Royal Commission into
Victoria's Mental Health System

WITNESS STATEMENT OF DAVID PEARL

I, David Pearl, innovator, author and public speaker of The Studios, Suite 23, Rocks Lane, Barnes, London, say as follows:

1   I make this statement on the basis of my own knowledge, save where otherwise stated. Where I make statements based on information provided by others, I believe such information to be true.

Background

2   I have no professional qualifications in relation to mental health—I'm not a doctor, a psychologist or a psychiatrist. But my unusual professional practice means that I might have something to offer. I'm known as a pioneer of arts in business, in the UK and around Europe. I've made my life, to my surprise, to be about bridging the arts and business. This career path has meant that I've ended up in boardrooms talking about what they call the "softer stuff". I call it the "hard soft stuff," because it's difficult and it has a real impact. That has been my journey into the mental wellness, in organisations in particular, around the world.

3   I run a not-for-profit social venture called Street Wisdom, which I discuss in detail below.

4   I also have my own personal experiences to draw on. When I was younger, I suffered depression and spent some time in mental institutions. Those experiences turned out to be a wellspring of all that I do now. I wouldn't wish depression upon anybody, but the experience turned out to be very, very significant and helpful in unexpected ways.

5   It is with this background, and with humility, that I give my evidence to this Royal Commission.

6   Attached to this statement and marked "DP-1" is a copy of my curriculum vitae.

Please note that the information presented in this witness statement responds to matters requested by the Royal Commission.

The role of communities in promoting social connection, good overall health and wellbeing and preventing mental illness

Definition of "community"

7   The word "community" is incredibly important, but it is overused and people don't hear it anymore. The word is marginalised as a kind of social proxy.

8   I've just written a book called *Wanderful: Human Navigation for a Complex World* (**Wanderful**).[1] The book is based on what I've learnt at Street Wisdom. Out of that, to my surprise, the thread that has emerged most powerfully has been that *no man is an island; we're not going to make it alone.*

9   In a very important way, the idea of community comes from a narrow definition. Facing the idea of community from that narrow definition is important. Companies don't think of themselves as communities; companies are commercial entities. But the word company comes from the Latin *com panio*, "with bread", and it means the people you break bread with. I work with a lot of successful companies, and many of them are re-finding that sense of the word "company", where colleagues have common interests over and above the commercial.

10   I think place-making is a really interesting way of thinking about community because it is not socially limited. These are communities defined by space, time and context that can spring up and propagate anywhere. In this regard a festival or an event can be seen as a community. A group of people sharing space, time and intention. Intentionality is very important and it provides the invisible shared energy that distinguishes a crowd from a synchronised group of people. You see this in crisis very often. Strangers bonding together in extremis.

11   The word community has to be rehabilitated. We may need a new word for it, because it's the driving force of a lot of activity I see.

The role of communities in supporting good mental health

12   My observation is that people feel more *well* when they belong somewhere to something. It is obvious and a cliché, but a lot of people don't feel they belong. For example, many companies are pushing diversity and inclusion. The problem is that these companies will often reach out to people who are atypical for the community, and think that the job is done. But the people who the company has made an overt effort to include can feel

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[1] David Pearl, *Wanderful: Human Navigation for a Complex World* (Unbound, 2020).

extremely lonely, because they don't feel at home. There is a difference between physical proximity and the feeling of being connected, and we shouldn't confuse them.

Key challenges facing individuals and communities in contemporary life

13   The key challenge that communities face in contemporary life is self-imposed isolation, especially when that isolation isn't visible to others. From my own experience of depression, I remember the feeling of being alone, even while being surrounded. There are people in plain view who are in fact isolated. That is a major problem because this kind of isolation is not evident at first glance.

14   For example, I do a lot of work outside on streets, and I have noticed that at first glance, everyone in the street appears to be in the same place. But when you look closely at people, they're off in their thoughts and worries. It is possible to get lost in a busy place, to be isolated in a crowd. This can be problematic because it's hard to see the evidence of the isolation. People might make a good fist of looking okay, but one has to go much deeper to find out how they really are. The invisibility is an issue.

15   At some point, however, the need for help becomes obvious. For example, I've done some work with communities in the north of England, where it's evident that help is needed. It is sort of a silent scream. But isolation is a problem even before it gets to that point.

The power of storytelling

Narrative and storytelling as drivers of change

16   The role of narrative and storytelling in driving change is a big subject. I have written about it and worked with companies for many years on it. In the past I worked as a film writer and worked with, for example, Stanley Kubrick. I fell in love with story. Since I have been working in business, I've discovered the executive power of storytelling, what it can do.

