



Tree of Life with young Muslim women in Australia

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Abstract

This paper explores how the Tree of Life was re-created and adapted for a group of young Muslim women living in Sydney, Australia. Blossomed from these conversations was the nourishing source offered from trees, and from the Islamic faith. Reconciling these two sources led to an uncovering of 'survival skills' that the young women draw on to resist the struggles of everyday life. The innovation of women guest speakers from the local Muslim community added to the richness, and power, of these conversations. The Tree of Life opened up a space, and an appreciation for, alternative knowledges, alternative stories, and a stronger sense of community amongst the young women.

Key words: *Tree of Life, narrative practice, Muslims, Islam, young women*

Introduction

And they set off out into the unknown, carrying the memory of all that they leave behind in their hearts and on their tongues, even if they carry nothing else. These they will resurrect in stories, and these stories will be passed on, and so they will endure. This is what they carry, this is what they bear. They are bearing their witness. And we who listen to their stories are also bearing witness. Carrying something whose significance cannot be described in language, but must nevertheless be contained within it. (Mounzer, 2016)

The Tree of Life is a concept that fascinated us from the moment we learnt about it years ago. In narrative practice, the Tree of Life process (Denborough, 2008; Ncube, 2007) has been used to facilitate conversations with children and young people, and their families and communities. Participants draw their own tree as they reflect on their 'ground' (home, daily life), 'roots' (where they come from and their survival skills), 'trunk' (knowledge and values), 'branches' (hopes for the future), 'leaves' (important people), 'fruits' (what they have received), and 'seeds' (gifts and legacies). These trees join together to form forests, and participants are invited to discuss some of the 'storms' that they have weathered and withstood. This process allows young people to tell stories of difficult times in ways that reconnect them with their history, culture, values, knowledges, and important people in their lives.

Trees have always been significant in our lives, through our culture, religious tradition, spiritually, and our connection with the natural environment. Trees have long been portrayed in art, religious iconography, rituals, literature and stories. They are beautiful and majestic and play a critical role in the quality of human life and the wellbeing of environmental communities. Trees provide shelter and food for animals, purify the air, and regulate the temperature. They provide a gathering space for lovers to meet and friends to connect, and a structure for children to climb. We grew up valuing trees; the distinct aroma of eucalypts was central to Australia living, as much as the beach and the barbeque. Trees have a living wisdom and a place in world folklore and symbolism. Some have healing properties in addition to their ecological attributes. Hageneder (2008, p. 6) asserts that 'trees are our strongest allies'.

The story we are about to tell took place in a high school in Western Sydney. It involved eight young women, between the ages of 15 and 17, who assisted us in adapting the Tree of Life narrative approach to work with young people who

are identified as Muslim. The school was chosen because one of the Tree of Life facilitators had previously been a student there. She felt warmly towards the school and hoped to give back to it in some way. She was driven by a desire to contribute to the young women who now walked the same hallways and sat in the same library where she had been, and which had not changed since her graduation 18 years before. Her personal experience of being a student of the school positioned her as a partial 'insider', and the young women appreciated this throughout the program. The student population came from disadvantaged backgrounds, and would be facing multiple challenges and difficulties. The school, like many schools in Western Sydney, operated with limited resources and lacked the privileges of other schools. Being in a disadvantaged area brought additional pressures. Schools in disadvantaged areas in Sydney usually have a particular narrative attached to them: one that stories the students as being 'complex', 'at-risk' and 'vulnerable'. Using the Tree of Life, we hoped to provide a platform, and a space, to unearth some of the alternative stories of the young women, ones that challenged the dominant narrative. We hoped that these counter-narratives might become more widely known, and that they might influence others' work with Muslims, encouraging approaches that value strength and collaboration.

The Tree of Life program

The program we developed was delivered every Wednesday for four weeks. The first session took place outside the school environment in a beautiful outdoor landscape. We thought this would be a wonderful way to engage the young women and make them feel comfortable in a non-school environment. The remaining three sessions were delivered at the school library. Each session took place over an entire school day. Week one was an introduction to the roots, and the drawing up of the trees. Week two was a discussion of the ground, and the trunk. In week three we covered the branches, leaves, fruits and seeds. In the fourth and final session, we discussed the storms, forests, and survival skills, followed by a ceremony, or 'hafla', to celebrate the young women's completion of the program. We sought to treat the young women as our guests. As Aman (2006, p. 4) suggests,

Treating someone as a cherished guest addresses the power differential undisputable in a therapeutic relationship by elevating the status of the person who comes to consult the therapist.

We wanted to make it clear to the young women that they were the experts in this space, and that we, the facilitators, were their 'hosts' for the duration of the program. Every

session included the sharing of a meal with the young women. Sharing food and eating in the company of others is considered a strong Islamic and cultural practice. In fact, there is an Arabic proverb that speaks of the symbolism of sharing food: 'a relationship is established once food is shared'. The sharing of food made it possible to have open and supportive conversations. Hosting the young women in this way further added to the sense of having guests, and to the young women feeling like they were being 'hosted' by us, the facilitators.

On the first day we set up a space outside under a chestnut tree. It was a beautiful big, strong tree with protruding roots. We decorated the tree with paper balls and flowers. On the ground we scattered pillows and arranged Islamic prayer mats and blankets to make a circle (see Figure 1). The space had a warm and inviting feel, and we knew this would not be like any other space the young women would have been invited into. Sitting on the ground, close to the Earth, in a circle, was reflective of our culture and traditional learning environment.

We reflected that, as Muslims, trees play a significant role in our traditions. The Islamic tradition is rich with references about our responsibility towards nature and trees. We invited the young women to consider how trees are addressed in the Quran: they are referenced numerous times and viewed as an example of God's existence and of the miracle of life (Quran, 53:14–18, 1999 Bookwork edition). We also discussed the special tree in Jannah (heaven) that is referenced in many sacred texts (Islamic authentic narrations, such as Bukhari), and spoken of in Islamic traditions known as Sidrat al-Muntaha. The young women expressed surprise at hearing about this.

