



EDUCATING PETER

LIFE HAS AS MANY TWISTS AS ANY DRAMATIC
YARN, AND QUEENSLAND UNIVERSITY
OF TECHNOLOGY VICE-CHANCELLOR
PETER COALDRAKE HAS MADE THE
MOST OF EVERY TURN IN HIS JOURNEY.

Story Susan Johnson
Portrait Russell Shakespeare

PHOTOGRAPHS IN THIS STORY MAY INCLUDE ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT PERSONS WHO ARE DECEASED

achievers

WHEN SOMEONE
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Rather than the humdrum of the everyday – featureless, unshaped – some people’s lives seem ready-made as a story. Professor Peter Coaldrake has just such a life, patterned like a myth. Australia’s longest-serving incumbent university head – he’s been at Queensland University of Technology since 2003 and recently renewed his contract until the end of 2017 – Coaldrake, 63, is a dual Fulbright Scholar on a million-dollar annual salary (\$937,145 in 2012 and we can safely assume that has increased under the terms of his new contract).

A former chair of Universities Australia – the peak body of Australia’s universities – and now a member of its board, Coaldrake was made an officer of the Order of Australia in 2011 for distinguished service to higher education. A canny political operator, he is one of academia’s biggest hitters.

Coaldrake was born Gregory Alan Naylor to a young girl, Jeanette, who had run away from everything she knew, but he grew up as the adopted only child of impoverished Anglican missionaries. “I’ve never [publicly] told this story before, so I’d like to do it properly because I’m not going to do it again. And, to be honest, why would you do it? You’d do it because it helps other people.”

Coaldrake recalls telling part of his story – probably with the same confusion between “you” and “I” – to a small group of people a few years ago at a staff conference. Afterwards, a senior staff member “was quite traumatised by it and asked me, ‘How can you possibly tell people that?’ It made me think later ... you probably do reflect and think, well, where do you get your drive from? Probably there’s a view that in this world, it’s better to be underestimated than overestimated because, you know, you make things for your life that people don’t expect.”

We can picture the start of Coaldrake’s mythical unexpected life with an image of a girl just turned 20, frightened, ashamed, travelling north on a train from Melbourne to Sydney on an autumn day in 1951. She hasn’t told anyone she’s pregnant (possibly she told the father – whom Coaldrake never knew – and she might even have sworn a sister to secrecy, but such details, he says, are now lost to the mysteries of time. Certainly, she never told her parents she was going to have a baby).

There she is, three months later, hiding by a door at Marrickville Salvation Army Hospital in Sydney’s inner west after giving birth to the “illegitimate” baby son she called Gregory. She’s going to give him up; it’s the only thing to do, isn’t it? – probably even the very best thing. Jeanette is relinquishing Gregory into the care of a tall woman with her hair pulled back in a bun, a poised woman, calm,

even-tempered, from the looks of her. Jeanette knows what she looks like because she is pecking through a crack in the door.

Coaldrake tells the story: “When I met my birth mother, I said to her, ‘So, did you ever see my adopted mother?’” He pauses, reimagining that moment with his first mother behind the door and his second in front of it. “And I asked her, ‘Well? What did she look like?’ And she told me. She said, ‘A mother never forgets.’ And she’d never forgotten my birthday, every day in all those years.”

For a second he seems emotional, then he suddenly veers away from the vulnerable, dangerous moment and breaks into a grin. “I said, ‘Well, I couldn’t have been too important to you. You got rid of me!’” He laughs, but it’s impossible not to think that this painful moment defined what came later: the ambition, the striving, the great driving force that propelled him. “You just wonder whether those things gave you a driving force, and you probably have to acknowledge that [it did].”

From the surrendered infant to the boy who became the cherished only child of missionaries, young Peter’s story continues. His adoptive father, Keith Coaldrake, a Church of England priest, lived with his wife, Sheila, on the remote Forrest River Anglican mission in the Kimberleys in the north-east corner of Western Australia that borders the Northern Territory.

Peter grew up as the only white boy in an Aboriginal settlement (renamed Oombulgurri and forcibly closed in 2011). His parents – now deceased – were austere people, products of the Great Depression, with very little money and no admiration for it.

“There was a little girl who was an orphan and her name was Anne, and I thought she was my sister. When my parents left the mission station, she was obviously not permitted to come, and I remember being upset about that.”

One of his earliest memories is of his parents being carted off to hospital from the mission, probably because they were suffering from malnutrition as a result of their harsh living conditions. “I was skin and bones, too,” he says. “My parents eventually left there, I’m sure, suffering malnutrition. They were decamped back by the Anglican Church to country NSW, where they had a parish for a year and regained their strength.”

