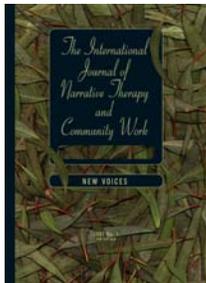




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3

The Written Word in Times of Crisis

This chapter explores the history of *Comment*, our most widely read publication. Created collectively, these informal news-sheets have been written at various times over the last ten years in response to current social events. These have been times in which we have felt considerably worried about developments that have been taking place in Australia, for instance, the rise in racism in Australia in the late 1990s. Certain events that have occurred overseas, such as those that took place on September 11th in the USA, and the bombing in Bali, have brought further grief and concern. At all these times we have felt a wish to respond in some way, not to remain passive in the face of broader issues. We have also known that many others have had similar feelings and have wanted to try to find ways to respond. As our primary work is in publishing, the question became: what sort of writing, what sort of publication could be most useful?

At all the times mentioned above, the social issues were being talked about everywhere. Not only were the issues dominating the national news but also conversations in coffee shops, in family homes and in workplaces. Many of these conversations were divisive and difficult. There were often marked differences of opinion within families and between friends and workmates.

What is the role of the written word at these times? While there were avenues available to publicly protest or express sorrow about government actions and policies, and there were alternative newspapers and internet discussion sites that were publishing informative material, we decided that as part of our response perhaps we could contribute a different sort of publication. Could we create publications that would not simply state a line of argument, and therefore only appeal to those who already agree with this line of argument, but instead offer an engagement with the issues in ways that may enable different conversations?

Robert Dessaix, an Australian writer, recently compiled a book of Australian essays. The following extract from his introduction to this collection conveys the spirit of writing that we hoped to create at these times of crisis:

The era we are living in strikes me as an uncommonly loud one. In the face of cataclysmic events we beat drums and fulminate. In the face of rampant injustice we angrily thump pulpits, trying to shout down evil The essay – in this country, at least, seems to be drifting away from anything resembling imaginative reflection or the tentative speculations of a nimble intellect towards high-minded haranguing and hectoring; away from lament or playful doodle towards setting fire to the furniture; away from the literary towards the journalistic; and away from intimate disclosures towards faceless assertions of public virtue. Indeed, as often as not it seemed to have even drifted away from the written composition towards a public lecture written up after the event.

... In search of my idea of the well-made essay ... I tended to feel most attracted to those pieces where the voice was clearly personal, easily located in a particular place... (A)ll these writers knew how to sit me down and not just talk to me, but get me talking back. In a word, they had the art of conversation, and this was closer to my notion of the satisfying essay than the more common skill these days, however highly honed, of the lecturer, the public speaker and the preacher And, for all the passion displayed in some of the more polemical pieces, they are all, I think, on the whole more reflective than raucous. At least some of our writers, it seems, are still finding ways amidst the clamour of strident voices to speak with a gentle vibrancy and wit about things that matter ... (Dessaix 2004, pp.vii-viii)

Many of the issues we have wished to respond to over the last decade have been very complex. We have not wished to convey to readers that we think we have easy answers. Nor have we wanted these publications to read like a political platform. While not wanting to create publications that proclaim they 'speak the truth', at the same time the *Comment* publications we have produced have been in no way neutral. We have not given 'equal space to differing views'. Instead, the principles that have influenced *Comment* have been quite different.

We have sought to collectively create writings that will be of assistance to everyday Australians in talking about complex social issues. We assume that, at these times of crisis, other Australians will be struggling as we are with how to talk about these issues, and about how to respond. We have tried to write in a way which would assist people who are deeply concerned with the direction and real effects of the national 'debate' about these issues, so that they could have in writing some tools, ideas and suggestions about ways of talking with their friends, family members and colleagues. We have particularly hoped that the writings could be of practical value to health and welfare workers.

