

Charles Strong Trust Lecture – Part 1

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A Far Cry – A Resounding call to ALL Australians

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To begin, I want to tell you that this paper is driven by the need to speak of some deeper things in my early life, that later led me to discover my Aboriginality from my great grandmother, and my Christian roots from my great grandfather – an Irish convict. My love for learning has taken me from the depths of despair to a journey of hope, with many different pathways, giving me a strong love for the Creator Spirit, the land, and my people.

It is a '*far cry*' from my early life as a child growing up in a primary school, in the once famous gold mining town of Coolgardie in West Australia. It was here that I had my first encounter with an Aboriginal community without knowing my Aboriginal heritage.

My father's relatives with whom I was temporarily staying, knew of my heritage, because their brother (my father) was married to an Aboriginal girl (my mother). This was considered very shameful and illegal in those days, so it was concealed from me. I was aware of being different because of the names I received at school, like 'nigger', 'boong', 'wog', or 'dago', because of my dark hair and complexion, also other children were not allowed to my place to play. I became very lonely, developing a strong sense of now being wanted, not belonging and often wondering who I really was!

While in Coolgardie, we lived opposite the East-West Railway line, which was also the boundary between the Aboriginal community and the whitefellas. On government ration days, the Aboriginal people would collect their flour, sugar, tea and tobacco from the police station. Then they would come to our place and sit in the shade of a huge peppercorn tree. My aunt would fill their billys with tea and any food we had for them. My uncle offered the men small jobs chopping wood. This encouraged them to work for extra things they needed.

On a sadder note, the Aboriginal women, often in terrible pain, sought the help of my aunt to tend to the terrible burn wounds they received when pushed too close to the fire, by their own men, who became intoxicated and violent, from the alcohol that depraved whitefellas took into their camp for use of their women. These poor women became abused victims by all.

Witnessing this violence as an impressionable child, later became an obstacle when I was struggling to find – acknowledge and accept – my Aboriginality.

It is certainly a '*far cry*' from those experiences to where I am today, wholeheartedly accepting and working for my culture and slowly acknowledging who I am.

It has been a long, hard, and difficult journey of self-discovery, one that is still ongoing. At the same time I have been enriched by the many people who have struggled with me, helping me to heal from those early years of a broken home, loss of family, rejection, low self-esteem and not belonging.

During this period, I received no religious upbringing, apart from some old fashion values of right and wrong, and some brief hymn singing, when I was placed in Graceville, a Salvation Army home for delinquent girls for being a rebellious teenager. Upon my release when I was sixteen I had no home to go to.

The war was still on, so I decided to put my age up and join the Air Force. I was posted to Melbourne to train as an aircraft mechanic. On completing my training, I went to work on aircraft engines at Geraldton, WA. Later I was sent to Bairnsdale, in Victoria. When the war ended I was discharged in Melbourne.

Once again, I was alone without family or friends. I found work in a department store in Bourke Street. Still only eighteen, I was put on a junior wage. This was not enough to live on without family support. I became desperately frightened and thought of ending my life. **But ... miracles do happen!**

An older lady I worked with, named Miss Virtue, sensed I was in trouble. One day at lunch time she suggested going for a walk. It was a Holy Thursday and she wanted to pay a visit to St Francis Church in the city. I agreed, as I had never been inside a Catholic Church. I was immediately impressed by its beauty. I asked many questions, then took some instruction and later, became a Catholic.

This literally saved my life. It gave me a sense of direction and some rules to guide me. The priest, Father John Connellan, suggested I change my job and arranged for me to live at a Catholic girl's hostel. I now had company and emotional help from the nuns.

But I was still wondering about my culture. So I went to the Registrar of Birth and Deaths. It was then, with an apology, that I was first officially told of my Aboriginality.

I later married and went to Geelong to live and had six children; this kept me very busy, and my search for culture was put on hold. **However, God's Time, is the right time.** After my children were all married, my husband suddenly passed away suffering from terminal cancer. I was alone, again.

One evening, while out walking, I was surprised to see an Aboriginal woman. We said a friendly 'hello'. Jacqui Johnson was from Queensland and was studying at the Koorie unit at Deakin University in Geelong. Then I spoke of my search for culture, and Jacqui suggested I come to Deakin and enquire about some study. I took her advice, had an interview, and was accepted.

This brought me in touch with Aboriginal people from various communities across Australia and the beginning of my acceptance as an Aboriginal person. After four years I graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Humanities. Later I did some basic theology at Nungalinya College in Darwin, which gave me some strong experience with Aboriginal Christians, some of whom were studying for Church Ministry. Another 'far cry', from being oblivious of my heritage in my Coolgardie experience!