17   While it is a very big subject, in essence I think there are two levels on which storytelling can drive change: the personal and the public. At the personal level, without trivialising the whole mental process, the story you tell yourself about your past and your future has an enormous effect on your mental health and your general wellbeing.

18   For example, I do an exercise with people all over the world where I get to show people their life and where they are on it. It has a number of elements, but one is to ask people to draw a line that represents their life, and then to draw a cross on the line to show where they are in the scheme of their life. The thing that is interesting is the story that people tell

themselves about how much time they have left. They usually put the cross in the middle—here I am in the middle of my life. But, as we are discovering, you never really know how much time you've got left.

19   If I tell myself I have 30 years left, I will be different than if I would be if I wasn't sure whether I had a week. We're seeing that at the moment—in the context of the Coronavirus—what that does to people's presence, urgency, openness to new ideas and so forth. I think that when you get lost in mental ill health, it's very often because you're telling a story to yourself that imprisons you in some ways. It is extremely powerful and the alternative is powerful as well: we can help people better construct their story. That's the work of psychologists, psychiatrists and therapists. I haven't worked at that level. But I do a lot of grass-roots work with people, helping them understand that they can alter their story; giving them the agency; giving them the sense of possibility; getting them out of the rut.

20   The second level on which storytelling can drive change is the public level. It's the story that organisations, institutions and governments tell about mental wellness. Just including these words in the daily currency of business makes it much more possible to talk about them. Also the choice of words is important. The story is different if the words used are "mental wellness" and when the words used are "mental illness". Vocabulary shapes meaning, clearly. New words stimulate new ways to think about things. A good example is *climate change* being supplanted recently by the much more urgent *extinction rebellion*.

21   Stories are useful, but we have to be vigilant, because ultimately, stories are fiction. What would be helpful for governments, organisations and the public is to be telling real narratives that have got a positive effect. I think the stories that are really helpful— geopolitically and locally and so on—are stories that generate change, that make a future state real to people. That's what storytelling is: it's making the imagined, real. If we can do that, people are then able to imagine a future where, for example, there is no stigma about mental health in the workplace.

22   What we don't want is "mental health washing", where people chuck into their reports accounts that they have an open policy about people who are struggling with their mental wellness or whatever it is, if that's not true. We have to harness the generative power of story, without settling for fiction.

Addressing mental health stigma and discrimination through narrative and storytelling

23   The simplest and most powerful example is when leaders tell their own stories of mental disturbance or whatever it is. It's a must-have in addressing the stigma. When the senior

people in an organisation business start being upfront and really unconcerned, or genuine about their concerns, it sends an enormous signal. It can be more difficult for the people in the middle ranks of an organisation. People in the higher echelons of a business are secure in their positions. If someone at the top opens up about their struggle with mental health, it almost adds to their kudos. But it's a different situation for people in the middle ranks of an organisation. Whilst they might accept what they've seen at boardroom level, they're less likely to do it themselves. They don't feel that their jobs are so secure. This can also mean that they may not be as patient with other people.

24   A common experience I've heard in organisations is that it's cool and accepted to talk about mental wellness; it's not career limiting to disclose to people that you have *had* a mental disturbance. But it is career limiting to say that you think you might have it in the future. In other words, people could accept that an employee has a history of mental disturbance. It's almost like "Oh, you've got a history of diabetes," it is something for HR, it is a kind of mitigated risk. But if employees say "I'm okay but I'm really feeling the wheels might fall off," they very often feel that, although nothing is said, people just pull away from them and start to assign the work in different ways. It is like it is a dangerous thing to say, which is interesting, because actually that's *the* thing you really want people to be able to say without fear of repercussion: "Look, I'm fine, but I can feel...keep an eye on me."

25   At a society level, it's incredibly helpful to have people who are prominent in government and business tell their stories publicly. There a different stories people can tell. One of those is the "darkness into light" story. We need to be careful with that story because it can be a bit self-aggrandising. When a person says, "I was low, but now I'm high. I came through it," that message can subtly stigmatise the experience of the dark. We could learn something from the arts, where the light and the dark are held in equal esteem. You can't make a film or a play which doesn't have a good balance of horrible-ness and goodness. It doesn't work.

26   Another story you want to hear leaders talk about is an ongoing struggle. An ongoing sense that there is light and shade. It's a story that says, as the social and environmental activist Jim Garrison puts it: "Things are getting better and better and worse and worse, faster and faster." If you are a leader in these complex times, you are going to have moments of elation and moments of despair, otherwise you're not a human being. I think that is what needs to be communicated. That the state of volatility is a human quality. Leadership is not about being all knowing, marginalising the difficulty, a crisp slickness.

