

Camp Dog

This story is more generic – it does not use a person's totem and therefore is suitable for group use. It includes several important life-affirming principles for those in prison, soon to be paroled or recently released.

Let's talk about life and law. Every living thing is alive because its needs are met. Barramundi swim around the billabong looking for food, and dodging crocs. Camp dogs sniff around the rubbish and dodging the rocks kids throw at them. Same with you, me and all fellas. We need food, and we dodge danger. We stay alive.

But, you, me, other fellas not like barramundi. We don't want to just stay alive. We need to think, yarn and plan things – we want good life. Someone to love, something to do, something to look forward to. So, it's not just food. Our life needs to make sense, we need purpose and meaning. Without these, life has no point. That's when a fella kills himself, didn't know there is more to life. Mob gets upset, wonder why they took their own life – they didn't think, yarn and plan.

Crazy people don't think, just do crazy stuff without thinking. Or they can't think – too much grog or gunja. Crazy people don't yarn, they don't listen so no point in yarning. Crazy people don't plan, only now - today not tomorrow; running amok not police, court, jail. No planning for one day to have special mate to yarn with plan future, have kids and good life.

Without thinking, yarning, planning, every day the same, seems like this is all there is, no other choices. They keep doing the same things over and over. Soon a big fight, people get hurt, stuff gets broken, mob turns against them. Then they get taken away, just you in a cage. No one to yarn with, no one to plan things with. Time to think then eh?

Time to think about what to do different. There has to be a better way. There is. Yarning and planning. Barramundi can't do this but us fellas can. It reminds me of a story.

Long time ago – things were different. Mean old bastard he was, nobody liked him, little kids scared of him, savage and dangerous he was. Because he didn't really belong in the camp, he used to slink around the edges. Then he would have big fight, they would take him away but he would find his way back. Nobody trusted him. He was a camp dog, part dingo, always in fights, mean as. He didn't like himself or anyone else. Sad story, until something happened.

Yeah, something happened alright. Nobody knows what happened because the last they saw of him he was locked in a cage on the back of a truck and taken away, a long way away. But the camp dog knew, he thought about it a lot and he remembered. He didn't talk about it much, but he told me. He said for me to tell other fellas, he thought it might help them know there is a better way than snapping and fighting.

The camp dog was taken away to a big swamp, lots of other dogs there already, snapping and snarling. It was horrible, cages everywhere, and a smell of dog piss and shit. Now, he might have been a mongrel, but he was also smart. When he was a little fella he spent a lot of time with his aunties. He had a lot of time to think in the cage and he remembered his aunties telling him two things he had never forgotten, even though he hadn't thought about them for years. One was the great emu in the sky, especially at night when all goes dark. He always watching, sees everything happening now, what happened long time ago, even sees what happens before it does. Aunties used to point to him in the night sky, they knew exactly where to look, they said "Never be afraid, he good friend always". The second thing they told him was "You got good blood ... way back in your family was pure dingo and big mob ... very smart, some people say sly and cunning, but we say smart and clever". "People call you but we say smart and clever, and emu thinks so too. And one day when we go and join our old people, emu who lives forever will tell you himself".

In the cage late one night, the camp dog remembered all this. Looking through the wires he thought he could see the emu in the sky, He wanted to be out of the cage so he could see without wires in the way. As he fiddled with the lock it came undone and the cage was open.

You might think he would be off and running, but no, he waited. Something told him no point in going back to being a mongrel camp dog again. "This time, go back different" it said. He waited some more, wondering about how he could be different. He wondered about the voice too, it certainly wasn't a dog's voice. Something sweet and gentle, must have been a bird, probably a night bird, a curlew, ones you hear but don't see.

"You need to believe in miracles" the curlew said. The camp dog gave a snigger. "I don't believe in miracles - they don't work" he said. The curlew continued "You don't have to believe in miracles ... the cage is open whether you believe or not. You are free to go. You don't have to believe in anything but it is best if you do".

The camp dog thought about that. Something about it made sense. Maybe he would go back to the camp different if he believed in something but he didn't know what, yet. He walked past the other cages, most dogs were asleep but one, a big black mongrel pushed his nose through the wires and snarled, ugly teeth and bad breath "Who do you think you are ... think you are better than us do you?" The camp dog kept going, so glad his cage was open but the black mongrel's wasn't.

