FIONA WOOD

"What I do is ordinary to me, it feels normal."

An Australian poll conducted by Reader's Digest in June 2008 found "the most trusted Australian" to be Fiona Wood. It was the fourth time the Australia-wide survey was undertaken and the fourth time Fiona finished first – the pollsters considered that the only person who could "knock her off the top is Mother Teresa, and she is dead".i

Fiona thought it all a bit of a mystery, she believed she was just "ordinary". Clearly she was not, in the minds of Australians and clearly the Bali bombings of 12 October 2002 events which catapulted her unwillingly into the limelight – were anything but ordinary. They changed life for Australians as much as they changed life for the Perth doctor.

On a bright Perth October afternoon in 2008, the day I first interviewed Fiona Wood within the outer University of Western Australia precincts. Students sat at external restaurant tables oblivious to traffic, their clothes were comfortable and they eagerly shared information and indulged in academic exchange. It was an interesting mix of people sharing the food and sunshine; professionals monopolised the inside air conditioned comfort. Fiona Wood is at ease in eclectic surrounds, although relaxed with prime ministers or students, she perhaps prefers the latter. Fiona has observed her own six children during their teenage years, years marked by curiosity, absolute resolve, indecision, the

full array of emotions – and found each so different, but always interesting. Fiona failed to notice as heads turned in her direction as she moved towards my table. Her immediate warmth was disarming and she appeared amazingly unburdened by the many titles she bore: Director of the West Australian Burns Service, plastic surgeon to both Royal Perth and Princess Margaret hospitals, co-founder and Director of Avita Medical, Winthrop Professor with the School of Surgery at the University of Western Australia and Director of the McComb Research Foundation. Little did I realise how far in distance, time and diversity this and future conversations would be – and how much I would learn about skin.

The north of England and a cluster of mining villages may appear unlikely origins for one who was named Australian of the Year 2005 and the most trustworthy Australian 2005–08. The grime and harshness of environment which enveloped villages like Upton, Frickley and Hemsworth were testing for all those who went down in the coal mines and the families who prayed they would come home again. It was 1 February 1958 when Fiona Melanie Wood was born into such a Yorkshire household. She was the first daughter and third child of Elsie and Geoff Wood. Her first childhood memory is of her sister Nicola coming home from hospital; Fiona was four. Another is of sitting on her father's shoulders listening to the loud ardent voice of union leader Arthur Scargill addressing miners. President of the Yorkshire region of the National Union of Miners, Scargill was viewed by unionists as honest, hard-working and genuinely ncerned for their welfare, but to Fiona, the child of a miner, he was plain long-winded.

A youthful Fiona Wood
Courtesy Fiona Wood

It may sound a cliché but Fiona's parents inspired her to be as good as she could be. "I was just extraordinarily lucky to have the parents that I had." They taught her there was something worth nurturing in everyone. Accepting this gave added strength to move forward. Such sanguine advice would be useful in the years ahead and especially across the world and in a new century. Her father was an intelligent man condemned to a miner's lot at a very early age because of economic hardship. Geoff Wood won a scholarship to grammar school but needed to contribute to the family income. He relished playing soccer for Nottingham Forest, but after breaking a leg could no longer play high grade soccer and found himself in the blackness of the pit. Fiona remembers his mood changes, the difference in her father on work days and non-work days: "he was significantly grumpier" on the days he trudged off to the mine; "it was hell on Earth". "He hated crawling around in the black dirt that he'd done since he was 13 years of age" which left him in no frame of mind for such a fate to happen to his children. Consequently Geoff Wood felt "very strongly" that "we had to explore our potential with respect to sport and education, to give us a choice in life". One of his sayings was "you never win a race on your last performance". It was one Fiona clearly took to heart as she did her parents' concept of developing potential so "that we got up in the morning and enjoyed what we did".

Elsie Wood was an achiever, a “go-getter”. Nothing was too much, too difficult, or insurmountable. “My mother’s great line was, ‘Grasp the nettle with two hands girl, because if you don’t somebody else will’”. In Ackworth there was a private school run by the Quakers. Fiona was impressed by their “ethereal” uniform, “Harry Potter” cloaks. To the then 13-year-old the students looked “so happy”. Ackworth School had been founded in 1779 by John Fothergill. Unaware of the cost of private education Fiona decided she would like to go to this school which looked so enchanting. Elsie Wood applied for a job as a matron at the school and then took one as a physical education teacher. Her mum had “sorted it” and Fiona joined Ackworth School as a “staff child”. It was this combination of hard work ethic and never accepting anything as impossible attitude, which was the making of Fiona Wood.

Mining villages could surprise outsiders with their strong sense of community and intellectual curiosity. It fostered a fascination with knowledge and the resolution of problems through greater learning and investigation. Ackworth School encouraged these. “There has to be a clear disciplinary framework and our expectations are high”, reads the school guide. Fiona flourished. She realises how fortunate she was to “have the level of education that I did, it was fantastic”. In 1974–75 she was Head Girl. Ackworth School never stopped watching the Head Girl. The school web page included: “we have constantly been impressed by the achievements of this extraordinary young lady and we are very honoured to count her among our Old Scholars”. On 15 June 2008 Fiona returned to Yorkshire to address the school community. The theme of her lecture was motivation. “Achieve your best – everyone can make a difference”, Fiona told those who packed the Fothergill Theatre to capacity. According to the principal the Australian delivered her message with “energy and passion”. She was:

> Thought-provoking, invigorating and inspirational. It should motivate the next generation of Ackworth students to a life of endeavour and of service, in the best Ackworth tradition: ‘Non sibi sed omnibus – not for oneself, but each for the good of all’.

The Religious Society of Friends, also known as Quakers, began in England in the 17th century and expanded throughout the world, especially to the Americas and Africa. Members believed their faith did not fit the religious dogma and

hierarchical structures of the traditional Christian religions. A Quaker could develop individual religious beliefs arising from personal revelations and conscience. Whilst some “Friends” believed theirs to be a Christian movement others considered themselves to be agnostic, atheist, realist, universalist, post-Christian and nontheist. Others identified themselves as followers of Buddhism or Islam.

Whilst divergent beliefs developed in different continents the central Quaker concept is “Inner Light”. God is everyone, the spirit is “within” regardless of whether an individual seeks mediation through a minister, pastor, or through the sacraments. Isaac Penington, the son of the Lord Mayor of London, who became a Quaker, wrote in 1670: “It is not enough to hear of Christ, or read of Christ, but this is the thing -- to feel him my root, my life, my foundation”.ii Quakers were intent on casting aside superficial differences and focusing on the spiritual elements which connected all people. Quakerism was group oriented rather than focused on the individual. Platforms of belief or “testimonies” were expressions of “spirituality in action”. Whilst these altered as society evolved, fundamental were those of peace, equality, integrity and simplicity. The Quaker movement proved influential and forward thinking. In America it played a role in the abolition of slavery. From early in its evolution Quakerism acknowledged the equal rights of women and promoted education.