

How We Walked Together: A Story of Complementarity-Highlighting Doing, Being, Belonging and Becoming

Helen Myles^{1} and Daphne (Dimurr) Naden¹*

*Independent Researchers, Australia
 helen.myles1@bigpond.com**

Abstract: *Publication of the Uluru Statement from the Heart by Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in 2017, issued an invitation to non-Indigenous Australians to ‘walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future’. This invitation spurred us to document what we believe is an example of such ‘walking together’, so that others may be encouraged to follow suit. Our story records this experience from two different Australian perspectives – Aboriginal and settler - and encompasses a working and personal relationship. We have used storytelling as our conceptual framework because this is a common and powerful Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander process of passing on all manner of knowledge, practice and philosophy. These three components interact in our story, conveying ways in which people from different cultures can learn and change through sharing each other’s history, cultural and life experiences. We use our occupational collaboration to detail seminal aspects of how this relationship ripened – through a willingness to learn, through mutual respect and trust. The article embraces a model of complementarity and assigns aspects of doing, being, becoming and belonging to the progress of our walk together. The conclusion outlines the value, particularly for settler Australians who may never have had contact with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people, of attempting to instigate connections with individual people through shared humanity and dignity. We believe such partnerships, between everyday people as well as at a national level, will enhance many aspects of our daily lives and the future of our nation.*

Keywords: Cross-cultural connections; aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; settlers; complementarity; storytelling; trust; respect

Introduction

We have written our story in response to the invitation by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of Australia, contained in *The Uluru Statement from the Heart* (First Nations National Constitutional Convention (2017), *We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future*. The story in our article describes walking together from two Australian perspectives: Aboriginal and settler. Born in Mossman, North



Queensland, Dimurr is of the Kuku Yalanji nation, with connection to the Kubirri, Julay and Buru clans. Helen was born in Brisbane, descended from Irish and Welsh settlers.

This story is about a cross-cultural partnership, specifically between we two Australian women who walked and worked together, but also encompassing relationships formed with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. In the telling of our story we draw on our own experience and the writings of prominent Aboriginal women - Mary Graham's 2008 world-views and philosophy and the contemplations of Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr (1988). We have also inserted some 'illustrative stories' which enrich the story of our journey and relate to our conceptual framework.

Historical and cultural perspective of the authors

As already stated, Dimurr was born in Mossman, North Queensland and is of the Kuku Yalanji nation, with connection to the Kubirri, Julay and Buru clans.

Mary Graham writes:

Aboriginal people have a kinship system which extends into land; this system was and still is organised into clans. One's first loyalty is to one's own clan group. It does not matter how Western and urbanised Aboriginal people have become, this kinship system never changes. (It has been damaged by, for example, cultural genocide/Stolen Children/westernisation etc., but has not been altered substantially) (Graham 1999:106)

In North Queensland, Yalanji clans were still living the traditional lifestyles as late as the 1920's.

Illustrative Story: *The early part of Dimurr's mother's and father's lives were spent in 'wuruns' or gunyahs, before their families were moved from their respective bush camps to church missions as part of government policy. Dimurr's mother's clan was moved to Mossman Gorge Mission and Dimurr's father's clan to Daintree Mission. Both missions were under the auspices of the Assemblies of God church.*

Living under *The Queensland Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897* (the Act), she and her family endured hardship through various government policies relating to Aboriginal people – commonly justified as being 'for their own good'. These policies were aligned to phases of: civilization, protection, assimilation, integration and self-determination (Queensland Health 1992). Anita Heiss writes in an essay about the effects of these policy periods:

It stopped them from raising their own children, stopped freedom of movement, having access to education, receiving award wages, marrying without permission,



eating in restaurants, entering a pub, swimming in a public pool or having the right to vote. (Heiss 2023)

Illustrative Story: *Dimurr's family were not paid wages for work they undertook. These earnings went to the government, to be held in-trust. To buy anything, Dimurr's parents had to make a request to the government-appointed Protector - most times through the Church Minister, who then facilitated the purchase. This is the process Dimurr's father went through to acquire timber, iron and other materials he needed to build their family home on the Daintree Mission. It was a small weatherboard house on stilts, with an iron roof, push-out windows and a modest verandah. The cost of these materials would have absorbed most of Dimurr's father's wages being held in trust by the government.*

When the Daintree Mission closed in 1962, residents were moved to the Mossman Gorge Mission. However, as the issue of Dimurr's family's Certificate of Exemption from the Act coincided with this Mission closure, her father opted for the family to stay in the Daintree area, where he continued to work for various farmers. This Certificate awarded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people access to the same previously denied benefits as non-Aboriginal Australians - pensions, public education, and housing.

The family house which had been hand-built by Dimurr's father on the Daintree Mission was subsequently bulldozed into the ground. No consideration of the family's loss or any mention of financial compensation was offered. They had to start over again. This story illustrates the financial hardship under which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people existed and from which many families have not yet recovered.

