

# Linking Stories and Initiatives:

## A narrative approach to working with the skills and knowledge of communities

By David Denborough, Carolyn Koolmatrie,

Djapirri Mununggirritj, Djuwalpi Marika,

Wayne Dhurrkay & Margaret Yunupingu

Team members for this project were:

Barbara Wingard, David Denborough, Cheryl White,

Sue Mitchell, Shona Russell & Barry Sullivan.

This paper describes an approach to community work informed by narrative ideas that we hope will be of relevance to practitioners in a wide-range of contexts. Over the last year, a number of Aboriginal communities, which are experiencing hard times, have been exchanging stories. These are stories about special skills, special knowledge, about hopes and dreams and the ways that people are holding onto these. They are stories that honour history. This article describes the thinking that has informed this process. It also contains extracts of stories and messages from different communities.

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## BACKGROUND

In recent years, practitioners in Sri Lanka responding to communities affected by the tsunami (Arulampalam et al 2005), in Bangladesh responding to communities affected by poverty (Chakraborty et al 2005), and in Palestinian communities affected by continuing occupation (Sehwail 2005; Rasras 2005; Hassounh et al 2005), have expressed interest in how narrative ideas can be used to engage with communities who are experiencing hard times, and in contexts in which there are few resources.

Over the past decade, narrative ideas have shaped a range of community assignments (Aboriginal Health Council of South Australia et al 1994; White 2003). These assignments have involved community-wide gatherings structured according to the definitional ceremony metaphor, and the work described in this paper has been highly influenced by this influential and hopeful approach. For some time, we have been hoping to develop further methods of community work informed by narrative practice (alongside the community gathering approach), methods that can be facilitated by sole workers in a range of different contexts and that can be developed incrementally depending upon the resources that are available. This paper is an attempt to describe one such parallel approach.

## INITIATIVES

Within any community that is facing difficult times, community members will be responding to these difficulties, they will be taking whatever action is possible, in their own ways, based on particular skills and knowledges, to try to address the effects of the problem(s) on their lives and the lives of those they love and care about. These initiatives may not currently be widely recognised, and they may not in themselves be enough to overcome all that is presently facing the community. These initiatives are, however, highly significant. Making it possible for community members to identify these initiatives, to richly describe them so that the skills and knowledges implicit within them become more visible to themselves and to others, and to trace the history of these skills and knowledges so that the ways these are linked to local culture are understood, can strengthen these initiatives in ways that make further action possible.

Finding audiences to witness stories about these initiatives is a next step. If richly described stories of community initiatives are witnessed and responded to by those in other communities facing similar difficulties, if messages can be sent back and forth, then support and a sense of solidarity can be generated. Those community members already taking action can be powerfully supported in this process, while others can be inspired to join in. The documentation, circulation and celebration of community skills and knowledge can, in time, take on a life of its own.

## LINKING STORIES AND INITIATIVES

This paper describes an approach to community work that requires engagement with at least two communities at a time, as each community is invited to become an outsider witness to the stories of the other. This form of community engagement is characterised by a criss-crossing exchange of stories and messages. These are stories and messages that contain hard-won knowledge about ways of responding to tough times. They are stories and messages that describe local initiatives and the knowledge, skills, values and dreams that are implicit in these.

It is our hope that the community approach described here can be replicated by practitioners in many different contexts – whether the community in question is a cultural community, a geographic community, a community of people within an institution or hospital, or a community of people who simply share certain experiences of life.

## THE STARTING PLACE: PORT AUGUSTA

The story of this work began in the Aboriginal community of Port Augusta when a group of community members came together to speak about the many losses that they had experienced over the past year. This meeting occurred at the local Aboriginal Health Service, Pika Wiya, and was facilitated by Barbara Wingard, Cheryl White and David Denborough from Dulwich Centre<sup>1</sup>.

The first step in any community assignment involves rigorous consultation. This consultation seeks to identify information that will provide a foundation for our work with the community, and for the development of partnerships with community

members. It seeks to identify the key themes that families feel are most important to address. Significantly, it also seeks to unearth some of the skills and knowledge of community members that may be able to be put to use to address current predicaments.

We wished to find ways to richly acknowledge the experiences of those who were sharing their stories with us. Permission was therefore sought to take notes during the consultation so that we could write-up a document containing the words and phrases spoken during the meeting. We indicated that we would then return at a later date to read this document back to those who had contributed to it. At all times this document would remain their property and it would be up to them to decide what happened to it.

Developing a document from the words spoken by community members and then arranging for a formal re-telling (reading) of this document back to the community can have significant effects. This is particularly so when the document:

- uses the exact words and phrases of community members so that these are recognisable to them;
- provides double-storied accounts of people's experiences<sup>2</sup> – accounts which richly describe the effects of the hardship that is being

endured and also richly describe the ways in which the community has been responding to this hardship;

- arranges what community members have been saying into certain significant themes;
- describes the values they have expressed, the history of these and how they have been holding onto these;
- conveys some of the skills and knowledges that are informing how community members' are responding to tough times; and
- weaves together different community members' contributions around shared themes.

During the initial consultation in Port Augusta, permission was sought to ask the occasional question in order to elicit stories about the skills and knowledge that people within Port Augusta were putting to use in responding to the losses they had experienced, and where possible to trace the history of these skills. We also tried to ask a question or two in order to elicit the values, beliefs, hopes or dreams that were 'absent but implicit' (White 2000) in expressions of grief or outrage or despair<sup>3</sup>.

The following document was created from the initial consultation with community members in Port Augusta:

### **RESPONDING TO SO MANY LOSSES: SPECIAL SKILLS OF THE PORT AUGUSTA ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY**

Recently, there have been so many losses in our families and in our community. Some of these deaths have been particularly difficult as they have been deaths of young people, and death through suicide or violence. We have experienced so many losses, one after the other. It has been a real struggle to get through. There has been too much sadness. This document has been created from a discussion we had together in Port Augusta to talk about our grief, what is important to us, and the ways in which we have been responding to so many losses.

**Asking Questions** ~ When some deaths seem particularly unfair, when it seems so very wrong, it can make it harder to continue with life. When the person who has died should still be with us, this can leave us not knowing where to look, not knowing where to go, or who to turn to. At times like this, all we have left are questions: Why did this happen? What is going wrong if our young people are having such a hard time? How can we support other young people? What steps can be put in place to ensure this doesn't happen to others? These are important questions. They show respect for the person who has died. They show respect for all young people. They show respect for life.

**Dreams** ~ Some of us have dreams in which our loved ones visit us. Even though they have passed away they come to us in our dreams. We dream of walking together again across the land. These images sustain us, they convince us that we will walk together again one day. Sometimes we also have a sense that our lost loved one is communicating with us – telling us that everything is all right. On the anniversary of people's deaths, sometimes our loved one comes back to us in our dreams to tell us they are going now and not to worry about them. This can lift a weight from our shoulders. We know they are now okay. Sometimes our dreams have a different sort of message. One of us even dreamt that a lost loved one saw us at the pokies. He gave one of us a slap and then left! That seems a pretty clear message! Mostly though, our loved ones offer us comfort through dreams. Even though they are no longer with us here on earth, they are still offering us comfort. Sometimes we also feel a touch on our shoulders and know it is our mother's touch. Or we feel her rubbing our back as she always did when we were children. Feeling the kindness of loved ones in our dreams or through their touch helps us to continue with our lives.

**Spirituality** ~ For some of us, spiritual beliefs and practices are what help us to get through. Faith that one day we will meet again with those who have passed away sustains us. Acts of prayer are also significant. Knowing that someone is listening and will answer our prayers can make a difference.

**Crying together** ~ When one of us is feeling low others feel it too. We have skills in feeling each other's pain and suffering. In this way we share grief. I remember one time, I was sitting in front of a photograph of my mother and I was crying when my relatives walked in. They sat down beside me, put their arms around me and they started to cry too. 'What are we crying about?' they said. I told them and we sat in sadness together.

**Honouring the contribution of key figures in the community** ~ At times like these it is important to acknowledge the work done by key people in our community – people like Aunty Margaret and Uncle Ken. The police or counsellors can never be there 24 hours a day. But it is family members who are there for each other. Aunty Margaret and Uncle Ken have been there for so many people in our community, as have other elders. Whether it is the middle of the night or the middle of the day, they are always there to share stories, to take people in. They have shared stories of those who have passed away. During times of hardship it is important to acknowledge those in the community who support us, who we can ring when we feel sad. Even if we just talk about the weather, there are key people in the community who keep us connected to each other and to our histories. We need to honour them. They offer us all so much.

**Remembering and staying connected to those who have passed away** ~ We have developed special skills in remembering and staying connected to those who have passed away. There are many ways in which we do this. We do not forget them. We honour and respect our loved ones. Here are some of the different ways that people spoke about remembering and staying connected to those who have passed away:

'I have a nice big photograph. It is a photograph of my mother and father. Both faces look directly out at you. When my dad passed away I put a candle in front of this photo and then lit the candle. I was thinking about my father and I heard my mother say, 'Don't forget me!' This ritual of lighting a candle in front of this photograph is one way that I remember and stay connected with my mother and father.

'Certain smells always remind me. I seek out these smells sometimes and spend time to remember those who have passed.'

'Some of us have also used writing to remember. Before one person's funeral, I asked a whole lot of nieces and nephews and other relatives to tell me stories and memories about the person who had died. Some of these stories were very funny as he could be a cheeky man! I wrote all these stories down in a long letter that I then read out at the funeral. People were laughing at some of these stories. There was tenderness and laughter.'

We all have different ways of remembering those who have passed away, or carrying them with us. There is one story that has always been very significant to me. This is of a particular woman here in Port Augusta. When her brother died, she used to carry his suitcase everywhere she went. This case had all his belongings inside, his clothes and other possessions, and she would carry this case with her throughout life – to the shops, to the pub, wherever she was walking. Wherever she went, this sister carried her brother with her. This was a way of honouring him. She also spent a lot of time at his grave site. We all have different ways of carrying our loved ones with us.

**Young ones' skills of remembering and staying connected** ~ We pass on these skills of remembering and staying connected to our children. And we pass on the stories too. It's our job to remind them of those who have passed on. Our four-year-old knows all the photographs. He sits down with them and can tell stories about those who have passed on. He has dreams of his grandfather and he lets us know when he has met with him in his dreams. When he visits the cemetery he says hello to all those whose stories he knows. We encourage our young people to know the stories and to remain connected to those who have passed away.

**Unity** ~ In times of grief we need a united stand, not a divided one. Sharing grief is important. Coming together makes a difference. Unity is healing. We must come together to find ways to offer more for our young people. They are our future.

**Music** ~ Some of us write and record songs and this is a way of responding to loss. These include songs such as: 'He's alive for evermore', 'Risen from dead', or songs about the land. We may even write and record songs about 'walking together again' with our lost loved ones. When we make up a song, and when we sing it, or listen to it, it helps us to cope. Painting on calico can make a difference too. As can listening to certain songs. Many people have particular songs by which they are remembered. Whenever a certain Slim Dusty song comes on the radio, we all say, 'that's Pop's song'. Even our young ones say this. Before we pass away, we might identify a certain song as 'our song'. This means when we are no longer here, whenever a certain song is played, we will be remembered.