He realised he didn't know who he thought he was, but felt for the first time he wanted to find that out. Perhaps that is something to believe in, as the night bird said. He didn't feel better than the black mongrel, but knew he wasn't in jail now, and at least he knows what a brush and toothpaste is for. Maybe there is nothing wrong with being better after all.

It felt great to be free, and it wasn't long before the swamp and all the cages were a long way behind him. He walked through the night, but soon enough the sun started to come up. He paused, still panting from his long walk and just looked at the sky changing colour, and then that big bright ball started to rise. "This is a miracle!" he said out loud, looking at it as though he had never seen it before. Certainly he hadn't seen the sun rise for a long time. After a night of drinking and fighting the sunrise was the last thing he wanted to look at. Perhaps, he thought, this is what it means to go back different, noticing things and believing in something.

He had a long way to go, but kept moving. He knew of a good place to stay that night, up on a rocky outcrop, he would be safe there and he needed a good rest. He was hungry but even though he came across a kangaroo beside the road, he only had a couple of mouthfuls. "Dead meat is for dead dogs" he said, and saying it made himself feel very much alive, even if still hungry. He thinks the feeling of being very much alive was because he was noticing things, not just moving about in a brain fog.

It was then he noticed two kookaburras sitting side by side on a branch. The camp dog paused, he thought it looked cute. He had mounted a lot of bitches in his time, but never had someone to sit beside like these two birds. Then the kookaburra spoke "You need to have someone to love ... believing in that is better than being not liked and lonely". "We have each other, and plan to grow old together" the other one added.

The camp dog kept going but couldn't stop thinking about someone to love. Although he was hungry and tired he was surprised at how well he could think about things. Deep things, like what he thought about next. "If I don't love myself, how could I love someone else?" Then he remembered his aunties saying about pure blood from way back. He felt lighter on his feet from just thinking about that.

By early afternoon he needed a rest and a patch of soft grass near some scrub was just the spot. He woke up some time later. There was a low buzzing sound – bees. There must be a hive near here, he thought. Sure enough a big hive with so much honey that some dribbled down the side of the tree. It tasted so good, and it soothed his dry cheeks. Sweet and soothing, how good is that.

He was about to get going when, strangely, he paused and said “Thank you bees”. Stranger still, a group of bees, their wings vibrating but not going anywhere said “Would you like something from us that last longer than the sweetness in your mouth and the soothing on your cheeks?” “Take some of our wisdom, for we not only have someone to love, but we have something to do... it gives us meaning and purpose”. “We can provide something for others, even wandering camp dogs like you”.

More to think about for the lonely camp dog. It was becoming quite a journey. He felt he was going to be different when he got back to camp whether he liked it or not. He did like it because he was sick and tired of the fighting and the cages. Something was happening to him in a good way. He didn’t understand it but that didn’t matter. From the lock undoing itself, the curlew voice in the night, the two kookaburras side by side, the bees who were busy and happy, and now as he noticed the night sky and the vast spread of stars as far as his tired eyes could see.

Then he saw the emu, well, more than saw it. The camp dog felt it and heard it speak with the wisdom of long ago. I mean this wasn’t the first time he had lay down to sleep under the stars, but it was the first time he didn’t feel alone. You see, camp dogs don’t have anyone to look after them. Nobody owns them, they just slink around the edges of the camp managing the best way they can. Nobody feeds them, and there’s not much food around - that’s why they fight a lot.

With the emu in the sky it was like he had an owner, somebody was looking out for him. He already felt different and he was still a long way from camp. His head resting on his front paws, you know the way dogs do it, the scars on his head and the tear in his ear was still there but he just knew that night, no more fight, no more blood, no more scars. Things will be very different.

He heard the emu, or was it the curlew, that voice in the night, it didn't matter. "You're a good dog". Nobody had ever said that to him. It felt so good. "You have something to look forward to". The dog was about to ask what, but he didn't need to because the voice in the night went on "Now that you are thinking, now that you notice things, planning on someone to love, something to do, it will be like never before". "I'll take care of things while you rest and when the sun comes up soon, it will be like a brand new start, a new beginning for you as well as a new day for all of us".

The tired old camp dog rested. Slept like he had never slept before and was ready for when the big old sun came up. Ready for anything, fresh and excited in the cool morning air.