



Beginnings

**(A summary of the CASSE/Central Australian Aboriginal Congress Partnership)
Kurunna Mwarre "Make My Spirit Inside Me Good"**

November 2010- Sorry time for unsung heros

The church was full. I was a large church in the centre of town. People were crying. Singing. Crying. Hugging. All in white. Clean. Hands being shaken. The grief was overwhelming-a river of tears for Margie *Kwemenje* who was the unsung hero who manned the funeral service for Congress people for over 30 years. Now it was her funeral. Her sorry business. The campfires burn. The people wail. She had guided me over the years and watched over my work and kept an eye on *Japanangka*.

Ancestors and colonisation

Japanangka was born in the old time amongst his ancestors, an *Anmatjirra* man, and found wandering nomadically over the red earth in a world of timelessness on sugar ant country, making country camps all over the land with the old *jilpas* under the stars and steeped in bush lore from centuries ago. Fat kangaroo and bush turkey were in abundance and the country was green and grassy under the swaying she oaks. Still *Japanangka* stood tall, astride, stockman's gait and strong. He had an akubra hat glued to his head, a cheeky smile, dancing eyes, rolling laugh and light brown skin. He was the son of a Nordic man and tribal woman and had to blacken his wide face from the welfare boys and run and hide far away from camp, playing with his shanghai until the whitefella mob were gone. When the devil, devil mob came with their cattle and destroyed his sugar ant lands he went droving the cattle as far north as Camowheel and got paid with flour, trous' and tobacco. He became the head stockman, boss man and bucked on wild, kicking horses, bareback and had to leave his country for long stretches of time. He lived among the whitefellas and far from his country and kin for sun ups and downs of time and his homesick heart ached in concert with the whistling winds and rose and fell with the crackling embers of the fire, night after night and he sent smoke signals along the tracks to his country, on the back of the whispering winds.

Many years later he came home for good travelling through dingo country as fast as he could. He married his woman in the sandy creek bed and made her his wife and they had one fat dark skinned baby after another-little blonde-haired brown eyed Mary, naughty Jonnie, skinny Charlene, Mopsy Topsy and all. He was so proud and she so shy. They travelled together over his sugar ant lands, finding them, eating them and looking after his sacred country. He made big fires and bough shelters in sandy creek beds for protection from the devil, devil cold and rain. He stalked the kangaroo and *Napanardi* dug for the witchetty grubs, berries and fruit. They all grew fat and made *welye* and became one with the ancestors again in time, ceremony and song. He camped with his old, old knarled mama and his sisters on their old country and

watched the whiteman build a fence around his brick house and pens for his cattle and saw his sugar ant land trampled on by poohing cattle that devoured the green grass in mooing chorus. He moved his kin further away and north of the centre to a cattle station on his own country run by his people. They lived in *wiltchas* and got the stock whips cracking again and ate big bullock for dinners. He disappeared into the bush with the other grown men under the full moon, silently like the snakes, for secret men's business and the women painted up with white ochre and the danced under the stars until spent, singing for their country and merging with their ancestors until the sun came up. Days and nights rolled into one and the seasons came and went and he became a wise old man, an elder strong in ceremony business and bush lore and a keeper of sacred secrets and stones, looking out for his country, making coolamons by the fires, erstwhile living on.

The whitefellas and the cattle began to multiply across his country like bushflies and he became a boss man for his people, learning to talk to the whitefellas who were like the perishing bullocks, no good, but destroying their country, the fat of the land. He became known as Uncle Charlie and he made the whitefella storeman and cattle men quake in their boots and shit their pants. His strong voice boomed "get off our land" and the whitefellas cowered, froze like the frightened roo and slunk off like the dingo dog until the fires died down. They made empty promises and created more bloody carcasses, letting the flies buzz around, the black crows circle and swoop the kill and the fires blaze in the red blood and burned the country. The kangaroos that weren't charred ran alongside with the people farther into the centre of the land. The whitefellas loaded their guns to get rid of the blackfella pests off their land, who stole their cattle and Charlie and his kin were shot at Conniston, massacred, bloodied, torn, wounded and left scarred but still they fought on. There was a power in the land that pulsed in their blood and their bush lore gave them the strength to carry on.

