Yarning with a purpose: First Nations narrative practice

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Straight Talk: Yarns from narrative practice with Indigenous men isolated from community and away from Country

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Indigenous people are highly overrepresented in the prison system. They are judged or categorised by the crimes they have committed and not given the opportunity to express themselves. I work with incarcerated Indigenous men who have been assessed as being at risk of self-harm. I yarn (Bessarab & Ng'Andu, 2010; Johnson, 2014) with individual men and facilitate a drug and alcohol group program called Straight Talk. Groups of ten to 15 men, aged from 18 to over 50 years old, participate in this program, which uses concepts and practices from the Indigenous social and emotional wellbeing framework (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017) and narrative practice (Wingard & Lester, 2001).

Storying self-harm

The people I work with have been assessed by professionals and deemed to be at risk of self-harm. This assessment determines their place or unit in the correctional centre. I believe that a lot of Indigenous men are classified as being at risk of self-harm because they answer the assessors' questions with simple and honest answers, or because they don't answer a question. They are not given the opportunity to explain or express themselves.

I first meet with the men soon after they arrive. While yarning with one young man who had been assessed as being at risk of self-harm, I asked, 'Brother, are you going to harm yourself?'

Young man: No. If I was going to do it, I would have done it without telling anyone.

Jonathan: Brother, what did you tell them [the psychologist]?

Young man: She asked me why I was not taking my medication and I told her I would rather kill myself than take that shit.

Him saying the words 'kill myself' terminated the interview and he was deemed to be 'at risk of self-harm'. In these processes, there is little space created for a person, Indigenous or non-Indigenous, to elaborate on why they answered a question the way they did. I asked this person a simple, clear open question: 'Brother, why don't you want to take your medication?' He went on to yarn a rich story about how when he takes his medication, he gets a headache and a sore belly, and he hasn't taken his medication for years. I asked if he had told the psychologist this and he said 'I didn't get a chance. She just left the room and I ended up here'. He went on to say that being in the observation unit in a suicide-proof dress, isolated, with no TV and only an hour of yard time a day was making him crazy.

When yarning with my mob – Indigenous men who are incarcerated – I try to give people space to yarn about why they answered a question the way they did. I ask: How are you, Brother? Would you like me to stay with you? And tell me about you? This opens space for a good yarn that suits the person, and that I can use to find out where they are at and if they are at risk of harm to themselves or others. Having a yarn like this with each inmate, I hear lots of rich, strong stories as well as finding out about the problems they're facing.

Yarning with individuals

One day, prison officers informed me about a man who was not engaging. They were concerned that he was going to 'snap' or go into a fit of rage. I asked them if I could have a yarn with this person. They asked if I would like them to bring him in from the yard to talk at a table inside the unit where I might feel safer. I thanked them for their concern about my safety, but asked if I could go out into the yard and have a one-to-one yarn. If I felt threatened, I said, I would bang on the door to come back inside. The officers agreed and informed me that they would be watching us on camera.

I went out to the yard and Brother Boy was pacing up and down with his fists clenched. I positioned myself so I was not standing there staring at him but alongside him. I placed the book I take notes in on the small bench seat in the yard. I wanted Brother Boy to know I was there for a yarn and not to take notes on him. Brother Boy kept pacing up and down and I also felt unease, but I thought that if Brother Boy was going to assault me, he would have done so by now. It seemed a good time for me to be silent, even though there were lots of questions I wanted to ask. I sat on the bench while Brother Boy kept pacing up and down. He would briefly look at me and then look down again. A few minutes passed and I

told Brother Boy about my role at the centre, and said that if he wanted to have a yarn, I was good, but if he didn't that was okay. Eventually Brother Boy sat down beside me on the bench seat.

I asked Brother Boy, 'Where you stop outside?' He told me where he lived. I then asked Brother Boy if he had a place to stay and any support outside. Brother Boy told me he lived with his sister and that she had helped him a lot. Brother Boy began to cry; his hands had relaxed and were no longer clenched together.

Over the next five or 10 minutes, Brother Boy yarned me his problem story while I sat and listened, alert for possible entry points to a preferred story.

Brother Boy: I feel shame, grown man crying. I'm broken. I just don't want to be here anymore. I'm no good. I've let everyone down. I can't even see my kids.

