



Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples in the Australian Context

Gabrielle Russell-Mundine and Graeme Mundine

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, the traditional owners of the land we now call Australia, had their world forever changed when the Europeans arrived on these shores. From the very beginning the interaction between the First Peoples and the foreigners was based on a lie, what we see as the original sin of Australia. The foreigners took the land, with no recognition of the vibrant and complex laws of stewardship and kinship; with no recognition of the relationship to the land, each other and the Creator that had been developed over some 60,000 to 100,000 years. Since then Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have had to fight for all that should be theirs by right as the Indigenous Peoples of this land.

Today, the statistics tell the story of people dispossessed from their lands, and their cultures denigrated. The life expectancy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples is some twelve years less than other Australians. The infant mortality rate is higher than other Australians. Many Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders live in squalid conditions without basic amenities such as running water and primary health care. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples die from preventable diseases, or are suffering from chronic debilitating disease. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples do not receive adequate education.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples – a statistical snapshot

Size of Population	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approximately 2.5 % of the Australian population is Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. • The median age of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples is 21 years. • Over half the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population live in NSW and Queensland. However, as a proportion of population in those States they are small numbers. In the Northern Territory the Aboriginal population is relatively small but makes up 32% of the population.
Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The infant mortality rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infants is 2-3 times higher than for non-Indigenous infants. • Chronic disease is the biggest killer of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. For example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples are 10-14 times more likely to die from diabetes than non-

	Indigenous people.
Income and Employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The average income in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households is 62% less than in non-Indigenous households. • 57% of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce participates in the labour market as opposed to 76% of the non-Indigenous workforce.
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples are half as likely as non-Indigenous people to have completed school to year 12.
Criminal Justice System	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners make up 24% of the prison population. • Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are 23 times more likely to be imprisoned than non-Indigenous women and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men are 16 times more likely to be imprisoned than non-Indigenous men.
Child removal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 38% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples had themselves been removed from their family or a relative had been.

Source: *Social Justice Report 2008*, Australian Human Rights Commission

Despite these very large hurdles, the story of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples is one of survival and resilience. With more than two hundred different language groups these diverse cultures remain strong. Grandparents, uncles and aunts are still handing down those Aboriginal ways that have survived for thousands of years. Despite being taken off their land and put into missions and reserves, the connection to the land remains vital and constant. Despite so many children being taken from their families over many decades, still the connection to each other remains strong.

Over the past twenty years there have been some small steps forward and some large steps backward on the road to healing and reconciliation. In the early 1990s the legal system of Australia finally recognised that Australia was not *terra nullius*, or empty land, as had been claimed by the first colonisers. This landmark decision opened the door for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to reclaim their lands. But the legal system remains slow, the burden of proof is on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, and the politics of Australia are a major impediment.

Although reconciliation has been on the political agenda for more than a decade, often people do not know what that means, or how to achieve it. For us as Christians, we believe that reconciliation has two parts. First, there is an acknowledgement that something is out of balance; an acknowledgement of sorrow and wrongs. The second part is to take action to make amends. Reconciliation is also about relationships and it is this aspect that informs our choice of readings for this study. The first reading is from the Bible, but the second reading is a traditional Aboriginal story which helps us understand our roles and responsibilities with regard to reconciliation and healing and the importance of our relationship to each other.

Reading: Genesis 1

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

And God said, 'Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.' So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

And God said, 'Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.' And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, 'Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.' And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

And God said, 'Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.' And it was so. God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

And God said, 'Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.' So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them, saying, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.' And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

And God said, 'Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.' And it was so. God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.'

*So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.*

God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over

every living thing that moves upon the earth.’ God said, ‘See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.’ And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

The first story is one that is very well known but little understood as a story pointing us towards liberation. How evocative this is as we hear how God reaches down and takes the soil of the earth itself to form human beings, and then how God breathes into human nostrils the breath of life. Surely this is a Dreaming¹ story, if ever there was one! What it says to us is that God created each and every one of us as very, very, very, very, very, very, very special to God. It is not so much an account of how things come to be in a literal, scientific sense, as a revelation of how we relate to God, God’s creation, and all that is. It tells us that, not only do we belong, but that we are intimately connected to everything and everyone else; that our life itself is not possible without understanding that we are the Land itself and that the life we share is the very breath of the Creator Spirit. It tells us that if you were created as a very, very, very, very, very, very special person, then I owe you due respect for being that special person. Likewise, I was created by God as a very, very, very, very, very, very, very special person, and you must give me due respect as one of God’s creation.