Uncle Charlie helped his people in the heavy rains who camped in the river beds and got them tents. He and his brothers worked hard for weeks handing out shelter and food until the rains stopped and the river bed was dry once more. They all talked hard together, laughed and cried and began to build a centre for their people nearby the river. They got a whitefella doctor to work alongside the *ngangerres* 'cos his people were dropping like flies, coughing from the cold, sick from the sugar, gone from the grog; the poison the whitefella gave them and made their fortunes on. He saw so many of his people young and old become sick ones, poor ones and the milk of the land dried up and the kids got bloated stomachs from hunger and cried long into the night. He mustered up the big bosses from all over the lands and they sang for country, told old time stories, fatted up and smoked their tobacco and listened to Charlie Pride sing out and spoke strong for their country and said they would talk strong together and to the whiteman to keep their dreamtime alive. They built a centre for the sick ones with the branches of gum trees from the creekbed in the heart of Red Springs and called it the Congress of the people. One night they had a big roaring fire, dug a deep pit and cooked the kangaroo slowly for hours, called all the people from the creekbeds to come in and have some tucker and make *welye* for their congress, a new country camp with the walls made from the old-time from long ago. They had a big smoking ceremony and the smoke found all the dreaming tracks and criss-crossed the lands telling all the people from the old-time camping far out into the bush the story of congress.

Uncle Charlie became a guardian for this place and could often be seen sitting on the bench outside the old welfare office, *kwemenje's* office, his akubra slung low, chewing a match in the corner of his mouth, smoking a rollie cigarette, drinking a billy of tea, sitting, sometimes so still, never missing a trick though, with his dancing brown eyes, which could spot a kangaroo in dense shrub miles away without even a turn of the head and sometimes a hooting *yukai* could be heard across the yard and the erstwhile silent, still Uncle Charlie could be seen doubling over in laughter and the whole yard would shake, in unison and smother the ever present lone mopoke cry.

November 2000- The Skies Are Crying

I arrived in Alice Springs. It was cold, wet and grey. Dismal. The roads were awash and the red earth sludge. The bush took on an intensity in the misty light, the spinifex a sweetened green, dappled yellow on the darkened red ruby sides of the MacDonald Ranges. A dingo howled inside me as I drove into town.

Japanangka had died three weeks earlier. He had kidney failure at the end of a long battle with diabetes. Corrie had rung to see if I could talk at his funeral. I stood alongside Warren Snowden-the minister and Jonny and Stephanie-the leaders of Congress and spoke:

I knew kumenjay over 20 years ago when I came to work at Congress on some health business. His family asked if I would tell a story about our work together. I am honoured to for it was a privilege to know kumenjay. Well, twenty years or more seems a long time ago and yet the time together seems like yesterday. I remember kumenjay standing tall, like the stockman he had been, leather belt with bullets slung low, always with his cowboy hat and a cheeky smile, rolling laugh, wise laughing eyes and larger than life.

We worked together for about four years like Congress has been telling you. I couldn't have done the work without kumenjay and really it was I who became the assistant and he the boss of the work. It became a running joke between us as to who was the Sergeant Major. There is no doubt that it was kumenjay. I was a young whitefella city girl who didn't know anything about the bush or the Aboriginal way. I didn't know how to talk to people out bush. Then Congress said kumenjay could work with me if he wanted too but warned me he probably wouldn't want to do it for long. Well he did. Congress kept an eye on me too and I remember always checking that it was ok for kumenjay and keeping me in line.

Kumenjay taught me about the Aboriginal way and really how to talk to you. On the long trips, he spoke to me in Anmatjirra, talked about the old time and about bush tucker, sign language and where to find, how to track, kill and cook turkey, perentie and kangaroo. I remember many times having to look out the Toyota window for hours on end and try and spot kangaroo while kumenjay drove. I used to quake in fright and pray that I could see something because kumenjay would get really cranky and say "we are not in rubbish country,

there should be big mob of kangaroo out there.” You can’t imagine my relief when I saw some. And then kumenjay would be so happy. He always wanted to be able to take food to the community we were visiting before the meeting and hated going with no tucker. He showed me how to see bush plants from rubbish ones and showed me the bush medicines. When we got to a community kumenjay would tell me who to talk to, how to talk and when to talk. Sometimes if I felt too shy and got in a sweat about having to approach a group, he would sing out and laughingly say “she is shy, what you crying for, what are you shy for? They’re not going to eat you. Get out of the car. Come on!”. He gave me the courage to talk. Sometimes if I was “hassling” to get started he would tell everyone I was “like a perishing bullock that had to learn to slow down!” Back in town, he interpreted tapes and translated tapes from English into Anmatjirra so everyone could understand what all the different communities had said. Kumenjay, on behalf of Congress, took on the responsibility of teacher, guide, and interpreter for me.