Often, at these times of social crisis, people feel confused. In creating issues of *Comment*, we have tried to acknowledge this. We have tried to describe why, at these times, it might make sense for people to not know what to think. Sometimes this can be comforting and ironically can free people up to engage in conversations and take other sorts of action. Many people wish to respond to all that is taking place but do not know where to start. Issues of *Comment* are designed so that they can be left on the table in workplaces or given to friends and family as a way of starting discussion. Rather than starting from scratch, it is often much easier to say: 'I have just read this publication and I'd be interested to hear what you think...' as from here a conversation can begin. Other ideas for small, possible actions are also always included in the publication. As we see it, these publications are generated *from* the local culture and are intended *for* the local culture, particularly our friends, families and colleagues in the health and welfare fields.

Creating these publications is always a collective effort. A small core group of people who have worked together over years, and who are

used to working under pressure, come together to focus on the task at hand. As Dulwich Centre is an independent organisation it means that at short notice we can put aside all other projects and give our full attention to the creation of a publication. It is usually important to do this quickly so we work long hours at these times. Throughout, we rigorously ask ourselves what is the purpose of this particular publication? Why are we doing this? And when we are stuck, when the words are not flowing, we try to name the dilemma with which we are struggling. Naming these dilemmas, articulating them, and including them within the publication itself are often significant parts of the process. As soon as drafts are created we then send these out to a wide range of people for critical reflection. We depend on practitioners in different parts of the world for honest, constructive feedback. Importantly, many of these people do not agree with each other. While some of this feedback may include opposing or diverging suggestions, we find this very helpful. It assists us to understand the differing perspectives that influence discussions on a particular issue and to clarify our own thinking and purpose for the publication. This is an integral part of the process.

As it has turned out, the issues of *Comment* which have been created have developed lives of their own. They have been photocopied and distributed throughout workplaces, rallies, demonstrations, unions, bookshops, national parliament and elsewhere. They have provided a forum through which we can respond to the issues that matter most to us.

We have included here some extracts from issues of *Comment* from the last ten years. These extracts are listed in chronological order, from the first issue of *Comment* to the most recent.

Responding to the Men's Rights Movement

The first issue of *Comment* developed ten years ago out of concerns about the extensive media attention given to American author Warren Farrell when he visited Australia in 1994, and the promotion of his book 'The Myth of Male Power'. Feminist counsellors were particularly concerned about the analysis of rape and sexual violence in this book. At the time, it had become clear that many therapists and health workers were unsure about what to think or how to respond to the sorts of things Warren Farrell was saying. The conversations were confusing people, including those working with men,

women and families in therapy. Cheryl had the idea of collectively putting together a publication on this issue and, with Maggie Carey and Chris McLean, co-ordinated the development of the first edition of *Comment*. It was decided that it would be most appropriate for the publication to be mainly written by men, based on the idea of men taking responsibility for critiquing other men's sexism. We have included here a slightly edited extract from the introduction:

New Ways of Responding?

By Christopher McLean

When we, as men, become aware of some of the negative aspects of male behaviour, and the negative effects on women, children and other men that this behaviour often has, it can leave us with some difficult questions to deal with. In particular, how do we respond when we come face to face with another man publicly acting in ways which we consider inappropriate? Traditional masculine ways of being provide us with some familiar and easily accessible answers. We could immediately define such a man as the enemy and go into attack mode.

If, however, we want our response to be a part of creating new ways of being for men, the answer is not so easy. Men generally find it difficult to challenge each other and to accept being challenged without adopting adversarial positions. If we recognise this and try to develop close, non-competitive and supportive bonds with our brothers, it can make it very difficult to make any criticism at all. If we air our concerns we can be accused of reproducing negative male competitive patterns. If we don't do anything we are allowing unacceptable behaviour to go unchallenged, and are thus complicit with it. What we need to do is find ways of responding which do not compromise the content of what we need to say, but which open space for meaningful dialogue rather than closing it down.