What a self-understanding this offers, and how different from so much of the media and mainstream messages we receive! Knowing this, we are truly transformed. Story after story in the cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples tells the same message. Sometimes the story is shaped and coloured a little differently. For example, in my clan, the Bunjalung peoples, we have stories about one particular sacred mountain, but the stories are shaped by our view of that mountain. We each see different aspects of it from our particular traditional lands. We all speak of our relationship with the same sacred mountain, but from different perspectives. Like the view of creation in Genesis, our stories speak of the same reality, of our connection to the Land and Creator Spirit, and of the consequent sacred worth and purpose we each share. For such ancient stories are not about a time long ago, but are about a time that is then, now, and to come.

In the light of what Christians have called our true spiritual identity, what then should be our re-action when this reality is not present in our lives and world? Again, the major stories of both the Christian faith and Indigenous culture concur. We are called to live out the relationship, which is our gift and true nature.

Emu, Brolga and Jabiru

The second story is that of the Emu, Brolga and Jabiru, as told by Pastor George Rosendale (Lutheran).

One day Emu is standing high on a hill. It is a beautiful calm day and she is looking all around her. Suddenly, she notices that down on the plains there is dust flying around. “That’s strange”, she thinks. “It is such a calm day, where is this dust coming from?” So she

¹ Dreaming stories are the stories told since the beginning of time by Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders to make sense of their world and their place in it. They are the way in which Law and cultural traditions were passed from generation to generation.

goes to investigate. When she gets there she sees her cousins Brolga and Jabiru fighting. They have their digging sticks and they are hitting each other. Crack! Crack! Crack!

“Oh no!” thinks Emu. “I must stop them”. So she stands on the edge of the place where her cousins are fighting and shouts, “Stop! Stop! Stop!”

Brolga and Jabiru hear her voice and momentarily stop fighting. They look at Emu, then back at each other and once more pick up their digging sticks and continue to fight. So violent is their fight that to this day when you see Brolga and Jabiru you can see their red marks made by the blood from this fight.

Emu, seeing the fight continue, thinks she must stop them. So Emu runs in the middle of Brolga and Jabiru and tries to pull them apart. As she runs in the middle, a digging stick comes down across her back, and crack! Her back is broken. To this day, when you see Emu you can see the hump in her back created by the blow of the digging stick.

Emu is walking on her own, when she spots her cousins Brolga and Jabiru fighting. What is she to do? She cannot but be involved, for she is related to them, as we are to everyone and everything. They are her family. First she stands on the sidelines and shouts out to her cousins to stop fighting. They stop for a minute, but then continue to fight. How often have we stood on the sidelines and thought we must do something about this, or we think everybody else is to blame, or is responsible. So we stand on the sidelines and shout, “the Governments should do this, the Churches should do that.” But as Emu finds, if we really want to change anything we have to jump into the fray.

In this story Emu gets between them and tries to stop the fighting. That is the first moral of the story: get involved! Don't pass by on the other side. We each have responsibility and relationship for and to each other. The second one, however, is that involvement may cost us. For Emu - whack! - down come the digging sticks upon her back leaving her, and her descendants, with a bent, broken, back. If we live with the breath of the Spirit in and upon us, and if we seek to share the good news of freedom which Jesus declared at Nazareth, we may also expect the kind of rejection Jesus also suffered.

Questions for Discussion

1. What does the story of Genesis say to you about your relationships - to God, to yourself, to the world, in your ministry and to the people in your life?
2. Where in your life have you stood on the sidelines when you could have stepped into the fray? What have been the consequences of getting involved?
3. What effect has getting involved, or not getting involved, had on your relationships?
4. How do these two stories guide us to a better relationship with each other and with God?

Acknowledgements and References

- The writers would like to acknowledge Rev. Dr Jonathan Inkpin who has previously written a paper with Graeme Mundine on Genesis 1.
- Australian Human Rights Commission, (2008), Social Justice Report, http://www.hreoc.gov.au/Social_Justice/index.html

Graeme Mundine is the Executive Secretary of the National and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Commission (NATSIEC) of the National Council of Churches in

Australia. Graeme is from the Bundjalung Nation in Northern New South Wales. Formerly a Marist Brother, Graeme has worked with the Catholic Church and now ecumenically with the National Council of Churches for more almost thirty years. He lives in Sydney and is married to Gabrielle.

Gabrielle Russell-Mundine < grussell@ncca.org.au > is the project officer for NATSIEC and is married to Graeme. Originally from England, she has lived in Australia for twenty five years and is currently working for NATSIEC while completing a PhD on Indigenous community capacity development.