Kumenjay was prepared to put aside his reputation in order to assist in what he believed was important work. I remember how suddenly kumenjay stopped talking in meetings. At first, he said “I am sick of talking that’s all”. The next time it happened he told me “I am worried that Congress is going to be seen as yet another empty promise (Lelyjente etja). People are crying out for things we can’t do anything about. People are going to blame me and Congress if these things like housing and water are not fixed up”. From then on kumenjay began every talk saying “Congress has no money but is trying to help so there will be no more empty promises”. Kumenjay used to get so upset to see so many of his people, all over, living without proper services. Despite his worries, he never gave up hope that things would change and he kept on working. He always stopped to help any one broken down and gave petrol and food. When we were camping at communities he’d always be up early making a billy of tea, talking to the old people or helping out where he could. He also gave up time away from his family to do these trips. Sometimes his daughter, “little Julie” then, would come on the long trips and be so quiet and helpful.

On the bush trips with Charlie Pride singing out, kumenjay used to tell me some of his own story. As a boy at Napperby, blacking his face and running away with a donkey from the welfare. Later on he was whipped in the stockyards, became head stockman at Narweitooma, working stockroutes as far away as Camowheel, for months on end, with tobacco sticks, trous’ and flour the only pay he got. We had a lot of adventures along the way, including flat tyres in the middle of nowhere and no jack handle, a snake on kumenjay’s swag, a dry, dust storm in a fibreglass Toyota, wild horses galloping into our camp, being stopped at Uluru by the ranger because they were shooting all the dingoes and lots more.

During the time we worked together on health business, kumenjay got diabetes, which stole years off his life. He hated having to give himself the needles and yet, he still went on working for Congress out bush. I was

*comforted to know that he died on his own country where I last saw him a year ago with my family. I only regret that I didn't come more often to visit and that I was not able to sit with him in the past few months as he sat with me so many times. I would like to say again **Mwarre-nthewrre ilerne mpwarreke nhenhe** (we have worked well). Culla mwarre alay.*

The day of the funeral was grey and cold. It stopped raining only at the cemetery long enough for the family and friends to see Uncle go down with his riding hat and boots as Archie strummed his guitar. It was a scene of raw grief. I remembered seeing Dede sobbing uncontrollably on the shoulder of her mother by his coffin. His big son, who had held himself for the duration of the proceedings gave way to his grief as the coffin went down and sobbed on me. It was brethren, caring sharing and close, sorry cuts and keening wails. The rain started again and watered the dry red earth on top of his coffin. What a long day. The funeral began at the Church in the morning. The surrounds of the church was filled with many different friends and family groups. I was with John and was grateful for his presence, calm, understanding and unobtrusive. Uncle's older son took me around to shake everyone's hands. "I'm Julie", said a young woman with a shaved head.

"Julie" I exclaimed in surprise "Little Julie". Little Julie, small and blonde, quiet and shy had come on many field trips, arms around hers as on this day not mindful of being black. The years slipped by and we were reunited again in grief. Everyone filed into the church chanting in Anmatjirra. One after one, people spoke of Dick's humour, strength, determination, good looks and booming voice. It was a searingly painful day, woven with old faces and memories, coming together with the beat of the strumming guitar in a new form-one of many sorry times for the people who are always sad. As Kemarre Turner says: you will always have sadness if you're a true Aboriginal person. (p.109). The sadness of watching the sun go down and watching the sun come up is the Law (104) –the weeping –sadness at daybreak.-watching the day beginning.

I want to honour *kwemenje Japanangka*. I wrote to Stephanie and Jonny a while ago and said that he along with Trevor will be overlooking this project and that *kwemenje Japanangka* will still be the Sergeant Major on this project. I remember us (*Japangka* and me) sitting out a dry dust storm near Tjilla Well on one of our bush trips on health business, many years ago, sitting tight in the back of the orange fibreglass Toyota, that he worried could go up in flames if lightning struck and then, later that night, I remember we were so happy for the rains came. Rains bring the country back; green and alive.