We invited the young women to quietly but curiously ponder the following: 'Have you ever gazed at a tree and wondered at its beauty, the complexity of its creation, and the sustenance it provides from every part of its being, from its roots to its leaves?' We stated that after our own experience with adapting the Tree of Life to working with Muslim young people, we would never again look at a tree in the same way. We had become more appreciative of the majestic nature of trees, and the extent of their relevance to our culture and religion. We used the following quote to highlight this relationship:

Narrated by Anas bin Malik (RA) that Allah's Apostle (peace be upon him) said: 'There is none amongst the Muslims who plants a tree or sows seeds, and then a bird, or a person or an animal eats from it, but is regarded as a charitable gift'. (Sahih al-Bukhari, Vol. 3, Book 39, Hadith 513)

The young women were interested in discussing the focus of Islam on charity and its relationship with plants and trees. Charity is one of the main principles that identifies a Muslim. However, charity is not limited to monetary deeds. The young women recognised that charity extends to other noble acts, such as planting a tree, 'giving back' and leaving something behind for others (the 'seeds' or legacies in the Tree of Life). We also discussed how the planting of a tree is regarded as an act of continuous charity, one in which the person who plants that tree will benefit from the fruits of their charity long after he or she has passed into the next world (the hereafter). We put forward a quote from the Quran, which highlights the extension of community beyond the human world:



There is not an animal (that lives) on the earth, nor a being that flies on its wings, but (forms part of) communities like you. (Quran 6:38, 1999 Bookwork edition)

Under the tree in Western Sydney, we discussed how trees are to be treated with respect, for we are taught that we are all creatures of God; whether we are tiny or large, all serve a purpose in the larger scheme of God's world. The verse above reminded us that the tree is a creation of God and one that has a place in this world, just like we do as human beings. We shared with the young women that, according to Islamic teachings, everything on the Earth worships God, including trees (Quran, 17:44, 1999 Bookwork edition). We were surprised to learn that they were already aware of this. However, they were amazed when we told them that, according to some Islamic teachings, the rustling of trees is the sound of them praising God. They found this to be an amazing phenomenon and we could sense their spiritual curiosity being awakened.

Guest speakers

Language gives the individual the power and strength of the collective. And writing, speaking, telling stories – wielding language in narrative form – has the ability to transform the collective through the individual experience. To cross over from that which is felt, experienced, to that which is voiced – for the purpose of witness[ing] and being witnessed – is each and every time the declaration of a singular understanding of what it means to be alive in the world. This opens up new spaces, new imagined possibilities, and those, through language, become part of the collective heritage. (Mounzer, 2016)

In adapting the Tree of Life for working with Muslim youth, we introduced guest speakers as a major part of the program. Storytelling is a strong tradition in Islamic culture, and the passing on of stories and experiences between generations is considered a necessary part of moving through life. Storytelling is a means of inheriting knowledge from those with shared experiences who are older and therefore seen to hold greater wisdom. Storytellers can be seen as planting seeds, or leaving a legacy to those who follow them. We observed that as the guest speakers relayed their stories, they related particular skills, values and hopes to people in previous generations who they may not have even met. This component of the program brought an awareness of a community of support that exists all around us, including the guest speakers, grandparents, and people from previous generations whom we may never have met.

Although this is not a traditional component of the Tree of Life approach, we made a calculated decision to include guest storytellers because we believed it aligned with Islamic understandings and cultural approaches to community. We incorporated traditional Islamic approaches to knowledge-making and to knowledge-sharing as a prompt for the young women. The guest speakers were each allocated a specific part of the Tree of Life to focus on in their storytelling. Before each session, each guest speaker was provided with a basic outline to guide their talk and to keep it relevant to their section of the tree. The questions were heavily influenced by Ncube's (2007) use of the Tree of Life with children. We also felt that it was important to add questions that would provide the guest speakers and the young women with prompts and permission to speak about events, places and memories that are traditionally excluded from programs with youth. We hoped the guest speakers' stories would clarify the Tree of Life metaphor for the young women when they had the chance to write on their own tree. Although the inclusion of guest speakers was an innovation, it was well-received and positively evaluated by the young women, and we suggest it would be an excellent addition to future Tree of Life programs with Muslim youth. It was recognition of our collective struggles.

The guest speakers drew upon, and brought attention to, shared words, experiences and descriptions. The guests were women from the Muslim community, to whom the young women may not have otherwise had easy access, and who had overcome their own storms. We chose to integrate speakers into the program to display diversity and demonstrate an array of choices and possibilities that might inspire and encourage the young women. This required that guest speakers be chosen to reflect the diversity of the Muslim community. The young women heard from women who had experienced 'storms' or difficulties that the young women could relate to. We hoped this would create a sense of hope within the young women. The guest speakers were sent a certificate of thanks (see Figure 2) which included some of the responses of the young women about what they had taken away from the guest speakers' stories: 'That we're all equal and the same and all have been in struggles in life', 'I will remember all the guest speakers who were talking and remember not to give up!', and 'Surround yourself with good people and get rid of the toxic people'. A young woman commented about another guest speaker: 'I felt like she was talking to me, talking about my story, and about my struggles'. This created a sense of connection with the strength of a tree.

We hoped that through the stories of the guest speakers, a sense of solidarity could be established among the young women; the type of solidarity that was open to contribution,



Tree of Life

This certificate is awarded to

Sarah

who others have observed;
is sweet, strong, friendly and thoughtful

Ola El Hassan

Facilitators

Lobna Yassine

Facilitators

but also allowed for differences in storylines of identity. Each guest speaker would come with her own story and would add to, or thicken, this sense of solidarity by speaking about shared values and shared sufferings. This worked to shift dominant unhelpful narratives about Muslims towards a storyline of Muslims as strong, intelligent and passionate people. The inclusion of guest speakers gave the young women an opportunity to see themselves differently, not just individuals, but as a community. This was particularly pertinent considering the current political climate for Muslims in Australia. The sharing of stories generated a sense of 'communitas' (Denborough, 2008, p. 41). It highlighted shared and collective struggles and difficulties, and also shared traditions, skills, values and histories. After each guest speaker, the most common response from the young women was, 'I'm not going through this individual experience alone'. Another common response was 'we are strong if we help one another and if we work together'. It was important to shift the 'I' to 'we' so that the young women could identify with a larger supportive community, and we hoped they would be able to rely on and turn to that community when the time came.

