

COMMENT

Issue No.5 May 1998

National Sorry Day

Coming to terms with the past and present

National Sorry Day is to be held on the 26th May, exactly one year after the tabling in Federal Parliament of Bringing Them Home – the report into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their families. Bringing Them Home revealed the extent and devastating effects of the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families - an official government policy that went on for 150 years into the early 1970s. The report proposed a number of recommendations including the establishment of 'Sorry Day'. Other recommendations included the need for apologies, reparation, compensation, services for those affected, and action to ensure that current welfare and juvenile justice systems cease replicating the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families and communities.

This publication has been put together by Dulwich Centre Publications for National Sorry Day. It has been created out of our own desire to apologise to those Indigenous Australians whom we have so wronged and our hope that a publication would be helpful in facilitating discussions. We hope this publication can contribute to the movement of everyday non-Indigenous Australians who are seeking ways to come to terms with this country's history, to heal past wrongs and address present injustices.

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Apologies

to Indigenous Australia in relation to the Stolen Generation

We are deeply sorry that our people, workers in the health and welfare field like ourselves, believed that it was right to dislocate your families; to decide what was and wasn't right for your people; and to disregard the protests that your people made at every step along the way.

We are deeply saddened that our people's actions tore mothers from children and split children from their people, their land, their histories and ways of understanding. We are sorry for the tremendous grief caused to parents and extended families when their children were taken from them. We wish to acknowledge that the consequences of our people's actions live on.

We are deeply sorry not only for the actions of those who came before us, but for our own lack of understanding of the consequences of these actions. We are also deeply sorry for our own lack of action. We wish to acknowledge the fact that there is still ongoing removal of your children and young people from your families and communities by current welfare, juvenile justice and prison systems. We wish to acknowledge that saying sorry by itself is not enough. In order to prevent the need for our future generations to apologise for current injustices we must accompany these words with actions.

We wish to acknowledge that what we have done has degraded all of us and that we are grateful for the opportunity you have offered us to come to terms with our past. By your willingness, courage and generosity to share your stories with us, we have been offered another chance to understand and to respond.

We are very sorry.

From the workers at Dulwich Centre

Statement of apology by ACOSS on behalf of Australia's welfare sector.

[Extract taken from the 'Statement of Apology and Commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People' by the Australian Council of Social Service's magazine, *Impact*, November 1997 (republished here with permission).]

The Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) and our undersigned members deeply regret the damage caused by the forcible separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families ...

Collectively, we feel a particular sense of responsibility for the consequences of these racist policies because their implementation required the active involvement of community welfare organisations. We unreservedly and wholeheartedly apologise to the individuals, families and communities who have suffered such pain and grief from these terrible acts of injustice.

We know that the impact of the past continues to resound today. Aboriginal children continue to be removed from their families for 'child welfare' reasons at a rate six times greater than the general population, and placed in juvenile detention centres at a rate twenty-one times higher. These disturbing facts show that the past lives on in the present, and will continue into the future unless we unite in a sincere effort to make amends.

Extract from a speech given at the Indigenous Mothers' Day Dinner, May 8th.

This dinner was hosted by Women's Health Statewide to raise money for a National Memorial for the Aboriginal children of the 'Stolen Generation' and their families which is being created on the site of Colebrook Home in Eden Hills, South Australia (for more information see page 11). Over three hundred women attended.

On behalf of the staff at Women's Health Statewide we would like to offer our apology, to say sorry. We wish to recognise the wrongs of the past, to say publicly that we are sorry for past practices. We want to give our commitment to continue to explore the role that we as a group of women and as individuals can play in the Reconciliation process. And we want to continue to look at the way that we as sisters and as women who have a role in healing can support Indigenous women to achieve health and well-being.

We would like to have a minute's silence, to take the time to think about Indigenous mothers and their children who were stolen, and about how everyone of us here tonight may be able to contribute to and support the Memorial Project.

A cheque was then presented for \$3,000 for the National Colebrook Memorial Project.

From Nada – an independent organisation in Adelaide, South Australia, that works against abuse to promote respectful ways of interacting.

We at Nada wish to acknowledge that what you, your families and your people, have been put through at a personal, political and spiritual level is violence and abuse. The pain you have experienced is incomprehensible to us. It is to our shame that this was done by our people, in particular people who, like us, worked in the helping professions.

Clearly non-Indigenous Australia owes a great debt to Indigenous Australians whose land and very spirit has been so badly hurt. It is to our continuing shame that, in so many subtle and not so subtle ways, these acts of oppression still occur.

We offer our sincere apology as a small and inadequate step towards assisting Indigenous Australians to have their rightful place in their country. Our work with people who have abused and who have experienced abuse informs us that apology is only a small aspect of the actions we need to take to fully honour you. Further steps we take must be accountable to your experiences. When the effects of your abuse are addressed then our lives and our country is made richer. We wish to acknowledge the stands you have taken against the abuse you have suffered, and our regret about the abuse perpetrated on you that has made those stands necessary.

Coming Home

from an interview with Jane Lester

The Human Rights Commission's enquiry into the Stolen Generation had massive ramifications for my family. My father was stolen. He was part of the stolen generation. His six siblings were part of the stolen generation. His forty or so first cousins were part of the stolen generation. They made up one entire mission home. They weren't allowed to talk their language, they weren't allowed to eat bush tucker. They were removed a thousand miles away from their country so that they couldn't be brought back home.

There were some good things that came from that mission compared to other places. They were cared for by two sisters, two missionaries who raised them to be resourceful and to have faith. They weren't just trained as jackaroos and domestics. If they wanted anything in life they were encouraged to go out and get it. They were taught many things, but so many things were taken away.

