

Search Dinner Speech

Millie Rooney

Tonight I want to talk about delight.

And I want to talk about why I think that the concept of delight can be used as a powerful tool for bringing about, and achieving significant change.

I first came across the idea of delight as a tool for change in 2007.

In 2007 I was working at the Australian National University as an environmental officer. I'd been in this role for years and was beginning to get tired and disillusioned. My job was to encourage changes to social practices in a way such that we could reduce resource consumption. My job was to tell people to turn off their computer monitors when they left the room to go to the toilet. (silly though this sounds, for an organisation the size of a university, this can result in savings in the tens of thousands of dollars).

The task was far harder than my bosses seemed to think and I grew intensely frustrated at the inaction of such a highly educated population in the face of what I believe to be a social environment in desperate need of change.

Anyway, around this time I attended a campus sustainability conference. There, amongst papers on dual flush toilets, recycling infrastructure and whether electric hand dryers were better than paper towels, I attended a presentation that fundamentally changed the way in which I relate to complex problems.

A woman got up, out of the blue, I don't know where she came from and my efforts to trace her since have been unsuccessful. She got up and she said 'we change by delight'.

She explained that she had used to be a very angry activist. She used to go to meetings and bang her fist, she used to go to parties and yell at people for eating meat, or inorganic food, or dairy, or whatever it was. She said soon she stopped being invited to parties. And she liked parties. So she tried a different approach. Rather than angrily yelling at people for their eating habits she started making cake. Beautiful, in season, locally sourced, organic and gorgeously decorated cakes. She said 'people started inviting me to parties again'. We change by delight.

She gave another example of the way in which an approach based on delight had more traction than that of one of fear or anger. She explained the way in which she ran vegetarian cooking classes for the wives of dairy farmers in NZ, who wanted to encourage their children to eat more vegetables. As they sat eating the food they had cooked, locally sourced and ethically grown, conversations about organics, process etc emerged. Lubricated by laughter, good food and good company. At the end of the course, 8 of the ten women went home and talked to their husbands about shifting their farming practices towards organic/ethical practice.

Once again, delight not fright won the day, or at least created a space in which these conversations could be had.

What this woman said really resonated with me. I took her idea back to the office, threw my work plan out the window and told my boss I needed \$200.

I was lucky I worked in such a trusting environment. In fact, I was trusted so much they doubled it – yes! I had \$400 to change the world with! The result was Celebrate Sustainability Day.

CSD was a day of celebration. Where we all paused to reflect on just how much good stuff was going on. It was a festival kind of day. It began with free pancakes for those who rode to work. There was a local band, a yummy cake, umbrellas shading stalls. You could test the quality of the water. You could learn about the frogs on campus. Have a sausage cooked in a solar oven. Join the student sustainability group. Test drive one of the campus electric buggies. Have a smoothy made by an erratically functioning pedal powered smoothy (which my boss and I had finished in my dad's back shed late the night before). Or use a grabbling iron to rescue some of the trolleys which had been thrown into the campus waterway. And there was a free dinner made by the campus food cooperative from the produce from the campus organic garden.

It was a day of delight. The sun shone, we ate cake, I did a radio interview while sitting on the bike. But it was more than just fun. It was inspiring.

Over the day, the ANUgreen staff were approached by numerous students, previously uninvolved, who would say 'I've got an hour between classes can I help!'. Suddenly the issue of campus sustainability was something that was energising. It was possible.

I'm not sure what the ongoing benefits of CSD were. We got a few new volunteers and we'd increased the awareness of the fun ways in which people could get involved in campus/ broader sustainability. But I still consider the event to be a highlight of my short career.

Before CSD I was at the end of my tether. I was burnt out and tired. I was getting depressed about the state of the world. Despite the fact that I had worked a 15 hour day, by the end of it I was elated, inspired and re-energised to continue pushing for the change I thought needed to happen on campus. And so was the rest of my team.

Such a powerful lesson was this, that I eventually quit my job to start a PhD on the topic. But not before I'd discovered the value of the delight approach on a personal level. Well firstly we have to look at just how powerful social norms are and how delight might be used to get people to change their traditional patterns of behavior.