The guest speakers were invited to reflect on how the young women helped them, encouraged them and gave them hope. The guest speakers were asked to reflect on their experience, and to write back some responses. They were asked the following questions:

- What did it mean to you, to have young Muslim women hear your stories, and to be witness to your learnings and wisdom?
- Did you identify with any of the girls? Did they remind you of yourself? Or someone else in your life?
- Was there anything you were left thinking or reflecting about?
- What hopes do you have for the girls?
- What did this opportunity give you?
- How will this experience shape or change what you do in your work or personal life?
- Do you feel stronger or more passionate about something now that you've met the girls? If so, what?

We received a mixture of responses from the guest speakers. They replied with hopes of passing on to the young women the wisdom that they had gained from others in their lives. They recognised the complexity of 'trying to fit in in your new one [home] whilst constantly carrying the weight of your old home with you: that third culture identity!' They observed the importance of holding onto hope and faith: 'I'm not going to sugar-coat anything; things do get hard, but I hope they stay determined and passionate'.

Another guest speaker reflected: 'I walked away hoping that they would follow their dreams and passion rather than doing what is expected of them. I know following dreams can be a struggle when some things aren't as encouraged as others. Also, [I thought about the] ways in which we can support them in doing so'. One of the guest speakers felt that meeting the young women influenced her in a powerful way: 'This was a refreshing experience and a good reminder ... I feel more passionate about the work that I do. It's when I meet people like these girls they inspire us more than anything'. One of the guest speakers felt that she was simply passing on the wisdom and the stories that were passed down to her. Again, this relates to a sense of communitas, which 'provides a sense of transmission of legacy from one generation to another' (Denborough, 2008, p. 41).

The young women were surprised that they had in fact affected the guest speakers and had inspired adults, a role not usually recognised in young people. It gave room to consider passing wisdom 'up' and across generations, as opposed to the traditional notion that wisdom is only 'passed down'.

Roots: Where we're from

In our first session, under the chestnut tree, guest speakers were invited to reflect on their own roots. We invited the speakers to share stories and memories that were rooted in their history and extended beyond their present life here in Australia. We presented an introduction to the idea of 'roots', and offered a few questions to prompt the young women:

The roots of the tree signify what grounds us, what holds us, what keeps us steady, what has shaped us: our history, our connection to our past, and our foundations. It's really about what makes you, you. That includes your physical location and the people who you are connected to. Everyone's roots will look different because we are all different. So think about the following questions:

- What are your favourite places to go to, where you have good memories?
- What places do you feel connected to, even if you haven't been to them?
- Do you have a second language?
- What is your favourite music?
- Who are your childhood friends, and current friends?
- What village, town or suburb did you grow up in? What is your neighbourhood?

- What sports or clubs are you a part of?
- What foods, including celebratory foods, are important to you?

We were mindful that this may have been the first time that the young women had been asked such questions. It may have also been the first time that they had been invited to share details about their 'roots'. Young people are often asked to discuss their present, and especially their future, but rarely are they invited to share the histories of their relationships with people, places and skills. This is even more so for young Muslims. We are living in a time where most depictions of Muslims in the west are negative, and these young women were grappling with finding their way through and out of the 'hate'. They had received frequent messages that 'integration' requires separation from their cultural identity or religious values and ways of life. This uncertainty about expressing their culture was evident when we were covering the section on 'roots'. A young woman asked if it was 'okay to put Makkah [an important place of worship for Muslim's around the world] in this section'. Another asked hesitantly if she could include Arabic songs and places in Syria, her birthplace, that were important to her.

We showed a short video, 'The secret lives of trees' (National Geographic, 2016). We had arranged for an outdoor TV to be placed under the tree, and this is where the video was screened. It created a lovely atmosphere and assisted the young women to become more relaxed and curious about the program. After the video finished, we came back together as a group and discussed the biological make-up of trees. We then expanded on the video's themes and spoke about how trees feed each other, how they have their own ways of communicating, and how they even care for one another. We could see that the girls were becoming even more fascinated as we continued. One of the facilitators mentioned that she had watched a documentary on the BBC that spoke of trees having children. The girls' faces changed and one said, 'now I think you have gone too far!' Everyone in the room broke into a laughing fit, creating further positivity and warmth in the atmosphere.

We then proceeded to speak about the significance of trees in Islam and what the tree symbolises to us as Muslims. We spoke of how in Islam, the tree in general is special to us. The general word tree, *shajara* in Arabic, is mentioned approximately 26 times in the Quran (Istanbul Quran Research Association, 2015). Trees are also mentioned by their specific names and are revered and valued in Islam.

We asked the girls if they had ever heard the hadith (a collection of prophetic traditions and narrations about the Prophet Muhammed) that describes how a tree will

be planted in paradise for a person who praises God. Most of the young women said they were aware of this. The saying is:

Whoever says: 'Glory is to Allah, the Magnificent, and with His Praise (Subhan Allahil-Azim, Wa Bihamdih)' a date-palm tree is planted for him in Paradise. (Jami At-Tirmidhi, Book of Supplications, Hadith: 3464)

We then asked the young women:

So what is it about trees? Why did Allah choose trees? What is special about trees? Did Allah choose trees purely because of their biology? Or is there more to trees than we think? Is there a spiritual element to trees? How can we live our lives like trees? What can we learn from trees about life, loss and hardship?

We asked these questions as a way of bringing attention to the Islamic culture of trees, and to encourage a sense of curiosity. It was also a way to softly introduce a metaphorical and spiritual understanding of the world. We invited them into an alternative realm of thought, beyond 'scientific facts' and 'objectivity'. Tamasese, in conversation with Cheryl White, articulated this beautifully when she said

... there is a real pain for me to see the long-term effects of psychological colonisation of our people's minds. The coloniser may well have succeeded in exterminating many, many of the people, but if they haven't got hold of the soul, and the mind, and the spirit, they will never win. So the most exciting thing is to see populations rediscovering their own ways of doing things, their own answers to their own problems, and breaking free from psychological deprivation and psychological constraint (Tamasese, 2016, p. 118).

