

COMING RIGHT WAY

"doing justly, loving mercy and
walking humbly" in Australia

Susannah Brindle



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Susannah Brindle grew up on the northern outskirts of Sydney.

Most of her adult life has been lived in rural, outback or rainforested areas of eastern Australia. During the 1970s she illustrated two books on the wildlife of northern Queensland under her former name, Kay Russell.

Experiences in the bush alerted her to the violations suffered by the Aboriginal peoples of whom she had been unaware in her youth. Beginning to “Pay the Rent” in 1988 continued the process of her spiritual awakening, and closeness with Aboriginal peoples developed significantly. At the request of her senior Jaara elder, Nola Kerr, she wrote stories for the children to help reconnect them with the Spirits of their country; one of these was published as *Jaleesa the Emu* (Penguin, 2001).

Susannah joined the Society of Friends (Quakers) in the early 1980s and delivered the 2000 James Backhouse Lecture *To Learn a New Song: a Quaker Contribution to Real Reconciliation with the Earth and Its Peoples*. She co-authored *Kinship With Creation: Two Quakers Share Their Views* (Quaker Green Action, UK, 2002) with Scottish author Alastair McIntosh.

In country traditionally belonging to the Jaara People of Central Victoria, Susannah lives with her husband Ray. She is a founding member and facilitator of the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) in Victoria, has two sons, four step-children and (currently) three grandchildren.

Acknowledgments

I would like to pay my respects to the elders of the Boonerwung People. Boonerwung traditional owner, Carolyn Briggs, graciously gave me permission to present the lecture, upon which this pamphlet is based, to the Dayspring Ecumenical Study Group, Hampton, Victoria on 4th April, 2001. As a welcome to Country, Carolyn asked me to read her great grandmother, Louisa Briggs' Creation story about the obligation of incomers to honour the law of the Country. I am sensible of the undeserved honour of being entrusted with such a task.

I would also like to acknowledge my indebtedness to the teachings of many wonderful Aboriginal people, especially Jaara elder, Aunty Nola Kerr, upon whose traditional land I live, my Gungalidda *gowidja*, Wadjularbinna (Nulyarimma) who continually stresses the religious centrality of the Aboriginal connectedness with every aspect of Creation, and Jerrinja-Wandiwandian elder, Delia Lowe, whose generous friendship has clarified so much for me.

I would like to thank Uncle Kevin Buzzacott, who allowed me to use his now famous phrase, "Come Right Way". "Go for it!" he encouraged me. "It's time."

Preliminary Note

It is common practice for the non-indigenous peoples who inhabit this continent and its islands to lump Aboriginal Peoples together in an "ethnic" context using the offensively adjectival term, "Aboriginals".

To Aboriginal Peoples, all non-indigenes are "Whitefellas" regardless of the colour of our skins. I have used this term throughout, for I believe that giving us a generic colour in this way can help make our behaviour, so apparent to others, visible and identifiable to ourselves as well.

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Introduction

For the purposes of this pamphlet, I have chosen to reflect upon two unforgettable moments from the rich and gentle tuition Aboriginal Peoples have given me in the last couple of decades.

The first occurred some years ago when I listened to Arabunna lawman Uncle Kevin Buzzacott tell of the destruction of his sacred homeland by Western Mining's activities. He told the story of radioactivity and environmental pollution “blackfella way”, describing how the Creator Spirits who still live in the land are being eaten up, just as the earth is being gouged out; and how they are being poisoned, just as the sacred underground aquifers, bubbling up to form the beautiful mound springs, are being poisoned.

As he told the story of this devastation, Uncle Kev used his own body as a map. This was a profound demonstration of a relationship of extraordinary spiritual intimacy with the Earth and its creatures;

and it was, therefore, a tale of specific personal physical, emotional, mental and spiritual violation because the Earth is violated.

It is a story that can be multiplied a thousand-fold wherever Aboriginal land has been usurped by us Whitefellas. I realised then that this is the real story we Whitefellas must listen to, respect and respond to and the like of which we must attend to not only for the sake of justice for Aboriginal Peoples but for the sake of all life on Earth.

Uncle Kev rounded off his story: "I don't know why you Whitefellas came, because you came *wrong* way," he said. "But now you're here you have the opportunity to *come right* way. Put back into this old land what has been taken out. Put back its Spirit."

Uncle Kev's words have become a metaphor for the way I seek to live my non-indigenous life in this country, and so, with Uncle Kevin's permission, I have called this lecture, "Coming Right Way". Instead of talking about Aboriginal spirituality (which I feel, as a Whitefella, would be improper of me to try to do) I would like, rather, to draw on what Aboriginal people have taught me about what my *own* spirituality calls me to do. I have therefore used the subtitle "doing justly, loving mercy and walking humbly in Australia" as a reference to that beautiful verse I am sure you're familiar with, from the prophet Micah.

