

“Fire in my belly not smoke in my eyes”

People ask me how come this community was able to beat violence, grog and gunja and have one of the best health care clinics in the territory. My answer is simply “I don’t know”.

It was a RFDS nurse who told me about the community, for she had been there lots of times, for you can’t have fighting without bad injuries. The little I do know comes from her, for, like me, she is white and to understand something we haven’t seen - the change from dysfunctional to flourishing, is probably beyond us. What we both do understand is that community health is less about treating disease and more about how they feel – like feeling enough is enough, and that they can make a difference. We also recognise that the change was like some great primal creative force was stirred and in a language of the heart only they could understand, it gave them back something taken from them years ago – dignity, and reason to stand as a proud capable people again.

Many in the community say the changes began when Emily came back from Katherine after some training days. It was mostly about first aid which Emily had been doing for years but there was something else that she didn’t talk about much. Whether it was because she didn’t feel confident in explaining it, or something much deeper is hard to tell. It was like some secret knowledge, like missing phrases of a song cycle or perhaps, now I think about it, like a page missing from the great story that had caused so much misunderstanding and confusion, had been found. It now made sense. Complete sense.

Perhaps the reason Emily didn’t talk about it much was because she wasn’t in charge of the clinic. The person who was didn’t show much concern for missing pages, to her it was business as usual. People showed up, she cleaned the wound, gave them a bandage and a few pills and sent them away without asking questions. The idea that things could be a lot better was not one she entertained. “It is what it is” she said. Whatever that meant was also something she didn’t bother about.

Emily, however, had been bothered for a long time. She knew deep inside that the community despair

Author’s Notes

The usual phrase for starting is: ‘It reminds me of a story ...’, but this is somewhat different.

Firstly I want to separate myself from the story and avoid being a ‘know-all’. It introduces the possibility that we will find out together.

Secondly it has layers of story, or stories within stories. It is important to set the scene a bit because it is answering a specific question: “What would it look like in our communities if these ideas took off?” (meaning the HG approach). So it starts with ‘community’, refers to the dysfunction, and points to a great clinic because the person asking the question works in a clinic. As a therapist/storyteller you are also setting yourself up to be very aware of who you are talking to and why.

My experience in the NT has formed the belief that any lasting change in communities will be driven by women, so the story has portrayals of strong enlightened women playing a major role.

They will have ‘had enough’, they will be sick of outsiders coming in and buzzing off again, and they will realise after a while if not initially, that they *can* make a difference.

The empowering effect of new insights that resonate with them and ideas that make complete sense could be that starting point.

This conviction will be necessary because there will be strong forces resisting change of any sort, and we need to suggest Emily is well aware of these resisters.

was a disease of the worst kind that no bandage could fix. What could fix it, she believed, was what she learned at the training day. That humans have needs beyond food and shelter, and if their emotional need for meaning was not met, life became pointless and nothing mattered, not even death. And, also, that if the way people made sense of their world and place in it was dysfunctional then everything else would be too. No amount of talking and tablets would make any difference. They would only get better if their sense-making was restored, and the way that could happen, was the missing page Emily had found.

Emily did talk to people she trusted. A regular church-goer, she didn't believe much of what was said but she did believe in the power of connection with a small group of women she had known since school days. It took a while but they came to like the things Emily talked about, and even if they didn't grasp them fully, they knew that Emily had been influenced by something profound and that was enough to convince them. As they talked over the ideas they came to realise that expecting different behaviour required a shift in the way people made sense of their world, and that to make that shift meant getting back to the way things made sense years ago. It had to involve the Great Creator Spirit, the dreaming, and the gifts of law for the country and their people.

"Our eyes have become diseased; we need new ways of seeing the gifts of country and mob" Emily said often to her family of friends. It sparked one friend to exclaim "Remember when we were just kids and we used to dance with our mothers, aunties and grandmothers, that's when we last saw clearly, when the dreaming helped us make sense of everything". They each agreed, and they reminded each other that that was until the teachers made them feel guilty for being part of the women-only ceremonies. Teachers saw themselves as 'knowledge-keepers' and didn't have any respect for things they themselves could not understand, and ceremony was certainly one of those things. The girls didn't understand the terms used to make them feel guilty, terms like 'heathen' or 'pagan' or 'old rubbish', but it occurred to them now, all these years later, that a vital part of how they made sense of things was destroyed with nothing to take its place. It was the language of the heart that told them a great loss had occurred.

