

Occasional Address: Southern Cross University

Graduation ceremony:

- **Gnibi College of Indigenous Australian Peoples**
- **School of Environmental Science and Management**
- **School of Health and Human Sciences (Postgraduate)**

Dr Judy Atkinson 4th May 2012

Let me begin by recognizing the land on which Lismore Campus of Southern Cross University is located: the lands of the Widjabel of the greater Bundjalung nation. We hold this country in guardianship. May we always work together to protect the inheritance of our children and grandchildren.

Let me also recognise and pay respect to our Ancestors and Elders - past and present.

This is not a clichéd comment.

I ask each of you to give some thought to those people who are your ancestors and elders, who in their diverse journeys to this country now called Australia, have contributed to who you are, and why you are sitting in this room - this afternoon.

I bring your attention to the Elders and respected people present here today: our Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, colleagues, distinguished guests, parents and friends, and most importantly today's graduates.

*'The way of knowledge is like our old way of hunting. You begin with a mere trail - a footprint. If you follow that faithfully, it may lead you to a clearer trail - a track - a road. Later on there will be many tracks, crossing and diverging one from the other. Then you must be careful, for success lies in the choice of the right road.'*¹

I want to talk with you today about the five 'r's on this right road – the journey of learning.

Respect Rights Responsibility Reciprocity Relatedness.

If what we learn is passed across our generations by Elders, who teach from the five r's, we learn respect for all life - for who we are. We learn that being respected means we have rights – rights to clean water, healthy food and knowledge for life. From those two r's we learn responsibility. We cannot be responsible if we have never enjoyed respectful entitlement of our most basic human rights.

¹ Eastman, C. (1916) From the Deep Woods to Civilization, Little Brown and Company. P 29
Boston.[http://www.archive.org/stream/deepwoodsto00eastrich/deepwoodsto00eastrich_djvu.txt]
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While on this journey of life, within the interaction between rights and responsibilities, in our search for information and understanding, we begin to learn and teach together, and this knowledge can be transformed into wisdom. We also learn reciprocity, (sharing and caring), from which grows relatedness.

These are the essential principles of Indigenous teaching learning practice – an Indigenous critical pedagogy. I will close by reminding us all that Indigenous cultural processes – that is, educational teaching social activities, are healing.

The Way of Knowledge starts very early, often before birth, onwards through childhood, until we get to a time in our life when we can see a clearer pathway, a point of knowing.

My real journey – my pathway to knowledge opened more fully for me in my mid forties, well after I had completed my under-graduate degree, when an Elder – an Aboriginal woman took me aside to ask for my help after a small child had been raped. She and other Elders had been told by authorities that 'it was cultural', hence there was nothing they could do.

My Elder was outraged and distressed. As I understood, no child, under Aboriginal Law would be treated in such a way. In seeking to find why no charges had been laid, as I talked to law enforcement officers and other government officials, I found at worst, explicit, overt prejudice and racism; and at the least, ill-informed, uneducated, and ignorant attitudes and opinions by those who should have made investigations and laid charges: those who should have worked together to provide healthy lawful learning environments and experiences for our children.

As I continued my search, I found troubling statistics around violence against Aboriginal women and children that were unexplainable from within my own cultural background; my own family lines. I began to ask questions; not – what is wrong with that person - these people; but what has happened to this person – those people.

And – what can we do together, about this great human tragedy.

In the beginning I saw many pathways – at first I thought the track was law, but I found that law was in no way skilled to respond to the critical human need to heal harm; then I thought the pathway was health, until I realised that the health care system has a narrow approach to health science practice.

I came to an understanding that my pathway was scholarship, not a scholarship that had me locked in a room in a university, but one where I could sit on the ground, listening to and learning from stories of the people who had lived their lives under government policies and controls across an Australian colonial history; who knew their communities, knew the problems and wanted something to happen; and were willing to work it make it happen.

In listening, I also learnt to reflect and think before coming to a deeper understanding, which enabled me to advocate and act on my responsibility to bring what I was learning back to the academy.

I found in fact, that the more I learnt, the greater was my responsibility to teach, not by words, but right action. Over this time the choice of the right road became very clear. At every level, the answers were education: **education for early childhood; for life long learning; for healing.**

The communal educational activities in which we were engaged, taught me the most. Truly the teacher and the taught together create the teaching. *We Al-li* - two words from the language of the Woppaburra: fire and water, essential elements for all life, are also symbolic of two deep emotions I found present in all with whom I was working – anger and grief.

I found under anger with all its attendant sub-emotions and actions, was grief, an anguish that was layered, unresolved, often depressed or suppressed, and increasingly acted out on self and others. I named what I found, generational trauma, deep hurt that needed healing. The responsibility was to put this into educational approaches that were trauma informed, and units of study that were trauma specific.

In the Story-work of *We Al-li*, sitting together, sharing stories, teaching each other, not just stories of pain and disorder, but of resilience and creativity, we re-learnt the deep cultural processes for what worked in healing trauma – as people made the choice to do something about their lives and to change their own circumstances.