27   In times of crisis that kind of leadership can be useful, but generally the leadership I have seen that is successful and is needed is not the leadership of an individual, but it is more the orchestration of the whole, the orchestration of many parts. Typically directive

leadership where the "boss" directs sub-ordinates ("solve problem x") is poorly adapted to our complex times. The more successful leaders assemble groups of skilled specialists and empower them—rather like an arts ensemble—to create their own solutions. The leaders' role is more like a conductor than a general. Jacinda Ardern, the Prime Minister of New Zealand, is very good at it. In my view, women are generally better at it than men. Being a good leader in that orchestration role, there's less of a burden on them personally to be always up, always on.

28   For example, early in her career Arianna Huffington was the classic power woman. She has since talked about how she burnt out, and now she is recreating herself almost as a wellness campaigner. It would be helpful to have more of that sort of discussion from leaders, because it not only legitimises burnouts, and helps people to recognise it, but it also broadens the definition of what a leader is and should be: a feeling human, who experiences ups and downs.

Harnessing creativity and music to support good mental health and wellbeing

Creativity

29   As people come under pressure to be more creative, we have to be more tolerant of what looks like eccentric behaviour because creativity is that; it involves breaking the mould. Traditionally, creatives in an organisation have been allowed to look and act a little differently, wearing crazy clothes and having odd hair. I think that allowing your creativity out, in whatever form it takes, is a good investment in your mental health.

30   One of my first clients approached me about increasing the creativity of the people in his organisation. He said, "David, what my people need is a bit of creativity. They're very stressed." With that organisation, I did an exercise where the 1500-odd people created and performed their own opera. We provided a light framework and some expert facilitation but it was the employees themselves who wrote, performed, designed, constructed, costumed and lit the final work. It was epic. What it introduced into the organisation was this notion of a kind of legitimate madness that goes with creativity.

31   Creativity is a pressure valve for individuals and organisations, but also—weirdly—it's now become a boardroom must-have. No one knows the answers to the questions that we are forcing ourselves to address. A lot of people in senior positions now have to sit, and I help them do this, in unanswerable questions and dilemma questions, the lessor of two evils type questions, which no amount of data is really going to solve. You've got to sit there and use your judgment and suffer all the way through it. A psychologist calls it "sitting in the fire". Creativity is a pressure valve in these situations.

32   To summarise, it is essential that to put more accent on creativity, because it helps both to legitimise eccentric thinking and to exercise it. It stops you stigmatising.

Music

33   On the topic of harnessing music to support mental wellness, I'll say three things. First, it's a way we define our identity. Everyone has *their* music—in workplaces, in prisons, everywhere. I do an exercise where I say to clients, "What's the track that you would put in your Will for the next generation?" That question resonates with people, because we all have a song. Next, I would ask them, "Where were you when you first heard that song?" In response I get authenticity; their experience with the song pours out of people. It is music that has drawn out that authenticity. This is a non-invasive way for people to learn a lot about their colleagues, to get beyond the day-to-day chat, or task-oriented interactions that make up the bulk of our working day. Here people are learning something about each other's inner life. The conversations are less about "what I do" and more about "who I am". Very often people's music tracks are linked to seminal moments in their life and/or important people. It's a way of puncturing the professional mask and finding out who team members really are, and what they really care about. By the way, I do think that the strain of maintaining an unbeat, unflappable—indeed unemotional—work-day facade contributes a lot to mental unwellness. An exercise like this—and I use many more— helps colleagues release the pressure valve.

34   My second point about music is possibly more contentious. I believe there is something transformational about great music, great art, which is a lost a bit now that everything is equalised, that hip hop is the same as Beethoven. It is all entertainment. I'm aware I might sound snobbish, but in my experience working with classical music and pop and rock, they are not the same thing. There are some messages to humanity built into great works of art, and that often means eighteenth century music. Encountering great music enables us, makes us healthier, mentally and physically. I can't tell you why, but that has been my lifelong experience.

35   One of the things I did in my classes was immerse people in an orchestra. I had people sit in amongst the musicians as the concert was happening. People were so moved they were in tears. Being *in* the orchestra is very different from watching it. I'm on the cusp of starting new researches into that area.

36   The third and final thing I'll say relates to performance art more generally. One of the lessons that artists have taught me, and which I'm now teaching to businesses, is the power of rehearsal. Performance is at the heart of mental stress at work, because performance if often synonymous with delivery. But high performance that you see in a more conventional performance art, I ask of people how long they think professional,

high-level performers spend on stage compared to how long they spend off stage preparing and rehearsing. The answer is that it's about 20 hours off stage for every one hour on. For every hour of art you see on stage, the performer has spent twenty hours rehearsing.