The country

Alice Springs is called *Mparnte* by the *Arrernte* traditional owners and it is the country of the ancestral caterpillars-*Yeperenye*, *Ntayarlike* and *Utnerrenggatye*- who travelled from the east from Emily Gap and travelled west to Heavitree Gap – the entrance to Alice-and created the songlines and caterpillar formations of the MacDonell Ranges . The town of Alice Springs was named in 1933 and replaced its first name "Stuart" to honour the explorer of the interior in 1888. The Todd river, or *Lhere Mpartnwe* usually a dry, wide creekbed, runs at the foothills of the ranges on the east of town. The river was named after Charles Todd, the postmaster and founder of the Telegraph station in 1872 established to connect Adelaide to Darwin. The town is supported economically by tourism, the Aboriginal dollar, pastoralism and mining. There non-Aboriginal population is largely transient.

Today the population approximates about 27,000 with approximately 15000 Aboriginal people live in central Australia. There are three main language groups which include 16 different languages. There are 18 Aboriginal-owned housing associations or town camps and the bush Aboriginal people live in main government settlements of Papunya and Yuendumu and outlying outstations, ex-missions such as St Theresa and Hermannsburg and Aboriginal cattle stations such as Mt Allen and on excursions on white cattle stations such as Larambah. The Pintubi were the last people to come in and to leave their nomadic lifestyle from near the western Australian border to stay in the settlement of Papunya. The Aboriginal organisations consist of the Central Australian Aboriginal Congress, a large health centre, Tangentyere the umbrella organisation for the town camps, Central Land Council, Central Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid, Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association and the Institute of Aboriginal Development amongst others.

Alice Springs has grown since I was last living there thirty years ago. It is no longer a one-horse town where one could purchase a cowboy hat and riding boots from the local leather store and pannikins for camping and get a gun licence and bullets over the counter. There is now a mainstream mall housing some art shops boasting large indigenous canvases in the windows, tourist paraphernalia, clothes shops, food courts and Coles, Woolworths and Target nearby. The Aboriginal organisations have grown and have modern buildings and some have multiple campus sites. In the late seventies, early eighties, was the hey-day of self-determination and land rights and cultural law and people felt empowered and hopeful. Lawyers and anthropologists and myself, many from down south, used to meet at lunch or on the road and exchange stories about the struggles for self-determination. Aboriginal people used to hold meetings where the strong men representing the different language groups, *Arrertne, Anmatjirra, Pitjantjatjarra, Warlpiri, Lowitja* and more, used to speak out and for their people. It was a town divided by the rednecks who supported Everingham, the conservative leader of the NT Territory government and those who supported land rights. Pine Gap residents manifested themselves in bellydancing classes and their manicured green lawns belied their residential whereabouts. There was a sense of outback adventure and in my time I met many interesting and well-known characters like the authors Xavier Herbert, Bruce Chatwin and photographer Penny Armitage and many of the lawyers have since become well-known judges like Hon Ross Howie, Frank Vincent, David Parsons, Geoff Eames and anthropologists such as Peter Sutton. I was the only sociologist at the time.

Self-determination has been superseded by the emergency measures of the NT Intervention introduced in September 2007 following the release of the report *Little Children Are Sacred*. Prescribed areas were introduced which involved the banning of alcohol, drugs and pornography and customary law in the courts and introduced compulsory income management and childhood check-ups for sexual abuse. Childhood sexual abuse is said to be rampant; albeit the reports bely this claim. Chronic alcoholism has fuelled the highest rates of homicide and assaults in Australia; ten times the national average. Most homicides are committed by Aboriginal people on their own people. Women are the main victims. Family violence is widespread and women and children the main victims. Alice Springs is known as the "stabbing capital of the world". It also has a huge number of liquor outlets. In February 2011 Action For Alice instigated a public meeting to address the increased lawlessness of the town, and proposed that a 'tough love camp' be provided for the increasing lawless youth. Bush people, coming to town to drink since the prohibition of alcohol on their communities with the NTER have been blamed for increased criminality also and were told to return to their communities. Two terrible cases of homicide in 2009 and 2010 straddled the racial divide and the town became a conflict zone. In the first, Ryder, an Aboriginal man was killed in July and five young white men were charged with manslaughter and in the second, a non-Aboriginal

local was killed by an Aboriginal man after prolonged racial brawling. In 2008 a big summit was organised by *Ingkintja* Men's Health service attended by 400 men at *Inteyerrkwe* and a profound and historic apology was made to the Aboriginal women:

We acknowledge and say sorry for the hurt, pain and suffering caused by Aboriginal males to our wives, to our children, to our mothers, to our grandmothers, to our granddaughters, to our aunts, to our nieces and to our sisters. We also acknowledge that we need the love and support of our Aboriginal women to help us move forward.

