

# Aboriginal Health, Healing, Spirituality, Truth and Forgiveness

*Diana rose Yoka*

I wish to acknowledge Dr Vahid Payman for inviting me to give this presentation\*, the Traditional Murrís of this land for their permission to speak, in particular, Lillian Colonel of the Jarowia people, and Beris Anning, director of Kumbari Nurapai Lag, and the mayor of Toowoomba, Councillor Dianne Thorley. I am not an academic but an experiential learner. In this presentation, I will use terms like “Dominant culture”, “Wedjela”, and “Gardiya”, which refer to non-Aboriginal people.

This presentation is about love, healing and forgiveness, which can only take place when the truth is told. It is not about blame or guilt, for people present here today have little, if any, knowledge about the real circumstances surrounding the colonisation of this country. Indeed, I did not know that I was of Aboriginal descent until I was 50 years of age, and I guess my traditional people decided that I was finally mature enough to know the truth. Aboriginal people like myself don't want your pity: we want your humanity, your compassion and your understanding.

Past, Present, and Future operate on one continuum. There is only Now. And what happened Yesterday affects what is happening Today. What happens Today will affect what will happen Tomorrow.

We are here today together, to learn the truth, so we can make a difference and leave our children and our grandchildren memories and an inspiration that were our lives that will have changed the negative past into a positive future for white, black, and brindle (people of mixed heritage) alike.

Therefore, I respectfully ask all here **to listen with your Hearts and not with your heads to this presentation, so you begin to feel the hurt and the pain of others.**

‘Abdu’l-Bahá says: *“The injury of one shall be considered the injury of*

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all” (*Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 168), which means you should be able to appreciate the pain of your Aboriginal sisters and brothers, as you feel the same pain for yourselves.

I will also say here and now, how much sorrow I feel for the Iranian friends who continue to be persecuted because of their adherence to the Faith. Your brothers and sisters, like Aboriginal brothers and sisters, are Deaths in Custody, the difference being that you are being persecuted for your Faith whilst Aboriginal people are being persecuted for their race as well as for their religious beliefs. In July this year in Western Australia, Aboriginal people lost 7 people in custody in a space of 6 weeks. Locally, a twelve year old Murri boy has just been jailed. For what reason? His family does not know.

We are now going to view 5-10 minutes of a video called “The Coolbaroo Club”, produced by urbanized Aboriginal people of Perth. At the conclusion of this brief footage, I will ask your opinion of what has been shown. If the people in this footage were members of your own race and family, would you be able to forgive the perpetrators?

We now return to how the colonisation of Australia occurred. In the 1700's, the colonisation of Aboriginal Australians began in New South Wales and spread to other parts of Australia. The British colonialists who occupied this country referred to it as “terra nullius”, unoccupied land. Yet this land was owned and operated by Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders. When the Indigenous inhabitants realised that the British intended to steal and not to share the land, the resistance and guerrilla warfare to the brutal colonisation of Aboriginal inhabitants began.

In the words of Kevin Gilbert, Aboriginal activist and print-maker:

*As Aborigines began to sicken physically and psychologically, they were hit by the full blight of the alien way of thinking. They were hit by the intolerance and barbarism of a people intent on progress only in material terms, a people who never credited that there could be cathedrals of the spirit as well as of stone. It is my belief that Aboriginal Australia underwent a rape of the soul so profound that the blight continues in the minds of most blacks today.*

Aboriginal people were referred to as “vermin”, “coons”, “niggers”, and “animals”, to name a few discriminatory terms, and were likewise hunted by many of the Colonisers of this country, including the so-called “Famous Australian Explorers” and “Pastoralists”.

Oral histories of Aboriginal people report on the dismembering of their people whose body parts ended up in the British and European museums for purposes of study. Even today, those same museums are still refusing to repatriate those remains to their descendants to allow a ceremonial reburial to occur.

Aboriginal traditional burials are varied, but I have been given permission to cite an example.

Once a person is considered deceased, they are interred facing east, in a hollow grave approximately 3 feet deep, which is lined with leaves and logs. The deceased is interred sitting up in the foetal position, so if they are not dead, they can climb out of the grave and resume their lives. If the person is obviously dead, their body will remain in situ for approximately 12 months and those remains will be given a ceremonial reburial. The grave itself will have a marker placed near it and sometimes a circle of grass will be burnt around it. In 12 months time, it will be green again, marking the position of the burial site.