37   One of the reasons there's so much mental stress and suffering in work life is that there is no rehearsal space. There is no legitimate time or place for people to get it wrong, to try different things. At work, people are effectively on stage the whole time. There's no break in performance anxiety from the beginning of the day right to the end.

Mindfulness and mental wellness

38   I'm not entirely sure what mindfulness is. Mindfulness is a broad umbrella term for many things. But I hugely applaud it because it has gathered together many very old and sometimes esoteric practices that people might not otherwise have been exposed to. But these practices have been marketed in a way that makes them seem incredibly acceptable and cool. As Tesla has made electric cars cool, headspace and mindfulness have done for mental hygiene and meditation and presence.

39   I think it is amazing how quickly mindfulness has become mainstream; especially amazing given there is no "it", but I think it is a vocabulary which makes those kind of invisible practices acceptable, desirable and accessible.

40   I'm not a clinician, but I cannot believe that mindfulness practice, even when practised in an informal way, doesn't bring about a marked improvement in mental health. Not least because mindfulness forces you to take note of your mental process. The minute you do that, you move into a different relationship with those processes. What is troubling about depression, is that there is no internal commentator. It is just the world is right against your nose and there no distance between you and it. So the minute people can say, "I notice I'm feeling this," or "I'm back in the room," I think that is a vital and massive step forward for most people.

41   Some people think mindfulness means stilling the mind and blotting out the disruption. That is not necessarily a bad thing to do, but it's not sufficient, because we live in a very disruptive world. I feel as though one thing we have to do is following the wandering mind in a conscious way. We should let the mind go for a wander, but go with it. Many discoveries and revelations have come about through people following their thoughts in this way. The mind has a wonderful way of wandering, and that is why my book is called *Wanderful*. Let your mind go for a wander, and let your body go for a wander. Step off the beaten track, risk stigmatisation because you're not doing what everyone else is doing.

But in exchange you'll be making the discoveries that we need so that we can survive the problems that we create.

Social connection and intentionality

42   An example of a community-led initiative that promotes social connection is the increasing number of community choirs that are popping up. There's a clue there about intentional groupings. People are getting together to *do* something. Another example is book circles. People love to get together and, men in particular, because it is a way of talking about emotions without admitting you have any.

43   I have another example on the theme of intentionality. Intention being the *why* you're seeking the objective. There's an exercise I do where I ask a group of senior people to learn and sing an African song. They're like, "Oh no." I then pick up my phone and say, "I'm connected with this orphanage in Kenya," and show them a picture of the orphanage on my phone. I then say, "In five minutes, I'm going to phone the orphanage, and the kids are waiting to hear you sing this song. So you've got five minutes to learn the song, and then we're going to sing to Kenya. Is that okay?" And people say, "Fine." It's as if I'm saying, "This isn't an exercise in singing, it's an exercise in love. Are we clear? Go." (I've got people to sing everywhere in the world and what I do is I send the song and some money to the orphanage each time). I think there's a clue there. The glue that binds together these small communities, these ad hoc communities that spring up to do healthy things together, it is where there is deeper meaning.

44   I am sure you'll see this with all the emergency services that have been battling the fires and so on. Not that anyone wants to choose to do that, but there is something meaningful. This raises another point, which is to too big to talk about here, but the quest for meaning. Living a life that is not really meaningful is a source of our mental malaise.

Street Wisdom

Creating Street Wisdom

45   Street Wisdom is the surprise of my life. You never know where ideas come from, but this one came from a combination of things. I have done a TEDx talk about it, and I discuss it in my book, *Wanderful*. One thing that contributed to the idea was quite a shocking experience I had when I was a kid. My brother was run over in front of me. He survived, but it was a shocking experience for a young kid to have. It was the first lesson the street taught me: that life can change on a dime. That wasn't a lesson taught at school, it was a lesson taught out on the street, and I banked that in my mind.

46   In about 2010 I started doing activities with businesses where I would take senior people out of their offices into the streets. The idea was to get them away from the whole construct, get out into the public and to play around. I would use public places to do activities that people find demanding and difficult.

47   For example, I was working with a guy who was set to become the CEO of a major company. But he was not very comfortable with people; he was quite an isolated person. I was in a café with him and said to him, "You see that guy over there? Here's a pencil, draw a portrait of that man." He looked at me like I was mad, and said, "I'm an engineer, I'm not an artist." I said, "I don't care. I didn't say draw a good portrait, I said just draw one." He didn't want to, and he was huffing and moaning, but he did it. That was the first part of the task. For the second part, I said to him, "Now, go over there and give the portrait to him as a gift." This guy said, "You cannot be serious," but he did it. This was years ago, but I bet if you asked him he'd still remember that moment.

