



Fire of Life: Yarning about stories of passions, strengths, skills, interests and hobbies of our mob

by Kynan Barnes



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Abstract

This paper presents a narrative practice metaphor called the Fire of Life. It's been designed to help tell our stories in ways that make them stronger by yarning about the passions, strengths, skills, interests or hobbies of Aboriginal people, along with the problems that we can face. Culture is healing, and the Fire of Life combines culturally resonant metaphors with practices and principles of narrative therapy to facilitate and guide therapeutic yarning. Through a story of practice, the paper illustrates how the Fire of Life can be used to yarn with someone about their passions and strengthen the story as a result. We explore Gilly's passion for living and promoting a healthy lifestyle in the context of challenges surrounding Aboriginal people's health in Central Australia. .

Key words: metaphor; re-authoring; outsider witness; Aboriginal; First Nations; narrative practice; narrative therapy

Origins of the Fire of Life

My pop said, “Everything you need is in your culture”. In Arrernte culture, everything comes from the Land and is forever arising from and within Country. The Land, story, kinship and people hold everything together in sacredness (Turner et al., 2010). And so it is by no coincidence that the idea for the Fire of Life came to me while on Country, around a fire, telling stories. Inspired by metaphoric practices such as the Tree of Life (Ncube, 2006), the origins of the Fire of Life lie in culture and on Country, opposing negative stereotypes and discourse about Aboriginal people.

Sadly, in my professional and personal experiences, it is clear that problem stories have been attached to our mob. In the education sector, where I’ve spent most of my career, this has included stories of school disinterest, student underachievement and deficit (Lowe, 2017). These attitudes can even limit our educators’ interest and capacity through what Lowe (2017) described as “deficit theorising”. This can lead to low expectations, and the blame for low outcomes being placed on individuals, families and communities. Our educational institutions must move away from the colonial worldview into contextualised, trauma-informed and strength-based approaches. Because, as Lowe’s (2017) findings suggest, in order to address sociocultural and educational needs of Aboriginal students, schools need to honour, understand and actively reflect on community history, contexts and aspirations. The principle of highlighting and attending to the strengths of our students holds true outside the classroom and can be extended to our communities and society more broadly. It is from this position that there is a platform to yarn about our stories in ways that make them, and us, stronger (Wingard, 1999).

The facilitation of the Fire of Life is intended to be a yarn – preferably around a campfire, though this is not necessary and not always possible. Mary Terszac (2008, p. 90) described yarning as “a process of making meaning, communicating and passing on history and knowledge”. I was

interested in the Fire of Life practice being facilitated in this way. Described by Aunty Carolynanha Johnson (2014) as “yarning with a purpose”, therapeutic yarns “allow time, free flowing conversation, two-way sharing” (Drahm-Butler, 2015, p. 28) and are connected to our ways.

Yarning with the Fire of Life

The Fire of Life practice provides guidance for people to yarn about their passions, strengths, skills, interests and hobbies in ways that make them stronger (Wingard, 1999). It consists of 12 parts that relate to the metaphor of a campfire. Depending on the facilitator, or the yarn itself, the process may take place over a number of yarns. This is not rigid and is meant only as a guide. The 12 parts of the practice are:

1. Naming the fire
2. Spark
3. Kindling
4. Sticks
5. Log
6. Coals
7. Losing light
8. Stoking the fire
9. Warming others
10. Future of the fire
11. Sharing embers
12. Fire watch

I will illustrate this with a story of practice at Apmwerre, our family Estate on our Country, Arnapipe. For context, I was here on a men’s cultural camp reconnecting back to Country, culture and traditions. A day into the camp, I was speaking to one of my kekes (brothers, male cousins) Gilly about their experiences of the camp so far, along with sharing stories about our lives since we last spoke. Within these conversations, Gilly referred to personal and career pursuits. These implied strengths and passions, which was a nice segue into yarning with the Fire of Life.

As you engage in the story of Gilly, you will notice that within their rich stories, there are possibilities and opportunities for further and alternative questions or narrative enquires. I encourage the reader to think about those possibilities and what further questions might be asked throughout.

