

Stories of Pride

Linking the experience of Aboriginal Australian, African-American, Latino and Native American communities

by
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Barbara Wingard is an Aboriginal woman who has worked in the area of Aboriginal Health for the last 25 years and is the co-author, with Jane Lester, of the highly respected book *Telling our stories in ways that make us stronger* (see page 95 of this journal).

In June 2001, Barbara Wingard, Cheryl White and David Denborough travelled to the USA to meet with people from African-American, Latino and Native American communities to talk through cultural protocols in relation to the upcoming International Narrative Therapy and Community Work Conference to be co-hosted by Dulwich Centre and Spelman College in Atlanta Georgia. The following piece of writing was created from an interview that took place on the banks of the Murray River upon our return to Australia. We've included this piece of writing because it powerfully makes the links between the experience of Aboriginal Australian, African-American, Latino and Native American communities.

In this writing, I would like to share with you various stories of pride. These are stories from many different communities – from South Australia where I live and work, from the African-American community in Atlanta, from the Latino community in California, and from the Cherokee and Muscogee Nations of North Carolina and Oklahoma.

There is one story from South Australia that I would like to tell before sharing some experiences from my recent trip to the USA. I would like to share with you a statement from the Council of Aboriginal Elders of South Australia. The Council of Aboriginal Elders consists of the most senior Aboriginal people in South Australia. The fact that this Council exists is a source of pride. The words that they have written inspire us:

*We as Elders of the Aboriginal People of South Australia,
claim from our ancestors our inheritance of a unique and
precious culture.*

*We accept the responsibility to lead our descendants on the
path of this new age,
by our own example.*

*We recognise the diversity within our culture
and support the right to
independent self determination.*

*We respect the land, beliefs, language, traditions and
principles of our ancestors
and request their daily spiritual guidance in our
deliberations.*

*We ask for healing of the heart of our grieving Nation
And for the strength to rise again to meet the challenges of a
new day.*

Statement of the Elders
June 6th 2001

I took with me copies of this statement on a beautiful poster, and also the Aboriginal flag, when I recently travelled to the USA with Cheryl White and David Denborough from Dulwich Centre. We were travelling in preparation for an international narrative therapy conference that we are holding in Atlanta. The conference is being held at Spelman College, which is a college for African-American women. We were meeting with various people to work out the protocols, the right ways to go about things in relation to culture.

I took the Elders Poster with me to share with the African-American community and also with the Latino and Native American communities that we were to meet with. Everywhere I went, people loved this poster, and related to the words written on it. They also loved our beautiful flag. The trip was an amazing experience for me. So many people opened their hearts and homes to us.

Atlanta, Georgia

One of the highlights was being in Atlanta, Georgia surrounded by so many black people. Here in Australia, it's not okay to call Aboriginal people black, but in the US the

African-American community is fine with it. In Atlanta, everywhere that I went there were so many black people in professional positions. In the motel there were black people behind the counter to greet me. In the shops black people served me. What's more, they have their own black banks, black businesses. And the people with influence are African-American. This was spectacular for me to see.

The last time I had a similar experience was when I was in Fiji many years ago. I remember that when I saw a white person in Fiji, it would be me looking at them, not the other way around. And this was true in Atlanta. It was the whitefellas that stood out and this was a lovely relief.

But most of all, I was moved by the pride of the people. If you've ever seen African-American women, you'll know what I mean – the way they stand, the way they do their hair, the hats they wear, they are just so classy. Everywhere that I looked, I saw their pride. And whenever I listened I heard the stories of the African-American people.

As well as stories of strength, I heard stories of great sadness. Stories of slavery, and of people being hung while white people looked on as if it was entertainment. These were stories that reminded me of what Aboriginal people faced after the English came to this land. I heard of very sad happenings and I couldn't help feeling connected to them.

And then I visited the house where Martin Luther King Jr. was born and the museum that honours his life. The church where he used to preach is also in Atlanta, and so is his final resting place. His grave is surrounded by water and his words are written there: 'Free at last, free at last, thank God almighty I am free at last'.

I first heard of Martin Luther King Jr. when I was a teenager in the 1960s. His dream, his voice inspired us all. To visit where he was born was very special to me. To see the clothes that he wore, and also his wife's clothing. It was a sad and inspiring place and everything I looked at seemed to relate back to our people's struggles in this land.

Perhaps what was most moving to me was to learn about the history of these people's pride. I bought a series of cards from the Martin Luther King Centre. They are photographs of black artists, lawyers, doctors. These are professional people from the 1800s. These were some of the people that led a revival of African-American pride. These were some of their strong leaders. Standing in the Martin Luther King Centre, I came to understand why the black people around me looked strong and proud. I realised there was a history to their pride. A history that had been reclaimed.

As Aboriginal people we also have a history of pride. Our old people were proud people. They stood tall, with their heads up. When you look within our old photographs, the first thing you see is our old people's pride. They are people of great dignity and character. They inspire us to play our part in bringing back the pride of our people.

North Carolina

The next part of our trip was to head to North Carolina, to the Cherokee Nation. We were travelling there to meet with Myrtle Driver who is the cultural custodian of the Eastern Band of the Cherokee. We were going to ask Myrtle if she would be involved in welcoming people to country at the Atlanta conference, because Atlanta is situated on what was once the lands of the Cherokee Nation and the Muscogee (Creek) Nation.

There were many beautiful things about our time in North Carolina. I remember putting my hot feet into the cool, clear water of the river that runs through the Cherokee lands. I remember our conversations, and Myrtle's kindness and enthusiasm. I remember how similar the issues facing the Cherokee are to our issues – especially in relation to diabetes. And I remember how they are using funds from a casino to do fantastic work.