Various amendments to the Act were passed from 1899 well into the 20th century, but it was not until the Aboriginal Land Act 1991 and the Torres Strait Land Act 1991 were passed, that the major features of that 1897 Act, pertaining to control of land and people, were removed. The negative impacts of this series of past government policies, including loss, segregation, displacement and separation of families has contributed to racial and economic disadvantage and the subsequent mistrust held by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people towards government services and systems.

In today's Western dominant society, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to be a marginalised and socially disadvantaged minority group. Compared to other Australians, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience significantly varied outcomes related to health, education, employment and housing. Discrimination, racism and lack of cultural understanding mean that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to face inequality and social injustice.

Dimurr was born in 1956 and spent her early childhood years in the Daintree Mission. She has drawn on her life-long experience to support the work she has done during her career. This has included working for government and non-government organisations, in indigenous-specific areas relating to health, housing, education, employment and training. Her



commitment to life-improvement for her people has been recognised through her appointment to numerous state and national forums – especially in relation to Aboriginal women’s issues. In co-authoring this article, Dimurr continues to share her lived experience of Aboriginal culture with other Australians who are eager to ‘walk with’ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in defining the future of our country.

Helen was born in Queensland, descended from Irish and Welsh settlers. In the latter part of her career in health, welfare and adult education, in Far North Queensland, she was fortunate to work with numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, for over a decade, in both urban and remote community environments. Sometimes it was as a staff member in an Aboriginal organisation and sometimes she was engaged as a consultant by an Aboriginal and Torres Strait organisation or by the State and Commonwealth governments.

In these roles, she learnt how to utilise her skills within a cross-cultural framework. In particular, she worked closely with three different Aboriginal women over these years. On a daily basis, as part of a three-person team, she worked on a family violence project in Cape York Peninsula for three years. Prior to that she had worked intermittently with another Aboriginal colleague, Isabel Tarrago - a Wangkamahdla Elder - over a 12-month period, negotiating with women in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in remote North Queensland, about establishing ‘birthing on country’. This project emanated from requests by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women themselves, who sought a safe but cultural return to birthing their children on homelands (Queensland Health 1992). They stressed the importance to their people of the place of birth to that person’s identity and their spiritual connection to their country – their belonging.

Being born on country connects an Aboriginal person to the land and community in a deeply cultural way and affords life-long privileges such as hunting and fishing rights, as well as life-long responsibilities for looking after country, both land and people. (Felton-Busch 2009:161)

Illustrative Story: *Dimurr and her siblings were all explained the traditional birthing custom by their parents and were also shown both their ‘birth trees’ under which their ‘afterbirth’ (placenta) had been buried. Their stories have been passed down in the family and this traditional custom carried on today by young family mums opting to have their placentas frozen by the hospital and taken home to be buried as close as possible to Dimurr’s mother’s birth tree. Private land ownership makes it almost impossible to carry on this important practice more widely.*

On a recent occasion, at the start of digging a hole, the singing of cicadas began. Together with the sound of light rain it was reminiscent of an orchestra playing. The minute the final rock was laid on top of the filled hole, the cicadas singing stopped. A young child asked out aloud “What is that?” to which a family elder replied, “It’s all the old people now, happy to welcome the baby.”



Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework for this article is based on storytelling. Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a history of 60,000 years in this land. An essential part of their culture has always been story telling. This quote explains Aboriginal storytelling as:

...a powerful means of passing on knowledge, history and philosophies to new generations. It invites conversation, questioning and moral inquiry. It challenges our perception of the world and its many complexities, helps us heal from the traumas of the past and weaves a deep connection with community. Ultimately, it influences how we care for others and for country (Watarrka Foundation).

Our story strongly relates to this description. It embraces important lessons for living in Australia alongside the original inhabitants, touches on settler and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural norms and aims to build relationship connections.

Miriam - Rose Ungunmerr- Baumann writes:

Through the years, we have listened to our stories. They are told and sung, over and over, as the seasons go by. Today we still gather around the campfires and together we hear the sacred stories (1988).

An example of the value of such storytelling which inspired us was a co-presentation by three women at the ‘Women and Human Rights, Social Justice and Citizenship’ international conference at the University of Melbourne on 30 June 1998. In brief, the co-presentation was by two women whose mother’s heritage was Indigenous and one woman whose mother’s heritage was European. Their focus was the life experiences of the three women’s mothers who all were born around 1920 in regional areas of Queensland. What the three women had discovered was that:

the history that the mothers and daughters share is not only their interest in Aboriginal culture and history but also the complex, historical webs of lines that cross and cut, and then diverge sharply, only again to touch, swerve and collide. What we are discovering - and this will be a long and difficult process - is that, although our class and racial identities seem to be so different, there are many things we unexpectedly have in common (Huggins, Saunders, Tarrago 1998:41).

This idea of a history of interwoven and colliding stories as a framework for subsequent co-occupations (Levesque 2023) and personal relationships, underlies our article. A similar framework of forming cross-cultural partnerships through story-telling is also evident in the invitation to ‘walk with us’ (The Uluru Statement from the Heart 2017). The storytelling component is seen as an essential ingredient of truth-telling and justice.