When the enquiry came to Adelaide we supported our older generation to give private interviews with regard to the impact of being taken away. The whole process was like trying to close the circle for my grandmother. She lost seven of her children, that's all the children she had. She lost each and every one in four different batches of abduction. The enquiry was a chance to reconnect the circle and take the family back to her. Even though she's not living physically she's still there in spirit. We can be honouring of her by honouring the blood connection we have, and by being able to sit on the land that she walked. Going to the enquiry was an honouring of my grandmother.

As members of the younger generation we gave interviews too. With two of my first cousins, who in Aboriginal ways are my brother and sister, we requested to have a private interview. We wanted to share our experiences of how the stolen generation didn't just impact on the first generation. It impacted the second. It's impacting the third, and it will potentially go on if we can't find ways to resolve the loss and make reconnections. The three of us went to the enquiry together. I'm a non-drinker but I felt like I could have drunk a bottle of scotch or something before getting in there! We knew we would be talking about painful things.

We were interviewed by Mick Dodson - a man for whom we all have great respect. Our respect only grew after spending this time with him and coming to understand what he as an individual and what the other commissioners were going through in hearing all of these stories throughout the country. We were amazed by the irony of Sir Ronald Wilson being a missionary and then coming back and addressing these issues, hearing people's stories of what actually happened. We thought that was quite a major achievement.

The enquiry was painful. We weren't just statistics any more. We weren't just numbers. We were identified as real people. In the private interview with my brother and sister, we talked of how there was love in our family and yet there wasn't

Taking care of this story

In order to take care of this story I ask if you, the reader, are thinking of distributing it widely or using it to facilitate group discussions, to please first ring me, Jane Lester on (08) 8346 6443 and we'll talk it through. Thank you.

a real love because there was so much fear - 'If you love your child, your child gets taken away'. We spoke of how when we were born we weren't citizens in this country. Welfare or the department, anyone, had the right to just walk in and take us away. Our parents didn't have the right to say no. They could say it but it wasn't heard. We spoke of the lack of parenting skills that we had, the loss of our language, the loss of our culture. We spoke of how our connectedness to our whole being and our relationships with our families were gone. Finding that one generation of your whole family made up a mission home for so many years is quite a hard thing to come to terms with.

When we talk about the enquiry now all these years down the track, my brother and sister and I always laugh about this one box of tissues. At one stage the three of us were sitting there having a good howl, and we'd used up all the tissues that we had brought. So Mick Dodson asked for one of his team to go and get a box of tissues. They went off quite discreetly and quietly. When they brought the tissues in, Mick took them and grabbed this great handful for himself. Then he sat the box on his knees. We didn't even get offered them! They were for him not for us! We found that quite humorous! He conducted the process in such a loving way, it was beautiful. After the interview we received letters by registered mail to thank us for the time that we shared with him. It wasn't a standard letter that had been mass-produced - he actually pulled out points from what we had spoken about and put them in the letter. This made it more personal. The commission was mindful in letting everyone who'd had anything to do with the enquiry know when the report was going to come out, when it was going to be delivered to parliament, when we would be able to go and receive our own copies. It was conducted in a really respectful way.

As the report went into parliament there were many eyes on television sets to see how it was going to be accepted. I watched with a lot of doubt, but I could actually feel that some of the politicians were saddened, that some did know that white Australia does have a connection to what happened to black Australia. Then we watched as all the different churches started to say that they were sorry for what they had done. Sorry is a very easy word to be shared, but at least it's a start. What we still need is access to records and a lot of the records that are tied up within the missions are not collated and therefore they're inaccessible. Sorry is a start but what we need now is action to help people come home.

Coming home

For the last ten years within our family, we've been very persistent with our older generation about the need for them to take us home - to teach us where we come from, to teach us who

our family is, so that we can regain our identity. We've mainly focussed on our aunties. I come from a family that has a very high number of women. So we pleaded with our aunties to take us back home. In 1993 they organised for us what we call the 'homecoming ceremonies'. Thirty of us travelled all together in a convoy out to Oodnadatta and then various relatives, our grandmothers and mothers and sisters and children, travelled from various areas all to this one location. We were put through a range of rituals and ceremonies to let the ancestors know that we were back in our country, to let our families know that we still had a need to be connected to the family, and to signify that we recognised that we had a hell a lot of learnings that we needed to rediscover.

We spent one week doing this process, and there were some really magical moments. Of course, when any magical moment occurs, there are always the hard moments that happen too. It was a very exciting adventure for me. Over the years of growing up I always knew I was Aboriginal and I had often travelled within South Australia and the Northern Territory. I knew I belonged somewhere along that line but never knew exactly where. It took me many years to find out exactly where I come from. It's only been in the last twelve years that I can say that I'm a Yangkumytjatjara / Antikirinya woman. I was quite sad when I recognised that, as a child, I had actually been at times in my traditional area and didn't even know it. But when I found out where I came from I was actually standing there, on my country. When I was told, 'You're from here', it was an amazing moment.

Trying to find out where I was from was a long process. Starting the ball rolling was the hardest thing to do. Ironically it eventually got to a point when I didn't have to look any more - things began to fall in my lap. But all along the way it took courage. I remember when I was invited to go to a conference out in the Pitjantjatjara lands. I went there and there was this old woman who sat in the conference for the two days. She was from the area, and there was a whole range of other black fellas from all over the state. For two days I looked at this woman and I knew I was connected to her but I felt it would be stupid to go up to her and say, 'Well, I don't know who you are but I reckon we're connected ...' Eventually when the two day conference finished it came to a point that I knew I had to choose whether to say something or not. Finally, I went up to her and said 'I don't why I'm saying this, but I believe that there's a connection between me and you', and she said, 'Well, who are you?' And I said 'I'm Jane Lester, I'm Colin Lester's daughter'. And this woman just burst into tears and wrapped her arms around me. She's my dad's first cousin.