48   I began to think that maybe the public spaces we have are really interesting places to experiment with human development. Bit by bit, I began to build up this idea: why don't we do some workshops in the streets? I called it a "Walkshop", because we basically use the streets to learn. I formulated it and I made it very simple, so that I could give it away and it could be done anywhere in the world.

What Street Wisdom involves

49   Street Wisdom is a three-hour experience that we codified and put online. We give it away, and support people to do it. It is currently in 42 countries around the world, so it's spread like wildfire. It is run by volunteer "street leaders" who learn the process through materials we provide via our site. It has also now been picked up by organisations, and we run quite a few corporate workshops.

50   Street Wisdom is a three-phase process. In the first phase, you tune up your senses; you sort of awaken your senses. Usually our senses are shut down a bit when we're in public, because cities are noisy places, and so busy. Once you have your senses awake, and you're plugged into your awareness, you are ready for the second phase.

51   The second phase is that we get people to ask themselves a question and go and find an answer. This is what makes the wandering purposeful, meaningful and intentional. The person chooses the question. People ask questions about work, relationships, health—a question about life. It is a moment where people very often ask those secret, personal questions that they have never discussed with anyone. For example, people have asked, "Should I stay or should I go?" or "Am I going to leave this company?" or "How can I make money and be healthy?"

52   When you go for a walk alone for an hour with that awareness, with your senses awake, the street, instead of being something to screen out, suddenly becomes like an enormous database of stimulus. People's minds start getting all sorts of new connections.

53   The final phase is a sharing phase, of 10 people in a café or somewhere where people can sit together. The people who have participated sit down together and describe what happened and what they learned.

The results of Street Wisdom

54   It has been really surreal to see how valuable people find the Street Wisdom experience. How people love to do it again and again. How many people have done it. And the stories that we hear. We ask people who have completed the workshop to share their stories with us. We've gathered lots of stories from around the world. I took some of those stories and made them the basis of my book, *Wanderful*.

55   I thought of Street Wisdom as more of a problem-solving exercise, but it has turned out to have quite a strong mental health improvement component.

56   There are certain common things we hear from people who do the Street Wisdom Walkshop. They use the process to address a whole range of questions—from the more trivial to the profound. But, at a base level, people like to have permission to relax. That is not a small thing. People do not give themselves permission to cool their mind down. It is a difficult thing to do. This is why mindfulness is helpful because it is a title for the "me" time. People can say, "I'm going upstairs to do my mindfulness."

57   The second thing I think people would say is that they got a sense of themselves again. A young, very driven woman in one of the events we did for a large organisation stood up and burst into tears and said, "I have realised I have never been for a walk." What she meant by that was not that she'd never walked, but that she couldn't remember going for a meander, just going for a stroll, as opposed to walking directly to a destination. The sense of self not being lost is an important component of mental wellness. I built that principle into an exercise I've done with some clients, where their people have reclaimed their lunch hour. People are encouraged to use the lunch hour to reset themselves. Instead of working at the laptop, they'll go out and use the Street Wisdom techniques to reclaim their lunch hour—but they're really reclaiming themselves.

58   A more profound outcome of Street Wisdom is when people find an answer to a question that's been troubling them. Sometimes it just happens that the answer is already there, but they don't want to see it, or didn't see it. The techniques in Street Wisdom put your subconscious mind outside so that you can see it. The answers people find often corroborate what people are feeling inside. We're not spending much time dwelling on

what we're feeling, but more and more time on what we're thinking. It takes an external stimulus to do that.

59   Other people have had truly life-changing experiences. I think it is a lot to do with the timing of when they come to Street Wisdom. Sometimes, when they bump into a stranger, and the stranger says something to them, it can have a quite a sizeable effect. People have decided to leave their partner, or get married. We had one man who was depressed for years after his mother died, and the depression just dropped, and didn't come back.

60   We often ask people to ask a stranger to ask the stranger and see what they have to say. It doesn't have to be a stranger who is asked the question, but it is often a stranger. Some people say to me, "I feel a bit scared asking a stranger." I ask them to imagine that they were the stranger, and someone approached them and asked for an answer to a question they'd been struggling with. "You'd give them the time of day, wouldn't you?" I ask. "So, trust them! They'll probably give you the time of day too." You would be amazed the answers that people—strangers—give you. It is one of those beautiful things about Street Wisdom. It is also amazing how often the stranger is the person is to ask.