Naming the fire

In preparation for a Fire of Life yarn, it is important to explain the concept, gauge interest in the yarn, and gain permission to go ahead. After building understanding of the metaphor, we begin by naming the fire. As it was in the following yarn, it may be helpful to consider stories from previous conversations where a passion, strength, interest, skill or hobby was discussed, whether it was implied or explicit. It may also be that the person is simply asked what their particular passion, strength, interest, skill or hobby is. I imagine there are many interesting and creative ways to name the fire.

After getting Gilly's permission and building interest in the yarn, we sat around the fire with a warm cup of tea while our nephews played in the background and other family members prepared for the day's activities. This was the perfect setting for this yarn: on Country, with family, around a fire. And so our conversation began with setting and naming the fire.

Kynan: Remember I was saying that thing was like a fire, the fire in your belly? Well, same thing with the Fire of Life. So that fire represents your passion, maybe a strength, skill, hobby or something that you might be interested in in your life. I know we spoke about some things before, but what's your fire? That fire that you have?

Gilly: Well, I think it's actually being healthy – healthy living and lifestyle, you know?

Spark

A spark is where a fire begins. In this part of the metaphor, we establish the history of the fire and learn about what particular time, event or experiences brought the fire to life. This is very much grounded in re-authoring (White, 2007), particularly in the landscape of action where the history of the preferred story is established and explored. Questions may include:

- What sparked your fire?
- Can you tell me a bit about what happened?
- Was there a particular time, event or experience that sparked the fire?
Or was it a collection of events?
- When did you realise this was a fire for you?

Kynan: So you know when we make that fire, before it lights up, it comes from a spark. Could be matches or lighter, you know? So that spark is where it first started. What sparked your fire?

Gilly: For me it was changing my lifestyle. That eating and looking after your body. That sort of sparked me up to change our younger generation, you know? Back in the day, our ancestors and everyone were not built to eat this Western society side of food, you know? Not used to eating sugar and everything. And being able to have that knowledge – growing up we never really got taught that. Sort of figuring out myself, you know? Actually, myself and my partner. That sort of opened up that side of the world for me. And I wish we would have learnt that growing up from our mob.

Kynan: That looking after your body sounds like something important for you.

Gilly: No smoking, drinking. All that, you know?

Kynan: And you mentioned ancestors and your partner. Like they were there to sort of help you on your journey. To spark it.

Gilly: Missus helped me find it; find something I never had before. And being able to find that now, and looking back and thinking: no-one ever taught us that, you know? Especially here. Her helping me to find this makes me want to help other people.

Kynan: You might start that spark in someone else!

Gilly: [Nodding] Start that spark! Yeah! And start that ripple effect from that one kid, and then they'll think, "Ah, look at this young fella. Look at how he's doing it. I might ask him now what he's doing with himself". And then – boom! From one it will be two. From two, three, four – next thing you know it will be the whole community behind it then. That's the knowledge I need to pass down now.

Kindling

After the spark, you need kindling to get the fire going. In this section we continue to build rich descriptions in the realm of re-authoring (White, 2007) through tracing histories. This part of the metaphor elicits a story of the fire first coming into action. Questions may include:

- When did you get your fire going?
- When did you first engage in your passion?
- What is your first memory of the passion in action?
- Where were you?
- Who was around?
- What were the steps that you took to get yourself ready to do what you did?
- What do you think was the turning point that led to you being able to do what you did?
- Was this event unusual or have there been times when you've done this sort of thing before?
- How did you manage this?

My conversation with Gilly was picked up again in the troopy (four-wheel-drive vehicle), which I've found is another great environment to facilitate the Fire of Life because the point of focus is outside. We were travelling back to town after the camp had finished with two other brothers in the car. They had both agreed to listen, be outsider witnesses and be a part of the Fire Watch, which I will explain further on.

Kynan: When did you start to be passionate about being healthy, healthy living and lifestyle? What was your first memory of that?

