

Who comes first—before why even

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Keynote Address

ANZEA Conference, 10–12 October 2022

“Would you do a keynote for the conference this October?”

“Love to,” I said.

That was June. Distant things seem smaller. As months evaporated into weeks and weeks into days the conference and its challenging wero—decolonisation and participation—loomed ever larger. Really, what *do I* have? Then Bob Marley’s iconic redemption song began in my brain’s backwaters “... *these songs of freedom ... 'cause all I ever had ...*” *Ka jank—ka jank ka jank “all I ever had ...” Kajank.*

Truth leaped out of ragged reggae lyrics. Yes! All I ever had is me. I’ll just offer my own song of redemption, how evaluation found and freed me by twisting who I ever was—my history, values, and strengths—into what I do. I hoped talking about knowing and living my full self, challenging other evaluators to do the same, would resonate. It felt risky, I felt vulnerable ... it felt right.

This piece is an invitation to come with me upstream into my distant headwaters, searching out little rivulets feeding into who I ever

was. Maybe you'll want to do the same for yourself.

As a Indian I'm colonised to my core —by British, by Portuguese, by Mughals before them, and surely others before them. I'm even branded with a Portuguese name, my whole community is—we're Mathiases, Fernandezes, Desouzaz, De Mels. Colonialism vapourised our Indian identity and left us as English-speaking Catholics with Portuguese names. Yet we found freedom in the ashes. We sought out education, tapped into privilege's mother lode, and diasporised ourselves across the planet. That's all far away enough for us to reinvent and retell our story to ourselves.

"We're South Indian Brahmins who became Catholics," I said, repeating our family narrative to my cousin.

He'd stayed India while the rest of us chased careers in New Zealand, New York, Munich, and Melbourne. He joined the Naxalites, spent his life in a heroic but ultimately useless Marxist revolution against India's ingrained discrimination.

Ken laughed.

"Bullshit! We're low caste. Changed religion and name to escape untouchability."

Of course he's right. We branded ourselves. Colonialism enslaved and saved me. Hmmm, complicated.

Ken's dead now. I am an evaluator in Aotearoa.

If you search for your truth in your history don't just accept narratives, those self-written stories saying where to look and where not to. Be prepared to unearth contradictions.

We migrated to New Zealand in 1971. A Te Atatu primary school playground turned my Tamil, my Konkani and my Indian accent into kiwi English. Vapourising me softly. I studied hard (Indian genes?), aced exams through school, and a scholarship fell out of the sky. Cambridge for a once-untouchable Indian kid, Cambridge! Three glorious years in a world centre of western knowledge and

privilege eddied out in Pimms on baize lawns, rowing on the Cam, and May balls on breathless summer nights. I'd aced exams again (swotty Indianness—all I ever had?), now golden apples were ready to pluck: PhDs in ivy league universities, the World Bank in Paris, commercial firms in London, or the UN in Geneva. One after the other my friends took one each. My proud parents, in Cambridge for my graduation, asked where I was going with my Cambridge MA.

“South Africa. Volunteering in a multiracial school,” I said.

With hardworking-immigrant dreams going up in flames before his eyes my father shouted, “Don't waste your God-given education!”

“What about my God-given life?” I shouted back.

A few months teaching in South Africa would teach me more—about myself—than 3 years at Cambridge.

Hitchhiking off into the heart of apartheid scared me and left me exhilarated too. When the 1981 Springboks came to Aotearoa I was a 16-year-old schoolboy. I was scared and unsure why, but knew I had to be in Auckland's barbed-wired streets. It was the same traversing a war zone in Mozambique in a truck to South Africa. Now I see why I was in both places. In the same stories repeating themselves in different contexts life was telling me who I ever was. Evaluation does that now.

From South Africa to Kalighat, Kolkatta. Mother Teresa's Home for Dying. Again I didn't know why. Again it felt right. Menial work helping dying destitutes sometimes to recovery, more often to scraps of dignity in death was made more special by morning prayers and sometimes *chai* with Mother Teresa afterwards. It was a transformative year, yet indefinably incomplete. I couldn't articulate it but strongly felt there was a bigger picture than tending dying people while looking away from the systemic injustice killing them.

