2018 Human Rights Oration

The kids are alright by Benjamin Law

13 December 2018

G’day everyone and thank you so much for that introduction Catherine. I'm so pleased and honoured to be here. When the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission approached me to give this year's Human Rights Oration I took the time to revisit the prestigious list of speakers who came before me, which includes so many personal heroes of mine. Professor Megan Davis, Graeme Innes, Dr Anita Heiss, Professor Gillian Triggs, Dr Anne Summers, Lowitja O’Donohue, David Marr. Reading that list again and realising I would be about to join their ranks just made me think to myself, wow, what a monumental clerical and administrative error the Commission has made today, one that I'm fully going to take advantage of. I hope you enjoy it, after today it may be the last Oration.

I'm not a full-time activist or advocate or lawyer. I don't do the work that so many of you in this room do and put the hours in, for which I'm entirely grateful and many others are too. In a previous life I was an academic but not a very good one and not one who dedicated his time to the promotion fully of equal opportunity and human rights. What I am, however, is a storyteller and telling stories and unpacking their meaning is what I have to offer today. I'm especially grateful for this opportunity to share stories and knowledge here in the Kulin Nation. Thank you Gheran for that exceptionally resonant welcome to Country. I would also like to welcome all members of the five clan groups that make up the Kulin nation in any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people here today.

First Nations Australians were already sharing knowledge and stories here for millennia when the first corals in the Great Barrier Reef formed and they continue to tell some of our most urgent and important stories now. As a non-indigenous storyteller I'm particularly grateful to Elders past and present that we can continue sharing stories here on Aboriginal land. We must acknowledge all of our histories ­– plural – here in Australia.

My writing career has been a little bit all over the shop. Professionally promiscuous is the term I like to use sometimes but one of the constant recurring preoccupations that I have in my writing is to showcase and uncover stories that I feel I rarely encounter as a reader. And this country, in particular, Australia is a country where so many vast stories and our histories are hidden or buried or dismissed or marginalised.

This is a nation of forgetting and erasing. Powerful people in this country breezily dismissed over 65,000 years of pre-colonial First Nations’ history, as well as what happened – and what continues to happen – in the aftermath. We erase the fact that they were people of African ancestry on the First Fleet. Look it up. We erased women from the story entirely and, constantly, even now. We erase the fact that Chinese Australian history is Australian history and that Chinese trade with indigenous Australia actually predates white arrival. We often erase the rich and sometimes sombre histories of our myriad queer communities.

It's important to tell these stories and put them rightly back at the centre of our national narrative because the stories and histories are the foundational myths on which we can build understanding of each other and of ourselves.

Now stories obviously aren't just for kids, however I do want to spend today reflecting on our responsibilities as adults when it comes to telling stories and taking care of the kids and teenagers in our lives. And part of that involves the kids that we once were.

Here's the kid I used to be (referring to family photograph). This is early 1990s Queensland, which you can probably tell by the clothes. Please look closely at this photo and don't tell me that migrants don't try to assimilate in this country because those outfits are all the evidence that you'll need. This is the Sunshine Coast in Queensland, which is one of the most beautiful places in the country. It's also one of the whitest. For reasons I think are pretty obvious my family didn't quite blend in very easily and I'm not just talking about the clothes anymore. We were Asians, specifically Cantonese Chinese, in a very Anglo part of Australia and there were a lot of us. After my parents moved to Australia from Hong Kong in the 1970s they did what migrants tend to do so well when they arrive in a new country – which is breed. In their case, enthusiastically.

I grew up reading a lot of Roald Dahl and Paul Jennings. I voraciously watched television which depicted an almost uniformly white Australia and, given that this was a pre Internet era, I just kind of assumed that's how all of Australia looked because when I walked out of my door Australia was white. When I turned on the TV, Australia was white. When I opened a magazine or when I even looked at junk mail or watched a local film, Australia was white. And it wasn't until I left home and moved to a big city – in my case, Brisbane – that I properly understood I was actually living on one of the most multicultural nations on the planet. That my family were part of the one in five of all Australians who speak languages other than English at home. That my parents were part of the one in four Australians who were originally born overseas. Or that my siblings and I were part of the one in nearly two Australians who have at least one parent born overseas.

