

Jane Caro, Social Commentator

Address to the Australian Council of Deans of Education Annual Dinner, 20 October 2016.

**Professor Tania Aspland:** Jane talks about modern technology in a lot of her work. She wished it they never had been invented. Machines that nag when you're going too fast or fridges that tell you to shut the door, et cetera. Jane's frustrated by that.

[00:00:30] We didn't ask Jane to talk about technology though, tonight. She's well-known for her passion and support for teachers. Where the community needs to improve, rather than constantly having elements of political leadership, the media and so called experts making ill-informed comment and judgements about the profession and the quality of teachers. That's music to our ears, Jane. I invite you to the podium now, please, to share some of your thoughts with us.

**Jane Caro:** I'm a little overawed. Here you all are, experts in education. I'm just a mouthy mum, frankly. I suppose I'll tell you a little bit about where my passion for education came from. Why I feel so angry about the way our policymakers, but not simply our policymakers. The way our community talks about teachers, because I wasn't acting on the drum. It infuriates me, when I get asked on the question that precipitated that little rant was, 'Do you think we have a problem with the quality of our teachers?'

[00:01:30] Can you think of any other profession where that question would be asked? The mere fact that, that question is an acceptable one to ask, is a gobsmacking insult. Teachers are such nice people. You like rules and you do tend to like obeying them. It's my one criticism of you. I'm not like that at all. That's perhaps, my use to you is that when I get angry, I express it, wherever I get a chance to. It happened to be on that television program. That particular clip went viral, and it's now got upwards of 1.6 million views.

[00:02:00] Now that's important for all sorts of reasons. It's very important for me and my career. I will totally acknowledge that. It's also nice for The Drum and for the ABC. It's also important from the point of view that, that is the highest viewing of any clip from The Drum, and it is about education and it is about teachers. Teachers as human beings, which is another thing we don't hear enough about.

[00:03:00] It's also the fact therefore, and it's important because the 1.6 million views indicates that there's a great deal of support out there, for teachers, and a great deal of anger out there, about the way teachers are routinely, casually insulted. Have been, for decades. One of the things I said in that clip, that I feel very strongly about is that, 'If politicians, 30 years ago, had gotten together and decided that they would systematically drive down the morale of the teaching profession, they couldn't have done a better job.'

[00:03:30] If you can think of something which will be more damaging to the results of students or to the ability of students to get ahead in their schools, than to drive down the morale of the people who teach them, well I would really like to know what that thing is. I actually feel that, forget about protecting teachers because they're nice people. It's actually about protecting students, by protecting teachers.

[00:04:00] There's a wonderful saying that I've always really liked. It's one of those anon. Who knows who first said it or wrote it or whatever it was? It is that, 'The most important thing a man can do for his children is, love their mother.' I often think that the most

[00:04:30] important thing that society can do for their children is, love and support their teachers. It makes the same sort of no-brainer kind of sense. We live in an era where no-brainer kind of sense has gotten lost. I think it was the plan that drowned it and a heap of odeur, is the word, I think, I'm looking for.

[00:05:00] What's happened, it seems to me ... It's not just in education. It's not just in teaching. One of the things that I do now is, I speak in all sorts of different sectors in the community. I'm hearing the same thing that basically, the control freaks and the measurement maniacs have taken over the world. The people for whom process is

[00:05:30] everything. The people for whom jargon replaces meaning. In fact, they're afraid of meaning. They don't want meaning because if there's any meaning in a statement, they can be pinned down to it.

[00:06:00] It's interesting that I just listened to the third debate this afternoon, between Clinton and Trump. What is interesting is, Trump sounds like he's saying something, but there's no meaning in it. It's a word salad. It's mostly, 'I'm great.' He reminds me of Joh Bjelke-Petersen. Anyone else see the resemblance? It's quite astonishing, how alike they are. When they transcribe what Trump actually says, it's a word salad. It's like he threw a whole lot of adjectives up in the air, and they all landed in his order. That's how he said them. There's no meaning to what he says.

[00:06:30] Clinton on the other hand, there's meaning to what she says. She's putting her colors to the mast. We know what she's going to do. She's been telling us patiently, calmly, through gritted teeth, for a long time. There are an awful lot of charlatans like Trump, in all sorts of powerful positions.

