



Healing our communities, healing ourselves

Jane Harrison

On my first day as an Aboriginal Research Officer, researching the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal children, I was given a report to read as background material for my new role. It evaluated the therapeutic service which had just employed me. I flicked through the report, my eyes alighting on a chart which outlined the types of trauma experienced by the service's clients, including exposure to family violence and physical assault, such as being hit with objects. (The report referred to all children, not just Aboriginal.) The report went on to list rates of other forms of abuse — emotional abuse, sexual abuse and neglect. I had to think to myself, did I have the inner resources to do this job? In my role, while I would not be interviewing children directly, I would be talking to clinicians, psychiatrists and counsellors, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, who had worked therapeutically with Aboriginal children who had been abused. Would I have the resilience to withstand the vicarious trauma to which I would be exposed? My position was based across a consortium of three organisations, — an Aboriginal childcare agency, a therapeutic service and a university, — so I had a deep pool of knowledge and wisdom to draw upon in developing my report. But what of myself, and my own life experiences; what could I bring to this role?

I grew up with my Aboriginal mother and one sister. My non-Aboriginal father was a severe alcoholic, and was absent for most of my childhood. He died from cardiomyopathy when I was nine. There were alcoholic grandparents on both sides of my family, but, fortunately, my mother had escaped that scourge. I suppose I was happy as a child, although we were often living “off the smell of an oily rag”, as my mother would put it, and our small family was quite socially isolated. My mother's family all lived interstate and we had little association with my father's family, except at Christmas. But my childhood provided me with lots of freedom: I was surrounded by nature, I had a best friend, I loved reading and I did well academically. By many of the measures I later perused as part of my research, I would have been classified as a resilient child. More to the point, I think I didn't act up, or act out, or if I did it, it flew beneath the radar. In my teenage years, I experienced my first bout of depression, and it has dogged me my whole life. So how does one undertake research, or work to heal Aboriginal children, when one needs to heal oneself? We Aboriginal workers travel a parallel journey, working to improve our community's wellbeing, while sometimes struggling with our own.

Sometimes I am aware of the irony; in my work I am a strong advocate for increasing the cultural connection of Aboriginal children, believing culture to be healing, especially for those who are in the child protection system and whose access to family and community is nominal. Yet my own cultural connection when I was growing up was very tentative. I always knew I was Aboriginal, I always “felt” it, and yet did not have the bonds

with extended family that is so much a part of “being” Aboriginal. There were no other Aboriginal students at my school or in my social milieu. In my childhood I felt quite comfortable telling people of my heritage, but when I reached adulthood, people — white people — would often question my Aboriginality: “How much of you is Aboriginal?” I too began to question my “right” to claim Aboriginal heritage, while still feeling a strong desire to belong, to connect. In my early 30s, being unexpectedly out of work as an advertising copywriter, I came across an ad for a writer/researcher for an Aboriginal theatre company. The project was “The Lost Children”, which later evolved into the play *Stolen*, themed around the “stolen generations”. I myself was not a member of the Stolen Generation, and neither was my mother, yet I was entrusted to write this important story. It took six years from commission

to its stage premiere and, in that time, I read and spoke to as many people as I could. It was an amazing, deep, hands-on education, and yet the most important part of the experience, for me, was finally building some connections. While all along I had doubts about my “entitlement” to belong, I felt (mostly) accepted as an Aboriginal person by the Aboriginal theatre community, and they became my *de facto* mob.

The spotlight is often on the dysfunction of Aboriginal communities, but what of the wider white community? Read the daily papers and note the innumerable examples of binge drinking, stabbings, reckless driving. We are all too aware of the plethora of pornography on the web, high rates of youth suicide and high rates of depression in the general population, but we never classify these as being “white” issues. In contrast, I think a healthy Aboriginal person and community represents “best practice”. They are connected to extended family and community; they participate in community events and have a way of conveying their culture — through art, music, dance, filmmaking, sport and the like. They look out for one another. They have pride in being Aboriginal and can express that, through opportunities such as NAIDOC (the National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee), but also in myriad everyday ways. Their Aboriginality is a source of strength. Their humour helps them through the tough times, and there is always someone wise to turn to. Although many of these ways of being have been eroded by intergenerational trauma and poor social indicators, the healthy Aboriginal person and community still survives to give us hope.