As I say those stats I know that many of you are nodding, thinking to yourself that you fall into those categories too. And for those of you that don't, don't worry, you're also very special and we love you just as much. You wouldn't have to go far back in your family history though to see the point at which you depart from this island nation. We are a nation of indigenous and immigrant stories and yet I heard so few of them growing up. And that leads to problems and misunderstandings. When my friends would ask me in the schoolyard whether I feel more Asian or Australian it would take me years to arrive at the obvious answer that I could – and obviously was – both simultaneously, and that all of us occupied multitudes everyday with ease and without a second thought.

When my friends told me that they agreed with Pauline Hanson, the Sunshine Coast still being a huge base for One Nation, and that people should have to speak perfect English before they could become citizens, I wish I had told them that my grandmother fit that description of a non-English-speaking Australian citizen perfectly and that she worked seven nights and days in this country, paid her taxes and therefore didn't really have time for English classes and, by the way, where were these easily accessible, affordable, government-subsidised, community provided English classes in our area of Australia anyway?

So, being an Asian-Australian kid in the 1990s could be confusing sometimes. However, I never really questioned whether I belonged to this country or not. As the comedian Mindy Kaling once remarked – she's Indian-American ­– she said, “My parents raised me with the entitlement of a tall, blond, white man”. I recognize myself in that. Only occasionally would I wrestle with the reality of growing up Asian in monocultural part of Australia. And, even then, I instinctively knew that it wasn't quite my problem but other people’s.

However, there was something about me that made me feel a bit different from other people and that I needed to contend with and maybe you can tell what that was from this photo. I'm not just talking about my, admittedly, very impressive flexibility, I'm talking about the fact that I was a Mariah Carey-loving, gymnastics-obsessed, flamboyant as hell, flamingly gay kid. I think every person from the queer Community probably has photographs like this that strongly suggest the evidence was there from the start and, in fact, there are entire websites dedicated to such photos and you can even add your own.

Now this was Queensland in the 1990s so I wasn't open about my sexuality. Not to my friends, not to my family. And, for most of my childhood and teen years, not even to myself. How could I have been? Back then it was a terrifying prospect to be gay. I'd argue that for a lot of people it still is. I went to a local Lutheran School and I remember several times where I prayed as a young kid, terrified, that I wouldn't turn out gay. Of course, in retrospect, the only reason I would even have been doing such a thing is because I knew deep down inside that I already was.

You also need to keep in mind the Queensland was the last mainland state in Australia to decriminalise homosexuality. That only happened in the early 90s and it was only in 2017 that the Queensland Parliament formally apologised to gay men convicted of the terrible crime of having had consensual sex. So, for a significant part of my childhood, the adult that I would grow up to be was effectively criminalised by the state. And we know that just because laws change that doesn't necessarily mean that community sentiments do too.

Growing up, all we knew about ‘gay’ was how it was used in the schoolyard: as a slur, as an insult, as a punchline to a really bad joke that I would have to laugh along without of fear and wanting so desperately not to be found out. Now I know what some of you were thinking, well that is terrible Ben but, also, Queensland. First of all how dare you, second of all, it wasn't just Queensland. The 1990s were a lethal time for gay men and queer people generally across the country. Not just because of HIV AIDS, also because of homophobia and violence. In Sydney, where I live now – this country's gay Mecca, gay men in Australia were haunted by gangs, often gangs of teenagers, at local beats, beaten with boots, hammers, and screwdrivers. Some were thrown off cliffs, some of them died and their bodies were never recovered. Some were significantly disabled, many were traumatised. This was an era where ‘poofter bashing’ was considered a coming-of-age sport, and where state police shoddily investigated hate crimes, at best, or were even accused of participating in them, at worst. The hate crime murder of American gay man Matthew Shepard is now synonymous with the state of Wyoming. Sydney had dozens and dozens of Matthew Shepards, the only difference is their names aren't widely known.

So being lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, gender nonconforming, asexual, even just unsure or non-committed is tough in this country. Independent study still consistently show that LGBTIQ Australians have the highest rates of suicidality of any demographic in this country, and that's not because of anything to do with our sexuality or gender but because of the hatred and hostility we encounter. Young people are especially vulnerable. One 2005 study found nearly 40% of same-sex attracted Australians have been treated unfairly because of their sexuality, and that was a conservative estimate. And of the abuse and harassment they face, three quarters of it happened in the schoolyard. Kids who are queer or questioning generally report high rates of truancy and are actually far less likely to complete school. Some adults might be, in fact we know they have been, tempted to dismiss this as a sad and regrettable statistic that ultimately, however, only applies to a small minority of young people.