[00:07:00] I was saying at the table that, I read a wonderful book a while ago. I recommend it to you. It's called Smile or Die by Barbara Ehrenreich. Basically, its thesis is that positivity is destroying America. In fact, I think you could argue that it's destroying the world. She doesn't extrapolate that far, but hey, I am.

[00:07:30] Her thesis is, and she comes to this idea about positivity. The relentless, never say anything negative. Never say anything that could be seen as you not being a team player. Exactly what you were illustrating with your plan, [Palm 00:07:37]. The fact that the message has to be massaged, until it's a positive message. Until it's not, 'This is shit,' but 'This is a wonderful ... Can promote growth.' That's exactly what is happening throughout society now.

[00:08:00] She argues that, how she came to this realisation was, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. A terrible thing to happen to anybody. She found that she was not allowed to speak about her grief and fear about breast cancer because whenever she did, people said to her, 'Oh, you mustn't talk like that. Those negative thoughts are what causes the cancer and what will kill you.'

[00:08:30] Now, what kind of stupidity A, would say that to someone with breast cancer? What kind of an asshole are you? B, actually believes that kind of infantile magical thinking. This level of stupidity is now being preached all over the place. She recovered from breast cancer, but she got really interested in this idea that you can never say a

negative thing. She said that basically, what's now happened. She investigates all sorts of business and government and policy and schools. The full gamut.

[00:09:00] Her thesis is very powerful. That what has happened is, if anyone speaks up and says, 'This is shit,' they're told, 'Oh, no. You're being very negative. You're not a team player.' You have to turn it into something positive, before you will be listened to. That basically ... There's a wonderful film. Oh, what was it called? [inaudible 00:09:17].

Professor Aspland: [Preacher 00:09:19]

Jane Caro: That was a wonderful film, but that's not the one I'm thinking of. No, it's the one which was about the guy who was trying to warn them that their company was about to fall off a cliff. He got fired and retrenched. It's about how the GFC happened. How the GFC happened was that, nobody was able to tell the truth to the Managing Directors, to the people who ran the companies because they were told they were being negative, they were being a downer, they weren't a team player, they weren't doing the right things. This cult of positivity, actually sent our economic system plummeting off a cliff.

[00:10:00] It's a wonderful and powerful thesis. We now have politicians who, when talking about their own policies, can only wax lyrical. The other side of that is, when they talk about the opponents, they can only wax critical. What we get is, this weird dance with one side saying, 'This is the best plan anyone's ever invented. The other one's saying, 'This is the worst plan anyone's ever invented. My plan was much better,' when actually both plans are shit.

[00:10:30] The problem is that, teachers are at the pointy end of all of this because what we are seeing, I think, in the world is, not a fight anymore, between the left and the right. I think those are old-fashioned definitions. There's a philosopher called Stephen Law. Some of you may have read his book, the War for Children's Minds, which is wonderful. He's very engaged in teaching and education.

[00:11:00] He defines it as a war between the authoritarians and the liberals. By that he means, those who want to tell you what to think, how to think, what to do. Those who want to teach you how to think, and leave it up to you, as to the conclusions you draw. Now, you would know as educators, that one is good teaching and one is bad teaching.

[00:11:30] The authoritarians are fighting very hard, to hold on to their authority. The liberals are fighting just as hard, to break that authority down. We're in a really dangerous, risky, difficult place. It's probably directly as a result of the invention of the internet and social media, which, like the invention of the printing press, has thrown all the powerful up in the air. The invention of the printing press destroyed the total control the Catholic had, over information in Western Europe. It destroyed it.

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[00:12:30] What is happening now is, the internet is taking that even further. It's basically, sorry white blokes in the audience, destroying the control that mostly, white men had, over information and powerful positions. That's what's happening. Of course, nobody gives up power without a fight. That's one of the things we're facing up to.

[00:13:00] When you are in schools. When I was at school in the 70s, I don't think anyone tried to control very much, what my teachers did. If they did, remembering some of my teachers, they spectacularly failed. Some of those teachers who would go right off script and wander all over the place telling us wonderful stories about something that had absolutely nothing to do with the lesson, taught me more than the ones who stuck rigidly to their curriculum. People are always asking me my opinion of curriculum. I'm not a teacher. I have no opinion of curriculum, except this.