Once I started there were a range of stories like that. We have a joke that we have a sacred site at the petrol station toilets at Pt Wakefield! There were a hundred of us one time. This is years later, when we were all travelling up to Uluru. My eldest daughter was four at the time, and I was trying to get her into the toilet quick. I got her into the toilets and when we were coming out I could see this whole queue of Aboriginal women

and kids. There was this woman in the queue and when I looked at her my heart did a somersault. It just sort of projected out of my body, and I thought, 'Oh, here we go again, I'm going to have to ask this question again'. So I walked up to her and I said, 'I don't know why I'm saying this, but, you know, I think there's something between you and me. My name's Jane Lester, I'm Colin Lester's daughter.' And, you know, the same thing happened. She burst into tears, and wrapped her arms around me. Another first cousin of my father. Gradually I didn't have to justify any more who I was. People knew who I was. I knew where I was from. I walked my own country. The people I feel most sadness for are those people who traditionally come from the land where there is now a city or a town because so much of their story has been stepped upon. Different sites have actually been lost. That's where I am at a privilege. There are still parts of my country that have only been walked by people of my blood line.

We must find ways for everyone to come home. Even if we can't reconnect with our immediate family we can still reconnect with our land, still reconnect to our extended family.

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We can find someone who knows the connections. We don't need a white system to do that. It's about trying not to hear the ripples and the words of the system and instead to follow the words and ripples of our heart, of our people. Even if you've

been adopted out and put in another country you can come back to this country and sit down with any people and say, 'Do you have any idea where I come from?' and they'll point you in the direction. Whether they are drunk or whether they're sober they will be able to do it. Eventually if we keep on following the directions we're gonna find where we come from. And we don't need no piece of paper to tell us that's where we come from. The people will know, and we will know.

Resurgence

Aboriginal culture is one of the oldest if not the oldest Indigenous culture and that is quite a key point. It has survived for so long. It was fragmented in a very short space of time but people are now going back to where they come from. We're learning where we come from. Everyone will do it in a different way, to a different degree, but there is, I believe, a strong wave happening in our community. Stories of homecoming are happening across the country. Reconnecting with our spirit places is going to bring a massive resurgence. There is going to be more pride in knowing our connection to Aboriginality.

We're coming back home. It's not about payback. It'll never be about payback. We're not about to take over the country. All we want is an acknowledgement of our connection to the land and to be able to continue that connection. It's not about 'this is mine' and 'this is yours'. This country belongs to nobody. It belongs to everybody. We belong to it. There is a resurgence happening. A homecoming. It will change this country.

Sorry – as sharing SORROW

from an interview with Sir Ronald Wilson

In 1995 the Federal Attorney-General requested the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, of which Sir Ronald Wilson was the President, to undertake a National Inquiry into the law, practices and policies by which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were separated from their families and communities by compulsion, duress or undue influence. The Commission consulted widely throughout Australia, led by Aboriginal Social Justice Commissioner Mick Dodson and Sir Ronald. They listened to 535 individual stories from the stolen generations and another 242 submissions from governments, churches, researchers and organisations. The Commission's Report, entitled, 'Bringing Them Home', was presented to the Government in April 1997, and tabled in the national Parliament on 26th May 1997.

The National Inquiry into the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families was an intensely personal process. Unlike other enquiries there was no way this was going to be simply an intellectual exercise. Of 770 people we interviewed, 535 were people who had personal stories to tell. They were either the victims of forcible removal themselves, or the children of those who had been taken away, or their siblings.

The overwhelming impact of these stories upon me can only be understood if I describe the process of sharing in them. Most of the personal stories we heard privately. The sessions were attended only by the story-teller and myself or one of my colleagues, and a friend or counsellor for the story-teller. We knew that the re-telling of these stories could be traumatic. We knew that we needed to take care. This process set the stage for an emotional experience. With every story as a listener I was invited into the experience which was being shared. As the experiences I was witness to consisted of extreme hardship and sorrow I could not help but be moved by them and involved with them.

I had never been exposed to such sorrow before. Simply to look into the face of the person sitting across the table telling their story was an extraordinary experience. The times in which we as white Australians have sat across the table from Indigenous Australians and listened to their stories, even in happy circumstances, for most of us have been all too infrequent. What was being shared was beyond all value.

I could not help but reflect on how extraordinary it was for me, as a representative of the white race who had been responsible for the policies, the laws and the administrations which had brought about these forced removals, to share in the stories of these people's experiences. This heightened the significance of the occasion for me. I could not retreat to a remote identity with the oppressor race, as during the time of forced removals I was for one year in the sixties the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church. We were running a mission for Aboriginal children at that time. This gave me an official role from which to relate to the stories and prevented me from distancing myself from these stories.

In turn, I experienced the generosity and forgiveness of Indigenous Peoples as well as their sorrow. It was an extraordinary and richly involving experience which has really changed me, made me a different person.

The sorrow of rejection

Time and again in the course of listening to the stories we heard of the tragedy of 'assimilation'. Whatever the intentions behind this policy, the consequences were often tragic. We heard the stories of young children removed from their families. Some were removed as babies. Some were removed from the hospital in which they had just been born. We heard stories of the abuse that occurred in many of the institutions and foster homes to where these children were often removed.

We also heard of times when the families into whom the children had been adopted were loving and caring. Even in these situations there was sorrow. So often, when the children were loved and cared for by their white foster families, the policy of assimilation still brought tragic consequences. We heard of how, as these children grew into adulthood, they experienced rejection from white society - they were rejected by the very society for which they'd been bred. In some instances this led to a double loss of identity. They'd been separated from their Aboriginality - this had been deliberately taken from them.

