



ourcommunity.com.au



# What Makes Us Tick

Communities in Control Conference  
Melbourne, 30 May, 2011

Presentation by

**Hugh McKay**

Psychologist, social researcher, writer

Thank you very much Denis and good morning everybody.

I think perhaps the strangest question that human beings ever asked themselves is this one, and you might like to reflect on whether you've ever asked yourself this question: "Why did I do that?"

It's a weird question, isn't it, because you did it, presumably of your own volition, and now you're asking yourself why. It's not surprising that we're puzzled by other people's behaviour. We know other people are strange and do strange things. But it is surprising that we're so often puzzled by our own behaviour.

Well, I guess the central theme of my new book and of my remarks this morning is that we shouldn't really be surprised when our own behaviour puzzles us, for a couple of reasons. One is that in Western societies we're very much held in the grip of the myth that humans are rational creatures. Which means that when people behave irrationally we're a bit shocked and we think, 'If only people would behave rationally the world would be a better place and everything would work better'.

Well, when you look at the evidence, everything from falling in love to falling out of love, to politics, to business, to war, it seems to me the evidence is almost overwhelming, it's compelling evidence that humans are no rational creatures, that we're ruled far more by the heart than by the head.

In fact, one contemporary brain researcher says we shouldn't think of the brain as being like a computer, we should think of the brain as being more like a gland awash with hormones. That makes more sense of how humans work out what to do.

The evidence, then, suggests that we're irrational creatures. But with very careful training and a lot of discipline we're capable of occasional remarkable bursts of rational behaviour – and that's what should surprise us. When the car keys are where you thought you left them, that's what should surprise you, not that they're not. And when people behave in what seems to you to be a rational, sensible way, be amazed because it's taken a lot of work to get there.

If quoting from this speech, please acknowledge that it was presented to the 2011 Communities in Control Conference  
 Convened by Our Community & CatholicCare, May 2011  
[www.ourcommunity.com.au/cic](http://www.ourcommunity.com.au/cic)



**Communities in Control**  
 One of the 16 Knowledge Centres  
 of Our Community.



**ourcommunity.com.au**

So that's one reason why we shouldn't be so surprised. This is just how we are. We are swept by emotions, we are irrational creatures.

But the other reason why our own behaviour shouldn't surprise us is that everything we do is not done just for one reason. Everything we do is the outcome of a constant dynamic interplay, an interaction, a contest between a number of desires. I want to mention 10 of them this morning, the 10 desires that drive us.

Each of these desires would like to control us. They're like a bunch of kids punching the air saying, "Pick me, pick me." But if you let any one of them run your life you're going to lead a very miserable and unbalanced life. Part of the art of living, in fact, is to recognise how these 10 desires do play such a big part in determining our behaviour and figuring out how to bring them into some kind of harmonious relationship.

Well, I'd better tell you what they are, and I'm not presenting them in any order of importance. If you [get hold of a copy of the book](#) you'll notice the chapters are not numbered. Some readers find that very irritating. But they're deliberately not numbered because I don't want to suggest that this is some kind of hierarchy or a list in order of importance.

But I do think it's important to emphasise that one of the 10 desires perhaps warrants a bit more attention than the other nine, not because it's the most important but because in any mix of desires driving particular bits of our behaviour you'll almost always find this one – that's the desire to be taken seriously.

That of course doesn't mean the desire to be thought of as a serious person in Australia, that's more likely to be seen as an insult than a compliment for some people, "Oh isn't she serious." We don't like people to think we're too serious.

But all of us want to be taken seriously, by which I mean we want to be noticed, we want to be accepted, we want to be appreciated, we want to be valued, we want to be understood. Perhaps even as we reach older age, we want to be sure we'll be remembered.

Some of you will be aware of the work of a remarkable English woman, now a very old lady, called Helen Bamber, who has devoted her life to the care of torture victims. She began her

If quoting from this speech, please acknowledge that it was presented to the 2011 Communities in Control Conference

Convened by Our Community & CatholicCare, May 2011

[www.ourcommunity.com.au/cic](http://www.ourcommunity.com.au/cic)



**Communities in Control**  
One of the 16 Knowledge Centres  
of Our Community.



**ourcommunity.com.au**

career in this remarkable field when as a young woman working for a charity aid organisation in the UK she found herself at the gates of the Belsen concentration camp in Nazi Germany at the end of World War II.