A practical example of this dilemma occurred recently when Warren Farrell made a public speaking tour of Australia in order to promote his book *The Myth of Male Power*. A lot of men and women found Farrell's message worrying to say the least. However, it

was recognised that many men (and some women) were impressed by what he had to say. He seemed to be recognising the reality of men's pain 'for the first time' and making some important points. To simply go on the attack could easily seem to be proving everything Farrell was saying. We needed to point out our concerns strongly, without seeming to be oblivious to men's experience, and in a way that made it possible for men to actually hear what we had to say.

This newsletter is one attempt to deal with this dilemma. Over the last two months, a group of men and women in Adelaide have been meeting and talking to try to organise constructive responses to this issue. We would like to let you know about them in the hope that it may help other people struggling with the same dilemmas.

- We feel that it is very important that men respond publicly to these issues. Men have a responsibility to deal with the effects of masculine culture. Leaving it to women is unfair. Through contacts in our network, various men spoke on radio to reply to Warren Farrell and to offer alternative understandings.
- We asked a prominent radio announcer to give us some training in how best to use the media.
- Attempts were made to co-ordinate with other groups who also had concerns about Warren Farrell's views.
- A special meeting was held to discuss our specific responses to Farrell's book as a way of generating a collective book review.
- We contacted several bookshops which were stocking *The Myth of Male Power*, and talked to them about our concerns. We asked them if they would be prepared to read our written response to the book, and to have it prominently displayed in their shops next to the book itself. We found that they were mostly very open to the idea. We believe that this can provide an effective way of posing alternative questions and raising issues in the minds of readers without having to engage in confrontational criticism or attack. (McLean 1994, pp.2-3)

This first edition of *Comment* also contained a number of reviews of Warren Farrell's book as well as tips and suggestions as to ways of using the media effectively. Copies of this *Comment* were provided to willing book stores where it was prominently displayed next to Warren Farrell's book. Anyone who purchased *The Myth of Male Power* was then offered a complementary copy of *Comment*! Significantly, within therapy networks this publication created a different language with which to discuss these issues.

Discussions, dialogues and interviews about homophobia and heterosexual dominance

The second issue of *Comment* focussed on another topic vitally relevant to families and counsellors. It was developed at a time when various therapists in our networks were considering the effects of homophobia and heterosexual dominance on counselling practice. This *Comment* was co-ordinated by Suzy Stiles who put an enormous amount of effort into facilitating group discussions, editing, layout and design. We have included an extract from this edition here. It is from the lead article, 'Challenging heterosexual dominance – the first steps' by Suzy Stiles:

The process which led to my involvement in this issue of *Comment* began for me in a suburban Adelaide living room more than a year ago. The room was full of members and friends of the Dulwich Centre's Community Mental Health Project, a predominantly heterosexual group. We were gathered to hear Laurence Carter, visiting Melbourne social worker and gay activist, lead a discussion about homophobia and heterosexual dominance. It was the first time in my sixteen consciously lesbian years that I'd ever known straight people gather to acknowledge and learn more about this problem, and the pain it causes – and, importantly, to recognise their responsibility. I was in turns angry, grateful, proud, shocked that people were listening with respect and interest to my stories, afraid of exposing too much, relieved to be able to do so, and at times reduced to tears by such a tumultuous stew. With it came a heady exhilaration, a rush of energy released.

I have been ‘out’ for a long time, with friends, family, work – but still carry a continual watchfulness in public places, a weasel voice that mutters somewhere between ear and brain: *Do they know? What will they think? Is this the right time to say it? Will they reject me? Will I still get that job? Can we hold hands? Is it safe here? Will they stare? Will they attack?* I know that many lesbians and gay men live with such inner police, to a greater or lesser extent. All of us hide at some point in our lives; it may be dropping your girlfriend’s hand when six big blokes are swaying down the street towards you after closing time, or a careful evasion of pronouns in connection with your partner during a job interview.

