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George Shipp Memorial Lecture 2026



Kindness: A species survival skill

Hugh Mackay AO



FOREWORD

Welcome to the fourth edition of the WEA Sydney Quarterly Journal 2026.

In this edition, we are pleased to share the George Shipp Memorial Lecture, delivered by renowned social researcher, author and commentator Hugh Mackay AO. His address, *Kindness: A Species Survival Skill,* offers a timely and thought-provoking reflection on what it means to live in a connected society and the importance of the relationships we build with one another.

Hugh challenges us to think about kindness as more than a personal virtue or a simple act of goodwill. He argues that our capacity to care for one another, to show compassion and to live cooperatively has been fundamental to our survival as a species. His central message is that we are, by nature, social beings. We need connection, belonging and a sense that we are noticed, heard and valued.

His observations about the growing prevalence of loneliness and social disconnection in contemporary Australia are particularly relevant. Despite living in an increasingly connected world, many people experience a diminishing sense of community and belonging. Hugh asks us to consider how our choices and changing ways of life have contributed to this, and, importantly, what each of us can do to change it.

There is a strong connection between these ideas and the work of WEA Sydney. For more than a century, we have brought people together through learning, conversation and the exchange of ideas. Our classrooms are places where people from different generations, backgrounds and experiences meet, discover shared interests and develop new perspectives. Education is not simply about acquiring knowledge. It is also about creating opportunities for connection, understanding and participation in the wider community.

Hugh's lecture reminds us that building a kinder and more connected society does not necessarily require grand gestures. It begins with how we treat one another, the time we give to others and our willingness to listen, include and engage. These are values that have a place in every classroom, workplace and community.

I would like to thank Hugh Mackay for delivering this year's George Shipp Memorial Lecture and for sharing his insights with the WEA Sydney community. The lecture provides much to reflect on, not only about the society we live in today, but also the kind of society we want to create for the future.

I hope you enjoy this edition of the Quarterly Journal and find Hugh's address as engaging and thought-provoking as those able to attend did.

Tiffany Roos
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George Shipp Memorial Lecture 2026

Kindness: A species survival skill

Hugh Mackay AO

Forty-two thousand years ago, a catastrophic climatic event hit our planet, wiping out four of the five species of humans that had been roaming the Earth for between two and three hundred thousand years.

The question that has intrigued archaeologists, anthropologists and others for a very lone time was this: Why did we survive, when our fellow-humans perished? Did we have bigger brains and superior cognitive capacity? No evidence of that. Could we run faster? Build better tools? Find safer hiding-places? No.

Recently, a group of British and German archaeologists, working in central Europe, believe they have found the answer: We, alone among all the human species, had mastered the art of living in relatively small, mutually dependent communities; sharing resources; caring for the sick and injured; learning to live co-operatively.

Paradoxically, as one archaeologist commented, our emotional vulnerability to each other – our acceptance of our need of each other; our acknowledgement of our interdependence – had become our greatest strength. In other words, we had discovered the power of community. All species of human were tribal, but only we had become communal as well.



Another archaeologist, commenting on the research, said it was a case of survival of the kindest. That sounds very different from 'survival of the fittest', but was an acknowledgement that kindness was one of the key qualities that made us fit to survive.

So let's think of kindness, and all the other attributes that express our essentially co-operative human nature – things like compassion, tolerance, inclusiveness – not merely as nice things to do, but as what they have always been: species survival skills.

We had evolved into another of the planet's many social species whose members are hopeless in isolation. We humans need each other: we need families, neighbours, friends and colleagues – groups and communities of all kinds – to nurture and sustain us and to give us that all-important sense of belonging that is fundamental to our mental and emotional (and physical) health, because we're members of this social species.

It's not a choice for us: we're communitarians by nature, born to connect, engage, communicate and to form mutually supportive communities. Not surprisingly, given all that, neuroscientists tell us, they can find the co-operative centre in the human brain. It's there, in our DNA. (By the way, there's no competitive centre: competition is a learned, social response, not innate.)

But that doesn't mean we are all born kind. It means we are all born with the *capacity* for kindness and all the other attributes we need as members of a co-operative species. But those capacities must be developed, nurtured, reinforced and modelled if they are to come to fruition. It's a bit like language. There's a language centre in the brain, too, but that doesn't mean we are born able to speak the mother tongue: that capacity also needs to be developed, nurtured, reinforced and modelled.

So what is this crucial ingredient in our survival called 'kindness'? How should we define it?

Being members of a social species means that our deepest psychological need is to belong, and the clearest sign that we belong is when we are taken seriously – noticed, appreciated, recognised, respected, included, *heard*. So I would define kindness as anything we do to show others that we take them seriously.

Literally, anything: a smile, a wave, a greeting, an expression of thanks or appreciation … or that beautiful expression of kindness: *listening*.

It's a remarkable quality? Think of kindness as a unique form of human love. (The original word was 'lovingkindness'.) All forms of human love are wonderful in their own way, whether romantic love, familial love, or the love of friends. But all of those varieties of love have one thing in common: they are all about our feelings; our emotional response to each other. Even when we use 'love' in more trivial settings – *I love dogs, I love chocolate, I loved that movie* - we're talking about our emotional response to those things; our feelings of affection for them.