Over a period of time they'd gained a new identity which was associated with white Australia, and then white Australia - with its still lingering white Australia Policy - rejected them afresh.

The story of one young man I knew years ago comes to mind. He had been forcibly removed from his Aboriginal parents and adopted into a loving white family. He told a story to the Commission of a materially rich childhood, and of the love he experienced from his adoptive mother and father - the only mother and father that he knew. He then spoke of how he was rejected when he first asked a white girl to a dance - how all hell had broken loose. He came to the Commission to testify in his twenties having served time in prison. He said, 'I love Mum and Dad, but I don't know who I am'. This had undone him mentally and physically. These double tragedies of the whole process of assimilation are less well known by the white Australian population.

The desire for apology

During the course of telling their stories many of the men and women said, 'Why did they do it? I'd love to hear them say they are sorry.' That is where the emphasis on apology came from. It wasn't our idea that saying sorry would count for something. It came from the Indigenous Australians' own longing for healing and reconciliation. Their request for an apology is an invitation to white Australia to play a part in the healing process. It is also why the apologies that have already happened - by churches and state governments - have been so important and why National Sorry Day is so important.

What I've found hard to understand is how some people seem to think that if they were not personally involved in forcibly removing Aboriginal children then there is no need for them to apologise. For most of us the events surrounding the stolen generation are somewhat distant. They happened a long time ago and we weren't personally involved. For some reason,

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some people seem to think that this means an apology is unnecessary. But this is also true for many events in our history about which we commonly express regret and sorrow. On ANZAC Day, the Prime Minister gave an emotional speech at Hellfire Pass¹ that was about the past. He had no personal part to play in those events and yet was expressing a deep emotional connection to the men in Hellfire Pass years ago.

There are many types of apology. An apology does not necessarily require involvement in the causes of trauma that has led to suffering. Apology is a healing response to suffering - an expression of empathy with the sufferer. It is a sincere bonding between people - if only momentarily. If it is undertaken with the opportunity for ongoing connection often it will lead to ongoing relationship.

This sort of apology is about identifying with another's sorrow with the desire to lessen this sorrow by sharing it - by taking it on a little bit oneself. It is an offering to play a part in healing. It relieves suffering to know that others have a desire to share what you are feeling.

Many Aboriginal people who are still feeling the sad effects of forcible removal - in the present - are longing to hear a national apology, some expression of emotion, some connectedness. I believe that when we as human beings are suffering we need to feel an affinity with others, a sense of solidarity. We need to experience an expression of solidarity from the contemporaries of our generation.

At funerals we experience sympathy for the bereaved, because we identify with their suffering. It is this, I believe, that Aboriginal people are asking for. They are looking to us to be with them in the healing process. There are many, many Australians who want to make a new beginning, who want to be with them in this process. There are many non-Indigenous Australians who want to look into the eyes of their fellow Indigenous Australians so that we can recognise each other's common humanity and move into the 21st century in a true partnership.

Apology is in the air

Apology is in the air. Not just here but elsewhere. Not long ago I read an editorial in an Australian newspaper that spoke of how 'the currency of apology is being cheapened by its frequency'. This was in relation not only to the current conversations in Australia but to Tony Blair in Britain apologising for England's treatment of the Irish during the potato famine, and Bill Clinton in North America apologising for the ways in which servicemen were treated in the war. I agree that apology can be an escape if it is just words, if it lacks sincerity it achieves nothing. It has to be a genuine, symbolic holding out of the hand. But, as I wrote to the editor of the paper, 'You are doing scant justice to those parliaments and churches, and all others, who have expressed apology to the stolen generation when you belittle their apology. Certainly apology can be cheapened, but if it has been given sincerely, it's not up to others to cheapen them.'

Learning from the past

by Sir Ronald Wilson

Perhaps the Indigenous Australian way of responding to our past wrongs - requesting understanding, apology and compensation - will be seen by white Australia as an invitation to consider new ways of righting wrongs. I hope that we learn from Aboriginal ways of focusing on the humanity of the person or people who have done wrong. Part of the report deals with Juvenile Justice. It recommends national standards and Indigenous Australian self-determination in relation to welfare and justice systems. At present, in various parts of Australia, governments have enacted laws that take away the discretion of the magistrate and involve mandatory sentences for young people. I am aware of one young man who is 12 years old who was sentenced to 14 days imprisonment for stealing something out of a fridge. If it is a young person's third offence then they are imprisoned for 12 months. This is scandalous.

Many of the young men caught up in the Juvenile Justice system are from Aboriginal families dislocated by the effects of the stolen generation. They were brought up by parents who were raised in institutions, who never learnt what a loving environment is like. Now, through the juvenile justice system, the abuse is continuing. The system won't look at why kids are bored, why kids are truanting. There is, it seems, an aspect of Australian culture that is heavily concentrated on punishment.

Indigenous Australians have a lot to contribute to the developing Australian culture - their family relations, the way their extended families hang together, their affinity with the land, their generosity of spirit, their emphasis on saying sorry and moving on, their healing ways. There is much we will learn if we take up their invitations. For now, the invitation is to share the sorrow of the stolen generation, to express that we too are sorry.

Spiritual

The process of the enquiry was, I believe, a spiritual experience in many ways. For many people it was the first time they had had the opportunity to speak of their experiences and for their stories to be witnessed, acknowledged. The telling of the stories engendered in us as listeners an intense longing and a desire to demonstrate in our attitudes, our actions and our words, sympathy and acts of redress. To enter into the experience of what was being told brought alive a strong impulse to solidarity. That is a spiritual experience. That is why we stated in the opening pages of the report that 'This is no ordinary report. It is made up of stories that came from the heart. And it is for this reason that they must be read with open hearts as well as open minds.'