However, and forgive me if this is obvious, I think we also need to point out that homophobia and transphobia is a type of discrimination that doesn't just affect LGBTIQ people. Homophobia and transphobia affect all young people. It's used as a weapon to police how young people behave, it's used to dictate what is considered manly or womanly. It's used to determine which hobbies, sports, subjects, and pastimes are socially sanctioned. It's used to shame and humiliate kids who are queer, perceived to be queer, straight, cisgender.

Obviously, it's important to emphasise the fact that young LGBTIQ people specifically are at risk. However, we might also consider also doing something even more radical which is to affirm that being lesbian or gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex, queer, asexual is actually great, it's actually fine. And that being part of an oppressed minority can simultaneously mean being part of a joyous and proud community with rich histories that span generations and span the globe.

Now when I wrote my first book I didn't really reflect that much on why I was writing it. This was a black comedy memoir about growing up gay and Asian in a very white part of Australia in Queensland during the 1990s at the height of Hansonism as my parents’ marriage fell apart around me. It's not exactly the classic Australian story. But after the book came out so many young people wrote to me or they saw me in person at events and they told me that they'd felt seen or represented for the first time. Some of them did that obviously because they were Asian Australian themselves, some of them did that because they identified as queer and coming out to me – a complete stranger – for the first time in the process of telling me. What I realised was that perhaps subconsciously I'd written a book that I wish I had read when I was growing up. So when the opportunity came to adapt a book into a TV show for SBS I ended up also writing the show that I wish I'd seen when I was growing up.

The first two seasons depicted a family inspired by my own Asian-Australian all, coincidentally, with the last name Law and the same names as all my family members. In 2016 our show made TV history as the first ever show with it with an Asian Australian family as leads. With our third and final season coming out in January next year, which is very soon, we're going to make history again as Australia's first ever TV comedy about gay teen sexuality and we're quite upfront about it. In fact that's not the front that's just the back. We already know this will be regarded and seeing as a pioneering moment in Australian TV but it will also be seen as a provocation.

So few periods are told about LGBTIQ youth in Australia because my hunch is that, even though we're obviously increasingly comfortable with the notion of same-sex marriage – adults engaged in the most respectable and traditional of relationships – we are not necessarily comfortable with the idea of young Australians having any cognisance of their sex, sexuality or gender. That's something that would be obvious to anyone who followed the controversy of Safe Schools in the past years and it's why I wrote the *Quarterly Essay* last year about it, about Safe Schools, the media coverage and its resulting controversy. I wrote about Safe Schools not because I was sure where I stood about it but because I was actually confused the more that I read.

So I wrote it for people like me who read the stories about Safe Schools and suspected, rightly, that there must be more to the story. I also wrote it for people tired of seeing Safe Schools used as a handy battleground to score points in a bigger culture war, and I wrote it for anyone who wondered why so few Australian kids were engaged in a conversation that was apparently about their welfare. And I wrote it because I felt we'd forgotten about what happens or what can happen when adults are remiss in their duties of protecting kids’ welfare. And I don't mean a selective cohort of kids who we think are the ‘right kind of kid’; I mean the consequences of when we don't protect *all* kids.

Now a quick heads up to our Aboriginal audience members I'm just about to show a photo of an Indigenous person who's now deceased. This is Tyrone Unsworth. He was indigenous kid who lived in Brisbane. Fair skinned, freckly, curly haired kid, sassy little dude who loved to dance and worship at the altars of Lady Gaga and Beyonce. We could easily have been friends, I think. Tyrone had only just entered his teens and he took his own life at the age of 13 in November 2016. His mother Amanda raged that her son had been bullied to death for being gay to the Queensland media, and the headline in the *Courier Mail* that day was tough to read. It read, “Mum’s anguish: ‘They ended up getting to him’”.