Standing there with other aid workers looking at the inmates staggering out the gates of the camp, Helen Bamber noticed one very frail woman, obviously spent, scarcely able to walk, and looking as though she was at the end of her life.

Helen Bamber, this young English woman, rushed up to her and knelt beside her and cradled her in her arms and listened while this woman rasped out a horrific account – or tried to – of what she'd endured as a prisoner in the Belsen camp.

While she was talking, Helen Bamber said to her, "I'm going to tell your story." And she said that at that moment the woman seemed to become calm, as though just to know that her name would be remembered and that her story would be told was all the reassurance she needed at the end of her life.

Well, we all need that reassurance, don't we? And not just at death but in infancy and in adolescence and in young adulthood and when we're having our mid-life crisis and all the way through, we need to know that someone is paying attention, that we're not being ignored or forgotten. We want our voices to be heard.

I don't know how often I've heard young people in particular, although it happens to older people as well, talking about the problems of finding a job and typically of applying for dozens and dozens of jobs and in most cases never even receiving an acknowledgement of the application and then saying, "You feel as if you don't exist."

Some of us feel like that if we're kept waiting too long in a doctor's surgery. An hour goes by, no-one's said anything or apologised or offered you a cup of coffee. You feel as though you don't exist. Even if a waiter ignores you in a restaurant it's a trivial thing but it's a symbol of the fact that you're not being taken seriously.

In Western society we live in an era of official apologies. In Australia, of course, we've seen the remarkable impact of the 2008 Apology to the Members of the Stolen Generation. We've seen

If quoting from this speech, please acknowledge that it was presented to the 2011 Communities in Control Conference

Convened by Our Community & CatholicCare, May 2011

[www.ourcommunity.com.au/cic](http://www.ourcommunity.com.au/cic)



**Communities in Control**  
One of the 16 Knowledge Centres  
of Our Community.



**ourcommunity.com.au**

the Roman Catholic Church apologising to the Jews for its role in Nazi Germany. We've seen other institutions and other governments making or preparing to make these official apologies to various abused or marginalised groups in their communities.

A lot of people are cynical about these official apologies; they say, "What's the point of all that? What was the point of the Apology to Members of the Stolen Generations? If there wasn't compensation or reparation or some major shift in policy that was going to improve their situation, isn't this just a bit hollow?"

Well, we saw, didn't we, in 2008 what the point of an apology is. Quite apart from any question of compensation or policy, we saw that an apology has the power to demonstrate to people who feel as though they've been in the margin that they are now front and centre, they're now on the radar, they're now on the agenda. And we all need to know we're on the agenda.

Isn't that why we hate being the victims of racism or sexism, because we know we're not being taken seriously as the unique individuals we know ourselves to be? We're just being lumped in with a group. "She would do that, she's a woman." What an insult. "He's gay," or, "They're baby boomers," or, "She's a single mother," or, "He's a Presbyterian," or whatever you like. As soon as you put us in a category it feels wrong, doesn't it, because it feels as though you're not being taken seriously.

It's the desire to be taken seriously that explains why listeners are so highly prized in our society. Isn't it a wonderful experience when someone gives you the gift of their undivided attention? It's not just that they're listening, it's the unspoken message that they're taking you seriously enough to listen.

And of course the opposite is true, when people aren't listening, when they're looking over your shoulder hoping to find someone else more interesting to talk to. Tragically, you often hear this in couples who have been together for a long time. One says, "He doesn't listen to me the way he used to." The tragedy is we know that isn't really the point. Listening is a symptom. What's really being said is he doesn't take me as seriously as he used to.