The ways in which ordinary people have responded to the report have been quite incredible. People have written to me saying that they believe the report will be a watershed in the life of this nation. It will not be allowed to gather dust on the shelf. The stories of the stolen generations will be alive in the hearts of the people of Australia.

¹ Hellfire Pass was the place on the Thai-Burma Railway, built under conditions of great hardship by Allied prisoners of the Japanese during the Second World War, including many Australians. Hellfire Pass was chosen for this year's ANZAC Day commemoration which was attended by the Prime Minister of Australia and many other Australians.

Reflections from non-Aboriginal Australia

Sorry day - an opportunity to heal histories

by Dorothy McRae-McMahon

Rev. Dorothy McRae-McMahon was the first ordained woman to preside over a parish in the City of Sydney, the Pitt St Uniting Church, where she was Minister for ten years. For the last five years she has been one of the senior national staff of the Uniting Church and has now retired. Always outspoken on issues of human rights, Dorothy received the Australian Government Peace Award in 1986 and the Australian Human Rights Medal in 1988.

Most apologies come after the event, especially when they involve actions by whole societies, because it is mostly in hindsight that we see our mistakes and grieve what went before. Hindsight brings new perspectives. When some people say that Aboriginal children who were forcibly removed from their families do not need an apology because they were taken away with the 'best of intentions', they are doing an injustice not only to Aboriginal people but to our own. For those people who removed Aboriginal children in a genuine effort to improve their life would surely be the first to want an apology made on their behalf if they could see the consequences of their actions and hear the devastation in the lives of those children. And for those people whose activities were related to ruthless racism, who will never deliver an apology, who else will say 'sorry' if we don't?

What sort of people will we be if, having asked those Aboriginal people most affected to tell us their stories, we respond with an uncaring silence? Quite apart from our knowing what our forebears have done and, in the knowing, having a responsibility to respond, we asked those Aboriginal people to revisit their pain by telling us what happened. It seems the very least we can do is to grieve with them now.

We could well make a case for saying 'sorry' as an act of reconciliation with Indigenous people whom we have wronged. But I would like to say as well that there are reasons for non-Indigenous Australians to apologise for our own sakes. What sort of people will we become if we cannot imagine a mother's grief as her child is taken from her arms, often never to be seen again? As we look at our own loved children and grandchildren, and say we are a people who are 'for' families, what do we mean if we can't find it in our hearts to feel a fragment of the pain of these, our sisters and brothers, as their families were ripped apart?

As we approach this Sorry Day, it seems a moment of opportunity in the history of this nation. When someone says sorry to another they offer a dignity, a sign that those who suffer are worthy of respect and that their pain is noticed, and they are acknowledged as equal and valued members of society. We have the opportunity to create a new relationship with Indigenous Australia and open a whole new dialogue about the possibilities for future life together. We have the opportunity to move away from valuing everything by money and risk believing that the cost to us in not apologising for past wrongs is far greater than the possible cost to our pockets. We have the opportunity to add immensely to our own lives, as non-Indigenous people and our future generations, by accepting the invitation from Indigenous Australia to come to terms with our histories. For the sake of those we have harmed, and for our own sake, let us say from the bottom of our hearts that we are sorry.

Sorry

By Loretta Perry

I feel I have a responsibility to be careful with my 'sorry'. It needs careful thought and timely precision to be in tune with the intentions of the request. 'Sorry' seems at first to be a word - a word to bridge worlds. But it also brings me questions.

How will my Sorry put food on a table?
 How will my Sorry contribute to health care?
 How will my Sorry prevent a child from being institutionalised?
 How will my Sorry create opportunities for Indigenous education and employment?
 How can my Sorry contribute to acts that redress the continuing structural inequities facing Aboriginal People? For it is this sort of sorry that I wish to give and keep on giving.

I wish so much for a 'sorry' of action and redress to be born. I wish so much for its future.

As a Native North American even in the moment of speaking the word 'sorry' I am connected to my people, my past, my heritage, my outrage.

The welfare system legitimised the pulling of my teeth, one after another. The semi graduands of University way back then needed extractions to pass exams; needed practice with anaesthetics, needed research for their Doctorates. They saw me and my siblings as not having a need for our teeth. Generations with no teeth.

As I try to think through the responsibilities of my 'sorry' I am reminded of old ways. Of what has been done, as well as the desire to seek out healing, conciliatory ways. I am reminded of how life was before, during, and after it got so confused.

There is so very much I am sorry about.

Sorry.

Beyond sorry

by Clare Bruhns

I've found it hard to think clearly about the coming 'Sorry Day'. Having spent eight years working on a remote Aboriginal community in the Central Desert, I experienced the ways of saying 'sorry' there in a very personal way. While living on the community a baby of mine died while I was giving birth. The ways in which the whole community shared in my grief and expressed their sorrow to me continues to affect me profoundly. It leaves me wondering about how ready we are as white people to say sorry in ways that do justice to the depth of the injustices we have inflicted on Aboriginal people.

My growing awareness of the sheer enormity of both the past suffering and the current injustices of Aboriginal people leaves me at a loss to imagine how simple words of apology, even if spoken unreservedly by the entire non-Aboriginal population, can be enough. I can only see the word 'sorry' as a haltingly inadequate first step towards healing the pain of the children, parents and larger families of the Stolen Generation. I worry that saying 'sorry' without recognising Aboriginal people's sovereignty over this country, and working to dismantle the structural racism that underpins Australian society, may seem like another meaningless platitude.

