



## GRADUATION ADDRESS | Friday 16 March 2018

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### VIGILANTES OF GRACE

One, day, when my little girl was sitting up on the back of my bike as I pedaled down to her primary school in Philadelphia, she asked me: “Mummy, what would you like to do when you grow up?” She paused then said firmly; “And you can’t say writer. It has to be a proper job, like a fireman or a princess.”

The truth is, when I was a teenager, the people in my Sydney church, spent a considerable amount of time telling me what I could *not* do when I grew up. As was the case in so many churches, women filled the pews but were not seen in the pulpit. As young women, we were told to dress modestly and responsibly; I remember an entire sermon devoted to this, explaining how holding hands was an accelerated pathway to sin. We were also discouraged from expressing ambition or opinion, which quickly became boring. And stifling. My best friend and I occasionally ducked out of services and hid in a little hut in the nearby kids’ playground, talking for hours about life and faith and books and escape.

Male headship was preached on again, and again, and again. Men were to lead, we were told repeatedly, and women were to serve their own special, subordinate role. Women, in that world, did not talk, did not opine, did not exert authority. Women, in that world, shrank. When I left school, I moved to the city, and a church in Kings Cross, from where I tried to convince the Sydney Diocese to ordain women priests – a spectacularly unsuccessful quest.

Throughout the 1990s, as the broader church moved to recognize the full equality of women, the teaching on women became harsher and more restrictive, with an even heavier emphasis on female submission, as a means of protection from a world they believed was being swayed by a demonic kind of feminism. (We were told feminism was cultural, and dangerous. But is it not misogyny that is cultural – and dangerous. Shouldn’t we be thinking of Harvey Weinstein in one corner, and Jesus in another?)

What never occurred to me, listening to those sermons, that that theology can both heal and harm. And that one day women would tell me that theology I was taught could be used as an excuse to bruise or break bodies. I did not know enough about the world, and about violence, to understand that men who beat their wives – or abuse, control and sexually assault them – would draw on, and twist these scriptures, insisting women submit to abuse as in everything.



But, to my surprise, decades later these wives came to me – dozens upon dozens of them – to tell me their stories. The police reports – of rape mostly - stacked up on the corner of my desk. I interviewed survivors, one by one, as they trembled with the recollection of trauma. To hide their identities and keep them safe they wore wigs, we shot through vases and glasses of water, blurred silhouettes and distorted voices. And they kept coming: with stories of horror and suffering, of fear and shame, of churches that refused to listen, and leaders who failed to understand.

One night – I got an email from a woman from the same church I grew up in, a who said for decades she had sat “seething in her seat”, listening to sermons telling her to be a submissive, obedient wife. At home, her husband referred to the same sermon to control her movements and their money, and, she wrote, “make her ‘service him’ like a prostitute’. He threatened to kill her, and she went to bed every night fearing for her life. Shortly before our stories were published, she said, her husband came from church and threw a transcript of the sermon at her, saying angrily: ‘When will you get it? Your position is to submit.’”

This woman said she could not tell her minister about the abuse as he would not believe her. But she is safe now, and has left. God looked after her in the end, she told me.

This is the other side of the story that we have been reporting - women who have survived abuse are very often sustained by their faith. This is despite the fact that the levers of male religious authority can be pulled by men who bully women. I hasten to add that I don’t mean to place all blame for issues surrounding domestic abuse in the church at the feet of complementarianism – that would be inaccurate, and unfair, and it’s far more complicated. After all, some of the best concepts of Christian relationships– the importance of marriage, the need to forgive, the possibility of repentance – can become weapons in the hands of an abuser.

But silencing the voice of an abused woman is like placing a silencer on a gun.

Theology can harm, and theology can heal. Those graduating understand this better than almost anyone; your responsibility is immense. Like physicians, you have studied the life of the spirit, what ails and what sustains, what frees and what suffocates and of this you should be proud. I urge you to do all you can to learn about domestic abuse, and all the myriad, deceptive forms it takes. The church must and can be a sanctuary for the abused, not a refuge for abusers.<sup>i</sup>

And on top of this I would urge three things.

First, to listen. Watching the fraught and often aggressive debate about domestic violence showed me how many opportunities there are – too often missed - for Christians to enter the public fray, unarmed, open, loving, concerned, keen to right wrongs, and to hear. One of the most profound countercultural things spiritual leaders do is listen.