But Coaldrake’s first Kimberley landscape – treeless, with red dust and great cliffs rising behind life-giving rivers – and the native people who lived and died there have remained with him.

At 10, his parents sent him to board at All Souls’ School at Charters Towers, 130km south-west of Townsville. (His late father was a Queenslander and knew of the school, which was established



Time and tide ... Coaldrake with his birth mother, Jeanette last year; (below, from left) adoptive parents Keith and Sheila Coaldrake (also opening page, at Forrest River Mission, WA); aged about 5, recuperating after a youthful accident; around the same age with a local boy at the mission.

**MY BEST FRIEND
IN MY EARLY YEARS AT
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One of the boys ... Coaldrake as a toddler aged about 2 with young Aboriginal hunters at Forrest River Mission in the Kimberleys, circa 1953.

in 1920 by the Bush Brotherhood of St Barnabas as a memorial school to World War I's fallen soldiers. It is now a co-educational school called All Souls St Gabriel School.) Coaldrake immediately gravitated to the Aboriginal boys. "My best friend in my early years at boarding school was what we called a 'full-blood' Aboriginal boy. You see, I didn't really know any white kids," he says. Coaldrake still speaks of one of the most glorious holidays of his life with best friend Lloyd Schreiber's family, at Yarrabah, an Aboriginal mission 50km north of Cairns, Far North Queensland.

"In those days, you couldn't reach it by road from Cairns, you had to go by launch. Interestingly enough, under the church rules, I couldn't stay in an Aboriginal house, which, of course, I didn't understand the significance of ... I had to be safe, you know, I had to stay with a priest!" He laughs again – Coaldrake's devilish sense of humour is well-known, but I suspect sometimes it's used as a weapon of deflection. He goes on to tell me that the priest at Yarrabah was a Father Bacon, and that he had a glass eye. "I couldn't make this stuff up," he says, laughing again. "Father Bacon was an old-style priest and a very honourable man, and he allowed me to go out after breakfast every morning and come back each night." Coaldrake would go out net fishing in the clear waters of the bay and his friend's parents carved him little artefacts from wood, which he still has. Childhood friend Lloyd is dead now and, a few years ago, Coaldrake travelled to Yarrabah to visit his grave. It's clear that that holiday carried meaning and importance to him.

Coaldrake always knew he was adopted. "They told me as soon as I could possibly understand. I understood from about age six or seven what that meant. I remember being a bit perplexed initially, but I never really knew anything else. I think it was some sort of loyalty to my parents; I was never really interested in my birth parents. I took the view – a slightly brutal, self-protective view – that

regardless of the limitations of the lot you got (which, in my case, was a very poor background and, in some ways, a very poor life experience), your parents still gave you the opportunity for education and they did the best they could."

He can remember sitting in a bath, a wood heater warming the water, when his mother told him. "I remember just digesting it. It wasn't traumatic ... probably she used to tell me things when I was having a bath so it was no big deal. She used to say the nicest possible things about my [birth] mother, like, 'I'm sure she was a lovely lady' and things like that. My mother was loving; she was quite delicate – emotionally delicate – and she didn't get much softness from my father. They were different, and he was of a harsher temperament."

Coaldrake believes the current fashion for apportioning blame in life is pointless. "I'm of the school of thought where I don't like newspapers and media being filled up with people blaming, suing governments and blaming them. I mean, seriously, I think people sometimes compromise their entire lives by blaming some unusual, unfortunate event, but who says if it was fortunate or unfortunate? It's the cards life gives you."

COALDRAKE CAN REMEMBER THE EXACT MOMENT THE penny dropped about the value of education. It certainly wasn't at school. "My parents must have had a sense that education was important, because they sent me to a school they thought would be an excellent school. The fact is, that school served largely a non-aspirational community in Queensland. There was really no emphasis on academic matters."

Although he was soon an accomplished pianist, Coaldrake never shone academically. "At school I got really ordinary marks. In one term, in grade nine, I think I got 900 marks out of a possible 1800 – that's pretty close to failing. Our school used to put you in situations where the dumbest kids in the most recent tests were in the front row and the brightest at the back. I was usually in the second front row." He did, however, pull his socks up in his final years, managing to scrape into James Cook University in Townsville, doing a Bachelor of Arts (in the end he completed honours). "I had no money and I knew my parents had no money, so I always worked hard. I used to work every holidays at Moura Mines [200km west of Gladstone] as a labourer, and I still remember earning something like \$1700 in 13 weeks in the early '70s, and that money set me up for the year.

