the medical team. He described restraining a severely malnourished and emaciated fellow Australian, his job being to hold his leg for the amputation. And he said, as I held the leg, I noticed drops of water falling onto the man in front of me. And I looked up and it was the tears of the doctor given for me. Stan O'Neal, in his book *One Man's War*, wrote, he said "I'm not sure how many operations would be considered to be normal in one day in Australia, but we believe that Kevin Fagan and his little team performed 40 to 50 ulcer operations every day. Many of them amputations", Lieutenant Don Lee in his book, a yarn or two he said "Major Kevin Fagan was ordered by the Japs to detail 100 men to remain and continue working on the railway while the remainder were to go south, presumably back to Singapore. That cohort number two, we had had awful casualties. In 1987, he wrote, "Major Fagin appeared on a TV documentary relating to the Thai Burma railway. You he said that the worst thing he ever had to do was to detail those 100 men that those men chosen must have hated him. And he'd never heard of the fate of a single one" Lee wrote. I was one of them. Following the documentary, I wrote to Major Fagan, assuring him that I held nothing against and doubted that any of us did. He was after all, like the rest of his obliged to carry out a very distasteful job. He was a wonderful doctor and surgeon at Changi, and all the other camps, he did a fabulous job. I cannot understand he wrote, In view of the wide publicity given to other doctors, why greater recognition was not accorded to this wonderful and dedicated surgeon. Later on, Major Fagan took seriously ill with cerebral malaria. He was held in such high esteem that half hourly bulletins were issued on his condition. In his book *The Naked Island*, Russell Brandon, reflecting on these experiences, the railway and the camps, he wrote, "above all, there was the extraordinary courage and gentleness and the incredible endurance of the medical officer Major Kevin Fagan. Not only did he treat any man needing treatment to the best of his ability, he also

carried those who felt he carried the load of men in danger of falling, and he marched up and down the whole length of the column throughout its entire progress. If we marched 100 miles through the jungle, Kevin Fagan, marched 200. And when at the end of our nights trip, we collapsed and slipped. He was there to clean blisters, set broken bones, render first aid, and bury the dead. And all this, he did with a courtesy of a society specialist who's being richly paid for his attention, and the ready humor of a man who is not tired at all. He's the most inspiring man I have ever met. Some 20,000 British and Australian troops share my view."

Fagan had said that the hardest thing he ever did was detail the 100 men who were to stay working on the Burma Thai railway, whilst the others would go back to Singapore. Stan O'Neal wrote about those returning to Singapore to Changi. When the second 30th battalion, along with the other, almost 15,000 Australians were incarcerated at Changi after the fall of Singapore. Their commanding officer was a man called Lieutenant, Colonel Blackjack Kelly, and Kelly get assembled all of his men under his command. And he said to them, not whatever lay ahead in their imprisonment, whatever they would face, they should always remember that they were soldiers that they were Australian soldiers, and they should conduct themselves as such.

So, for those who returned to Changi, having obviously not died on the march or on the railway Stan Oneill described them returning to the to the camp in Changi. He said this, it was a moonlit night, in Changi with the tropical waters around the island was so beautiful. I can still hear the squeal of the brakes as the trucks lined up. Our fellow prisoners from Changi knew we were coming. And they came over to see us to look for old friends and see how we were. We got out of the trucks. A couple were dead. We laid them on the ground, and we lined up on the road.

We were not ashamed, because we were soldiers. And we wanted to look like soldiers. The people from Changi stood back and added another word. It was really quite strange. We learned up on the road as best we could and stood up as straight as we could. Those who couldn't stand up straight were on steep and those who couldn't stop shaking with malaria were held by their friends. We thought this is what we should do as soldiers to say that we will not be the sergeant major drill.

We stood in a straight line as he went over and reported to major Johnston. Johnson went over to blackjack, and he said, You're a second 30th or present and correct, sir. And Galligan said "where are the rest? The major said they're all here, sir. And we were Blackjack, elegant. The odd man broke down and cried. It was an incredible scene. We wanted to show that we were soldiers. The atrocities endured. And the suffering system became an affirmation of Australian courage and injuries.

In terms of all of this, and why it's important. On the third of June 2017, three terrorists weaponized a van on the London Bridge. Their intention was to kill and maim as many people as they possibly could. A panicked Melee of humanity ran from the scene of the carnage, desperately fleeing. But one young woman, one young Australian, a 28-year-old nurse from Adelaide, Kirsty, she ran in the opposite direction. Her concern that day was not her own safety or her own welfare. It was the safety and welfare of others. Her last words, I'm a nurse, I have to go. She was one of eight killed that day, fatally stabbed through the chest. A year later, she received the Queen's commendation for bravery, in 2019, the Florence Nightingale medal. But



what really got my attention was the two days after her death, her family and Adelaide went into the Australian media. And they said of their daughter, that she was selfless, caring, and brave.

And I asked myself when I read that, what is it? What is it that makes people amongst us, seemingly every day, Australians, selfless, caring, and brave. Genes, family upbringing, a values-based framework for education, which in her case I discovered was Emmanuel College in Adelaide. But there's something else. It is a societal milieu, that it places a premium, a value on those amongst us who manifest these qualities to be selfless, caring, and brave. And that is why the honoring of Kevin and fake and Australian men and women, like him, is so important to us and to our future.