If quoting from this speech, please acknowledge that it was presented to the 2011 Communities in Control Conference  
 Convened by Our Community & CatholicCare, May 2011  
[www.ourcommunity.com.au/cic](http://www.ourcommunity.com.au/cic)



**Communities in Control**  
 One of the 16 Knowledge Centres  
 of Our Community.



**ourcommunity.com.au**

We all need to know that someone is taking us seriously, even if it's only the dog. Some people do acquire a dog so that when they come home after a tough day the dog will reliably wag its tail and take them seriously. But most of us need two-legged reactions as well as four-legged.

Perhaps, counter-intuitively, it's the desire to be taken seriously that explains why minority groups in any society –ethnic minorities, religious minorities – typically thrive on persecution. When they're persecuted they don't typically say, "We're obviously annoying people. We'd better keep quiet and pack up and think something else or be someone else." What usually happens under the influence of persecution is that our ethnicity or our faith will be strongly reinforced because even being the victim of persecution says you're being taken seriously – in a negative way, but still being taken seriously.

So the extent to which we listen to each other or not, the extent to which we make time for each other, the extent to which we attend to each other's projects, each other's passions, even if we don't share them, even the way we make love to each other, all of these things convey the unspoken message either that I'm taking you seriously or I'm not.

Many of you, I'm sure, will be familiar with a very old experiment, a famous experiment conducted in the field of industrial psychology 50 years ago by an Australian psychologist called Elton Mayo who was working in the US in an Illinois plant of an electric company.

Mayo was studying one of the early time and motion studies. He was studying the effect on the productivity of workers of the conditions in the plant in which they were working. So he was fiddling with all sorts of aspects of the working environment. One of the things he was interested in was illumination.

He found, exactly as he had predicted, that if he increased the brightness of the illumination in the factory, productivity went up.

Later in the experiment he reduced the illumination level back to its original brightness and, not as he'd expected, he found that productivity went up again. And he pondered that and in the end decided, in what was really a landmark study that's been quoted ever since, that what the workers were responding to was not just illumination levels, what they were responding to was the fact was that someone was showing such interest in their working environment.

If quoting from this speech, please acknowledge that it was presented to the 2011 Communities in Control Conference

Convened by Our Community & CatholicCare, May 2011

[www.ourcommunity.com.au/cic](http://www.ourcommunity.com.au/cic)



**Communities in Control**  
One of the 16 Knowledge Centres  
of Our Community.



**ourcommunity.com.au**

So that's the desire to be taken seriously. Let me very quickly run through the other nine and we'll see how they interact and produce some bits of human behaviour that we might otherwise think of as irrational if we didn't understand what was going on.

There is the desire for 'my place'. In our society we talk about the sense of place as though this is very much about Indigenous people, as though Indigenous Australians have a sort of mystical connection with the land and this need for places that define them, sacred sites, this kind of thing.

Of course that's true but it is rubbish to say that that's somehow unique to Indigenous people. It is the human experience. We all need places that say things about us that we're pleased to have said. We all need places that symbolise us, places that make some tangible contribution to our sense of who we are.

For some people it's the childhood home. It's amazing how many people even in their middle years are outraged when their frail and elderly parents finally want to sell the family home. "You can't do that! That's my place." Well of course they can do it and they do.

For some people it's a favourite armchair. For churchgoers it's often a favourite pew and if someone else sits in their pew they feel as though their space has been invaded.

For long-distance commuters it's often a favourite seat on the train. For many people it's somewhere at work, a particular corner of an office or a workshop that feels like our place.

For many contemporary people, especially blokes, it's the car, the place where people feel as though they're really comfortable and in control. Speaking of blokes, of course it's often also the shed.

But we need these places and if we don't have them then we are often anxious. We often feel restless.

Migrants report this sense of rootlessness, which is very directly related to the sense of place. Having left behind their country of birth, with all of these places that formed and symbolised their identity, they now come to a new place where they may never recapture that strong

If quoting from this speech, please acknowledge that it was presented to the 2011 Communities in Control Conference  
 Convened by Our Community & CatholicCare, May 2011  
[www.ourcommunity.com.au/cic](http://www.ourcommunity.com.au/cic)



**Communities in Control**  
 One of the 16 Knowledge Centres  
 of Our Community.



[ourcommunity.com.au](http://ourcommunity.com.au)

sense of place. That's why you so often hear migrants say, "I feel as though I don't really belong in either place." They've left that behind but they haven't discovered the places in their new country.