[00:13:30] Curriculum's what you practice on. You're learning how to learn how to think. You're not learning to remember and regurgitate what was in the curriculum. If you ask me now, what was on the curriculum when I was at school. I finished school in 1974. If you ask me what was on the curriculum then, I couldn't tell you a single thing. Not one thing. I think I can remember one quote from King Lear, that I crammed up on, for the HSC. It was 'How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is, to have a thankless child.' I don't know why that stuck with me, but gee, I found out the truth of that, later in life. That's about it. That's about it.

[00:14:00] What I do remember, vividly remember is the personalities and the relationships and the fun and the mischief and the bad things we did, and some of the good things we did as well. It's about the people. It's not about the stuff in the textbooks or the stuff on the ... We had blackboards, on the blackboards. It's not about any of that.

[00:14:30] I learned enough to pass the exams, go to university and become a writer and do what I needed to do. They taught me how to think, not what to think. As I watched my own children go to school, I was astonished about the changes that had happened. How much more rigid and narrow it seemed, that their learning was. Also how everybody had an opinion, what went on in the classroom. Parents used to talk to me about what was being taught and whether it was the right thing or the wrong thing.

[00:15:00] Now, I am a naturally slack parent. There is no doubt about that. I was not terribly interested, what was going on in the classroom. I was just deeply relieved to hand my children over to someone else and let them be their responsibility for a while. I thought that was excellent. As long as they came home and occasionally showed that they could read something and write something, I was pretty happy. Even adding up didn't bother me that much because I've never been able to do that myself.

[00:15:30] A lot of other parents were unbelievably engaged in what went on in the classroom, in ways that I felt were a bit neurotic really. In fact, I think that is another thing that is being caused by the cult of positivity, by the general meaninglessness of a lot of what passes for public conversation these days, is the ramping up of anxiety.

[00:16:00] Of course, if you have a highly anxious population who feel out of control. One of the things they will do is, control what they can. Of course, parents feel that they can control what happens in their child's school and what happens in the classroom, in a way that I don't think my parents ever dreamed of.

[00:16:30] I've a very great friend who said to me once, 'you know, it's really changed.' She said, 'When I was a kid, if a teacher had told my mother that I showed signs of having an imagination, my mother would have expected her to beat it out of me.' Now, I don't

recommend we go back to that extreme, but there wasn't that idea that, every single child is gifted and talented.

[00:17:00] If I speak to room fulls of teachers, I know I have a sure-fire opening line. I say to them, 'Hello. I'm the last parent in Australia of two perfectly ordinary children.' That always brings them to their knees, weeping with gratitude and delight. The reason parents feel their children are gifted and talented or try to pretend to themselves that they are, is because they are so anxious. The anxiety has been ramped up. They have been made to feel that, if their children don't come top, then the likelihood is, their children will never amount to anything, which is absolute rubbish.

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[00:18:00] I never came top in anything in my life. In fact, I got invited back to my old high school, Forest High, to give a speech at speech night, which I was rather pleased about actually. What I was really pleased about was, I was able to get up and say, 'Look, to all the brothers and sisters of the nerdy swats who are winning stuff tonight, I just want to say to you, this is the first Forest High speech night I've ever been to.' They didn't ask me back.

[00:18:30] I think teachers have found themselves at the pointy end of all this anxiety because it is gathered around their children. That people have gathered it around their children, and the fear for the future is very much concentrated on children and what might happen to them. There's a feeling that you have to buy them an advantage. You have to buy them a network. You have to get them tutored, so they're going to get these really high marks. There's an almost weird lack of recognition, of the way the world actually works.

[00:19:00] My youngest daughter got into OC class in fifth and sixth class. She only went because it was at the school that she was already attending. It was a disaster. I wish I'd never sent her, but you can ask me about that later. At the orientation day, I will never forget this. I sat at the back of the room because we already went to the school. I felt, 'Well, I don't really need to know a lot about the school. A lot of these parents came from other schools. I'll sit at the back and just listen. Show willing. Pretend I'm not a slack parent.'