The name of the deceased is not mentioned again for a time. Words that rhyme with the deceased person's name are not used, neither are plants and animals from which the name has been derived. The conception and birth sites are also avoided. The Kinship system takes precedence over personal preferences, and the loss of a dear one makes for imbalance in this system which has been given to Aboriginal people by their own Ancestor Lore Maker (Manifestation of God). Therefore, the break in continuity needs time to heal and repair so the harmony of the group is restored.

In the setting of the Dominant culture's hospital system, it is deeply offensive to Aboriginal people to have their deceased relatives subjected to the dismembering of their body parts, namely, the removal of their brains and hearts etc during autopsy, for the purposes of Gardiya study.

People of the Jewish Faith are not treated with such contempt. Indeed, the Rabbi is summoned once death is pronounced and the body of the deceased is removed and buried the next day according to the rites of the Jewish Faith.

Aboriginal people need to be consulted in the Hospital setting and often require a traditional 'smoking and wailing ceremony', which could take place away from smoke alarms and other hospital patients, if a special area was set aside for such purposes.

In urbanized areas like Perth, once an Aboriginal person dies, the people there often do not have the amount of money needed to hire a funeral parlor to bury their relative. It often takes 2 weeks for extended kin to raise the necessary funding for even a deposit. In addition, if an Aboriginal person dies at home, unless money is available, the relevant health authorities refuse to remove the body until funds are obtained. This type of discrimination would not be tolerated by Wedjelas, who usually bury their loved one within three days.

Giving birth is also a sacred act. Baha'u'llah says that "*the soul is given to the child upon conception*". Aboriginal people say that, "*a spirit child is put there in the mother's womb.*"

The wise older woman will take the pregnant young mother to-be to a

sacred woman's place. The ground is sterilized by spinifex, which is fired up, and sterilising herbs are added to the fire, producing sterilising smoke, which the young girl is asked to straddle so the aromatic smoke can engulf her body. The older woman then leads the young girl to a birthing tree and she instructs the girl to squat down while she massages the spine in a circular motion. The squatting girl braces herself up against the tree and braces herself while pushing to help the baby in its descent from the womb. The older woman scrapes out a hollow in the ground to receive the baby, and when it is born she cuts the umbilical cord with her teeth and buries the afterbirth in the depression. She then moves away with the baby from the young mother, and breathes into the nostrils the names of the child's totems that acknowledge his indebtedness to, and respect for, the plants, animals and earth. The baby is then wrapped in paperbark and returned to the mother in a coolamun (bark carrying dish). The mother and wise older woman remain in seclusion for a few days and then return to the group where the newborn is greeted with ceremony and joy.

The Hidden Words of Baha'u'llah state: "*Know ye not why We have created you all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other*".

Aboriginal people traditionally have an egalitarian society, unlike Dominant culture, whose society is based on Feudalism and divide and rule.

From George, a traditional man cited in *The Survival Dreaming* by Peter McCloy:

*Why would I want to set myself above my people? To do so would interfere with our kinship, I would not be able to assume any position of real leadership if I set myself apart from the other elders or the people. For us, leadership brings obligation, not privilege, unless you count it as a privilege to serve. Why would we want to change that for your system? How can people claim to be leaders, when their method of gaining this position is by creating division." "In our society", says George, "everyone shares responsibility for the welfare of the land and the people, but in your society you elect politicians and you blame your lack of responsibility on them.*

In the book, *Indigenous Education*, by Bill Barnes, Bahá'u'lláh is quoted as saying: "*By one word more he was guided to recognize the Source of his education.*" Bill Barnes goes on to say:

*We start at the Source, which for human beings is the archaic, the primitive and the indigenous... The indigenous is at the center of education. Education must start at the centre, with Revelation, which is the 'essence of knowledge' (The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, p.138), with prayer, with moral example, with the basic and permanent structures of thought and*

*social purpose gained from the indigenous vision of Revelation animating the indigenous powers, and work out from there. The indigenous powers are the universal powers restored at the origin and centre by Revelation.*

In the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Bahá'u'lláh also says hunting is not forbidden, but it must not be done to excess. This implies land rights for Aboriginal people, and Rúhíyyih Khánum, I have been told, also advocated land rights. It is time, I believe, that the Australian Bahá'í Community supported Aboriginal people with regard to issues of justice.

