

'My Saving Grace' TED talk: National Conference August 2015



Greetings today. I am Lisa Craig from the Peel Community Legal Service in Mandurah Western Australia.



My Mother says that being born under an old moon is to blame for my crying. My tears rise and fall as regularly and predictably as the waxing and the waning. So well recognised is this in my family that I am known as the Mariah Carey of crying. My range spanning, at times, five octaves.

And while this has elevated me to a rather moist eyed Goddess status amongst my kin I have struggled with my “sensitive disposition” in my professional life.

I worried when I began working at the Peel Community Legal Service that being surrounded by the stories of others on a daily basis my crying may become an occupational health and safety issue. That there may need to be a whole new chapter in the Risk Management Guide, or at least a special section for working inclusively with people such as me.

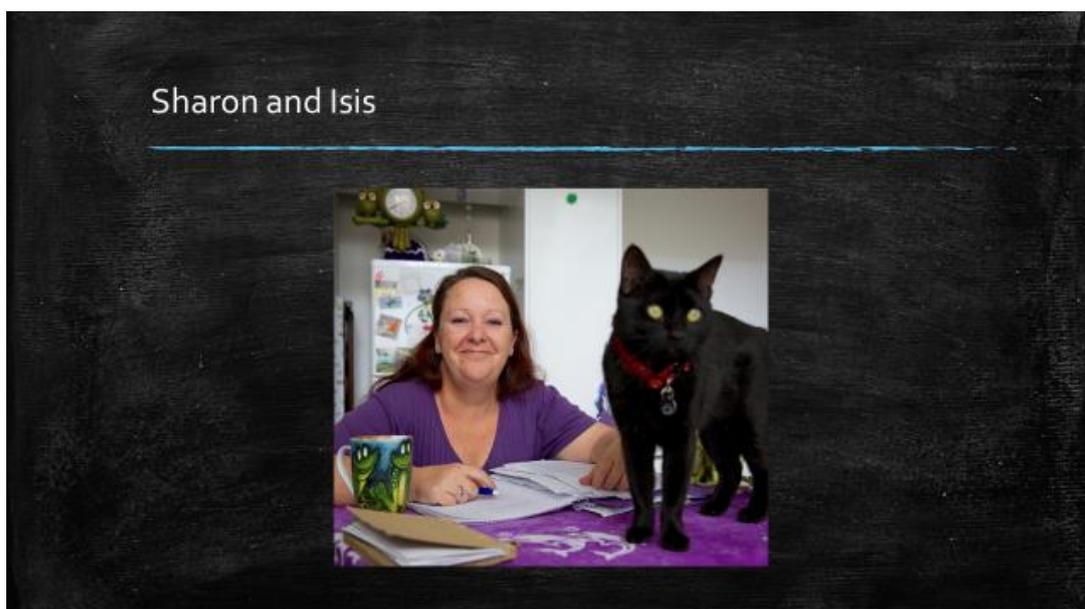
And it is true that I can easily be moved to tears by stories of injustice, cruelty and horror, there are some stories, which also contain these same elements which elicit quite a different response in me. Responses such as curiosity, tenderness and even hopefulness.

What then was in these tales that made the difference to me? Out of the chapters of despair, what words, images and observations evoked a sense of energy rather than depletion?

So I listened and waited and continued to hear stories told by women who had experienced domestic violence until one day when one woman was describing her journey said “I just wouldn’t have made it without my cat, she was my saving grace”.

And so, I discovered, there was a Science to my sadness.

I decided then to find a way to link these stories together, to help build momentum through the resonating sound of voices speaking collectively. To enable connection with the experience of domestic violence through the stories of companion animals. And that’s how the ‘My Saving Grace’ project was born.



Sharon and Isis were the first participants in the My Saving Grace Project. Sharon was in a violent relationship for ten years. During that time she lived on an isolated property and was unable to leave without permission. Every movement was tracked and prescribed. Sharon is beautifully articulate, most poignantly so when she speaks of her relationship with her beloved cat.