Jonathan: We all got feelings and crying can be good for letting no-good feelings out … Which way you broken, Brother?

Brother Boy: You know people talk about rock bottom? I'm there, Brother. That's why I don't want to be here anymore. I'm over coming to jail. That's all that happens – in and out of jail. I can't do it no more.

Jonathan: We here today yarning. What make you keep stand up?

Brother Boy yarned me about his kids and other family members who had been good supports. I asked Brother Boy, 'With such loved ones impacting on your life, why you feel bad or no good? If they were here standing beside me, what you reckon they go speak you? And if you could speak me a message to give them, what you go speak them?'

For the next half hour, we yarned about how he felt bad for letting everyone down, and how this showed how much he cared for the good supports in his life and they cared for him. I externalised drugs and listened to events and experiences he could recall when drugs were not present in his life journey. I finished our yarn by informing Brother Boy that he was the expert on his life and relayed back light bulb moments that had struck me in his yarns: him being a family man, his love for his kids and how his feelings were not crazy but shaped the person he is today. I didn't try to talk him out of feeling down, but instead honoured that his feeling bad for letting everyone down reflected the fact that he cared about those people in his life.

Adapting group work to my mob

As well as meeting with individuals who have been assessed as 'at risk' when they enter the prison, I run groups about alcohol and drug use, creating space for people to yarn their preferred stories while completing a required program.

Although we meet in a classroom in a prison education unit, I look for ways to use cultural concepts when dealing with my mob. Many First Nations people live with multiple layers of trauma. I believe First Nations people have survived to this day because of their strong connections to culture. But many First Nations people living in Australia today know little about their cultural identity and stories, their language or even their totems. This is a result of attempts to wipe out First Nations people from their own land. Bagele Chilisa (2014, p. 42) described how 'we have been so colonised to know others and ignore knowing ourselves. We know so much about Western philosophy … but we know so little about our own Indigenous knowledge. In fact, often we don't even recognise our ways of knowing as legitimate knowledge'. I look for ways to draw out our own Indigenous knowledge, and to bring back 'folk traditions' using cultural knowledge and practices that can help us (Denborough, 2008, p. 162).

Very important when working with my mob is to start each program acknowledging the land we are meeting on and paying respect to Elders past and present who have fought and continue to fight for future generations to be proud of their Indigenous culture. This leads into a yarn. I introduce myself and where my mob is from, and give a brief outline of my role and the program. I then get each person in the group to share their name, where they are from (which tribe they belong to) and how they are connected to their culture.

Everyone has their own experiences in life that have shaped their identities. In the first session we focus on each participant as an individual. Each person is invited to respond, however briefly, to a series of questions. This creates space for people to start coming together as a group, rather than each man sitting in the classroom thinking to himself that nobody knows what he's been through. They see that they're dealing with some of the same issues and with the impacts of drugs and alcohol on their lives. In the prison system, there is always the mentality that expressing yourself is a weakness – that in this environment it makes you vulnerable to others. Creating a safe space and breaking down barriers is important. The participants may be from different communities, but they are linked by drug and alcohol issues. They can relate to each other and connect very respectfully. Despite being situated in a correctional facility and labelled by a number, when people have opportunities to express themselves they can feel less confined and isolated, and more in control as they're recognised as the experts on their own lives with values and goals that are important to them.

Externalising social and emotional wellbeing

At the beginning of each session, I like to check in with all who are present, going around the room and asking each person how they are feeling today. I ask them to tell me small story of something that's happened recently that they're happy about.