At this point we probably need to backtrack slightly because by the time Tyrone took his own life, Australia's national broadsheet – *the Australian* newspaper, which is widely the regarded as being this country's paper of record – was in his tenth consecutive month of indefatigable, sustained coverage and criticism of Safe Schools Coalition Australia, a federally-funded program launched in 2014 to support LGBTIQ students. And this was an initiative that was an inexpensive $8 million over three years. By contrast the national school chaplaincy program cost $243.8 million over four years. And it was pioneered here in the state of Victoria before becoming a federal initiative. When it was launched, Safe Schools was really seen as this political no-brainer because it was about keeping young people safe. And that changed in February 2016 when *The Australian* ran its first front-page story excoriating the Safe Schools program: “Activists push taxpayer-funded gay manual in schools”, which sounded obviously alarming to a lot of people and, perhaps, a lot of parents are understandably alarmed. Within hours of this story Safe Schools was being debated in Parliament. Within days Coalition backbenches pledged to destroy it. Within a fortnight then-prime minister Malcolm Turnbull requested education minister Simon Birmingham launch a review. And after one month Birmingham confirmed that Safe Schools federal funding would not be renewed. That didn't mean the coverage of Safe Schools stopped, because as long as Safe Schools continued in any form so too would stories in News Corp papers. Those attacks on Safe Schools angered many within the queer Community including myself and, by the time a 13-year-old kid had allegedly killed himself because he felt unsafe, that anger really boiled over.

I was really stricken by the news of Tyrone's death. I didn't know him but my family live very close to where he is and that made me and, I think, a lot of people angry and exhausted by this media coverage of Safe Schools. I logged onto Twitter where a lot of people were posting hot takes and I added my own. I wrote, “Tell your kids – no matter how young – that being LGBTIQ is fine, that bullying is torture, and then demand Safe Schools”. It was only months after I tweeted that that I started doing my own research into Safe Schools and I saw that tweet for what it was: it was a premature take on something I thought I understood but I actually knew next-to-nothing about. I genuinely thought it was a program that adults taught young kids about LGBTIQ issues, and to me that sounded great.

However my knowledge of Safe Schools had also been gleaned from stories I now realise were, at best, inadequate or misleading and, at worst, false. And my tweet, in its own way, was a small drop in a slurry of commentary about Safe Schools built on shaky foundations, bad faith and half-truths. It turned out that there was a sustained period in the so-called debate about Safe Schools where supporters and critics – sometimes both at the same time – were talking about something that wasn't quite what Safe Schools was. What it really showed me was that many adults whose career it is to tell stories failed in their duty of care in this period. And that the coverage of Safe Schools by News Limited, a company for which I actually worked for many happy years, should shake our faith in journalism and media in this country.

Along the way I actually discovered some unexpected surprises, like the fact that for all the bashing doled out against Safe Schools by conservative politicians, the people who launched it were actually conservative themselves. On a state level that was conservative premier Ted Baillieu, in Victoria, and on a federal level that was old mate, former prime minister Tony Abbott. Why would two conservatives support something they would end up bashing, especially in the case of Tony Abbott? Because before the Murdoch press got hold of it and spun it into something it wasn't – as I said Safe Schools wasn't controversial, it was an initiative to help principals and teachers support LGBTIQ kids at school and it was devised because it's been proven that general anti-bullying programs don't shift the dial when it comes to homophobia and transphobia. You have to address it explicitly for anything to change. The only mandatory requirement of Safe Schools was principals signing the following statement:

The only formal requirement for to become a member of Safe Schools Coalition Australia is the completion of a membership form signed by the school principal and, in signing, principals make genuine commitment building a school free from homophobia and transphobia, and to support gender diversity, intersex and sexual diversity.

Member schools are not even expected to be 100% safe – that is in writing. It's quite light, I think, and quite uncontroversial in that iteration of what Safe Schools was. Teachers, principals and support staff were encouraged to undertake professional development training where they learn some of those basic statistics about LGBTIQ people, research about the impact of homophobia in students and, perhaps controversially ­– most controversially – that gender isn't just necessarily male and female but existed on a continuum.

Some of you, and I've met people who consider themselves open-minded and progressive, bulk at this notion. However, if you think there are only two biological sexes you need to talk to any paediatrician about the roughly 1 in 1,500 babies born with intersex conditions – that's close to 17,000 Australians – and beyond that when it comes to gender, human history is rich in people who have identified as neither gender, both gender, the opposite gender, genders in between. Various communities around the world recognize 3rd, 4th, 5th, even more genders from Thailand’s *kathoeys* to India's *hijras*, from women deep in the Albanian Alps who take an oath to live as men, to Tiwi Island’s brother boys and sister girls.

