



A Tree of Spirituality:

Exploring insider knowledges of balancing
Catholic and First Nations identities using narrative practices

by Danita Martin



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Abstract

The Catholic church has been implicated in histories of colonisation and loss of identity for First Nations peoples. For many Aboriginal people, it is also a source of community, pastoral care and identity, and is held in complex balance with Aboriginal spirituality. This paper describes a process of seeking insider knowledges from Catholic First Nations school students about how they hold their Aboriginal spirituality with care alongside their Catholic faith identity, and how they navigate the Catholic education system. It shows how the Tree of Life process was adapted to include invitations to reflect about spirituality and religious identity. This provided space for identification of unique outcomes about what the students valued and how they hold on to what is important to them.

Key words: *Aboriginal; Catholic; Christian; religion; decolonising; Tree of Life; narrative practice*

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I met with a group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who were yarning about Mary MacKillop, an Australian Catholic saint. The students were struggling to connect with the story of their school's namesake and her values. I am interested in nurturing a climate that affords students the power to make meaning from religious and cultural identities that resonate with them (Taliaferro et al., 2013). Drawing on re-membering practices (White, 2007), I invited the students to think about these questions:

- How can we make the story of Mary MacKillop relevant to our story as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?
- What are the beliefs and values that Mary MacKillop held on to?
- Can you think of a person within our own Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community who reflects the same values and beliefs?

Yarning about these questions both deconstructed the story of Mary MacKillop and invited the students to consider other members of their club of life.

Through particular practices of power, the Catholic church and other religious systems have invited First Nations peoples to engage in the subjugation of our own lives (White, 1995). Religion has been used as a colonising instrument to control Aboriginal people, including our spirituality, leaving a legacy of oppression, dispossession and loss of spiritual identity. Exploring the effects of Mary MacKillop's story with the students left me wondering about other stories from Catholic First Nations people. How do they connect their Aboriginal spirituality and Catholic faith identity? How might their stories and local knowledge contribute to others who struggle to negotiate this space (Epston, 2014; White, 2007)?

This paper describes one aspect of a broader project of working with young people to explore their insider knowledges about balancing identities that might be complex or in conflict, particularly in relation to Aboriginal spirituality and Catholicism. It describes use of the Tree of Life (Ncube, 2006) as a method for engaging young people in these discussions.

Context

As the Aboriginal Participation Officer for Catholic Education, I support 78 primary and secondary schools

in Brisbane, which together have 1000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Schools and families seek my support for problems associated with absenteeism, disengagement with school, breakdowns in communication and concerns about children's wellbeing. I enquire about what has given rise to these problems and what actions families and students have taken to address them. I explore people's preferred identities, which are richly described through the ways they are responding to problems and through their abilities, skills, knowledges, hopes and dreams (Morgan, 2000).

During these yarns, it's often relevant to identify some of the reasons why First Nation families have chosen a Catholic school. These may include:

- the availability of pastoral care and support
- identifying as Catholic and holding strong beliefs in relation to this religious identity
- having heard positive stories from community members about their Catholic school experiences.

When yarning about spirituality, I remember that:

- everyone has their own beliefs about spirituality, religion and First Nations identity
- people's meaning-making is not fixed
- I must focus on the meanings people make about the Catholic context and its complexities
- I can acknowledge the unique expressions people give about their personal journey of spirituality
- people are the experts on their own lives (Combs & Freedman, 2012).

Yarning about spirituality

When I was first introduced to narrative therapy, it was described as a non-blaming approach that sees people as being the authors of their own lives, and in which the person is not viewed as the problem, but the problem is the problem (Morgan, 2000). These principles of practice offered new ways of responding to the families I meet. I have since found that narrative practices align with our First Nations mobs' beliefs and oral traditions built on storytelling.

When working with my families and students in a therapeutic way, colonised practices associated with time and system structures can bring challenges for the way I provide cultural support. These practices hinder working in a culturally respectful way with my community, bringing what Reynolds (2011) has referred to as 'spiritual pain'. In this context, engaging in yarning is a decolonising practice. This practice invites collaboration and engagement with our students and families. It involves sharing with one another and listening to each other's stories and experiences in a supportive and honouring way. The use of yarning circles is a deeply foundational cultural practice that is specific to First Nations peoples. It provides ways to engage and an opportunity for therapists and clients to share an experience that is culturally safe and supportive (Johnson, 2014).