Emily grasped two essential ideas from the training day that become part of the story: the importance of emotional needs being met, and how we make sense of our world.

Emily will not be able to do this alone. She needs trusted and committed allies.

The story also needs a spiritual dimension, but not of the church kind. It has to go back to ancient times before the missionaries and restore the concept of 'Great Creator Spirit' for want of a better term.

I am not sure how authentic this part is. I have read several accounts of the missionaries in Arnhem Land, and wonder why the church has become such a fragmented and confusing force. It seems to have little to offer communities struggling with addictive and abusive behaviours, so the idea it could become part of Emily's quest is doubtful.

Emily and her friends knew what they had to do. With no mothers and grandmothers to ask, they realised the stories had to be created afresh. It must have looked strange, but this small group of determined women took off one night and they were missing for several days – only three husbands knew where they were and they held the information tight. At their insistence, no search was made, and the women immersed themselves ‘in country’ to listen to the spirits of the land talk to their hearts. They didn’t want so much for the old stories to come back, but new ones from country to speak for the present times. For they knew that the good spirits were troubled at the confusion, the aimlessness, the loss of dignity, and despair and would speak new law into the chaos. For most of the time, the women kept from speaking with each other, it was only toward the end of their isolation that they talked over what they had heard in heart language.

What they had heard was simply astounding. As each one started to recount something the others seemed to already know the rest of the story. The stories came from the trees who stood so tall and strong; the birds who were so free and happy; the animals that were doing what they do since the dreamtime. Each spoke with an ancient wisdom to the women with vital lessons for the times. The women were excited, and couldn’t wait to engage the rest of the women of the community for it was the grandmothers, aunties and mothers that had carried on so bravely in spite of the terrible violence. Emily and her friends gathered these women together in a ceremony of stories, of dance and healing. A new vigour and sense of purpose spread through the community – it was like the dawn of a new era. The church pushed back, because they didn’t want a return to the ‘old ways’ but Emily had prepared for this. With help from an indigenous leader high up in religious circles, she was able to talk about Jesus as creator of all things, and just as grieved as anyone about the rise of dysfunction and despair among the mob. But most persuasive of all, was her recounting of how the Great Creator Spirit of the land spoke to the women, gifting a new vision and stories of hope. The church hadn’t spoken anything like that for years.

Now comes the really incredible part. The three husbands who stayed the search for the women were

For all that, I am not convinced that a return to the old ways is possible or necessary.

While I may have some hesitancy about the role of the church in the loss of ‘old ways’, I have a lot of confidence in the benefits of ‘being immersed in country’. There are only two characteristics universal in every culture, the propensity to worship and sex-regulated behaviour. The notion of a superior power/being is essential, and it appears in the story both as a validating factor (‘spirits were troubled’) and later as a power to assist changing behaviours (‘wisdom of country from the Great Creator Spirit’).

I have a lot confidence in people arriving at ‘enough is enough’ and driven with a conviction that it need not be this way, gathering around them kindred spirits that avoid outside help, and getting in touch with the solutions already within them. The whole point of country speaking is just that, and the passion they show becomes infectious.

Yes, I have been in missionary circles long enough to know the church will push back, but Emily has enlisted the help of ‘big guns’ to fire a couple of well-placed salvos across the bow of ‘big-ship’ religion.

wanting to know what had happened that made such a difference in their lives. Emily had prepared for that too, for she realised that the tradition of men not listening to women was part of the 'old ways' that had survived. No one is quite sure how this was handled, but word has it that the men agreed to a weekend in country as children completely dependent on their mothers. It must have worked, for it became obvious that they had been profoundly affected. Called the 'New Trinity' – a term the church didn't approve of – the men gathered together with the elders of clans, gang leaders, and even some uncles from down south, and had ceremonies for men and boys. It lasted for weeks, and what amazed everyone was how the three men were able to revive the power of lost stories in the elders. It was like the beauty and clarity of the dreaming had been restored.