When I was the President of the Australian Medical Association, the young doctors asked me to their annual conference. They asked me if I would speak to them about the topic of success. And I remember standing before them, barely a decade younger than me. And I said to them, when you work it out, can you let me know. But now at the age of 65, screaming to 70 Even though I still feel as if I'm 25 internally, I've got a better idea.

There are five things that I have concluded are essential to success. The first is to have an open mind. You have to have a mind that is open to new ideas, to the unfamiliar, to people that are different, to be willing to have your inherent biases and prejudices test people who close their mind do so to set themselves up for failure. Whatever field of endeavor, or walk of life you may be in. The second is to nurture and protect the inner integrity of your own intellect, your ability to think, to formulate ideas, and express them in ways that will challenge and change the attitudes

of a society that wields so slowly and painfully, too. It's critically important to not fall into the trap of seeing the world through a straw to focus only on your own field of endeavor, whether it's in the law, in medicine, in engineering, in trades, or whatever walk of life you are, it's essential to be interested in and interesting to the rest of the world. To understand the context of the world in which you live, and you work. The broad geopolitical realignment that is occurring throughout our lifetime, the most consequential that we have seen the major shifts in business in culture, and society.

The third key to success is character. It transcends everything in life, rank, power, money, influence, looks, intellect, it's far more important. You will see people that have immense abilities, intellectual, physical, and other attributes, who never achieve their full potential. By virtue of failures of character. Character derives from the Greek word it means the impression left in wax by stone seal ring. The Greeks called it the stamp of personality. And it's informed by worthwhile intrinsic virtues, that the Jesuits who educated me in Adelaide, South Australia, in the final two years of mine, secondary education, set me up for my life.

They said to me that four values would be essential for success in building character. The first thing I said is commitment. You have to consistently apply yourself to whatever it is in which you believe in the people and the cause to which you have committed that you do not ever give up. The Endurance if you like, personified by Kevin Fagan, and others whom I've described. The second race it is conscious. Every single decision, I was told, has a question immediately beneath what the right thing is to do. And I remember father, David strong, saying no such thing as big or small decisions. Every decision he said, has consequences for you and for others. And

in leadership throughout my life, I have seen it repeatedly, people who are obsessing over a particular decision, I've got a really important decision to make spending copious amounts of effort and time on that decision and then trivializing and dismissing a whole number of other decisions which they regard as less important. Invariably, they get into trouble.

The third that usually would sit is compassion, which as you would know means literally to share another person's pain. One of the mistakes people make in life is believing that if they know what a person thinks, then that's the most important and it's not unimportant. But what's far more important is understanding how people think. Once you have worked out who and what is shaping a person's worldview, that is when you are more than halfway there to challenging and changing their outlook.

The fourth, the Jesuit said is courage. Nothing. Not a single thing in life of value is achieved without taking a risk. Courage is hard to define. You know, when you see it, when you feel it. It's a spirit that challenges depth. imposes will protect your integrity, advances values, then ultimately, allows you to break through fear, moral courage, physical courage. The fourth key to success is what Graham Deveson describing the abuses and uses of Australian history as being imbued with the imaginative capacity to see the world through the eyes of others.

Almost all of life suffering, misery and pain emerges from people who are unwilling or unable to see the world through the eyes of another human being. And so too the same can be said of nation states.

It's interesting that in 1999, when I was laboring away in Bradfield extending my backbench career upsetting John Howard, I had a small delegation of three men of advancing years come to see me in my electorate office, and they said they were members of the second 30th battalion Association. The men about whom I spoke of which Stan or Neil had been one, I'm ashamed now to say I had no idea what that meant, other than they were second world war veterans. Anyway, they said to me, we're worried about young people. And we've been through a lot in our lives. And we'd like to pass on to young people, some of the things we've learned. They asked me if I could help them get an \$8,000 grant from the Department of Veterans Affairs, said, Hey, guys, it'd be a lot easier to fight the war and get money from the DVA. But I'll have a go.

So about six months later, a book arrived in my electorate office entitled, getting on with it, reflections of the second 30th battalion Association. It's sat in my briefcase for about five weeks before I read it on a plane from Perth to Sydney. And there were two things that stood out. One of the reflections was this, you might want to hate the Japanese to what they did. You might never to be able to forget. But I can't hate another human being. I can't, I need to forgive. And it's the hardest test of all. But it's worth it because I believe in myself. And I value others. Another said, I suppose compassion means being prepared to listen to other people's point of view. And respecting those.

The fifth thing that I have concluded, is essential to success in life is the humanity that you show toward others. As you go through your life 18th birthdays 21st Birthdays, hens' nights, bucks' nights, weddings, baby showers, divorce parties, and 60s birthdays. And but as you get older, you find yourself increasingly at funerals. And if you're not delivering the eulogy, you're listening

to it. And you realise that in the end, you're not going to be remembered for what you are. The position that you have all those things they list on your CV. You are remembered for who you are.

The Great 17th century Prussian philosopher Immanuel Kant wrote that every human being is an endowment to himself. And not a means to be used by others. Respect your own humanity will be found and respect for humanity of others. And morality is freedom.

And finally, Kevin Fagan in summarizing his reflections on what he endured, what he saw others endure and what he gave on the Burma Thai railway. He said this in conclusion. "The war gave me a great understanding of men and great appreciation of ordinary things in life. Bread and butter. Bit of jam on your toast in the morning, a glass of beer when you're thirsty and the value of human relations. He said you know when it comes to an end, the only thing that really matters are the people whom you love. And the people who love you".

For we are one and we are free.

Kevin Fagan.

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