The second unforgettable moment occurred under the tutelage of Tex Sculthorpe from northern NSW. Tex uses his gifts as a storyteller and great artist to teach non-indigenous people the Aboriginal way of learning.

As Tex patiently coaxed us Whitefella students to put our true selves and what we had learned from listening to the Earth into a painting, and to enter wholly and non-judgmentally into the Dreaming stories he articulated through his breathtakingly beautiful paintings, I began to see in myself and observe in my fellow students:

- how skilled we Whitefellas are at using objectifying concepts and theories to shield ourselves from engaging with the reality of life, and
- how seductively self-centred, self-absorbed and self-congratulatory we are — so that we rarely absorb any teachings we might derive from Aboriginal Peoples and Nature

For Aboriginal Peoples there is no such desire to become separate from the life that surrounds them. Their way of learning is to become one with “the environment”, the story, song or painting and to celebrate their kinship with all life in the reality of their daily experiences. I recalled something I had once been told: that “To come right way, to really belong, you Whitefellas must find where you are in one of those dot paintings”.

For Uncle Kev and many Aboriginal people I have spoken with over the years, “Coming Right Way” involves listening to what Aboriginal people tell us, respecting the spiritual law of the land, and responding with appropriate action.

Perhaps we think we have already done these things with our “Reconciliation” work, our defence of Native Title, our deep interest in acquiring knowledge *about* Aboriginal culture and our

hunger to learn more. But Aboriginal Peoples tell us that things have only got worse for them; and in March this year, Aboriginal Senator Aden Ridgeway expressed his impatience with “Reconciliation” as fine words but no effective action.

I would like to look at some of the things that may prevent us from “finding ourselves in the dot painting”, those things that prevent us from truly belonging here. I want to share with you a little of what I have learned over the years from the land and from the Aboriginal peoples who are so intimately related with it. And I would like to explore some of the ways we (who may scarcely know what Spirit really means) can begin to put the Spirit back into this old land. I would like us to look at some of the ways we can begin to “come right way”.

Listening

What is it Aboriginal Peoples are telling us? Primarily, Aboriginal Peoples tell us that the land — representing hundreds of distinct countries on the landmass and its related islands which we call “Australia” — is still theirs.

- They tell us their lands were given to them to care for by the Creator Spirits, and that these Spirits gave them the deep Earth knowledge to know how to live safely, productively and sustainably on these lands.
- They tell us that this landmass, its islands and its seas are networked with a complex of relationships given to them in the beginning by Creator Spirits who require utmost respect for

Law in order to preserve these relationships; that these relationships exist simultaneously at all levels, from the most practical to the most profoundly spiritual.

- They tell us that because of this Law they are intimately related to every aspect of their country — to the rocks, the waterways, the specific trees and plants, the particular birds and the particular animals of their country; they tell us that, for instance, the brolga is their sister, that tree is their mother, that fish is their uncle — and that they must care for these entities accordingly.
- They say their Countries have been stolen from them by more than two centuries of Whitefella invasion and occupation.
- They tell us that the land is grieving and ailing for the loss of their care. They tell us that, as they die in ignominy and dishonour, so too does the land die.
- They tell us that alcoholism, diabetes and kidney failure, heart disease in people barely out of their teens, and respiratory disorders are in epidemic proportions and that they are sick unto dying when their country is injured or destroyed and when they cannot care for it as they should.
- They tell us that they are poor and powerless, depressed and outcast, that their communities are dysfunctional with youth suicide, substance abuse, and violence because the culture and traditional ownership of land are not respected.
- They tell us that along with the land, we have stolen meaning from their lives and have stolen the future from their children.

- They tell us that the intolerable stresses imposed on them by having to negotiate the legal, economic and bureaucratic minefields laid for them by White Australia are killing their elders younger than ever
- They tell us that “Reconciliation” and walks across bridges only make Whitefellas feel better about themselves, that these actions have done nothing for Aboriginal People who are, in fact, worse off than ever and no closer to rightful self-determination.
- They tell us that, because we continue to hold the power, we only really ever attend to ourselves — to our *own* wants and desires, to our *own* realities and dreams: and that, in negotiations, the odds are always stacked against them, with the onus on them to prove their case to the Whitefella satisfaction.
- They tell us that, “Reconciliation” notwithstanding, Whitefellas, being in the powerful majority, still make all the rules and refuse to countenance rightful Aboriginal Sovereignty.
- They tell us it is not just that our culture and ways have stolen the land and their children from them, but that our self-absorbed, self-justifying, self-gratifying, self-congratulatory and materialistic ways continue the genocide and the ecocide on this continent.
- They tell us that our conveniently linear concepts of time cannot vanish away unacknowledged crimes, and that a state of war still exists between them and Whitefellas.