61   Street wisdom is about creating an atmosphere of social cohesion, the feeling that no man or woman is an island. That the answer to our mental health—and our survival—is collective. At the same time we have to have a sense of self because if you lose that you can very quickly be prone to other pathologies. The sense of the self in the crowd being connected to the crowd is one of the goals of most human development programs. In Street Wisdom, I just feel like I might have tripped over some techniques that could be harnessed.

62   I am not claiming that Street Wisdom will solve your problems—I don't want to oversell it. The results have as much to do with the person as the technique. But it's truly amazing to me that life-changing things can happen, and shifts in mental states, as a result of the experience. *Wanderful* contains some comments people have made after participating in Street Wisdom. Cecily from New Zealand says, "It was like turning up the volume on my eyes. I was amazed how the process brought me to a different state of being, allowing me to think in different ways than ever before." Another person said, "I move so fast in my body and mind I miss out on all the different and interesting things around me, which makes me think how much of my life I've just walked right passed and missed out on."

63   But for me, the core of Street Wisdom is that it gives people simultaneously a sense of themselves and their closest relation to others. People with depression can feel lost in the crowd. People have said that Street Wisdom was like being found, but in a crowd. In other words, they get a strong sense of *this is who I am, and this is what I'm feeling, and these are my surrounding and I'm hugely appreciative.*

64   There's a big element of generosity and love buried in Street Wisdom, which is designed to help people realise—which is something that I learned in my own mental health journey—that appreciation is an antidote to misery. Because if you can appreciate the moment, then it's very difficult to be depressed about it. You can appreciate that—whilst life isn't necessarily what you want it to be—I'm alive. That appreciation settles the demons down, as it did for me. Without making a big claim that, actually that what's buried in the middle of it and I think broadly that's what people experience.

65   A completely unexpected side effect of Street Wisdom is the sense of social cohesiveness that arises when we get together back at the café. There is something about strangers talking. In Street Wisdom, each person goes through this experience by themselves, they have all been off doing their own wanders, and come together in the café as strangers. An interesting by-product of Street Wisdom is that having your own journey connects you with other people. Friendships are often made. The café phase is supposed to last for an hour, but it regularly rolls on to two hours; people just don't want to leave because there's a sense of this ad hoc intention of community. It is that social cohesiveness that needs to happen that I think has got potential for the future.

Broader application of Street Wisdom

66   One idea that has been brewing for a while but which has been brought forward by the recent COVID-19 crisis, is showing people how to use our street-based techniques *inside*, in the home or workplace. Though the streetscape is the more usual setting, the actual work is happening in our perceptions. And this change of awareness can be practised anywhere. Indeed, that's the endgame for Street Wisdom—to teach techniques which individuals can use any time, any where. In response to the widespread movement restrictions and lockdowns, we've created a program called Street Wisdom Comes Home which guides participants through home-based exercises designed to maintain mental health, dispel monotony, boost morale and stimulate creativity. We provide free regular online "drop in" sessions (via Zoom) which we call the Digital Street Corner, where people are encouraged to share what they have learned with others.

67   One of the beauties of Street Wisdom is that it's a free, public event that comes and goes. It doesn't require any cost because it is using publicly available land, and it is the cost of a cup of tea, so there is no barrier of entry.

68   I started wondering what would happen if we were able to do it again and again in a place. What effect might it have on the place? For example, what would happen if, at lunchtime every day, there was a street that was designated "Wisdom Street"? What would it be like if people got to know that there's this place you go to when you have a troubling question on your mind and you want to get some answers? What if we were to train the shop staff,

the retail staff, that if people come and ask you a question, they could feel free to answer it? What if we talked to the street cleaners and the local people? What if it were known that this was a thing that happens here?

69   I started to think about approaching a council, and suggesting they try it. We could denote a street "Wisdom Street", and say that for a period of time, the rules of engagement on the street are slightly different, which are: if a stranger talks to you, you're welcoming; if you've got a question to ask, as a stranger; you're allowed to slow right down. If all the principles from Street Wisdom were institutionalised, what would happen?

70   We have tried to create a Wisdom Street a couple of times. We tried it with Oldham Council, which is a district council in Greater Manchester. Oldham Council is an interesting, innovative council, partly because they've got no money. They are known for doing interesting stuff, because they have to. We trialled Wisdom Street there, but it didn't work spectacularly well. We used a very light touch, and it was in competition with lots of other initiatives. We also trialled it at an urban festival.