Working out when to hide and when not to consumes a lot of energy. One thing that has stayed with me from that evening more than a year ago is the memory of how good it feels when that energy is released. Another thing that has stayed with me is an excitement that there are some heterosexuals out there who are beginning to understand that the oppression of lesbians and gay men is *their* problem. And they are even talking about doing something about it!

The excitement is for me accompanied by some caution. Until last year I had assumed that the gay and lesbian battle for the basic three R’s – rights, respect and recognition – had fallen and would continue to fall squarely on our own shoulders. For some of us the question arises – do we really want straights meddling in, and maybe taking over, *our* struggle? Will they prove trustworthy?

Whether heterosexuals can and should seek to unseat heterosexual dominance (and benefit from this themselves in many ways) is an idea that is explored from different angles throughout the following pages.’ (Stiles 1995, p.3)

This edition (which was more substantial than other issues of *Comment*) includes articles about the responsibility of heterosexual people for addressing heterosexual dominance and homophobia; interviews about key concerns for therapists and health and welfare workers; considerations in relation to education and the law; community responses to anti-lesbian and gay violence; useful resources; and more. Copies of this *Comment* are still available.

Responding to issues of guns and violence

On 28th April 1996, at Port Arthur in Tasmania, a young man armed with a military style rifle, killed 35 people and seriously wounded 18 others. The Australian community responded with grief, outrage, soul-searching, and collective action in the form of demands for new national gun laws. For some reason, the Port Arthur massacre became an opportunity for Australians to speak out about the directions in which we wished our country to head. It became an opportunity to make strong statements about violence and its contributing factors. And importantly, it became a time when lawmakers responded in a bi-partisan way to the wishes of the electorate.

These seemed significant foundations upon which to build our responses to violence on both a community and national level. This *Comment* was intended as a contribution to broaden the continuing discussion about guns and violence. It included a number of differing perspectives on the events at Port Arthur, as well as considering further possible responses to guns and violence.

Racism: How can white Australians respond?

In 1997, Australia was gripped by an upsurge in racism incited by the speeches of a particular politician and the responses, or lack thereof, of the mainstream parties. It was an alarming time in the life of this nation. The issue of *Comment* that was written, 'Racism: how can white Australians respond?' (1997) became the most widely distributed publication we have ever produced. We have included a number of extracts here.

The current wave of racism across Australia is having widespread effects in the everyday lives of many Australians. Racist abuse in the playgrounds and streets of Australia's cities and increased violence and hostility in rural areas are being reported throughout the country. Many Australians are now having to brace themselves whenever they go out in public. Potential changes to immigration policy and native title threaten to alter Australia's cultural climate and it seems as if each day race relations experience further setbacks.

Many Australians have been struggling with how to respond to this wave of racism. In recognition of the urgent need for white Australians to find creative and constructive ways of talking and taking action about racism, we have gathered together in this Comment a small collection of ideas and information in the hope that they may be found useful. These writings have been produced for and by white Australians in acknowledgement of the privileges that we experience because we are white, the ways in which we are prone to inadvertently reproduce racism, and our collective responsibilities to try to address racist beliefs and practices.

The following pages are not intended to provide answers or solutions but aim instead to generate conversations and to provide encouragement, information and ideas to those who are already trying to respond to racism in their own lives and in the broader culture. If you find the writings useful, we invite you to make lots of copies, to share them with friends and family, to leave copies lying around your workplace, or ask for them to be discussed at your next work meeting.

'All in it together': Our responsibilities as white Australians

In summary, the two main themes that came from the conversations in preparing these writings were that as white Australians we all experience privileges because we are white, and we are all prone to inadvertently reproducing racism. This means that we are all in it together – that as white Australians we have a collective responsibility to try to address racism. We may not be able to be non-racist but by seeking to be anti-racist, in trying to notice racist ways of thinking, we can open possibilities for conversations and action. Another way of putting this is that we may not have created the problem, it may not be our individual fault that racism exists, but we have a responsibility to 'break the chain' of racism.