You may not be able to remember the person with whom you shared your first romantic kiss but I'll bet you can remember where you were when it happened. It's like saying, "Where were you when John F Kennedy was shot?" Well we all know where we were because place is such an integral part of emotionally charged episodes or phases of our lives.

Then there's the desire for something to believe in. Humans are great believers. We have a need to believe and, generally speaking, when we have something to believe in, that has a therapeutic effect for us. Most of us are healthier with a belief system than living in a state of permanent scepticism or agnosticism. I don't just mean that in the religious sense. The neuroscientists are now telling us it's easier for people in terms of brain function to believe than to remain sceptical. I don't suppose that's surprising.

The question is, why do we need to believe? Why are we such credulous creatures? Bertrand Russell a long time ago wrote, "Man is a credulous animal and must believe something. In the absence of good grounds for belief he will be satisfied with bad ones." That seems to be true.

So why do we need a belief system of some kind? The answer, of course, is that life is a mystery. We don't get it. We don't know why we're here, we ask questions like, "Why are we here? What does it all mean? What's the point? What will happen next?"

These are mysteries which we won't penetrate just by thinking about them. We make some leap. We have some belief. We create some framework, some template, some code which allows us to explain the meaning of our own lives and perhaps even the meaning of life itself in a way that satisfies us.

Through history, for most people that kind of belief system has been religious. But in Western society, especially in Australia, traditional religious belief has been in very sharp decline. Only about 15% of Australians are currently attending church regularly. Not that that's the only sign, but certainly religious belief is in sharp decline.

If quoting from this speech, please acknowledge that it was presented to the 2011 Communities in Control Conference  
 Convened by Our Community & CatholicCare, May 2011  
[www.ourcommunity.com.au/cic](http://www.ourcommunity.com.au/cic)



**Communities in Control**  
 One of the 16 Knowledge Centres  
 of Our Community.



**ourcommunity.com.au**



This doesn't mean that people have stopped believing. It just means that they believe in other things. We have some beliefs: 35% of Australians say they believe in astrology. (I've already betrayed what I think of that by the tone in my voice. I've probably offended 35% of you who believe in astrology.)

Well, of course it's attractive to think that this could somehow be the key that will unlock our understanding of each other and of the future. And even if you're sceptical about astrology, everyone seems to know their star sign. Put your hand up if you don't know your star sign. OK, everyone knows their star sign, which of course doesn't mean you believe in astrology but still it's interesting, isn't it, that you find yourself in the hairdresser reading a magazine that's two months out of date and you're drawn to what the stars say. And if only you could remember what was happening to you two months ago you'd be able to check.

I remember hearing someone say, "All this astrology stuff is rubbish. On the other hand, my husband is a textbook Aries." Well, it might be superstition, it might be conspiracy theories, it might be the free market – there are people who think that there are some kind of economic laws that will help us make sense of the meaning of life.

If you doubt the power of human belief, if you doubt our need to believe, and if you doubt the therapeutic effect of belief just take a look at the famous medical phenomenon of the placebo effect. I'm sure you're familiar with this. A medical researcher testing the efficacy of a new drug will recruit two samples of people. One sample will receive the drug; the other matched sample will receive a placebo, a piece of chalk, sugar-coated, that looks like a pill.

They all know that half of them are going to get the drug, half of them are going to get the placebo. No-one knows which they're getting. And in hundreds of published papers on this kind of research it turns out that about 30% of the people swallowing the chalk experience the therapeutic effect associated with the drug.

If you think that's remarkable, here's an example of the placebo effect from surgery. If you've recently had an arthroscopy on a knee, do not listen for the next couple of minutes. This was an experiment published in the *New England Medical Journal*, a totally respectable journal, a fully scientific experiment in which a number of patients due to have an arthroscopy operation

If quoting from this speech, please acknowledge that it was presented to the 2011 Communities in Control Conference  
 Convened by Our Community & CatholicCare, May 2011  
[www.ourcommunity.com.au/cic](http://www.ourcommunity.com.au/cic)



**Communities in Control**  
 One of the 16 Knowledge Centres  
 of Our Community.



**ourcommunity.com.au**

on a knee were divided in half. Half of them had the surgery. The other half had an incision in the skin that was sewn up, no surgery.

