

Dreams, Dilemmas & Dilalogue

**By
Lillian Holt**

I'd like to start by acknowledging the ancestral spirits of the traditional custodians of this country, the WULGURU KABA, BINDAL and BIRRI GUBBA.

It's also good be back in Queensland. For as someone once said, just as with Catholics there are no ex-catholics only lapsed ones, the same applies to Queenslanders, there are no ex-Queenslanders, only lapsed ones, too.

I'd also like to thank the organisers for asking me to speak at this conference which, for me, has an inviting and abundant topic and tone to it, namely, "Building Just and Vibrant Societies".

(Wow – how both inviting and frightening that order is!!!)

I really do feel that such a title speaks to the human condition and, by default, not only invites us all to participate but also implicates us all in the building, thereof.

Pause....Mahatma Gandhi said: "be the change you want to see".

Don't wait for or rely on others. Just do it, as Nike would say. Let it begin with me, is another way to say it.

Too often we want watertight formulas and answers from others.

But let me say that I do not come in that capacity today, nor any other time. That is, I do not come with watertight formulas and answers.

Nor do I speak on behalf of anyone else – black or white.

Rather, I come to share my experience, strength and hope in this area. To share snippets or snapshots of my own journey and to say this is what I have observed.

Which is why, I said in my abstract that I needed fellow travellers who possessed an ounce of courage, a glimmer of hope and a pinch of indignation who were willing to share their thoughts, their hopes, their fears, in delving deep and digging a deep dreaming track for us all in this rich and abundant but often racialised country.

Why courage one may well ask? Pause.....

Well Courage is needed, for there is the discomfort of discovery along the way. But within courage is the play of life. And we need to play. We need to have fun along the way in building our dreaming tracks. We need to be vulnerable, to make mistakes ---- for the only mistakes we make are the ones we don't learn from.

Why Indignation one may also ask? Pause.....

Well, to quote George Sand, the writer, who once said: “Indignation at the world’s woes is the most passionate form of love”.

WhyHope?

Well, Hope contains the seeds of expectancy. Of the present and future. More importantly, as St. Augustine said: “Hope has two daughters. Anger and Courage. Anger at what is wrong and courage to change it.”

So a glimmer of Hope, a pinch of indignation and an ounce of courage could serve us well!!!! I see them as somewhat like the spiritual savouries we need to imbibe and digest if we are to build Just and Vibrant societies.

Furthermore, I would suggest to you all that not formal qualifications are needed to build “Just and Vibrant Societies”. Rather, we need only honesty, open-mindedness and willingness.

With ourselves and with others!

Certainly, we do not need “experts”. (joke about expert!)

We will certainly need humour. That humour which Edward De Bono says is the most under-utilised faculty in western, academic education. That humour which moistens us up, loosens us up, so that we don’t take ourselves too seriously.

I don’t know about you, but good gut laughter, is required regularly in my life. And please note: Humour comes from the latin: “umere” to moisten which is a wonderful image for it reminds me the first drops of rain pelting down on the drought stricken, hard, group. It moistens and loosens.

Humour is often the tool of the fool. The fool who is the full cousin of the sage, the wise person. They come from the same archetypes I am told so they are full blood relations. The fool is the one who takes risks and says: “it’s ok to make a mistake”. “We’re human, after all”.

And, as Patrick Dodson, that magnanimous first Chair of the Council for Reconciliation said: “there’s no shame in saying we’ve made a mistake. We just start again”.

But in a society that demands answers and control, we’re often not allowed to make mistakes. However, I suggest that if we are to build just and vibrant societies then we need to acknowledge our human limitations which, in turn means that we will make mistakes, we will be vulnerable and that we about progress rather than perfection.

I speak like this because when I was initially asked last year to present at this conference, the woman in Melbourne who asked me ----- had heard me speak and tell my story. She said to do something similar, to keep it simple.

To share!!!! Pause..... One human being to another!!!!!!

And in sharing our courage, hope and even indignation, we tell one another who we are. We can thus dialogue and dream together.

Indeed, after working or studying full time for past forty plus years, I've come to the conclusion that we need to know one another on a deeper, more profound, more intimate level.

Pause.....Perhaps we need a new language for all of this. I've dared to take into Melbourne University words like "dreaming" which, in some ways, is just another word for "discerning" (talk about new job) and "journey" and "visions" which lessen the distance between the head and the heart. For they are not set in concrete and we can appropriate ownership of them to whatever degree we want.

Words can be risky business!!They are potent weapons for they can be exclusive or inclusive.

But if they appeal to the human condition which consists of both head and heart, spirit as well as structure, then they can be more holistic and encompassing.

