

Who am I? Who are my people? And where do I belong?

by

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I wish to acknowledge that I am on Kurna Land¹ and that I speak in the presence of many indigenous people and people from other cultures.

In being asked to speak about spirituality I have had to think deeply about my relationship to belief and faith. I have had to consider as a white, middle-class lesbian woman, what place if any spirituality has in my life. I guess I'm here to say that spirituality, faith and belief has a significant part of my life, in spite of my lack of participation within organised or defined religion.

I am a daughter of two ex-Salvation Army parents. Their marriage was the opportunity for both my parents to flee from the constraints and regulations of the Salvation Army. They made a brief attempt to insist their children go to the local Sunday school, but I was the fourth child and they had abandoned the project by the time I was old enough to attend. Consequently I am untrained in the religion of Christianity or any other religion.

I am the product of the secular, capitalist society that has turned ritual and spirituality into an orgy of consumerism and commercialism. Finding my way to spirituality within this context is not simple.

The absence of organised religion is easily replaced by the God of money with its daily and weekly consumer rituals.

Retail therapy is widely practiced as an effective relief from all sorts of modern ailments. However, its benefits are usually short-lived and ongoing shopping expeditions are generally required. This tends to lead to unwanted side effects such as debt and unwanted junk that we thought we needed. I have found the temple of consumption to be very alluring but rarely truly satisfying.

It has been through the challenges from Indigenous women that I have been able to explore more satisfying strategies to create ritual and meaning in my life. Alternatives to ongoing consumption as a way of experiencing the world around me have led me into relationships of belonging to my community and the environment I live in. From this belonging, faith, purpose and meaning have been able to unfold for me. This meaning or purpose is not fixed or definitive but it is a base, a foundation from which I grow and live and will ultimately die.

The beginning of this journey was from a series of questions asked of me by Kurna women in the early 80s. These questions were: 'Who are you? Who are your people? And where do you belong?'. These questions profoundly affected me. The obvious answer: white middle-class lesbian, fourth child, born in Melbourne, seemed very superficial. Yet in truth I could not name much more at the time.

What I began to be able to understand and answer first was that I was a tenant in Australia. I live here and enjoy its beauties, its freedoms, its enormous skies and its wealth, and I do all this on Aboriginal Land. I am a tenant.

Realising this really helped my sense of belonging. I had a good understanding of how to be a good and respectful tenant. The responsibilities and requirements of 'paying the rent' fitted my cultural framework perfectly. As I said earlier, the temple of consumption knows lots about paying bills.

This recognition of my relationship to this land as a tenant has been an important place from which to develop my understanding of myself and my cultural heritage. An essential element of these early learnings was being able to distinguish between what is my personal heritage, what is my collective cultural heritage, and what is someone else's cultural heritage. These distinctions have served me well in building respectful relationships that seek to honour the beliefs and rituals that fall outside my experiences.

This is about learning from other cultures. Learning from other cultures and religions rather than appropriating or souveniring other cultures has also been a central lesson in this journey. This is not an easy lesson when my collective cultural

heritage of centuries of invasion and appropriation of a whole host of different cultures. Regularly noticing where the rituals are drawn from helps me to honour the traditions that have shaped me and also draws me into relationships with others across time and context.

Creating rituals that facilitate connectedness helps me to answer the questions: Who am I? Who are my people? And where do I belong?

What I can now say about myself is very different from when I was first asked these questions seventeen years ago. I know so much more about my heritage of being a lesbian and the world of silences and secret codes and intense belonging. I know the different silences of being a relinquishing mother and the heritage of living outside the mainstream structures of our social arrangements. I continually learn about the interplay in my own life, between marginalisation and mainstream privilege.

The rituals of birthdays, summer solstice, our local community dinners and my team meetings all provide an antidote to the sense of isolation that can be generated through being different. One of the oldest rituals in my life is summer solstice. This pagan ritual resurrected through feminism is celebrated by my community through sharing our reflections of the year passed and hopes for the coming year. It also includes a present-giving ceremony in which everyone has chosen a name from a hat three months prior and we each make our person a present. We are not allowed to buy a present. Every year this ritual so close to the chaos of western commercial Christmas feels like a burden. The effort of making presents and supporting children to make presents seems like so much work. However, each year when we give our presents and share our year we all know we'll be doing it next year.

From our solstice ritual we have given meaning to the art and joy of giving as opposed to consuming. I have a wonderful collection of t-shirts with children's paintings on them, home made calendars and painted boxes made by children and adults, each of them a delight to receive and each coming to me with a story about why they were made for me. I draw strength from the belonging these communal rituals mark and make visible to all of us who participate.

Not all my rituals are communal. Many are solitary – sitting with chooks, watching the sun set, noticing the change in season, visiting the same piece of bush or same bit of beach just to notice the different ways the passage of time is experienced. Doing these things helps me to be in the moment,

in my life, to notice me and who I am. And they remind me that I am part of much bigger life cycle than my own life.

From these rituals I am acutely aware of the urgent need for healing the earth. Learning to caretake the environment is a big task that will require the collective efforts of us all. We need to create some shared commitment to protecting and caring for our shared environment. This is a huge task and one we need to get on with now not later. For me this translates into the development of daily skills in caring. Learning to be carers is another major challenge to the practices of consumption and throw away culture.

Within our community caring is about learning to relate well. To address our struggles and conflicts with each other in ways that move us closer rather than further apart. It also means not living within a nuclear family construct. This recently involved two parents within our community resigning from their struggles with their daughter over homework. Louise and Simon, Anna's parents, for a long time had a big struggle with getting the homework done. It wasn't working and they were feeling pretty bad with each other. Through our community and our caring for each other it became obvious that Anna still needed help with her homework but maybe not her parents' help. So our household – six doors down from theirs – is now responsible for helping Anna with her homework. And Louise and Simon have been able to resign from this struggle. They are now able to put much more effort into having a good time with Anna, free of the anguish of this fight. And our household is now where Anna visits her Homework Aunties every Monday night and we take pleasure in finding her books and giving her Homework Auntie advice.

Within our community, through getting better at caring for each other, we are creating daily rituals of respect and love.

From this place it is much easier to value the diversity of people, particularly in their ways of making meaning in their worlds. My rituals are so new and my meanings are often fragile and unclear, however, this is the world I am in – where the organised religions and spiritualities are either not intact or do not help me as a white middle-class, lesbian woman to make sense of the world

In developing this speech and exploring how spirituality expresses itself in my life I have come to realise that my faith and hope for the future is enriched by my regular spiritual practices of continually finding answers to the questions: Who am I? Who are my people? And where do I belong?

Thank you for listening.

Note:

1. The Kaurna people are the traditional custodians of the land on which the city of Adelaide now stands. In Australia, it is becoming customary, as a sign of respect, to acknowledge the Indigenous Australian peoples of the land prior to speaking at a formal event like a conference.