Engaging in yarning practice supports me to remain decentred and influential when asking our mob to speak about any problems associated with spirituality, and avoids positioning our mob as the problem. I also bring my own personal experience of how I do spirituality, which is deeply embedded in practices of hospitality. My grandfather, Auntie and mum created a home that was open to anyone who needed to come for a cuppa and a yarn. It was filled with love, laughter, acceptance, prayer, nourishment, safety, music and warmth. When people came to visit, they always left feeling nourished spiritually. They were heard and felt a sense of belonging and connection. This spiritual practice is what I carry into my work with families and students today. Auntie Barbara Wingard (2001), our First Nations Kurna Elder, has said that Aboriginal spirituality is reflected in stories that speak about the quality of our relationships, the ways we keep connected to Country and how these are sustained by our practices and protocols.

Colonial practices reflect a Western knowledge system that differs from Indigenous knowledges and worldviews in relation to spirituality. Catholic education and spiritual practices are guided by religious beliefs, rituals, values and social justice (Grieves, 2009). Historically, Catholic practices were about imposing religious beliefs and values on First Nations peoples as a form of control, therefore becoming the dominant story in the lives of our mob (Smith, 2012). Morgan (2000) has written about how our cultural worldview can be impacted by this dominant culture. When Indigenous knowledges are discredited and underappreciated, that detracts from our identities (Grieves, 2009). At the same time, Victoria Grieves (2009) points out that

in contemporary Australian society some Aboriginal people express their Spirituality through participation in the Western Christian churches ... For those Aboriginal Australians who observe aspects of the Christian faith, it is often a way of continuing with their own spiritual beliefs and cultural lifeways. Many Aboriginal people of high degree do not reject Christianity outright but rather incorporate it into their existing belief structures. (Grieves, 2009, p. 18)

Yarning is a decolonised method that can support our people to speak about their spiritual lives and identities in ways that are culturally safe. It also creates space between the person and the problem story. As we begin to yarn, I like to spend the first few moments with families getting a sense of how they are and what has been happening for them before moving into yarning about problems. White (2007) referred to this position as a 'cool engagement', offering an opportunity to talk about life outside of worrying experiences.

Using the Tree of Life to explore spirituality

I have been captivated by the Tree of Life metaphor created by Ncazelo Ncube (2006) to support children who are experiencing trauma. There is a long history of experiences of oppression and disconnection from those practices that support our Aboriginal spirituality. I wondered how the Tree of Life metaphor might support First Nations students to explore their identity stories of religion and Aboriginal spirituality. For First Nations students, the story of Catholic identity is taught in school where, more often than not, our students struggle to relate. In my experience, this struggle is not an isolated experience but a collective response. Engaging with the Tree of Life supports a collective approach when working with groups to find ways to give voice to and explore preferred identities (Denborough, 2008). I was interested in how this might be helpful when meeting with students to seek their insider knowledge about balancing their Aboriginal spirituality and Catholic identity, and in particular, their alternative knowledges that sit outside of the educational space (Epston, 1999).

I met with the school leadership team to talk over the details of my proposed co-research with the students. We discussed the length of sessions, parental consent forms, who would be involved and which groups of

students this approach would be suitable for. Once we had worked out the details, it was time to schedule the sessions. It was decided that the Year 8 cohort would be involved because the school leadership said that these students were not engaging at school.

A few questions began to crop up in my mind: Would these girls want to be involved? How would they view me seeing as the school doesn't have a positive view of them? How might I create a therapeutic space that reflects curiosity, frankness and respect to present this Tree of Life program as an opportunity for the students to explore their own identities (Freedman & Combs, 1996)? How might I create a therapeutic space that avoids reproducing the oppressive practices that are embedded in the education system towards our mob (White, 1995)?

Preparation

The first Tree of Life session would involve a group of seven Year 8 First Nations students whom I had not previously met. I decided to check in with the Aboriginal worker, Abbie, a few days before to make sure that I had covered everything (food, space, who was attending, parent permissions), and to find out whether the students had expressed any questions or concerns about the sessions. Abbie mentioned that some of the girls were feeling quite anxious because they didn't know quite what to expect. I decided to hold an online session before our first meeting so that the students and I could come together as a group to yarn about the Tree of Life process and discuss any questions or concerns, as well as letting them put a face to my name. I hoped this would be an opportunity to build connections and yarn in our way, with me being open, curious and respectful as the basis of a therapeutic relationship (Freedman & Combs, 1996).

Practices of welcome

Finally, our first official yarning group session began when the Year 8 students began arriving at our First Nations room. It was important to make sure the space for this yarning and connection reflected our identity as Aboriginal people. The room had powerful imagery of our people in various cultural settings (dance, music, art) displayed on the walls, along with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags and artefacts. I hoped this welcoming space would help the girls to feel that sense of belonging and being valued, not only as students but as First Nations people.