And, in being so, they can be the opposite of that rational, logical, linear language of western, academic education, which Edward De Bono describes as having "arrogant assumptions and dangerous polarisations".

(And if you don't know who Edward De Bono is, he's the guy who gets paid millions of dollars for speaking and thinking the way I do. He's a lateral thinker and goes beyond the limitation of linear language.)

For me, personally, language is important in the way we communicate.

And linear language has much limitation if we are to push the boundaries and take risks. For example, many cultures have many, many, ways of describing one thing: e.g. the Eskimo, the snowflake. The Bedouin with his camels. (programme on SBS).

In our everyday language, labelling is often used. Especially in bureaucracies and hierarchies. And I think that there is a real danger in this. Labelling can inadvertently create mischief and misunderstanding even malice!

(and this is best illustrated by a joke!)

Pause.....So far, I've mentioned humour and language. They're both important tools for me in building just and vibrant societies for they can point out ourselves to ourselves. We can be revived and replenished with both.

Other tools we can use are those of simplicity and honesty. They can be part of the language of storytelling which I think can draw us closer as communities, as a collective.

Storytelling is an ancient art. Common to all cultures, it appears. And why wouldn't it be? For Storytelling requires no formal qualifications.

More importantly, I would venture to say that it is about the spiritual as opposed to the mere structural which is so honoured in this society.

Storytelling is about simplicity, sincerity and equality. It is about our authenticity rather than mere acculturation,

Authenticity dictates that anybody can sit in a circle and tell their story. Acculturation dictates that not everyone is invited to the high-table of hierarchy.

I think it is a simple yet profound tool for social justice. Perhaps as yet unacknowledged and unhonoured. It can incorporate all of the essentials of history, with honesty and, even humour. It can be a connecting cable for our humanity and the human condition. And, in being so, can help us build just and viable societies.

Pause.....It is a tool that is freely available. And, in the twilight of my own years of working in Aboriginal affairs what with all of its hopes and fears, my primary concern is that we engage more meaningfully with one another. That is my wish for our country.

And maybe the simplest and purest way is through telling our stories to one another.

Maybe we activate our common humanity through the sharing of our stories. And in activating thus, we become more aware of ourselves and others. Of our common human condition.

Thus we stop seeing ourselves so much in terms of class, image, position in hierarchy, what we own, where we live. Which, essentially is about the acculturated self rather than the authentic self. (Really interested in this area!)

Storytelling can allow us to see one another through different prisms. Through the different facets of our humanity.

In 1999, a book titled simply: "Reconciliation" edited by Michelle Grattan was published. It contained some forty or so essays on the topic featuring a wide range of contributors from the Prime Minister to the Governor General, along with others such as Noel Pearson, Lowitja O'Donoghue, Evelyn Scott, Peter Garrett and Kim Beazley.

Aden Ridgway, Aboriginal Senator, was also one of the contributors. And I found his piece to be one of the more interesting. It was both stimulating and challenging and, in summary, he talked about the need for storytelling in the process of Reconciliation.

Let me quote him: "The art of storytelling is at the centre of Reconciliation and Reconciliation is at the heart of Australian society. The twenty-first century gives us an opportunity to reflect on the past, to think about the Australia we learnt about at school, and confront what is often an uncomfortable and unfamiliar past.

"Many Australians have lost the ability to tell a story and find it even more difficult to accept some "home-grown" truths particularly as told by indigenous storytellers, peacemakers, healers and bridge builders.

On reading his contribution, I was struck by the simplicity of storytelling as a tool in getting to know one another. For despite all of the good-will of the people's movement, the policies, the platitudes of government, the rhetoric, the reality is that I feel - and I know many other Aboriginal people share my view - that we are essentially estranged from one another, in this country.

Why that may be so, is something I would ask you to ask yourself rather than asking me. Pause.....Personally, I see that type of question inviting an interrogation of whiteness as opposed to the continuing studying and researching of blackness.

However, I saw today as an opportunity to share my own story as part of the social justice fabric of this country. Part of the tapestry of stories that can inform the reconciliation backdrop. Part of the need of what Aden Ridgway calls for. I agree wholeheartedly with him. I've heard him speak. Heard him tell his own story. And, in doing so, move people in a way that the statistical and structural process does not.

I didn't come here, today, to tell you to do anything that I, myself, would not do nor have not done.

Thus, before I close, I need to tell you who I am. For my story is about my spirit. My identity. Myself, not just as a player in this ancient and abundant country of ours but also in humanity and its condition.

I was born in 1945, on Cherbourg Aboriginal Settlement, in Queensland. That makes me 58 years of age. (Cheese/Picasso). My mother was part of the stolen generation, that is, she was taken away from far north Queensland and put on Cherbourg at a very early age and died, in 1987, not knowing her next of kin, that is, her mother, father, sisters nor brothers and her date of birth. (Hers is not an isolated story and I cannot find any records).