And you know what happened? The researchers reported that there was no statistically significant difference in pain relief or knee function between those who had the surgery and those who thought they'd had the surgery but didn't. So it wouldn't do to be too sceptical about faith healing, would it?

Then there's the desire to connect. We all know about the desire to connect. We know that communication is our lifeblood. We need to be part of communities. That's the core belief of everyone in this room, I guess. So we know about the human desire to connect.

But it's not just the desire to connect with each other. It's also the desire to connect with ourselves. The ancient Greeks said "know thyself" and for most of us it's a life's project, trying to figure out who we are.

My psychological hero, an American psychotherapist called Carl Rogers, reflecting on 40 years of psychotherapy, said, "There is only one problem." What he meant was that it didn't matter what his patients were bringing to the consulting room, it didn't matter whether it was a dysfunctional relationship or a drug addiction or a phobia or whatever it might be, in the end it always came down to "Who am I? What kind of person am I that's got into this situation?"

So we need that desire to connect with ourselves, and of course there are many, many strategies for doing that which I won't explore now.

There's another dimension of our desire to connect. We also desire to connect with the natural world. And again, when we lose that sense of connection, just as we lose the sense of connection with our local neighbourhoods and communities, we do feel restless, which is why people who live on the 14<sup>th</sup> floor of a high-rise apartment block in Melbourne will typically have a pathetic little pot plant struggling for survival on the balcony as though to say, "I know there's a natural world out there and this is my little symbol of it."

You go down to the St Kilda pier any evening at dusk and watch all the people enthusiastically lining up waiting to see the penguins appear just for a little link with the natural world. That's

If quoting from this speech, please acknowledge that it was presented to the 2011 Communities in Control Conference

Convened by Our Community & CatholicCare, May 2011

[www.ourcommunity.com.au/cic](http://www.ourcommunity.com.au/cic)



**Communities in Control**  
One of the 16 Knowledge Centres  
of Our Community.



**ourcommunity.com.au**

why people keep pets, it's why people love bushwalking and swimming and doing all these things that put them into the natural world.

Some of you are old enough to recall the pet rock phenomenon of the 1970s, when a slick Californian marketing type successfully marketed hundreds of thousands of pet rocks to the world, including a handbook on how to care for your pet rock. Most people found their rocks to be deeply unresponsive as pets. But they sat on the mantelpiece reminding us that there is a natural world out there and we're part of it.

Then there's the desire to be useful. I don't think I really have to say anything about this. It's one of the deepest of all the drivers of our behaviour. It's easy to be cynical about humans but let's remember that it's in our nature to be useful. If you doubt that, just reflect on how you would feel if, at the end of your life, or now, people's assessment of you was, "She's pretty useless"; "He's been a useless father"; "She's a useless person around the office"; "He's a useless member of the community". It's the ultimate putdown, isn't it, to be told that we're useless.

I heard just a couple of days ago about some research conducted in nursing homes. The researchers were trying to find out what were the big anxieties, the big worries about people settling into a new life in hostels and nursing homes. Number one on the list was feeling useless, looking for some kind of meaning, something meaningful to do.

If you doubt the desire to be useful, just look at the thousands of people who queued up with mops and buckets in Brisbane after the floods to help clean up the homes of total strangers.

Then there's the desire to belong. Again, I don't think I have to say much about that to people like you who are passionate about encouraging the sense of connection and belonging. Our sense of identity, our sense of emotional security, depends on satisfying our desire to belong in two ways. We're herd animals; we need to belong to little herds that give us a sense of intimate connection, typically with seven or eight other people. That's a normal-sized herd.