My good Catholic mother was proud of me, but wanted me on a more travelled path. Her letter with an Auckland Medical School application dropped a golden global apple north into my hand.

Medicine in Auckland or fulfilment in menial work with poor Indians? Maybe as a doctor I could do more for poverty? Only later did I realise rapid sequence intubation in Christchurch ED asks none of the system and justice questions that holding a dying man's hand in Kolkatta avoids.

Like a fish flicked out of a stream I landed with a smack in Auckland med school. On my first day a white girl in a paisley *salwaar-kameez* drifted dreamily into the student cafe. Interesting. She told me she was born in India, lived in Nepal, spoke Nepali, climbed mountains. Fascinating. We missed lectures, talking privilege, power, and parathas on Lower Circular Road, Kolkatta. Irresistible. As starry eyed and misguided as me, she too thought medicine magically unlocks the doors of justice.

“I'll use my medicine against poverty. I dream of a global south village clinic, the Himalayas maybe,” she said, wearing her “why” right there on her sleeve.

I was smitten.

We somehow survived med school—despite (because of?) a wild year off in Latin America. Mountains, crocodiles, hitchhiking with cocaine-crazed truckies, and freedom in the streets of Havana replenished our spirits. I dived back into the same ferment for my medical elective doing public health amidst malaria, rubber tappers, gold miners, land grabbers, assassins, and indigenous people in Amazonia. Intoxicated by wildness I stayed 2 weeks extra and arrived 3 days late for my last course. My graduation was withheld and I lost my first job in Whakatāne, but hell it was worth it listening to life whispering my own story to me.

A golden junior doctor job in golden Nelson fell into my lap. White and clean and rich, Nelson was very far from Kolkatta and the Amazon. Kaaren got a job there too. Glorious times ensued, especially paddling and hitchhiking to Putaruru for a hippies-on-hay-bales

wedding on Kaaren's family's gorgeous dairy farm. "We worked hard for this farm," they'd say. Just like ours, their family narrative is about where to look and where not to. They did work hard of course, but hard-working Māori, now landless, are not in said narrative.

After our halcyon Nelson years came Hamilton. Leaping the flaming hoops of emergency medicine specialisation was technically complicated (so much to learn), conceptually simple (follow protocols), and (for me) morally kinda empty—never ask "why?"

One day Kaaren came home and said, "Time to go now."

Within weeks we were in Cambodia. Up on the banks of the Mekong in a flooded stilt house we were up to our armpits in bottom-up development with poor neighbours. Life in Asian slums is relational and rich. We were intensely alive swimming with slum kids on golden evenings and were intensely alive one black night watching one of those kid's mothers die of AIDS-induced TB. Back then our world had anti-retrovirals for Kiwis and Americans but couldn't spare any for J____. As I held her hand, system change was no nearer than from Mother Teresa's. I saw economic apartheid and saw my feet on both sides of its fence. I'm still like that—outraged and complicit. While living in a Delhi slum in 2010 I got TB—death for my neighbours. I played my privilege, flew to NZ, and was made well by wealth. In COVID's early days, despite "equality" writ large in our health narrative, New Zealand struggled to share vaccines with much-worse affected Fiji. Everyone looked away.

After Cambodia we were still trying to use medicine for justice. We visited a Nepali hospital and said we'd volunteer. They directed us to their English head office for an interview. Without asking why global south hospitals need global north directorates we went, were interviewed, and were rejected. In London I saw a Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) poster showing a superhero doctor, radio on hip, leading an emaciated black kid to a makeshift clinic in Africa

somewhere. Strong and white and good reaching down to help poor and black and weak exudes colonialism. As inspired as I am self-contradictory, I wanted to be that doctor. We applied, were interviewed in Amsterdam, accepted for Colombia, flew to Bogota, and were sent to Uraba's heart-of-darkness jungles. In Colombia's guerrilla war, with MSF a beacon of hope shining from a pillar of colonialism, we started participatory health with indigenous and black people in the ferment of flooding rivers, falciparum malaria, guerrillas, jaguars, and bandits. Here was my medical elective on steroids, more intoxicating than ever, and now with tiny slivers of structural change. Two heady years later we left Colombia expecting twins and arrived in MSF's Amsterdam office jubilant with the news: MSF had just been awarded the Nobel Prize! Eurocentric, idealistic MSF receiving a Eurocentric, idealistic prize. Self-contradictory, idealistic us debriefed and flew back to safe Aotearoa.