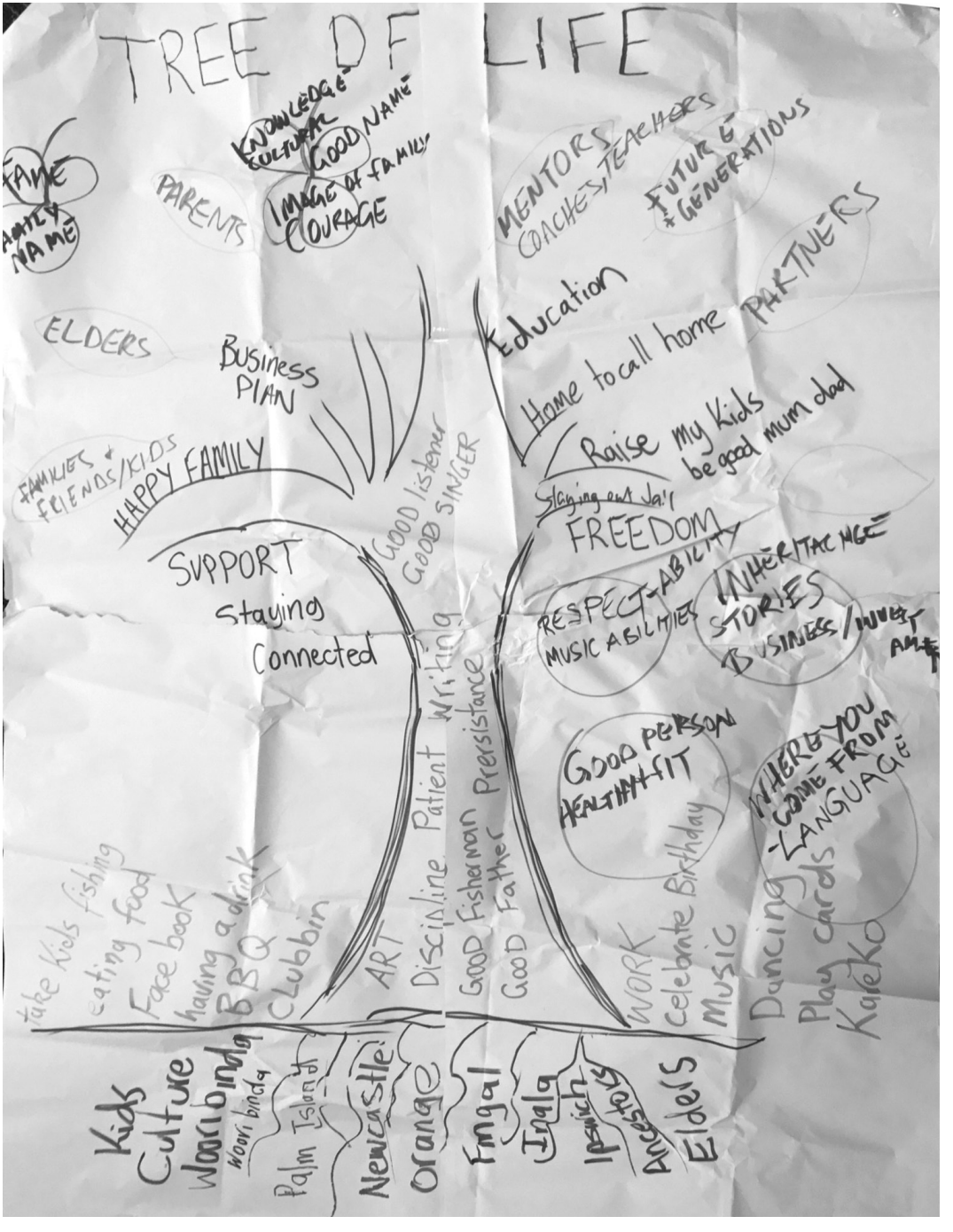
To introduce and externalise (White, 2007) the idea of social and emotional wellbeing, I draw a simple diagram on the board of two stick figures. One is bent over and his hands are facing down; the other is standing up straight, smile on face and arms upwards. This creates the opportunity for me to ask the uncles and brothers in the group which kind person stands up properly, which one no good. They say, 'one on the right good one. One on the left no good'.

I ask the group to come up with a name for the figures. One group said the no-good figure should be called Archie: 'Archie because he arched over ready for sleep. Looks like he needs a shot!' This group agreed that Michael was a good name for the upright figure. We now had two people on the board, one named Archie one named Michael, one bent over and one standing up straight, each externalising a way of being. I ask the group a question: 'Which way Archie thinking – good thinking or no-good thinking?' I listen to their responses. I ask: 'Which way Archie energy – he wanna run around or go sleep?' I listen to their responses. I ask: 'Archie health – he strong one or which way?' After engaging with everyone as a group and listening to them speak about Archie we move on to Michael. I ask the same questions for Michael: Which way Michael thinking? Which way Michael's energy and health – strong one or weak, which kind? The group that I was working said that Michael was proper good strong. Archie was ready for sleep. Michael and Archie provided us with a shared language and externalised frame of reference and we came back to them throughout the program.