The *Ingkintja* Men's Health Service then organised a number of Stop The Violence marches through town, in September 2010 and November 2011 and many Aboriginal men marched. Newspaper articles, TV broadcasts and books have described, more frequently and recently, and often graphically, the destruction, conflict, crisis, lawlessness, poverty and rivers of grog which adulterate the racially divided town.

Now Aboriginal leaders say their people are suffering trauma from the measures of the NT Intervention. The trauma and the feeling story is not often spoken about by non-Aboriginal people.

June 2010 - Beginnings

I presented a paper on the Intervention called *The Intervention: Mere Arltyewele* (Settle Down Country)—Bear the Gap To Close The Gap- The NT Intervention in Queenstown to a hushed audience. I was terrified. It was political and being a psychoanalytic forum could be seen to break with the orthodoxy that demanded neutrality. I shouldn't have been. It was well received. People cried. I was on Maori territory. I then sent the paper to my colleagues in Alice Springs who occupied both camps of the bitterly divided and certain terrain of those for it and those against it. The Intervention measures were introduced on 15 September 2007 and the cynics say it was a political grab for votes and land. The emergency measures had gutted me in their patronising control of the original owners of this ancient land, they breached the Racial Discrimination Act and the apartheid of South Africa seemed to rear its head on the supposed democratic inland of Australia. The measures caused enormous controversy. My colleagues from both sides of the divide all said they thought the paper was good. I had achieved the small goal of attempting to present the third position of this divide and wrote that we had to *bear* the gap rather than attempting to bridge it the whitefella way. A few months later, a psychotherapy colleague who had asked me to send her the paper asked me when I was going to present it in Melbourne. The thought again terrified me. "Oh all in good time. Not sure if it's relevant." "Oh I think it is so good you really must present it." "OK I said only on the condition that you chair the session." Her son had lived on an Aboriginal community for a number of years and worked with an old colleague of mine. There was a rift between them. Her son died a year or so later. I had talked unknowingly about this colleague of mine at a dinner and felt I had put my foot in it. I was happy to have her chair the session. Again the psychotherapists sat in silence. Again they cried. The Chair Anne Kantor—was also a philanthropist of sorts and has funded a psychoanalytic organisation which has the mandate to create a safe and supportive environment-CASSE. I remembered seeing a colleague of mine sitting in the audience when I gave the paper and his presence was rare at these events.

May 14 2010-The Rains and Congress

I think rainstorm informs the beginnings of this project. And rainstorms may inform the process for the rains make the country grow. Sometimes after good rains, when bush tucker became plentiful, Aboriginal people came/come together performing ceremonies to increase the plants and animals, and to perform ceremonies of initiation, to re-establish relationships with kin and to celebrate the travels of beings of *altjerre* whose tracks criss-cross the land. I write this story now about the beginnings of the project as it rains hard outside.

On 14th May –a Friday-a very wet and cold Friday-I (in an exhausted state) met with a colleague of mine in a cafe in Kew and he proposed that I join CASSE as a project manager-in response to my paper on The Intervention-and said I had a year to talk to Aboriginal people to put a proposal together. He said he was very busy and so to take my time. We commenced training together (over 14 years ago) as psychoanalytic psychotherapists and we have worked together on a committee for many years-along with Anne-and achieved a lot together- for the Victorian Association of Psychoanalytic Psychotherapists of which we three are members.

I told him that if I was to come on board (privately I didn't think I would) that I would only work with an organisation called Congress-The Central Australian Aboriginal Congress- if I was to proceed. Congress had its beginnings in the rains-handing tents to their people to shelter from the rains and the flooding Todd River. It has grown into a large Aboriginal-controlled health organisation and services Aboriginal people in the town and bush. Over the years, the leaders have struggled with trauma and daily sorry business, straddling two worlds with great fortitude, knowledge, thought, imagination and relentless resilience. Congress has grown in the rains!