Gilly: First memory I think was with footy. I wanted to benefit myself in that area. I was looking at AFL [Australian Football League] players and their physique, and I thought in order for me to get on that level and be able to look like that: start off by doing all the right things. So I started to knuckle down. Yeah, and cut all the sugar and things. That was sort of the gateway for me then. And after doing all right things for a year, I sort of saw my body start to develop and my mind wasn't lazy, and I was more active, more energetic. Once I had a taste of that, I just wanted more of it. And it sort of opened my mind up and then had me thinking, well, imagine if I can – if other people could feel like this back home, they could be flying.

Kynan: So, you said that started with football. When was that, was that high school or?

Gilly: So that started, you know, only in my late twenties ... about when I was 27, 26. Sort of started there with me and my partner being into the gym and everything. She sort of taught me everything in that area ... I wanted to do it for footy, but at the end, I sort of did it for myself. Just wanted a change and break that cycle with alcohol and all that other stuff.

Sticks

We put sticks on to make the fire grow. This part of the metaphor continues in the landscape of action and also explores the person's fire in the landscape of identity (White, 2007). Here we yarn about how the flame grew, drawing on more experiences and events that may have supported that. This section also opens up possibilities for re-membering conversations (White, 2007). Questions might include:

- What other events or experiences made your fire grow?
- What happened? What did you do?
- Were there people involved?
- What internal efforts did you make that allowed the fire to grow?
- What support did you have from others?
- If there was someone who saw this, what did they see or what do you think they would have seen in you?

Kynan: Those bigger sticks are there to make the fire grow a little bit more. What enabled that passion for your health to grow?

Gilly: Just being in that cycle back home here, coming back. Nothing's ever changed. All the family members not being healthy. Yeah, coming back and seeing that hit me as well. Having young family members on dialysis, that sort of hit me as well. I want to be able to teach these younger kids while they're fresh and haven't really taken this bad stuff in their body yet. I want to be able to spark that up for them.

Kynan: So, seeing family on dialysis and things like that sort of fuels your fire because you don't want to see that happening.

Gilly: Especially [because] you go to buy a healthy sandwich and that's the same price as a Big Mac meal, a large Big Mac meal! Or a combo meal or whatever. It makes it hard for people because it's an easy road to that unhealthy eating lifestyle. And it

doesn't help when all the healthy food is really expensive as well!

Kynan: Absolutely. Was there anything you did to sort of grow that passion?

Gilly: I taught and tried to get a few families on it. But they kept teasing me by saying I'm a kangaroo eating grass! So right now, I'm trying to figure out a way where I can get family members on board, even it's for a couple weeks, just to feel that difference in how your body can change and all that. And what I experienced was sugar. Two weeks of craving that sugar was the hardest part of getting over that period, and once I got over that, everything just came naturally. Tried to explain to family but it's the same thing again. It's hard because you sort of get teased for it as well. I'm sort of at that stage of how I'm going to bring this in with my family and all the other young fellas.

Kynan: How did you then grow that in yourself? Were you reading? You mentioned before about AFL players' physiques.

Gilly: Yeah, just research. YouTube and things like that. And seeing body builders and stuff, how they went vegan. And that sort opened my eyes up. And our ancestors and everyone. They weren't vegan, but they were eating lean meat, kangaroo, walking, eating veggies and all that. And that's why they were really ripped and that's why they were full of energy, carbs that they could burn. So doing all that sort of stuff and having that research and everything sort of helped me as well.

Logs

Large logs keep the fire going all night. In this part of the metaphor, we continue exploring the landscape of action and also prompt reflections in the landscape of identity (White, 2007). Here, we explore what has kept the fire burning for

the person. This could include internal efforts, particular experiences or events, or influence from others. Questions might include:

- What keeps your fire alive all night? What sustains it?
- What have you done to keep the fire going?
- What keeps it strong?
- Is it important that it keeps burning? Why?

Kynan: The next part is the big log. You know how we grab that big log. The big log keeps the fire going all night and for a long time. What is that log for you? What sustains the fire for you? What keeps it going, keeps it alive?