Having externalised ideas about social and emotional wellbeing to our stick figures, I ask the men to break into small groups of two or three to consider their own social and emotional wellbeing. I write on the board: What do I like to do or engage in? How do I like to feel? What makes me proud for who I am physically? Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a very deep and strong cultural connection to the inner spirit, so I also write: Spiritually, how are you connected to culture? I list some examples such as song, dance and art. Each small group is given colourful pens and butcher's paper to write on. I can see that great strong stories are being shared and unpacked.

For those in the group that cannot spell, others offer assistance or they use symbols to represent their thought or idea. One brother drew a picture of a river because when he goes back to Country he would go swimming in the river and meet up with family – these were good times and places in his life. Aboriginal people are smart people and incorporating visual tools allows them to express themselves more fully and reflect on what they will have to do to be a person better in community and stay out of the prison system. Each week the group work gets more colourful and the ones in the group who have been quiet really open up and want to contribute, which is amazing.

After each small group has completed their diagrams on the paper provided, they are given the opportunity to present to the group about what they like to do, how they like to feel and what makes them feel this way. They


TREE OF LIFE
FAME
FAMILY NAME
PARENTS
KNOWLEDGE & CULTURE
GOOD NAME
IMAGE OF FAMILY
COURAGE
ELDERS
Business PLAN
FAMILIES & FRIENDS/KIDS
HAPPY FAMILY
SUPPORT
staying Connected
Good listener
Good SINGER
MENTORS
COACHES/TEACHERS
FUTURE GENERATIONS
Education
Home to call home
PARTNERS
Raise my kids be good mum dad
Staying out Jail
FREEDOM
RESPECT-ABILITY
MUSIC ABILITIES
INHERITANCE
STORIES
BUSINESS/INVEST
GOOD PERSON
HEALTHY-FIT
WHERE YOU COME FROM
-LANGUAGE
take kids fishing
eating food
Face book
having a drink
BBQ
CLubbin
ART
Discipline Patient Writing
GOOD Fisherman Persistance
GOOD Father
WORK
Celebrate Birthday
MUSIC
Dancing
Play cards
Kaleko
Kids
Culture
Waaribinda
Waari binda
Palm Island
Newcastle
Orange
Fmgal
Ingla
Ipswich
Ancestors
Elders

talk about their wellbeing, healthy eating and what they like to eat; about exercising and how they like to train or work out. Good yarns come about when they tell the group what makes them spiritually strong. Often yarns re-member family and experiences of being connected to culture.

Tree of Life

In another session, we use the 'Tree of Life' idea (Denborough, 2008; Ncube, 2006) to yarn about people's connections, to research their strengths and goals, and to find out who supports them to stay connected, stay strong and to achieve their goals.

We discuss the Tree of Life as a whole group. I use good short questions to explain how we will use the parts of a tree to record things that are important to us. For the roots I ask: Where you connected to brother? Can you tell me a place or person you have good memories of? For the ground I ask: What do you like to do each day? What did you enjoy doing in out-there life? What are good times you can recall? For the trunk I ask the brothers: What skills and abilities you have? For the branches I say: When you look at a tree most time the branches are faced upwards, hey? So, the branches of our trees are going to represent our goals for the future. I explain that the leaves on our trees are going to be support people or places, and that the fruits will be our legacies. I ask the brothers: What legacy you want to leave? When people speak your name, what you want people to say about you?

I then encourage the group to break up into small groups of two or three people while each creates their own tree. When people come to recording their skills and abilities on the trunk, sometimes shame intrudes. I refer back to what they have written or drawn for the ground and unpack this: 'Brother boy, you mentioned taking the kids to school every day. Could you say you are a caring dad?' 'You mentioned that you love doing it and you think the kids love it too, so could I say you're lovable?' I emphasise that there are no right or wrong answers and that all responses are okay.