One by one they walked in and sat on the lounge and on the floor, all facing towards me. It felt like a space

had opened up between us and I needed to fill it. I started the yarning session with practices of welcome. Aunty Barbara Wingard (2013) says that conducting Welcome to Country is about inviting respect for land and for each other. I said:

Hi, you mob, how are you all going? Thank you for joining with me in this Tree of Life session and for your time when I know that you all will have a lot going on at school about this time of year. We begin always with a cultural acknowledgment of each Country and of each other. Do we feel comfortable to introduce ourselves and where our mob is from? I am happy to introduce myself first to lead the way, then others who know can lead after me. If you are not sure of your connections, you can simply acknowledge the Country your school is located on.

Joining with the students in this experience was especially important considering the historical implications of colonisation on identity stories. However, the students weren't quick to take up the invitation to introduce themselves and their Country. I noticed that one student was moving around a lot more than the others and I asked her if she would like to introduce her classmates to me. As she was introducing them, she shared a little something special she knew about each of them.

Over the morning, I struggled to cross the wide space that I felt between myself and the students. I didn't hear any negative comments, negative identity conclusions or expressions of anxiety, worry or fear, but the girls were not engaging in the conversations either. I sought to externalise religion and spirituality and to work towards experience-near descriptions to provide language for our conversation. This proved difficult.

Two Year 11 students joined us later in the morning. As our yarning continued, particular stories of Catholic identity emerged. With curiosity, I invited one of the Year 11 students, Brittany¹, to share her story with the group. Her Catholic story was centred around family. Brittany and I began to engage in a small yarn. I asked whether her whole family was Catholic and what the experience of attending a Catholic school had been like for her. Did she connect with the Catholic faith identity? I listened for descriptions of preferred identities and whether these identity conclusions had created any problems for her. One response she provided was that the Catholicism that was taught in the school was different to the Catholicism at her church. I was curious about this. Brittany couldn't find a description

other than to say that the Catholicism in school was really different to what she experienced in her Catholic church. I wondered what this description spoke to for Brittany. Could she name these differences? Why were these differences so noticeable? Did it connect her to a person, a story, a memory? Was there a particular difference that connected Brittany to her Aboriginal spirituality?

Session two

In the second session, I had a new group of five girls join: two Year 11s, one Year 8 and two Year 7s, along with the Aboriginal support worker, Abbie. They all came very excited. I had set up another welcoming space, with an Aboriginal printed tablecloth laid down on the table and my sound box playing soft, calming music.

Faulkner (2020, p. 25) has described the importance of structuring safety in ways that attend to power relations. We spent a few moments yarning as a group about what a safe space looks and feels like, and how I would know if they didn't feel safe. Was there a particular signal that they would show me? Structuring safety is also an ethical requirement from an education system perspective.

I began this yarning session by briefly explaining the Tree of Life concept. I also spoke about my intention to see how the Tree of Life might work to support students in exploring their spiritual identities.

As we moved further into conversation, we began to unpack the word 'spirituality'. I had planned some questions to support the students to externalise this word and to seek out insider knowledges that the group could draw on throughout our conversations. I asked, 'When I say the word "spirituality", does it bring to mind any images, thoughts, stories, sounds or smells that connect with you in any way?' Having this type of yarn together, as a group, opens up the space for everyone to hear each other speak meanings. I used the Just Therapy team's beautiful description of spirituality to launch into further externalising conversations.

Spirituality to us is essentially about *relationship*. For us relationship is expressed in four primary ways.

The first of these is the primary relationship between *people and the environment*. By this we refer to the land, the mountains, the sea, the sky and so on. Anything that promotes or facilitates the relationship between people and

the environment, to us, is spiritual. Anything that detracts from this relationship, to us, is the antithesis of spirituality ...

The second relationship we understand to be spiritual is that between *people and other people in terms of justice and love* ...

The third relationship we focus on is that between *people and their heritage*, their ancestry, their forefathers and mothers, those who have gone before ...

The final relationship we speak about concerning spirituality is between *people and the numinous*. We cannot find a better English word than numinous for that which is other, beyond, transcendent, or what some people call God. (Waldegrave, 2000, p. 35)

I shared the image below (Figure 1) and then asked: Were there any particular words that drew your curiosity? Were these words a collective or individual expression? Does this help to explain what spirituality means to you? I invited the students to jot down expressions that stood out to them so we could explore them later as a source of experience-near language to describe spirituality.



