

Sorry Day 2020

Sorry Day has become part of the calendar of commemorations that challenge us to reflect on our colonial history, as well as our present-day attitudes to our Indigenous brothers and sisters. The formal National Apology given by then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd on 13 February 2008, brought a great sense of catharsis, relief, satisfaction, as though at last, the wrongs of the past were being exposed and confessed. As I look back on the YouTube video of that day on 13 February 2008, I am moved to tears because of the tears flowing on the faces of the Indigenous people, gathered in and outside Parliament.

Part of our ongoing atonement is the observance of National Sorry Day on 26 May each year. This day was inaugurated in 1998, one year after the tabling of a report about the removals of Aboriginal and Torres Strait children from their families.

As well as being a day of repentance for the cruel injustices of the past, it is a day that highlights some of the wonderful achievements of Aboriginal people in numerous fields of endeavour, The Arts, Music, Dance, Poetry, Theatre, Comedy, Law, Education, Medicine, Health, Literature, Painting, Traditional Languages, Bush Knowledge, Care of Land.

In some circumstances of our everyday lives, the word 'sorry' is not easily said, but once it is uttered with sincerity, a way is open for reconciliation, for a more genuine encounter with the other, for ongoing acceptance of mutual shortcomings. To say sorry is to trust oneself and one's story to the other's understanding. The genuine encounters of each day in the flow of what happens, leave space for people to grow and accept one another's limitations. Reconciliation is happening in this gradual and sometimes painful way.

As I reflect with Sisters who work closely with Aboriginal people in remote communities and in urban parishes and settings, I hear them attest to this honesty and mutuality in their relationships. Genuine appreciation of one another, being sorry and saying sorry weave through the ups and downs of everyday encounters. This is reconciliation in the everyday; part of being immersed in 'the smell of the sheep'. It happens on the verandahs, in the Community, the classrooms, the roads, on the bush trips, in the office, the shop, the Art Centre, in times of death, grief and loss, imprisonment and release, resolving conflict, in the talking circle, sitting around corroborees, songs and stories, women's and men's business shared and honoured.

Specifically, targeted programmes can be very beneficial in healing the traumas, and consequent violent behavior, carried from the cruel practices inflicted on past generations. 'Healing the Cause of Violence Programme' organised by Sr Alma Cabassi, for the people of Halls Creek and Balgo, is one such programme. This has been run with the support of small grants from Mary MacKillop Today and currently a significant grant from The West Australian Police Force. The sessions are conducted by an experienced psychologist, who presents

learnings that help people understand the cause of their reactions and violent behaviours. This programme suits Aboriginal learning styles, Sr Alma says, as it includes illustrations and stories.

In the Warmun Community, as Sr Theresa Morellini attests, the people have taken ownership of the Lirrkarn Kerrem Programme, (Teach and Understand) which has been conducted for many years, with the support of North West Mental Health, significant elders in the Community, and specialist government departments from Wyndham and Kununurra. The people of Warmun see the value of traditional healing ways and want to engage with the elders, learning from them and listening quietly to one another. Some of the young people have Certificates in Drug and Alcohol education.

The programmes are a high point, enhancing the sense of self and pride of the participants, leading to learning and motivation to live the good Aboriginal way.

The value of such programmes continues in the day to day support of community workers who are part of the fabric of the community.

In the Baabayn Community, an Aboriginal led Family Centre, at Mount Druit in NSW, a model of healing is offered, involving listening and yarning, practising just being able to sit and be quiet, to listen and to share. Baabayn is described as 'a safe haven for respectful cultural healing, for everyone who wants that in their life.' The purpose of the yarning process is to explore the cause of trauma for Aboriginal people. A yarn is a circle; each person fits into the circle and brings their own bit of energy in that direction. The reflections of the people who have participated in the healing circle show the lifegiving effect of such yarning. 'Just by sitting and being connected, we start to heal. As we start to connect again, other people can feel and see these effects. It is important to just sit and be guided and be part of nature.'

Excerpts from: Baabayn Weaving and Reweaving: Just Sit and be Quiet and Listen

Authors: Members of the Baabayn Community, recorded by Ruth Townley

You took the children away, the children away
Breaking their mothers' heart, tearing us all apart
Took them away

The children came back, the children came back
Back where their hearts grow strong
Back where they all belong, the children came back

Took the Children Away: Archie Roach

ownley.