Speech

Address By

Her Excellency the Honourable Quentin Bryce AC CVO
Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia

On the occasion of

Opening the 9th Biennial National AGOSCI Conference

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I acknowledge the traditional owners of the magnificent land on which we gather, and I thank you for your warm welcome.

I want you to know how delighted I am to be here for the beginning of your 9th biennial national AGOSCI conference.

First and foremost because it allows me to express my sincere admiration and respect for you; to thank you for what you do every single day.

In your different roles as researchers, health professionals and therapists, teachers and special educators, carers, communication partners, parents, and friends, you make an incalculable contribution to Australian society, where one in seven people experiences difficulty in communication.

In understanding and supporting them, in your recognition of how essential communication is to all our lives, you add to our sense of cohesion and harmony, to our rich social fabric.

My deep lifelong interest in your work, what you do, what you stand for, goes back to my mother – as so many things do for all of us. In the early sixties my mother left her country life to return to her profession as a teacher – to support the education of my sisters and me, which she was passionate about.

She taught at the Spastic Centre, as it was then called, in Brisbane at New Farm. Her students were in their primary years, from the city and the country – all with cerebral palsy. She was devoted to them, to their families, to the volunteers who helped with their daily needs, and to the therapists.

They were early years in developing and creating opportunities for children with CP to reach their potential. She was inspired by her colleagues, particularly the Principal, Geoffrey Swan, and by the work of Professor Fred Schonell and Dr Eleanor Schonell, wonderful, generous scholars who pioneered special education.

My mother used to insist that I spend time in her classroom. Then in my teens, I found it awkward and confronting at first but I learnt so much from those experiences – about the struggle for communication, about difference, about myself.

I admired my mother’s dedication, commitment and determination. I marvelled at the way she ensured her pupils had access to lovely things as well as learning. She took them to all sorts of special events – ballets and concerts – and sometimes I went with her.

I didn’t know it then because we didn’t have the words, but I came to understand that what she was doing was translating into practice equality of opportunity, recognition of the dignity and worth of every human being.

When I went to Government House in Queensland I came to know well many of the organisations I was Patron of, particularly disability advocacy groups, at meetings, and special celebrations – on one unforgettable occasion, hosting wheelchair dancing in the sombre Investiture Room.
It meant a lot to me to catch up with some of my mother’s former students. They spoke of her with great affection and she loved to hear about their successes in professional and community life, their extraordinary achievements in the face of extraordinary challenges.

I owe a debt of gratitude to her for engendering in me not only understanding but also many enduring and enriching friendships. She handed on to me an ease in reaching out. She taught me that the key to communication, to conversation, to sharing ideas and experiences, to relationships, is in taking the time to listen.

In slowing down, giving our attention wholly and patiently to each other, in valuing more what takes longer to arrive.

A few years ago I was intrigued by rumours about a worldwide “Slow Movement.”

I found Carl Honoré’s book In Praise of Slow, and lingered over his sanctions of the slow, the contemplative, the receptive, the still.

He wrote:

In many quarters, ‘slow’ remains a dirty word. Just look at how the Oxford English Dictionary defines it: “not understanding readily, dull, uninteresting, not learning easily, tedious, slack, sluggish.

Hardly the sort of stuff you want to put on your CV.

In our hyped-up, faster-is-better culture, a turbocharged life is still the ultimate trophy on the mantelpiece.

When we rush, we skim the surface, and fail to make real connections with the world or other people.

All the things that bind us together and make life worth living — community, family, friendship — thrive on the one thing we never have enough of: time.

His words struck a chord with me, and reminded me of Dr Rowan Williams’ well-known commentary on our “portfolio society.”

In 2004, the Archbishop gave the trenchant warning that in rushing through life, we remain in the shallows.

He referred to “the [modern] assumption that jobs, friendships, relationships and ties of birth and kinship are all in flux. The short term is now the only term; if things do not work out, the response is to change the people and the pattern.”

He asks how, in such fluidity, you can build a “a life that has three dimensions, which has interiority and resonance?”

Though my own life often gets caught and swept off in the swell, I have meditated on these thoughts and found them nourishing.