"And then I worked in a meatworks [JBS Swift Australia, Townsville]. I was a flunky, hanging around doing odd jobs and things, and one day the foreman said to me, 'Can you read and write?' I said, 'Yeah', and he said, 'Go and see the manager at smoko'." Coaldrake was given a new job, writing consignment notes.

"I said, 'I don't want that job', but he made it clear to me that the skill of reading and writing was much more than I realised and a lightbulb in my brain went off about education. Up until that moment at uni, I think I got straight passes. I used to do enough to pass and not a step more. But from that moment, when someone pointed out that I could get more from tying meat up with a wire machine and writing the consignment note than working elsewhere in the factory, everything changed."

Coaldrake never looked back: a PhD from Griffith University, his first Fulbright to George Washington University in Washington, DC, as a postdoctoral fellow in the field of politics/public policy; and another as a Fulbright Senior Scholar in the field of higher education policy and management to the University of Arizona. ▶

achievers

He is also that rare academic who has crossed over into government, chairing the Queensland Public Service Management Commission, the body established in 1990 by the Goss government to overhaul the Queensland public service. He's authored, or co-authored, a number of books on university and government, and is presently chair of the Queensland Heritage Council.

While continuing his stellar academic career, Coaldrake married Lee Ann (known as Lee), a GP with a practice at Ashgrove in Brisbane's west, where they raised their family. He and Lee have two daughters, Emma, 29 (a marketing manager in the Brisbane office of Weis Frozen Foods) and Jessica (Jess), 27, now married and also working in Brisbane as a speech pathologist.

It was Lee Coaldrake who encouraged him to seek out his birth mother. His adoptive parents Sheila and Keith died ten years apart, in 1991 and 2001, respectively. While clearing out Keith's study – he had died of complications from dementia in 2001 after suffering the condition for almost a decade – Coaldrake stumbled across a paper napkin with his birth name written on it. "From there, we got a full birth certificate, searched the electoral rolls, which were all on microfiche, looked at telephone white pages and, eventually, we worked out how to contact her."

A few weeks later, Lee wrote to Jeanette – without telling her husband – assuring her they didn't want to disrupt her family or cause her any hassle, nor did they want money. "Which was just as well as she didn't have any!" says Coaldrake, laughing again. A couple of weeks later, his birth mother phoned; she and Coaldrake spoke for almost an hour. They hung up, agreeing to meet the next time he was in Melbourne. "So I turned up outside Myer in Melbourne, thinking, this is a stupid place to meet; there's a bloody lot of people here. I was looking around when this woman suddenly came up and put her arms around me." She had picked him out straightaway.

It turns out Jeanette was married to a man she had wed in her twenties – who he prefers not to name – and went on to have seven more children. From being an only child, Coaldrake found himself

with seven half-siblings, most of whom still live in Melbourne. None of them academics, most work in trades. When it came to telling her family about her relinquished son, Jeanette found it difficult. "She wasn't fulsome with the truth, necessarily," he says. "I don't want to be ungenerous, but she protected herself, you can see that." Jeanette now lives in a self-contained room in a nursing home at Reservoir, an outer suburb of Melbourne. "It's all very uncomplicated now; I have close connections with a couple [of siblings] and sporadic connections with others. It's all very civilised if I go to a family event."

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QUT OBVIOUSLY HOLDS COALDRAKE IN HIGH

regard, despite his implication in a 2013 scandal involving QUT research scientists. Coaldrake was cleared of any wrongdoing after reporting himself to the Crime and Misconduct Commission when he inadvertently revealed the identity of a protected whistleblower in what he thought was an off-the-record discussion about an alleged fraud in a grant application. QUT also cleared the scientists of misconduct, but acknowledged there were errors in both the grant and the research paper.

QUT Chancellor Tim Fairfax says the University Council was unanimous in its decision to extend Coaldrake's contract. He adds that Coaldrake's success can be measured by QUT's place as Australia's highest-ranking university in the 2013 (second-highest in 2014) Times Higher Education 100 Under 50, a ranking of the world's top 100 universities under 50 years old. Support for Coaldrake's leadership was also evident "in the outstanding results of the 2014 staff opinion survey", Fairfax says.

When Coaldrake finally retires, he may write another book. "If anything, I'll probably write a memoir," he says. He's been thinking a bit about his early life – the poverty, being sent away to boarding school as a boy. "Initially, it was hard, quite hard. On the other hand, you could say I learned some good life skills." ●

The extended clan ... At home with wife Lee and daughters Emma and Jess, with Mark O'Flynn (Emma's fiancé) and Calum Watson (Jess's husband).