Figure 1. Spirituality

The Tree of Life activity

Before moving into the activity, I did a brief check in to see how everyone was going so far and whether they were still feeling safe: Has any part of what I have been sharing been difficult to understand? Does this space make you feel welcomed?

I briefly explained the Tree of Life process (Denborough, 2008; Ncube, 2006) and how I had adapted it to include questions about spirituality:

- **Roots:** these are about where you come from, your family history and those who have contributed to and influenced you, perhaps through particular stories about spirituality or religion.
- **Ground:** this is about where you live and things you are doing in support of your spirituality or religion like rituals and practices that are important to you.
- **Trunk:** this is focused on skills and what you give value to in relation to your spirituality. What do you contribute to the spirituality of others?
- **Branches:** these represent your hopes, dreams and wishes. What do you hope for in relation to your own spiritual journey? What are your hopes in relation to others' spirituality? What do you hope your spiritual journey might make possible for others?
- **Leaves:** these speak about people who are important in your life (and in your spiritual identity).
- **Fruit:** this represents the gifts that have been given to you, including contributions people have made to your spiritual journey or identity.

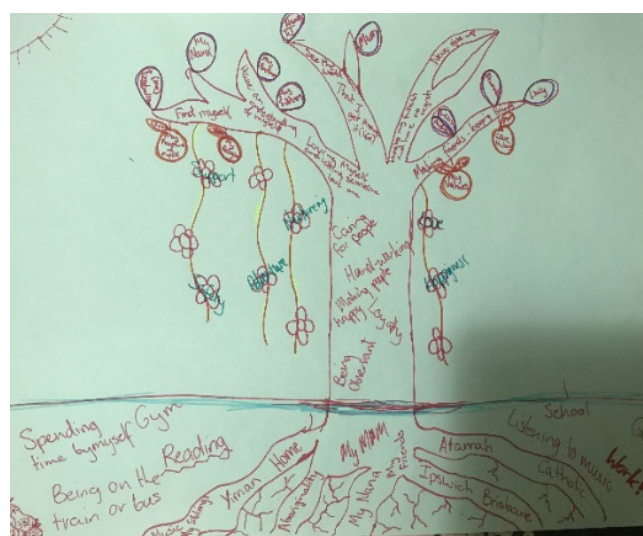
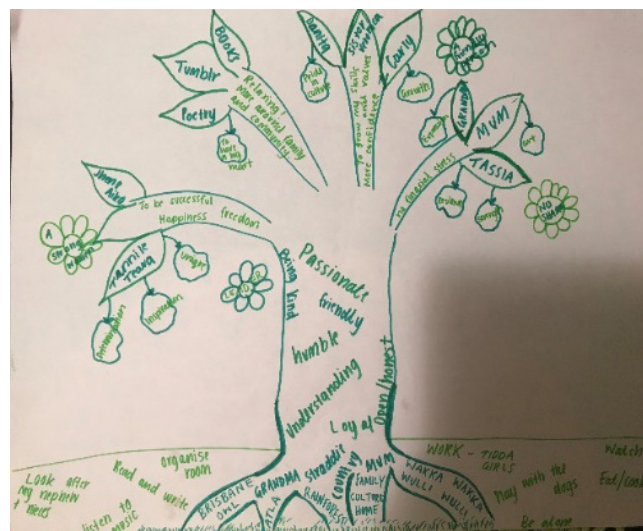


Figure 2. Examples of the students Trees of Spirituality

Definitional ceremony

I wanted to introduce a final closing to this experience with a definitional ceremony. This took place the following week. We shared in a nice lunch together, yarning about the experience we had been through. I had prepared a definitional ceremony in the form of certificates that acknowledged the beliefs and values I had heard during our yarns. I handed each girl a certificate and a gift bag, which contained a journal and a pen. I invited them to read their certificates quietly to themselves. You could hear a pin drop. With eyes wide open and smiles of acknowledgment, this small ceremony brought closure. I have noticed that in a group setting like this, the young girls are always presenting their stories to each other, bearing witness to each other, and telling their stories in ways that support others to join in and share (White, 2007).

I proposed the idea of journal writing. They could write about whatever experiences they wanted to record, and we could come together at the end of

each school term to share in the telling of any stories they chose. I would offer opportunities for others to respond and would ensure that the space was safe enough with support for those who would like to be a part of it. Denborough (2008) has written about enabling people to contribute to others with similar life experiences through sharing particular knowledges, and bringing a sense of companionship: 'I understand what you are going through because I have been through the same thing'. The girls liked the idea of journal writing, and using their experiences to contribute to others. I am hoping that this yarning circle will continue to build and be a space where insider knowledges about engaging in Catholic church while holding on to Aboriginal spirituality can grow stronger.