My Aboriginality came as a result of payback. I had a Gardiya great grandfather who committed atrocities with his mates at La Grange in 1865. Under tribal law, a member of that family was paid back for those atrocities. In this instance, my white grandmother, who gave birth to an Aboriginal boy who was murdered, gave birth a year later to my Mother, who was fair enough to be passed off as white but was abused by her mother, who blamed Mum for the circumstances surrounding her conception. Mum's mother was Edith Cowan's first cousin, and Edith Cowan's father-in-law, Walkingshaw, was a Native Protector from York. Walkingshaw was a decent man, who actually did protect the Natives, unlike his contemporaries, and his son John married an Aboriginal woman, Matilda, from Blackwood station.

I would also like to say a few words about Edith Cowan, the first woman member of Parliament in Australia. Edith Cowan's main interest was in social welfare and together with some of her contemporaries, she established the Karrakatta Club of Perth, Western Australia. These women formed the Women's Service Guild and their aims were as follows:

- 1) To educate women on moral, social and economic questions and the disadvantages of the use of alcohol as a beverage.
- 2) To support from the standpoint of women any movement to protect, defend or uplift humanity.
- 3) To be loyal citizens of State, Commonwealth and Empire.
- 4) To seek public good and not personal advantage.
- 5) To establish equal rights of citizenship for both men and women.
- 6) To form a link, through national, Empire, and international affiliations, with women throughout the world.
- 7) To provide a common ground on which women of all shades of thought and opinion can meet.

A similar organisation was formed in the state of Western Australia, whose aims were as follows:

- 1) To establish a bond of union between the various affiliated societies

- 2) To advance the interests of women and children and of humanity in general
- 4) To confer on questions relating to the welfare of the family, the state, and the commonwealth.

Returning to the subject of my interaction with my mother, Mum abused my sister and I, although she did have some positive interactions with me. Because Mum's identity had to be hidden, she was sent to an up-market boarding school called Koobeelia at Katanning in the south west of Western Australia. She learnt everything to survive, from reading and writing, to handling money, bookkeeping, academic work, gardening, cooking, sewing, washing, ironing, and cleaning. Mum was a Jill-of-all-trades and mistress of them all. I am the eldest of five siblings so Mum knew nutrition sufficiently well to feed us all properly. She also trained as a Nurse at Princess Margaret Hospital in Perth and used to go flying with the flying doctor to various parts of Western Australia. Mum was a brilliant nurse, who was excellent with other people's children, but she despised my sister and I because of what her white mother had done to her.

A few lines of my poem "Void" describes Mum's interactions with me:

*I was her punching bag, my head smashed against walls, the boxing-ring of life, for I was always in strife. I was shocked and bewildered, a small child, not understanding, why I did not fit in, why, what did I do to deserve this, in a world I never made?*

I was privileged to meet my tribal grandfather in 1944 at Brown Hill Boulder Kalgoorlie. He was the payback man that I have previously mentioned. He took me for walks with him and also, to his credit, he apologised for what he did (taking advantage of my white grandmother by using love-magic). That old man taught me to respect everyone regardless of caste, creed or colour, and he taught me to be a servant of the people. I was also taught about the atrocities committed by my white great grandfather, and was informed that my job was to restore honour to the black and white history of my family by exposing the truth. Later, when Dad returned from World War II, I ran away with grandfather again, but the miners came up after me with guns and were going to shoot him in front of me. I yelled at them and saved his life, as well as saving the lives of the women, young men and children. The last I ever saw of him he was walking free back out into the desert. But his spirit has been with me ever since that day, which occurred when I was two and a half years of age.

A year after the event with my grandfather, my mother called me into the dining room and she presented me with an Oxford Dictionary to teach me to read. She also gave me simple books on other people's cultures, mythology,

and a picture book on Comparative Religions. Later, at the first one-teacher school of 14 children, the teacher there made us learn about Persian History of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and it was there, at the age of 5 years, that I learnt about a “political dissident” called “The Báb”. When I heard his story, I informed the Catholic teacher, “that Man was a Man of God and I shall follow Him”. ..for which statement I was given the cane. In fact, because I did not understand Mathematics, and the Gardiya way in which it was taught, I frequently was given the cane. Some of the Catholic children there stoned me and beat me, and one child, who was physically mature, tried to rape me. My mother’s response to those events was: *“Get out of my sight, I wish you were dead, I wish you had never been born, I don’t want to know you, or anything about you”*. My mother was abused the same way by her Gardiya mother, and, because she was starved of love and affection, she was incapable of feeling for her daughters.