It's also worth noting that since inception of Safe Schools, not a single school principal or teachers made one complaint about the program and, after its initial success, school staff started asking Safe Schools for optional materials they could use in classrooms and this is where things blew up. For a good part of the year Safe Schools developed an electronic resource called *All of us* that centres on a full colour PDF booklet with information and activities. And for all of the, slightly strange, conspiracy theories and claims that this resource teaches children how to use sex toys – that's something that's been said a lot – anyone can actually read *All of us* online. It has always been freely available and it is distinctly sex toy free.

It resembles a slickly designed, glossy magazine for young people emphasizing bold couples and utilising photos of queer couples and, controversially, everyone in it is smiling, which implies that young LGBTIQ people can be happy.

And together the case studies – which involved a young lesbian, a transman, bisexual person, intersex woman, another bisexual person and a gay men and a trans woman – together those stories formed what I guess would have been the cast of a great upcoming network teen drama I would absolutely watch. There are infographics, stats, comprehensive lessons plans for teachers. Now one of the things that really stunned people was that this was a resource designed for year seven and eight students. Some people thought, is that appropriate? But if you think of that as scandalous, salacious or shocking please think about the aggressive and meticulous dullness of what's involved in developing Australian educational resources for kids. This resource was developed with a consultation review of independent curriculum experts. The content was thoroughly tested and piloted in real schools with year seven and eight children, refined even further before the launch, and remember that review that Malcolm Turnbull asked from Simon Birmingham – one of Australia's most respected education experts Professor Bill Louden spearheaded it. And his findings infuriated the hard right conservatives in the Liberal Party who are against *All of us* and Safe Schools. He wrote that: “it's consistent with the aims of the program, is suitable, robust, age-appropriate, educationally sound and aligned with the national curriculum”. Even so, as a response to that review, you had furious federal MPs claiming Safe Schools promoted adult fetish sites and S&M – and if it sounds like a stretch, it is, but I think we're used to the idea that some of our federal politicians like a good pull. Later, you’d have former PM Tony Abbott labelling all this as an exercise in social engineering, somehow forgetting that his government launched it federally in the first place.

In one year though, *the Australian* published over 90,000 words on Safe Schools. That's one story on average every two days, with letters to the editors about it on every off day. That might sound comprehensive because that is roughly the size of a PhD thesis and, after my quarterly essay came out, I would actually bring the book of all the printouts with me which would launch on a table with a satisfying thud – the kind of thing that you can throw at someone and probably injure them with. However, when journalists who wrote these 90,000 consulted with education or medical experts often they were academics and experts who with clear affiliation with the Australian Christian Lobby, the primary body mobilised against same-sex marriage and Safe Schools in this country. And the volume of stories were almost wholly negative. And across the entire period *the Australian*, this self-appointed guardian of the safety of children, spoke to not one single school-age LGBTIQ young person. Not one. And later, when I spoke to queer teenagers who followed the saga, they told me that the dynamic felt familiar. At school we call bullying, in the media we call it a beat up.

So where are we now? After the independent review into Safe Schools came back with the all-clear in 2016 the then education minister nonetheless announced the program would not be renewed once federal funding expired the year after. In the period where Western Australia, South Australia, the ACT and Victoria all still had Labor governments, the chief ministers or premiers all committed to delivering Safe Schools in some form from their own pockets, though some programs were rebranded – such was the success of the attacks on Safe Schools.

When South Australia change their government early this year they cut funding to Safe Schools almost immediately – two years before the contract end date. So, it can’t be denied that in fundamental ways the attacks on Safe Schools – this independently designed initiative, designed to help teachers protect kids – those attacks worked. However, we know that there's hope and it manifests in many ways. So, for instance, back when Simon Birmingham announced the review of Safe Schools Coalition in February 2016, at the height of the scandal, principals across the country examined the evidence, faced pressure and abuse over Safe Schools and they held their nerve. When the review was announced 495 Australian schools were Safe Schools. A couple of weeks later that number was 526.

So many principals and teachers continue to be quiet heroes in amongst all of this. Even principals who initially signed a letter at the direction of their local church, an open letter calling for fresh legal protections for religious freedoms, some of them have openly apologised. One even said it was the most humiliating moment of his career and recognised the harm that he had done. And in an interesting development one of the Catholic school systems started rolling out its own version of Safe Schools to 52 Catholic schools across the country, showing that Christianity and supporting young vulnerable people are entirely compatible things, I think Jesus would have agreed.

