

# REVERENCING THE EARTH IN THE AUSTRALIAN DREAMING

By MIRIAM ROSE UNGUNMERR-BAUMANN and  
FRANK BRENNAN

**T**HIS LAND WILL be home again for all who live here only when we all have a place for our neighbour in our hearts.' So spoke the Australian Heads of Churches in a statement 'Towards reconciliation in Australian society' marking the commencement of the Australian Bicentenary of 1988. Without a declaration or war of independence Australians were invited to celebrate a bicentenary thirteen years before the first centenary of nationhood. On 26 January, 1788 the English sea captain Phillip came ashore at Sydney Cove founding a penal colony and proclaiming British sovereignty over half the land mass of the Great South Land of the Holy Spirit. The European mindset encompassed the Great South Land. Aborigines went about their daily affairs until the frontier of pastoral expansion passed through their tribal boundaries taking all in the name of the Crown.

The Colonial officers and entrepreneurs had little understanding or regard for the history of the land and its people. Australia's first Aboriginal deacon in the Catholic Church, Boniface Perdjert says,

God did not begin to take an interest in people with the incarnation of his Son, nor with Moses and the prophets, nor with Abraham. My people existed here in Australia thousands of years before Abraham set out for the land of Canaan. In all that time God was with my people. He worked through our culture. He was saving us despite human weakness. He was preparing us for the day when we would see the features of Aborigines in the image of his Son. So we must recognize, we must use the things of God in our culture.

The Aboriginal reverence for the earth is born of 40,000 years' existence on the land, and more recently 200 years dispossession

and dispersal from the land. In recent generations, the land has been the only constant in a foreign sea of suffering and despair. The land has been the touchstone of 'the dreaming' and the abiding reminder of life before the coming of the white man and his ways. The anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner says,

No English words are good enough to give a sense of the links between an Aboriginal group and its homeland. Our word 'home', warm and suggestive though it be, does not match the Aboriginal word that may mean camp, hearth, country, everlasting home, totem place, life source, spirit centre and much else all in one. Our word 'land' is too spare and meagre.

Particular pieces of territory, each a homeland, formed part of a set of constants without which no affiliation of any person to any other person, no link in the whole network of relationships, no part of the complex structure of social groups had all its coordinates.<sup>1</sup>

The dreamtime myths assign present meanings and values by grounding all contemporary reality in the eternal present of the great drama of creation played out in the past and involving all created things, of which human beings were neither the greatest nor the least, neither central nor peripheral. Before the coming of European ways, all things were believed to be held in balance, suspended in the eternal present which had no regard for the future—the future which occupies the Europeans who 'try to foresee, forestall and control by every means from astrology and saving to investment and insurance'. Muta, a wise old Aborigine, once said: 'White man got no dreaming. Him go 'nother way. White man, him go different. Him got road belong himself.' The clash of cultures and the gulf in mindsets created a yearning for a utopian time and place—the past and one's country. The ancient law, though often no longer life-giving and death-dealing, was reverently recalled as the way to belonging to the land. For those of both Aboriginal and European descent, the land remained the sacramental expression of creation's life-giving power. Meanwhile industry, tourism, farming, mining and urban expansion transformed the land and erected a new society, leaving Aborigines without bearings in what to them was a violated wasteland. The bush was the only retreat to get back in touch with the land. It remains the deep spring that is within those who continue to identify themselves culturally as Aborigines. It is not exploited for

gain but revered with no thought of its transformation. The silence and sounds of the bush teach Aborigines a quietness of soul and sensitivity of spirit putting them in touch with the world of spirit. This is best described by Miriam-Rose speaking in the first person.

*DADIRRI—touching the sacred in the land*

We still have a special respect for nature. The identity we have with the land is sacred and unique. Many people are beginning to understand this more. We have a very strong sense of community. All persons matter. All of us belong. We are a people who celebrate together.

Another special quality of our people, our most unique gift, the greatest gift we can share is called *dadirri*. It is inner, deep listening and quiet, still awareness. *Dadirri* recognizes the deep spring that is inside us. We call on it and it calls to us. This is the gift that the world is thirsting for. It is something like what others call 'contemplation'. When I experience *dadirri*, I am made whole again. I can sit on the river bank or walk through the trees; even if someone close to me has passed away, I can find my peace in this silent awareness. There is no need of words. A big part of *dadirri* is listening. Through the years, we have listened to our stories. They are told and sung, over and over, as the seasons go by. Today we still gather around the campfires and together we hear the sacred stories. As we grow older, we ourselves become the storytellers. We pass on to the young ones all they must know. The stories and songs sink quietly into our minds and we hold them deep inside.

