



## CHANGING MINDS, SAVING LIVES – PSYCHOANALYTIC INSIGHTS

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Welcome to Pamela Nathan's psychoanalytic series, taking simple gems from the psychoanalytic dreamtime that may become tools for living...

# HOW STORIES ARE HEALING THE RACIAL DIVIDE

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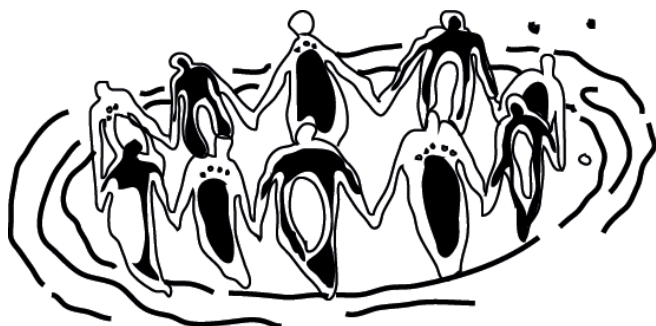
## Outcomes of taking a new approach to Aboriginal disadvantage

By Pamela Nathan

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*We must understand that we may not know the answer. It is OK to be silent. By listening, we may gain a deeper understanding. We may experience the ruptures together and establish a shared emotional experience. We may find a way to move forward... together. Kurunna mwarre. Make my spirit inside me good.*

*- (Inspired by artist and elder Kathleen Kemarre Wallace)*



Our past has a living presence. That is particularly apparent in the racial tensions that still exist in Australia, in our politics, our policies and the way of life for our two communities – Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal.

Our past is an emotional storm of two peoples in traumatic collision and change, much of which was, and still is, uncharted territory. The racial divide and cultural contact is the eye of the thundering storm.

But Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people have the capacity to transform the stormy ruptures. My experience over 25 years of working with Aboriginal people has shown that when we as “whitefellahs” recognise and empathise with the breakdown of Indigenous culture – the pain of the past, of the chains and massacres, we bring the then of the past into the now of the present in a very different way – a creative way – and we can more easily make the changes that must be made.

It may sound daunting; we know that some terrible wrongs have been done. How, then, can we build a bridge over this racial divide?

Actually there is a deceptively simple process that gets the job done: the sharing of stories. Time and again, in our work as CASSE, we have found that sharing stories is the way both sides of the racial divide can learn, grow and reconcile. This exchange of stories is essentially a psychoanalytic process (the underlying approach we take at CASSE), which relies on remembering, experiencing and listening to the journeys that have led to the racial divide as a means of healing. The sharing of stories humanizes peoples and engenders visibility, recognition, pain, empathy and respect for differences.

It’s our belief, based on practical experience, that a psychoanalytic approach can be applied as readily to a community as it can to an individual. Although this is a surprising and innovative idea, we have found it is eminently suited to helping all Australians understand and bridge the racial divide. Given time, it can help us move towards the ideas so beautifully expressed by the artist and elder, Kathleen Kemarre Wallace, of *kurunna mwarre* for all – all of us can have our spirit made good, and feel that internal healing.

## ***Cleaning our side of the street***

Reconciliation is a two-way process. The fact is that we “whitefellahs” have much to reconcile in taking responsibility for the way Aboriginal Australians are living. This is under-acknowledged. The role of psychoanalysis is to acknowledge the existence of actual oppression and dominance and of the silence on matters of racial trauma, which permeates and pervades the unconscious and conscious world in Australia.

We whitefellahs brought our own trauma to colonisation. How could those early arrivals find a home in such wild and unknown country, without envy, savagery and terror in their hearts? The terrain was unfamiliar and inhospitable, and provided scarce resources and often dry and dusty deprivation for them.

By contrast, these settlers watched the Aboriginals by their waterholes and campfires, with their ability to gather fruits and seeds and cook bush game, at home on the land. In fact it was a veritable Garden of Eden to them. The settlers were exposed to the harsh elements, either too cold or too hot, and were often thirsty and hungry in an alien country. And they were held hostage in Australia, many as convicts, chained, unwanted, evacuated and got rid of by their own countryman.

They arrived with a deep-seated sense of unconscious, if not conscious, “badness”. It’s not too far-fetched to say that the convicts and other settlers projected this onto the country and its black inhabitants. The imposition on the white law of so-called *terra nullius* – that this land belonged to no-one – is a powerful illustration of this projection, bringing with it an inherent barbarism under the guise of civilization. Nor can we dismiss the idea that the settlers’ envy of the Aboriginal ease within the Australian landscape fostered the viciousness of their attacks on traditional lifestyles, lands and culture.

