Our fear of difference is hard-wired in the human brain. It is so intense that we often define ourselves by whom we hate. We define “US” by hating ‘THEM’.

This fear of difference is played out in the species struggle for survival, in the clash of tribes and nations, and in the tension between religions. Three strands of fundamentalist certainty, Christians, Muslims and Jews, all believe they are descended from Abraham and yet their rivalry between fundamentalist factions has persisted for 1400 years. For some it is still “INFIDELS OR CHOSEN ONES”, “INSIDERS AND OUTSIDERS” or “IF YOU ARE NOT FOR US, YOU ARE AGAINST US”.

Curiously this fear of difference remains dangerously strong despite globalisation, despite the media that wires us together and should keep us informed, and despite the universal threats to our species such as global warming, catastrophic storms and food shortages that one might assume would give us a stronger sense of the common good. If we have more to unite us than divide us why do we have such a powerful fear of difference?

The great biologist, Edward O. Wilson, writing in his book, The Future of Life, says that humans have been programmed by evolution to think most of the time
about ourselves, about one single place, the place we call home. I think Professor Wilson is right in describing the human journey so far. It has always been this way.

Al Gore, in his latest book, *The Assault on Reason*, argues that political leaders have exploited this fear of difference, the politics of fear. The former American Vice President says that a precondition for this exploitation has been television’s role in dumbing down the information available to people and numbing them with a saturation of trivial, low grade entertainment that stimulates our senses.

I urge you to read both of these books to deepen your understanding of how human biology and modern media create the matrix we live in. I don’t mean a cyber world matrix like in the movie but a matrix of self-interest in which our views are shaped by our family values, our education and the information we are programmed with.

You will need more than night vision goggles to see through the spin and the fog of war. You must train your mind to shatter the matrix, to recognize the Big Lies and see the truth. I am not embracing fundamentalism here. The truth is as powerful and precious as love and we need to cherish it.

For your generation to handle the most critical challenges facing our species I believe we need to undergo a further evolution, not a physical one but an evolution of the mind, to recognise the critical importance of nurturing the diverse talents of our extended human family. After what I have seen of this world, more than thirty wars and the impact of man made famines so often caused by this species struggle, this limiting fear of difference, I deeply believe that human diversity may prove as important to the survival of our species as natural diversity is to the health and vitality of our biosphere.

People who have lived in one place for sometimes tens of thousands of years have had to adapt to survive and so the subtle differences of outlook, of creativity
and of culture are, in fact, extremely valuable for the health of the entire human family. When we rise above an obsession with our own lives and start believing in what we can contribute to the health and happiness of the entire human family we define for ourselves what it means to be human. This is a more promising future than the age-old hatred and fear of difference.

Living in Australia during what is a golden age of prosperity for most people here it is difficult for many people to draw from our media information that really helps them empathise with say a poor Afghan family struggling through a lifetime of war, drought, hunger and almost constant hardship. It seems equally difficult for most Australians to understand what Aboriginal families are going through even here in our backyard. One survey a few years ago indicated just seven per cent of Australians knows an Aboriginal family well enough to have shared dinner around a table together.

There is a space between us and the media too often accentuates this by playing with stereotypes and shallow exploitative prejudice.

The essence of good journalism is the pursuit of the truth. But commercial mass market current affairs television has abandoned this core value. For such shows the Holy Grail is no longer authenticity, it's getting attention, so you can sell the product.

Television has become the most successful selling machine in human history because its visual power is so effective. Al Gore’s book, *The Assault on Reason*, explores the neurological hard-wiring that allows such mindless messages to penetrate our minds.