Another valued form of Aboriginal storytelling is familiar to and often sought after by settler Australians – art. A current exhibition at the National Gallery of Australia, curated by Kelli Cole (Warumungu and Luritja peoples) and Heti Perkins (Arernte and Kalkadoon peoples), invites audiences to look at the work of Emily Kam Kngwarray – the highest-selling female artist in Australian history – ‘through a new lens which brings Country, community and ancestral knowledge into focus.’ They quote:

"Something that Kngwarray was so effective at doing was creatively channelling that story and that knowledge into a form that could be seen by audiences and, if not interpreted accurately, appreciated" (Fuss 2024).

Furthermore, they believe: ‘If you really listen to the work, the stories and the truth-telling becomes clear to you.’

Reconciliation in Australia

In the previously mentioned example of inspirational storytelling, it was reported that the presenting women stood side-by-side on the stage, ‘to confirm their commitment to Reconciliation.’ In 1991 the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation was enacted with the broad task of fostering a process for the coming together of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the wider Australian community.

Jackie Huggins was a member of that original Council and stated the following:

The true essence of reconciliation is more than making friends with non-Indigenous people. Our motto is a united Australia, one that respects the land and the heritage of its Indigenous peoples and provides justice and equity for all. (Huggins 2017).

In respect to the goal of ‘reconciliation’ that is often put forward, Dimurr finds it hard to use that word – inferring it as an expectation of responsibility placed on her people, when so much has been taken from them over the past 200-plus years. ‘Conciliation’ or ‘resolution of the situation’ sits better with both authors.

From our perspective, the word ‘Australia’ is simply a name given to this continent. The concept of all Australians being one nation doesn’t reflect that there are hundreds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations still existing on this landmass. First and foremost, Dimurr thinks of herself as Kuku Yalanji, rather than Australian, whilst Helen thinks of her friend and family as the original owners of part of this land.

Complementarity as a model

We have taken up David Turnbull’s (2023a; 2023b) suggestion of ‘complementarity’ as a model to demonstrate ways in which settler Australians and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples can inform, learn from and complement each other. But, as Turnbull states:



There is, in fact, only one possible interest, from a settler perspective, that could count towards developing such relationships. It is to complement First Nations people in their struggle for truth-telling and justice; to follow their lead; to support and encourage and never to take control (Turnbull 2023a).

In what follows we set out what we believe are aspects of our complementarity in an occupational sense of *doing*, whilst encompassing other relational aspects - *being, belonging* and *becoming* – all grounded in storytelling. These concepts were introduced by Ann Wilcock (2007) in writing about the Occupational Perspective of Health, subsequently discussed by others in occupational science from a mainly western perspective (Hitch et al. 2014), Bratun et al. (2023) and Turnbull (2023b). In adapting this occupational model for our own purposes, we have also been influenced by Turnbull’s reflections on doing, being, becoming and belonging, *re-interpreted* through the lens of the Uluru Statement from the Heart (2023b) In grouping the activities of our story within this broad narrative framework, we pose a somewhat different interpretation of the terms doing, being, becoming and belonging from their accustomed use by western academics.

We are residents of Far North Queensland and strongly support the proposal put forward by the ‘conference’ of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people in 2017, to bring about positive change to their lives. Many settler Australians have not had the opportunity or occasion to meet and spend time with any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Australians and therefore may feel hesitant to take up the aforementioned invitation. In late 2022, in his Boyer Lecture, Noel Pearson, an Aboriginal leader and lawyer, commented on this point:

...we are not personally known to many Australians. Few have met us and a small minority count us as friends (Pearson, 2022).

Possible partnerships between people of different cultures, in which they engage in mutual discussions and occupations and thus ‘walk with’ each other, has been proposed by Turnbull (2023a). In authoring this paper, we consider that we have already ‘walked’ together, not only in an occupational sense – or in ‘co-occupational engagement’ as referred to by Martine Levesque (2023) - but also through the formation of close, long-lasting bonds with each other. By telling our story we are hoping to encourage other people to walk on the same path, together.

Building complementarity

David Turnbull describes complementarity as:

a way of understanding relationships between phenomena that, each on their own, are incomplete. They require each other, in order to form the description of a whole (Turnbull 2023b:82).



Occupation, defined by Wilcock (2007) as ‘all the things that people do’ includes the complementary relationship between we two contributors to this article – in the work situation and in our personal lives.

We see our complementarity as involving the different attributes of each person, which improved or emphasized the qualities and aspects of the other. The word ‘attribute’ comes from the Latin ‘tribuere’ meaning ‘give or bestow’ (Merriam Webster n.d.). This giving or bestowing proved to be a fundamental component in building complementarity between us, as had also ensued for Helen during her previous partnership with Isabel Tarrago and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island women.

In these encounters, ‘giving’ engendered a willingness to learn from the other, as described by Turnbull:

In terms of human action, complementarity is constituted by a relationship between activity and receptivity, in which activity is receptive and receptivity is active (2023b:82).

For Helen, these exchanges resulted in adapting her ways of thinking about the world, her actions, behaviour and her perception of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

For Dimurr, whose upbringing had been segregated in the Mission, working closely with members of the settler culture required overcoming the impacts of previous racist actions directed towards her.

