***From This Day Forward: Marriage Equality in Australia* by Rodney Croome**

My first real conversation with Rodney Croome was in the year 2000 on January 26th; or as some like to call it, Australia Day. Already we both had something in common: we were workaholics who believed a public holiday was an excuse to get even more work done.

Rodney had been asked by the Australian Human Rights Commission to head to regional and rural areas to find out why young LGBTI people were killing themselves in greater numbers than their heterosexual counterparts. Rodney and I met at my office in Geelong’s Old Post Office building where I’d worked for a few years supporting young LGBTI people in Geelong and the surrounding regions.

On that Monday afternoon I remember that my LGBTI life changed forever. We talked for hours, especially about my work piloting a challenging homophobia program with Year 9s at an all-boys Catholic school and the challenges of young LGBTI people living outside the big smoke. I felt like it was the first time I could speak to someone who could so calmly exploded the myths of what LGBTI life was like in regional, rural and remote communities. Rodney was clear that forcing someone from the place they’d grown up in - where they had their primary sense of connection and belonging - was a form of violence.

This was classic Rodney Croome: naming something that so many of us felt deep down but didn’t yet have the words to articulate. Indeed one of Rodney’s gifts is coming up with the right words, at the right time before most of us can. This is what Rodney has done with the book we’re all here to launch tonight, *From This Day Forward: Marriage Equality in Australia*. Some might feel like it’s all been said and that it’s overdue. I disagree, but we’ll get to that soon.

When I set out on a 266-consecutive day drive around regional, rural and remote Australia to challenge homophobia one cuppa at a time, most people thought one of three things would happen to me:

1. I’d be chased out of town with pitchforks;
2. Myself or my openly gay truck called Bruce would be harmed or damaged; or,
3. That people would simply just not talk to me.

Instead, what they had to say was, “It’s about bloody time”. It was about bloody time for two reasons:

1. The impact on their communities by rural youth suicide and how young LGBTI people were way, way overrepresented in those statistics; and,
2. That local young LGBTI people didn’t feel like they could be themselves and instead left for the big smoke.

In some strange way I felt prepared to make that drive through country Australia and, for many reasons, it was because of my friendship and conversations with Rodney. Only he could fully comprehend what I was trying to achieve and what I’d face; in his words, ‘an overwhelming, impossible amount of need’.

Without realising it I’d been prepared by a decade of conversations with Rodney where we talked about how we work with rural Australia, how we deal with resistance and how we bring people together.

Some of our most insightful conversations have happened while walking to the end of his street in South Hobart, which boasts a rivulet. If you continue walking, you’ll walk by the Cascade Brewery, best in the late afternoon sun in the colder months, and up Mt Wellington.

On one occasion, when I was much younger and more idealistic, I recall Rodney getting annoyed and impatient as I talked about a difficult project. This was rare because what I’ve always admired about the unflappable Rodney is that he’s not often miffed. In his calm, considered and thoughtful way, Rodney shared some wisdom.

“Dan, you think you can solve everything in isolation, by locking yourself away from everyone and everything; but the greatest ideas and insights come along in conversation with others…”

And over time I realised he was right.

Rodney can understand that dilemma. As a shy, introverted boy from a dairy farm in the shadows of Mt Rowland in Tasmania’s north, Rodney reveled in solitude.

*(and if ever you get the chance, listen to Rodney talk about Mt Rowland; it’s when he’s perhaps at his most heartfelt)*

In those early years he dreamt of being an archaeologist, and spent his childhood constantly digging across his family’s property, looking for something grand; and he kept digging, despite never finding what he was looking for. I can’t think of a better metaphor of Rodney’s work than constant digging, because Rodney approaches his quest for social justice with the same ferocity as his boyhood archaeological digs. One of Rodney’s greatest needs is to uncover and understand why ignorance, resistance and hatred exist and, more importantly, how to overcome them.

What can be uncovered about the marriage equality debate you’ll find in *From This Day Forward*. It’s no accident that Rodney has uncovered so much, and it’s the product of decades of conversations. Rather than remain in solitude, and lock himself away from everyone and everything, instead Rodney has had 1000s of conversations with everyday LGBTI people, their families, friends and allies, politicians and possibly more opponents than he’d like. This is why he’s able to speak with such authority and depth, about how it touches so many of us.

Many of those conversations about marriage equality have come through Australian Marriage Equality visits to every state and territory. I still remember my surprise and skepticism a few years ago when Rodney asked me to develop and deliver Marriage Equality workshops with everyday LGBTI people and their allies. Like many, I thought that the fight would be all about political lobbying and strategising; something foreign to me. I also could feel LGBTI people who’d spent their lives in grassroots politics sharpening their knives to take me out; weren’t they far more suited than me? When I raised my concerns, Rodney quickly changed my mind.

“Dan, the fight for marriage equality is about local MPs around the country. It’s about everyday people telling everyday stories to politicians and local media, and then them being equipped to handle the homophobia they’ll face along the way. I can’t think of anyone better placed to do that…”

For a few years I regularly delivered these workshops across the country with the likes of Rodney, Shelley Argent, Alex Greenwich and Ivan Hinton, and through those visits we learnt a great deal about the marriage equality mood. Despite the progress, there are few opportunities for those in favour of marriage equality to come together with like-minded individuals. There are soundbites and photo memes, yet it’s rare for us to go into any depth or, as Rodney puts it, “beyond the catchcries”. That’s why I’m confident that most of us will be engaged, pleasantly surprised and, at times, delighted and infuriated by what we read in this new book.

In *From This Day Forward*, Rodney gives us depth and breadth all in the one place. It’s not just about why there should be marriage equality, it’s also the questions Rodney gets asked day in and day out: why are we even debating this? and what is it I can do?

**[quote in Rodney’s preface about the community debate being over and**

**how it’s now about equipping supporters of marriage equality]**

*From This Day Forward* also doesn’t shy away from the difficult questions and criticisms of the marriage equality movement, such as why LGBTI people would even want to be part of the institution of marriage and inclusive language for trans, gender diverse and intersex people.

If anyone here knows my work, you’d know I’m a fan of personal, everyday stories, and I’m delighted that Rodney has used these to great effect throughout his book, demonstrating how, sometimes, a story is the best strategy to change everyday hearts and minds.

*From This Day Forward* is, like Rodney himself, intelligent, personal, balanced, nuanced and insightful.

It’s my pleasure and honour to launch *From This Day Forward: Marriage Equality in Australia.*

Daniel Witthaus

24th July, 2015