Gilly: I reckon my younger siblings that are living with me now. How they feel and they've changed and seeing them develop, you know? What I've been though is sort of good as well.

Kynan: So being able to pass it on and working with younger family members and your community is what keeps it strong for you.

Gilly: Yep.

Kynan: Is there anything else? There doesn't have to be, I'm just asking.

Gilly: Yeah, just especially the young kids we work with back home, back in Adelaide, with the criminal side of things, you know? Working with youth justice for a long time as well. Being able to create programs for these young kids that are running around town about opportunities for work and all that. You learn a lot at school, but how we teach our young people going out bush – that's proper teaching. Instead of having a meeting place in there [in prison], make it out here [on Country]. Yeah. So, I reckon the biggest one is the justice system. Trying to break the cycle for that.

Kynan: Yeah, sounds like there's a theme of passing it on, being able to pass that

on to younger generations even outside your family where you're working in youth justice.

Gilly: That's it, yeah. It's not cool to do silly things – breaking cars and breaking into houses and all that, you know? Our ancestors were warriors, not criminals. But they don't see that side of things at the moment, you know? And that sort of breaks families apart now, and culture. So, stop that and start putting in all these programs, right things to do, and then – boom! – we are heading in the right direction. Boats are turning slowly, we just gotta keep cruising.

Coals

The coals are where the fire is hottest. They keep the fire strong. Coals can be likened to our values, which are the foundation for our fire in life. In this part of the metaphor, we explore values in the landscape of identity, yarning with the person about the values that their fire speaks to. Questions might include:

- What does your fire say about your values and what you stand for?

Kynan: And the next part is the coals. So, like you make the fire and coals are there keeping the fire really hot, and they're always there when the fire is going and we sort of relate that to your values. Those are the things that you can fall back on, you know? And can keep you doing what you're doing and remembering why you're doing it.

Gilly: That's creating that foundation then, that start.

Kynan: Yeah. What's some of the values that your fire speaks to?

Gilly: Respect is a big one. Knowledge. And I reckon Future. Especially with language. And especially with our culture. Yeah, that's another one: culture. Culture is that main one where social media is coming

out now and it's easy for our younger generation to choose that path and forget about culture. Just teaching them language and everything now. You know, it's scary to think that we're already in line to take over for Country. It's scary that all our grandfathers are gone now. Our grandmothers and all our uncles are the last ones left now. Uncles and aunties. And they're the ones holding all the knowledge, and we're in that scary part of it where it falls to us now to teach these mob. It's scary to think in the future, you know? But we gotta think about the future for our little ones.

Losing light

Losing light is where the metaphor moves into double story development (White, 2007). The earlier stages of the metaphor focus on building the preferred story as a platform and foundation to talk about problem stories. Here, the metaphor integrates externalising conversations (White, 2007), including naming the problem, mapping the effects of the problem, evaluating the effects of the problems, and justifying the evaluation. Questions might include:

- Was it caused by a particular problem?
- What was going on around you when this happened?
- If something was putting your fire out, what might you call that? Or do you have an image in your mind of what it was?
- How did it affect you or your fire?
- Is it okay or was it okay with you that this [problem] affected your fire?

Kynan: And so the next part – sometimes that fire can go down a little bit, it can lose its heat a little bit and get a little bit small. Has your fire ever dwindled a little bit, you know, that passion for health?

Gilly: It did go down a little bit there. I had this down patch.

Kynan: What did this down patch do to you or your fire?

Gilly: It really had me missing my family and home and all that. Making me a little bit thing – unhappy, you know?

Kynan: And did this down patch affect anyone around you?

Gilly: Yeah, I suppose my missus a little bit. She had to deal with me with being a bit short, you know? And it was no good for us really.

Kynan: Did it impact other parts of your life?

Gilly: Just had me feeling a bit down, especially for home, for Country, you know? And family.

Kynan: Was it okay or is okay with you that it's had this effect?

Gilly: Nah, it's not.