- They tell us that, although we Whitefellas today may not have “done it”, it is *we* who continue to reap the material benefits of what has been done.
- They tell us that while guilt is a meaningless and usually self-indulgent response, *shame* for what has been done is indeed appropriate and will lead us to “Coming Right Way”.
- They tell us that their sadness and fears are not only for them and for the countries entrusted to their care, but for *our* physical, emotional, mental and spiritual well-being as well.

This is what they tell us — and this is what they have always told us. But we still do not appear to listen.

Instead, we Whitefellas counter the bits we do hear with a tangle of extraordinary arguments that don’t compute even by the moral standards of our own culture.

- We, not understanding the distinction between “guilt” and “shame”, insist we don’t want to feel “guilty” because that’s such a self-destructive emotion.
- We say that, if the theft has been on a grand enough scale, at some indeterminate point stolen goods cease to be stolen, and can even be shared occasionally with their previous owners in a way that seems quite magnanimous to us.
- We continue to be obsessed with concepts of “racial purity” and insist on distinguishing between “true” (or “full-blood”) Aboriginal Peoples and those who have are “untrue” to their race, presumably by having ancestors who were violated

by Whitefellas. These latter we still offensively term “part-Aboriginals” or “half-castes”. We speak of “real” Aboriginal culture to distinguish it from that found among those whom our society has radically dispossessed.

- We still stereotype Aboriginal Peoples in terms of alcoholism, laziness, stupidity, dishonesty, incompetence, uncleanness and violence.
- We say that Aboriginal people are hypersensitive about indigeneity, that *all* of us are “indigenous people” (from somewhere) and that Aboriginal talk of genocide demeans the term when one considers the Holocaust and places like Kosovo and Rwanda.
- We say that land-loss and the disrespect shown Aboriginal people have nothing to do with their poverty, powerlessness, societal dysfunction, illness, substance-abuse and Aboriginal youth suicide because *our* knowledge recognises no such superstitious connection.
- We say that nevertheless we would like to “help”, as long as helping does not involve a shift in our self-perceptions or levels of comfort. We would like to “help” because *we* have the solutions to Aboriginal problems — better housing, better education, a few more Aboriginal people in parliament, better health services. (Perhaps a few more dialysis machines?)
- We are convinced that our strategies and agendas for Aboriginal justice are more effective than those put forward by Aboriginal Peoples themselves. And our actions reflect this conviction.

- We say it is generally better for Aboriginal Peoples to be kept out of national parks and wilderness areas because it is we who understand about delicate ecosystems and so forth.
- We protest we only “caretake” the land until the Aborigines are “ready for the responsibility”.
- We say that Aboriginal people are not really ‘indigenous’ to this landmass but originally from Africa — the inference being that our science is superior to their creation wisdom.
- We say our scientific knowledge has the solutions to Australia’s environmental problems although we would like to incorporate a little “indigenous propriety” in our environmental management.
- We think it reflects indigenous mythical metaphor to say a human being can be related to an animal or a rock in a real sense, unless it pertains to physics, chemistry or evolutionary theories. *We* know such primitive animism cannot be a valid religious position for 21st century Australia.
- We consider “Australia” to be a land whose sunny shores have known nothing of the tragedy of war and invasion.
- We consider Aboriginal people to have been in a state of needing to evolve, culturally and spiritually.
- We say learned-sounding things like, “Well, Aboriginal people never did OWN land ...” which presumably opens the right of way for us to do so.

- We say we have as much right to be here as they do — the implication being “more, in fact”.

The above examples are not infrequently heard expressions of Whitefella beliefs and attitudes towards Aboriginal Peoples and what they try to tell us. Nor are these examples drawn from overtly racist or politically conservative circles. They are derived from attitudes I meet with among those who consider themselves historically re-educated and on the side of “Reconciliation”. They are lifted from conversations I have, or overhear. They are drawn from what people earnestly tell me, face to face, as their considered beliefs. They come from people who are involved in “Reconciliation” circles, they come from socially aware members of church groups, including my own, the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). I have come to realise that the racism expressed in these words reflects the norm for those Whitefella Australians who today consider themselves among the socially enlightened.

Commitment to real listening does not mean attending to a selective repertoire of what we find acceptable to hear. When we cannot hear Aboriginal Peoples tell us how it really is for them, is it fear of our own dispossession and loss of control that blocks our ears and paralyses our hearts, or is it simply that we are spiritually dead?

And so far, we haven’t even begun to look at how we listen to what the Earth may teach us. We usually take the phrase, “listening to the Earth”, to mean we are “mellowing out” in Nature, planting trees, or saving old-growth forests, doing permaculture or eating organic foods. But again, whatever it is we are doing, it is usually

done from the perspective of *our* desires, *our* knowledge or *our* wisdom. It is done for *our* sakes. As yet we have little inkling of the Earth's needs, knowledge or wisdom, or that the Earth may have a purpose greater than to serve Whitefellas' desires, be they for food and comfort, or wealth and recreation.