Illustrative Story: *In primary school Dimurr and a non-Aboriginal girl were close friends, - they played together, sat on the school bus together, sang together. However, on the first day of high school, which they both attended, Dimurr walked towards her close friend and when she was about 2 metres away her friend turned away from her ...and they never spoke again during those high-school years. Dimurr couldn't understand this at first but quickly came to realise that black and white just did not associate at that school. In hindsight, she thought that her 'friend' was pressured by this 'norm'. In life after this, the memory of that conduct meant Dimurr often had to push-back against making judgements based solely on skin colour, so that when she met Helen and our other Aboriginal team member, whom she also didn't know, she focused on the initial task of seeking out their values.*

To do this, Dimurr had confidence in her ‘Aboriginal way’ of assessing integrity in people – watching body language carefully, listening to the tone and words people used and depending on what could be described as her ‘spiritual centre’, or ‘wholeness’, to weigh up the outcome.



Illustrative Story: *Women in remote Cape York communities commonly used this same practice and Dimurr remembers women saying to her, about Helen “She good one, that one”.*

Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr describes it thus:

In our Aboriginal way, we learnt to listen from our earliest days. We could not live good and useful lives unless we listened. This was the normal way for us to learn – not by asking questions. We learnt by watching and listening, waiting and then acting. Our people have passed on this way of listening for over 40,000 years... There is no need to reflect too much and to do a lot of thinking. It is just being aware (Ungunmerr 1988:2).

Between the two authors, ‘bestowing’ created a willingness to impart knowledge and experiences – to be interested in respecting and sharing similar and disparate talents, skills, beliefs and capabilities – knowing that generating a strong and secure team was the way to approach the challenging project about family violence. The vision for the project and the goals we set, emerged as a result of close conferring.

In effect, the Aboriginal women Helen worked closely with, including Dimurr and Isabel, were her mentors. These roles turned the usual occupational dynamic on its head – a reversal of ‘the dominant culture’ professional inviting an Aboriginal representative along, to legitimise the activity. In the work-situations mentioned in this article, Aboriginal women were always the leading figures and sometimes vocalised that they had recruited Helen ‘from the heart’ (Myles and Tarrago 1996), another example of relying on their ‘spiritual centre’.

Complementarity – recognising the benefits of and adopting a bi-cultural way of working because of its obvious usefulness - became our valued approach, not only to our work, but also to our friendship. In this way, capitalising on more than one perspective led to recognising and building upon our complementary attributes, which in turn resulted in confident collaboration and an enduring connection.

Relational aspects of our complementarity

Doing

Doing is commonly understood as the act of carrying out something, ‘a visible quality that is recognisable to observers’, ‘which is uniquely meaningful to the person’ and demonstrates purpose (Hitch et al. 2014). ‘Developmentally, previous *doing* is understood to provide skills and abilities for future doing’ (Stagnitti 2010, cited in Hitch et al. 2014). Those academic perceptions underpin this story. However, in addition, we believe that learning-by-doing is an important component in bringing about change in oneself and we both benefitted greatly through this approach.



Learning-by-doing is an educational theory developed and expounded by the American philosopher John Dewey (1859 – 1952), who believed that people must relate to their situation to learn and adapt. This educational method was also adopted by the Brazilian philosopher and educator Paolo Friere, who wrote:

Education makes sense because women and men learn that through learning they can make and remake themselves, because women and men are able to take responsibility for themselves as beings capable of knowing—of knowing that they know and knowing that they don't (Friere 2004:13).

When Helen first came to live in Far North Queensland, she knew she wanted to learn about and connect with Aboriginal people and she did this, firstly, in her local town through community work, which often drew condemnation.

Illustrative story: *Helen was involved in establishing a Community Centre in a small town and along with committed others, was labelled as supporting 'bludgers'. In addition, local governance bodies declined requests for in-kind co-operation to support the volunteer work.* Later she was employed in a professional capacity to work in Aboriginal organisations, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander colleagues and it was then that the extended need for learning-by-doing became more apparent.

Jatin Mahajan has written about the benefits of learning by doing. He extolls its community association:

Learning by doing involves different stakeholders, rather than sitting in isolation, whether in the library, in your room, or stuck in understanding the book concepts. Since the whole community is your learning ground, scientifically, you can grasp matters if you can gather local partners like mentors or guides...

This means inclining more into the personal spaces that it encourages. You are part of a community. This form of collaborative learning allows you to interact more and connect with it... (Mahajan 2021).

As mentioned before, a major component of the 'doing' aspect of our complementarity was mentoring. Yarning together during long road trips to Aboriginal communities provided opportunities for this to take place and for Helen to realise her opportunity to 'make and remake' herself. Mentoring is usually defined as an older and more experienced person assisting another person to learn and grow. Since humans began to live in social groups, we have learnt our norms, values and behaviours through the example of and coaching by, others. This style of learning and growth is especially practiced in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, where stories are passed down from generation to generation.