Stoking the fire

We stoke the fire to bring it back to life, to breathe in oxygen so the fire can reignite. This part of the metaphor continues the externalising conversations and builds stories of resistance. Questions might include:

- How did you respond?
- How did you know to stoke the fire?
- What helped you to be able to stoke the fire?
- Can you name this skill? Or do you have an image?
- What does it say about what you might value?
- What does it say about you as a person?
- What does that say about your relationships? Your family? Your people?

Kynan: You know how we have to stoke the fire to bring it back up again, get that fire going again? This part is like that. How did you respond to the down patch. How did you get the fire going again?

Gilly: I think by coming out here. Yeah, I'm at my peak now. Coming out here with all my brothers, sons and nephews, that's that spark I got again, you know? I needed that. Now I can go back and restart again. So, I'm at that journey now where I fell down, and now I can get myself back up. And that's that support that I had from all my brothers out bush. Being at home and Country and that. Go back home stronger now.

Kynan: Deadly. And what does that say about you? Come out here and that helping with the down patch?

Gilly: Probably that I can get through it, you know? Just got to keep pushing on.

Warming others

Our fires can warm other people, and this stage of the metaphor invites the person we are yarning with to reflect on the membership of their life through re-membering conversations (White, 2007). We focus on what the person's fire may have contributed to the lives of others. Questions might include:

- Does this fire warm anyone else?
- Who gets warmed by this fire?
- How might it make them feel?
- If you were them, what do you think you would feel?
- What's that like for you to see yourself through their eyes?

Kynan: Your fire can warm not only yourself, but it can also warm others as well. So, people might be impacted by your fire in positive ways. Does your fire warm anyone else?

Gilly: Yeah, it does. It warms only the ones that want to listen, the ones that are close. There's a saying that my partner taught me: "You can't change the world but changing one young fulla or one young woman's life – start from there." Because changing

that young woman's or young fella's life changes their world for them. That's [when] that ripple effect starts to kick in – make them sort of open up their own flame from their own spark, their own world from there. But start from there and you can sort of see how a big bushfire [can] come alight from that one positive change.

Kynan: That's deadly. And do you have a story about a young one that's been warmed by the fire, a particular person that you think of?

Gilly: Nah, not a young fella, but I'm thinking of one our brothers, Bro Ron. He's come a long way and he opened his akaperte [mind] and he's heading in that right direction now. And we had a good chat last night until about two in the morning. We was just talking really positively, and you know, he's really refreshed and recharged too. And he's really looking forward to going back to apmere [home] too, back to Adelaide, and we want to start that journey together. So I am really looking forward to that. I can't wait.

Kynan: What do you reckon it's like for Bro Ron to share that fire?

Gilly: We always talk, and I think he appreciates it. But we're brothers, family, that's what we do, you know?

Future of the fire

We may want our fires to burn on into the future, and in this part of the metaphor we explore the person's hopes and dreams for their fire in the landscape of identity (White, 2007).

Questions might include:

- What are your hopes and dreams for this fire?
- What's it like to know that might be on the horizon?

Kynan: What about looking to the future – what are your hopes and dreams for the fire?

Gilly: Well, you know, it's just looking after our health by learning our culture now. So that's the main part of this next journey ... for all us brothers to get together, learn together from each other. Learn together. That's the part I'm looking forward to, too. So we can feed off each other, being able to sing together and dance together. I'm really looking forward to that, so I can't wait til that day comes where we are all together.

Sharing embers

We can learn valuable lessons from our fires and those can be shared with others as embers to contribute to building their fires. This stage invites the person to think about themselves and their stories in the context of others. The Fire of Life process may elicit hard-won knowledges (Denborough et al, 2006) that can be shared with others. It is my aim to collect these embers in a collective document so they can be shared and responded to. Questions might include:

- What advice would you give to others who might be working on their own fires?

Kynan: We can share the embers of our fire so that others could start their own, or it could fuel someone else's fire. So, what advice would you give to some who might be working on their own fire?

Gilly: I reckon that first part is going to be hard. With every journey that first part is always going to be hard, you know? And then it just gets easier and easier. Not too easy though – you're going to have your challenges up and down. You just got to keep steering that boat in the right direction. Because in your journeys, you're always gonna reach the top of the mountain, but you're always going to go down and reach another [low point]. Just don't give up. If you got a dream, you got a passion that you want to reach, just keep pushing.