**Our families** ~ The first people we turn to are our children, grandchildren, sisters, brothers, uncles, aunties, mothers, fathers, grandparents ... it is our families who support each other the most. Turning to each other means a lot to us. Just hearing our mother's voice on the phone, just hearing that our relatives are okay, that they are with us, brings comfort. There are many ways in which we stay connected with each other. Sometimes we send kind messages over the radio ... giving these and receiving them can make a difference to your day. Even if alcohol and drugs affect our families, there are still very significant connections. We talk together about everything. We can share secrets with the older generation ... about our men for instance! We can laugh together. We trust each other and these relationships are sacred to us.

**Remembering the good times** ~ It helps us when we remember the good times of the past. For some of us, this means remembering certain times on the Missions when we used to go out with the whole family, camping and hunting. For others, we remember good times that we spent with the person who has died. These good memories are precious to us. We sit around together and talk about all the good things that we used to do together. Once we start talking, we all remember different things. This means we can put different stories together. We can put it all together when we are talking with each other.

**Acknowledging that people react to grief in different ways** ~ People respond to grief in many different ways. Some people drink, smoke, gamble. They do these things to escape from the pain. We can't criticise them for this. We need to find ways for them to be able to talk about what they have been going through. We need to help them, but without criticising.

**Tears and Laughter** ~ For us, tears and laughter go together. As well as sharing sorrow together, we also re-tell the funny stories from a person's life. It's important we don't forget these funny stories. We talk about the good times, we laugh, this makes us feel sad, and then we laugh again. Sometimes looking at a particular photograph might bring tears, another time a burst of laughter! For us, tears and laughter go together. There are many very funny stories. For instance ... when we asked one of our young ones if he could remember his grandfather's voice and what he used to say, this young one said: 'Yes, sure, I remember him. I remember him saying ... Can you shut up you bastard!' It was very funny! Another time, we were coming back from a funeral on a bus and there was a lot of laughter as we hurried along. As the bus was going a little too fast one young guy yelled out: 'I don't think grandpa wants to see us again quite so soon ... we only just said goodbye to him!' There are many ways in which we grieve with tears and laughter.

**Young people caring for us** ~ Sometimes it's our young people who offer us comfort. They can feel when we are upset and they might say: 'Are you feeling okay? Can I come and camp with you? Can I come and sleep in your bed?' Or our older kids might say: 'Mum, have a rest. I'll cook tonight'. These acts of care mean a lot to us.

**They are with us forever** ~ Because we love them so much, we may grieve forever for those who have died. But we will never forget them. They might not be here with us but we have them in our hearts and in our minds.

When this document was read back to community members, they confirmed that these were the ways that they were trying to deal with the losses they had experienced. They also let us know that they would be more than willing for their words to be shared with other Aboriginal people if we believed this could possibly offer any assistance.

## A SECOND STEP

At around the same time as the initial consultation in Port Augusta, Dulwich Centre was approached by Relationships Australia (NT) with a request to join a project relating to two remote Aboriginal communities in Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory. These communities are located in the far north of Australia, almost three thousand kilometres north of Port Augusta! Over recent years, these two communities, Yirrkala and Gunyangara, had experienced a devastating number of suicides of young people, and funding had been made available to try to respond to this situation<sup>4</sup>. Initially, it was proposed that these funds would be used to provide training in relation to suicide prevention to health

workers who are linked with Yirrkala and Gunyangara and based in the nearby town of Nhulunbuy. In responding to this invitation, there were a range of matters that we wished to consider.

- The invitation had not come directly from the communities of Yirrkala and Gunyangara. What processes of consultation could take place that would ensure that any project was relevant, desired, meaningful and accountable to the people of these communities<sup>5</sup>?
- In our experience, the most meaningful responses to suicide and prevention of suicide occur *within* communities, by community members. How could any project support the residents of Yirrkala and Gunyangara who are already taking such action? How could we contribute to supporting initiatives already underway in the lives of individuals, families and the two communities?
- How could we respond to the grief and loss associated with the prevalence of suicide in these two communities in culturally appropriate ways<sup>6</sup>?

- How could we contribute in some way to providing a context for those young people most at risk to feel as if 'life is worth living'?
- Colin Tatz (2001) and others (Youth Suicide Advisory Committee 1998) have described the importance of acknowledging that Aboriginal suicide is different from non-indigenous suicide. How could we ensure that at all times our response acknowledged the particular history, culture and context of Aboriginal life in these specific communities, and the skills, knowledge, values and beliefs of the Yolngu<sup>8</sup> people of Arnhem land?
- Was there a way in which the process of community engagement, and the process of training for workers, could compliment each other<sup>9</sup>?

To explore these matters, meetings were planned with key community leaders of Yirrkala and Gunyangara<sup>10</sup>. In preparation for these meetings, we asked those community members of Port Augusta who had contributed to the document 'Responding to so many losses: Special skills of the Port Augusta Aboriginal Community', if they would be happy for us to take their stories with us and to share these with the Yolngu people. Considerable enthusiasm was expressed about this idea, partly because the people of Port Augusta hold the Yolngu people in high regard as they are well-known for their strong connection to traditional culture, for their artwork and music, and for being the original custodians of the yidaki (didgeridoo). The enthusiasm from those in Port Augusta was also due to a hope that their words could be of some assistance to those up north. They expressed a hope that out of the difficulties they were facing, perhaps could come some sense of connection with those of another community responding to similar losses and similar grief.

## THE FIRST SHARING

On our first visit to Yirrkala and Gunyangara, many conversations took place. Some of these were formal meetings in council houses facilitated by the traditional owners of the land<sup>11</sup>. Discussions also took place with concerned mothers from the community. Some meetings were held under trees,

or at the beautiful Shady Beach looking out over the water. Wherever we were, and whoever we were talking to, one of the first things we'd do was share the document from Port Augusta. We would ask people if they would be interested to hear a message from an Aboriginal community down south that was going through hard times, which had experienced too many losses, particularly of young people through violence and suicide. The Yolngu people responded very warmly to this suggestion.

As the document from Port Augusta was read aloud, people would nod their heads, and indicate that what they were hearing was resonating for them: 'Same. It's the same here. Their words speak for us.' We would then ask if they would like to send a message back to the people of Port Augusta, and invariably they did:

### RESPONSES TO THE PEOPLE OF PORT AUGUSTA FROM YOLNGU WOMEN

Their words speak for us. Their stories are so similar to what we experience. It is like they are talking for us as well. It's like we are sharing the same problems under the one tent. We know now that these things are not just happening in Arnhem Land but also down south. We are thinking of them and now we would like to pass on something to them. We want to share our stories with them, just like they shared their stories with us. We will speak about our experiences and then link these together with the experiences of those from Port Augusta. Then we can translate this all into our language and share this through our community. This is about sharing knowledge and sharing stories together.

So began a process of sharing stories and messages backwards and forwards between communities. Narrative ideas influenced how this took place, but this project was powerfully shaped by the heartfelt enthusiasm that members of Yirrkala, Gunyangara and Port Augusta displayed at the idea of exchanging stories and messages.

As a team, we began to adopt a position of 'messenger'. Our role involved remaining decentred and facilitating a process by which the important initiatives being taken by community members could become more richly described and documented, and then finding ways that these stories and messages could be shared back and forth between communities. Along the way, our role was also to convene mini-definitional ceremonies (White 1999) at every possible occasion so that community members got to hear and experience how their words were touching and influencing, in positive ways, the lives of others. Sometimes these 'others' were in Aboriginal communities in different parts of the country. Later on in the project, stories and messages started to be exchanged across the seas to New Zealand, Samoa and even to the USA and Canada.

But first our task was to assist community members in Yirrkala and Gunyangara to articulate particular stories and messages they wished to send to others. These were not just any sort of message. They were messages that contained special cultural skills and knowledge about responding to some of the current difficulties facing Aboriginal communities. They were messages of how community members are trying to reclaim community life from the difficulties that they are currently facing. They were stories of how community members are holding onto their hopes and dreams despite profound obstacles. They were stories of hopes, skills and special knowledge that too often get neglected or over-looked.

## MESSAGES FROM ELDERS

On the first trip to Arnhem land, we invited two senior elders at Yirrkala, Djerrknu (Eunice) Marika and Djuwalpi Marika, to make short video messages that could then be played back in Port Augusta. They responded warmly to this proposal and Djerrknu Marika described why she felt this process was important:

*We have been feeling for our community, but our hearts are for all people. We would like to share these words with others, with the wider world. We would like you to know about what is happening here. We would like to exchange ideas with other communities. We must not hide ourselves. We must openly*

*share ourselves. We are alive and our words must travel, they must go on journeys, further and further to enable people to see us.*

## GATHERING STORIES FROM YOLNGU PEOPLE

As we met with people in Yirrkala and Gunyangara, we would continue to read out the words from Port Augusta and invite them to compose their own messages. English is only a third, fourth or even fifth language for some Yolngu people, but it is the only language that is shared by the people of Yirrkala/Gunyangara and those in Port Augusta. When working in Arnhem Land, in order to make it possible for the messages to be sent in English, we would note down people's spoken responses and then read these back to them. As messages were composed and then read back to check their accuracy, we realised that these re-tellings were taking the form of small definitional ceremonies. Through the process of hearing their messages read back to them, community members began to embrace their own stories of skills and knowledge of how they were dealing with hard times, and were doing so in the presence of an imagined audience of the people of Port Augusta.

Participating in this process led senior elder Djuwalpi Marika to then invite us to meet with many different members of his community – elders, women, men, young men and young women. As he describes below, he saw this gathering and sharing of stories to be of considerable significance:

### DREAMS AND VISIONS FOR YIRRKALA Djuwalpi Marika

Yirrkala is a unique place. It is a physical paradise. We have a rich history and a strong cultural commitment. At the moment though, we are living with so many problems. We have had too many deaths, too many suicides. There has been so much sadness and loss. There is too much alcohol and other drugs. At night we hear fighting and breaking glass. It is like a nightmare.



Despite all these difficulties, we still have visions and dreams for this community. We have held onto these dreams even through very hard times. We want to bring the community back to how it was before ... at night you could hear the sound of the clapsticks, the yidaki, and singing at the campfire. We are looking at these problems and identifying how to address them. We have a good network of people who are doing all that they can – a community patrol run by strong women, a drug and alcohol unit, a woman's safe house, young people who are writing and singing songs, and strong leadership in the council.

Many people are contributing to holding onto these dreams and visions. The young people of the community made a video. It is called 'A Vision for Yirrkala'. It has the voices of young people, of older people, and also voices from our past, our ancestors. Our vision is being held together by younger and older people.

Despite all the trouble happening around us, we are holding onto our dreams and visions for this community. Saltwater people know that the water can be rough today and yet smooth again tomorrow. This knowledge helps us. Those of us from inland know that when the bushfires come, there are ways to break through and to survive. We watch the kangaroos. Where they break the line of the fire, this provides the opportunity. We know then where to break through the fire. At the moment it is like the water is rough, but we know it will be smooth again tomorrow. Or it is like when the bushfires are upon us and we are doing all we can to work out how to break through the fire.

These are difficult times, but we are holding onto our visions and dreams for Yirrkala. These dreams and visions have long histories. They were carried for thousands of years by our ancestors. They are now being carried in different ways by different members of our community, by council members, by strong women, by young people, and by children.

Everything starts from the grass roots. We need to sit together, on the ground, under the tree to share our visions. We wish to bring elders, young people, children together to share stories and to find ways forward. As our stories link together we will grow stronger. All the voices need to be heard. All of our skills, all of our knowledge, needs to be brought together. Every member of Yirrkala has stories and dreams for this place. We need to listen to them.

At Djuwalpi Marika's invitation, we began to approach different members of Yirrkala to speak about how they have been trying to deal with the tough times they have been going through in order for us to share these stories with people in Port Augusta. A similar process began to unfold in Gunyangara.