Life at school was so bad for me that I could not cope with it any more, and, one day, I ran away from school out into the desert. In those times, Afghans and their camels brought fruit, vegetables, and pots and pans to the mining towns in Western Australia, so when I thought I was alone, and was crying by myself, I was amazed to hear a Voice from No-where asking me why I was crying. I saw an old man with a fez and a grey coat, he also had a snow white beard and the bluest eyes I had ever seen. I knew because of His vibrations and the Light around His body that He was not one of those “Afghans”, indeed we had an amazing conversation which pointed me in the direction of Progressive Revelation about which I talked to Church officials and for which I was abused continually, and He told me that my parents would never know me or ever understand me. And was I willing to do as He asked me, especially and most importantly to always strive to “Tell the Truth” no matter what was done to me, so I agreed, but asked Him for courage and Divine Protection, which He agreed to give me.

My family moved to Queensland in 1949, and I attended various schools there, and the abuses continued by teachers as well. In one incident, I was caned in front of the whole school for saying “hullo” to two identifiable Aboriginal youths. In another incident, a teacher hit me over the back of the head with a book called “The Third Reich” and he threatened to kill me if I told my parents, so I walked in my sleep and screamed the place down for 6 months. So my parents sent me to another school and, unfortunately, I was put into a Catholic Priest’s class for Religious instruction, and I was denounced as a heretic and was caned and the yard stick was used on my spine which was fractured in several places. I was never taken to a doctor by my mother, I usually used to go by myself, but there was no point in going when the whole district turned against me and I was described as being ‘contaminated’ and all children were instructed to avoid me. I have never recovered from that

incident, I did not reach puberty until I was nearly 17 years of age and this came with a Kundalini awakening, and later when I was 18 years of age, I went nursing with childhood fractures of the skull and other parts of my body, a very bad scoliosis, and chronic exhaustion from Meningitis, which I had in 1949 without antibiotic treatment.

I was a nurse for 35 years and worked in medical and surgical nursing as well as with children, orthopaedics, geriatrics, palliative care, and psychiatry, to name a few. I became a Nurse Educator without the university degree, and an assistant manager of a retirement village, but in spite of my achievements, I had no sense of self in which to have any confidence or esteem.

It was not until I began to understand Bahá'u'lláh's Hidden Words where He says, "*Noble have I created thee, yet thou hast abased thyself, rise then unto that for which thou hast been created*", that I began to make sense of my life. Up to that stage I was so put down, that not only did I not have a sense of self, I was totally unaware of my own repressed anger, and of the effect I was having on other people. I was told one day by a friend that I did not accept myself. That statement really touched my inner being, and I burst into tears and began to write out my feelings for the first time in my life:

"Do you see this little child, she never had a chance, all she wanted was acceptance, all she wanted was a loving glance, but all she ever got each day was ridicule and scorn, I wish you were dead the Mum said, I wish you had never been born". As I explored my own issues, I became aware they were the same issues for the stolen generation and anybody who is labelled "different" or "queer" or "eccentric" etc, and I became aware that I was not alone.

Most of my life I was subjected to name calling such as 'moron', 'mongrel', 'lazy-good-for-nothing', 'spineless', 'useless', 'you'll never amount to anything', etc, which, as Bahá'u'lláh says, very badly affects people even more than the power of the sword. "Sticks and Stones will break your bones, but names will never hurt you" was the childish song sung by most children in the 1940's and 50's, but name-calling does hurt children and I have no doubt it is responsible for the Australian population having the highest suicide rate in the world. After all, if you tell a child they will never amount to nothing... 'nothing' is annihilation, it means you won't have a job, earn money, have a girl-friend, etc. I am also sure this is why young people break into houses. If gardiya people won't employ them, they will take what doesn't belong to them, on the basis of unconscious payback.

In 1990, I was told that I was of Aboriginal descent by an Elder I met in New South Wales, and since that time, I have been working through my own 'issues of identity' with support from Aboriginal people who have set up their own Medical and Counselling services around Australia.