The Aboriginal way is quite other. It is not for nothing that Aboriginal Peoples themselves ask permission to enter Country not belonging to them. It is not so much that they are "respecting the property of others", but rather that they have a proper respect for the Spirit of Country and for Earth Law. They know that they do not have the knowledge to be safe in another's land without appropriate spiritual protection.

Over the years, I have come to see that the Aboriginal approach to Country may be termed, "loving mercy". Not only do they show "loving mercy" to the Whitefellas they must struggle with to win back vestiges of their own land, but no greater love for God's Creation has been shown than by their unswerving devotion to Country.

No matter whether we Whitefellas have desecrated it with the bitumen, steel, glass and petrol fumes of our cities, poisoned it to death with our agricultural practices, gouged out its soul with our mining activities, or blown it apart with atomic experiments — as at Maralinga, South Australia, — the reverence and undying love that I have heard and seen expressed for the Country that gives them human identity at every level of Aboriginal being has taught me what "loving God", "adoration" and "worship" are all about. For Aboriginal peoples, Country (or their land) IS Spirit. Thus they are

related to, with and within Spirit at all times.

Theirs is a uniquely humble position to take. I feel I have learned much by observing it, reflecting on it and trying to honour it with action. Although I used to relish the freedom to go wherever I wanted to in the bush, these days it doesn't sit well with me to travel anywhere without first seeking permission of the traditional owners. This teaches me to attend to the Earth from a totally new perspective, one that leads me into an even deeper respect for the Aboriginal people whose wisdom about it never ceases to astound me.

Respecting

In these days of individualism and community breakdown, have you noticed how we Whitefellas have come to use the word "respect"? "I respect your views," we say, often with a hand movement that signifies, "but keep them well out of my space!"

"Respect" refers to how we receive information and actually means to "look again" at something — to pay closer attention to it. If we respect something, we are putting aside fears and prejudices which obstruct our appreciation of whatever it is so that we can experience it from a fresh perspective. "Respect" also carries the implication that having seen the truth at the heart of what we are looking at, we will refrain from harming it and will commit to protecting its integrity.

So far, we seem to have confused respect for Aboriginal Peoples — their truth, their culture and their spirituality — with *our* intellectually acquisitive interest in their cultural idiosyncrasies,

with an unhelpful preoccupation with the *concept* of the stolen generations (separated, we believe, from what we continue to do by time and context) and a vague, relieved feeling that Aboriginal people aren't nearly so bad as we once thought they were.

We feel that this new “respect” has washed away *our* racist sins (if we ever had any), although we acknowledge that “overt” racism is alive and well in the public and private arenas.

But respect has an empathetic aspect to it — a trying on for size, as it were. Once we have listened to what Aboriginal Peoples say about their intimate relationship within Creation and the suffering they continue to endure, true respect is what takes this reality into our hearts and allows it to change our perspective. Respect for Aboriginal reality, then, asks us to stand empathically in the horror of the past 214 years — to dare to enter intuitively into the murder, massacres, poisoning, torture, rape, internment, enslavement, the stealing of children, incarceration, assimilation, banishment, dispossession and the desecration of sacred country.

Do we have the spiritual and emotional strength to risk this sort of respect? I recall a life-changing day when, quite unintentionally I found myself among a tiny handful of Whitefellas I didn't know at a large convention of angry Aboriginal elders from all over Australia who were speaking of the injustices they and their people continue to endure. At one point, I thought I could stand it no longer and I wanted to make a run for it. It was then that a little voice said, “This is what they have endured for more than 200 years; surely you can stay for a few hours and listen to what they have to say”.

I believe that our being here at all at the beginning of the 21st century is an indication that paying this sort of respect is part of what we are given to do in this life. However, I *am* aware that fear quickly follows acknowledgment of the horror.

Does this mean I am no more than one of the so-called "illegal boat people"?

Does this mean I don't belong here?

Does this mean I will never belong?

If I don't belong here, what shall I do?

If I ask permission and the Aboriginal People say "no", where shall I go?

Our questions keep tumbling out and eventually, in self-preservation, we are in danger of denying everything and switching off.

Let us listen to what Aboriginal Peoples say, for their reality is not based, as ours is, upon separateness.

Although many Aboriginal people admit they would be better off if Whitefellas disappeared and left them in peace to heal themselves and the land, they realise this is unlikely to happen.

So, for the sake of their sacred Countries, Aboriginal people actually want us to belong. There are many stories around this, but I love the one a friend once told me. An Aboriginal woman told her "Look, you're one of us, you always have been. You just went away for a long time and your skin went white and you forgot how to behave. You'll just have to learn how again if you want to belong."