## **WOMEN'S STORIES**

Crucially, Djapirri Mununggirritj, the Co-ordinator of the Yirrkala Women's Resource Centre, began to introduce us to women in both communities who were willing to send messages and share their stories. It soon became clear that the words from Port Augusta about experiences of being visited by lost loved ones in dreams were touching the hearts of Yolngu mothers. They wished to send the following message back down south.

### **YOLNGU WOMEN'S STORIES: OUR SPECIAL WAYS OF DEALING WITH GRIEF**

There have been so many losses lately that there is much sadness here. We have all been trying to do what we can to respond to this grief. We have special ways of dealing with loss and grief.

**The first thunder of the year** ~ When the first thunder of the year occurs, this touches the heart of any mother who has had a loss. It reminds mothers who have lost a son that

he will not be with them for Christmas. The first thunder of the year echoes in the hearts of mothers. We ask ourselves questions: Am I able to go on? Am I able to find ways that what I have experienced can be of help to others? How can I make sure that others don't go through the same thing?

**The cry of mothers** ~ When a family loses someone, the cry of mothers does not stop for years. In every rising sun, there is the cry of the mother. As the sun sets, this is the cry of the mother. Calls of grief echo through the lands. Our grief is also linked to the four winds – Lungurrrma, Bulunu, Barra and Djaladthun. This can continue for five years. There are foods we will not eat, places that will not be used. We treasure our children here, when we lose one of them, the cries of the mothers do not stop for years.

**So much pain** ~ Many of us mothers have gone through so much pain, so much suffering. I lost one son to suicide, and almost lost another. We have lost too many young people. Instead of young people singing for older people, it's been the other way around. Some of our young people have seen bad things. Some of them have lost people they dearly loved. Our young people are very important to us. We keep doing everything we can to keep them alive. Sometimes we don't know what to do to make our children safe. This is a terrible feeling. We do everything that we can, everything that we can think of. But what do you do to save a person who is planning suicide? Sometimes there is no answer. We can only keep doing everything that we can.

**Dreams** ~ Sometimes our loved ones visit us in our dreams. They tell us that they are all right now and they offer us comfort through their words and their touch. We don't get frightened by this. We know they are caring for us. In this way, they still offer us comfort even though they are no longer here on earth.

Sometimes, if they regret things that they did, or how they died, they may even come back in a dream to apologise to their mother or father about what took place. These dreams can be very comforting. We also feel their presence during our waking hours. We feel them when we least expect it. Certain smells or sounds evoke them. Our loved ones remain with us. They walk with us in life.

**Our concern for our young people** ~ We're living here across from the refinery. The land speaks to us. It speaks of the harm that has been done. It cries. It touches us as we listen. We are the senior elders of our community and we are concerned about our young people. The night is for us to sleep, but now we sit looking out at the road, waiting for our young people to come home. We sit all night with worry. Is he in trouble? Has there been an accident? The worry stays with us until we see the car come down the road, until we see that he is home. Sometimes we cry one whole night. Our tears think back to how our old people used to live. We have been holding onto dreams and poems.

### **SILVER ROAD**

by Gayili Marika Yunupingu

*Last night*

*I saw a silver road*

*Go straight across the sea*

*And quick as I raced along the shore*

*That quick road followed me.*

*It followed me all around the bay*

*Where small waves dance in tune*

*And at the end of the silver road there*

*Hung a silver moon*

*On a pale green sky*

*With a pathway bright and broad*

*Some night I shall bring that silver moon*

*Across that silver road*

In the night, when waiting for our young people to come home, I think about the silver road. There have been signs recently that dreams are being carried on, that our young people are settling down, listening, going back to the homelands. They are holding onto their dreams and they are passing them on. They are trying hard to stay away from trouble. They are going fishing, camping, making spears. I will go away soon. But I will be happy in spirit because I will leave my children happy. There have been signs lately that the bondage is beginning to break. We will keep watching the silver road.

**Times when happiness is in our hearts** ~ Even when there is so much sadness around us, there are still times when there is happiness in our hearts. Despite it all, despite all that is happening, we still have times when happiness shines, when we say, 'Okay, that's it. Let's get in the car ... let's go!' We camp out, share stories, sing. This has always been true. It is part of our way. Somehow, even during times of hardship, we find ways to ensure that happiness remains in our hearts.

**Honouring life through making a special pole**  
~ When a person dies, a special pole – a baburru – is made in their honour. This is given to the mother and father of the person who has died, or to their closest family member. And it is then passed down through the generations. It is a way of always remembering and honouring the person who has died. When we look at these poles, we also remember the things that we learnt from the person who has passed away. They help us to continually reflect and think about our own lives. These poles are important to us and we do whatever we can to protect them. During times when alcohol and drugs are affecting family members, if this means one of these poles is at risk we might hide it away, and only bring it out when respect has returned.

As the Yolngu women spoke about their grief, team members were not passive. We were taking notes and through occasional questions and reflections were seeking to draw out special cultural and community knowledges about ways of dealing with loss. We sought to elicit the values that shaped these mothers' grieving, and particular attention was paid to the exact words and phrases spoken by the women. When we read their words back to them, a key contributor said: 'Our words are like poetry'. The poetry and artistry implicit in the Yolngu mothers' responses to grief became more richly described as a result of this process. Significantly, we also began to hear of a wide range of actions these mothers are taking to try to prevent further losses. We began to hear stories about the many ways Yolngu mothers are fed up with what has been taking place and how they have been taking steps to address the grief, alcohol, conflict and suicides in their communities. It seemed particularly important to find ways of acknowledging these responses and to make the skills involved in these responses more visible and more widely known. We also sought to trace the history of the current initiatives. The following document was a result of these explorations:

## **MOTHERS TAKING ACTION**

A handful of ladies in this community have been trying for a long time to help those who are losing their way. Twenty years ago this house here was a refuge for the ladies. They used to come here when their husbands had beaten them. They came here for safety and for a good night's sleep when their own home was dangerous. This was in the 1980s when middle-aged men were drinking. We reached out to these men, talked to them about the children, about how they must be feeling. We did a lot of talking, took a lot of action, and things did quieten down. The heavy drinkers started to limit their drinks. Then in the 1990s everything changed. Young people started drinking. And as women we have started to take action again.

**Fighting back against the grog** ~ After my nephew died recently, we have started taking more action. I told those who were drinkers that when they brought alcohol back into the community I would be waiting for them, with my club. They came back with a 30 pack of beer. We took it from them. I started to throw the cans up in the air and hit them with my club. My sister took a machete. She started doing the same as me, but slicing the cans. We burst wine casts with our fingernails, or with spears. When they hid the beer in lemonade cartons, we were not fooled. When they hid alcohol under their clothing, we burst them and the alcohol sometimes spilled down their legs. The enemy is the grog and now we are taking up weapons against the enemy. We used to be softball players and these skills are now coming in handy (laughter)! We have a very good aim. And we have many very funny stories about our efforts to free this community from alcohol. There is a long history of taking action here. Things have quietened down here now. The drinking has not stopped but there is much less shouting, much less aggression. That has stopped. It is changing in our family. They are listening to us and it is changing.

**Reconnecting with our loved ones when drugs have taken them away** ~ It can be heartbreaking when our young people are using drugs or sniffing petrol. It is as if we lose them to the drugs. When a young person has left the community, left their family, and is hanging out in town, mothers sometimes don't know what to do. It is a very worrying situation. As mothers we do all we can. There was a time, in the past, when my son was sniffing petrol with a group of other young people on the beach. They were there for many months. I would drive to the beach and go down to where all the young people were, including my son, and I would say to them all: 'Has anyone seen my son? I am missing him very much. If anyone sees my son, could they tell him I miss him. His bedroom is still

empty.' I would sometimes also bring food or some money for him and ask the other boys to give this to him if they saw him. He was always there, of course, listening, and I knew this. I could see him. I did this for month after month: just telling the group that I missed my son. Then, one day, he walked back into our home and into our lives. He never talked about what I had done. And he never went back to that lifestyle.

Sometimes we have been able to do this. Other times we have just continued to pass on the message: 'I love you. You know you have a bed and a home and parents who love you.' We have reached out to young people. We try to respect them and this makes it more possible for them to respect us. This is how we got rid of petrol sniffing in the community. But there is still so much to do in relation to issues of drugs and alcohol. We are looking for new ways of reconnecting with loved ones when drugs have taken them away.

## **THE WORK OF THE COMMUNITY PATROL**

We have a community patrol now. It started when women walked to bring food to those who were drunk on the outskirts of the community. Now we have a vehicle. We pick up people who are drunk, we treat them kindly, we bring them home, we put them to bed and tell them to stay safe. People listen to us because we have old women with us. Young people do listen. We wait until the next day, when they are sober, to talk with them. If they continue with the stupidity, we send them to a homeland, out bush for a couple of weeks, where there is no grog, no drugs. We always approach people with kindness, even if they are acting badly. We never hit them. We never approach them in ways that could make them fearful. We tell them, 'We care for you, we love you' and they take notice of this. We respect them, and in turn this means that they respect us.

**Filling the gap for those who are split from their family** ~ Family is very important to us. When people get disconnected from family, when problems get in the way and when relationships are strained, people become very lonely and this is when they are most at risk. This is because family is so important to us. Even people who think they don't have families who care about them, they do have families. We are all related to each other up here. All Yolngu are related to each other. If we see someone who is in trouble, and if their immediate family is no longer connected to them, then we reach out to them. We talk with them. We try to fill the gap between them and their family. And then we try to link them back with their family. For instance, I saw a young kid, who was very drunk, lying by the side of the road. When I asked him what was wrong he said: 'My family don't love me. They don't care about me.' I took him to my home, put him to bed and gave him a big feed. The next day I took him back to his parents. We sat together and I relayed the boy's concerns. This made a big difference. I have seen him around lately and he is doing really well.

When we notice young people who are losing their way, we cry inside and love to sit down with them. It breaks my heart to see young people lose their talent, their talent is important to us, so I try to reach out to them. We talk together. We talk about getting out of the trap. Alcohol and drugs are like a trap or a pit. We talk together about this, and about ways of getting out. I am always clear that trying to get out is their choice. I share stories with them. Stories about what it was like here when I grew up. How we saw the first pub being built. How we have seen so many changes. We share history. I also try to reconnect them with the spiritual side of life, to link them back to a sense of spirituality. When I talk to them, they start to picture themselves differently. They can see themselves in a bigger picture. When we speak about the trap, about the pit, they

agree with me. They say: 'Someday I might start limiting my drinking. At the moment it is too hard. But sometime ...'

We try to enable our young people to talk with us. We find ways to fill the gap and then link people back to their immediate family.

**How to respond when someone is despairing and may take their own life** ~ When we are on community patrol we are sometimes called out to young people who are threatening to take their own life. There was a time when a young man had climbed up a pole and was saying he was going to hang himself. When I went up to him, I talked to him very gently, very calmly. And he listened to me and climbed down. There was another time when a young man was on the roof of a house and ready to hang himself. When we speak to them, people do listen to us and they do respond. This is because there are particular ways in which we approach people in this situation. If we are tense, or angry, or anxious, then they will notice this and react to it. Our calm voice calms them down. Sometimes family members take off at these times, it is too much to witness, or they are frightened, they don't know what to do. We turn towards young people at these times. We speak to them with kindness and care. We try to fill the gap between them and their families. Often we then take them off to a nearby beach so we can be alone and sit down and talk together. We talk in ways that enable us to find out what the problem is, why they are trying to harm themselves, what is bothering them. We talk with them in ways that will enable them to speak back.