I am now firmly convinced that my learning had a purpose and had taken me on many exciting journeys. Today I am involved with the Aboriginal Catholic Ministry of Victoria using my interests in the issues of education, social justice, reconciliation, searching for connections in Aboriginal culture and my Christian spirituality, giving talks about my two small books *River Dreaming* and *The Power of Story*, and writing articles and stories with an Aboriginal focus for various magazines, such as the Jesuit magazine, *Madonna*.

So as I continue y liberating and at times paradoxical spiritual journey, I'll now move on to my **resounding call for all Australians.**

As I am not a prophet, these observations are simply my own humble thoughts as I perceive them.

One strong issue that disturbs me personally is that Australia is widely recognised as the world's most secular nation. On the face of that statement, it would appear; that we are suffering a very deep loss of the spiritual in our national culture.

David Tacey brings this out strongly in his book *The Edge of the Sacred*, in which he says "... ours is a thoroughly secular age, which has experienced widespread disenchantment and loss of religious experience".

Many other respected and talented Australian writers have written about the search of the soul or spirit of Australia. To name just a few, David Tacey, as above, Denis Edwards in *Jesus and the Natural World*, Peter Malone in *Developing an Australian Theology*, and Eugene Stockton in *The Deep Within*, speaks of an 'archetypal theology'.

Aboriginal woman, Miriam Rose Ungunmerr in her class 'Dadirri', says '... deep listening, and still awareness, is something Australia is thirsting for'. Another Aboriginal Elder in his language says, "the trouble is you white fellas got no Dreaming". To me this says it all. Materialistic consumerism, appears to be the white fellas God. There is a paradox here.

But, as author Father Ron Rolheiser, OMI, points out "it will not be helpful to regard secular society as the enemy. Secularity is Christianity's adolescent child, not bad but unfinished and difficult..." We must discover how God is experienced and to live lives that make sense of the Gospel in secular society.

To look for the true spirit of our nation then, we must begin with parabolic wisdom and search for the pearl of great price, the treasure in the field, which is the deep spirit within our land. I believe the spirit lies in the tap root of Australia's own *Tree of Life*, the deep traditional wisdom of our unique Aboriginal people. Its very essence is **sublimely simple and profoundly awesome**.

From the very beginning, human kind was given knowledge of the spirit world. It is planted deep in the human heart. As we gazed at the wonder of creation, the forests of trees, the land with the sun to light the day, the rivers and the oceans, the mysterious beauty of the night, the glow of the moon and myriad of stars to light the night and govern the seasons, we Aborigines, became aware of the mystery of some *óther* - a Great Creator Spirit - that provides a land that sustains us and must be diligently cared for.

Everything was created from the One Great SPIRT.

So all was Sacred

This is the Pearl that our Nation needs to recognise

It is the Heart and Soul of our Land and its people

'The Eternal Dreaming'

Always Was – Is Now – and – Ever will be

It is the gift our people have wanted to share.

But not be taken from us.

I believe that the collective nation must realise that the greatest harm being done to our people, is the ongoing alienation from our spiritual connection to the land. This must be restored if reconciliation is to be authentically sound. Politicians must consider the importance of the healing of our spirit as a fundamental issue.

I understand that recognition, respect, responsibility, sound education and health are absolutely necessary. All must be grounded in the spiritual wisdom of our culture. Is it possible then to see this country through the lens of an Aboriginal nation? What would this mean?

It simply means becoming a nation that believes in the historical uniqueness of our first people as custodians of the land, and in the core belief of the **'Dreaming', that all creation is sacred. A gift from the Great Creator Spirit. This has been the authentic Australian Story from the beginning.** It could become the foundation stone for the reframing of Australia's Constitution – a rebirth of the history of this nation, the one political builders rejected. It's time to get it right.

Impossible?! I don't think so. Anything is possible with God.

There has been one glorious moment in our history that stands out strongly for me. A moment in time, when we all believed as one people, and metaphorically speaking we all sat on the ground under a peppercorn tree together and believed as one people and one nation.

That moment was when a young Cathie Freeman in the 2000 Olympic Games walked through the flame of fire, then went on to victory and her subsequent sitting down on *sacred ground*. The whole nation rose together as one people and one voice applauding her hour of glory and she spontaneously shared it with her people by sitting on her beloved land. I truly believe at that moment deep in our subconscious hearts we truly recognised our land as a sacred place and became as one people.

So what has been done before can be done again!
This then, is my 'Resounding Call to All Australia'.

IT IS TIME!

To let the sacred essence of *The Dreaming* become our authentic Australian national story. Only then, can we be rightly called '*The Land of the Holy Spirit*'. May we all say '*Amen*' to that.