The knowledge that gets transferred through different generations of our people is passed on in a casual kind of way. No one tells you to sit down and listen, like when you're at school or something. Usually it's just an aside, or maybe something told in a storytelling form. Sometimes a story has a message that isn't immediately obvious, but you work things out – like a jigsaw puzzle where you're putting the pieces together in your mind. You get that knowledge over time because you're chosen to receive it. And you have to prove you're worthy of receiving that information (Dodd and McKinnon 2019:ix).

This inherent storytelling competence flowed naturally from the three Aboriginal women Helen travelled and worked with at different times. They assumed this role flawlessly with their settler colleague, taking up the following quote which describes the 'contemplative way of dadirri' as the basis for 'doing':

In our Aboriginal way, we learnt to listen from our earliest days. We could not live good and useful lives unless we listened. This was the normal way for us to learn – not by asking questions. We learnt by watching and listening, waiting and then acting. Our people have passed on this way of listening for over 40,000 years (Ungunmerr 1998:29).

Our mentoring-based relationship not only covered history but also features of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communication, which was to be tested during our community visits to consult with women. Dimurr and Helen's project related to family violence, which in itself was a sensitive topic, so particular attention had to be paid to teaching Helen ways to promote cultural comfort among the women involved in discussing such personal situations. In a similar way, the sensitivity of the birthing project, which discussed personal and culturally confidential information, required some co-exchange of knowledge between Isabel, the Wangkamahdla woman and Helen, the non-Aboriginal midwife, taking into account the following quote:

There are many Indigenous stories which are sacred and are only meant to be shared with certain people. We have to strike a balance between sharing and privacy when it comes to storytelling (Yarn n.d.:82).

For Helen, the learning was intense, but the companionship of the kind, knowledgeable and thoughtful women helped her absorb the important cultural traits necessary for the success of their work and their on-going relationships. This learning-by-doing approach and the effective application of 'doing' the cultural elements in the meetings with remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, proved to be a most rewarding consequence for Helen. She discovered a new way of seeing the world and it motivated her to step out of her comfort zone, whilst at the same time retaining successful outcomes. Whilst the features described here were

gained in an occupational context, using the same tactic of learning-by-doing could also apply to anyone of settler culture wishing to connect with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Looking for an opportunity to engage with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people, then approaching them with friendliness, respect and a willingness to learn, could be all it takes to gain a new worldview.

We learn best by doing. We have known this to be true for quite some time. More than 2,500 years ago Confucius observed: "I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand" (DuFour et al. 2013:13).

Being

Wilcock (2007) described this elusive quality as ‘how people feel about what they do’ whereas Bratun et al. (2023) say it links ‘with people’s sense of self and how they experience an occupation’(activity) and Hitch et al. (2014) highlight that it ‘is a purely psychological /philosophical/spiritual dimension’. In what follows, the term ‘being’ applies not so much to a sense of self, but a sense of complementarity. Additionally, facets of our time together, working or otherwise, certainly embraced the even more elusive, spiritual elements.

The being, or essence of our complementarity, came to pass firstly through the core of our relationship – trust. The trust between us, in the occupational arena, involved behaving in ways that depended on the other. We each had the belief that the other would act in certain ways and felt confident in this working partnership. Even though Dimurr trusted in Helen’s knowledge of white professional processes from the start, she had to trust that Helen had grasped the importance of a culturally appropriate approach to the work and was able to implement it. Meanwhile, Helen had to trust that by adopting what she was being taught, she could still retain the ability to record information essential to documenting the on-going project.

Illustrative story: *When driving to the community where they were to run their first workshop on family violence the next day, Helen reminded Dimurr that they hadn’t yet devised a format for these workshops. They agreed that Dimurr would work it out that evening. She did...and that trust-in-action produced the meeting format they used for the entire program duration!*

This substantial trust between we colleagues became the bedrock for our continuing work, an aspect especially important to the two women mainly responsible for the funded project they were tasked with carrying out.

Secondly, the community women who had offered to meet with us did so based on their trust that we would abide by cultural essentials. Negotiating with community women and complying with community protocols was an important role for Dimurr. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people know that they need not only permission to go on to other clans’ country, but also that they have to abide by each community Council’s protocols. Not paying



attention to protocols can make or break an attempt at community engagement and Dimurr kept this at the front of her mind. She communicated with older community women she knew and those on the project Reference Group (see later under the heading belonging) to establish dates and venues, as well as with each community Council, to familiarise us with the protocols for visiting and working in their particular community.

Other ways in which we demonstrated our ‘culturally informed’ approach included ‘knowing our place’. This was especially relevant to Helen, an unknown member of the ‘dominant culture’ (Trudgen 2000), but also relevant to the two other women in the team. For, although they were culturally ‘sisters’ with the women in the communities, through cultural respect they were obliged to seek permission to visit another’s country.

It was always clear that Dimurr’s place was as leader of our undertaking. She made the initial contacts with communities, as well as playing the principal role in each workshop we participated in. For Helen, ‘knowing her place’ largely relied on her listening very hard and speaking very little, apart from her role of sharing factual and service information. She abided by the quote from Mirriam-Rose Ungunmerr in describing the concept of Dadirri – ‘the quiet stillness and the waiting’.