It's not only about responding in these moments of crisis. We also keep a very close eye on people who are vulnerable. Other community members will tell us if they are worried about someone and once we know this we will keep an eye on them and have a quiet talk whenever it is needed. Some of these skills we have developed through

training courses. We have done role-plays to work out how to respond to people when they are aggressive or when they can hardly talk. We bring all our experiences and abilities to this work. Some of these skills have long histories. Some of us have lost family members to suicide. We are dedicated to do what we can to prevent further losses of life. Our young ones are precious to us.

**Responding to violence** ~ We have also had to develop ways of responding to violence in our community. If we see violence taking place, a man hitting a woman, then we will always intervene. I remember one time when I saw a man hitting his wife. We went up to them and I said, firmly: 'Stop hitting your wife.' And then I made a joke: 'If blood starts to come out of her head you will have to drink it! Stop this. Let's go home.' This made them laugh. I was strong but I also used humour. The way in which you approach these situations is very important. There are skills involved in how to defuse these sorts of situations. Some of us, in the past, have used our own homes as safe houses, where women and children could stay the night if the man is being violent. In the past, we also developed a program to deal with domestic violence in the community. We would hold a meeting with the man and woman and their parents and key community members. We would talk about how domestic violence is not part of our culture and how we must symbolically break all the weapons. We would get them thinking about the children's experiences. And we would always help the women who were having a hard time. We are proud of this history of how we have tried to deal with domestic violence in our community. There is still more to do. We hope one day that there will be a safe house in the community. This is something we are still working towards.

**Intervening in conflicts** ~ There is sometimes significant conflict between members of our

community. There was an occasion recently when two groups were facing each other with spears. As women, we stood in between them. We broke the spears and threw some of them up on the roofs. There was another occasion when young men turned on the Police with machetes. It was the community patrol women who again intervened and ensured that no-one got hurt. We have to stay calm in these situations. We have undergone self-defence training so that we have ways of responding. If we don't intervene there could be terrible consequences.

Lately, community members have started to call us instead of the Police when there is trouble. If we come across an aggressive person, but they are not harming anyone, we will let them be, we will come back later when they have calmed down. When we see people who are very drunk or affected by drugs we will pick them up and take them home. We will leave it until the next day to talk with them. The next day we will sit down with their whole family and talk it all through.

If the situation is tense, sometimes humour is very important. We joke together. They make us laugh and we make them laugh. For instance, if we see a man who is drunk and who is the right relation for marriage we might say: 'Come on, I'll take you home'. And there is much laughter! The other women will then say: 'No, come in our car, we'd better take you!' These are very funny moments. They take away any awkwardness, or aggro, or shame.

Some of the older people in the community are having better sleeps now, because they know that the community patrol is out there. There has been so much to worry about. There is still a lot we are concerned about, but it is significant that there are women who are always available now to respond to those sorts of crisis, to respond to people with care, and to link them back to their families.

The sorts of skills and knowledges described here by Yolngu women are of the utmost relevance in relation to preventing suicide and other acts of harm within their communities. In fact, since the development of the community patrol, rates of suicide have decreased in the communities<sup>22</sup>. Finding ways for initiatives such as the community patrol to become more richly described, so that the particular skills associated with this initiative could become more vividly known, makes it possible for these skills to be further drawn upon and also for others in the community and elsewhere to learn how to take similar action.

The Yolngu women had started to share these stories about their skills and initiatives in response to hearing the words from Port Augusta. As we listened to the Yolngu women, we took notes as they spoke, and then wrote these notes into documents, some of which we have included here. The next day we sought out the same women and read out the documents which contained their words. These re-tellings were conducted in a relatively formal, ceremonial manner. Community members were able to sit back and listen to a re-telling of some of the skills and knowledges that they were putting to work in their lives. These documents combined the words of a number of different community members around shared themes<sup>23</sup>. After reading the documents, we checked that all those present were happy with the wording and asked whether they wanted to make any adjustments. Once the documents were finalised, we indicated that we would take their words with us and share these with communities down south. We also made it clear that we would return in a month or so to let them know what their stories had meant to others.

### **RETURNING DOWN SOUTH – GATHERING OUTSIDER-WITNESS RESPONSES**

The stories and video clips from Yirrkala and Gunyangara were then taken back down south, first to Adelaide and then to Port Augusta. The next step was to gather a range of outsider-witness responses (White 1999). In Adelaide, the local Aboriginal Health Service is called Nunkawarrin Yunti. Here there is a training program in narrative approaches to therapy and community work and we asked the participants in this program if they would be willing to act as

outsider witnesses to the stories from up north. They were delighted to do so. Of course, we also returned to Port Augusta and shared with the community there what their stories had sparked.

By now, this process had developed a life of its own. The second meeting in Port Augusta involved a two-way definitional ceremony. Messages were being sent down to Port Augusta demonstrating the profound impact that their stories about responding to loss had had in Arnhem land. At the same time, the people of Port Augusta were invited to send further messages back to the Yolngu people about what influence the Yolngu stories will have in Port Augusta. These mutual exchanges were to come to characterise the rest of the project.

To give some idea of the sorts of messages that were sent back and forth we have included some examples here:

#### **MESSAGES FROM ABORIGINAL PEOPLE IN PORT AUGUSTA AND ELSEWHERE TO THE YOLNGU PEOPLE – IN RESPONSE TO HEARING THE STORIES FROM YIRRKALA AND GUNYANGARA**

*A gentle breeze and common-ground* ~ We so appreciated that you shared these stories with us. As we listened to your stories from Arnhem land, I visualised your words as a gentle breeze of strength and determination. This is a breeze that tells us that there are many similarities between our different communities. We are all going through the loss and the grief. As your words go on these journeys, the breeze is getting stronger and stronger. And as it gets stronger I think there'll be more participation, there'll be more ways we can take action to address the issues facing our families and our communities. It's like you are sending out a message on that gentle breeze, a message to all Aboriginal people. That gentle breeze is to help us talk about suffering and ways of coming together. It's a gentle breeze that is now moving around Australia. You're sending a message out to all Aboriginal communities, a message of what's going on in your community. It's a message to

keep our hopes and dreams alive. It's a message about not losing sight of our visions for the future. It's a breeze that is going to keep on touching different communities now.  
*(Aboriginal woman from Adelaide)*

***A statue showing the strength and love of Aboriginal women*** ~ For me, as an Aboriginal woman, after hearing the stories from the women up north, I'd like to stand next to them and put my arms around them! When there are a lot of deaths in a community, there is always conflict that divides the women also. But it sounds like they are finding ways to bring the women together because we all want to go for that one goal. Those women's words reinforced this to me. We have had a lot of deaths in our community recently and there is a lot of division. But their words have encouraged me to try to bring the women together. You know what? As I think about this, and about their stories, I'd love to see a big black woman statue somewhere! A huge statue showing the strength and love of Aboriginal women!  
*(Aboriginal woman from Port Lincoln)*

***Community Patrol*** ~ I loved hearing about the work of the community patrol. This is what we need here in Port Augusta. I loved hearing about how they take older women with them on these patrols and how people respect this. Maybe their work and their words will inspire us to do something like this down here in Port Augusta.  
*(Aboriginal woman from Port Augusta)*

***A message from an Aboriginal man to the women up north*** ~ As an Aboriginal man I would like to acknowledge the stand that these women are taking against the grog. I think it is so important what they are doing. We all need to take these sorts of stands because I have seen what alcohol does to the

men, and then what the men do to the women. I think what they are doing is fantastic. But I'm not so sure if softball bats are the way to go here! (Laughter). Seriously though, it meant a lot to me to hear those strong women's voices. In Aboriginal culture, the woman is probably the most powerful member of the family because they give birth to us. In Aboriginal culture the earth is the Mother Earth. We're born from her, we come from the earth, and when we die we are buried back in the ground. As an Aboriginal man, I really want to acknowledge our women, for the pain they're put through and for their strength. They have such strength when they give birth to babies, when they rear their family when their husband's not there or their partner leaves. I just want to really acknowledge them.  
*(Aboriginal man from Port Lincoln)*

***Taking up weapons against the enemy*** ~ What they said about the grog being the enemy, and that now they're taking on the enemy, was inspiring to me. And the story about them taking up weapons against the grog is fantastic! Their softball skills sure sound like they are coming in handy. They reminded me of a story of my own. When I was about 12 or 13, my dad and uncles came back from a fishing trip and they were all very drunk. I just got sick of it and so I went and broke into the car, grabbed all their cartons, dragged them across the road and into the bushes. Then I went to all the secret spots where they stashed grog in the front of the car. I grabbed each can and opened them and threw them on the road. I was really fed up. I liked hearing how the women up north have got fed up too. When my mum saw what was happening she thought it was so funny, that I was telling my dad off for drinking. But when my dad came out he saw what I was doing, he started to cry. This was the only time I saw my dad cry except for at funerals. He started to cry and said: 'I'm sorry, I didn't



realise'. So we had tears and laughter all at once. My mum thought it was hysterical! Can you share that story back with the women up north?

*(Young Aboriginal woman from Ceduna)*

***The special poles*** ~ I was particularly drawn to the special poles that they make when people pass away. It's a beautiful thought that these poles are passed down from generation to generation to remember the life of a loved one. Sometimes, lately, there have been so many losses in one immediate family that we get overwhelmed by emotion. We may not have had a chance to have grieved for one person when we're suddenly grieving for another. Having something physical like a pole to constantly remind you of each person who has passed away, sounds beautiful to me. This is something I will think more about. I will think about how we might be able to do something similar that can also be passed on down the generations.

*(Aboriginal woman from Port Augusta)*

***Going out bush again*** ~ It meant a lot to me when the people from up north spoke about how it used to be in the old days, when at night they would hear the clapsticks and the singing around the camp fires, and how they want to get back to this. When I was younger, and even now when I go back home, we never heard the clapsticks. We just had years of abuse and fighting all the time. So there's not that comparison to make. I think what they have had is so precious. I didn't grow up with the singing or dancing or clapsticks. Those of us who didn't grow up with these things sometimes have special knowledge about how precious and important our culture is. The only time we ever got to hear the clapsticks and singing was once a year when we'd go camping. We'd drive all day up to the Murray River. This was always a big family thing, all the cousins would go too, and my

uncles, aunties. We'd take probably three vans and with our whole mob there'd be like 15-20 people! When we got there we would meet with locals who would take us to their special places. We'd camp by the river and they'd share with us their stories and their histories. At night we'd sit around the fire and there would be singing. As we got older, these camps stopped happening. The adults stopped going and people moved away. The abuse never stopped, but the trips did. We began to blend in, rather than being proud of our culture. I was the only Aboriginal kid at my school, and I had various identity issues, but somehow I held onto the knowledge of how precious our culture is. You know, after listening to those stories from up north, I know what I am going to do. I am going to go back home and speak to my aunties and my mum, and my uncle, and my little brother and sister. And we're all going to go out bush. That's where you can totally relax. And it will remind us all of Nanna. It's been too long since we went out bush. My brothers have never been and I have to take them. The words from the people up north have reminded me of what I have to do. I've been thinking it for a while, but things happen for a reason, you know what I mean? You hear things for a reason and it's like their words have pushed me to take that next step. Please thank them for me.