My friends, for you, I know, they are not new. In the area of complex communication needs, they are part of your mode of being, informing your steady and practiced response to the challenges of communication disability.

Among the many key issues that you negotiate daily – issues of access, opportunity, participation, and wellbeing – is the way people who use augmentative or alternative forms of communication need more time to communicate than our frenetic pace usually offers.

They face discrimination when there is insufficient time for them to ask questions, find information, respond to requests, present their work. They encounter exclusion when impatience scuttles the time they need to participate fully.

The irony is that those who are most assiduous in saving time end up with less. Less time, but also less engagement, less openness to the offerings of their fellows and the world around them.

We’ve grown used to our age of rage – road rage, shopping rage, internet rage, gym rage. Yet our unseemly haste – what Carl Honoré might call our ‘tempo tantrums’ – in fact leaves us empty-handed, disconnected.
A sublime example of the rewards of patience is the life and work of eminent physicist Professor Stephen Hawking.

In his twenties, already recognised as a genius and embarking on his PhD at Cambridge, Hawking developed symptoms of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis – a form of motor neurone disease that would gradually deprive him of all neuromuscular control.

In time, he would lose the ability to walk, speak, wave, breathe, swallow. Later, a tracheotomy left him dependent on a computerised voice synthesizer.

Yet Hawking’s voice – synthetic and monotone – is one of the most important of our generation. He is a global leader in theoretical physics and one of the most effective science communicators: a New York Times bestseller since the late eighties.

He is philosophical about his disability, and modest about his accomplishments:

“It is a waste of time to be angry about my disability. One has to get on with life and I haven't done badly.”

Indeed the author of the wryly titled Brief History of Time is a prophet of the long view. He says "It is no good getting furious if you get stuck… Sometimes it is years before I see the way forward. In the case of information loss and black holes, it was 29 years.”

The scientific community would concur that Hawking’s contributions are worth waiting for.

Hawking’s extraordinary gift gives him an international platform and furnishes an audience. Others who share his complex communication needs find it much harder to be heard.

In their paper “Key Principles Underlying Research and Practice in AAC,” published in 2007, Blackstone, Williams and Wilkins point out that in researching communication disability and designing effective responses to it, “The most important voices are often the hardest to hear.”

_Individuals with CCN hold an intensely personal stake in AAC research and clinical practice; hence the slogan, ‘nothing about us, without us’. Their characteristics, experiences, preferences, priorities, opinions, suggestions and expertise must be sought, respected, attended to, understood, and employed – in the design, development, delivery and evaluation of AAC systems and services._

That principle underpins your conference this week.

As you gather to exchange collegial, professional, academic and practical experience, you are listening for the voices of those hardest to hear, eliciting and prizing their part in a crucial dialogue.

Over these three days – full and overflowing as they are – there will be time for each person, for each story to be heard.

And I, for one, can’t wait to hear what a Blabber Finger is!

I wonder if my final story might contain one?

It’s about Locky, who is 7. Locky goes to Geebung Special School – a place I grew very fond of in my Brisbane years.

One day Locky packed his little knapsack with toys and ran away from home. He quickly became lost, but he had no way of asking for help.

He found his way to a police station, but again, he could not explain who he was or where he lived.

An officer gave him a pen, but he cannot write legibly and has trouble with sequencing.

Desperate, frustrated, and frightened, Locky suddenly had a brilliant idea.

He pulled a toy from his knapsack. It was his Thomas the Tank Engine mobile phone.
He began to dial his home number on the fake plastic keys. The officer watched, smiled, and caught on. As Locky patiently dialled the number again, he followed the pattern of his finger until he had the number right.

Mum and dad were called, and clever Locky was restored to his home.

To me, that story captures the spirit, creativity, and courage you find in yourselves and each other every day.

I know you will feel it in spades during your conference, which it’s my very great pleasure now officially to open.

In doing so, I leave you with the sage advice of Winnie-the-Pooh, who knew all about taking time for the things that matter.

Sometimes, if you stand on the bottom rail of a bridge and lean over to watch the river slipping slowly away beneath you, you will suddenly know everything there is to be known.

My friends, thank you. I wish you all the very best.