I wish our planet didn't have Pol Pot or HIV, coca, caste, TB, and guerillas, but it does. I'm a self-colonised, educationally privileged untouchable Indian kid. Kaaren is a multilingual white woman, a daughter of missionaries who grew up in the poor world and is a NZ public health physician. We're made to mess in this messiness.

A senior job in Roto Vegas ED dropped into my lap. I was asking questions now: why, in a hospital on iwi-gifted land, are so many of my Māori patients disconnected from land and health? How were they vapourised into tangata non-whenua? In New Zealand, which our national narrative says doesn't have discrimination? Such questions had taken me to South Africa long before medicine. Now, while doing chest drains and femoral lines in Rotorua ED by day, I started studying development extramurally through Massey by night.

Next was the world capital of clean and white and good, Christchurch. Christchurch ED is its epicentre. After 2 well-paid years of complicated, uncomplex medicine, just as I was getting used

to the sweet side of the tracks, my moral compass came home and said, “it’s time to go now.”

We chucked everything into a container, put it in a Canterbury paddock, and hitchhiked into the Himalayas (“Flew” doesn’t alliterate). Twenty years after our med-school café conversation we arrived to a clinic in a forgotten Himalayan valley. There was heroic surgery, spinal anaesthetics, and other Schweitzeresque stuff, but our clinical medicine segued into supporting village women health workers, a network of young mothers as nutrition workers and a programme with kids of Nepali migrant road workers. Though essential for India’s burgeoning infrastructure, Nepali migrants suffer brutal exploitation and discrimination. This in India, inspirationally liberated from colonial discrimination by Gandhi, salt marches, *ahimsa* (Nonviolent resistance) against artillery and all. My India.

We took a cliff-bottom hospital to questions like “*Who* has TB? *Why*? Whose knowledge does government education exclude? Do migrant road workers have rights? Will you look away when we say *caste*?”

Leading a community-based adaptation to climate change project (aka helping Indian villagers whose planet I polluted to change behaviour) pushed me into systems and how they change. Now I was circling in on evaluation, asking questions, looking for answers, and thinking systemically. In the journey I found outcome mapping and outcome harvesting. I joined online—talked actor centredness, complexity, partners not beneficiaries, system change by system members, undermining power ... In listening to and learning from others with similar questions (and some answers) I found my tribe, people for whom Indonesians with HIV, Afghan health ministers, Kenyan street kids, police chiefs, schoolgirls—all count. Finally! The confluence of my professional and personal journeys.

Last year I evaluated a prisoner reintegration programme in Ōtautahi. “We don’t have apartheid,” says our national narrative

(narratives, eh?) yet somehow 60% of NZ high-security prisoners are Pasifika or Māori—(are my in-law’s farming their ancestral land?) Actually, I wasn’t evaluating, only mentoring. Long-term prisoners, corrections staff, men in the community, volunteers defined **their** questions, what data answers them, how to get it. Interviewed, analysed on software. We sense-made together. This was my privileged self reaching across the fence inside, shaking hands with my excluded self and saying “let’s do this”. There I was, all of me, integrated in what I was doing. And of course I *was* evaluating—evaluating myself, decolonising myself.

In my river’s headwaters is an Indian kid telling and retelling himself the same story since forever. I’m brown, enslaved and emancipated by colonialism. I married a gorgeous white woman on the gorgeous Waikato dairy farm her colonial English ancestors hewed out of Tāne’s trees. We’ve oscillated between power and poverty, complicated and complex, in and out ever since. We chose hard options sometimes, let golden apples land in our laps other times. Trying to contribute to justice via system change originates up there. Evaluation has me confronting my contradictions, able to ask complex questions of the world and myself. I’m doing what is important to me, truly living, not just leading my default swotty-indian-kid-becomes-a-doctor life. I can now look my (now dead) father in the eye and explain why his 20-year-old son hitchhiked into apartheid.