Traditionally, of course, the herd was the household. One hundred years ago Australians lived in herds, in domestic herds. Now more than 50% of Australian households contain only one or

If quoting from this speech, please acknowledge that it was presented to the 2011 Communities in Control Conference

Convened by Our Community & CatholicCare, May 2011

[www.ourcommunity.com.au/cic](http://www.ourcommunity.com.au/cic)



**Communities in Control**  
One of the 16 Knowledge Centres  
of Our Community.



**ourcommunity.com.au**

two people. The fastest growing household type, and indeed all around the Western world, is the single-person household.

Well, if you live alone or just with one other person, that's not a herd. And so most of us now are looking for contemporary substitutes for the domestic herd. We're still herd animals. So we look for a book club or a work group or a current affairs discussion group or an art class or a choir, whatever it might be that provides us with that sense of being part of the human herd.

If you can't think of any other way to connect with the herd you just go out and graze with the herd – the coffee shop, café, the food court. Don't you love food court, that euphemism for the public trough where you just go up and line up with the other cattle? You don't even have to moo if you're not feeling particularly sociable but you feel as though you're connected with the human herd. We need that.

We also need another kind of belonging. We need to belong not only to those little herds. We also need to belong to tribes. Again, traditionally of course, that was our extended family. But in a world where extended families are often in disarray and fragmented and dislocated we look for other tribes, religious tribes. For many people religion is at least as much about feeling as if they belong to a tribe as it is about believing particular things.

It may be a political tribe. It may be a sporting tribe. It may be an organisational tribe. One reason why so many people are so passionate about their workplaces, so connected to their workplaces, is that work provides the double whammy of belonging to a little herd, a work group, and to an organisational or professional tribe as well. We need both of those to satisfy our desire to belong.

Then there are a couple of desires that have to be on any list but are very troublesome for us. One is the desire for more. You may have noticed that as a species we're insatiable. The epidemic of obesity in Western society is just one of the many symptoms of how unrestrained the desire for more can be – more eating, more drinking, more of whatever we're enjoying, more money, more possessions, more travel, more sex, more education. Sometimes it seems good but often it gets out of hand and we just become obsessed, to the point of greed or, of course, in the end, perhaps even addiction.

If quoting from this speech, please acknowledge that it was presented to the 2011 Communities in Control Conference

Convened by Our Community & CatholicCare, May 2011

[www.ourcommunity.com.au/cic](http://www.ourcommunity.com.au/cic)



**Communities in Control**  
One of the 16 Knowledge Centres  
of Our Community.



**ourcommunity.com.au**

All of us want more life, don't we? When we're young we say quantity of life is unimportant. It's all about quality – if I even get to the stage where bits start falling off and I start doing and saying stupid things just hit me on the head, put me out of my misery. Then soon enough we get to the stage where bits are falling off and we're saying and doing stupid things and then we're saying, "Is there a pill? Is there some way to prolong this?" Of course, many religious believers have faith in the idea that even this mortal span isn't enough, that there's more to come via reincarnation or eternal life.

The other desire that often gets us into trouble is the desire for control. This is not a puzzling desire in itself. We started out as babes appearing to be in control of the universe and it was quite good. You yelled and were fed. You lay in a dirty nappy and someone cleaned you up. This was near enough to paradise. If you could have snapped your fingers, it was all happening with the snap of a finger.

But then we started to grow up and become socialised and to realise there were lots of other people around us who also thought they were at the centre of the universe and that we'd have to figure out some kind of cooperative arrangement if we were all going to survive in reasonable harmony. So the desire for control has deep origins within us.

And of course if we feel as though we've lost control, that can produce neuroses. All the classic human phobias are about loss of control: fear of flying, fear of travelling in lifts, fear of crowds, fear of open spaces, fear of sitting too far from the exit in a theatre, all of these things which really trouble and often disable people are the classic signs of the fear of loss of control.

The problem with the desire for control is that we are often looking in the wrong place for control. In particular, the big mistake most of us make for most of our lives is we think we can control other people. It takes us a long time to figure out that whether it's your spouse or your kids or your colleagues or your employees or your neighbours or anyone else, you can't control them. The only life you can control is your own life.