When invited, we travelled to other countries with our educational work: Timor Leste where the students asked me: *'what is the difference between political trauma; historic trauma; social trauma; cultural trauma? Can we talk about the difference between loss and grief, victimization, and traumatization'*. I have since written academic papers around these questions, but they were first asked by those students in Timor Leste.

'In Timor', the students said to me, *'we must all be responsible for re-building our country. No one person created our violence. We now must find a way to heal, men and women, separately, and together, always placing in the centre of our circle, our children'*.

These students have much to teach other peoples.

The people of Kaugere, a settlement on the edge of Port Moresby Papua New Guinea, grown up like topsy as a shanty town to service the needs of the Second World War Allied Forces, asked us to run an education package for them, with a focus on human rights in relationship to family, community and street violence. For the five days we were there, Kaugere became an adult learning centre – a 'university'.

Each day 75 men and women sat together to consider the United Nations

Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1956); the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (1948), and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), in relationship to the violence they perpetrate, live with on a daily basis. They came to recognize that while they had few rights in their own country, they had to become responsible for the change they needed.

Starting with what happens to children when they witness and hence experience violence, the men, and the women, at first in separate gender groups, and then together, worked to develop an action plan to their needs, enabling healing change to occur within Kaugere, and elsewhere.

As I think back to those five days I witnessed the deepening movement of **education to educaring**. As people began to feel safe, they began to listen and learn together. Once they felt comfortable, not threatened by the painful truths they were learning about themselves, they went deeper, inwards, looking at themselves.

They were talking to each other about issues of violence they had never previously discussed. And in the circular process of listening and learning together, as their voices grew strong and powerful, and in the process, talking became music, shared between them, and with us, the visitors, a social healing.

On the last day, in what they called a *celebration of change*, they sang us a farewell song. A young man, Emmanuel Mailau sang his song, 'Children'.

Ceremonies can often be rituals of grieving, and the song 'Children' is a lament for the lives of children, crying and dying on the hills around Moresby.

These are human experiences and they validate our humanness. The song, 'Children', located us in a place where children see much violence, where children are hungry because their parents have no money to buy food, and where children die early from diseases that are preventable. As Emmanuel says: "I live in a settlement. The song is about all the children that I see everyday living such hard lives of poverty, the orphans that roam the streets in the settlement — it is an emotional song".

As I flew out of Papua New Guinea I reflected on the relevancy of education in the lives of children – all children; in the way healthy parents can educate; how skilled teachers can educate; and the responsibility of the academy, institutions of higher learning, who graduate the elite of our societies, is to find the moral compass that will show us all the right road.

Last week I returned home after being in New Zealand, meeting with Maori academics and healers about the work we can do together to re-grow our Indigenous healing practices. As we talked together, I brought to their attention the more recent work of Bruce Perry, one of the world's leading Child-Trauma Specialists, in his work on the neurobiology of early childhood trauma.

Perry validates the work of the Indigenous practitioners I meet with in New Zealand, and our own work here at Southern Cross University and elsewhere.

*'An examination of the known beliefs, rituals, and healing practices for loss and trauma that remain from Aboriginal cultures reveal some remarkable principles. Such healing rituals ... converge into a set of core elements related to adaption and healing following trauma. These core elements include an overarching belief system – a rationale, a reason for the pain, injury, loss; a retelling or re-enactment of the trauma in words, dance, or song. The most remarkable quality of these elements is that together they create a total neurobiological experience influencing cortical, limbic, and brainstem systems (not unlike the pervasive neurobiological impact of trauma): ... The remarkable resonance of these practices with the neurobiology of trauma is not unexpected. These practices emerged because they worked. People felt better and functioned better, and the core elements of the healing process were reinforced and passed on. ... While these therapeutic practices may not at first seem "biological": be assured that they are not only likely to change the brain, but they will assuredly provide the patterned, repetitive stimuli required to specifically influence and modify the impact of trauma, neglect, and maltreatment on key neural systems.'*²

The way of knowledge is often circular. Perry takes us back to the begin of the trail - the pathway, as we continue to learn what it is to be human – respecting the intrinsic knowledge that education must be a process that enables people to come to know themselves; to name what influences have shaped who they have become, their humanness; informing an awareness and knowledge of other peoples and life forms, their histories and stories, what has shaped them; and hence our collective social and cultural environments; what actions influence and shape community, and a knowledge and understanding of our place and responsibility to community - to humanity - to build a better world.

My hope as we all leave this graduation ceremony is we will see perhaps a new track to follow, or recognise an old trail to revisit, a footprint that will excite our interest, a pathway that will enrich our collective lifelong learning journeys.

'When you see a new trail, or a footprint you do not know, follow it to the point of knowing.' Uncheedah³

² Perry, B. in Malchiodi, A 2008, 'Creative Interventions and Childhood Trauma', in *Creative Interventions with Traumatized Children*, The Guilford Press, New York, pp. ix – xi

³ Grandmother of Ohiyesa also known as Charles Eastman, in Eastman, C. (1916) *From the Deep Woods to Civilization*, Little Brown and Company. P 29
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