We wanted to remind the young women that Islam is not only about the physical and concrete, but also involves spiritual and soulful aspects of being. In a sense, we were encouraging alternative knowledges through which the young women might see and understand themselves in relation to one another. Our questions about the role of trees in Islam aroused their curiosity, and our invitation to reflect on these questions led to some fruitful conversations about how we take trees for granted, and how we tend to focus on the 'doing' part of our religious practices. There was a general agreement that, as Muslims, we can sometimes overlook the spiritual aspects of our religion. Igniting a *spiritual* noticing was a good opening to drawing up and creating their own trees.

We spent most of the first day on the roots, because we were conscious that the roots of the young women in the group were grounded in many different places around the world as a result of war and displacement. Ghassan Hage (2010, p. 7) reflected that the 'importance and power' of roots, as he discusses them, is not that they 'keep you grounded', but rather, that they 'stay with you as you move'. Hage quotes Gertrude Stein: 'What good are your roots if you can't take them with you'.

We also felt connected to Deleuze & Guattari's (1987) concept of the rhizome, borrowed from botany. We were interested in how trees, like people, may appear to be individuals, standing alone and separately, but how underground, or on the margins, they may be connected and networked in a multitude of ways. Smith (2010, 2011) stated that:

In botany, a rhizome is a horizontal plant stem, which exists underground, and from which the shoots and roots of new plants can be produced. Growing horizontally underground, rhizomes are able to survive extreme weather. The rhizome has been picked up in activists' cultures for its usefulness in dismantling hierarchy and power structures, while inviting a form that is more organic, responsive, co-creative and alive. (as quoted in Reynolds, 2014, p. 131)

We explained rhizomes to the young women, in simple language, and together we wondered how they might be creating connections, and spaces of empowerment and of movement, among themselves.

Ground and masabha: Daily life and identity

The ground part of the Tree of Life process is a wonderful opportunity to acknowledge the taken-for-granted identities and activities that we all enact daily. We wanted to be creative, and to use a tradition familiar to the young women, to make this task easier to grasp. We chose to use the *masabha* (prayer beads), a tool that is used to aid prayer and meditation in Islamic practice. It is used to bring attention and a sharper awareness and focus on God. This practice of repetitively praising God, using the beads, is considered to affect the soul in a nourishing way. We explained to the young women that each bead on the *masabha* could be used to signify one of their multiple identities, based on their everyday activities. We noted the similarity between the motion of using the *masabha* in prayer and the everyday motions that they engage in, which may seem trivial and repetitive, but reflect their multiple identities. We had the young women draw the *masabha* on their trees, either dangling from the tree or placed on the ground (see Figure 3). We then asked them to write on each bead about the different roles they embody. We came back as a larger group and each shared their identities, one at a time. For example, 'I am a daughter', 'I am a sister', 'I am a carer', 'I am a student', and so on.

Trunk: Skills and values

The young women were asked to reflect on their skills and values. All the young women placed God and hope among their values. Their relationship with God was often drawn upon as were their values of prayer, caring, forgiveness,



freedom, and helping others. One young woman stated, 'I value my religion even though I'm not religious'. The two young women beside her questioned her about what she meant by this. A respectful and curious conversation ensued about how we define 'religious' and how we define 'Muslim'. By the end, the three young women came to agree that it was possible to value a religion and not necessarily engage in the practices of that religion. One of the young women reaffirmed, and reassured her friend, that being a Muslim is about a commitment to certain values and about 'the kind of person you are'. This was a powerful moment in the session where the girls themselves, among each other, dislodged inflexible ideas around religiosity and embraced a fluidity of identity. Most notably, they expressed agency around some rigidly established ideas of 'Muslim-ness' and religion. Some other themes emerged, particularly in relation to the Prophet Muhammed (peace and blessings be upon him). There is an understanding in Islam that the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) embodied the teaching of Islam through his character, relationships and dealings with people. The young women felt that he role-modelled many of the values that they had learnt to appreciate, such as honesty, trust, respect, patience, and love. The young women who were new to Australia particularly valued 'other people's struggles'. The young women assisted one another when they were 'stuck' for ideas about their skills. For example, one of the young women announced that her friend was a wonderful singer, another announced that her friend was great at applying make-up for her friends. These conversations helped thicken the accounts, and bring forward details about what made them strong as a community.

Branches: Hopes and dreams

Freire said 'It is imperative that we maintain hope even when the harshness of reality may suggest the opposite' (Freire in hooks, 2003). With current politics in the background of this program, we were conscious of the harsh realities that the young women were facing. So we were surprised to find that they were drawn to 'hope', and were quick to complete this part of the tree. The young women were invited to think about their hopes for themselves, for other high school students, for young people all over Australia, and for young people overseas. A number of the young women expressed hopes for 'peace and freedom' for Muslims struggling overseas in war-torn countries. We asked for multiple landscapes of hopes to connect the young women with other communities, beyond the borders of this particular program, and even the school. We hoped that the young women would locate themselves within several communities, and recognise and reflect on how we

are connected in our struggles, even though we may not ever meet or personally know the people we hold hopes for. An interesting conversation emerged among the young women in relation to Indigenous youth in Australia. The young women discussed how their struggles were similar, but also that the struggles of Indigenous youth are 'harder' due to colonisation and their particular history. They said, 'Aboriginal people get neglected and treated differently to everybody else; they are not treated equally'. They identified struggles they had in common with each other, such as experiencing racism and being unfairly represented in the media, while at the same time 'just trying to deal with being young'. The young women shared hopes for freedom, equality, love, and peace. They hoped for positive schooling experiences and to make their families proud. The guest speaker for the day reflected on her hopes, and her grandmother's hopes, for attainment of higher education. She also spoke about her father, who had been exiled from Palestine and had made life decisions driven by the commitment to these hopes. She spoke proudly, and in honour of her grandmother and her father. This personal hope was extended to a collective hope when the guest speaker said that she also held these hopes for the young women. The young women were touched that the guest speaker held these hopes for them, and similarly, that they shared these hopes for young women globally.