If you're dealing with circumstances beyond your control the only thing you can control is your response to those circumstances. But most of us stumble on feeling as though other people should conform to our wishes and so we're constantly frustrated and disappointed.

If quoting from this speech, please acknowledge that it was presented to the 2011 Communities in Control Conference  
 Convened by Our Community & CatholicCare, May 2011  
[www.ourcommunity.com.au/cic](http://www.ourcommunity.com.au/cic)



**Communities in Control**  
 One of the 16 Knowledge Centres  
 of Our Community.



**ourcommunity.com.au**

For many people a belief system is a form of control. If you feel as if you can understand what's going on, that helps you to feel a bit more in control of it.

There are two others; firstly, the desire for something to happen. All of us need things to look forward to. We all need stimulation. We're very odd about this, by the way. We say we resist change. In fact, many of us do resist change if it seems to be too significant, too revolutionary. Many Australians, many Westerners, have resorted to tranquillisers and anti-depressants in vast numbers over the last 20 years to help cope with the relentlessness of contemporary social, cultural, economic, technological upheavals of various kinds.

Yet the truth about us as a species is that we thrive on change. We all need emotional stability, we need to know we're securely loved, perhaps by a partner or family or a circle of faithful friends, but beyond that all our dreams of stability and certainty and predictability are both unhealthy and ridiculous.

In fact, we kind of know that, don't we? When we have got things apparently under control, perhaps even got the CD collection in alphabetical order, then we sit back and say, "Nothing ever happens." And so we look to go on an adventure holiday. But mostly we can rely on other people to provide all the stimulation we need.

People are beginning to realise you've got to have uncertainty in your life in order to keep the brain plastic, keep yourself alert and alive. Many people are doing a crossword a day to achieve this. Well, I have grave news. If you enjoy doing crosswords, by all means do crosswords but don't expect them to keep the brain active or keep you young. A crossword a day is just another habit. Once you've mastered the art of the crossword it's not really the challenge you're looking for.

What you need is people. What you need are people to crash into your lives with bad news or good news or just to be there. Have a couple of teenage kids in your life – that will keep you stimulated; that will keep the brain plastic.

It's other people, social contact. If you walk down the road and start talking to people in the shop, that's what will keep the brain plastic.

If quoting from this speech, please acknowledge that it was presented to the 2011 Communities in Control Conference  
 Convened by Our Community & CatholicCare, May 2011  
[www.ourcommunity.com.au/cic](http://www.ourcommunity.com.au/cic)



**Communities in Control**  
 One of the 16 Knowledge Centres  
 of Our Community.



**ourcommunity.com.au**

So we all need something to look forward to. A very wise American psychiatrist wrote recently, “If you have something useful to do, something to look forward to and someone to love, that’s about as good as it gets.”

Well, that’s three out of my 10 but there other seven others. He mentioned someone to love and that’s of course the last one on my list, the desire for love, to give it and to receive it. I don’t think I have to say much about that, do I? We all know that it’s love in our lives that enlarges our own capacity for compassion, for empathy. It brings out the best in us. It contributes more than anything else to our sense of emotional security and personal serenity.

And when we’re freely giving it, it is by far the most significant contribution we can make to making the world a better place.

So those are my 10: the desire to be taken seriously, the desire for my place, the desire for something to believe in, the desire to connect, the desire to be useful, the desire to belong, the desire for more, the desire for control, the desire for something to happen and the desire for love.

I’m sure some of you are saying, “Well, I’m quite happy with those but surely there are others.” And yes there are others, other kinds of desires. Some people are driven, and we’re fortunate of course that there are such people, by a passion for justice or beauty or truth. So there are those ethereal desires.

And then there are bodily needs which some people think of as desires. I wouldn’t call them desires. I’d say they are survival issues. We have to eat, we have to drink, we have to sleep and the species will die out if we don’t have sex. All of those things are part of survival.

The desires that I’m talking about are not survival needs. I call them our social desires. They’re about how we get our sense of who we are and how we manage our relationships with each other.