[00:19:30] There was all these questions. 'How many hours' homework are they going to get? What's going to happen?' Teachers dutifully answering them. Finally I put my hand up and I said, 'Well, I just have one question. All the kids coming into this class, are used to being in the top two or three of their normal class. Obviously, only two or three of them can be the top two or three in this class. How are you going to deal with that?'

[00:20:00] The teacher was great. She said, 'Oh, I'm so glad you asked that question because that's actually the biggest.' What was interesting was, not her answer. What was interesting was, what happened to all the parents who were sitting in front of me. They all turned around and looked at me with this expression on their face. It had never crossed their minds that, in fact, all the two or three of the children were actually now, not going to be top. It had never crossed their minds because they were so busy driving them into this achievement, that they'd never thought about what it meant, when they actually got there.

[00:20:30] We seem to be in this world all the time, where people are aiming for what I think, are false Gods. Then when they get there, it's not what they wanted. It's not giving them what they expected. We are obsessed with outcomes. You're the Deans of bloody education. Outcomes are your business, aren't they? Aren't you all constantly being held to account for outcomes?

[00:21:00] I'm going to say something which many people will think, is heretical. You cannot control outcomes. It is impossible to control outcomes. The only thing you can control is, inputs. That's all, each of us can control. I discovered this in a brutal way. I will tell you how I discovered this.

[00:21:30] I was asked by the wonderful Marilyn Parker. You know, Marilyn Parker. She's retired. Wonderful education journalist in the Daily Telegraph. She asked me to fill in for her. This was a long time ago. Write her column while she was on holidays. Just one column. She asked somebody else to do the second week. I had never written a column in a newspaper before. I killed myself to write that column. I researched it, I wrote it over and over again. I came up with all sorts of possible different topics. I wrote a number of different columns before I decided, I've never worked that hard on a column since, I can tell you.

[00:22:00] I worked on this one because it was my first. I was really proud of it and I sent it to the Daily Telegraph. I met my deadline. It went into the paper on the designated day. I can guarantee you, nobody read it. I can guarantee you, nobody read it. The reason I can guarantee you that, is it appeared on the 12th of September, 2001. No, poor me. No, who cares about my stupid column. What I'm saying to you is, that's what happens, that gets in the way of outcomes.

[00:22:30] You can put your heart and soul into doing something. Something can come along out of left field, that you had no bloody control over, and knock it out of the water. You can be working with the brightest young teacher, and bringing them up and nurturing them. Then someone in their life gets terribly ill or something awful happens to them. They fall away. That's nothing to do with you and what you did. If you're being measured on how this young woman or young man performs, you're going to suffer

[00:23:00] for something that you had no control over. It is ridiculous.

I admire watching Hilary Clinton in the debate. In the first debate she said. Donald Trump said something to her. 'I've been traveling around, while you've been locked in a room somewhere, avoiding people.' She said, 'Yes, I was preparing for this.' I think Donald's saying, 'I'm prepared for the debate. He's right. I did prepare for the debate. I'll tell you something else I've prepared for, and that's to be President. I think that's a good thing,' which was an excellent answer.

[00:23:30] Quite apart from that excellent answer, she was saying that she was controlling her inputs. She was doing the hard work, to make sure that she had what she needed at her fingertips, in the face of the biggest lunatic who's ever prowled the debate stage, let alone stood for President. That is why she's been able, to not get goaded into responding. To stay stead, sane and calm in the face of this onslaught of complete

[00:24:00] craziness, because she controlled the inputs.

There is no one who can control Donald Trump. This is perfectly clear. Even Donald Trump cannot control Donald Trump. This is perfectly clear. She didn't even try. She just controlled what she could do. This is how sane and mature human beings manage their lives.

[00:24:30] I remember once, for my sins, I worked in advertising for 35 years as a Creative Writer. I remember a client saying to me once ... It got worse and worse from the 80s on, about people wanting you to guarantee stuff. He said to me, 'Can you guarantee that this campaign you want me to buy from you, and that you're trying to sell to me, will reach my sales targets?' I said 'No, but I can't guarantee that my children will grow up to be worthwhile citizens either. I'm just giving my best shot at both.' He didn't buy the campaign.