Leaves: Re-membering lives

The young women were asked about significant people in their past or the present who had encouraged or believed in their hopes and dreams. They were also encouraged to think about people they had shared good times with and had good memories of, and the importance of these significant people. We asked the young people to also think about what they may have offered these people and how these people would feel about making it onto their tree. We encouraged them to include writers, singers and famous people who fit this category. Some examples of the people identified by the young women were the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him), significant family members, close friends, famous singers, and famous Arabic poets. These conversations were heavily connected to people they had listed in their roots and branches. The young women were invited to share the people on their leaves. They ranged from uncles who were overseas, right through to Arabic singers. We engaged in brief 're-membering conversations' (White, 2007) with the aim to 'provide an opportunity for people to revise the memberships of their association of life' (White, 2007, p. 129). We were keen to trace the histories of key people who shaped the young women's lives. Michael White stated:

Re-membering conversations are not about passive recollection but about purposive reengagements with the history of one's relationships with significant figures and with identities of one's present life and projected future. (White 2007, p. 129)

The young women were encouraged to share with the group how significant figures had affected them and continue to influence their lives positively, and to identify people who had made a useful and helpful contribution.

Fruits: Gifts received

The young women identified gifts they had received from the people on their leaves. These included books, songs, love, and the Quran (sacred Islamic text). All of the young women identified jewellery they had received as gifts from significant women in their lives, such as their mothers or grandmothers. We discussed the cultural practice of passing down jewellery, and its significance and meaning to the young women. This made it possible to again recognise common traditions and common connections. Our discussion of this section of the tree led into the contributions that the young women had made to others in their lives: the seeds.

Seeds: Legacies we wish to leave

In this part of the process, we asked the young women to think about the seeds that they were planting in the lives of others. This conversation naturally led to the concept of legacies and messages they hope to pass on to others. The young women identified legacies of strength, open-mindedness, inspiration, and being brave. We also learnt about some of the seeds the young women were planting by mentoring other young women in the school who were from a refugee background. This section provided recognition of young people as active agents and contributors: they were 'giving back' through small acts of activism and advocacy on behalf of one another, such as mentoring newly arrived students at the school.

Storms and forests

We hoped to have a collective conversation about the troubles, struggles and difficulties that young Muslims face. By sharing these openly, we created a platform to externalise and analyse the problems, rather than analysing and pathologising the young women. It was a good way to 'separate the person from the problem', and, particularly, to

separate problems from specific communities. By inviting the young women to list the 'storms' they had experienced, they were able to recognise that the problems were not specific to them as individuals. Investigating and gaining a further understanding of the problems gave the young women access to survival skills and strategies to prepare for future storms.

Verily with every hardship comes ease (Quran 94:6, 1999 Bookwork edition)

The guest speaker for the day reflected upon the above verse, and discussed the storms in her life and how she used her faith to overcome them. She spoke about how she did not feel alone, because as a Muslim she believes that 'nothing is lost with God, that God shares our burdens, and no hardship is too difficult to overcome'. This particular guest speaker came to Australia from Syria as a young person, a similar story to three of the young women in the group. The young women asked questions such as 'what was the hardest thing about coming to Australia?' and 'How did you adjust to life here, coming from a different country?' The guest speaker shared a number of stories that demonstrated the multiple ways she learned to survive the storms, and how overcoming them prepared her for future storms.

After sharing some mystical features of forests, we discussed the dangers that forests face, such as bushfires, and the struggles that young people face. Some of the struggles were specific to racism, the exercise of power within schools, and unwanted cultural practices and expectations. They also listed more general struggles, such as pressures to look a certain way, peer pressure, bullying, and troubles at home. Other struggles they listed were leaving home due to war, not being listened to or taken seriously by adults, and violence at home. We wanted to tease out not just the struggles, but also the impacts of these struggles on the young women and their families and communities. The young women listed things like feeling depressed and suicidal, using violence, losing hope and trust, hating yourself, losing faith in your religion, ending relationships, giving up, turning to alcohol and drugs, and making wrong decisions. The young women created a long list of effects of the problems, and did not take long to appreciate the variety and diversity of struggles that young people experience.

Survival skills

Listen to music, read a book, distract yourself with your phone, hide in the library, go to your room to avoid the 'dramas', Make du'a [pray]. (Survival skills identified by the young women)

Through our past work with young people, we discovered that they rarely have opportunities to share their struggles, concerns, experiences, and ways of coping.

Often, the experiences of young people are diminished and go unnoticed. Discussing survival skills – ways people had coped through the storms –acknowledged the many ways young people respond to trauma. By the time we reached this section of the program, we were confident that we had created a space where the young women felt safe enough and encouraged to share their survival tips, and to engage in conversations to identify and connect with other young women’s experiences and tools for getting through tough times.