Conclusion

Exploring First Nations people's knowledges about religious and spiritual identities has been a valuable experience. I have learnt more about what Aboriginal and Torres Strait students give value and have identified openings to supporting their preferred identities. Everyone holds on to spirituality in a different way. Although the story of colonialism sits in the background of discussions about religion, First Nations peoples have practices and relationships that support them in maintaining preferred identity stories. Using narrative practices to navigate conversations about spirituality can make room for untold stories to be spoken. This opens up a pathway for others to join the journey.

Note

¹ Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper. The students have given permission for their stories to be shared.

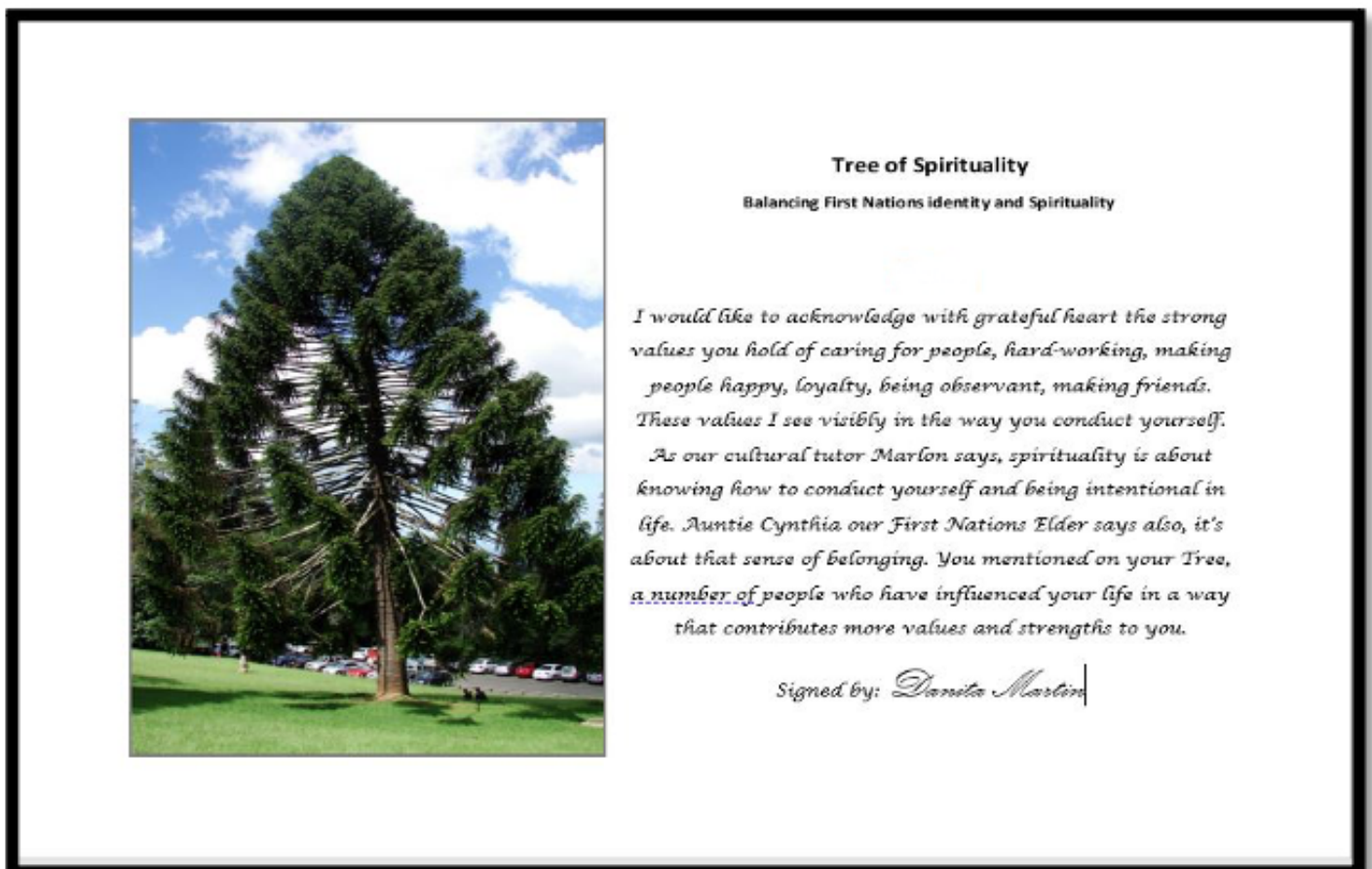


Figure 3. Tree of Spirituality certificate

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