What would we need to do to create constructive conversations about racism?

In acknowledging the importance for individuals to speak out against racism, how can we at the same time remain aware of the real effects of the ways in which we speak out and the actions we take? Ways of responding which make us 'feel good' by distancing ourselves from overtly racist beliefs may not be experienced as particularly helpful by those people who are feeling the full effects of racism. Similarly, ways of responding to racism by white Australians which lead to increased polarisation and conflict between white people may actually make things worse for those people who are the direct targets of racism. How can we remain aware of the effects of the ways in which we speak and the ways we take action in relation to racism? And how we can act and speak in ways that increase the chances of constructive engagement with other white people?

The recent wave of racism and the need to respond has brought out into the open significant differences within families, between friends and in workplaces. This has led to many conversations about issues of racism. Many of us have examples of times and contexts where it has been impossible for us to find ways to make these conversations constructive. Just about the only thing that seems clear is that there are no easy answers on how to create constructive conversations about racism. And yet this seems an important area to explore.

- How can we respond to racist views and practices in ways that make it clear that we reject these views and practices while at the same time avoiding blaming individuals for what are collective issues and responsibilities?
- How can we show our commitment to anti-racist action without adopting an attitude of self-righteousness or showing hostility to other white people?
- How can we find respectful ways to talk with other white people about racism which don't lead to increased alienation from each other?

- How can we find ways to talk with other white people about racism which keep the conversation potentially always open?
- In what circumstances, after what time and effort, is it appropriate to leave certain conversations alone and to put energy on the issue of racism into other areas?

Taking care of conversations

In preparing these writings, many people spoke of the difficulties they had recently experienced in talking about racism. Listed below are some of the things that they had found most helpful:

- Some people spoke of the usefulness of asking questions rather than getting into arguments or debates.
- Some people have found it useful to try to invite conversations that involve a mutual exploration of how each person has come to think in the ways that they do.
- Other people spoke of the importance of acknowledging the ways in which they had at times been captivated by racist ideas or practices and using this as a starting-point for discussion.
- Some people spoke of how naming and acknowledging the fear of being seen as racist can open space for more honest discussions.
- Discussing racism as a ‘system’ outside the person has been helpful for some.
- Speaking of ‘what racism tells us’ or ‘what racism teaches us’ was seen by others to make it easier to have discussions that avoided arguments about whether or not certain individuals were racist.
- People felt that remaining aware of the effects of our conversations and creating contexts in which to speak about these dilemmas were good starting-points.

This issue of *Comment* also included an interview with Professor Henry Reynolds, one of Australia’s most respected historians. We have been consistently assisted by the generosity of eminent Australians who have been willing to be interviewed and have their words included within these informal publications. We also included a range of information about

native title and immigration as well as reviews of various resources and books available on these topics. Significantly, because it was a time in which many of us felt considerable despair, we also included a section entitled 'Good News' which included descriptions of creative and non-violent responses to the wave of racism that was occurring at that time.

Land rights

Later that same year (1997), issues of Aboriginal land rights became a key consideration. Rulings by the highest court in Australia created the possibility that meaningful land rights of Indigenous Australia would be recognised in law. This sparked a powerful backlash, however, and once again issues of race were a part of everyday conversation throughout Australia.

In response, we published a special supplementary issue of *Comment* which consisted of a speech given by Indigenous Australian lawyer Noel Pearson who at that time was Chair of the Cape York Land Council and member of the National Indigenous Working Group. This speech was given in Adelaide and it was so inspiring to us that we asked Noel Pearson if it would all right for us to distribute it in written form, and he agreed. We have included an extract from this speech here, as although the issues have changed, its key message still seems powerfully relevant today.

Let me say that there have always been Australians of goodwill. Ever since day one there have been Australians of goodwill who came out from England on those tall ships. There have always been people throughout our history who spoke up against Aboriginal murder and dispossession on the frontier. Even through that long period of silence about our true history - 150 years of silence - even through that period there were lone voices. There were ordinary Australians speaking out trying to have their voices heard about Indigenous injustice.