But what I will always treasure from North Carolina, is the Cherokee Council House. Inside this small building is one of the most beautiful rooms I have ever seen. It is not large, but it is the Cherokee Council room. It has a long curved table, just like they have in Parliaments. And they have microphones in front of each member. There is a lot of natural wood and elegant chairs in which the Council of the Cherokee sit.

We have Aboriginal Councils in South Australia but the rooms in which they meet are just ordinary rooms. They are not rooms of dignity and honour. To see the Cherokee council room was like looking into the future. I'd like to think that we will have council rooms like that one day.

Oklahoma

We then flew to Oklahoma, which is the state in the middle of the US in which many different Native American tribes are now located. The Cherokee people were marched thousands of miles across the country in winter and thousands of their people died on what has become known as the Trail of Tears. The stories that we heard were those of sorrow and

great injustice. Our people also have trails of tears and to meet with the Cherokee and the Muscogee was a great honour.

What was quite extraordinary for me was that while we were in Oklahoma we were invited to attend a pow-wow which is a ceremony of dance and song. Our host was a man named Rob Anque and as soon as our car pulled into the site of the ceremony he wrapped a shawl around my shoulders. This is the tradition of their people. Their ways of welcoming people are similar to our own.

The entire evening was spectacular. We were outside on a summer's evening gathered around one large circle. In the centre of this circle were the drummers and singers and around them people danced. There were many different people from different tribes, all in beautiful costumes and the ceremony began with some of the elders walking into the circle. I just couldn't stop smiling the entire time. The colours were startling, the music so comforting and everywhere people had their heads held high. There were old people and children, and beautiful young men and women, all dancing within the circle.

Towards the end of the evening we were also invited to dance. I proudly gathered up my shawl and with David and Rob joined the dancers. We moved around the circle to the sounds of the drums and song. It was quite enough to see a pow-wow but to actually be invited to be a part of it, was quite something. I was almost floating around the circle.

Cheryl at different times during the trip had been asking me, 'what's been the best thing?' and I had not been able to answer. But after the pow-wow, I knew the answer to that question. It was an extraordinary evening. We had come such a long way and we had found a place where everyone was welcomed to enjoy this dance, culture and song. As an Aboriginal person, connecting with these other indigenous people was very special. It was inspiring too. Back here in Australia we are beginning to relearn our dances, our songs. We are beginning to learn to speak our own languages again. I caught a glimpse of what things might be like for us in the future as we keep going down that path.

California

The last part of my trip took me to Latino communities in California. There I met with my friend America Bracho and the team at Latino Health Access. This is a team that works in the Latino communities around health issues. When

I was there they were in the middle of an alcohol awareness campaign. It was pretty intense. The people there live in huge apartment blocks with no backyards. I never saw a clothesline! I can't imagine what it would be like to live with so many people so close together, and where everyone speaks Spanish!

It was very interesting for me to realise that within the US so many people's main language is Spanish. My Spanish is not that good, to say the least. But I did hear about and see some great work happening around diabetes and alcohol use. These are two huge issues for the Latino community just as they are for our people in Australia.

Latino Health Access is involved in community campaigns around these issues and the number of people who get involved is really incredible. They had 120 one day, 200 the next, 150 the next. But perhaps what impressed me the most was that they have a Youth Council. It wasn't a youth committee, or youth group, it was a Youth Council. And this Council had been very involved in the planning of every event. This wasn't work that had been decided by professionals and then offered to the community. This was organised by the community. Everyday they had different themes and each day people would record their messages of hope. These messages were beautiful. On the last day of the campaign each person was given a flower. These were placed in the palms of their hands. It was a symbol of hope and there was a sense throughout the campaign of a community in the process of reclaiming its life. While I was there, they gave me a most beautiful blanket.

Pride

In all the places we visited, the Aboriginal Elders' poster and the Aboriginal flag were much loved. The African-American community, the Cherokees and the Latinos were also very interested in our reconciliation process. This was something that seemed to offer a lot of hope to those we met with. I shared with them the formal reconciliation agreement that has been signed between the Department of Human Services in South Australia, and our key Aboriginal Elders. There seemed a lot of interest in what we are doing here.

Our pride comes from a knowledge of hard times. It is a pride of knowing what we have been through. It is a pride of knowing our stories and finding ways of sharing them with others who want to hear.

I have tried here to share stories with you about how we are reclaiming our pride. When I think of the Martin Luther King Centre, The Cherokee Council House, the shawl I wore at the pow-wow, and the blanket from Latino Health Access, I have a sense of being joined with many other communities in reclaiming pride.

Pride is a lovely word. It has brought us to where we are today, and it will take us into the future.

Acknowledgements

Many people have made this writing possible. I would like to thank *Lisa Berndt, Vanessa McAdams-Mahmoud, Makungu Akinyela, Gail Lapidus, Laura Garcia, Rob Anque* and *Ken Hardy* for their kindness and hospitality while I was in the USA. I'd like to acknowledge the support and kindness of *Christine Charles*, who is the Executive Officer of the Department of Human Services in South Australia, and *Brian Dixon* who is the Executive Officer of the Aboriginal Health Services Division. I'd also like to thank *Kevin Eglington*, who is my regional manager at Hills Mallee Regional Health Service, and Dulwich Centre for their ongoing support.

Note

1. This paper was given as a keynote address at the Pan Pacific Family Therapy Conference held in Melbourne in September 2001. It has been published on the Dulwich Centre website www.dulwichcentre.com.au for some time and has also appeared in a number of Australian newsletters including the Victorian Association of Family Therapy Newsletter. Barbara sees this paper as public property and anyone is welcome to copy or republish it in any form.