Jesus’s words “whoever has ears let them hear” is repeated throughout the gospels. And in Revelations 2:7 it is written: ‘He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’”

So who amongst us has ears? What does it even mean to have an ear?



I think it means – and this is my second point - to pay attention. To closely observe those around us. As poet Mary Oliver wrote: “the first, the wildest and the wisest thing I know: [is that] that the soul exists and is built entirely out of attentiveness.” Iris Murdoch said paying attention is a moral act; it is also a spiritual act. For Christians, it is a responsibility and a discipline, especially in a world of distraction and parallel cyber-lives pocked with infinite rabbit holes of information, of woe and wonder. Attention is a rare and precious commodity.

Third, people are not seeking lectures, but signs of grace. In the 2017 McCrindle national study of religion, non-Christians said: the greatest attraction to religion is “observing people who live out a genuine faith”. People liked Jesus, but not the church. And there are reasons for that.

It was the acts of grace that most struck me when I watched the pitchforks bobbing in the crowd baying for my head – as well as Hayley Gleeson’s, -yelling that we were bent on destroying the church by airing accounts of abuse in Christian communities. Some shouted us down, some scratched heads, some grabbed popcorn as though watching a stoning.

And some just took the opportunity to show love to the women.

A handful asked if they could help the women we interviewed, and offered accommodation, or to pay for things like fumigation, or, dropped around groceries. Others circled some of the angrier online forums and reached out to those who piped up – in greater numbers than ever before – to say they had been abused. The kindness was arresting. Kindness clarifies, argument obfuscates.

*Faith is not an argument.*

I began to see these people as vigilantes of grace. Vigilante, of course comes from vigilant – being watchful, observant, attentive, and, most pertinently – on the lookout for danger – and is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as “A member of a self-appointed group of citizens who undertake law enforcement in their community without legal authority, typically because the legal agencies are thought to be inadequate.”

Vigilantes of grace would be people who, even if leadership has failed, can model love and keep an eye out for danger. For many decades, we have failed to observe and be vigilant. There is much work to do, much grinding, important work lies ahead. Some will be done one heartbeat at a time, in your parish, your street, your home.

And grace will always leak through the cracks.

So as you go into the world armed with your renewed, deepened knowledge of theology, remember these three crucial ways of applying a faith that sanctifies: listen, pay attention, be a vigilante of grace. And if all else fails, there’s always the back up plans of a proper job, like a princess.

Julia Baird  
*University of Divinity*  
*March 2018*

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<sup>1</sup> And remember: “everyone who does evil hates the light”, hates exposure and scrutiny and public airing. (John 3: 20) We should welcome them.



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## ABOUT THE SPEAKER

### Dr Julia Baird, Doctor of Divinity (honoris causa) 2018

The Chancellor of the University of Divinity, Dr Graeme L Blackman AO, conferred the Doctor of Divinity (honoris causa) on Dr Julia Baird at a graduation ceremony held on Friday 16 March 2018 at St Michael's Uniting Church, Collins Street, Melbourne. The award, made in recognition of her outstanding scholarship and contribution as a public intellectual to the wider community in the area of religion, is the highest academic honour the University bestows. The Doctor of Divinity is the oldest award of the University, created in 1910 and first awarded in 1913.

The Vice-Chancellor, Professor Peter Sherlock, described Dr Baird's journalism in the area of religion as courageous, saying, "at times Dr Baird's journalistic work has been prophetic, uncovering suppressed injustice. A current example is her investigation of domestic violence in communities of faith. She not only identified the presence of abusive behaviours in religious institutions but also articulated the powerful connections (both good and bad) between theology and culture."

"Baird's commitment to truth, justice and the eradication of violence is evident in her participation in community and media panels to promote change for good in this area, alongside survivors and church leaders."

The citation for her award reads:

*Dr Julia Baird has made a sustained and distinguished contribution to critical debate about religion in Australia as a journalist, historian and author. Her books on the media treatment of women and the life of Queen Victoria demonstrate her uncompromising integrity in research and her flair for communication. Her incisive work as a journalist has given voice to the powerless and invited critical attention to those in power. Dr Baird's investigation of the links between religion and domestic violence in a variety of faith traditions has demonstrated the capacity of theology to harm and to heal. She has revealed the profound connections between sacred and secular, theology and culture in contemporary Australia, and in doing so has opened a pathway for change to survivors, families, and religious communities in search of truth, justice and the eradication of abuse.*