My father, in contrast, was the eldest of fourteen children. He was born on a cattle station in the rugged Carnarvon Ranges, in Central Western Queensland.

Due to the policies and circumstances of the day, my father never went to school whilst my mother was educated to fourth grade which was the furthest any Aboriginal person could go in school if they lived on an Aboriginal settlement. After that, women were sent out to work on stations as domestics, which is what my mother did.

The reason I was born on Cherbourg is that my paternal grandfather was sent there in 1919 or 1922 for being what could only be described as a "difficult blackfella". Ironically, Cherbourg was set up in 1908, for so-called "difficult and disadvantaged" Aborigines. As a result of his exile to Cherbourg, my Grandfather was physically and spiritually alienated from his country of belonging. There was severance from not only his country (explain country) but from his kin and language. This was not an uncommon occurrence for Aboriginal people.

In the early sixties I was in the first group of Aboriginal students to enter high school in Queensland. This group comprised less than a dozen students. And, in the late

sixties and early seventies, when I ventured into University, the numbers were approximately the same. The sixties were times of change and none more so than for Aborigines when a referendum was held in 1967 which meant that we were counted in the census for the first time.

As a child of the sixties in the sense that I was coming to adulthood, they were heady days of hope what with all hoop la about the Referendum and the subsequent setting of policies pertaining to Aboriginal Affairs in the seventies.

From the early seventies I became formally involved in Aboriginal education and have remained so for the past thirty years. (And, no, I don't get a free car nor any other freebies)

My jobs have included being the first Aboriginal executive officer for the then, National Aboriginal Education Advisory Committee, in the mid-seventies. The NAEC was the official national advisory body to the Federal Government.

Until my current appointment at the University of Melbourne, five years ago, my most substantial work was at the Aboriginal Community College, in Port Adelaide. On my return from the United States in 1980, where I did post-graduate study, I was offered a three month teaching appointment there which turned into sixteen years, the last seven of them as the first Aboriginal principal.

Tauondi, as it is now known, and which is the local Kurna word for "breakthrough" was based on a philosophy of holistic education, i.e. the physical, mental and spiritual. And in the 70's holistic thinking was viewed somewhat suspiciously.

Tauondi taught me much. Over the sixteen years that I worked there I met men and women of high degree and by that I mean men and women who were unlettered and uncluttered. The lack of the western ego was refreshing. (and, that is something one detects rather than defines).

Its modus operandi was essentially that there is no such things as a "no-hopers". In a society which defines people as "winners and losers" this was and still is, unusual. But then it also challenged the prevalence of deficit language inherent in the "Aboriginal Industry". (Tell joke)

More importantly, it introduced myself to myself and gave me a sense of belonging as I listened to the many stories, told in many forms, of the many men and women who passed through its warm atmosphere. (John Ingram – founding principal. Atmosphere/environment. Human condition)

Thirty years down the track of Aboriginal issues/areas/problems be it education or reconciliation, I am increasingly and passionately concerned that black and white in this country find common ground and connecting humanity.

For what has diminished me as an Aboriginal woman has also diminished you, as a non-Aboriginal person. And, perhaps if we are genuine about building just and vibrant societies, perhaps some of the unpalatables of race really need to be ruminated over and digested.

We shouldn't be too daunted by the tasks ahead of us. For simplicity contains all of the essentials. Indeed, we should not be too terrified by it all, either. For there are no innocent bystanders in our history and humanity and neither should there be any terrified ones.

In closing, I want to say that I am truly interested in the identity and spirit of this country which birthed my ancestors thousands of years ago.

I have travelled the world and yet, on returning, I know intuitively that I belong here physically, mentally and spiritually.

I'm interested in furthering and building new, just and vibrant societies, either through knowing and saying hello to my neighbours in the street where I live (which is locally) in sharing myself at conferences like this, nationally, or tripping away to far off lands and speaking the language of the human condition, internationally.

It's all too easy to throw our hands up and curl up in our own comfort – thinking it's all too hard. But as Confucius said: “every journey begins with the first step”.

I'm interested in meeting fellow travellers who are interested in the dreams and the dialogue and the dilemmas, as well. It is through sharing with others that I have learnt in the winter of my own discontent there is an invincible summer. (with apologies to the poet whose words those are).

Finally, I am led to believe that my language is not new. It's not innovative for as a 17th Century English tombstone reads:

A task without a vision is drudgery.

A vision without a task is a dream.

But a vision with a task is the hope for the world.

I'll repeat that:

Thank you!!!

**lillianholt©july2003
2985 words**