To me the recognition of sovereignty is part and parcel of saying sorry. However, I find that thinking about sovereignty raises a number of quite difficult dilemmas for me. If we recognise that we are only in this country due to invasion, and that Aboriginal people have never voluntarily given up any of the land to us, what personal responsibility do I have for rectifying the injustices from which I have benefited? How can we, as white people, formally acknowledge Aboriginal people's pre-existing sovereignty and influence our government to give up exclusive control over the land and resources of this country? Perhaps it is time to reverse the governmental priorities that have existed for so long, and give Aboriginal people first claim on the resources of the country, not last. In a nation which is so wealthy in comparative international terms, surely we can relinquish control over sufficient land and resources to enable Aboriginal people to live the lives they choose and build the communities in which they wish to live. On a personal level, am I prepared to change some of my own priorities in life if that is what is necessary to make Aboriginal independence and self-determination possible? I think that the biggest challenge is to step out of our own taken-for-granted ways of seeing the world. Rather than thinking about ways in which Aboriginal people can be treated more justly within our society, how do we start exploring ways in which we can co-exist with a strong, sovereign Aboriginal nation?

Playing our part

by Lien Nguyen-Navas

Having come to Australia within the last twenty years, like most of the Vietnamese community, I feel I have a different relationship to this country and to Indigenous Australia than many other non-Indigenous Australians. However, I believe that it's important for me to recognise that Indigenous Australians were here first and that this country belongs to them. Regardless of our reasons for coming here it is still their home. While we are here, we live within the structures of mainstream Australia, we are influenced by the thoughts and actions of white Australia, and we participate in the life of the country. So, I believe, whether or not we call Australia home, it is up to us to try to understand and to play any part we can in challenging current injustice.

In relation to the Stolen Generation, I wish to take part in Sorry Day because I am sorry that one people did not treat another people with respect. I also wish to say sorry because I too was brought up very much within the dominant white culture, believing that the people with lighter skin deserve greater privileges. I grew up believing that people with lighter skin than myself were in some way justified in doing what they liked with the world, and that I was superior in some way to those with darker skin. It has only been in the last few years that I have become aware of these issues and I am sorry for this as well.

I am interested in finding ways to speak with my community about these issues. I feel it is our responsibility to have conversations about Indigenous Australian issues. The Vietnamese Women's Association of South Australia has the privilege of a half-hour radio program each week. We hope to use the occasion of National Sorry Day to raise awareness within the Vietnamese community.

I hope that in talking with our community we will increase our understandings. I hope that we will increasingly recognise that while we are living in this country we have responsibilities to its traditional owners

"...[non-Indigenous] Australians have grown up believing that Aborigines were altruistically taken out of wretched conditions, to be offered the immense benefits of white society. Now a National Inquiry was describing the practice in terms of a horrifying crime. For eight months the Government made no response except to say that there would be no national apology, and no compensation would be paid.

Their silence was not echoed in the country. Bringing Them Home has sold far more than any comparable report. A shortened version has been produced, a total of 60,000 copies of the two versions are in circulation, and it is a frequent topic of media discussion. State parliaments and churches have held occasions to hear from representatives of their Aboriginal communities, and to ask forgiveness. Now the Government has announced that it will make available \$50 million over four years for counselling and family reunion services. Clearly it has been surprised by the response to the Inquiry's revelations."

(An extract from www.austlii.edu.au/au/special/rsjproject/sorry/
For more information see page 12.)

Restitution and reparation – other sides to apology

an interview with Michael Lapsley

Michael Lapsley trained in Australia as an Anglican priest before going to work as a Chaplain to the ANC. While working for the ANC outside of South Africa he received a letter bomb which exploded in his hands resulting in permanent injury. He is currently working as a Chaplain to a trauma and torture centre in Capetown and is in the process of establishing an institute committed to 'the healing of memories'. In this short interview he speaks of the meanings of forgiveness.

Across the world, whether it is here in Australia or in South Africa, it seems to be a time of struggling to come to terms with our pasts. Our past is not going to go away. Unless we face it, deal with it, struggle with it, it will, it seems, continue to haunt us. Our past here in Australia and in South Africa seems to have been based in the assumption of the superiority of one race, one culture. Where people have acted on assumptions of superiority, even when they have acted with goodwill, it has caused great harm.

The harm that has been done is now clearer and people are asking: 'How can we come to terms with the past?' One aspect of this process is apology. There are many types of apology, many different steps in the journey of healing. In the process of healing what people often ask for is an acknowledgement of wrongness, for someone to say, 'We're sorry. It was wrong. It should not have happened.' This plays a significant part in creating a context for healing to occur. If people of goodwill reciprocate and respond to this request for apology then, although we cannot rewrite the past, we may be able to begin to make it up, to make it better, and we may be able to do this together.

To me, though, forgiveness is a package, a process, a journey. Part of this process involves the person or people responsible for an injustice saying, 'I did it. I am the one. I was responsible. I am sorry.' But there are further steps as well. If a person is truly sorry this needs to manifest itself in acts of reparation and restitution. This is how I understand the Christian package of forgiveness. Apology is not only about the past, it is about taking action in the present. This to me explains some people's reluctance to apologise. For the next steps after apology involve reparation and restitution.

In South Africa we are currently struggling to come to terms with what we, of the same generation, have done to

each other. Here in Australia, in relation to the Stolen Generation, we are dealing more with the legacies of injustice - even if the histories of injustice are recent. Many people seem to claim that, 'We were blind and we could not see' as if this absolves us of the need for action. However, if we are now able to see, then it is this vision which brings new responsibilities to find forms of reparation, restitution and healing, and to be a part of creating human rights rather than furthering human wrongs. What's more, those people who can honestly say 'I was not involved myself' in relation to the acts undertaken by their ancestors, acts based on the assumption and maintenance of superiority, could perhaps equally honestly say 'But I have been the beneficiary of this injustice and for this reason I will take action'.