In my own view, tabloid television treats reality as just another brand of fiction, it shapes current affairs stories as little movies. There’s a plot, a dramatic structure, a fairly predictable climax and occasionally a surprise twist in the resolution. The producers control the drama unless you run into a prima donna reporter like the Mike Moore character in the FRONTLINE series who often tries to make himself
the story. You’ll see plenty of this casting on Sixty Minutes too. The other characters, big parts and small, are really just chosen with the drama in mind. Who will produce surprise, shock, horror, anger, even hatred? Who will grab our attention?
The well written FRONTLINE series, like that groundbreaking media movie, NETWORK, shows us how to spot the stereotyping of many different people, women, gays, Muslims, Aboriginal people, anyone, frankly, who is different. Stereotyping is an example of journalists being sloppy with the truth. A truthful portrait can be hard work. Stereotyping is easy. So you’ll constantly see the main characters being treated as good guys or bad guys, or in some other one-dimensional portrait. Too much television current affairs has simply lost the real plot, lost that belief in authenticity. Many of these reporters are probably in the wrong union. They should be in Actors Equity. Because so much of television current affairs is now pure melodrama, a B-grade movie performed by B-grade actors, full of themselves and full of dreadful over-acting.

Well that is some of the bad news in my profession. For the sake of balance I want you to appreciate that the profession also has many honest men and women. I have come across enough quality, even excellence, to keep me interested and challenged to do better during more than forty years as a journalist, writer and film-maker. I have seen the power of the truth, in the hands of honest storytellers.

In my book, A LIFE OF EXTREMES, I examine a long series of the most fascinating Big Lies of our age. The role of some journalists often was central to the promotion of these Big Lies but other journalists also contributed to their ultimate exposure. It is a great way to study the difference between good and bad journalism.

I’ve had to work out for myself what’s true inside the Matrix, As I admit in my book, when I was in the last years of highschool and the Vietnam War was
approaching its terrible climax, I was desperately trying to understand the truth of that war because I was facing military conscription. The truth, revealed by a courageous American named Daniel Ellsberg in a great newspaper, *The New York Times*, was that the massive escalation of American military involvement in Vietnam was based on a Big Lie, the first of many during that war. The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in the American Congress was actually drafted months before the attack on the American naval vessel that was used by the Government as its official excuse for plunging deeper into the war. It was a brazen Big Lie. But it was exposed by courageous journalism. Daniel Ellsberg published in *The New York Times* the Pentagon's own secret study, the so-called Pentagon Papers, that not only revealed this Big Lie, but many others. While President Lyndon Johnson had been telling Americans (and indirectly Australians) that there were no long-range plans for the war, secretly he was committing more troops there. When Richard Nixon became President he told Americans (and indirectly Australians) that there was 'light at the end of the tunnel' in Vietnam, but the truth is that even within the Pentagon and CIA most recognised that this war was a disaster. As a young ABC correspondent in America over the last years of the Vietnam War, I reported how very brave American dissidents, the great questioners, like Philip Berrigan, the first priest to speak out against the Vietnam War, how these truthful people were disclosing so many official lies by the American Government, lies that had been passed on by the Australian media and Australian government and used to justify our own involvement in a terrible war. The truth was very much in the hands of journalists and it became a great test of democracy itself.

As an ABC foreign correspondent I was also in Washington during one of journalism's very finest hours: the coverage of the great political struggle of Watergate. There the truth, or the public's right to know, was pitted against the power of an imperial and corrupt presidency. Watergate was surely one of the most impressive demonstrations of the real values and importance of journalism. The coverage of Watergate helped inform not only the public who had been
misled by all kinds of lies but also to inform members of Congress who ultimately discharged their responsibility and voted for the impeachment of Richard Nixon to proceed. Although the Presidency had been disgraced, the media, the Congress and the Judiciary all lived up to their responsibilities. Democracy had passed a crucial test.

We are now in the midst of another war, the so called War on Terrorism, and so we sit watching television like our parents and grandparents tuned in to radio during the Vietnam War, the Korean War, World War One and Two. I suggest that just as before most of us will not get the whole story until long after these events. The truth takes time and care to assess. That is why journalists must be out there on the front lines filming and finding out the facts.

It is a dangerous job. Dozens of journalists are killed pursuing the truth. Each time it happens I remember seeing my cameraman dead in a wooden box during the coup against Chile’s President Salvador Allende in 1973. Good journalists live and die for the truth because you and I are going to need all of the accurate, thoughtful information we can get to work out the truth.