*(Young Wiradjuri woman now living in Adelaide)*

Gathering these responses required the active participation of team members. Either through asking the occasional question, or sometimes in the process of editing the responses, we sought to elicit messages that:

1. Clearly mentioned which parts of the stories from up north had been particularly significant to those who had heard them.
2. Described what sort of image the stories from up north evoked for the listener about the people of Yirrkala and Gunyangara.
3. Explained why these particular aspects of the stories resonated for them personally.

4. Conveyed where the listener had been taken to on account of witnessing these stories, i.e. what would be different for them on account of hearing the stories from up north<sup>14</sup>.

The responses we included above offer examples of some or all of these themes.

## HEADING UP NORTH – SHARING THE OUTSIDER WITNESS REFLECTIONS

Having gathered a wide range of reflections and messages from Adelaide and Port Augusta that were addressed to Yolngu elders, women, men, young men and young women, the next trip to Arnhem Land was orientated around two purposes. Firstly, to share the wide-ranging messages from down south about what the Yolngu stories had meant to those who had heard them. And secondly, to gather more stories from Yirrkala and Gunyangara – particularly stories from men and from young people. We especially wanted to create contexts in which young men could send messages back to Port Augusta as we had been told that in Yirrkala and Gunyangara young men were the group most at risk of suicide<sup>15</sup>.

## RE-TELLINGS

In order to share the reflections a range of small definitional ceremonies were convened. These occurred with women, with men, with young men and young women and in many different sorts of settings. Some simply took place outside the houses of individuals who had contributed to the stories that were sent down south. Others occurred in more formal meetings in council houses. Some even took place in shopping centres when we by chance bumped into someone for whom we had a message! In these ceremonies, we sometimes re-read the story from the Yolngu people and then read the corresponding message from down south. If the Yolngu person then wanted to send a further message, we jotted this down. By now our role as messengers was in full swing. Significantly, on this second trip we were accompanied by Carolyn Koolmatrie who is a community member from Port Augusta. Carolyn was therefore able to personally convey messages from her family and community to the people of Yirrkala and Gunyangara.

Sharing these sorts of reflections back to the communities of Yirrkala and Gunyangara had the potential to provide:

- a sense of connection and linkage for individuals who had perhaps previously felt relatively isolated in their initiatives;
- a rich sense of acknowledgement of the skills, knowledge and values that were being demonstrated in people's daily lives in Yirrkala and Gunyangara;
- a sense of comfort – that those who have been lost are now not only remembered in one's own community but are being respected and treasured in another part of the country;
- a sense of agency – that one's suffering had not been for nothing, and that in fact the hard-won knowledge gained from responding to this suffering was now making a valued contribution in the lives of others; and
- a sense of being joined in grief and in honouring those who had been lost.

Community members of Yirrkala and Gunyangara embraced the reflections that had been sent to them from down south. They described the experience of receiving them in many ways, but a common phrase was: 'These stories are like a healing, like a medicine'. Upon hearing them, people often came up with ideas about further acts of connectedness that could occur. For instance, a suggestion was made that the communities in Arnhem land could hold remembrance day ceremonies, honouring those who have passed away, at the same time that similar events were held in Port Augusta and other Aboriginal communities.

## TALKING WITH YOUNG MEN – SCAFFOLDING RESPONSES

In the next section of this paper we will focus in some detail on how young men became involved in this process. At times, on our first and second visit to Arnhem Land, it was possible to read the Port Augusta document to members of Yirrkala and Gunyangara, ask them if they wished to send a message back in response, and then simply notate their reply. Usually, however, it was necessary to provide some scaffolding<sup>16</sup> for these responses, to make it more possible for people to find the words

to express what was most important to them. This was particularly true in meeting with young men.

We relied entirely on adults in the community to introduce us to young men. In this, Djapirri Mununggirritj played a key role. At times, we drove through the community with Djapirri hollering in Yolngu Matha<sup>17</sup> out of the window of the car to various young men to encourage them to come and listen to some stories from the Aboriginal community of Port Augusta. Djapirri would explain that young people in Port Augusta are having a hard time, and she'd ask the young Yolngu men if they'd be willing to send some messages back to them. If a young man agreed, a team member would sit with him and would read out the Port Augusta document. Having done so, the team member<sup>18</sup> would then:

1. Enquire into which aspects of the stories from Port Augusta touched a chord for them and why.
2. Ask whether the issues facing people in Port Augusta were similar or different to the situations they were facing in Arnhem land, and whether the skills demonstrated in Port Augusta were similar or different from those being engaged with in their community;
3. We'd also ask: 'If you were to send a message back to Port Augusta about how you or others here have been trying to deal with hard times, what would you wish to convey to them?'

Often, the young men spoke of a sense of connection with the ways in which people in Port Augusta were remembering, honouring and staying connected to loved ones who have died. When young men expressed a sense of resonance with these stories we would ask: 'Do you also remember people who have died? Do you also feel their spirit with you at times?' Questions like these would assist to get conversations moving.

It was important to ensure that the conversation did not linger for too long in territories in which individuals were speaking about difficult circumstances in their own lives. This was particularly true in speaking with young men. We had not been invited to offer 'counselling' or 'therapy' within these communities. What's more, the idea of speaking about your own individual life to someone from outside of the community contradicts

many cultural values. And yet, we were keen to develop rich accounts of the skills and knowledge of young Yolngu men in dealing with the predicaments they are currently facing. The process of eliciting messages to send back to another community in which young people are having a hard time, enabled this to occur. Whenever a conversation seemed to be moving a little too far towards focusing on an individual's life, we could ask further questions or offer short reflections, such as:

*I reckon these sorts of experiences you are talking about (e.g. of evoking the voice or image of the person who has died) will mean a lot to young men in other communities who have also lost loved ones. They are also trying to deal with too many losses. Can you say more about when you are most likely to feel his spirit, how this occurs? Are there ways in which you can make this happen?*

Or,

*What you are saying reminds me of another story from Port Augusta ... can I read this to you now and then ask for your comments?*

These sorts of reflections continually reinforced that there was a purpose for the conversation that we were having together. This purpose was to offer something to those going through similar difficulties in other Indigenous communities. Practical considerations were also significant. These conversations with young men often took place outside, on the beach or under trees. We would not be facing each other but instead looking out together in the same direction. The tone of voice of the person asking questions and taking notes was kind but practical and pragmatic. There was no 'therapeutic' style evoked in this process. The emphasis was always on what could be offered to the people of another community who were going through hard times.

Once the young person had articulated a certain skill, or value or belief that they wanted to pass on to young men in other communities, a number of key questions could be asked to thicken the story. These included:

- Can you speak about the history of this skill/ value or belief? How did you learn about this?
- Who was it that introduced you to these ideas?

- If they could hear you talking about these things now, what would they say?
- What would it mean to them that you have held onto these dreams and visions<sup>19</sup>?

These questions enabled young men to identify how their current efforts to deal with issues in their lives and communities are linked to legacies of people who have been before them.

In listening and responding to the young men as they composed the message they wanted to send, we were actively involved in trying to arrange this message around a key theme. Some of this arranging occurred in the actual conversation, and some of this occurred when we wrote up the message, prior to reading it back to the young men to check its accuracy. To demonstrate the way these messages are arranged around certain themes, we have included three of these stories below. The particular stories included here involve themes of 'Trying hard to find a future', 'Carrying on when so many have been lost', and 'True leadership'.

Before sharing these, however, there is one further important consideration to mention. In some circumstances, we knew that we were speaking with young people who had experienced considerable recent losses. Often these included deaths of siblings. Some of these deaths had been to suicide. We also knew at times that the young person we were talking with had themselves attempted suicide on various occasions. In these situations, the process followed the same structure. We read the Port Augusta document, and then asked if they would be willing to send a message back to young people in Port Augusta who are also struggling with many losses and many suicides in the community. The young men we spoke with all wanted to do so. In these conversations we paid special attention to listen for, and draw out, any particular skill, belief, value or hope expressed by the young man. We then sought ways to gather more stories about the origin of this skill, belief, value or hope. Often through this process young men were able to reflect favourably on how they were carrying on the legacies of those who had died. They were also able to speculate about what this would mean to those who are no longer living. Within these conversations, we often asked the young men to view themselves and their actions 'through the eyes of their lost loved ones'<sup>20</sup>.

The responses to these questions were often very moving.

One young man described his experience of these conversations as being positive because 'you're not thrown in the deep end'. By this we believe he meant that he was able to speak about the themes that are of most importance to his life, but without there ever being a focus solely on the hardships of his life, or on the grief he was experiencing in relation to the loss of his brother. Instead, he was able to offer something to the lives of others in a different community. One of the ways he did so involved speaking about the contributions that those he had lost were continuing to make to his own life.

Here are three examples of messages from young Yolngu men that were created from this process:

### **CARRYING ON WHEN SO MANY HAVE BEEN LOST**

It is so hard to go ahead sometimes. It can seem as if there is no way forward. It is so hard because my brother, my father and my grandfather are all gone. We have also lost uncles and aunties. It is hard to talk about this. It is so painful because we care so much about them.

When my older brother died, my mother wasn't here, she was far away from Yirrkala. When I heard about my brother's death it was a real shock. I had to try to respond in some way. According to Yolngu way, we couldn't let my mother know about his death until she returned home. She was away for a few months. All this time, I knew about the death but my mother did not. When she came back, we held the proper ceremony with the girls on one side and the boys on the other. We had to tell her in Yolngu way. At a certain point in the ceremony, the crowds cleared and as her son, I walked towards her. This was the first time she had seen me and it was then that she knew it was my brother who had died. I knew it was very important that my mother found out this way, Yolngu way. It would have

been harder for her if she had found out any other way. Doing it this way, we were showing care and concern for my mother. We were also following the old people's footsteps. They used these ceremonies a long time ago. As younger people, we know about our leaders from the past. We know about our law. I learnt about these forms of sorry business when my father passed away. My grandfather came looking for me then. He cared a lot about me. He was my father's father. He taught me how to do the sorry business for my father's death. If he could hear us talking now, if he heard about how I responded to my brother's death in Yolngu way, he would be pleased. He would be proud that I followed in his footsteps. I still feel him with me sometimes, and my brother too. When I am at the homeland, or when I'm alone I can feel them with me.

My grandfather used to take me and my brother into the bush together, to teach us men's business, special knowledge. It was just the three of us. I was fifteen and my brother was about twenty. My brother sometimes taught me singing and dancing also. But my grandfather was the main leader of our homeland. He was a significant person. He took us and taught us to be what he was. He showed us how to be strong in the culture and he noticed me learning things. He noticed me learning the dances, the singing, the hunting and the caring. He noticed that I was caring. There was a Balanda (white) teacher some years back who also noticed that I cared about people.

I have my brother's kids to look after now. They are five and four years old. They are with my mother but I want to help to look after them. I can't just let them grow up by themselves. If my brother heard me saying this he would be *manmark* (delighted), he'd be pleased. We must pass on the dancing and singing. And we must pass on the caring ways too. These are like roads or paths that we have to continue. They started in the past, we must carry them on now in the present and into the future.