Our Aboriginal culture has taught us to be still and to wait. We do not try to hurry things up (1988:45).

This deep listening navigated the way to a connectedness, which in turn contributed to a sense of ‘being’ with the women. In addition, those women trusted that we would respect their contribution by listening and recording their experiences in a safe environment. In other projects Helen had worked on, the actual words the women spoke were recorded, with permission, and then included in final reports (Queensland Health 1992). A similar method of project preparation and implementation is highlighted in the current Birthing on Country project in Northern Territory which states that part of the methodology was to ‘explicitly privilege Yolgnu ways of being, doing and seeing’ (Ireland et al. 2021).

Another way of encompassing being in complementarity is the time our team was willing to spend in the communities we visited. Sometimes ‘sorry-business’ or other family matters would impinge on the women intending to talk with us and so participating women appreciated our preparedness to accommodate such concerns and sometimes re-schedule our visits.

Belonging

Belonging is described by Bratun et al. (2023) as ‘people’s interpersonal relationships and sense of sharing their occupations and their meaning with others.’ Others expanded on this:

Relationships are essential to belonging, whether they be with a person, place, group, or other factor. A sense of reciprocity, mutuality, and sharing characterize



belonging relationships, whether they are positive or negative. (Hitch et al. 2014:242)

The Indigenous sense of belonging quoted by Aileen Moreton-Robinson in 2020 was stated by Bill Neidjie of the Bunitj clan, Gagudju language group — a traditional owner of the world heritage listed Kakadu National Park in the Northern Territory:

Our story is in the land ... it is written in those sacred places. My children will look after those places, that's the law. Dreaming place ... you can't change it no matter who you are. No matter you rich man, no matter you King. You can't change it ... Rock stays, earth stays. I die and put my bones in cave or earth. Soon my bones become earth...all the same. My spirit has gone back to my country ... my mother. (Moreton-Robinson 2020:1)

In our story, we have used belonging as fitting in, being accepted and comfortable in a place or group. As Ungunmerr (1988) reflects: 'All persons matter. All of us belong'.

Another 'belonging' factor was not only the teamwork but the fellowship between the workers. Functioning in a cross-cultural team highlighted additional factors from those relating in general to efficient teamwork. The remote country work involved experiencing things together that were not part of usual working relationships.

Illustrative story: *One wet season in Cape York Peninsula, we three workers were committed to conducting a pre-arranged workshop in Laura. We arrived at the crossing of the Laura River, only to find it in major flood. Due to mobile phone reception, we were able to contact the community and report the state-of-affairs. Community members said 'no worries' and promised to 'fix things'. We waited with our car until we saw a tractor towing a tinny arrive at the other side of the swollen and rushing river. Tom, an obliging community member, un-hitched the dingy and motored across to pick us up. We were wondering if a vehicle would also arrive to take us back into the community, but no...we stayed in the dingy and the tractor towed us back to town at a most noisy and restrained pace, along the bitumen road! We shared a lot of laughter in experiencing this adventure together.*

During our professional collaboration, Dimurr was always the team leader. She had responsibility for funding allocation and leading the project planning. Importantly, she negotiated with Aboriginal community officials to ensure that invitations were issued to our team to visit and her leadership in communicating with the women involved in the project was crucial. Helen's main roles involved assistance in design of project processes, listening, recording and analysing information, then committing it to paper. These reports acted as a reminder of the women's stories and knowledge, of their advice and of our listening. Our second Aboriginal team member lent administrative support to the whole process and Dimurr greatly valued her calm tone of voice in speaking with survivors of family violence.



Repeated invitations from women to visit their communities lent positive feedback to the way we worked and the connectedness we had founded. Our complementarity in communities gave us the sense of belonging to or being part of something more than just ourselves and certain experiences highlighted this sense of belonging.

Illustrative Story: *One day, when Helen was in a Western Cape York community, an older woman approached her saying some of them wanted to go out into the bush to collect material in preparation for a smoking ceremony in the community. They had access to a vehicle but no one to drive it. Helen offered to be the driver and about eight women piled into the troop carrier for the trip. The old woman sat in the passenger seat and they set off on a track out of the community. After a short distance, Helen was directed to turn off into the bush and keep driving as instructed. Eventually they arrived at a circular palm grove. All the women disappeared into the trees and Helen waited with the car. After a while, the elder who had instigated the journey emerged from the grove. She came into view bare-breasted, having taken off her top, and carrying a number of palm fronds over her shoulder. She walked directly to Helen and said “You come with me, girly”. We ambled a little distance then sat on the ground. “I show you how to make a grass skirt” she said and proceeded to peel strips off the palm branches and demonstrate how they could be interwoven into a ceremonial skirt to be worn during the ceremonial smoking of a house before a new tenant moved in.*

Paying respect to women’s cultural knowledge and utilising meaningful language and terminology, was also an important part of culturally friendly resources we engaged in developing. We secured the work of local artists to illustrate these items and they contributed significantly to our ‘belonging’ factors.