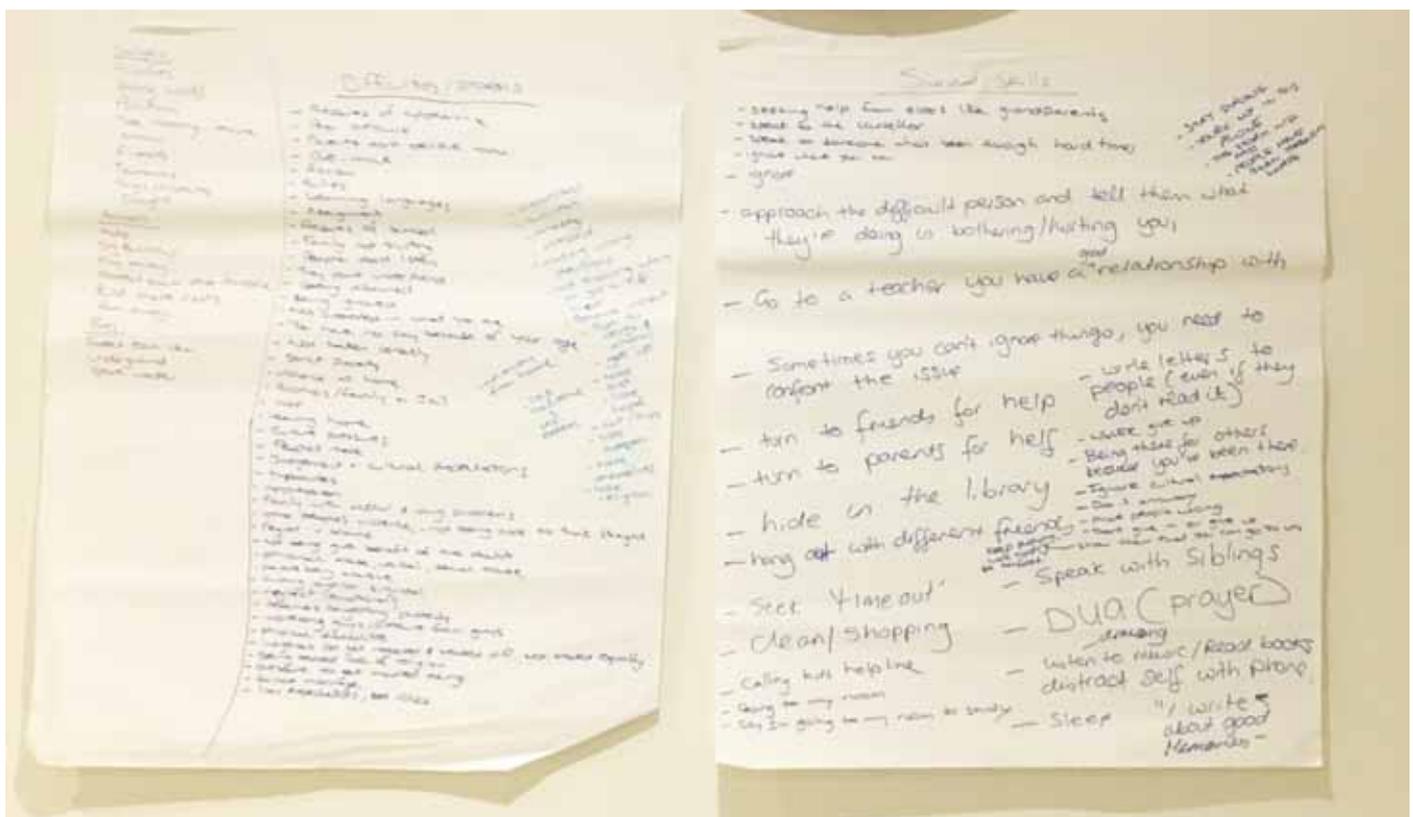
The young women collectively identified and named traumatic experiences that young people may face, such as escaping war, bullying, racism, family breakdown, family violence, community violence, sexual abuse, and experiences of grief and loss. The young women recognised that they had resisted the storms they had faced: a reflection often lost in deficit-based conversations about problems and the struggles that often occur in the presence of trauma. These conversations were influenced by Michael White’s notion that ‘no child is a passive recipient of trauma, regardless of the nature of this trauma’ (White, 2005, p. 12). It didn’t take long for the young women to begin describing ways that young people get through difficult times and the skills they develop along the way. It helped to start off by talking about how young people in other countries survive

through storms, and then how young people they knew either at the school or within their community cope through their own storms.

We used butchers’ paper to list ‘young women’s survival skills’. These skills ranged from seeking out help and support from an adult, a counsellor, a teacher or a trusted friend, to distracting themselves and avoiding certain situations, people, and conversations. As the young women were talking, we noticed they would look to each other and affirm each suggestion with a nod or by shaking their head in agreement. We also noticed that some young women would look at a friend when sharing a skill, almost as though they were speaking on that friend’s behalf. That was truly a beautiful moment to witness. Our butchers’ paper filled up very quickly. By the end of this session we had three pages filled with tips (see Figure 4).

The young women spent time discussing the ‘Kids Helpline’, and how confidential the service was. The older students advised the younger students that it is, in fact, confidential, and that your name does not have to be given to the professional on the helpline. Essentially, the young women were discussing formal resources and services, and advising one another about how safe services and resources are.

The young women also discussed power relations between teachers and students, and how to navigate these power relationships. The girls gave one another advice about what to do about a teacher who targets a student. One young



woman advised her friend to speak to the school counsellor, another student advised her friend to speak to a teacher that she was comfortable with. This conversation took place despite the presence of a teacher in the group, who was offering formal processes for dealing with complaints. The young women did not take up this offer, and instead went with the suggestion to simply speak to a teacher that they were comfortable with, rather than the teacher who is formally responsible for complaints.

The ceremony: *Hafla*

The young women were given formal invitations for their parents to attend the ceremony (see Figure 5).

Prior to the official ceremony, the trees were hung up, and the young women were asked to speak to the group about their reflections on their individual trees. Each was asked questions about the people on her tree, and about the events, skills and values depicted. Stories were told, and the histories of values and skills were traced to their roots. Hopes were shared and reflected on. For example, a student had hopes for people in Syria. One of the other students in the program had recently arrived from Syria. She was asked

what it was like to know that young women here in Australia had hopes for people like her, when she was back at home in Syria. She said that it meant a lot to her to know this, and that she had no idea that people in Australia were thinking about her and the plight of the Syrian people. The student who had this hope on her tree was asked to reflect on that comment. She said that it made her feel that she wants to help students who come from Syria and who are new to the school, perhaps by helping students in the international English class at school. Another student expressed surprise and appreciation that the other girls could give an accurate description of her, including her hopes and how she saw her herself. This was made possible by the sharing of stories along each part of the tree.

We wanted the *hafla* to honour the young women and to celebrate them and their achievements. Pride is central to Arab culture, and we are known to do things 'big'. We stated that the Tree of Life was an international program run in all parts of the world. When we said this, we noticed the parents light up with pride. Certificates were handed out and descriptions of each young woman were read out aloud. The descriptions written on the certificates were based on comments that the girls had made *about each other* during the program. As the certificates were read out, one of the



mothers nodded vigorously in agreement when her daughter was described as 'strong-willed'. This created a light-hearted atmosphere, built on humour.