Humour, graciousness and forgiveness on this scale humbles me so that I can barely talk about it. Believe me, this is not a one-off story, but the spirit of generosity and compassion I have come to associate with Aboriginal peoples.

Our separation from the spiritual source and nature of Creation prevents us from realising that such inclusiveness is fundamental to the Community of Life. What we, locked away in our White arrogance, still can't comprehend is that Aboriginal people are waiting for us to learn the proper way to behave within Creation. They are waiting for us to learn the real meaning of "respect".

Responding

So what might responding look like? Ultimately, I believe, it all comes down to action — action appropriate to our awakening to the facts that we live on a stolen continent and that we share this land with untold entities which are not human, and action that affirms the inextinguishable fact of Aboriginal Sovereignty. (The difficulties we have in accepting "sovereignty" reflect the narrowness of our understanding of that term.)

How terrifying it is to take that first step of acknowledging—

- that we do not own what we always thought we owned;
- that we have no intrinsic right to the unearned privileges and power that our being non-indigenous gives us here;
- that we have no intrinsic right to move around the country as if it were an homogenous whole under our control, instead of at least 250 different nations under the jurisdiction of Creator and

Ancestral Spirits and in the spiritual custodianship of the traditional elders.

Asking permission

The step of asking permission of the traditional owners of the country one lives on or visits implies all this. And Aboriginal Peoples remind us that it is actually good manners to ask permission before entering someone else's place. They also tell us that

- Not to ask permission is to deny that theft of land took place and still takes place;
- Not to ask permission is to deny that these Countries will always be sacred to the traditional owners;
- Not to ask permission is to deny that their physical, emotional, mental and spiritual identity is derived from their Country and its Creator and Ancestral Spirits;
- Not to ask permission is to practise a direct form of racial and religious intolerance, superiority and disrespect.

I could also add that not to ask permission is to proclaim that we Whitefellas are supremely in control of all life — an absurd stance in the light of the escalating global ecological crisis.

Thirteen years ago when I began to think about asking permission to live on Aboriginal land, I was assailed on all sides by the advice of friends and neighbours. I was told that I would be overrun by a mob of Blacks and that I would lose the house that I had, as a struggling, single mum, just managed to acquire.

When I actually found the local mob and fronted up, what I *was* offered was unconditional acceptance and welcome. I went home with a new understanding of what love for people and love for Country might mean. That, I later realised, was a watershed moment, for I found that I had fallen to a much deeper level of spiritual understanding and that my life would be forever changed — for the better.

The rare people I have been able to persuade to take this path of asking permission have reported the same sort of responses. A man who recently asked permission of the elders to live on sacred Jaara land says, although recognising he has far to go in the journey towards justice, that he feels somehow lighter and more at peace now. Born and bred in rural Australia, he was always sensitive to living somehow in a veneer-thin dimension of meaning. “Coming Right Way” has offered him a fresh spiritual perspective on life here, where he now feels he may begin to belong.

“Pay the rent”

While all of you remember that Peter Garratt had SORRY printed in white on his black clothes during the Olympic Games closing ceremony, do you recall that the words he sang were “pay the rent”? For me, the first step of asking permission is always associated with “paying the rent”.

Aboriginal Peoples remind us that the first person to “pay the rent” for the privilege of living on Aboriginal land was an insignificant Quaker farmer in South Australia in 1838. Somehow, the practice just didn’t catch on. I think this had less to do with the quaintness of Robert Cock’s religious affiliation than with the

peculiarity of his trying to act justly towards Aboriginal Peoples. Nothing so dampens conversational ardour and blanches the countenance like the most casual mention of “compensation” — as if genocide and ecocide could ever be compensated for by money!

Among the many reservations Whitefellas have about “paying the rent” is the one about its being “tokenistic”. I struggle to understand exactly what is meant by this and can only think that it reflects more on the intention behind the action than on the act itself.

I feel that a fruitful way of explaining “paying the rent” is to use the phrase, “exchange of energy”. As guests, it is not uncommon for us to “bring a plate”, to give flowers or a gift or, if we stay for some time, to contribute in some way to the expenses we have helped our hosts incur. It is Aboriginal Peoples who have offered us “paying the rent” as a way we materialistic westerners *should* understand of coming into right relationship here.

When we have been granted permission by the traditional owners to be on their land, we enter into a spiritual relationship with them and with the land. We are now under the protection of the Country’s Ancestral Spirits and we are expected to respect the land, listening to what it teaches and learning better how to respect it. Respecting land is fundamental to respecting Aboriginal law, and increasingly we must recognise that our imported wisdom is a new and shallow thing.

Ultimately, the three aspects of Coming Right Way — listening, respecting and responding are interrelated aspects of each other.

They all stem from whether our hearts are in the right place or not. And this is something Aboriginal Peoples can instinctively recognise.

Who can “Come Right Way” ?