But here's where kindness is unique: It's the only form of human love that doesn't entail the emotions. It's not about how we feel about the people we're kind to. As Samuel Johnson wrote, 250 years ago: 'Kindness is in our power even when fondness is not.' Isn't that a beautiful thing to know about our species? We're capable of being kind to people we don't like; people we could never agree with; even total strangers. Think of kindness as 'love without the need for affection'; a natural human quality that appears whenever we're being true to what Abraham Lincoln once described as 'the better angels of our nature'. Not heroic; just human.

And we do it without qualification. We don't see a person in need of our kindness and say, 'Well, I *could help*, but first, I need to know where you stand on immigration, or nuclear power.' No, kindness is practised *indiscriminately*.

If that's the kind of species we belong to – if that's the kind of people we are destined to be – what went wrong?

How come, in Australia in 2026, in a society comprising members of this gloriously social species – this mutually dependent species – this essentially co-operative species – social disconnection has become our number one public health issue? Recent research from the *Ending Loneliness Together* coalition has revealed that 51 percent of Australian adults are currently either lonely, socially isolated, or both.

How did that happen?

There's no mystery about it: it's the result of choices we've been making about how to live – especially over the past 30-40 years. These are choices that have actually been pushing us in the opposite direction from our true nature, creating trends that have been eroding social cohesion and increasing the incidence of social fragmentation.



We sometimes talk about these trends that have been reshaping our society as if we had no agency! But we've done these things to ourselves, presumably without realising the long-term consequences for own health, and the health of our society.

Briefly, here are a few of the trends I'm referring to:

- **Shrinking households.** In the past 100 years, our population has increased five-fold while the number of dwellings has increased ten-fold. Our fastest-growing household type is the single-person household, already accounting for one in four households, and projected to rise to one household in three. Many solo-householders love living alone, but the scale of this household revolution means that, as a society, we have dramatically increased the risk of loneliness and social isolation.

- **High rate of relationship breakdown**. Between 35 and 40 percent of contemporary marriages or partnerships are ending in separation. This contributed to social fragmentation by fracturing families and friendship circles and potentially disrupting neighbourhood connections.

- **Falling birthrate.** Our birthrate is now the lowest it's ever been, so the 'social lubricant' effect of children in the neighbourhood has dramatically diminished.

- **Increased mobility**. We move house, on average, once every six years, so there's a lot of movement in and out of neighbourhoods.

- **Increased busyness.** We seem to have become proud of our busyness, without recognising that busyness can be a significant barrier to social interaction.

- **The IT revolution** (and its full flowering in AI). The IT revolution is a paradox: it promised to make us more connected than ever before in human history … and it has! But it has also made it easier than ever in human history to stay apart from each other and still feel we're 'in touch' via screen-based devices that deny us that crucial ingredient in human interaction: *eye contact*. (The loneliest age cohort in our society are the 18-24-years olds: 'connected but lonely'.)



The cumulative effect of these and many other changes has produced the so-called Me Culture, in which we are at risk of placing a higher value on our personal identity than on the common humanity we all share. We are becoming more individualistic, more competitive, more mistrustful. We are becoming angrier, less compassionate, and less inclined to devote time and energy to community-based organisations.

It's no surprise, therefore, that we are now suffering from three major epidemics of mental illness: loneliness, anxiety and depression. Of course we are! When herd animals are cut off from the herd, they suffer. When the herd starts to fragment, we are all at risk of suffering. The truth about us is that we all exist in a shimmering, vibrating web of interconnectedness and interdependence, and when we try to disentangle ourselves from that web, we pay a high price.

Social isolation is a public health issue because of all the health consequences that flow from it: not just the increased risk of loneliness, anxiety and depression, but our increased vulnerability to hypertension, inflammation, sleep disorders, assorted addictions … and even a reduced life expectancy.

But social isolation and loneliness also have social, cultural and political consequences: fragmentation leads to an increased vulnerability to extremism, and even radicalisation via the online world, where the lonely and/or socially isolated may be made to feel welcome, as if they 'belong'.

That increased vulnerability to conspiracy theories, propaganda, lies and disinformation is partly due to the absence of the normative influence of direct social pressure that, in conventional social settings – stable families, friendship circles, workplace groups, etc. Such normative influence can modify the potential influence of media content and, at the same time, sharpen our moral clarity (since the moral sense is a social sense).



Given what we know about the nature of our species and the secret to its long-term survival, and what we now know about the negative effects of our recent life-choices, the question is: *what are we going to do about it?*

Or perhaps the deeper question is: *What kind of society do we want to become?*

We know the essence of our true human nature is social; we know we need each other; we know we need to connect and engage with the communities we live and work and play in, and yet we keep fragmenting.

Clearly, there's no magic wand. Nor is it up to 'the government'. We have done these things to ourselves and only we can reverse, or at least halt the trends that are fraying the fabric of our society.

If you dream of a better world – a society that better reflects our true nature – kinder, more compassionate, fairer, more tolerant, more harmonious, less aggressive – then there's only one way to make that dream come true. Each of us who shares the dream must live *as if* it's that kind of society. If enough of us live like that, that's the kind of society we will become.