In the ceremonies we celebrate the awareness of our lives as sacred. The contemplative way of *dadirri* spreads over our whole life. It renews us and brings us peace. It makes us feel whole again. One of our ceremonies that brings about this wholeness is the Smoking Ceremony. I take part in the ceremonies. I love to see the painted bodies and to watch the dancers. I like the sound of the didgeridoo and the clapsticks. I never feel alone in the ceremonies. Sometimes at a corroboree, before the dancing has started, we sit and listen as the song-men or song-women begin the story. Everyone is relaxed. We feel secure and happy. We are all together and it is good.

I feel deepest sympathy for many of my people who have lost their ceremonies and their culture. The pressures and the tragedies

in our recent 200 years history have hurt and killed many of our people. I have read and heard about the things that happened, how people were shot or driven away from their land. I still feel hurt in my heart for those people. And all this happened because people did not know and understand or respect each other.

Even today, many of my people are dying inside. Yet, as a people, we still survive. Survival is something that has become part of us from centuries of struggle and endurance. Culture keeps on growing. With education and interaction with other people, I hope our culture will grow strong again. I hope that with this education and interaction, we will become better people. In our Aboriginal way, we learnt to listen from our earliest days. We could not live good and useful lives unless we listened. This was the normal way for us to learn—not by asking questions. We learnt by watching and listening, waiting and then acting. Our people have passed on this way of listening for over 40,000 years.

The pope said to us in 1986:

You lived your lives in spiritual closeness to the land, with its animals, birds, fishes, water holes, rivers, hills and mountains. Through your closeness to the land, you touched the sacredness of man's relationship with God, for the land was the proof of a power in life greater than yourselves. You did not spoil the land, use it up, exhaust it, and then walk away from it. You realized that your land was related to the source of life.

Quiet listening and stillness—*dadirri*—renews us and makes us whole. There is no need to reflect too much and to do a lot of thinking. It is just being aware. My people are not threatened by silence. They are completely at home in it. They have lived for thousands of years with nature's quietness. My people today recognize and experience in this quietness, the great Life-giving Spirit, the Father of us all.

It is easy for me to experience God's presence. When I am out hunting, when I am in the bush, among the trees, on a hill or by a billabong; these are the times when I can simply be in God's presence. My people have been so aware of nature. It is natural that we still feel close to the Creator. Dr Stanner, who did much of his work among the Daly River tribes, wrote 'Aboriginal religion was probably one of the least material-minded, and most life-minded of any of which we have knowledge'.

In recent times we have come to listen to a sacred word that comes to us from God, our Father. This new Word is Jesus. *Dadirri*, the deep listening and quiet stillness, can make us whole and revive us. This is a special quality in our lives. It is born in our culture. The Word of God finds a home here. Jesus enriches and renews our culture. He gently stirs our inner stillness, but he does not take away our peace. We like to hear words of peace, like Jesus spoke. We want to listen and to pass on words that are true and good—like the words that have come to us through our culture and traditions; and like the words that come to us in the gospel of Jesus. This is what I long for: that with these words to guide us, everyone will come to listen to the sound of God. We all have to try to listen—to the God within us—to our own country—and to one another.

The other part of *dadirri* is the quiet stillness and the waiting. Our Aboriginal culture has taught us to be still and to wait. We do not try to hurry things up. We let them follow their natural course—like the seasons. We watch the moon in each of its phases. We wait for the rain to fill our rivers and water the thirsty earth. When twilight comes we prepare for the night. At dawn we rise with the sun. We watch the bush foods and wait for them to ripen before we gather them. We wait for our young people as they grow, stage by stage, through their initiation ceremonies. When a relation dies, we wait a long time with the sorrow. We own our grief and allow it to heal slowly. We wait for the right time for our ceremonies and our meetings. The right people must be present. Everything must be done in the proper way. Careful preparations must be made. We do not mind waiting, because we want things to be done with care. Sometimes many hours will be spent on painting the body before an important ceremony.

We do not like to hurry. There is nothing more important than what we are attending to. There is nothing more urgent that we must hurry away for. We wait on God, too. His time is the right time. We wait for him to make his word clear to us. We do not worry. We know that in time and in the spirit of *dadirri* (that deep listening and quiet stillness) his way will be clear. We are river people. We cannot hurry the river. We have to move with its currents and understand its ways. We hope that other people will wait. Not so much waiting *for* us—to catch up—but waiting *with* us, as we find our own place in this world.

There is much pain and struggle as we wait. The pope understood this patient struggle when he said to us:

If you stay closely united, you are like a tree, standing in the middle of a bushfire sweeping through the timber. The leaves are scorched and the tough bark is scarred and burnt; but inside the tree the sap is still flowing, and under the ground the roots are still strong. Like that tree, you have endured the flames, and you still have the power to be reborn.

My people are used to the struggle, and the long waiting. We still wait for the white people to understand us better. We ourselves had to spend many years learning about the white man's ways. Some of the learning was forced; but in many cases people tried hard over a long time to learn the new ways.