Anyone, anywhere can “Come Right Way”. If “Reconciliation” is about our coming into right relationship with Aboriginal Peoples, “Coming Right Way” is an important pre-condition of this process.

One of the most frustrating things people can say to me is “I don’t *know* any Aboriginal People. *I* couldn’t be with them the way *you* are.” I even had a friend ask me, as if I were an expert on some sort of specialist subject, “Susannah, how *do* you speak with an Aboriginal person?” It was only her earnestness that made me realise it wasn’t one of those trick questions like “How do you eat an elephant?”

When people say these things, I want to protest loudly that I wasn’t born with any predisposition to know or appreciate Aboriginal Peoples. In fact, on a lifelong racist principle (probably derived from our family’s unspoken implication in the Myall Creek massacre) my mother ardently supported Pauline Hanson and her One Nation Party. I have never worked professionally with Aboriginal Peoples, nor has life offered me unique positions with Aboriginal people that would have been unavailable to any one of you here tonight.

I believe that it is the responsibility of *all* of us non-indigenous Australians to discover our own unique path of “Coming Right Way”. All of us, after all, live on Aboriginal land. If our

commitment to “Coming Right Way” is strong enough we will come to find and to know Aboriginal people *because they will want to know us*.

But we do need to ask ourselves some blunt questions:

- What *real* priority does this sort of spiritual justice have in our busy lives?
- Has our Reconciliation work been simply an interest to give mental and social stimulation to our lives, or
- Has a relentless Spirit of Humility and Justice stirred us to the very core of our beings and given us the reparative task of shouldering more than two centuries of massive national shame?

The answers to these questions will depend very much upon how important “doing justly, loving mercy and walking humbly with our God” is to each of us.

It will be challenging work to relinquish the superiority, rectitude and control we have never doubted was ours in every aspect of life in this country. I am reminded of the rich young man who asked Jesus how he could be saved. You will recall that, when Jesus suggested that he give up the wealth that was so important to him and follow the path of justice, mercy and humility, the young man sadly turned away. Jesus likened the difficulty he and materialistic others faced in achieving life abundant to the impossibility of an overloaded pack-camel’s passing through the narrow Jerusalem-wall gateway called the Needle’s Eye.

“Coming Right Way” is like that too. “Coming Right Way” has

little, if anything, to do with *words and concepts* of “Reconciliation” or the intellectual acquisition of knowledge “about” Aboriginal Peoples and their cultures; nor is “Coming Right Way” about us feeling friendlier towards Aboriginal people and nicer about ourselves as a result.

“Coming Right Way” is about honesty to face the truth about the fundamental theft on which our lives are based; it is about commitment to change; it is about courage to enter realms unknown and perhaps undreamt of; and ultimately it is about action.

Not only is “Coming Right Way” a requirement for anyone with a basic sense of decency, and the only point from which the ongoing genocide of Aboriginal people in this country will cease; it is also the point from which the destruction of this continent can be put into reverse. Learning to feel shame for the black history of this country *is* certainly part of our human evolution as Whitefella Australians.

And “Coming Right Way” is more than that. From Nairobi in early February, 2001, the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) formally recognised that Indigenous languages and stories encode the Earth’s secrets for human and non-human survival. It stated that the destruction of indigenous peoples, their cultures and their lands by the march of colonisation and globalisation tolls the death knell for life on Earth as we know it.

Aboriginal people continue to look to people of the Spirit to help them turn the tide for real justice. They mostly find us, however, locked into the racism inherent in being a Whitefella in this country — unconsciously addicted to the retention of materi-

alistic power and possession, and to faith in the superiority of our new theories about how things are and should be. We need urgently to realise that connectedness to all Creation is physically, emotionally, mentally *and spiritually* fundamental to our own lives as well.

“Coming Right Way” begins with a single act of humility and contrition, the first step in a journey towards justice, community — and “Reconciliation”. “Coming Right Way” can become non-indigenous Australia’s uniquely significant contribution to a world hungering for just and peaceful alternatives.

Individually becoming aware — of who we really are on this continent — and beginning to act from this awareness *can* help create the critical mass for real justice, a position from which it will ultimately become unthinkable for the rest of Whitefella Australia to retreat. “Coming Right Way”, then, is about becoming fully human at last, and learning how to act as a humble, though integral member of the Earth’s community.

I hope we will not find ourselves to be camels too fully laden to pass through this Needle’s Eye, for I suspect that “Coming Right Way” is potential salvation not only for us Australian Whitefellas but, by extension, for the rest of humanity and for the Earth itself.

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AFTERWORD

I

I am grateful to the Indigenous Concerns Committee of the Australia Yearly Meeting of the Society of Friends (Quakers) for their commitment to publishing my lecture in this form. During their considerations, a committee member confessed to feeling confronted by the material and wished I had given some direction as to 'what to do'. Her comments are valuable in drawing attention to the necessity to see knowledge of our true history and ourselves as an active part of the nation's 'journey of healing'.