Even now Safe Schools and all of its independently reviewed resources are freely available for all of us to read and access. In this state of Victoria it was interesting as an outsider to see that the Andrews Labor government took to highlighting the importance of Safe Schools once again in both the election campaign and speeches. We've also got other ways to see this country and other realms of hope. Over 60% of surveyed Australians support two adults of the same sex marrying. In my home state of Queensland we outstripped New South Wales in ‘yes’ votes percentage wise. At the same time we have to acknowledge that we were forced to spend money as a nation – roughly a hundred million dollars – on giving an unnecessarily platform to bigots for months who would have otherwise gone unheard. And during that period the data and the research showed that hate crimes and hate speech against LGBTIQ people spiked significantly.

I'm an adult who doesn't have a personal stake in marriage necessarily but even I felt the psychological toll of those months. And when I think about myself I have to wonder what cost did this have on young people's mental wellbeing in this time. I personally think it's worth being sceptical and wary of any politician who cites marriage equality as one of their benchmark achievements. If they see the postal survey as a triumph I would ask them to engage with young, queer Australians especially and ask what their lives were like during that period. The attacks that they had to hear in the media, and the bigotry that was brought to the surface in their families. Marriage equality, as it's often been said, wasn't achieved *because* of this postal survey but *in spite* of it. After the victory of the ‘yes’ campaign in the same-sex marriage postal survey, in spite of the politics, in spite of the fact that overwhelmingly the LGBTIQ community did not want it, after the success many of us wondered where the next fight would be. Of course there are so many. In this country I think the biggest one right now is the welfare of young people and this isn't just a theory or speculation.

This September, not even a fortnight into being prime minister, Scott Morrison declared on Twitter that Australian schools didn't need “gender whisperers”. This was in response to a report saying teachers were now being taught how to spot transgender students, with the same report implying that there was some link between equipping teachers rather to support vulnerable gender-diverse teenagers and more teenagers somehow becoming gender diverse. Sometimes stupidity can render us mute from shock so I'll leave the last word on this story to my friend the comedian Jordan Raskopoulos who also happens to be a trans woman: “Dear @ScottMorrisonMP, I attended a single-sex religious school and became Australia's premier roller skating transsexual”.

We've got marriage equality now but we've also got the most powerful politician in our country openly targeting vulnerable kids and the good teachers who support them, in what I think, at best, is tedious and, at worst, a very dangerous culture war. We have politicians in our Senate delaying a vote on legislation to protect LGBTIQ students from discrimination by repealing exemptions for religious schools. And why? Not even feigned concerned about kids anymore but because the government was concerned about losing control in the House of Representatives. We're now also pushing for stronger religious protections, as of today, this comes from the same government that sought to dilute the Racial Discrimination Act. All this while we live in a country where one in two transgender kids who aren't supported by schools or families will try to take their own life. Those are kids.

After this year I'm increasingly starting to wonder whether the best thing that adults can do is to simply step out of the way. At the end of last month two very cool things happened, both of them led by teens. One of them was the student strikes and the Climate March, which showed dilly-dallying adults in power, that when it comes to climate change kids sometimes are leading the way. And I know that some adults were taken aback by kids chanting and sometime swearing at the Prime Minister but just be aware that when the apocalypse is upon us those kids will eat you first. Around the same time Finn Stannard, a student at one of the city's most elite Catholic schools which boasts former prime minister Tony Abbott and former deputy prime minister Barnaby Joyce among its alumni, stood up in the Assembly Hall of over 1500 students and told everyone he was gay – to a standing ovation – in a video that went viral globally.

Brave young people in this country are incredibly resilient and strong. But they are also going to have to bear the brunt of anti-marriage equality radicals, once known as Marriage Alliance, who have now regrouped and rebranded as Binary Australia, which personally sounds like an advocacy group to me that promotes the computing that uses zeros and ones but, no, they are a people who insist there are only two genders and this is the hill they're going to die on. At the heart of their message is the idea that you can make young people same-sex attracted or transgendered. Now the idea that you can influence or affect someone's sexuality is ludicrous and goes against all data, but even if you could you’d only have a problem with the idea because you think being those things – same-sex attracted or gender-diverse – are wrong in the first place.