It is not as if Indigenous Australians are asking for us to be punished for past actions. Instead, it seems they are asking for acts of restorative justice - actions that restore people's dignity, actions that make it up to Indigenous Australians, acts of redress and healing. Our past is not going to go away but we can, if we choose, be a part of healing

Reparation: '*Reparation* is the appropriate response to gross violations of human rights. According to international legal principles, reparation has five parts: *Acknowledgement* of the truth and an *apology*; *Guarantee* that these human rights won't be breached again; *Restitution* (returning what has been lost, as much as possible); *Rehabilitation*; and *Compensation*.'

(An extract from 'Bringing them home' - a guide to the findings and recommendations of the National Inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, p.28.)

Saying Sorry – Responding to beliefs that minimise the need for an apology

At the moment throughout Australia there are many conversations happening about the meanings of sorry and apology. Many of us have been struggling to find ways to talk with our families and workmates about why we feel it is important to make a meaningful apology in relation to the Stolen Generation. In this section we have tried to list some of the common beliefs and ways of understanding that minimise the need for an apology and acts of reparation, and then we have tried to explore alternative understandings.

‘It didn’t have anything to do with us. We didn’t take anyone’s children or kill any Aborigines. Why should we say we’re sorry?’

Saying sorry is not always about admitting direct and personal responsibility. It can be a statement about the kind of world we want to live in. Saying sorry is a way of saying that we want to live in a society where people treat each other with consideration, and care about the pain and suffering that all of us experience from time to time.

Saying sorry to Aboriginal people can be a way of saying that we understand that they have experienced an enormous amount of suffering and injustice as a part of Australia’s history. It can be a way of recognising that this has not been openly acknowledged by Australian society as a whole, and that we want to put this right.

All of us who live in Australia are living on land that was forcibly taken away from Aboriginal people. Any prosperity we have enjoyed in this country has been made possible by their dispossession. Even though we did not do the killing, we still benefit from it.

Those people and governments in the past that were responsible for such actions, clearly stated that they were doing them on behalf of all white people, in particular the future generations. Saying sorry can be about saying ‘I’m sorry they did those things. I realise that I have benefited from them. I would like to understand more about the ongoing consequences of those past policies and maybe even do something to make things better now.’

‘It all happened so long ago. We should

leave the past behind and move forward. Dragging all this stuff up is no use to anyone.’

When an injustice has been done, it can be very difficult to move forward when the injustice is not openly acknowledged. This understanding is evident in many arenas within our society. Many Australians still want the Japanese to apologise for the treatment of prisoners during the Second World War. The war crimes trials in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia are based on this understanding, as is the Truth Commission in South Africa. Openly acknowledging the injustices of the past makes two important things possible. We can identify what can still be fixed, and fix it. Then, on the basis of mutual understanding and trust, we can truly move forward together.

Australia’s most significant national celebration – Anzac Day – is based on remembering the suffering of the past. ‘At the going down of the sun, and in the morning, we will remember them.’ One way of viewing Anzac Day is as a way of remembering the suffering and sacrifice of war and acknowledging the terrible things that it involves. Each year we can renew our determination not to allow such things to happen again. Saying sorry to Aboriginal people could be part of a similar national resolve.

It seems important for us to realise that for many Aboriginal families the injustices have not stopped. The ways in which Aboriginal children are stolen have simply changed. Many are still removed from their families due to child welfare policies designed and implemented by white governments. If some Aboriginal

parents are unable to care for their children in ways which we define as ‘proper’, simply removing them is the modern equivalent of past policies. Perhaps it would be more just to provide the support necessary for Aboriginal communities to heal the wounds of past injustices, and rebuild their own support networks.

‘This *Black Armband* view of history is not good for the country. Australia’s history is full of wonderful achievements. We should focus on them for a change. We don’t have any reason to feel ashamed.’

Until very recently Australian history as taught in schools and universities was exclusively a celebration of the achievements of white society. There seems little danger that these achievements will suddenly be forgotten.

Saying sorry does not need to deny the wonderful achievements of Australia’s past and present. In everyday life we often recognise the courage and integrity involved in people admitting mistakes, apologising for any hurt caused, and resolving to do better in future, based on a deeper understanding. Such a willingness to admit mistakes often makes us admire a person all the more. Similarly, the achievements of Australia’s history could only be enhanced admitting the wrongs that have been done, apologising to those who have suffered in the process, and finding ways of building a more just and inclusive future. If Australia could achieve that, it would be building on the achievements of the past, not a denial of them.

When someone hurts us, we want

them to apologise, not have them tell us about all the good things they have done. Until the hurt has been acknowledged and an apology made, it can be very difficult for us to see the other good things.

‘Many of the so-called Stolen Generation have become very successful because of their access to the benefits of white society, like education. If they had stayed with their families they would not have achieved anything like their current success. Why should we be sorry for that?’

The success of Aboriginal people, whether or not they were taken from their families, is a testament to their courage and determination, not the goodness of white Australian policies. Their success does nothing to diminish the pain and suffering involved in being forcibly removed from their parents. It does

nothing to diminish the pain experienced by the parents when they lost their children. How would we feel if our children were forcibly removed when we became unemployed, on the grounds that other parents could guarantee them a better future? Surely white Australia was capable of making the benefits of this society available to Aboriginal people at the same time as leaving them with their parents!

‘People in the past did what they believed to be right according to the thinking of the time. To criticise them now is to impose modern standards and attitudes to the past. It just isn’t meaningful.’