I do not believe one can avoid feeling confronted by this true history. I remember the day and the date I was faced with 'the full horror' of what had happened and what continues to happen to Aboriginal peoples. I had turned up to what I thought was an environmental conference only to hear many Aboriginal elders from around the nation speak the word 'genocide' and tell the details that support their claims. At first I thought they must be exaggerating. In spite of knowing that many massacres had occurred *in the distant past*, I could not believe that the Australia I lived in could ever have sanctioned genocide or that genocide continued into the present day. As one of the few non-indigenes present, I felt as if I were being shot down by rifle-fire. I couldn't seem to breathe properly. I needed to go outside for some fresh air. I wanted to escape to the safety of a former ignorance I would never know again, but something made me stay.

Since then I have come to know Aboriginal people intimately

and to read widely from both black and white sources. I can only affirm that, far from its growing less, my feeling of being confronted continues to increase. What I have written here is but a tiny part of the truth. It is a gentler part of what could be told for, as a whitefella, I can *never* know 'the full horror'. From Aboriginal friends I can still learn things that give me sleepless nights weeping in shame not only for what my people have done but what we, including me, continue to do. When I think that nothing I now read about Australian history could shock me more deeply than I have been already, I can pick up a little book like Rosalind Kidd's soundly documented *Black Lives, Government Lies* and feel as if I want to throw-up.

I have asked my Aboriginal friends what direction to point us whitefellas in. They are unanimous in advising us not to study them, not to jump in too quickly with a neat solution, but to let the truth of the situation sink into our psyches and our hearts. They tell us to study *ourselves*, and see how we, as whitefellas, operate. Some years ago, when I asked the predictable (and patronising) question "What can I do to help?", a close Aboriginal Friend brought me up sharp by saying, "Aboriginal people are literally sick and tired from trying to educate you whitefellas. You have to go and do your homework yourself."

It is just that—homework—the sort of work you do when you are "at home" to yourself. Consider looking into your genealogy. (I did, in the hope of finding an Aboriginal 'connection', and instead found involvement with a notorious massacres and with the daily hunting of Aboriginal people as my 'pioneer' forbears 'opened up

the country'.) Read all you can—the accessible works of historians Henry Reynolds and Rosalind Kidd (see reading list below) are good places to start if you are having difficulties with 'cognitive dissonance'. But be sure to read and hear what Aboriginal people say about their own experiences! Listen to their voices with living ears and a living heart. Monitor your responses. Where do those responses come from? Do you want to make excuses and justifications? Why do you think this is so?

Expect to be sickened and horrified. Expect that your view of the Australian environment—and perhaps even yourself—will never be the same again. Expect to feel your heart fill to bursting with grief, and expect to weep embarrassingly at times. Expect also to be classed as a 'race traitor' and 'troublemaker' as you speak out your newfound truth. Expect to feel attacked, ignored, frightened and alone as you do so. (Do not expect accolades from Aboriginal people for behaving with basic decency.) Feel the shame of it all, and know that your tears can begin to expiate the crimes of our forebears and our contemporaries. Feel the pain of it all, and know that acting from this knowledge will contribute to true justice. Know that this is the way forward on the 'journey of healing' and know that you have a vital role to play in it.

II

Suggested References

(meant only as possible starting points)

Aboriginal Texts:

Moreton-Robinson, Aileen, *Talkin' Up to the White Woman: Indigenous women and feminism* (University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Qld; 2000)

Mowaljarlai, David and Jutta Malnic, *Yorro Yorro; Everything standing up alive; Spirit of the Kimberley* (Magabala Books, Broome, WA; 2001)

Rintoul, Stuart (ed.), *The Wailing; a national black oral history* (Heinemann, Port Melbourne, Vic; 1993)

Bringing Them Home: Report, National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families (Commonwealth of Australia; 1997)

The following two texts have been written at the instigation of Aboriginal elders

Bell, Hannah Rachel, *Men's Business, Women Business; the spiritual role of gender in the world's oldest culture* (Inner Traditions International, Vermont; 1998)

Trudgeon, Richard, *Why Warriors Lie Down and Die; towards an understanding of why the Aboriginal people of Arnhem Land face the greatest crisis in health and education since European contact.* (Aboriginal Resource and Development Services Inc. Darwin, NT; 2000)

The following three texts have extensive bibliographies. Like

the preceding titles, they should be found in any major reference library:

Horton, David, *The Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, society and culture* 2 vols (Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, ACT; 1994)

Kleinert, Sylvia & Margo Neale, *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture* (Oxford; 2000)

Schürmann-Zeggel, Heinz, *Black Australian Literature; a bibliography of fiction, poetry, drama, oral tradition and non-fiction including critical commentary 1900-1991* (Peter Lang, Berne; 1997)