I think Trevor (the first white doctor of The Central Australian Aboriginal Congress) who died prematurely was alongside me. For those who didn't know of him, he was like a cyclone, working hard and fast. I rang Stephanie to test out her interest after the meeting and she said: "Oh I'm in a hotel in the city so come and meet me". However I couldn't get a park in the city and time was running out as I had to be at a concert at 8.00. I ran along Southbank with the heavy rain bucketing down in the dark to get to see Stephanie. I recalled texting my colleague that night saying that it was fortuitous but I was meeting with a senior Aboriginal leader from Central Australia who happened to be in town and who is very interested. Stephanie had just had a meeting with Prime Minister Gillard and thought it would be good to proceed with such a project sooner rather than later. Stephanie suggested that I join the Global Reconciliation visit – Palestinians and Israelis (and Marxists) in late July where I could get an update on Congress.

July 2011-Global Reconciliation

I was invited to join a group to visit central Australia led by Paul Komesaroff. It was a global reconciliation group consisting of two Palestinians, three Israelis, two Jewish members, an AO, and Aboriginal leaders. They were visiting the Central Australian Aboriginal Congress to exchange information. The CEO of Congress, Stephanie Bell asked me to join the group as a scouting exercise which could help develop a proposal on violence and trauma. It was an intense week of meetings, discussions, personal tales, dinners and trips in troupes. My colleague came with me. The plan was that we might develop a proposal with the Aboriginal leaders on violence and trauma. I had worked with Congress thirty years before and on and off with the same Aboriginal leaders. I needed to be updated. My colleague had not been working in Alice Springs but he had worked in Victoria with the Aboriginal Health Service and with the same doctor, Dr Trevor Cutter, who bought me to Central Australia. I also had worked with the Aboriginal health service in Victoria.

We met the group at the airport. By coincidence, we were all sitting in the same seats on the plane. I sat next to X who was an Israeli anthropologist who confessed to me he had a phobia of flying planes. I did too but I didn't tell him. I observed the group. They were lively and already engaged in discussion. Paul James introduced himself and reminded me we had worked together many years ago in the Arena print house at Malmsbury. I laughed to myself. A Marxist on the trip as well! We arrived and were plunged into meetings straight away. We sat in a big room in a building I had not seen before. It felt unfamiliar and somewhat alien – off a corridor in a new mall. We were watching a slide show on the origins and development and context of Congress. In came Jonny Liddle and when he saw me he gave me a big cheesy smile his famous for and a kiss. Jonny was Director of Congress when I was there thirty years ago and we did some good work together and he got *kwemenje Japanangka* to work with me. I was so pleased. I sat next to Stephanie, the current CEO and the years fell away. Jonny had been boss of Congress when I worked there and Stephanie had been the secretary.

Before I went in I passed a group of Aboriginal women. I said "Hello Betty" and was hurt to see she didn't recognise me. I could see her appealing for help. "It's me Betty-Pam!" Betty Carter spent all her working days in Jonny's office when I was there and they used to chatter all the time together. Suddenly I was hugged. "Remember me, its Helen" said another and it was my turn to feel uncomfortable in my failure to recognise. "I worked with you as a research assistant all those years ago". "Helen Kantawara!" I expostulated, and we hugged. Her hair was cut short in accord with the protocol of sorry business and from the young flighty girl with the blonde hair of years ago stood a mature woman who was speaking language in confidence. Helen worked as a research assistant on Health Business many years ago with me and today she is Chair of Congress. Apart from some meetings around town, I remembered us going out to Wallace Rockhole armed with a mass of whitefella questionnaires and people sitting down and hiding away in *wiltjas* and then Helen got another job pretty quickly soon after and I told Commonwealth Health they could forget their whitefella papers and that I had to work the Aboriginal way. All my fears began to drain away. I was starting to feel at home again.

Before we commenced the meetings we were taken on a bus trip around Alice and the traditional owners showed us the sacred Aranda sites of the caterpillar dreaming and the incursions made by whitefellahs on their sacred land. In all the years in Alice I had not recognised the sacred sites around the town. I had come to believe that sacred country primarily belonged to the bush mobs. I was learning more about the Arrernte people.