[00:25:00] Nevertheless, I was right. People can lie to you about the fact that they can control outcomes, but they can't. The really pernicious side of this for teachers, particularly teachers who are struggling in very disadvantaged schools, servicing very  
[00:25:30] disadvantaged communities is that, they are being asked to solve poverty. They are being asked in the classroom, with a rigid curriculum and various outcomes that their students are meant to meet, to control and to solve poverty.

[00:26:00] This is an absurdity. It is for that reason, that so many bright, young people leave teaching within the first five years, because they are being asked to do the impossible. To be asked to do the impossible, makes you go crazy. There's a term. It's becoming quite popular in feminist circles, called Gas-lighting. Does everybody know what Gas-lighting is? It comes from an old movie, starring Ingrid Bergman and Charles Boyer. Charles Boyer tries to make Ingrid Bergman think she's going crazy.

[00:26:30] That's what Gas-lighting is. It's when people ask you to do things or change the reality. Deny, Donald Trump is a champion Gas Lighter. You say, 'Well, you said this.' He'll go, 'No, I never said that. Here's the video evidence of you saying that. No, I never said that.' That's where it makes you feel like you're crazy. To ask young teachers to go into classrooms full of kids from incredibly chaotic backgrounds, and reach set outcomes, is to gaslight them. It is to make them feel like they are going  
[00:27:00] crazy, because they can't do it. No one can do it.

[00:27:30] All it does is, eat them up. Make them feel like failures, when they're not failures. When they're amongst the most admirable young people in our society, because you have to be a pretty admirable young person to decide 'I'm going to go be a teacher.' Yeah, because it's paid so well. The conditions are so brilliant. It's such high status. If you go to a dinner party and you say you're a teacher, people go 'Wow. Wow, really?' No, they don't. They say, 'Oh, weren't you smart enough to do anything else?' That's what they say.

[00:28:00] You have to be a pretty special and motivated and compassionate young person, to make a choice to go and be a teacher. Then we put them in situations where they cannot succeed. Where to succeed, they have to work hours I've never seen.

My eldest daughter is a teacher. She's currently on maternity leave. Thank God, because otherwise she would have had a nervous breakdown. No, frankly. Because

- [00:28:30] she was so idealistic and dedicated, enthusiastic. Wanted to get in there and change these kids' lives and make a huge difference, all of which is incredibly admirable. Had she been left alone to get on with it, she might have actually been able to do some of that. Because she had to constantly prove to other people, that she was doing what she said she was doing in the classroom, the overwhelming amount of paperwork that she had to do, basically burned her out.
- [00:29:00] I think at the bottom of this, and it's to do with anxiety. It's to do with the relentless cult of positivity, it's to do with the kind of meaninglessness of much of the conversation that goes on between those who are meant to be our leaders. It's to do with the gas-lighting that constantly goes on in public life, and is very rarely called out.
- [00:29:30] I think that we place young teachers in a situation where they try desperately, to please everybody. To fill in all the forms. What has fundamentally broken down is, trust. We no longer trust the teacher in their classroom, to get on with the job. Instead we all micromanage the teacher in the classroom. Parents micromanage them, BOSTES micromanages them. Politicians micromanage them. Shop jocks on radio, who are so expert at everything, micromanage them.
- [00:30:00] I get asked on Sunrise routinely, to comment on something that a school has done. Now, Facebook, Twitter and social media micromanage them. It's hardly surprising that ... I think the statistic is about 50% of the teaching profession have gone within five years, never to return. Sorry, that is a red flag saying, there's something horribly wrong with the way we're treating young teachers and the sort of jobs that they find themselves in.
- [00:30:30] We're also finding all the teachers giving up. Not actually giving up in terms of leaving, but giving up in terms of trying to do anything differently, remaining committed. We're seeing things like applications for Principals jobs, plummeting in terms of the people who are actually willing to apply for those jobs. Who wouldn't?
- [00:31:00] I have a sister who's a Principal. Holy shit. That is a job and a half. You are responsible for absolutely everything. Recently, teachers, certainly in public schools. I presume in private schools as well, were told that they need to go and notify about obese students. Have you seen your average teacher of a certain age? It's not the sveltest profession. Not that I can talk. I'm not svelte either. Can you imagine a rather fat teacher going up to a pair of parents and saying, 'Your child is obese and I have to notify.' Dogs. To name and shame your child and your family because your child is obese.
- [00:31:30]
- [00:32:00] The parent's quite rightly going to turn around and say to the teacher, 'I'm sorry? You're calling my kid fat?' This is the level of ridiculousness that we're getting to, in terms of policymakers, politicians, bureaucrats, passing the buck for social issues down the line, until they get to the school, and to the teacher and to the Principal. Basically saying to them, 'Your job. You fix it.'
- [00:32:30] That is outrageous. It's outrageous and we need to be saying so. I think, and what have I got, to back this up? I'm a bloody nobody out of advertising agencies. I think however, that the best schools and the wisest schools are those that become oceans