Young people have chutzpah and intelligence and are leading the way, and it's tempting to think they can do it on their own but they're not necessarily resourced, they can't vote and, despite what they tell you, teenagers do sometimes need adults sometimes. One example of adults being allies for queer kids is Minus18’s annual formal – seven years old now, originally created in part for kids who couldn't bring their same-sex partners to their own school dance – and it's so popular now that it's actually hit capacity. Bigger crowds mean bigger venues which means more expensive tickets, so they're not willing to pass that cost on the teenagers just yet so instead, the formal, which now happens annually in Melbourne and I think Adelaide and plans to expand to other cities too, would actually already be in every capital city if it weren't for a major financial institution pulling funding at the height of the Safe Schools controversy.

Demand for this event and events like it grows not because kids are somehow getting more gay or more transgender but because young people are increasingly confident and comfortable in their own skin. Some adults, though, would prefer those teenagers remain uncomfortable for the sake of their comfort. In 2016 an anti-Safe Schools group tried sabotaging this particular event by rallying supporters to buy early bird tickets so that teenagers would arrive to an empty Hall. And disgusted queer adults across the country started buying full price tickets in droves to support teenagers so they can get in for free. It's clear that in this whole saga – where politicians and journalists have thrown young people under the bus, and to hold on to a version of the world that they insist is correct – that there have been heroic adults and we should all aspire to that.

Now I'm not a parent but I do have kids in my life. My boyfriend and I are godparents, or secular fairy godfathers, to dozens of kids. We’ve been in their lives since they were babies and now when we go on holidays they jump on our bed to wake us up, which is very cute and very annoying. They've grown up with us and we have active stakes in their lives. I'm glad to see that some of the young boys in my life are actively choosing some of the sparkliest clothes available to them, that some of the young girls in my life are choosing sports that they would have been teased for playing a generation ago, because I think that is truly letting kids be kids. Letting them do what makes them happy and fulfilled without pressuring them into models of what they should be. I'm also really staggered and astounded and impressed by the books they have in their lives as well, they’re inclusive, they’re non-prescriptive and they're embracing of everyone. One of my friend’s kid’s favourite books is *Stories for boys who dare to be different*. Have you seen this? It's an illustrated roll call of inspired men from across politics, arts, activism, and sports. Quote, “Boys who changed the world without killing a single dragon or saving a single princess”. There's a girl's version of this book as well. Within the first few pages of the boys version it features American physician, radiologist, tuberculosis researcher, writer and novelist Alan L Hart, who also happens to be a trans man, and to know these stories and to understand and appreciate – not simply tolerate – difference from such an early age is why I know the kids in my life are going to be all right.

In his book *Far from the tree* British American writer Andrew Sullivan writes about a father who struggled to accept his transgender daughter's gender identity, and refused to use his daughter’s preferred pronouns of she and her. As a result he ended up in counselling and he told Andrew Solomon – and this does include some mis-gendering language – finally a therapist asked us, the parents of this child,

Is it making him happy for you to insist on calling him a boy? And of course the answer was no. But when he asked me if it would make my son happy if I called him a she the answer was a clear yes. He then asked what was more important to me than my child's happiness and I started to cry. My fear of ridicule, coupled with my fear of the ridicule he will suffer, was causing me to deny him true happiness.

Even before they’re verbal, and I'm seeing this right now in the kids in my life, children can communicate to us what they need. What makes them happy, what makes them upset. In response, the adults in their life are compelled to make things better, to make them happy. However, handing over agency to a child to express and forge their own happiness can be a heart-tearing experience for adults. The last thing anyone wants for a kid is to make imperfect decisions like the ones that we know we've made for ourselves and especially about anything fundamental and lifelong. However, as kids become adults they're going to assert themselves as they wish, whether we like it or not. And our instinct is to stop them before they hurt themselves, or the world hurts them, no matter what age they are. But what is it to live in the world without any agency? What is it to live in the world, seen exclusively through the lens of those around you, and not as who you truly see yourself? Is that a life worth living?

That kids and teenagers assert their sexuality and gender identity in ways that challenge us is a reminder of how tenuous our grasp is on the next generation and I think for some of us it terrifies us that we, as adults, might not be able to control their destiny. However, I think it should also really reassure us that new generations are courageous enough to bring their own perspectives, asserting themselves and being vocal about what they need. We as adults should help them in that task. And by doing that, we will show we're mature enough to acknowledge that sometimes, to our embarrassment and shame, that it's adults not children who are least equipped to understand, accept or process new realities about the world in which we live. And maybe we should start trying because we're supposed to be the grownups after all. Thank you.