I’m still trying to align myself with my values—we all are—but I’m getting there now. I write this from Afghanistan where I am working with government, community, NGO, men and women together as a participatory evaluation team in a country where women are not allowed to work. Out in that wild world, beyond protocols that always intoxicated me, evaluation shows me pathways to system change by stealth. I can look that world in the eye. I’m glad I said

“yes” to the keynote. It made me define where I am, where I’m going, what I’m doing, ask myself if my why aligns with my who.

That’s me, looking back to where I came from shows me the way to coherence in what I do now. Is like that for you? Are there questions you always asked without knowing why? Do some stories come up again and again in your life? Why? Do you see yourself oscillating around something huge and hidden in your centre, a “Leviathan / Stirring to ocean birth our inland waters?” (James K. Baxter, “Poem in the Matukituki Valley”). Risk a deep dive in there, tease out your story’s connecting strands. Your evaluation practice will be much better for asking why you evaluate and knowing *who* it is doing the mahi. Mine is.

On my journey, life threw challenges at my feet. Here are 12 wero I picked up. As an evaluator or as a human being maybe you want to pick up one or two. Maybe you don’t.

Jeph’s 12 wero

1. **Its not about me.** But one of eight billion humans, I am a speck in a universe of creative and destructive force. I alone can’t change the world. My wero is to become less self-centred, self-important in my work.
2. **But it is about me.** I can’t change the world, but can choose how I live in that world. I want to “live deliberately” , so that when the time comes to die, I will not say “I had not lived” (Thoreau, “Walden Pond”). I’ll use my one wild and precious God-given life on evaluation if it expresses who I am more than emergency rapid sequence induction does. My wero—deliberately self-aware choices in what I choose, what I reject, the way I work, who I work with.
3. **There’s only one me.** I reject the personal/professional dichotomy in favour of authenticity without hats, roles, or disguises. Rather

than “look professional” I’ll focus on how I am. The guy who swam with kids in the Mekong, operated on cervical TB in the Himalayas, liked safe easy Christchurch ED, was expedition doctor for rich people with \$100K spare to be guided up Everest, is now evaluating with women and men together in Afghanistan. Even if I’m self-contradictory, my work is better for bringing all of me to it. The wero: authenticity in everything.

4. **Evaluation is me, not just my profession.** If I am not bringing values into my work I should stop evaluating. Do something else. My life, my values are more important than my job. I have to know why I am doing every job I take, why I reject some jobs. The wero? Embrace my “why?”
5. **Evaluation is truth to power.** Power lurks in every evaluation. My privilege enables me to find excluded voices and let them speak, face power brokers, let them listen. I must use that privilege. Evaluation commissioners have power—I need the courage to ask them to reframe their questions. I need courage to piss-off powerful people. Truth to power can be scary, can be fun. I’m nervous writing this from a locked compound in Afghanistan. My wero—courage to speak truth to power in my evaluations.
6. **Who I am with, why, and how I am with them is more important than what I do.** Western culture can be functional. For me evaluation is relational. I must be truly participatory. Let others make decisions. This needs confidence—it’s always safer huddling in my corner of control. I got Kenyan street youth to draw a system map which no one had ever asked them to do. Their map, more insightful than I or the NGO could have done, informed a better evaluation that was not mine, but theirs. Working with Kenyan street youth made me more myself. My wero: hand my power over into relationships, see myself as facilitator not owner of evaluations.

7. **Change and be changed by the world I work with.** My time at Mother Teresa's was my life's most intense year. Trying to dignify poor people's deaths enriched my life. "Objective, external evaluator" is a western construct which does not fit me and my history. I should hold evaluation not as a cold blue light but a hot red flame in my hand. The way I define questions, define data, search for it, analyse it, has the power to change systems. How I twist values into design, the tools and skills I use to look, creates the world I see. When an ex-high security prisoner interviewed the director of Christchurch Men's Prison last year it was two ends of a system talking to itself in an evaluation. Who knows what will unfold this week in Afghanistan between women and government and community. To live my most intense life I must use my evaluations as interventions with the possibility of bringing change to the world and be vulnerable to let that world change me. The wero is aiming for system change in evaluation design while keeping myself soft and open to being changed by my work. Easier not to go there, much more rewarding to do so.
8. **Nurture both my creative and rational selves .** Evaluation needs tools and structured thinking. I want to keep expanding my toolbox, increasing my skills with what I have. Yes, learn programming to analyse data, study statistics to better see truth in stories. Analytic thinking is essential, but that's only half of the story. There's a creative, human side too. I want to hone my skills in out-of-the-box questions, drawing inclusive boundaries, collective mapmaking, novel designs, new methods. Evaluation, like the rest of life, puts us between creative complexity and right-angled efficiency. My wero—professionally and personally—is to embrace and enhance my creative humanity alongside my rational self.
9. **Keep learning** new things, trying new things. My 14-year-old self says, "young people try new stuff, middle-aged people only