The truth can impinge, it can reach deep into the Matrix, even shatter the bubble that insulates us from the rest of humanity. It can make us think and feel and act. I have seen my journalism do that. When Communism was collapsing in the Soviet Union I used the opportunity to lead the first film crew to document one of the dirtiest secrets of the Cold War, how the Russians had irradiated troops and villagers around the Republic of Kazakhstan. In the villages near ground zero it was like a land of living mutants. I saw a military chamber of horrors that had a ‘cyclops ‘child with a single eye in the middle of its head, two headed babies and another that looked like a mermaid child with a whispy tail. I met a young boy named Birik, a boy who had no eyes because of the Bomb. And I could not ever forget about him. Afterwards doctors in Europe were able to give him some surgery to soften his grotesque deformity. But Birik helped me tell the truth to the
world about the horrors of nuclear testing and we had a glimpse into the future of what another nuclear war would be like.

At FOUR CORNERS I trekked into the Central American country of Guatemala and filmed an hour long documentary, one of three I did in the Central American warzones. We were captured by a Mexican border patrol on the way out and were lucky, very lucky, to get out with our story. But this one recorded the proof of another terrible truth, the genocide being carried out against the Maya Quiche Indians, the last indigenous majority in the Americas. There were heads on stakes, babies skulls bashed on rocks, women skinned alive. I gave testimony about this before an American congressional committee and our film was the proof. The committee voted to suspend shipment of the helicopters that were being used in the slaughter of several hundred thousand Indian people. Many other lives were saved by our effort to reveal the truth.

Did you know that 180-million people have been killed in conflict in the past one hundred years? In Rwanda, where I made two horrifying journeys, I saw the result of the swiftest genocide in history, with almost one million people killed in just one hundred days. Sometimes even when the alarm is raised the world turns away.

When you use the media wisely, drawing on the extraordinary ability that billions of people now have to draw on the best and brightest ideas, we begin to realize our potential to prolong the health and well being of our species.

As well as educating ourselves to understand how genuine democracy and a sense of equality of undermined by the manipulation of information, we need an accurate human perspective.
We need to remind ourselves what it is to be truly human: to have a heart and a brain, to love one another, to love our children, whether they are lost in Burma or under the rubble in China, to seek something better for our families, to yearn for safety and happiness. All of this makes us human.

One important truth I learned from Aboriginal people is that laughter is a wonderful medicine for the greatest discomforts we may endure. For generations Aboriginal people have been treated with disdain and brutal discrimination but one of the strongest features of their resilience and resistance has been the remarkable ability to laugh. It levels the anger.

I sense this is also true as those brothers and sisters on SALAM CAFÉ take an amusing and often self-deprecating view of the life of Muslim Australians. One way to process and overcome media discrimination against you is to satirise this folly. It is a dangerous line and you need to tread carefully. I have listened to the stand up routines of Waleed Aly and while he provokes anger from his critics I believe he illuminates the shallowness and knee-jerk tendencies of so many fundamentalists of all persuasions. If we can laugh we may also learn why others are suspicious of our own behaviour.

The media loves to whip up a storm about episodes of Muslim hysteria and violence after insults directed at this religion’s great Prophet. I have seen the same thing happen to the great film director, Martin Scorsese after he filmed his highly original story, THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST. Scorsese is a former Catholic seminarian and a man deeply interested in the historical course of organised religion. But those that were determined to hate his film included some who conducted mock crucifixions of Scorsese in his front yard.

Steven Spielberg, a Jew, also has had to worry about his family’s safety because he too is a frequent target of the politics of fear and difference. The messengers are frequently targeted.
Spielberg’s SHOAH project, documenting the stories of thousands of Holocaust victims and their surviving family members, shows the extraordinary potential of television to contribute to important history. Spielberg told me some years ago that he regarded the SHOAH project as his most important work. But how many will see it compared to the next instalment of INDIANA JONES?

Are we programmed forever to fear those who are exotic and different? Or can we learn like all world wanderers discover that it is the great beauty of these different shades of culture and knowledge that help make life wonderful. You see when you overcome your fear of difference a whole new world seems to open up.