Becoming

Becoming is the perpetual process of growth, development, and change that reside within a person throughout their life. It is directed by goals and aspirations, which can arise through choice or necessity, from the individual or from groups (Hitch et al. 2014: 241).

Here, we interpret becoming as beginning to grow, changing gradually. The becoming aspect of our ‘walking together’ spread not only from Dimurr to Helen as expressed earlier, but also to the Aboriginal women who were involved in sharing and discovery. They learnt how to change parts of their lives, how to utilise specific health-related services and developed the capacity to speak out for themselves. Each workshop opening by Dimurr encouraged the women to look at their individual talents and skills and ended with the ways participants could use these skills to benefit their community.

This becoming was enabled by numerous factors. Firstly, the work undertaken by us in Cape York communities was based on a community development model:



An Indigenous paradigm for community development may be defined as: working with communities to assist their members to find plausible solutions to the problems they have identified (Sherwood 1999:5).

Taking on this understanding of community development, our project established a Reference Group, comprising Aboriginal women who already represented their communities on the Board of the Aboriginal organisation which employed us. This group directed Dimurr, provided a communication link to communities, advised on the greatest need, recommended changes required and assisted in the meetings with community women. Ownership of the project by these community members confirmed the principle put forward by Sherwood of community people themselves identifying problems and finding acceptable solutions to them.

Acknowledging potent cultural obligations between younger and older women in Aboriginal communities necessitated conferring mostly with elders, although we did also speak with younger, less confident women. Jackie Huggins discusses the communal nature of Aboriginal women's relationship. She outlines their 'connectedness' but also 'who actually does what, who has responsibility for what, who takes responsibility for saying things to whom, who does the saying, who does the writing' (1994:19).

However, because of the cultural and sensitive nature of the topic we were addressing, it often suited the community women to come individually to Helen with specific stories – things they didn't want to necessarily share with their Aboriginal 'sisters', Helen's co-workers, because of moieties and kinships. Helen was seen as a neutral person and Dimurr had predicted this might happen, so to address this component of the work, she arranged for a counsellor to be available for healing time with Helen after returning from community visits.

In those remote communities, Helen would not assume that she was as closely tied as all the participating Aboriginal women were. She understood that she could fit, or belong, because she was trusted by Dimurr and she sometimes became aware of the connectedness of everything and has written elsewhere:

Spiritual connections between black and white women, between women and the Law and between women and the land are not easy to describe, but the feelings are strong and we each knew when it was happening to us (Myles and Tarrago 1996:200).

Conclusion

This story has been written to demonstrate how settler Australian and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can walk together in positive partnerships. Our intent has been to encourage settler Australians to seek out within themselves traits of humanity and dignity shared with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, to respect their culture and to be willing to learn about it. To do this requires engagement between everyday people at local levels as well as at national levels.



People's cultural beliefs, values and world-views influence thinking, behaviours and interactions with others. It is important to reflect without judgement before, during and after interacting with people whose beliefs, values, worldviews and experiences are different from your own.

The qualities of respect, trust and relationship highlighted in this article are basic components of the complementarity we promote. By telling our own story of relational connection, we are hoping to demonstrate ways in which many Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians can walk together 'in a movement of the Australian people for a better future' (The Uluru Statement from the Heart, 2017). We hope that for people who are willing to see life from another's standpoint and feel up to challenging their commonly held beliefs, that this story will rouse in them an effort to seek complementarity in either an occupational sense or in a personal sense.

In writing about recognition for Aboriginal people's belief that 'ownership is a social act and therefore a spiritual act', Mary Graham concludes with words which we believe also apply to the effects of stronger connections and complementarity between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and settler Australian cultures:

What will eventually emerge in a natural, habituated way is the embryonic form of an intact, collective spiritual identity for all Australians, which will inform and support our daily lives, our aspirations and our creative genius (Graham 1999:117).

Acknowledgements

We sincerely thank David Turnbull, not only for his editing contributions but also for many inspirational discussions about how settlers can 'walk with' Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. He also assisted in the development of a robust framework of ideas for us to pursue, in our own way. We also owe thanks and appreciation to John Winter for his personal support and technical editorial skills

Acknowledgement of country

We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of all countries on this continent and pay our respects to elders past, present and future. We also give recognition to those who have taken leadership in bringing about change for the benefit of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

References

Bratun U., Asaba E., Zur, J. (2023). Motives of Retirement-aged Workers and the Importance of Doing, Being, Becoming, and Belonging: A systematic Review of Qualitative