Elizabeth Shoves uses an example of bathing practices to explain just how powerful our assumptions of 'normal' are. She writes about the way in which resource use is determined by the social construction of normal. In roman times bathing was associated with the rich and luxurious. Pompous Romans would lie around in bathes drinking wine, relaxing and probably being brought peeled grapes. In the time of the plague it was considered unhealthy to bathe as that pesky plague was likely to enter your body through the pores that you opened by having a bath

And today? Today who would be willing to admit that they hadn't showered for three days? Going a week without a shower is unlikely to have any negative health implications really, but it's akin to social suicide in some circles.

Another study shows the way in which people act in certain ways subconsciously based on what they think is normal for others. I know some of you are staying in this hotel tonight. Have you noticed the sign about re-using your towels? If you leave your towel on the floor someone will come and replace it. If you hang it on the towel rail, it will be the towel you use tomorrow.

A recent study was conducted to see what it was that motivated people to reuse towels. Some hotel rooms had the sign "please re-use towels and save the environment", others had signs saying "please reuse towels to assist the staff of the hotel" and yet another said "most people in this hotel re-use their towels"

And it was this last sign that resulted in the greatest towel re-use. Of course when asked, no one identified this as the reason. So what does this say? It says that people model their behaviors on the perceived social norms of others.

So how does bathing practice and towel re-use relate to delight?

I think many of the challenges we face today are about getting people out of their habits of practice. Showing them an alternative way of being/writing policy/existing etc without getting angry, without preaching, without exhausting ourselves. How can delight be used to 'bump' people out of their habitual groove.

One of the definitions of delight that I really like is that delight is the combination of joy and surprise.

In the 1960s Arthur Koestler wrote a book entitled *The Act of Creation*. In which he explained one of the ways in which creation occurs, and by creation he means new ways of seeing and doing, is through humour. In which humour is the result of two different ways of seeing the world colliding. Humour is basically paradox exposed. Where two rational truths are presented in a context in which they both maintain their truth and in which truth cannot actually be possible.

An example of this which I hold dear is the image of my uncle on the beach. My uncle John is a serious uncle. Older than my parents he's always had a bit of a serious grandfather role in my life and well dressed. I've also been to the beach many times and seen my nieces and nephews in those neck to knee sunsuit things. So imagine my surprise when I saw my uncle on the beach for the first time. Wearing a full wrist to ankle sunsuit and sporting the most spectacular frog like goggles. Imagine my surprise at seeing this normally serious person in my life become a figure of fun.

The humour of this situation, the joy and surprise of seeing a serious uncle transformed into a saltwater frog, provided me with a glimmer of a different perspective. If my understanding of my uncle can be so changed, what else might I see differently?

There is an excellent example of the delightful approach to change on the website 'the fun theory'. The site is actually an elaborate advertisement for a car manufacturer, but has some fantastic videos of ways in which joy and fun can be used to change behavior.

My personal favorite is the piano stairs. In an attempt to get more people to use the stairs rather than the escalator, the stairs are converted into a working keyboard. Video footage of the project shows people gravitating towards the stairs and tentatively stepping on the keys. Realising they make a noise people start jumping erratically as they slowly make their way up or down the stairs. Kids, dogs, the elderly, people in serious business suits with matching serious faces. The experiment saw a two thirds decrease in people using the escalators and the facial expressions showed that the experience was joyful and surprising. It was delightful. Sure, the novelty might wear off eventually, but by then perhaps new patterns of behavior will have been established. I thought a lot about how to end this presentation, and about how small I would feel both because I knew that there would be lots of you, and one of me, but also because of the incredible hope, passion and commitment that you all show as a part of this organization.

And yes, some of this is naïve. A Pollyannaish approach to everything is not always going to work. But if we have to fight hard, then lets at least make it fun for ourselves.

As part of my local sustainability group, I'm really keen to develop a strongly network community, one in which the local drunk feels a part of, one in which the parents and children from the housing commission feel welcome in. My way of doing this is to hold free community pancakes in the park.

For two hours I made pancakes on the park barbeques and handed them out for free. Some people in the group were dubious it would work, but I decided to try anyway, if not one else turned up – I'd be there with at least one friend (who had been roped in) and we certainly wouldn't be short on pancakes.

Of course, we had so many people turn up I'm not sure I even got one pancake.

So the idea of delight is really just one part of bringing about change. But for me, in my quest to address the complex social and environmental changes I think we need to create a better society, I'd much rather have a pancake in hand than a rotten tomato.

I'd rather approach change with spirit, enthusiasm and hope and delight because in my experience it works, and really, what else is there?