of sanity in a crazy world. That that's what schools should aim to do. I've heard examples of it.

[00:33:00] There was a wonderful Principal of Parkes Primary School. Parkes Primary School had a very high-level of disadvantaged kids in it. A lot of kids coming from very chaotic background. She was very tall. Ruth Brain, I think her name was. Anyway. Very tall woman. She told me this lovely story about how every single kid who came into her school, who enrolled in her school. She would get down to their level and she would say to them: 'Look, I can't do anything about what goes on outside of school. I can't control things that go out of school. Anything that happens in here, I will make you a promise. You will understand why it happens. If you don't. If something happens here, good, bad or indifferent, and you don't understand why, you can come to me and you can say Mrs. Brain, I don't understand why that happened. I will find out why it happened or explain why it happened. You'll get into trouble if you do the wrong thing, but I'll be able to tell you why.'

[00:34:00] Now that's creating sanity. That's actually, her throwing a lifeline out to a small child and saying, 'The world is not all crazy. You can have reason and logic and warmth and nurturing. Yes, discipline. You can understand why things happen,' which is the essence of sanity. To understand why things happen.

[00:34:30] With our whole society is losing connection with that idea of what sanity is, which is, you need to understand what's going on. I think there are a whole lot of people in jobs right now, who have no idea why they're doing what they're doing. They're getting orders to do things. I think a lot of the accountability that teachers have to do. The only reason they think they're doing it, is because it's going to solve somebody else's problem, further up the line in terms of, what were you talking about all the constant reviews that nobody ever looked at. That's crazy. That's insane-making, because that's people doing work that comes out of their energy, their time, their heart. That no one looks at. No one cares about.

[00:35:00] It's so that some politician can get up in the House and say, 'We're doing a review on that.' It's an insane world. You teach the last bastion of sanity left. For God's sake, don't give up on them. Don't give up on sanity. Don't give up on reason and don't obey the fucking rules.

Professor Tania Aspland: Thank you very much, Jane. That was a bit of a reality check, wasn't it? The bit that I related to, most was being crazy. You got to be crazy, to go into this job. Jane, I think we want to thank you for being an advocate for teachers. We struggle. We think highly of teachers. We plan programs for teachers, but we absolutely struggle with the craziness of regulation.

[00:36:00] We are one of the most regulated professions in the world. We have three or four regulators to work with. If that's not craziness, I don't know what is. On behalf of the group tonight, thank you for raising our consciousness, I think, about our important role in carrying on and following you in this advocacy of challenging government, of challenging the regulators, of challenging the broader society. Placing our teachers back in the position that you're suggesting, right up there, out-front, leading for the betterment of society. Join me please again, in thanking Jane.

**Jane Caro:** Thank you.

**Professor Aspland:** Oh. As a sign of appreciation of Jane's great work out there in the field, we're offering her a certificate of Honorary membership of this association. Now, she may reject it, but I'm hoping not.  
[00:37:00]

**Jane Caro:** Is it free?

**Professor Aspland:** It is free, just like Nan Bahr's book, okay? I'll just read to you. We've got a little plaque for you as well. The certificate and the gift is for your support and advocacy as a critical friend of the Australian teaching profession. Thank you again, Jane.

**Jane Caro:** Oh, thank you.