- Studies. *Journal of Occupational Science*, 30(3), 420-437
doi:10.1080/14427591.2022.2057574
- Dodd R. and McKinnon M. (2019). *Talking Sideways – Stories and Conversations from Finnis Springs*. University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Queensland.
- DuFour R., DuFour R., Eaker R., Many T. (2013). *Learning by Doing. A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work*, (2nd edition) Google Books, Chapter 1 (1).
- First Nations National Constitutional Convention (2017: Uluru, N.T.) & Central Land Council (Australia), (issuing body.) (2017). *Uluru Statement from the Heart. Central Land Council Library*, [Alice Springs, Northern Territory]
- Felton-Busch C. (2009). Birthing on Country: An Elusive Ideal? *Contemporary Nurse*, 33(2), 161-2. doi: 10.5172/conu.2009.33.2.161.
- Friere P. (2016) [2004]. *Pedagogy of Indignation*. Abingdon, England: Routledge: First Letter doi:10.4324/9781315632902. ISBN 978-1-59451-050-2. p13:21-24.
- Fuss E. (2024). *The NGA's Major Retrospective of Emily Kam Ngwararray Re-writes her Story and Brings it Back to Country*. ABC Arts. Posted 26th January 2024.
- Graham M. (1999). Some Thoughts about the Philosophical Underpinnings of Aboriginal Worldviews. *Worldviews: Environment, Culture, Religion* 3, 105-118.
- Heiss A. (2023). *Government Policy in Relation to Aboriginal People*. Essay accessed on Barani, Sydney's Aboriginal History website. <https://www.sydneybarani.com.au/sites/government-policy-in-relation-to-aboriginal-people>
- Hitch D., Pépin G., Stagnitti K. (2014). In the Footsteps of Wilcock, Part One: The Evolution of Doing, Being, Becoming, and Belonging. *Occupational Therapy in Health Care*, 28,(3), 231-246. doi:10.3109/07380577.2014.898114
- Huggins J. (1994). Aboriginal Women and the White Women's Movement in Grieve, N. Burns, A. (Eds), *Australian Women: Contemporary Feminist Thought*, Oxford University Press:77.
- Huggins J. (2017). *AZQuotes*. <http://www.azquotes.com/quote/68179> Retrieved November 25, 2023.
- Huggins J., Saunders K., Tarrago I. (2000). Reconciling our Mothers' Lives in Docker, J., Fischer, G., (Eds), *Race, Colour & Identity in Australia and New Zealand*, Sydney. University of NSW Press, 39-58.
- Ireland S., Maypilama E. L., Roe Y., Lowell A., Kildea S. (2021). Caring for Mum On Country: Exploring the transferability of the Birthing On Country RISE framework in a remote multilingual Northern Australian context. *Women and Birth*, 34(5), 487-492. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wombi.2020.09.017>
- Levesque M. (2023). *Review of: The Uluru Statement from the Heart – A consideration from three perspectives*. <https://doi.org/10.32388/12XTW5>
- Mahajan J. (2021). *Learning By Doing: 4 Reason Why it's Relevant*. July 11 2021, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/learning-doing-4-reasons-why-it's-relevant-jatin-mahajan>
- Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, (n.d). Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/attribute>. Accessed 6 Jun. 2023



- Moreton-Robinson A. (2020). *Our Story is in the Land: Why the Indigenous Sense of Belonging Unsettles White Australia*. <https://abc.net.au/religion/our-story-is-in-the-land-indigenous-sense-of-belonging/11159992>. Posted 9 November 2020.
- Myles H., Tarrago I. (1996). Some Good Long Talks: Cross-Cultural Feminist Practice, in Walters, S. and Manicom, L. (Eds), *Gender in Popular Education*, Zed Books London (181-201).
- Pearson N. (2022). *Who we Were, Who we Are, and Who we Can be*. ABC Boyer Lecture Broadcast Friday 4 Nov 2022. <https://www.abc.au./listen/programs/boyerlectures/14095284>.
- Queensland Health. (1992). *Some Good Long Talks, about Birthing for Aboriginal Women in Remote Areas of Queensland*. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Health Policy Unit & Women's Health Policy Unit, Queensland Health.
- Sherwood J. (1999). Community, What is it? *Indigenous Law Bulletin*, 4(19), 4-6.
- Trudgen R. (2001). *Why Warriors Lie Down and Die: Towards an understanding of why Aboriginal people of Arnhem Land face the greatest crisis in health and education since European contact*. Aboriginal Resource and Development Services Inc. Darwin.
- Turnbull D. (2023a). *The Uluru Statement from the Heart – A Consideration from Three Perspectives*. <https://doi.org/10.32388/QLVCDK>
- Turnbull D. (2023b). Transforming the Coloniality of Occupation and Health: Reflections Based on the Uluru Statement from the Heart. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Sciences*, 7, (2), 78-93.
- Ungunmerr- Baumann M-R. (1988). *Dadirri: Inner Deep Listening and Quiet Still Awareness: A Reflection*. (29). (45). <https://www.miriamrosefoundation.org.au/dadirri/>
- Watarrka Foundation Blog. (n.d). <https://www.watarrkafoundation.org.au/blog/indigenous-stories-with-indigenous-voices> (1-5).
- Wilcock A. (2007). Occupation and Health: Are They One and the Same? *Journal of Occupational Science*, 14(1), 3-8. DOI: 10.1080/14427591.2007.9686577
- Yarn (n.d.). <https://www.yarn.com.au/blogs/yarn-in-the-community/the-importance-of-storytelling-within-indigenous-culture>

Paper Received February 5, 2024; Accepted March 7, 2024; Published May 2, 2024