Not everyone was happy to be on board. Some wanted the Land Council in Darwin involved, others wouldn't be part of it unless extra police were there, and of course there were some who opposed it for reasons only they knew about. I did hear that some men were against it simply because Emily was seen to be a trouble-maker with her new ideas. White society isn't the only one that has difficulty letting women lead. Fortunately, or perhaps the Great Spirit was so powerful, those opposing it were outnumbered and either drifted away or became swept up in the enthusiasm.

The changes were almost immediate, particularly among the men and young boys. People seemed to infect each other in a good way, and a sense of purpose and purposeful activity spread everywhere, the clinic, the school, the store, even the club – it nearly closed but the men wanted it to stay as a place to hang out. They still drank, but nothing like before. And, the part of the story that most people cannot believe is that the violence settled down and gunga and petrol sniffing disappeared. Believe it or not, a new community was born.

Now, as I say to people who ask me how this happened, I say "I don't know". But that is not altogether true. The last time I was there I had to go to an outstation and Tony, still a teenager, wanted to come with me. He had been away from school for a long time, and had returned, along with his mates and had found a real purpose in being there. However, he

The men will have to come on board, and here again I avoid the 'know-all' stance with 'word has it'. While at one level I am writing a story, at another level this recounting of how the community changed has to be realistic; it has to be within the realms of possibility. I believe it is, mainly because men too can reach a point of 'enough is enough' even though they don't say so. However, I stand to be corrected.

I mentioned 'realistic' so here is another dose of realism – not everyone will be on board with such a change occurring. People get defensive and use all sorts of tactics to slow it down and derail it if they can. Good luck trying to out-wit the Great Spirit though.

Now for these changes to happen, thinking has to be drastically different. This is where another layer of storytelling fits in. A story that embeds a whole new set of patterns in their emotional (read 'primal') brain using the power of metaphor.

felt he needed a day off 'to clear his head' he told me as we loaded the Toyota. I wasn't expecting it but after an hour or so, he started to talk. This is how I remember it:

The Owl is a keeper of ancient wisdom, wise things from the Creator Spirit our fathers and mothers knew from a long long time ago. When someone asked the owl if that was still true – if he was more wise than the cockatoo or goose. This is what he said:

The cockatoo and goose, like you, sleep when all is dark and dangerous. Night is when the owl stays awake, our eyes are big and clear – we watch for danger when all is dark. Cockatoo and goose, like you mob, sleep when dark stuff and danger is everywhere – in what you watch, drink, sniff and eat. Wisdom is like the owl staying awake to guard ancient knowledge. We sleep when it is safe, when there is no darkness. This is still true even though people don't know or don't care.

You mob have lost ancient wisdom. Danger of grog and gunja and porn is everywhere but you sleep then wake up stupid and fight each other instead of fighting danger.

Have you ever noticed campfire smoke? It does four things: stings your eyes so you can't see; follows you when you try and move away from it; makes you cough instead of breathe properly; and it turns you into walking crazy-people, head down tripping over things and falling down.

Whole camp is like that. Mob can't see properly; can't get away from it; head down and can't breathe properly. Smoke everywhere, mob all stupid crazy-people.

Tony felt so much shame because what the wise old owl said was true. Camp smoke, stinging eyes and crazy-people, he could feel it all. The owl went on.

You haven't asked me and I don't usually speak when people don't ask. But I can see you are a good young man. You have a good heart and I can see you know what

Notice the teller of the story is a teenage boy, the very cohort that caused much of the anguish in the first place. Notice too, that the owl is speaking wisdom with the authority of the Great Spirit.

I have said is true. Let me show you a way forward, listen carefully with your heart not your head that is always distracted. Be more like an owl than a cockatoo, more like a snake than a rabbit.

