

Seeking Spirit in Time before Time

By Marshall Leaver

Turmoil and challenge seem to be the biproducts of our contemporary situation. People are encountering situations in ways they have not been experienced before, like the vast extent of environmental shock during the recent Australian summer of fires, the waves of change resulting from the corona virus pandemic. This followed by the cultural and political turmoil which has followed the killing of George Floyd and the rise on a global scale of the Black Lives Matter (#BLM) movements, just as the #MeToo movement in recent years has deeply challenged so many accepted conventions on gender. How can we deal with these major changes when we are required 'keep our distance', communicate on-line and deal with the myriad and at times conflicting sources of information. How do we make sense of a shape-shifting world?

On the questions raised by #BLM there have been diverse responses – I've heard friends offer 'but all lives matter' and 'I'm so glad I am white at this time', however, there have been so many powerful stories shared of black, brown and coloured peoples experiences of prejudice, discrimination and racism at the personal, societal and the institutional levels. We live in a time when these histories, stories and lived experiences are being shared like never before and if we truly hold to the principles of:

- The worth of all persons
- Unity in diversity, and
- The pursuit of peace

then we genuinely and respectfully need to open our ears, open our minds and open our hearts. Listen and learn from the voices of those who have lived with oppression as we all need to be informed to consider the best options for an enhanced future.

Generous Sharing of Aboriginal Culture

In Australia, how can we listen and learn from Aboriginal people to respectfully reach out to their lives and ways on knowing the world? I have had the experience of working with Yuin Elder, Uncle Max Dulumunmun Harrison for many years and through his generous sharing of culture and ceremony I have been able to experience and learn of Yuin beliefs and wisdom. Uncle has given permission for me to share story which I trust will offer the chance to learn from the wisdom of the oldest living culture on this earth.

Yuin beliefs hold to our world being made up of Mother Earth, Father Sky, Grandmother Moon and Grandfather Sun and that all was created by Daramah, the Great Spirit. After all of the heavens, the earth and all of nature were created then Daramah created two people, a woman called Ngardi and then a man called Tunku and to them Daramah, Great Creator gave two gifts: a rock and a tree. These gifts could provide everything they required to live - to make tools, to build fires, to create art so they could pass on this knowledge as lore through the generations. (Harrison, 2013, 20)

In his way of teaching and sharing culture Uncle Max takes people through ceremony at dawn. This Morning Ceremony focuses on the arrival of Grandfather Sun and provides the opportunity for each participant to share their hopes and thoughts for the day ahead. As the warmth of Grandfather shines on us all, this is acknowledged in how this energy enables all things to live and grow, allowing all plants to live and all creatures in turn to have the chance to thrive. Without that energy there would be no life. Even after the sun has set that energy can be released when we light a fire and the energy stored in that wood glows and burns to keep us warm. We have so much to be thankful for in that giving of life, each and every day. It is a pure and simple reality to show our gratitude and respect for that life force.

Equally important is to acknowledge the Mother, the Earth, the provider of the soils that grow the plants we need to live and which enrich our lives, the provider of all the minerals which we use to make metals and the myriad of tools in our lives. Even the oil in the

ground used to fuel our machines and the plastics we use every moment, the rare earths that make our technologies so efficient – all come from the Mother. Our connection to the land is elemental to our being, though we can be guilty of taking that for granted. The land is a wonderful teacher if we have can open our eyes, all our senses, our minds and our hearts.

Grandmother Moon controls the waters and the tides and gives us woman time without which there would be no birth and no life. Father Sky gives the air we breathe, the clouds and the winds. All life is to be respected and the world that has been created for us should be acknowledged very day. We must walk and work with respect for all creation and be in awe of the spirit in all things. There is so much to learn from the wisdom of First Nations Peoples – we need to end seeing Aboriginal people in a deficit model and start seeking the deep spiritual connections that their way of knowing can offer.

Uncle Max tells of a time as a young boy when he was feeling bad and walking around the camp kicking stones and feeling grumpy. His grandfather asked what was the matter and the little boy replied "Ah Pop, I'm just having a bad day!" Pop said, "You just sit down and I'm going to tell you something really, really important." Full of listening little Max heard these words, "Daramah, the Creator Spirit gave us hot days, cold days, windy days, rainy days, frosty days and snowy days but he never ever gave us a bad day!" With that the Senior man stood up and walked away leaving Max to ponder the meaning. Today Uncle Max would ask us with a grin, if we are having a bad day could we take a photo of it and show it to him? Uncle's message is about greeting each day, as he greets Grandfather Sun as it was the first day for the rest of his life. Embrace the opportunities the day will offer, be open to the world around us. Listen, watch and learn. Whatever has gone before, today is the first day for the rest of our lives.

These teachings from Yuin lore and culture are shared with permission from Uncle Max Dulumunmun Harrison. For further readings see his book *My People's Dreaming*.

Reference:

Harrison, Max Dulumunmun, *My People's Dreaming*, 2013, Harper Collins.



Marshall Leaver is a member of the Drummoyne congregation. His career as a secondary school teacher focussed on cultural studies, in particular, Aboriginal cultures, Indonesia, Timor Leste and Japan. Marshall established, under the guidance of Aboriginal Elders the Biamunga program at Monte Sant Angelo Mercy College, North Sydney which for over 20 years worked to provide deep and genuine understandings between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians and establish community connections with Aboriginal communities in the Central Desert (NT) and South Coast NSW.