Once people have completed their own tree, they are invited to explain what they've recorded on their tree and why it is important to them. People's descriptions of their roots show strong connections to family, Country, Elders and the ground. Even through they are incarcerated, the ground around people's trees shows meaningful daily activities such as going to work or doing a program. We hear about uncles who were strong and good mentors, and about wanting to be remembered a good dad, caring and proud of culture. I acknowledge people's courage in opening up about their stories. The men experience self-worth through storytelling without being judged. I often hear that they have never spoken about what they have just told the group, and they often thank me for listening to them yarn their story.

We admire the forest of individual trees before reflecting on the 'storms' or life events that these trees have lived through. Groups have found it useful to apply their

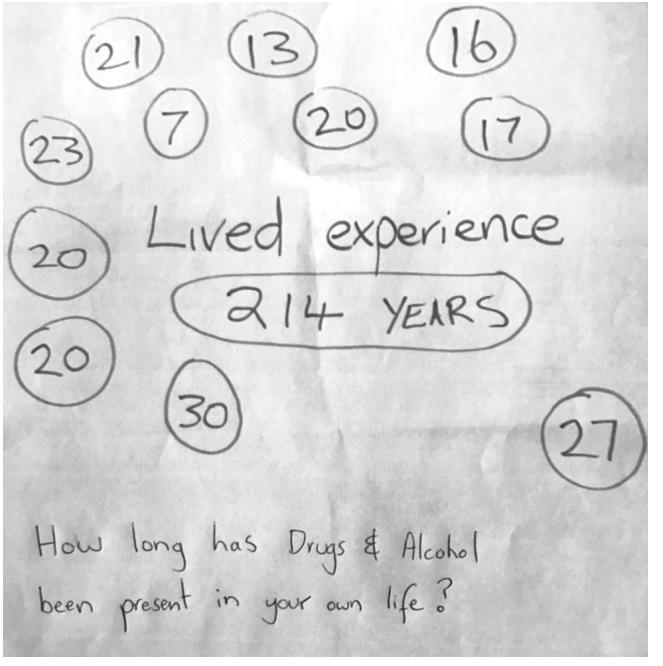
own names and metaphors for these experiences. One group named toxic relationships 'fire' and drugs as a 'hailstorm'. Jail was depicted as 'constant rain' bringing loss and separation.

The group I mentioned earlier always related back to Archie and Michael. When doing the Tree of Life with this group, they described their trees as Michael. When we were yarning about the storms that effect the trees they said 'Archie is the storm, just like the weather he always changes. So can I. I can be Michael one minute then Archie the next. Archie never too far away'. This created the opportunity to unpack these storms and how they affect the trees.

I am always looking for lightbulb moments, using deep listening and asking further questions to enrich the men's stories. Plenty of rich stories come from them, providing me with a better understanding of their multilayered stories and lives. Using the Tree of Life with the men creates a different space for me to listen to them and helps them to explain in further detail the experiences they have endured through their life, their thoughts around these, and what they've learnt about how to survive the storms.

Externalising drugs and having conversations with ice

In later sessions, we address drug and alcohol use more directly, co-researching the effects they have. The participants' lived experience is valuable when



A group's combined lived experience of drugs and alcohol

discussing the impacts drugs and alcohol have, not only on users' own lives, but also on their loved ones. We found that one group collectively brought 214 years of lived experience to the room.

Inspired by Aunty Barbara Wingard's conversations with Lateral Violence (2010) and with Sugar (1998), this group researched the drug ice (methamphetamine) and recorded a conversation that captures their collective knowledge about what it does to a person.

Here, Brother, who you?

Brother, my name is Ice. I am made from household chemicals and other substances. I can be a rock, shards,

crystal, powder or liquid. I am created using chemicals that are very harmful to the body.

Ice, do you go by any other names?

Bruz, I got plenty mob. Cousin brother shabu, sis koota, aunty pink champagne, uncle strawberry quick and close family MDMA, speed and coke.

Where can I find you, Ice?

Brother Boy, I am everywhere. I'm hanging out on local streets in neighbourhoods. I like it at pubs, clubs and parks. I even get around at train stations. Sometimes you can find me on the dark web.

Ice, what do you do with people you come in contact with?