Many of the messages from young Yolngu men were sparked from similarities between the stories from Port Augusta and the situations they were currently facing. But this was not always the case. The following message was crafted when a young man said that his situation was different from those in Port Augusta. He said that, in contrast to those from Port Augusta, when needing support he does not turn first to his family. In fact, he is trying to stay away from his family as he knows that this is important if he is going to be able to 'find a future'. In asking him about questions about this, the following message was written:

### TRYING HARD TO FIND A FUTURE

Some of us are doing all we can to try to find a future. One of the ways I do this is to try to stay away from trouble. When my family members are drinking every day, when they come back from town drunk, I know I don't want to end up like this. I think about doing some work, or doing something for the day. Making a plan to do something is important. I might go hunting for the day, or do some work. That's better than hanging around doing nothing. It can be hard to hold onto dreams for the future when things are tough in your family, and when there have been a lot of losses. You can use some help from a friend – someone who knows you very well. A friend can say something, give you a little idea that might help with your situation. And then they keep in touch to see how things are going. This makes a difference to me. It helps me to keep trying to find a future. I am 19 years old now. I have been trying hard for a future since I was 15. I have two more years to go. If I get to 21 I will have a future. At 21, I will break the line. It's like there is a line that we have to break. We have to break out. Inside the line there is all this trouble. It is all around us. We have to find ways to hold onto our dreams and then we can break the line.

I have known about this since I was fifteen. This knowledge came from school and from old men who talked to me about this.

They talked to me so many times about having a future. This was when we were at outstations, doing ceremony business. After the dancing we would sit down and they would talk to me and encourage me.

A lot of things have happened since then. It has sometimes been very hard to hold onto a future. If the old men could hear me talking about this now, if they could hear that I have still remembered what they said to me, and that it has helped me to hold onto a future, I think they would say: 'I'm really surprised. I'm pleased. Thank you for listening.'

These old men also had a vision for the future. They had the same thinking. It was their hope for the future and now I am saying it. It was like they put a seed in the sand. Next, my kids will be saying it. When I have a kid I will pass the 'hope for a future' onto them. I will hand this vision over to my son. The seeds turn into trees, with branches. My aunty told me this image.

When it gets hard to hold onto these hopes for a future, sometimes I go back to the outstation and stay there for a while. That's the best place to be to get reconnected. That's where the story came from in the first place.

Other people probably don't know I have this vision. I have not talked about it. It's good to share these things with other people. I have a little nephew. He is three months old. He is someone who will take up the message and he can pass it onto his kids when he has children. When he gets to five I will start encouraging him to make spears, to go hunting. I will tell him the stories that the old man said to me. While he is still very small, I will tell him to watch me doing things. I will take him to watch me using a spear. In this way the seed can go into his mind. It can start to work its way. That's what I am here for, to carry on this message and share it amongst the little ones.

We are trying hard to find a future.

The final message from young Yolngu men that we will include here relates to the importance of 'True Leadership'. This story has already travelled quite some distance and touched the lives of young Maoris and Samoans in New Zealand.

### **TRUE LEADERSHIP** **by Wayne Dhurrkay a young man** **from Gunyangara (Ski Beach)**

We're going through the same cycles, the same hardship as every other Indigenous community. We are trying to put people on the right track but it's really hard when there is so much negative energy around. Sometimes around here, it seems like hope is a candle in the wind. Here in North East Arnhem, our culture is strong, but culture is not a barrier to the negativity.

The key issue in Indigenous communities, I believe, is leadership. True leaders can make a difference, but there are only a few of these true leaders around. I remember one leader, a former chairman of ATSIC (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission) who knew all about balance. He brought in non-indigenous people to offer guidance and training, but then their roles would be taken over by indigenous people once we were trained and qualified. He had the vision to enable our people to 'be somebody', to be their own bosses, not to take orders from somebody else – especially here on our own land. He was passionate about our people, and I was about twelve when I first noticed what a difference he was making. He had a real positive vibe. Sometimes you can just feel it. I felt it in his work. He died some time ago but I have remembered his vision. If he knew this, if he heard me talking about this, I think he would be proud that he has left a legacy. I know that I would be. We need more people who are willing to do the hard yards, to genuinely get the job done. Leadership is not just about getting your pay-check; it's about making sure everyone else gets their pay-check too.

My uncle also sends a real strong vibe. From a distance you could feel intimidated by him, but he is a really welcoming strong leader, not only culturally but spiritually. If you've got a problem he will listen, and if you've done something wrong, he'll straighten you out. The thing is, when you talk to a true leader, when they look at you, you can sense straight away that they are not ignorant or arrogant. They are still with you at the grassroots. You can't help people if you think you are up above them, if you think you are at a higher level. If you try to help people from a higher level, all you can succeed in doing is plucking them from their roots, pulling them away from what is most important to them.

I've been thinking a lot about leadership lately. For instance when things happen, like a fight breaks out in the community, members of one family might come up to you and ask you to get involved. They might expect you to take some action on their behalf, they might even expect you to take on whoever it is that they think were in the wrong. True leadership, though, is about realising that there are always two sides of the coin. We have to listen to both stories. True leadership involves hanging in there, and sorting things out early on before they can escalate. It's also about being patient and about being strong, strong as a rock.

To be a leader, is to be somebody who is caring, kind and loving to people. You have to give respect to get respect. And in our communities, we need to respect everyone, even if it's just a little kid with a snotty nose. That little kid might be a leader one day. And we have to respond to them now with respect.

This is a task for everyone. Not everyone will be the leader of the community, but everyone can be a leader in the community. We can't afford for anyone to take a back seat. All of us can be possible leaders in our own family, in our households, and so on. And there are so many different ways of showing leadership. See those four little kids

over there, playing on those logs ... The oldest one there, he isn't just telling the others to do this or do that. He's showing good leadership. He's showing care to them ... look at that ... he's looking out for them.

When people are led into darkness, it is so sad. If there is no help, no direction, no care, then this is when you get the suicides, the substance abuse. Guiding people in the wrong direction is often due to bad leadership. Leadership is not only about building economy, infrastructure and getting grants, and so on. It's also about guiding people mentally and emotionally. When people are saying that they are drinking to drown their sorrows, leadership involves pointing out that sorrow floats, it doesn't drown. When alcohol is weakening people, leaders have to be strong.

The other thing is, we need to protect leadership from going wrong. Sometimes when people begin to move in more powerful circles, their leadership can suffer. Staying down at the grassroots, living with the people, can make a real difference, a positive difference. Once you set yourself as a rock, as a leader, you can't move your house onto a hill with a beautiful view. Putting yourself higher and giving yourself more than everyone else is one of the many temptations of bad leadership, it can corrupt you. Once the rock is set, don't move it. I don't mean you have to go without to be a leader, because we also need to live with pride and show people what we can do. Looking after yourself and having pride in your life can make a difference. But we have to stay connected to the grassroots.

'Up on the hill' leadership can leave the people looking up at you, and when you walk around the community, the people may feel too intimidated to talk to you. If you stay at the grassroots, though, when you walk about the community, the kids will come up to you, they will say hello. They will know your name. It's like a spider web. Everything is connected, and as a leader you need to be at the centre of it, at the centre of connections.

People often think that a leader has to be the voice of the community. They think that a leader is the person who talks to the government. I believe this stereotyping of leadership is the biggest crisis in indigenous communities. The person who talks to government is only one type of leader that we need. That's not the only type of leader you can be. What about the leader who people talk to about cultural issues? What about the person you turn to when you have a problem with hunting turtle? Or the person you turn to when you are upset? These are all different types of leaders we need in the community. Just imagine how much better a community would be if we recognised this. We have to recognise that certain people in the community, men and women, don't talk so much, but when they do everyone listens. They don't talk their lungs away. But they are firm, they are like rocks, they are leaders in their own way.

If our understandings of leadership can keep changing, if we keep acknowledging the leadership that everyone in the community can offer, then it's going to be awesome. If kids can grow up seeing a whole lot of leaders, not just one, then imagine how many leaders we will have tomorrow! We'll be able to address poverty, health, unemployment, crime, education, etc., through our own leaders and not have to rely on outside help.

To leave leadership to the known leaders is wrong. If you don't like something that is going on in the community, then you don't necessarily have to say something publicly but you can do something positive, make some changes, people will notice. Just like ants in some way. Ants don't leave it up to one ant to do all the work. Everyone does the work, everyone benefits. Even if we don't feel we can speak out in public, or do a big job, we can be leaders in our own ways. Don't fit yourself into doing it in a way that you are no good at... you will only set yourself up to fail. And if you feel like you could be a leader, don't let people push you

into it. If you are pushed into leadership when you are not ready then it could damage your mind and future as a leader. Just like, if you can't swim and you are pushed in at the deep end, you might get scared and never go swimming again. Find your own form of leadership.

There are many forms of leadership that we are developing, including forms of emotional leadership. For instance, my nephew and I recently found a young girl who was in the process of committing suicide. We found her by chance and just in time. I brought her down from the tree, put her in the car and drove her back home. I made sure I gave her plenty of emotional support to ease her mind and make her feel better. Sometimes here, families don't know how to respond when a young one has attempted suicide. They often get angry and might even flog them to tell them that what they have done is wrong. They do this because they care about the young person but it only makes the situation much worse. Emotional leadership includes talking with families about other ways of responding. It involves caring for people when they are depressed. Trying to get people out of depression is a vital form of leadership. Our whole community in some way is in depression, and we are trying to take leadership to draw the community out of this. Leadership is support, support is leadership.

In talking about leadership, there is one other person who I must mention. My brother, who passed away recently, was the biggest influence in my life. Ever since I was small, when I first started to walk and think for myself, he was there and he was like a leader to me. In my eyes, he was the greatest person on earth. I listened to him more than I did to my mother and father, because they were drinking and fighting as much as anyone else around here. He put me on a positive track. Because of him, I didn't drink until I was 25 and I have never used drugs of any sort and never will.



When he made it to the elite level and played professional (Australian Rules) football this just confirmed his status to me even more. In recent years, he spread his leadership to everyone in the community. He was trying everything he could to draw the community out of depression, to work out a better life for our people. His death was a big loss to all of us, our family and the whole region. He had time for people. His life wasn't just about him, it was about others.

If he could hear the things I was talking about today, he would agree with me one hundred percent. The steps that I am now taking in my life I am doing in his honour. His legacy is continuing. I am carrying on his work and honouring him in the process. But it is more than this. He is the greatest influence in my life, but I am not just doing things for him. We are taking leadership now for the present and the future, for all the people of our community. And we are changing how we understand leadership. Leadership is about all of us.

## WHAT DID THESE STORIES FROM YOUNG MEN MEAN TO OTHERS?

Having generated these stories from young Yolngu men, these were then taken back down south to gather further outsider witness responses. Perhaps the most significant responses to these stories were offered by a group of Aboriginal people in Port Augusta who are known as the Munawiya gang. In other parts of Australia these folks might be known as 'long grassers' – men and women who gather together in public places during the days, who talk and drink together, and who sometimes sleep out at night. In Port Augusta, these folks used to spend time under the overpass of the highway that runs through the city. We have included here the responses that they sent back to the young men of Yirrkala and Gunyangara after they had listened to their stories.

## THESE STORIES ARE DEADLY<sup>21</sup>

*The following words are from members of the Port Augusta Aboriginal community. These people in Port Augusta have all experienced many losses lately, including losses of young people through suicide. Many of them have also attempted suicide themselves, and many of them are struggling with issues of alcohol and other drug use. The stories from young Yolngu men were read out under an overpass near the water in Port Augusta. After the first story was read, one community member encouraged others to huddle around and listen to these important stories from up north. The words from up north were treated with great respect and they wanted very much to send these messages back to the young men of Yirrkala and Gunyangara.*

*It touches our hearts ~* Listening to the young men's stories from up north was good stuff. It's deadly. The way it expresses what they're going through. It touches your heart. It's like they're reaching out to us to touch our hearts. The things they're talking about are happening here today – too many drugs, alcohol, and too many deaths. A young girl committed suicide here recently. If she'd heard something like this she might still be alive. These sorts of stories are important. They can keep hope alive.