We have learned to speak the white man's language. We have listened to what he had to say. This learning and listening should go both ways. We would like other people to take time to listen to us. We are hoping people will come closer. We keep on longing for the things that we have always hoped for—respect and understanding.

Going back to the bush, I find new hope. I never get tired of going back. My relations have told me about the origin of these places. The history of my ancestors has real meaning for me. I learnt about a trading trail, a track that neighbouring tribes used to follow, the place of our ceremonial grounds. All these places mean a lot to me. They are part of me. All the bush is part of my life. I was born under a tree. My mother showed me the place. She showed me where I used to play, and where I would hunt for wild honey. The feeling I have for this place is very special. This place where I was born—it is me.

Being still brings peace—and it brings understanding. When we are really still in the bush, we concentrate. We are aware of the ant hills and the turtles and the water lilies. Our culture is different. We want other people to take time to know us; to be still and to listen to us. I believe it is not just twice as hard, but four times as hard for an Aboriginal person to achieve anything in our country. Life is very hard for many of my people. Good and bad things came with the years of contact—and with the years following. People often absorbed the bad things and not the good. It was easier to do the bad things than to try a bit harder to achieve what we really hoped for.

I think it is something like a whirlwind. We might get caught in it, but after, we come out—all 'fluffed up'. We think: 'I got through! I made it!' But some people get caught and stuck. They might feel trapped; or they might drop out. They might commit suicide. Today I see my people caught in a terrible whirlwind, tossed about and trapped in a circle of confusion, frustration, often despair, unable to escape. I have felt the confusion, the fear, the helplessness. Yet in some strange and wonderful way, God is, by degrees and ever so gently, lifting us out of the whirlwind. So we are asking that our fellow countrymen will come and learn; and listen and wait with us. This will encourage us and lighten our burdens. And we know that our white brothers and sisters in this land themselves carry their own particular burdens. We believe that if they let us come to them—if they open up their hearts and minds to us—we may lighten their burdens. There is a struggle for us; but I believe we have not lost our spirit of *dadirri*. It is the way that we strengthen and renew our inner selves.

There are deep springs within each of us. Within this deep spring, which is the very Spirit of God, is a sound. The sound of deep calling to deep. The sound is the word of God—Jesus. I am beginning to hear the gospel at the very level of my identity. I am beginning to feel the great need we have of Jesus—to protect and strengthen our identity; and to make us whole and new again. 'The time for re-birth is now', said the Holy Father to us. Jesus comes to fulfil, not to destroy. If our culture is alive and strong and respected, it will grow. It will not die. And our spirit will not die. And I believe that the spirit of *dadirri* that we have to offer will blossom and grow, not just within ourselves, but in our whole world.

In recent years Aboriginal Christians have prayed:

Father of all, you gave us the Dreaming.  
 You have spoken to us through our beliefs.  
 You then made your love clear to us in the person of Jesus.  
 We thank you for your care.  
 You own us. You are our hope.  
 Make us strong as we face the problems of change.  
 We ask you to help the people of Australia to listen to us  
 and respect our culture.  
 Make the knowledge of you grow strong in all people, so  
 that you can be at home in us.

and we can make a home for everyone in our land.  
Amen.

Being the only constant in the lives of those who have lived precariously on the fringes of society and the Church, the land has nurtured the Aboriginal spirit which knows nothing of mediated sacredness and which experiences the immediate power of the land. Living in ennobled equilibrium with the land, Aborigines have continued to reverence their spirit place, abiding in its constancy, despite the whirlwind of change in which the West and the future immerse them. Belonging to the land, their world of meaning is still shaped by an interactive rather than a transactional world view.

Recently an Irish film crew wanted to film Aborigines eating mangrove worms in remote mangrove swamps. Having transported the elaborate equipment through the mud, the film director asked for a shot of an Aborigine eating a worm. The Aborigine reached down into a log, extracted a worm, broke it in two, gave half to his mate, and ate the other half. The director called, 'Cut! I want one single motion.' The Aborigine replied, 'We share.' Sharing, we reverence the earth and all its creatures. Wanting one single motion, we exploit the earth and define the purpose of all its creatures. For 200 years Australians have set the land to task. For 35,000 years before Abraham set out for the land of Canaan Australians revered the earth and saw this as their most sacred task. Only when we belong to each other again in reverence will we come to reverence the land of our belonging. The 200 year conflict of mindsets may yet produce the blessed realization that we belong together on the way to the Father of the Dreaming. An Aboriginal great-great grandmother sitting under a huge mango tree on the beach was asked if the missionaries planted the tree last century. 'No' she replied, 'I planted this tree. I am very blessed to sit in the shade of the tree I planted and to see it bearing fruit.' Reverence is born of waiting and watching what is beyond our power, accepting that we are of the earth, and knowing we are shaped by the land of our birth.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Stanner, W. E. H.: *White man got no dreaming* (ANU Press, Canberra, 1979), p 230.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p 589.