Non-indigenous Texts:

Chapman, Valerie & Peter Read (eds.), *Terrible Hard Biscuits; A reader in Aboriginal history* (Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, NSW; 1996) (Some Aboriginal voices included)

Goodall, Heather, *From Invasion to Embassy; Land in Aboriginal politics in New South Wales, 1770-1972* (Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, NSW; 1996)

Kidd, Rosalind, *The Way We Civilise; Aboriginal affairs, the untold story* (UQP, St Lucia, Qld; 1997)

——— *Black Lives, Government Lies* (UNSW, Sydney, NSW; 2000)

Reynolds, Henry, *The Other Side of the Frontier; Aboriginal resistance to the European invasion of Australia* (Penguin, Ringwood, Vic; 1981)

——— *Frontier; Aborigines, settlers and land* (Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, NSW; 1987, 1996)

—— *The Law of the Land* (Penguin, Ringwood, Vic; 1988, 1992)

—— *Dispossession; black Australians and white invaders* (Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, NSW; 1989) (A collection of sources.)

—— *With the White People: the crucial role of Aborigines in the development of Australia* (Penguin, Ringwood, Vic; 1990).

Revised edition: *Black Pioneers* (2000)

—— *Fate of a Free People; a radical re-examination of the Tasmanian wars* (Penguin, Ringwood, Vic; 1995)

—— *Aboriginal Sovereignty; three nations, one Australia?* (Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, NSW; 1996)

—— *This Whispering in Our Hearts* (Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, NSW; 1998)

—— *Why Weren't We Told? a personal search for the truth about our history* (Viking Penguin; 1999)

—— *An Indelible Stain? The question of genocide in Australia's history* (Viking Penguin; 2001)

Rose, Deborah Bird, *Dingo Makes Us Human; Life and land in an Australian Aboriginal culture* (Cambridge University Press; 1992)

—— *Nourishing Terrains; Australian Aboriginal views of landscape and wilderness* (Australian Heritage Commission, Canberra; 1995) (Some Aboriginal voices included. Unique, I think, among Australian anthropological writers, Rose offers (with permission of her elders) a respectful understanding of Aboriginal spirituality.)

III

FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION

The following questions are suggested by Canadian Quaker, Sarah Chandler during the course of her Sunderland P. Gardner Lecture, 2001 *The Never Broken Treaty? — Quaker witness and testimony on Aboriginal title and rights: "what canst thou say?"*

Please pause to think about your relationship to land.

This land comes to mind...is it land that you visit?

Is it land that you own? If so, how did you come to own it?

Is it land that someone else owns?

Is it possible to "own" land?

What does it mean to "own" land?

Who else do you know that has a relationship to that same piece of land? What are their interests?

Please reflect again on the land that is important to you:

What is, or has been the relationship of this land to Indigenous Peoples?

What should it be today?

What can you do to reinstate fairly the relationship of Indigenous Peoples to their own lands and resources?

Please reflect on your personal and community relationship
with Indigenous People:

If you have a relationship with Indigenous People, is it all that it
could be?

What would help to strengthen it?

If you don't have a relationship with Indigenous People, where
might you begin to develop such a relationship?

If you are not engaged in relationship with Indigenous People
nor in supporting indigenous issues, what is it that prevents
your engagement?

Reflect upon where you stand in the trajectory between denial
and acknowledgment of Indigenous Peoples' history and
rights.

Ask yourself, "Where do I feel led to go from here?"

The Yearly Meeting Indigenous Concerns Committee of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Australia

Australian Friends have for many years had strong leadings to work for justice for Indigenous Australians. From the days of the FCAATSI, through the turbulence of the land rights movement, the 1967 Referendum and the campaign setting up the Tent Embassy in 1972, and the more recent moves in the High Court and internationally, Friends have been part of the movement of people seeking to 'come right way'.

The national body of Friends, Australian Yearly Meeting, has an Indigenous Concerns Committee, based in Canberra, that acts on behalf of Friends nationally and seeks to encourage regional and local initiatives throughout the country.

This publication is the first, in what is hope will be an ongoing series of short texts on Quaker approaches, experiences and involvement in Indigenous concerns in Australia.

Yearly Meeting Indigenous Concerns Committee
Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Australia
Canberra Regional Meeting
PO Box 63
O'Connor ACT 2602

The views are those of
the author not necessarily
of the Society of Friends

COMING RIGHT WAY

"doing justly, loving mercy and
walking humbly" in Australia

Susannah Brindle

This is a timely comment on the need for an open-hearted response to Reconciliation. The author is generous in her willingness to understand an indigenous perspective without being distracted by personal experience on majority cultural mores. Her words remind us that true reconciliation is more about a state of mind than a bureaucratic process imposed by well-meaning but often prejudiced advocates.

Margaret Reynolds (former Senator, president of the UN Association of Australia, and a member of the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative).



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