*On the same track ~* Listening to their story about trying hard to find a future was good stuff. It was inspirational. It was something I'd never heard before, and it was a good thing to hear. I'm trying to be on that track too. It's like I'm halfway on the track. Sometimes I get off track, and sometimes I'm on the track. It's a bloody good story.

*Life is precious ~* Their words made us think about how life is precious, about how we only live once and there's no point in throwing it away. Their words have made me think of my family, my kids, grandparents, brothers and

sisters. If I am feeling hopeless and I think of all of them, it stops me from cutting myself up. Their words have made me think about how precious life is. Please tell this to those young people.

*Remembering people* ~ Listening to them talk about remembering people who have died ... they're comforting words. Does it make us feel good? It's like half and half. There is sadness remembering people who have gone, but it's comforting too. (Aboriginal woman from Port Augusta)

*Thank you for helping me remember my daughter* ~ These tears are because I'm remembering my daughter. She died five years ago. She died through cot death. I was holding her in my arms, running for help, but I couldn't do anything. I'm crying because I worry that other people might no longer remember her. Hearing their words was good for me because it's good to remember. I remember her a lot. If I watch the other children I think about what she'd be like if she was playing with them. If I could see her one more time I would tell her I love her. And if she could listen to me talking now, and if she could talk to me, I think she'd say: 'Hi Dad, I love you'. Her name was Edith Barbara Ann Nash. Please tell the young men up there that their words have helped me to remember her, and thank them for me. (Man who lives with Aboriginal community in Port Augusta)

*Feeling more protected* ~ Listening to their stories about remembering people who have gone has made me think about my brother. It makes me feel as if my brother is still around and that he's still touching us. Feeling his spirit makes me feel more protected. (Aboriginal woman from Port Augusta)

## COMMUNITY RE-TELLINGS

The process we have described here of generating stories and then sharing messages and reflections back and forth between communities

continued a number of times until it was felt that each section of the communities (women, men, young men, young women) had made significant contributions. At this point (and also when the funding for the project was coming to an end!) it was decided that a small community gathering would be held in both Yirrkala and Gunyangara<sup>22</sup> in order to:

1. Re-tell some of the stories from the community so that a range of community members could hear these.
2. Enable a representative from Port Augusta, Carolyn Koolmatrie, to speak about what the process of sharing stories has meant to those in Port Augusta;
3. Launch a written booklet that contained all the stories and reflections<sup>23</sup>;
4. Launch CDs and tapes on which these stories were recorded<sup>24</sup>;
5. Play two songs that had been written from the words spoken by the community<sup>25</sup>;
6. Enable local health workers to read out to the community messages that they had composed in response to what the community's stories had meant to them<sup>26</sup>; and
7. Share a number of messages that had been sent to the communities from further a-field.

These further reflections included messages from:

- Murray Bridge (another Australian Aboriginal community);
- a member of the Stolen Generations<sup>27</sup> who had been moved and inspired by the stories from up north;
- a representative of the Keetowah Band of the Cherokee;
- Samoan and Maori young people with whom team members had met on a visit to New Zealand that happened to coincide with this project; and
- a Canadian colleague with both African and Aboriginal heritage.

These further reflections had been gathered either in person, over the phone, or via email. With current technology, once stories have been

documented it becomes possible for them to travel across the planet! The idea of sending the messages further a-field had come from Djapirri Mununggirritj who suggested that Indigenous communities in other countries might be interested to read these stories. She also knew that members of her community would welcome hearing from people of other nations.

We have included here a message that was sent from a representative of the Keetowah Band of the Cherokee:

### **A MESSAGE FROM JULIE MOSS OF THE KEETOWAH BAND OF THE CHEROKEE**

My name is Julie Moss. I am an Indigenous woman of North America. I am a Keetowah Cherokee. We came originally from the South East of the USA but were forcibly removed just a few short generations ago and marched to Oklahoma Indian Territory ... which is where we are now. We still follow and practice traditional ways. I am the wife of one of the leaders of our ceremonies. We have this message for you.

We send greetings and good tidings to you from here in Indian country, Oklahoma. I send greetings on behalf of the Keetowah Band of the Cherokee.

Our hearts go out to your community, including your elders and ancestors. Thank you for sharing with us your visions and dreams. We honour these. In your words we sensed a strength in traditions and ceremonies and a beautiful view of life. We stand in solidarity with you and hold you in our prayers. We are also using our traditions and our dreams and visions as a fire-break in tough times.

We are reading and telling your stories all the way over here in Indian country. Your stories are a teaching, just like our dreams are a teaching. Your stories about remaining connected to those who have passed away are a teaching for other peoples. This is something to be honoured, acknowledged and treated as sacred.

When we have a sudden or violent death or a suicide here it leaves a lot of pain behind and questions. It's like someone has been snatched from life and our people are still reaching out to that person. Many times, in order to achieve peace for ourselves and our community, we hold a sweat lodge ceremony. Our sweat house is considered sacred and holy. We fast before we enter and inside we sing tribal songs and offer prayers. It is our holy place and this is where our healing happens. Peace is achieved in the doorway between this world and the next. The person who has gone, comes to that doorway and then after the ceremony they move on, and we are allowed to go on with our lives.

The next time that we hold our ceremony we will remember you all in our prayers. We will pray for you inside our sweat lodge. We will speak of how you sent your stories to us and what this has meant to us. We will request prayers for you in our lodge.

Thank you for your teachings and your beautiful way of looking at life.

### **MESSAGES FROM LOCAL WORKERS**

Throughout this project, a parallel process was occurring with local health workers. This involved training relating to narrative ways of responding to trauma and loss<sup>38</sup>. The last part of this training consisted of a one-day workshop in relation to outsider-witness practices. During this workshop, the stories from the communities were shared with participants and the local health workers then composed messages (according to the outsider witness categories of response) to offer back to the people of Yirrkala and Gunyangara. A number of these local health workers then attended the community re-tellings, and within the ceremonies read aloud their messages, or the messages of other workers. This structure was developed in the hope that it would enable local workers to:

- witness the rich knowledges and skills of community members that are being put to work in response to current predicaments;
- learn about and put into practice the skills of outsider-witnessing; and

- build or strengthen their relationships with the local communities.

Local workers played a significant role in these community re-tellings. They will also play a vital part in continuing to share and distribute the stories and messages of the communities and in supporting the initiatives of community members.

To give some idea of the sorts of messages that workers offered during the community re-tellings, we have included an example here:

### **STRONG LINKS ~ BY BARRY SULLIVAN**

What stood out for me in your stories was the section about feeling the spirit of those who have passed away, especially if you are hunting alone or sleeping out. This makes me think that it is probably important to you to keep your links with friends or family, even with those who have passed away. You talk about feeling both sadness and comfort at these times – it sounds like these links are strong enough to bring up strong feelings for you.

I think this particular section of your story stood out for me because sadness and comfort can sometimes go together for me as well. I can be alone and thinking about the links I have to people I love, and this can make me sad if those people have died or moved away. But it can also give me comfort to think about the good memories of my loved ones. Reading your story has helped me to realise once again that sad feelings and tears are a sign that the links between me and those I love are strong links.

The community re-tellings in Yirrkala and Gunyangara were open-hearted events in which key figures of the communities, who had been influential in gathering stories and messages, were able to reflect on what the process had meant to them. They were also able to witness the contributions that their efforts had meant to the lives of others. The events were not large gatherings. In fact, in one community only a handful of key people attended. They were, however, tender and beautiful events and they were not the end of the story...

### **CONTINUING RE-TELLINGS**

It was always our hope that even when our team's formal involvement in this project came to an end that the process of sharing stories and messages would continue. Producing written and audio versions of the stories will enable continued re-tellings to take place. Copies of the stories have been provided to organisations in both Port Augusta and in Arnhem Land. A Yolngu radio station has expressed interest in sharing these on air, and the Yirrkala school is in the process of translating some of the stories and messages into Yolngu language to share with students. Those key community leaders who attended the community re-tellings are now planning to share the stories and messages at upcoming council meetings, on camps for young men, and during women's nights. Significantly, it was discovered by Carolyn Koolmatrie that there is a radio station that is listened to both in Port Augusta and in Arnhem Land! Carolyn has had the idea of continuing to send messages between communities via this radio station.

This sense of continuing exchange is best articulated in the following message from the people of Port Augusta:

### **SOMETHING HAS STARTED HERE ~ A message from the people of Port Augusta to the Yolngu people**

*Something has started here.  
We are going to share these stories with  
friends and family.  
Perhaps we'll put them on the radio,  
Maybe we'll make an exhibition.  
We want other people to hear these stories now.  
It's like a flame that is spreading like wildfire  
It started small, in this little community,  
and headed north  
And then your stories have meant so much to us.  
Who knows where it is going to go or how  
big it is going to get ...?  
It only takes a spark to set a fire going.  
There's a flame now.*

A number of other Aboriginal communities have since expressed interest in similar processes. In fact, the stories from Port Augusta, Yirrkala and Gunyangara are already being used to spark conversations in a range of different places. In Murray Bridge, for instance, Barbara Wingard has started a process of collecting and sharing stories with mothers, grandmothers and young people, and the effects in the local community are already apparent.

## REFLECTIONS ON THIS PROCESS

Earlier in this paper we outlined a number of key considerations we wanted to think through in relation to under-taking 'suicide prevention work' in the Arnhem Land area or in other Aboriginal communities. The process we have described here was not pre-arranged. Each stage of the project developed in response to conversations that were shared in the respective communities. However, the processes that developed did take into account all the key considerations listed earlier. Processes of consultation took place to ensure that the project was relevant, desired, meaningful and accountable to the people of Yirrkala, Gunyangara and Port Augusta. Making it possible for local initiatives, skills and knowledge to be spoken about, documented, and shared across communities, provided support to those community members who are taking action in their own lives, in their own families and in their communities. The process of exchanging stories enabled community members to speak about the ways they are responding to current predicaments (including profound grief and loss) in ways that highlighted particular cultural skills and knowledges and made these more visible and more available. The process also provided for the training of workers to coincide with community engagement and then enabled these workers to play a significant role in witnessing and responding to the stories of community members.

Thinking through how to play a part in providing a context for young Yolngu men most at risk of suicide to feel as if 'life is worth living' was a further aspect of this project. There are a number of ways that this project endeavoured to contribute to this. We sought to enable these young men:

1. to listen to and engage with the ways that members of other Aboriginal communities were trying to deal with hard times;

2. to speak about some of their own key values, beliefs and hopes that they hold for their lives and to speak about their current efforts to hold onto these dreams and visions;
3. to experience these efforts as linked to the efforts of others – other young men in their community, other Aboriginal people in different communities, and also to experience these efforts as linked to the legacies of those they have lost;
4. to experience re-tellings of these key values, beliefs and hopes through reading back to them written documents of their own words arranged into storylines around certain themes;
5. to receive copies of these documents in written form, on CD and also in song;
6. to share with others the ways in which they are re-membering and honouring those who have been lost, and in the process to make more visible and available their skills in remaining connected to, and receiving comfort from, their lost loved ones; and finally,
7. to experience ways in which their words and stories are making a difference in the lives of people in other communities. This occurred when we were able to read back to the young men of Yirrkala and Gunyangara the reflections from Port Augusta and elsewhere. Sometimes this occurred with individuals, sometimes with groups, sometimes in family settings. Where it was not possible for us to convene meetings of young men, we have left the stories and messages with key members of the communities who will now share these with the young men at appropriate times.