71   Wisdom Street might be worth a trial in cities, because it's got lots of upsides. First, it's a rarity. Secondly, it's free, and there are no infrastructure costs. Thirdly, the project would create cohesion, because it would bring the retailers (because it would be good to be on a shopping street) together into a sort of community feel. Fourthly, I have a hunch that there would be positive side effects for the community. For example, the street would tidy itself up. I suspect the buskers would do better, the conversations would go deeper, the strangers would feel less strange, for example by breaking down the disconnect with rough sleepers.

72   It might help to break down the disconnect between the homeless and the people who pass them by. One thing I have learnt from the Street Wisdom exercise is that when you slow down, you connect with other people who are also moving slowly. This means that the two types of people that Street Wisdom participants tend to connect with are rough sleepers and shopkeepers. Those are the people who are generally watching; they're not zipping through the street.

73   My hunch is that there is a very interesting prototype exercise that could be done. The first step would be to select a street to serve as Wisdom Street. Perhaps streets might compete to be designated a Wisdom Street. They would have to meet certain minimum standards of cleanliness and no pornography, or whatever the standard is.

74   Once you've chosen a street, the next step would be simply to say that when you are on the street, certain rules apply. The aim would be to conduct Street Wisdom workshops there so frequently, that their principles become the norm.

75   My hunch is that the village fountain of the past would have been the place where this happened. You would notice if a person was looking glum, because you know them and you see them every day. The introduction of a Wisdom Street would be like reinstituting some of the village wisdom that used to exist, but which urbanisation has swept to one side. But the desire for community is still there in essence. I know it because I've seen it and I feel like it wants to happen.

76   Perhaps Australia is the place to try out Wisdom Street—maybe in Melbourne, maybe not. I feel that there is a spirit of openness in Australia, and in many respects you're ahead of the rest of the world in the mental health conversation. In your approach to talking about these issues, I see both a maturity and a humility. The way you are putting mental health front and centre is truly admirable.

Platforms to facilitate and encourage communities to promote good mental health, prevent poor mental health and support people living with mental illness

The role government can play in better supporting communities to achieve good mental health

77   I have had limited experience working with local councils, but I would say, "Support your champions." Many people in those communities are not financially oriented. They're highly intentional and they'll do what they do whether they are supported or not. It's easy for governments to make high-sounding, broad, general statements. But what is needed is for governments to be as granular as possible; I think what is needed is for governments to get out of the way of people who are trying to do good stuff. If you know what they need, then give it to them and lavish the local heroes with support. And then step back, because almost any large-scale initiative has unintended consequences.

78   Governments can help by facilitating the facilitators. Perhaps set aside some money that you're willing to risk on a new initiative, on a new experiment. Having an experimental fund would be useful, and it would be better than declaring from the top what the desired outcome is and how to achieve it.

Forming alliances between organisations outside government

79   I have seen some interesting and promising initiatives where organisations form alliances. There is an increasing number or Millennials and Gen-X people in positions of power. They want to be doing meaningful things and understand the importance doing meaningful things for people suffering with poor mental health.

80   For example, I was talking recently to somebody in the Middle East who runs a big retail operation. Other companies are chasing graduates, but he's not; he's looking for young

people who have autism. He's recruiting them because they can do the job really well and it makes a huge difference to them. This kind of pragmatic exercise shouldn't be ignored. While people may be cynical, I think these kind of pragmatic exercises should be encouraged and the ideas should be shared between companies, because they can be very, very helpful.

81   Geoff McDonald is another prominent spokesperson who is destigmatising depression. He was a senior HR executive (from Unilever) who, out of a blue sky, found himself experiencing depression. It came as a huge shock, as he was barely aware of the phenomenon at the time. He recovered, learning a huge amount about the disease in the process. A colleague of his, also suffering depression, was not so lucky and rather than talk about the problem at work, took his own life. On return to professional life, Geoff decided to devote his time to removing the stigma of mental ill health from the contemporary workplace. His not-for-profit venture is called Minds@Work.

82   I wonder whether some type of consortium or international register of goodwill exercises would be helpful. The problem with some of these small-scale initiatives is that they can get quite narcissistic. The problem is that we are all working on the same stuff, but locked up in our channels. It would be helpful if the micro-ventures had a way of connecting up with each other, to help and share knowledge with each other.

83   A final point is that while it's great for a workplace to have psychologists available onsite, it's better not to be creating conditions that drive people to need psychologists. It is great to have professional mental health help on-site. But some organisations don't realise that they are the problem that they are trying to solve. It is probably better to hit the root cause than deal with the symptoms.