From the beginning of white settlement many white Australians were well aware of the injustices being perpetrated on Aboriginal people and many spoke out against official

government policies. Their voices were ignored and they were often ridiculed. Saying that everyone in the past thought the same way is to deny a rich and important part of our own history.

Identifying the destructive consequences of past actions does not mean that we are saying that those responsible were ‘bad people’. Their intentions may well have been very positive. That, however, doesn’t seem to be the issue. Whatever their intentions, the consequences of their actions remain the same. It is these consequences which need to be acknowledged and addressed.

While some people in the past may have been unaware of the injustices perpetrated on Aboriginal people due to the absence of full and accurate information, that is not true for any of us today.

National Memorial on the Colebrook Site

Colebrook Home was begun in 1924 at Quorn, South Australia. In 1943 it moved to Eden Hills. Between 1943 and 1972 some 350 Aboriginal children lived there, isolated from their families and the beloved land of their ancestors.

On 31st May 1998, a National Memorial to the Stolen Generation will be unveiled at Colebrook. The aim of the memorial is to provide an artistically appealing, dignified place of reflection for all Australians, which can become a national symbol of the history of forced removal of Aboriginal children. As Raymond Finn, who was in Colebrook as a child, describes:

We want the Colebrook experience and other experiences of the Stolen Generation throughout Australia to rekindle the spirit of community through supporting, caring and sharing with and for each other, grounded upon the ethical foundation of justice, freedom and truth for all.

The memorial will eventually include a ‘fountain of tears’, information plaques, a ‘wiltja’ shelter containing a history and photos of the ‘Stolen Generations’ across Australia, a sculpture of three Colebrook children huddled together, a campfire ‘story-telling’ area, and finally a sculpture of the Grieving Mother.

The unveiling of the first stage of the Memorial will occur at a ‘Bringing them home’ community day at Colebrook Home (178 Shepherd Hill Rd, Eden Hills) on Sunday, 31st May 1998, 12:30-5pm. For more information please contact Blackwood Reconciliation Group phone 8278 1657 / 8336 2525.

Further acts of sorry & acts to address current injustice

Sorry Day is not only about coming to terms with the past but also the present. What would *acts* of sorry look like? What are acts that we can all be involved in to right current injustice? Different people will clearly have different roles to play - acts of sorry from children and young people will be different from acts of those with greater access to resources and will be different again from the acts of sorry that institutions could make. Here we are focusing on acts of sorry and acts to address current injustice that we can all play a part in.

Here are some ideas that people have found helpful:

- Photocopying publications and leaving copies in the workplace staff room, or giving them to family members to read and then discuss. The 'Saying Sorry - Responding to common arguments and questions' section in this publication might be a good one to stimulate discussion.
- A 30-page guide to *Bringing Them Home* is available from the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. Some people have bought a box of these (they are very inexpensive) to distribute. Phone 1800 021199.
- Writing an entry for a 'sorry book', sharing this with family members and friends and talking through the issues. State coordinators, listed below, would know the location of your nearest 'sorry book'.
If you have access to the internet look up the following web pages where there are petitions to sign, information about events and resources to use in raising the issues with others: <http://apology.west.net.au>
<http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/special/rsjproject/sorry/>
- Talking with children and young people about the issues. For those looking for ideas about ways of introducing children to the issues, and resources, activities and acts of redress that young people may be interested in engaging with, the Catholic Education Office has produced a package of 'Educational Activities for National Sorry Day'. It lists many very practical ideas of action that can be taken in school, classrooms or other forums for conversation. It describes which pages of the report would be most accessible, how to generate conversations about them. It includes ideas about songs, videos and children's books that relate to the issues. Contact Frank van der Heide, part of the National Sorry Day Network (ACT) on phone (02) 6234 5455 or fax (02) 6234 5496. It is also on the following home page: <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/special/rsjproject/sorry/>
- Sorry Day t-shirts are now available! They cost \$15 plus \$3.50 postage and handling. The design features the soles of two feet, one black and one white. Above this design is written 'I'm sorry' and below is written, 'Let's walk together'. They have been created by Rosie Egyedi and others in Western Australia in co-operation with local Indigenous groups. All profits go towards coexistence and reconciliation projects. Order c/- Third Eye Partners, 51 Malcolm St, West Perth 6005, Western Australia, ph (08) 93212964 (ask for Rosie). Please specify your size: S, M, L, XL, XXL, and whether you want a white background or black background. Delivery takes 10-14 days.
- In South Australia, workshops are being held which aim to create a context for conversations in which non-Indigenous Australians can explore the connection between past actions and present day effects. These workshops, entitled 'Recognising and responding to racism and its impact on Indigenous Australians' include sessions on planning strategies to respond to racism in the workplace, as well as explorations into the meaning and importance of apology to Indigenous Australians for past and ongoing practices of injustice. The workshops are facilitated by Sharon Golan, a Ngarrindjeri woman, and a white colleague. For more information please contact Sue Hetzel on (08) 8212 2877 or Shona Russell on (08) 82025190.
- Contact your local state co-ordinator of Sorry Day activities to find out what activities and actions are planned in your area:
ACT: David Hunter (02) 6288 0679 / John Bond, (02) 6281 0940
NSW - Jason Field (02) 9550 5666 VIC - Greg Thompson (03) 9287 2307
SA - Glenn Giles (08) 8278 4270 WA - Trish Cowcher (08) 9381 3144
TAS - Greg Thompson (03) 9287 2307 QLD - Wally Tallis (07) 3891 2554

Comment is a publication initiated to provide a forum for responses to topical social issues. It is produced on an irregular basis, as need arises. Everyone is welcome to offer suggestions, topics, thoughts, plans, etc., and to actively join small groups to work together to produce it. We also encourage people to photocopy it and distribute it widely if they find it useful.

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