You see there have always been people like you and people like you have always lost the argument. You have always been the minority in the argument ... There have been too many episodes of

voices for justice throughout our history that have never prevailed. So it is not going to be enough to say that we form a part of the number of people black and white who want fairness and justice and the right thing. That is never going to be enough. For now is the time for people who want reconciliation to prevail.

You will have to use all of your powers of persuasion and goodwill and energy over the coming six months, or a year, or however long it takes, for us to prevail in relation to the native title act. You have to use every bit of your power to ensure that we prevail. But remember this, when you leave here tonight to set about the task of convincing and educating and talking with and discussing with Australians the importance of this opportunity, remember this; that the pearls of goodwill do not only reside in our hearts. The pearls of goodwill do not just reside in our black and white hearts. There are pearls of goodwill in the hearts of all Australians. We must find them – be they encrusted by faithlessness and misinformation, or enshrouded by frustration and manipulation. We must look for and find the goodwill shining through. We can't afford not to.

Finally, let me say to those Australians who are disturbed about how we should properly deal with our past and our responsibility for its legacy in the present, let me say to those who feel doubtful about their responsibility for the past, let me say to them that even if you reject any responsibility for the wrongs, the blood and the tears that were shed in the past: you are at least responsible for the history you are making now. (Pearson 1997)

National Sorry Day: Coming to terms with the past and present

In 1995 a National Inquiry was established 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 Wilson. They listened to individual stories from the stolen generations as well as submissions from governments, churches, researchers

and organisations. The Commission's Report, entitled, *Bringing Them Home*, was tabled in the national Parliament on 26th May 1997.

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 a 'National 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.

An issue of *Comment* was published to coincide with the first National Sorry Day on the 26th May 1998. This *Comment* was written out of our own desire to apologise to those Indigenous Australians who we have so wronged and our hope that a publication would be helpful in facilitating discussions. We hoped this publication could 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.

The issue included interviews with Jane Lester, an Indigenous Australian colleague about her family's experience of the inquiry into the Stolen Generation (see Lester 2001), various apologies to Indigenous Australia and reflections from non-Aboriginal Australia. It also included the following interview with Sir Ronald Wilson who was one of the Commissioners of the Inquiry.

Sorry – as sharing sorrow

from an interview with Sir Ronald Wilson

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 storyteller and myself or one of my colleagues, and a friend or counsellor for the storyteller. 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, 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.'

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. (Wilson 1998, pp.5-6)

We ended this issue of Comment with a list of short examples of actions that various individuals, organisations and communities around Australia had been taking about these issues in their own ways. We introduced this section with these words:

“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.”

Responding to the recent events in the USA: How can we talk with each other about this?

Within a week of the events of Sept 11th 2001, we had produced an issue of *Comment* written for a US and Australian audience. This was perhaps the most ambitious and complex publication we have produced. We faced a very real dilemma as to how to acknowledge the devastating loss of life that had occurred while also responding to very real fears about the possibility of Australia being involved in retaliatory military action and concerns about the rise in anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiment in Australia. We were also trying to write for both a US and Australian readership which we had never tried to do before. How to write in ways that would resonate for readers in both countries was a significant challenge. Furthermore, we were under a lot of pressure from some colleagues to simply name the issues, oppose US policy and make statements about what we believed should happen as a response. But we did not wish to respond in this way. People in the USA at this time were in a profound sense of shock and mourning. We wished to respond to what people were experiencing, and at the same time to consider many complexities.

We included letters that we had received from a number of colleagues from New York City and other parts of the US. We also included various messages of support to US colleagues and friends and a series of articles on 'talking about retaliation', 'responding to prejudice' and 'talking with children about these events'. We distributed this *Comment* widely throughout our networks of counsellors, therapists and community workers in the US and here in Australia. We have included here one short extract from this *Comment*:

Some people here in Australia are saying that it seems that more attention is being paid to the grief and trauma associated with these terrible events than all the other tragedies which occur in different parts of the world. How can we respond to this?