Aboriginal people are very diverse and there are many success stories, which are rarely mentioned by the media, which only focuses on negativity.



In Australian universities, it is a policy that Aboriginal people are targeted as objects of study by people studying social work, psychology, and related health sciences. Aborigines are fed up with being treated with such contempt, because families are still being invaded by do-gooders and children are still being taken away.

As Pat Dugeon and Darlene Oxenham say regarding white academic colonisation of their culture: *“That Aboriginal people are exploited for data. What benefits do the source community obtain for the papers, books, PhD’s and employment that are gained by studying Aboriginal people?”*

That ownership of this data then, transformed into processed information, allows arrogation to an expert status and entrenches non-Aboriginal positions of power and influence of Aboriginal Affairs and so affects Aboriginal self-determination. Western concepts, (psychological and social) must be seen as reflecting that culture and as such are inappropriate for assessments/appraisal/ understanding of Aboriginal culture.

In conclusion, until Dominant culture acknowledges the shared history of the colonisation of Australia, until this alien culture addresses its own issues and studies its own race to find out why they have difficulties dealing with their own issues, there can be no final reconciliation, in spite of the many wonderful, caring, and loving interactions that are finally occurring with both groups.

My challenge to the Bahá’í community is that I hope you will write letters to the Local and National Spiritual Assemblies and request that The Universal House of Justice takes an interest in Indigenous communities around the world, so that they can be an advocate for justice in the same way that they are advocates for the Iranian friends.

Nelson Mandela says that his heroes are women and men of good will regardless of status. May the Bahá’í community agree with this view and may we all go together, hand in hand, to ‘defend the victim of oppression’ as we would also like to be defended.

The following is from my poem, *“Nobody”*:

*For they were gentle souls, whose deeds go unsung, except in the memory of God who knew their worth and gave them in the world of spirit, much higher rungs. They would not have wanted a Eulogy written about them on several pages, for they were unsung heroes, rocks for all ages. They were but a thread of life woven by the Eternal Mind, and they fulfilled God’s destiny for them, which was to till the soil and sod of this precious time. For they were no less an equal in the Eyes of God’s sweet Grace, they were not Nobodies but Somebodies worthy of an Eternal Place.*

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*The Coolbaroo Club Ronin Films* available from Early Childhood Education Royal Street East Perth WA.

*The Survival Dreaming* by Peter McCloy (1995) published by Management Interface Pty Ltd Sydney

*The Complexity of Aboriginal Diversity (1989) Identity and Kindredness in BLACK VOICES vol 5 no 1*, James Cook University Townsville Queensland, Pat Dudgeon and Darlene Oxenham.

The Aboriginal Justice Council July 2000 Issue: "On any one Day in Western Australia:

6% of all Aboriginal men are in prison

6% of all Aboriginal men are on community supervision orders

.5% of all Aboriginal women are in prison.

2% of all Aboriginal women are on community supervision orders

9% of all young Aboriginal people aged between 10 and 17 years are under community supervision and 1.5% of all Aboriginal youths are in detention.

A rape of the Soul so profound by Peter Read (1999) Allen and Unwin

Another video not mentioned in this presentation available from SBS:

"Stolen Generations" screened July 2000 Naidoc Week Celebrations:

Key points include:

- Most whites knew that Aboriginal people were being murdered in large numbers
- the demise of the Aboriginal population due to being shot, diseases, and drinking poisoned water.
- At the time there were few white women, so the white men had sexual liaisons with Aboriginal women.
- The government stopped the integration of Aboriginal people with white settlers because they saw the Aboriginal population as : a security threat, morally corrupt, and racially unhygienic.
- There was an increase in "half-caste populations" which outnumbered the European population, and this was responsible for children being "taken away".
- Government reserves, missions, and cattle stations, were in control of children of Aboriginal descent being taken away.

The 1905 act allowed the removal of children from their families. The Tindale stud book (called that by Aboriginal people) under the forced assimilation policy said that: 1 full blood with a half-caste equalled a three-quarter-caste; a three quarter caste with one quadroon equalled a half-caste; this was the Eugenics principle through breeding out the "full bloods" to improve Aboriginal people by breeding out their "impurities and colour".

"Indigenous Education: Rebuilding Civilisation", Bill Barnes, Daystar International School, Japan.

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