This was just one time-limited project and it was not always easy to arrange opportunities to meet with the young men of these communities. Overtime, if these processes were able to be continued, we believe they could significantly contribute to young men of these communities experiencing an increased sense of agency and purpose. To experience one's own words and stories, about ways of dealing with hard times, making a contribution in the lives of others, can significantly contribute to a sense that 'life is worth living'. This is especially so when the

'others' whose lives you are affecting are those who you relate to and respect, in this instance people from other Aboriginal communities, and other communities of Indigenous peoples.

Making it possible for stories about special knowledges and skills in dealing with hard times to be shared between communities can enable conversations to take place about difficult issues, and about people's hopes and dreams, in ways that don't put individuals on the spot. These are topics that otherwise don't often get talked about. This sort of sharing of stories can make it more possible for people to reconnect with their own skills and knowledge and to take further action in reclaiming their communities. This process also provides a rich form of acknowledgement for the significant initiatives that community members are already taking to try to address current predicaments. Significantly, this process can enable the older generation and the younger generation in communities to listen and learn from each other about what is most important to them in their lives. And, at the same time, this process enables links between communities to develop. This means, far from feeling so alone in current difficulties, it becomes possible to see that one's community might have something significant to offer other communities who are dealing with similar issues. This has clearly been the case in relation to Yirrkala, Gunyangara and Port Augusta. This brings a broader sense of meaning and purpose to all the efforts that people are already making.

At the outset of this paper we described how we have been hoping to develop ways of engaging with communities using narrative ideas that others can replicate in a range of contexts. The ways of working described in this paper emerged from specific invitations and were shaped by the particular contributions of three Aboriginal communities. We do believe, however, that similar processes could take place between any number of different sorts of communities. We can imagine, for instance, a group of people residing in a certain institution beginning to share stories with those residing in another institution. Or a group of women who have all taken steps to reclaim their lives from the effects of violence starting to share stories with another group of women in a different place. Or a village in one area of a country affected by a natural disaster

sharing stories about their efforts of recovery with another village in a different part of the country, or a different part of the world. All the processes outlined in this paper could be just as relevant in a myriad of different contexts. All that would be required would be a worker in each community or setting who is versed in narrative ideas to facilitate the process.

Within any community that is facing difficult times, community members will be responding to these difficulties. They will be taking whatever actions are possible, in their own ways, to try to address the predicaments that they and their loved ones are facing. While these initiatives may not currently be widely recognised, and they may not in themselves be enough to overcome all the present difficulties, they are highly significant. Making it possible for these initiatives to be identified and richly described, making it possible for the history of the skills and knowledges implicit within these initiatives to become more visible and acknowledged, can strengthen these initiatives in ways that make further action possible.

## LAST WORDS

It seems appropriate to end this paper with a final message from Djuwapli Marika, senior elder of Yirrkala:

### **A MESSAGE TO THE ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY OF PORT AUGUSTA FROM DJUWALPI MARIKA**

*Even though the distance is far  
The spirits have become one  
We are joined  
Your words and our words are matching  
Our two spirits  
From north and south  
Are sitting around the fire  
Their spirits have come to agreement  
  
Our two spirits are shaking hands  
Sharing knowledge*

We have been lost in the darkness and need to find the place where the water is. Wherever there is water, we know that there is also the sound of the frogs. When we hear this, the frog leads us to the streams, to where water is running. We have been lost in darkness, looking for a way to survive. These stories are like the call of the frog. We can't see the frog in darkness but the sound tells us that the water is there, the future is there. We must follow the sound of the frog. We must follow these stories to where they will lead us.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The process described in this paper has only been possible due to the generosity and goodwill of the members of Yirrkala, Gunyangara and Port Augusta. At all times, throughout this project, everyone who was approached responded with enthusiasm to the idea of being linked with people in other Aboriginal communities. Every person who was approached expressed a willingness to participate in sharing stories in ways that might assist others in moving through hard times. A number of people from Port Augusta made particularly significant contributions to this project – including the staff of Pika Wiya Aboriginal Health Service, and Carolyn Koolmatrie and her family. In Yirrkala and Gunyangara, there have also been those who have played vital roles in making the process possible. These have included Djuwalpi Marika, Gulumbu Yunupingu, Margaret Yunupingu, Wayne Dhurrkay and Dhangal Gurruwiwi. The assistance of Beth Davis and Scott Beverstock has also been really appreciated. Most significant has been the kindness, thoughtfulness and wide ranging contributions of Djapirri Mununggirritj - without whom this project would not have been possible.

## A NOTE ABOUT THE STORIES IN THIS PAPER

The stories included in this paper from members of the Aboriginal communities of Port Augusta, Yirrkala and Gunyangara. Readers are requested to respect these stories. If you wish to share these with friends and family that is okay. If you are interested

in sharing these stories more widely please seek prior permission by contacting:

- Djapirri Mununggirritj in Yirrkala  
c/o Women's Resource Centre,  
Ph: (61-8) 8987 1973,  
Fax: (61-8) 8987 3586  
Email: yirrkalawrc@bigpond.com or  
Djuwalpi Marika c/o Dhanbul Council,  
Ph: (61-8) 8987 3433, Fax: (61-8) 8987 2304  
Email: dhanbul.admin@octa4.net.au
- Wayne Dhurrkay and Margaret Yunupingu  
in Gunyangara c/o Marn Garr Community  
Government Council, PO Box 144,  
Nhulunbuy, 0881, Ph: (61-8) 8987 2105  
Fax: (61-8) 8987 3582  
Email: marn Garr@bigpond.com or  
wdhurrkay.marn Garr@bigpond.com; and
- Carolyn Koolmatrie in Port Augusta  
c/o 0439 563 258.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

Many aspects of this project have not been included in this paper. For instance, the focus has remained mostly on the work in Yirrkala and Gunyangara rather than on the re-tellings that took place in Port Augusta. Similarly, we have not been able to include stories from the men of the communities even though messages between men were highly significant in the process. Young women's voices were involved in this project but to a much lesser extent. On another note, a document was created from conversations with a group of Long Grassers in Nhulunbuy that has also not been included here. And the parallel process that took place with local workers has only been briefly alluded to. If you would like to know more about these aspects of the project, please contact David Denborough c/o Dulwich Centre, 345 Carrington St, Adelaide, South Australia 5000.  
Phone: (61-8) 8223 3966, Fax: (61-8) 8232 4441.  
Email: dulwich@senet.com.au

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The work described in this paper was carried out by a team of workers in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous practitioners worked in partnership. Barbara Wingard was the senior Indigenous practitioner. The team consisted of David Denborough, Carolyn Koolmatrie, Sue Mitchell, Shona Russell, Barry Sullivan,

Cheryl White and Barbara Wingard. Barry Sullivan can be contacted via Relationships Australia (NT) on Ph: (61-8) 8923 4999 or via email: barry.relaustnt@octa4.net.au All other team members can be contacted c/o Dulwich Centre, 345 Carrington St, Adelaide, South Australia 5000. Ph: (61-8) 8223 3966. Fax: (61-8) 8232 4441. Email: dulwich@senet.com.au Website: www.dulwichcentre.com.au

- <sup>2</sup> Ensuring a balance in these double-storied accounts requires some practice. It is very helpful for whoever is creating the written document to be able to read out drafts to colleagues, who were also present in the initial discussion, who can then offer feedback about the balance between the stories.
- <sup>3</sup> For instance, if a person speaks about the painful divisions and conflict within a community or family, it is often possible to ask questions that enable them to articulate the reasons why this is so painful to them. Often this is because they have a commitment to unity, or certain knowledge about how 'unity is healing'. It then becomes possible to trace the history of this knowledge in their lives. Similarly, if people are speaking about the dangers facing young people in their community it is often possible to inquire in ways that enable them to link these worries to a special knowledge about the significant of safety, or to particular values about the lives of young people. Once again it then becomes possible to trace the history of this special knowledge in their lives.
- <sup>4</sup> This funding was provided by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing through Relationships Australia, Northern Territory. Dulwich Centre also contributed funds to this project.
- <sup>5</sup> To read more about the importance of ensuring meaningful community engagement in any suicide prevention project relating to Aboriginal communities, see McCormack, Mohammed & O'Brien (2001) and Delaney, Raphael & Wooding (2003).
- <sup>6</sup> The importance of responding to grief in communities in which suicides have been prevalent has been documented by Elliot-Farely (2004) and Tatz (2001).
- <sup>7</sup> Colin Tatz has described the extent of Aboriginal suicide as reflecting 'our failure, as a nation, to offer sufficient incentives for remaining in life' (2001, p.9).
- <sup>8</sup> The Aboriginal people who live in the far north of the Northern Territory are known as Yolngu.
- <sup>9</sup> The discussions and training of workers that took place as part of this project is outside the scope of this paper. For more information about this training, contact Sue Mitchell (sueymitchell@yahoo.com.au), Barbara Wingard (abchair@bigpond.net.au) or Shona Russell (shonarussell@internode.on.net).
- <sup>10</sup> Barry Sullivan played a key role in organising these initial meetings.
- <sup>11</sup> When approaching Aboriginal communities, formal protocols require reaching out first to the traditional owners of the land. Barbara Wingard, as the senior Aboriginal team member, was always centrally involved in these protocols.
- <sup>12</sup> Personal communication with Tony Fuller, Senior Sergeant, Nhulunbuy Police.
- <sup>13</sup> During times of significant hardship, divisions occur within any community. Finding ways in which the perspectives, values and hopes of individual community members can be linked with those of others in the community is significant. At all times, considerable care needs to be taken to ensure that the processes of compiling and sharing stories does not contribute to division.
- <sup>14</sup> These categories of outsider witness response correspond with those described by Michael White (1999).
- <sup>15</sup> It is hoped that future projects will focus more on the experiences of young women.
- <sup>16</sup> For more information about scaffolding narrative conversations see White (2006).
- <sup>17</sup> This is the local Indigenous language.
- <sup>18</sup> David Denborough was the team member who spoke with young Yolngu men.
- <sup>19</sup> For more information about the significance of enquiring about people's values, hopes, dreams, commitments, see White (2001).
- <sup>20</sup> For more information about this form of narrative practice see White (1988, 1997) and Wingard & Lester (2001).
- <sup>21</sup> 'Deadly' in Aboriginal lingo means 'awesome' or 'fantastic'.
- <sup>22</sup> A smaller community event was also held in Port Augusta.
- <sup>23</sup> There is not the space in this paper to include all the stories and messages that were exchanged. Stories from men and young women have not been included here. Nor have stories that were collected from Long Grassers in Nhulunbuy or from Aboriginal health workers. If you would like to read a comprehensive collection of all the stories and messages then please contact us and we will email a copy to you.
- <sup>24</sup> It was significant to record the stories onto CD and tape form because many community members would find this medium far more accessible than the written form. If you would like a copy of the CD version of the stories contact us and we will try to arrange this.
- <sup>25</sup> One of these songs was written to the words of 'Trying hard to find a future'. The other was written from the words of the Yolngu women in relation to taking action against the grog.
- <sup>26</sup> These messages had been written during a training day in 'outsider-witness practices' that had been run by Shona Russell the day before these community meetings. Many of these local workers had also attended training days with Barbara Wingard and Sue Mitchell on the themes of 'narrative responses to trauma' and 'narrative responses to grief'.
- <sup>27</sup> For more information about the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families see Human Rights and Opportunities Commission (1997).
- <sup>28</sup> This training was offered by Sue Mitchell, Barbara Wingard and Shona Russell.



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