Fire watch

The light of our fires can be helpful to those who witness it, and so this part of the metaphor includes an outsider-witness reflection (White, 2002). The witnesses listen to and acknowledge the preferred stories of the person and authenticate their stories (Carey & Russell, 2011). Questions might include:

- What resonated with you?
- Does the story make any difference in your life as a witness to the fire?
- Does their fire remind you of any experiences in your life?
- Do any images come to mind when you hear about their fire?
- Does witnessing the fire make any difference for you?

Kynan: When you listen to keke [brother] there, what resonated with you about what he was saying? What did you connect with?

Ron: His commitment and dedication to what he's trying to do: to make himself better, healthier, stronger and share that knowledge and pass it on. But, like he said, it's hard but he keeps going with it, you know? He keeps pushing through it and it's good to see and good hear and it gives you energy to want to do it yourself.

Kynan: And anything stand out for you, keke? Anything you connect with?

Daniel: Yeah, I really like it too. When he was talking about young kids, you know? Back where I'm from, we don't have any of this happening up there, you know? But down here, it's a good idea to take something and share what I experienced down here, take it back home and share it with my people up there. Maybe doing something out like this. But here, I'll take this thought, this idea back up to Top End and share it with my people up there.

Gilly: Culture is the key!

Daniel: Yeah! That's so true.

Gilly: It brings you back on track when you go off track. Like he said, all the other things dragging you away: Western culture, alcohol, TV, or doing drugs or video games or sit-down town movies, or whatever you want to do. But what brings you back is culture. Keeps you on track.

Daniel: That's true. Even taking young ones back and teaching them about living off the land! That's a good one. That's a really good thought. When I get back home, I'll share this with my people.

Kynan: Are there any images that come to mind when listening to Bro Gilly's story?

Ron: He's talking about old people, ancestors. They didn't have takeaway or junk food, sugar or fatty foods. They was all living off the Country, and I think that image is really strong people, you know? They are walking around hunting. No big guts or chubby cheeks: they all solid. Just really strong people. Strong physically, strong culturally, spiritually, everything. They was strong. When he was talking like that's what it makes you think about. You see them old photos, sixpack and everything – solid! Muscly, strong, could run everywhere, walk all day, everything.

Gilly: Happy people too, because [they were] eating all that right stuff!

Kynan: Yes, absolutely! So, tell me, what was it like for you to hear them connect with your story?

Gilly: It was good, you know? I want to be able to give that to keke mob. So, it was good. That's what I want to do is bring that to our people, our family groups, our people, you know? One will have that one specialty in this area and one in that area, so we all bring everything to the table. So that's why

we need to find that balance now. Can't wait to do this again in six months' time, and I'm really looking forward to it.

Reflections

People come with their own skills and knowledges in life, and I strongly believe that exploring, learning and relearning those skills, particularly our cultural knowledges, strengths and skills, is fundamental in healing our mob.

When we finished the Fire of Life yarn, I asked about Gilly's experience of exploring his passion for healthy living in this way. It was interesting to hear the ways he felt it supported him.

Kynan: Thanks, keke, for having a yarn. What was that like for you, those questions?

Gilly: It was good, keke. You know, it's sort of eye opening again. Brings you back. And them questions sort of open up new ideas and opportunities for yourself.

Future fires

The Fire of Life is by no means a complete practice. I hope the Fire of Life metaphor will continue to grow and be developed by those who might use it, and that facilitators will acknowledge the practice and where it comes from. I've used the practice in group settings and would love to explore artistic expressions of people's fires such as songs, paintings and media. I hope that it can be adapted and shaped in new and interesting ways within others' contexts utilising their own skills, knowledges and experiences, and that these new ways are shared. I hope that people's strengths, passions, interests, skills and hobbies can be acknowledged and honoured in ways that make them stronger by using the Fire of Life metaphor – hopefully on Country, maybe with a tea, yarning around a campfire.

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