do what they always did, and oldies even stop some stuff they used to do.” I want to stay young in evaluation. Last year I evaluated with prisoners, learnt a data-analysis computer language, experimented with the world first “realist outcome harvest”. Right now on a participatory evaluation in Afghanistan, way outside my comfort zone, I’m a bit scared, and totally energised. Trying things I have not done before is a life wero, not just a professional one. I’m learning to ski in my mid fifties, learning te reo, still trying new mountainbike routes. It all makes me nervous. This stuff keeps me young. Choosing to go outside my known is a wero.

10. **Take risks.** Doctors don’t take risks. In evaluation I can. I don’t want to stay safely doing what I always did and predictably get what I always got. Why not get prisoners to define evaluation questions, Guatemalan teenagers using Excel pivot tables for monitoring, say “yes” to a role as a “process expert” between policy and science in a room full of technical experts, or enlist buddhist monks in belief change on a snow-leopard conservation? Recently, I facilitated a design workshop through the night from a phone hotspot in Mount Cook for a homeless youth project in Kenya, where policemen shoot street kids. I had police and street kids together preparing and acting a role play about police with street kids whose friends had been shot. They had to tell the real story and add their own love-to-see ending. Everything, even my internet by hotspot, was risky but it was transformative for all, including me. Risk sometimes goes bad. With MSF we tried community malaria control in Colombia in a war with indigenous and black people in amongst racism, violence, colonisation, and land grabbing. It was like nothing I had ever done before. We had to negotiate with guerillas and generals and risk malaria—jaguars even. Our flame burned brightly for a year, then the paramilitaries killed a team member, kidnapped two others, and

threatened us with death. We ran, leaving mirror microscopes mouldering in the jungle as a monument to failure. Even so, I'd rather regret what I tried than what I didn't. This piece—trying to take highly qualified evaluators into the borderlands between personal and professional—has me nervous. My wero to my personal and my professional selves (they're one, remember): take risks.

11. **Humility. I need help.** So many people have guided and nurtured me professionally. Workshops with Michael Patton, participatory sensemaking gently and reflectively with OM colleagues. Designing an outcome harvest/realist evaluation with Gill Westhorpe extends my thinking way more than philosophy at Cambridge ever did. Many brave and generous people in the global south have figuratively held my hand through their complexity, like Javid in Afghanistan with whom I just had lunch. It's all possible only because I am connected to a wise and caring community. My wero: stay connected, give generously and receive graciously from my [evaluation] whānau around me.
12. **Keep dreaming.** One beautiful version of the Australian Aboriginal creation story has the dreammaker singing the world into existence around him along songlines. I'm a dreammaker, each evaluation a songline. Out of many possibilities my sacred task is to create space for good futures to sing themselves into existence. I must believe there are magical ways to the unimaginable for me and my participants. An ex-prisoner interviewing a prison director, transforming them both was impossible but became true. Having him speak to an evaluation conference at Te Papa was also impossible and became true. Men and women evaluating together in Afghanistan unfolding around me now is another example of how I understand "truly impossible". In work and in life, keep dreaming. What a wero!

Twelve seems like many were. It is. Whichever line we walk across this sacred earth there *are* many challenges. My line is partly enforced by the shape of the world where I stand, partly by my choices of where I place my feet, who I choose to walk with. Yours too. Your line is not my line, your boots not my boots. In my twelve were I find three themes. So I throw—no, humbly place—down in front of you my three were to rule them all. If they look like yours pick them up, test their heft, feel the fit for you. Consider if you'll choose to carry them on in your evaluation journey, your life.

Be myself.

Be with others.

Be the change.

The author

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