The young women and their parents were invited to reflect on the trees together. The parents were proud that they were on their children's trees, and that shared values and significant people were on the trees. Two fathers expressed an interest in giving back by donating trees to the school and making tags to attach to the trees. Another father expressed how valuable the program was, and his keenness for the program to continue into the New Year. A father expressed pride that his daughter had participated in an international program. His daughter said that she 'felt smart' to be part of an international program. Another father stated that he wanted to frame his daughter's Tree of Life and hang it up in the family living room.

In setting up the ceremony, or *haffa*, we were inspired by a Tree of Life program created by Aboriginal Australians, which allowed for 'intergenerational acknowledgement' (Denborough, 2008, p. 94). Inviting the elders to our ceremony provided the opportunity to honour their past, and for the parents to see their histories expressed by their children. The legacies and stories that the young women drew on were reflective of their parents' collective histories and cultures. Even the skills and values that the young women drew on could be traced back to their roots, right back into past family generations. Without planning or aiming to so, the ceremony had become a 'ritual' that provided 'intergenerational honouring and acknowledgement' (Denborough, 2008, p. 94).

I will never look at trees in the same way again.
(One of the young women at the end of the program.)

Young Muslims as knowledge-producers and competing knowledges

When making the decision to offer the Tree of Life activity, we reflected about focusing specifically on young Muslim women. Dulwich Centre Foundation has been encouraging practitioners from different cultural and religious contexts and traditions to adapt and transform the Tree of Life (and all narrative practices) in order to avoid psychological colonisation and also to spark innovations in the field. The work described in this paper was supported by Dulwich Centre Foundation and Bankstown Youth Development Service (BYDS) which were both excited about the Tree of Life being adapted for Muslim young people. The Tree of Life was originally developed for children in South Africa,

in response to shared experiences and losses from HIV/AIDS. The Tree of Life has been described as a way to work with collective experiences, and 'collective vulnerability due to broader social factors' (Denborough, 2008, p. 72). Since then, the Tree of Life metaphor has been widely shared and adapted to different settings, and is being used in culturally relevant ways (see <http://dulwichcentre.com.au/?s=TREE+OF+LIFE>).

As women who identify with the Muslim community, we put forward an array of reasons about why it was important to facilitate a project with this particular group. Our reasons came from direct and personal experience. One of the most significant reasons was that Muslims in Australia are up against dominant hurtful and harmful narratives about who they are. In the context of blatant racism in Australia, we recognised that Muslim youth are a particular focus and target of the media, government interventions, and research. For example, recently, the Australian government has contributed millions of dollars to 'countering violent extremism' programs for young people, with the ultimate goal of 'deradicalisation'. Embedded in this discourse is the assumption that violent extremism is present, and now it is a matter of 'countering' this extremism among Muslim young people. Young people have been defined as 'radicalised', hence the need to *de*-radicalise them. Young Muslims are *done to*, enacted *upon*: they are risky subjects (Besley, 2010). We embarked on the Tree of Life process in a context where people, organisations and institutions who have access to young Muslims are favouring this approach. Any approaches that do not fit the 'deradicalisation' narrative are viewed with caution. From experience, convincing schools that Muslim students could be engaged in a project that was not focused on the 'risk' of 'radicalisation' was usually met with hesitation and resistance. Culturally specific programs are common across Australian schools, for example, programs specific to Indigenous or Pacific-islander students. However, in our experience, Muslim-specific programs are generally viewed as excluding other cultures, and encouraging non-secularism, which could be perceived as creating problems for Muslims integrating into Australian society.

Ball (1990, pp. 17–18) stated that discourses are not only 'about what can be said, and thought, but also who can speak, when, where and with what authority'. Discourse limits what can be thought. From the start, we had a sense of the dominant discourses that were producing limited subject positions for Muslim students. Drawing on Ball's work, we reflected that young Muslim people are spoken about in binary terms: either as *vulnerable* to terrorist recruits, or as *culpable* terrorists in the making. We drew on Hussein (2016), a writer and an academic,

to inform our views on this, and to prepare for the young women's questions and discussions. For these young women specifically, what might they think about themselves and others? What was it *possible* for them to think about themselves and others? What limits had been placed on what they *could* think? We had no doubt that the stories of young women we would engage would be shaped by similar binaries.

Hamid (2007) aptly asserted that there is resistance to change; however, 'power comes from becoming change'. With this in mind, we were very excited to hear about the young women's resistance to the limitations of dominant discourses. We hoped to dismantle and replace dominant harmful discourses; however, we had yet to discover which discourses the young people would choose to dismantle, and what they would replace them with.

Deleuze (1994, p.158) insisted that we are

... slaves so long as we do not control the problems themselves, so long as we do not possess a right to the problems, to a participation in and management of the problems.

It was in this vein that we were attracted to the Tree of Life process. We knew that this was a way of privileging and honouring the knowledge of young people, and a way of accessing what Foucault (1975) refers to as, 'subjugated knowledges'. We hoped that the Tree of Life would create for the young women a sense of having some rights over the problems that they faced. We also hoped that the Tree of Life would work to destabilise current dominant narratives about young Muslim people, and that these might be replaced with stories of resistance, solidarity, community and hope. We hoped that the Tree of Life activity would allow young Muslims to become *knowledge-producers*, a role often reserved for adults and academics.

Michael White stated:

In this work, people experience being knowledged, but this is not the starting point. Experiencing this is the outcome of a process that is at once characterised by 'resurrection' and 'generation'. As therapists we play a significant role in setting up the context for this. We assist people to gain access to some of these alternative knowledges of their lives by contributing to the elevation of the sub-stories or sub-plots of their lives, by contributing to the resurrection of some of the knowledges of life that are associated with historical performances of these sub-plots. And we join with people in the generation of knowledges of life through the exploration of the ways of being and thinking that are associated with these sub-plots. (White, interviewed in Hoyt & Combs, 2000, p. 11)

The treasure of the Tree of Life lay in the process of bringing to the forefront 'alternative knowledges' 'sub-stories' and 'sub-plots'. We were confident that the Tree of Life would give room for a genuine, and most importantly, hopeful approach.