The events of the past week have been terrible. It appears that thousands of people have lost their lives and therefore at least tens

of thousands of people have lost loved ones. There have been other crises in different parts of the world that are similarly terrible, and tragically this will no doubt continue. Rarely do such tragedies occur in English-speaking countries, however, and rarely in the context of such media resources. Because of this, and perhaps our own priorities, we generally do not hear from other tragedies about the particular stories of grieving, trauma and family sorrow that we are engaging with so painfully this week. Rather than engaging in comparisons of suffering which often cause further anguish, what would it mean if from this tragedy came a determination to find ways to bear witness to the experiences of all those who are subject to acts of violence and oppression in different parts of the world? For some people in the US, this is one of the things they realise they will be taking away from this week's events – an increased sense of connectedness to other people who experience similar traumas. Some people are already talking about what it will mean for them if bombings begin of civilians in other countries. This new awareness of trauma will make witnessing other people's hardship and terror all the more painful. Some people are already talking about how this will lead them to act to prevent the occurrences of such bombings. Perhaps here in Australia we can draw meaning from their words and actions.

For the first time, email was the primary medium for the circulation of this issue of *Comment* and we were amazed at the possibilities this opened. We had produced the issue in less than a week since the events of Sept 11th and, once we had sent it out via email, almost instantly we began to hear back from readers in different parts of the world with further reflections, ideas and notes of appreciation. It seems relevant to mention that we also received a small number of extremely angry responses from people who felt we were too critical of US foreign policy. Overwhelmingly though, the feedback we received was very positive.

When war seems imminent ... how can we respond?

As it became clear that Australia was likely to join in an invasion of Iraq, we began to work on a written response which was placed on our website and again distributed widely via email (Denborough 2002b). It received many replies from people in different parts of the world. When the invasion did take place we collaborated with other agencies in making a poster that called for an end to the war which was then displayed prominently in many organisations. In response to the war in Iraq (and earlier in relation to the Bali bombing) we have also written and recorded songs which have then been played on radio stations here in Australia and overseas. We are increasingly interested in exploring the use of these and other mediums.

Responding to crises and to trauma

Just as we were completing this book, our region and the entire world was rocked by the devastation occurring in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, the Maldives and Thailand due to tsunamis. We have realised how very little we know about responding to such crises and how unprepared we would be if we were to find ourselves in a context of disaster – whether by nature or by war. We are thinking about how we can become more familiar with the work that is involved in responding to such situations. If you have experience in crisis response, or in working with communities to rebuild lives after a crisis event, we would be very interested to correspond with you about this. We are also in the process of creating a publication on the theme of ‘responding to trauma’, including the trauma of war, occupation, terror, natural disaster, political violence and torture. This project is in response to the sad reality that there are people in many different countries who are currently living with the effects of profound trauma.

Reflections

While issues of *Comment* have been put together quickly, and produced with very little expense, we have been surprised at how widely they have been read, and how appreciative people’s responses have been. The fact that highly respected public figures have welcomed their involvement in these pieces, and been delighted with the outcomes, has been heartening to us.

It seems that at the very times when fatalism, hopelessness and the politics of fear are most pervasive, the wish to be connected with others becomes stronger. This brings us considerable hope. At these times, if we remain aware that others will also be seeking connection and small ways in which they can make a contribution, then the written word can become a way of bringing people together. It can also provide support and a framework for people as they think through the issues and respond in their own ways and in their own contexts.

We are continuing to explore the role of the written word in times of crisis, and we feel that we are now joined with many others in these explorations. If you have ideas as to future issues of *Comment*, or are interested in responding to social issues in similar ways in your own workplace, community or friendship network, we would very much like to hear from you.