Mentally healthy workplaces

Rationale for workplaces investing in mental health and wellbeing

84   I think it is well understood amongst employers that an effective workforce requires mental as well as physical wellbeing. Those that fail to invest accordingly are experiencing the negative effects (poor productivity, low morale, high absenteeism) quite quickly. And those who were unconvinced before the COVID-19 pandemic will, I believe, see this essential connection even more starkly. Home workers will only be able to function well over time if they remain mentally and physically well.

Community model

Features of a community mental health system that could support people with milder presentations to appropriately self-manage their mental illness and seek professional help when needed

85   I don't know what the features are. But if I just consult my own experience, I think it is like the foothills of the problem—if you want to call it a problem—and if you're left alone or uninterrupted in your behaviour in the foothills, quite quickly you end up in a strange place. Before these things start to happen, this is when you need to talk to someone, talk to anybody. The thing that you do not want to do is not talk to people because getting trapped in your head is dangerous, from my experience.

86   It would be a good thing if the experience of a community was such that such that people could immediately spot and interact with people who were showing signs of mental unease. Because triaging people is difficult. I'm still not clear myself—I have spent a life in this area—on what is a mood and what is pathology. And the person suffering has no way of knowing.

87   It is quite a mature thing to be able to say, "I don't really feel that there's a problem, so I'm going to go and talk to somebody." It has taken me a long time to get to the point where I know something is up, so I am going to get ahead of this thing. It is a subtle and difficult thing to do. If a community were better able to spot and gently interact with members of that community who are presenting, even just the beginnings—we are all under stress, these are very stressful times. A more grassroots, non-intrusive conversation would be really helpful. It's a sign of a healthy community, and I have a hunch that Wisdom Street could be a tool to help create that sort of healthy community.

Other thoughts

88   I don't want to seem immature or glib about mental illness, but one of the things that I discovered in my own experience—and I describe this in a talk I did at Google—is that darkness is part of wholeness.

89   In my experience working with successful people, for want of a better phrase, is that sometimes what shows up as a kind of mental disruption is them waking up to what real life is like. For many people, that brush with, let's call it mental illness, is the beginning of the next phase of their life, because it's the beginning of their understanding that this is a difficult world. If people are reacting with despair to the world, there is something to be said for affirming and legitimising that experience. Life can be very difficult and incredibly stressful. There is a place for understanding—and this is what the arts do—what

depression or some unwelcome pathology looks like, and that it can in fact be the growth of the individual.

90   Difficult stuff happens in life, and if you're really awake and watching, you're going to be despairing and ecstatic 20 times a day. That's what life is like. But I think we shouldn't be trying to damp down everything so we can go back to the norm. When people have gone through some life-changing trauma, as we are doing now with the Coronavirus, it is the conversation that follows that, and the approach we take, that is important. And it may not be just a mental health conversation. To be clear, I am not saying that we should take this approach in all cases. There is a difference between mental illness and mental preservation, or whatever you want to call it. And I think we should be vigilant to treat each accordingly. That means not trivialising mental pathologies. But also not medicalising the inevitable ups and downs. There's a class of unwelcome mental disturbance that is called "being alive". It's a cue for exploration, not something we should damp down.

sign here ▶ *David Pearl*

print name David Pearl

date   11th May 2020

Royal Commission into
Victoria's Mental Health System

ATTACHMENT DP-1

This is the attachment marked "DP-1" referred to in the witness statement of David Pearl dated 11 May 2020.

Curriculum vitae

David is an innovator in the arts, business and social change.

Drawing on his background in the performing arts (opera, theatre, TV and film), he's a creative confidante to the leaders of some of the world's major businesses, known particularly for designing and leading high-stakes meetings around the world.

Beyond business, his social enterprise Street Wisdom (www.streetwisdom.org) transforms ordinary city streets into extraordinary learning zones. Easy to facilitate by anyone, anywhere, it's already active in 40 countries around the world.

He is the author of Will There Be Donuts? *(Harper Collins), an engaging and widely read book (Top Ten Summer Reads* The Times*) on how you can revolutionise business, one meeting at a time. His second book on the power of narrative,* Story for Leaders*, was published by London Business Forum in March 2016, drawing on his experience across arts and business to help leaders access the formidable power of narrative—not only to describe the world, but to shape it. His latest book* Wanderful: Human Navigation for a Complex Age *was published by Unbound in January 2020.*

David is in demand as a public and Business Speaker, one of the most engaging and interactive on the international circuit.

A life-long performer (he sang with Placido Domingo at the age of nine), he keeps his own performance skills honed in the knife-edge improvised shows of his company Impropera (www.impropera.co.uk).