That very afternoon an intense discussion broke out. It didn't take long for the intersection of the past and present genocide and the racial divide between the Israelis and the Palestinians to surface. Betty was telling them about her basics card introduced in the intervention. Betty is a grandmother who has worked at Congress for over thirty years and she does not drink. She now lives in a prescribed area which was entranced by the sign No grog, No Porn and half her cash is quarantined and she has to buy goods at two stores only with her card. She told me this story when I had a glass of wine in my hand as we sat at the restaurant in the casino in Melbourne. I was so shocked. I felt intense shame. "This is so racist!" I promised her I would try to have the card revoked. She said "Oh I have written 3 times to Mike Dillon: and been told there are no exceptions. We are all blanketed under the same policy". Betty and Stephanie had come down to Melbourne for the funeral of Bill Roberts a white dentist who had visited her once in her home in Tennant Creek; a visit she never forgot and she wished to repay and pay her respects at the funeral.

Anyway she told the group about the Basics Card. It is a compulsory measure of quarantining income which applied to all those living in prescribed areas regardless age, sobriety, child caring and so on. Suddenly the older Israeli woman—a descendant of Ben..a well known political member of the Knesset and her husband likewise said: “In all my years and of all the stories I have heard and lived experience I have had of genocide I have NEVER, NEVER heard of such a racist measure in all my life!” There was a deafening and electric silence. The presence of the Palestinians was palpable. So was their silence. We all shifted in our seats. Betty saved the situation and went on talking about the measures of the Intervention. The Aboriginal leaders spoke about this in hushed whispers after the meeting. We all wondered what this trip had in store - the racial divide indeed.

That afternoon I sat next to Mohammed on the bus; a handsome man. He was trying to sleep as we trucked along to Hermannsburg; a Lutheran mission. Oh I said: “You can’t sleep now. Look at the country. It is one of the most spectacular drives in the centre”. Joey sat in front of us beaming as he pointed out sites on his country. The bus bumped along the Then I said: “ Oh it must have been hard for you today?”. He replied with quiet dignity: “Oh I am the guests of the Aboriginal people it is OK.” He proceeded to give me a detailed history of the relations of the Israelis and the Palestinians he told me how he works at Al Qued University in Jerusalem and how each day he has to go through a checkpoint. He told me about the essay his 16year old daughter wrote about the portrayal of the Arabs snipers and the shelling they inflicted and how her essay won a prize. It made the international media. He told me he was thinking of joining the X party as he could see no other future for reconciliation. He told me how he lived in occupied territories. “We don’t have our own country. I have to get permits to get into Jerusalem. My grandparents, now in their 60’s, have houses in Haiti and other places of my childhood. We walk around with keys in our pockets. We can’t use them”. I saw the tension and suffering so tightly held in a slight twitch at the side of his mouth. It was Mohammed who was in tune with the oppression of the Aboriginal people and who always asked the challenging questions. He spoke with enormous considered wisdom and we all loved Mohammed by the end of the trip. His speech on the last night was very moving and he spoke about the importance of the trip for him and what sacred experiences he would take back to his country in his fight for reconciliation. When I returned I saturated myself in Palestinian history. I never felt the same pride in being half Jewish again. I told him I was a half-caste Jewish girl who had grown up on a diet of Jewish oppression at the hands of the Nazis and was old I would have been sent away to the camps or experimented on and I told him I was shocked to hear about his life of oppression today. His niece Rand is a doctor and was also on this trip. She was also handsome. She thought I was Palestinian because of the shape of my jaw and my darkness. She touched me as soon as she met me and outlined my jaw. She told me it was going to take her two days to get home through the checkpoints. She told me about a picnic they went on recently and how many checkpoints they crossed and how many she has to be checked at to get home through the checkpoints and how she has to endure the possibility of a gun going off with a mad soldier. Mohammed again told me about his grandfathers’ keys to their abandoned and now occupied homes. He looked so sad and resigned when he was talking about it.

Later that day we listened to the Hermannsburg women sing the hymns. Hermannsburg was a Lutheran mission and the home of the Strehlows. Aboriginal people learnt to speak German as they became missionised. The women wore broken glasses held together with band-aids, a legacy of Fred Hollows, and raggy, once colourful now faded dresses, and stood in bare feet, in the soft red dust, singing hymns. It was heart breaking. I wondered why? Was it the music or was it the footprint of the mission days? They stood in front of the historic mudbrick buildings of the mission

days. There was no *welye!* Only hymns. Out came Ada; a large old woman shuffling slowly with the support of a stick and the elbow of her grandson. She had a beanie on her head. I walked over. "My goodness! You look so like old *kwemenje*. The same shaped face and smile and laugh". We talked. I gave her some money and got her some scones. She was the elder sister to *Japangka* and still alive.