Pancho Arguelles (2007) stated simply: 'If it doesn't start personal, it does not start. But if it ends personal then it ends'. For us, the group had to go beyond addressing 'personal' issues or struggles that young Muslims were facing. It had to move into the realm of politics, movement and connectedness beyond the small group of students that we engaged. We were also conscious that although the current political climate is no fault of their own, they were responsible for responding to it, addressing it, and being each other's protectors and caretakers (Coates, 2015).

This journey also clarified for us why Michael White was hesitant to categorise or separate clinical practice from community work. He stated:

I've always refused the sort of distinctions that put what is commonly referred to as clinical practice in one realm, and community development and social action in another. This is not a distinction that I can relate to. It is a distinction that makes it possible for therapists to treat the therapeutic context as if it is exempt from the relational politics of culture, and to disavow the fact that therapeutic interaction is about action in the world of culture. (White, interviewed in Hoyt & Combs, 2000, p. 24).

This certainly resonated for us, as we were very conscious of the real life effects for these young women.

As social workers who identify as Muslim and women, we share a devotion to matters of social justice. We believe the inclusion of diversity is significant to the moral fibre of society. We found ourselves drawn to the Tree of Life because it was a culturally relevant concept. The more we explored the concept, the more we felt it was something close to our hearts. We could envision how Muslim youth might connect with the Tree of Life if we made it relevant to them by using Islamic traditions, concepts and teachings. Our previous experience with running community programs, which mostly lacked cultural recognition and diversity, gave us a greater appreciation of the flexibility that the Tree of Life process offered us. We could adapt the program and integrate cultural and religious elements.

We also share an experience, and love, of working with young people across our working lives. We both had an understanding that young people are individuals in their own right, not merely 'adults in the making', a discourse

that shapes many other programs. We approached the young people in the 'here and now', as a group that was facing real life problems, and offering responses. Our agenda, as much as possible, was driven by the young people, as opposed to prioritising adults' (and institutions') agendas. We maintained an awareness of our adult-centric approaches and environment, and worked hard to remain conscious of any blind spots throughout the program. We were conscious of the power differentials that White & Morgan (2006, p. 59) discuss: 'the invitations for adults to reproduce dominant cultural practices of marginalisation are ever-present' when working with children and young people. We also held very closely the importance of Michael White's concepts of remaining decentred and influential, while also positioning young people as experts in their own lives.

On a more personal level, both of us had experienced being a Muslim in Australia. We had experienced racism, stigmatisation and stereotypical responses, both as young people and as adults.

We were both familiar with the hardships, or storms, that we as a community are facing. As young people, we had both had our fair share of issues and difficulties to overcome. We used this familiarity and experience to guide our adaptations of the program, and to relate to the young people with whom we were working.

We hope that the Tree of Life program achieved its overarching aim of providing the opportunity for young

Muslim women to actively contribute to each other's lives by drawing on their own expertise and knowledges. Our biggest learning has been to appreciate, acknowledge and honour our communities' ways of knowing, healing and surviving. We have learned new ways to resurrect stories, pass stories on, and to become the bearers of each other's stories. This is a form of resistance.

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'I would like to thank my mother Adla Hadid Elhassan for inspiring me to become a social worker. This is her legacy.'
Ola Elhassan



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Reflection by Aunty Carolynanha

Reading through this project, a number of things stood out for me.

I am an Adnyamathanha Aboriginal person from the Northern Flinders Ranges in South Australia.

I have used the Tree of Life in a number of contexts and the opportunities are endless. Reading through this one I was particularly drawn to how the young women were taken to a space where they could speak freely about their spiritual beliefs, and having the guest speakers coming in to build on the stories and to share to create strength through past knowledge and experiences.

It was beautiful how they placed God and hope in their values and the spiritual theme was drawn out through the elements of the tree. I remember growing up on a Christian mission that expected us to partake in the weekly church going, prayers and practices which seemed to have been imposed on us, however, later in life I found that we as Aboriginal people already had a similar spirituality in our lives. This set the stage for the beginnings of my spiritual beliefs and ongoing practices in life that would sustain myself throughout the years.

I was particularly drawn to the first reference around treating the women as guests. We sought to treat the young women as our guests. As Aman (2006, p. 4) suggests,

“Treating someone as a cherished guest addresses the power differential undisputable in a therapeutic relationship by elevating the status of the person who comes to consult the therapist”

In the 1930s a white missionary rode on a push bike to my remote community in Northern South Australia to work with my people the Adnyamathanha. His role was to continue to preach the word of God and to convert the people. However, the Adnyamathanha people did exactly this to him, they treated him as a cherished guest whom they could learn from, but remained strong in their own cultural identity to be able to work side-by-side. If you have insight into the colonisation story of Australia you would appreciate what this meant for Aboriginal people during that era.

The following references particularly resonated for myself also because it is something that we firmly believe in and draw on whilst navigating our way through the daily challenges of our lives as individuals, therapists and community members.

... there is a real pain for me to see the long-term effects of psychological colonisation of our people's minds. The coloniser may well have succeeded in exterminating many, many of the people, but if they haven't got hold of the soul, and the mind, and the spirit, they will never win. So the most exciting thing is to see populations rediscovering their own ways of doing things, their own answers to their own problems, and breaking free from psychological deprivation and psychological constraint (Tamasese, 2016, p. 118).

And we are also continuing to build on our own language and cultural ways of doing things because these are the things that give us strength.

Language gives the individual the power and strength of the collective. And writing, speaking, telling stories – wielding language in narrative form – has the ability to transform the collective through the individual experience. To cross over from that which is felt, experienced, to that which is voiced – for the purpose of witness[ing] and being witnessed – is each and every time the declaration of a singular understanding of what it means to be alive in the world. This opens up new spaces, new imagined possibilities, and those, through language, become part of the collective heritage. (Mounzer, 2016)

Overall, I thoroughly enjoyed reading about the project and how it was used in this context. It gave me greater appreciation of the snapshot of Islamic tradition that I was introduced to. I got a strong sense that the young women have now acquired and been made more aware of their skills they have used to survive, and which ones they will continue to use. The use of the guest speakers brought in another dimension to the whole concept of the Tree of Life and this is something I will look forward to using when I am doing my community therapy.

Acknowledgement and thanks for the young women for sharing, and for everyone else involved in the project.



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