I’ll just give a couple of very quick examples, as I said I would, of how these 10 desires can interact and compete, sometimes contradict, collide with each other, in order to produce particular bits of behaviour.

If quoting from this speech, please acknowledge that it was presented to the 2011 Communities in Control Conference  
 Convened by Our Community & CatholicCare, May 2011  
[www.ourcommunity.com.au/cic](http://www.ourcommunity.com.au/cic)



**Communities in Control**  
 One of the 16 Knowledge Centres  
 of Our Community.



[ourcommunity.com.au](http://ourcommunity.com.au)

I mentioned work a few minutes ago. Work is a classic example. If you look at it from a rational point of view you'd say many, many people are quite irrational about their work. In Australia, for example, we work far too long. Our working hours are absurd by Western standards. People become workaholics. People work when they don't need to work. People work when they don't need the money.

Many men, in particular, become fearful of retirement, wondering what will happen to them after work. So why do we do that? The answer is that work, especially a sensitive, enlightened, productive workplace, satisfies many, many of these 10 desires: obviously the desire to be taken seriously – a pay packet is quite an eloquent statement of how seriously you're being taken; the desire to be useful; if it's an organisation you believe in, the desire for something to believe in is satisfied; the desire for my place, as I've mentioned, is often more richly satisfied at work than elsewhere; the desire to belong to the herd and the tribe; and the desire for control – it's perhaps the most harmless setting in which our desire for control is most obviously satisfied, if we're focusing on controlling our own work output rather than our colleagues'.

I've mentioned religion a few times. Hitchens, Dawkins, Harris etc., write vehement attacks on religion on the grounds of its irrationality. Well, talk to people who have religious faith, who engage in religious practice, and what you find is in such cases all 10 of these desires are being satisfied by their religious life. The question of whether it's rational or irrational simply doesn't arise.

All these desires have a dark side. None of them is inherently good or bad. They all have the capacity to bring out the best in us or the worst. The desire to be taken seriously, when frustrated, always brings out the worst in us. People can become not just cranky but positively violent if they feel as though they're not being taken seriously.

And this is not just individuals. Whole nations can become violent. Germany, between the two world wars, was perhaps the textbook case, but there are some around the world right now, people who have become violent because they feel they're not being taken seriously.

The desire for more, when unrestrained, almost always implies less for others.

If quoting from this speech, please acknowledge that it was presented to the 2011 Communities in Control Conference  
 Convened by Our Community & CatholicCare, May 2011  
[www.ourcommunity.com.au/cic](http://www.ourcommunity.com.au/cic)



**Communities in Control**  
 One of the 16 Knowledge Centres  
 of Our Community.



**ourcommunity.com.au**



The desire for something to believe in, when frustrated, usually leads people to mock other people's beliefs.

The desire to belong can be unhealthy; it can lead to unhealthy levels of conformity and acquiescence and obedience.

Well those are the 10 desires that drive us in my view. Why do we need to know about them? I hope it's obvious why we need to know. It seems to me it is helpful to have a better understanding. For example, in a relationship we will often feel the contest between the desire for love and the desire for control. But when the desire for control enters a loving relationship that almost always spells trouble.

Even though many brides, perhaps most brides, have been heard to say, "Once I've got him I'll fix him," they usually wake up after a little while that that won't be possible.

Yes, there are these tensions. We need to know what these tensions are. It's perhaps one of the ways of knowing ourselves better to recognise that a frustrated desire is going to be troublesome and we can recognise where that's come from.

But the much greater value in this sort of analysis, it seems to me, is to encourage us in dealing with others to recognise that they too are struggling to reconcile, to harmonise the same 10 desires that we are, and it is as much of a struggle for them as it for us. Perhaps that's an encouragement to a little more patience, a little more kindness and a little more compassion.

Thank you.

If quoting from this speech, please acknowledge that it was presented to the 2011 Communities in Control Conference  
Convened by Our Community & CatholicCare, May 2011  
[www.ourcommunity.com.au/cic](http://www.ourcommunity.com.au/cic)



**Communities in Control**  
One of the 16 Knowledge Centres  
of Our Community.



**ourcommunity.com.au**