The camp smoke is because the fire has gone out. The flames that let you see in the dark and warm you on cold nights have died. That's why there is so much despair and sadness. The spark of light and the breath of life have gone out and now just that awful smoke following you everywhere. You can't see and you can't get away from it.

Tony had been listening like the owl, like the snake, not distracted, just feeling the deep vibrations of ancient wisdom from country where things like this were known long ago. But then he asked the owl how we can get the spark of life back so we don't all die so young. The owl didn't answer straight away, he needed to think about an answer from the wisdom of long ago and he wanted Tony to be listening from his heart again. When the owl was ready, his big bright eyes full of ancient vision he said:

The spark of life and the flames of light come from three things in your life;

1. *someone to love – for when you love someone you become part of the big cycle of life, you also take pride in yourself and stand tall.*
2. *something to do – for people doing nothing have to put up with what happens, nearly always bad stuff.*
3. *something to look forward to – for this gives hope and keeps the fire in the belly, the flames bright, the spark of life alive and that rotten smoke away.*

That's the wisdom of our mothers and our fathers, our aunties and uncles of long ago and I have kept it alive by not sleeping when everything goes dark and danger is everywhere. I know it is true because it is the wisdom of country from the Great Creator Spirit.

I could tell Tony had been affected by the story. He talked about his love for Shanika: "I want to be a good

man for her, she cares for me in a way the gang never did. I want to stand tall and strong not looking to the ground in shame. I have something to do, that's why I am back in school".

"I look forward to working in community someday – a mechanic or truck driver, or even helping kids with footy. When I look forward to something like that it gives me hope, and not just me. A lot of us young fellas are like this. It is like there is no smoke following us around and we can see stuff like we've never seen before. It's like fire in our belly not smoke in our eyes".

I chose not to dissect the story because it is not a good idea. Stories are interpreted by the individual in a relaxed, dream-like state, and will be impacted by particular metaphors in their own way. Such is their power, and to try and put markers from my perspective, even as the author, would be to reduce the story's power to create useful change-driving patterns.

I mention 'dream-like state' intentionally. You see the emotional brain is where dreams take place, and if we are to add new patterns with which to see ourselves and our world, we must simulate the same process. Deeply relaxed, and sneaking under our rational thinking brain are powerful metaphors that get embedded in our subconscious brain. In this dream-like state, Owls can talk and the smoke is real. Age, race, culture or gender doesn't matter because all humans dream even if some can't remember them.

The three keys to happiness, someone to love, something to do, and something to look forward to, may seem trite or corny. Let me tell you it isn't. In many years of private practice I have used that saying more than any other. I believe its impact is because those three things will ensure three vital emotional needs are met: loving brings connectedness, belonging and 'other' focus; doing stuff brings a sense of control instead of being overwhelmed, and looking forward brings a sense of meaning into our lives, it gives us hope. Hope is the anchor to the soul and when storms blow and the tide is against us, we have something secure to hold us. What an asset in a crazy world.

To assist in the creation of your own stories that heal, let me offer some 'essentials'.

Look for the metaphoric. You know that an owl is not like a cockatoo, that's just observation. But at a metaphoric level the story needs authoritative advice, the words coming from a deep source of reflective all-knowing ancient wisdom. The owl can do this but the cockatoo could not. Neither could the goose. Similarly, the snake is not the rabbit. There is a reason Jesus told his new evangelists to take on the wisdom of the serpent and that is they sense what is going on rather than just rely on what they see – a deeper level of knowing.

Secondly, as stories go, you could probably say it is not the best you have heard. After many years of doing therapy I have come to see that it doesn't matter, and realise I wasted a lot of energy in the early days trying to 'get it right'.

I realise now that I am more effective if I don't try too hard, and don't overthink it. At the rational brain level you could ask what is the connection here ... where does that fit ... what is the point of saying that, and so on. Well the point is Emily was talking to women in trance, their rational thinking was being bypassed and she was embedding metaphors that have the capacity to empower and inspire. She was talking 'heart language' and I wish you every success in doing so too.