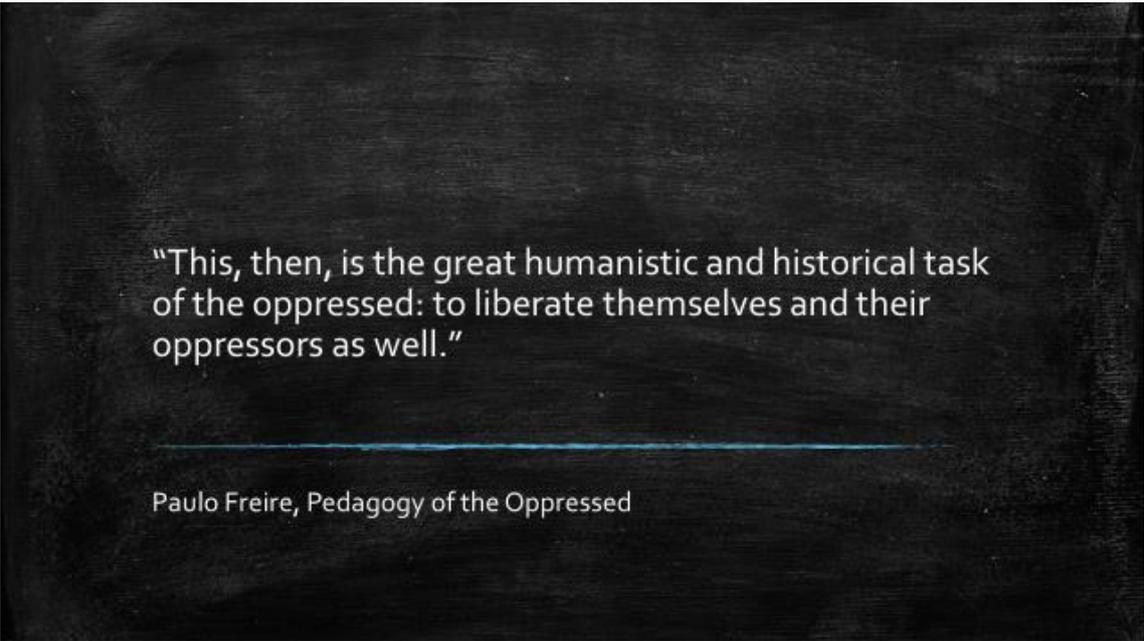
"I could talk to her where I couldn't talk to anybody else. I had no family and no friends, basically I just had my ex locked away in a little isolated area, so when he was at work I could tell her how I was feeling and cry with her, and sit with her and just be with her without being... having anything expected of me, without, being judged, without being told I was an idiot, without any of the derision that came from my ex.

She saved me, she gave me something else to think about and she gave me somebody else to care about, and she cared about me in a way that I've never had from a human.

I wasn't going anywhere without my cat. Like, you know, I'd had her from six weeks of age and she was my baby. Without her I wouldn't have gone anywhere".

My Saving Grace is a research and storytelling project. And our lens is a furry one. In inviting people to listen to the experience of an animal in violent relationships we get entry into the domestic violence narrative through a surprising and disarmingly open portal. The love that many people have for their companion animals is a cat door into more open hearts and minds.

The connection between animals abuse and domestic violence is now well documented and yet little recognition and action on this research is in operation. We have interviewed Forensic Veterinarians, Animals Shelter workers, Animal Law advocates, Police, RSPCA, CLC workers and Academics. The voice we have privileged above all is the one we actually never get to hear and that is the one of the animals. As one judge put it in his sentencing, "they are the silent victims".



"This, then, is the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well."

Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed

In many ways 'My Saving Grace' is a call to listen.

The other day I asked Sharon what, if anything, was beneficial about telling her story through the project. And looking at me directly she said, telling my story in this way, liberated me. Now, I AM FREE.

So why do we tell these stories?

Because stories do have the power to liberate. To lift the burden of shame and to free the owner of the story. And more. Stories are not a one way ticket.

Because as Freire says, we are all in this together.



'My Saving Grace' is due to be launched in the New Year. If you are interested in adding your story to the project you can contact me on my email or connect with me here at the conference. Please don't be afraid.

I promise not to cry.

Thank you.