Working in an Aboriginal organisation, you see all around you a dedication to making a contribution, to making a difference for future generations, while many of us at the same time are struggling with our personal demons. One of these can be low self-esteem. Low self-esteem can make us vulnerable to real or perceived slights or put-downs, or can make us feel undervalued, which can impact on our working lives. One friend told me, after suffering put-downs at work, that she was used to being treated that way — that was how people (Aboriginal or otherwise) had always treated her. “Lateral violence” can be rife:



it's like we feel powerless to assert our rights "out there" in the wider community, so we turn on ourselves and on those closest to us, because it's there that our anger and sadness and hurt have most traction. Some of us battle addictions, whether it's alcohol or the pokies. Many of the Aboriginal women I know who are working in the child and family welfare area, me included, are also single mothers, and while that is not a deficit in itself, it is often linked to financial stresses and sometimes means that there is less household support. And yet we, me included, are all striving to be professional (and we are) — striving to have our lived experiences recognised for the insight and wisdom, empathy and compassion they bring to our working lives.

In my own journey towards "belonging", there are gems. Presenting at a recent conference, and introducing myself as having Muruwari heritage, I was later approached by two Elders who had attended the session. One said, "I couldn't believe it when you said you were Muruwari — we're Muruwari!" And they were proud of me for presenting at the conference. I felt "claimed" as one of them. I have a photo of myself in between the two Elders, and it is special to me. Travelling up to Bourke and Brewarrina, for the first time, in 2000, and meeting my mum's cousins and extended family, a young relative greeted me with "G'day cuz". That was like winning an award for me — priceless.

Of course, it's not only Aboriginal people who have had traumatic life experiences, but on the whole, I reckon we have been subjected to more than most. I'm not going to catalogue mine right here, but they'd make pretty good material for that new genre of literature, "miz lit", which has been described as a chronicle of a miserable childhood or, in my case, a (partly) miserable adulthood. After reading the statistic on children whose parents had tried to kill them, it was only much later that I recalled that my father had once tried to strangle my sister. Although I didn't witness it, and was not directly affected, those kinds of episodes permeate the very atmosphere in which you grow up. The crack in the kitchen wall that was never repaired, where he'd punched it in a drunken rage. The shame... I was told that I, being the youngest child, had been protected from many of those experiences, but perhaps they cannot help but soak into the core of who you are and how you feel about yourself? As a family we had no professional help, and informal assistance was mainly through my mother's membership of Al-Anon, a voluntary group that offered support to the families of alcoholics.

At this moment in our country, there is a vibrant and exciting conversation happening around healing, with the setting up of the new Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation, and many Aboriginal-run healing centres popping up like mushrooms. I try to experience and learn as much as I can about Aboriginal ways of healing, including smoking ceremonies, healing circles, deep listening and narrative ways. I try to increase my understanding of Aboriginal spirituality and how it can be incorporated into a holistic approach to healing. I try to embed all of my learnings into my work with Aboriginal children and communities.

For myself, I have found ways to manage my depression, including daily exercise, plenty of omega-3s, good nutrition, managing my physical health, being socially connected, undergoing counselling periodically, involving myself in the arts and having a means of expression through my writing (plays, essays and fiction). My writing helps me to make sense of my world and my experiences, and to learn more about the history of Aboriginal

people before and after colonisation. It is a privilege and a responsibility, in equal measure. I believe in the work I do, that it makes a difference in the world, and that, in doing it, I am contributing to something bigger than myself. I try to find time for nature, to learn new things (enrolling in a PhD and having Italian lessons). I have a responsibility to my children, to be a good role model for them, so that they can have a better life than mine, and hopefully one not plagued with many of the issues I've had to deal with.

For those working with Aboriginal people, we are strong and resilient, but we may also, while doing a fabulous professional job, be subject to strong undercurrents in our lives. Be kind to us, and — for all of us Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are working for the betterment of our communities, especially our children — be kind to yourselves. You are gold.

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