No good, Bruz. I create chaos in the mind and body. I strip your identity. I am a destroyer to all kinds of people. I don't discriminate. My best aim is to rip families apart. Once you stay in contact with me for three days or more, I make you do crazy things, having no respect for family, community and the self. I stop people feeling good and make them feel delusional. When they become mentally unstable and cannot make the right choices, I make people think that they can't live without me. My aim is to affect the community, family and friends. I don't care if you rich or poor, Bruz, I will take it all. I have no age barrier and there is no limit for me. Even if you don't want me, I will come looking and find you.

What makes you weak, Ice?

I feel weak when people stand up to me and face their problems, when they reject me and speak down about me. I can't stand it when people put their family, community and self first. When people reflect and make healthy changes to their lifestyle, I feel like they're turning their backs on me. I can't stand living in the light; my best work is done in darkness.

What do you mean when you say 'I can't stand living in the light; my best work is done in darkness'?

When more people face me, I become light, and the more that don't face me I become dark. Knowledge makes me proper weak. I hate it when Elders, community and support services speak this knowledge.

I can recall one person in the group saying, ' I never done this before'. I asked, 'What you mean, Brother'? He said, 'I done plenty years in and out of jail. Done every program they had so it looks good for me, but they always telling me what to do and when I try and say something it feels like they are correcting me, running me down. So I just shut up. They think I don't know what I'm talking about. Brother, I been doing drugs for years, that's why I'm locked up. I know this. I feel right here to speak up – you not judging me'. After Brother Boy said this, others in the group gave similar responses: they felt safe to deconstruct the impacts drugs and alcohol can have on one's own life.

Timeline mapping

In one session, we use a made-up individual as a conversation starter. I invite the brothers to imagine they are a counsellor or community worker. 'You have someone come to see you. He's around 40 years old and he is struggling with a few issues'. I ask the group to give this person a name. I then say that this person has agreed to do a timeline of his life journey. I ask the group: What was happening for the person when he was four years old? What you think his living conditions were like? Did he live with mum and dad? Were they both around? Does he have any brothers and sisters? Were there important people in his life? Grandparents? I ask the group what they would like the next age to be for the imagined person. Most times its around eight to 12 years old. I ask the group: What you think was going on for him? Was he going to school? Did he play any sports? Who he was living with? Any issues that may have happened in his life? As a group, they fill in the life journey of the person they have created. Group members willingly contribute to fleshing out the timeline of the person they have created. In the process, they often express experiences from their own lives. Having the story visually represented up on the wall, externalised to an imaginary character, brakes down the shame that affects a lot of Indigenous people. They go on to identify and discuss preferred stories about the made-up person, thickening their own preferred stories in the process.

In one group, when considering the made-up person at 30 years of age, one of the men mentioned the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. This created the opportunity for me to ask about why the royal commission had come to his mind. He began to tell a very big story about how he had been abandoned when he was a small boy and was raised in foster care and residential facilities. He went on to tell us about being sexually abused and how no-one was there to help him. I thanked him for expressing himself and for not being silenced by shame. I then asked the others in the group how they had felt when listening to this, thanking them also for not interrupting him as he was speaking. One by one, members of the group gave huge acknowledgment of the courage of this person to speak his story. They said a lot of us mob don't talk about these things because we feel shame. They then went on to say how through the years this person had helped them and was like a brother to them. The person who had shared his story about being abused came to the class full of aggression and did not want to participate. I think he was covering a lot of hurt and sorrow. Through the sessions as he listened to others share their experiences, he began to feel it would be okay for him to express the way he felt, knowing he would not be forced to do so. Through others in the group responding to his story, we could see the person's demeanour change. He was more relaxed and a smile came to his face. He became a lot more engaged in subsequent sessions, looking for opportunities to contribute.

Bringing narrative practices to work with Indigenous men who are in prison

My experience in bringing narrative practices to my work in prison has been awesome. I have witnessed and heard amazing changes in individuals and groups of men through using narrative approaches: deconstructing people's problem stories, using questions to enrich preferred stories and co-researching ways to address drug and alcohol issues in ways that honour their insider knowledges. 'Yarning with a purpose', as Aunty Carolynahna beautifully describes it (Johnson, 2014), has deep meaning when engaging with Indigenous men who are incarcerated. Plenty of strong stories are shared, and when their meanings are unpacked and the stories are expanded and enriched it creates space for the healing process to begin and each one's life journey to become strong – for their tree to blossom and grow big.

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