## ***Stories lead to action***

Does all this really matter? There are those on both sides of the racial divide that want us to stop talking and listening, and simply “get stuff done”. Aboriginal people are living in a post-colonial world of gross inequality, poverty, suffering, violence, homicide, suicide, assaults, and

domestic violence. A 60,000 year old civilisation has staggered into the twenty-first century challenged first by colonialism and traditional dispossession and then by modernity. Addressing these issues in practical terms is a pressing concern.

And this is where we offer really exciting news: stories lead to action and change.

Through CASSE's Aboriginal Australian Relations Program, I have been working with Aboriginal leaders, listening and empowering, traversing the zone of trauma and violence. Without searching for the outcomes of "cure" and "success", and allowing the process of hearing and sharing stories to remain central to the work, terrific projects have been created – projects that create employment as well as dignity. A case in point is the 'Tjilirra - Traditional Tools, Life Tools' Project – in which Aboriginal men show each other how to create and use traditional tools, while sharing stories and knowledge.

This project is a direct result of using CASSE's psychoanalytic approach to tackling the entrenched social disadvantage Aboriginal people face.

### ***Learning from our history of failure***

In considering the value of CASSE's approach, it is important to remember that the track records for almost all other approaches to healing the racism and disadvantage leave a lot to be desired. Millions of dollars, if not billions, have been poured into "solutions" over the past couple of centuries and the result has been, to say the least, disappointing. The numbers speak for themselves, in a very tragic way.

CASSE's psychoanalytic framework is eminently suited to analyse and deconstruct racist and colonialist thought and seeks to illuminate, not reproduce, colonialist and racist relationships. If we really want to stop reproducing the ineffective and wasteful programs of the past, we need to allow ourselves and our relations to face some scrutiny over the past, and to talk and listen to each other and to Aboriginal people – there is a moral and human imperative we are facing at this point.

## ***The way forward***

Racism simply depicts the breakdown at the point of colonial contact between Aboriginal people and Whitefellahs. Psychoanalysis acknowledges that we all have, residing within us to varying degrees, hateful feelings which can become tyrannical and all-powerful. We are all capable of splitting off the bad, unwanted parts of ourselves and projecting them onto another person, or an entire race.

Over time Aboriginal people sustained a psychological/cultural breakdown as their lands were invaded and occupied by pastoralists and missionaries, their children stolen, their women raped and their people shot, chained in neck and leg irons and massacred. Nonetheless, Aboriginal people continue to survive.

Actions like the “intervention” are recurrences of the old mind-set. The Federal Government’s 2007 Northern Territory National Emergency Response Bill gave the Government wide control over Aboriginal lands, families, and community services, breaching two treaties to which Australia is a signatory — the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The army rolled in and the past became the present as people fled in fright.

The same can be said of recent moves to forcibly shift Aboriginal people from their remote homelands.

In order to create a safe, supportive environment for all Australians, we need to find and tell the stories from both sides. We need to feel the feelings associated with them, and make sense of the stories. As we work through the multiple layers of loss and grief and pain about the life that has been taken and that will never be recovered, as we struggle together, mourn together, survive the storms and listen together, we will start to create a future reconciled Australia, and achieve *kurunna mwarre* – a deep and profound sense of healing and of humanity for our individual and collective spirit – for all.

## ***About Psychoanalysis***

Psychoanalysis is about listening, talking about and understanding the past. It encourages difference, seeks to understand internal dynamics, and teaches us how to 'walk in each other's shoes' by developing empathy for ourselves and others. The psychoanalytic process honours pain, loss and trauma, and restores the human in the development of understandings so healing can be achieved.

## ***About CASSE Aboriginal Australian Relations Program***

CASSE's Aboriginal Australian Relations Program uses a psychoanalytic framework to work with Aboriginal people and communities to understand and process the emotional experiences of generational pain, trauma and violence. Working towards *Kurunna Mwarre* ('making my spirit inside me good'), changing minds and thereby saving lives.

Since its establishment in December 2011, CASSE's Aboriginal Australian Relations Program has established a 5 year partnership with Central Australian Aboriginal Congress; held two public forums - a Reconciliation Forum in Melbourne and the 'Walk in my shoes' town forum in Alice Springs - with internationally and nationally renowned speakers; produced three educational booklets; and lobbied for positive change and against injustices, providing a forum for Aboriginal people to be heard. Two demonstration projects have also been established: A Men's Shed best practice research project in collaboration with the Central Australian Aboriginal Congress' (CAAC) Ingkintja, and The Tjilirra Traditional Tools project, in collaboration with the Royal Flying Doctor Service and communities in Kintore, Haasts Bluff, Papunya, Mt Liebig and Kiwirrkurra. CASSE has also funded mentors to support the Atyenhenge-Atherre Aboriginal Corporation's Cultural Horse Trek in Santa Teresa.

***For more information about how CASSE can provide support for individuals and communities to think together about how to develop secure relations and psychological wellbeing for today and the future, contact us:***

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