On the wayback Paul the Marxist came to sit with me. The sun was setting over the golden country and a soft dusk light was holding the hues and the Finke river was full and flowing. We talked non stop-intense discussions about old members of Arena and their conflicts and demise-about his brother, an Aboriginal youth football team and then an esoteric and very intellectual flight of ideas about unconscioning and processing. His work entails relocating slums and getting rid of the rubbish plastic, which are toxic in their fumes, and causes illness and death. I thought about the unconscious meaning of this work. He said unconscioning has always been present it is just that now it is named and the knowledge of it is not suppressed. He said there was no such thing as a Dreamtime that it is temporal and spatial and simply exists. The discussion became very dense and esoteric and I had trouble hearing and following him. It sounded important. I kept wondering about his brother nonetheless. It was an old connection renewed. As he said-"you won't recognise me now as in the old Malmsbury days I had a long beard". We reminisced with nostalgia about the Arena days at Malmsbury in the early eighties. I remembered the production line in the old woolshed, which helped put together the book "Settle Down Country".

The next day we all headed out to Five Mile Bore. It was a day trip and we all were feeling enthusiastic. We went in convoy. We joked around and chatted and stopped for a breakfast stop along the way. Stephanie dropped off the twins who had travelled with us. Joey showed me the toilets which were a long hike up the hill. We drove on and on, along the highway with expectant anticipation. We arrived. There were a series of bombed out dilapidated buildings. Some mangy camp dogs wandered about. In the distance some neglected houses sprawled. A shanty town? Some Aboriginal men followed by some women walked in single file towards us, heads bowed, slowly and reluctantly. My God! Five Mile Bore! Despair. Bleakness. Hopelessness. The women sat together in a huddled group. Behind them some school aged kids played. The men came forward and shook hands. The Congress mob began to busy themselves with lunch and soon kangaroo tails were cooking. My colleague could be seen in the distance holding his mobile phone out taking shots of dilapidated houses and buildings. Oh no! Helen nudged me sharply between the shoulder blades and told me to go and tell him to stop it immediately. I walked over quickly almost at a run and had to almost shout to my colleague to stop. It took me months to understand the image etched in my mind-he held the camera at a distance with his extended arm-not even looking through the viewer - capturing the horror on film-because he couldn't look at it or see the horror himself- like us all. He felt terrible about this and said it was so out of character for him. Later, Paul with a huge camera lens strode around filming. "Paul do you have permission?" I tentatively asked. Rather aggressively I thought, he replied "I have permission for everything I do".

Mohammed's niece looked at me and rolled her eyes in recoil: "Primitive" she said "so primitive and so hopeless". My heart sank. We had a desultory lunch. No-one was talking. The flies buzzed. The only life was the NNTV news man, Aboriginal, who was filming and talking to some of the elder men. We formed a circle and began to talk. Paul K persisted in asking them: "Why don't you DO something here like with the gardens and the disused buildings over there". More questions: "Why don't the kids GO to school?". The men told him: "We don't have any money, the NT government

stopped the local councils with the money and replaced them with white administrators and regional councils. We have broken down trucks. No money. No petrol. No trucks. No school here. The bus doesn't come here to pick up the kids. We can't take the kids from here. Here is the old clinic building. We got no nurse." And on it went. Paul K persisted. "But what stops you for example growing a vegetable garden here and DOING something?" My colleague and I, in reaction, began to advocate vehemently: "The NT Intervention has done terrible things to remote communities like this...the Constitution is racist" and we loudly interjected. We forgot our analytic skins. Paul, the Marxist indicated he thought there was too much emphasis on material things. Jonny said: "You have been taken here because Five Mile is full of despair". After an hour or so the old men indicated they were annoyed and wanted to end the meeting. They were angry with Paul K. So was I. I said to the NTV guy: "I hope you're going to edit this footage". "Oh yes!" he said. He walked off to the dilapidated clinic and began to film and talk to the traditional owner about what had happened to the nurse. We drove home, silent, tense, confronted and any idea of romantic remote communities was shattered. I recalled with nostalgia the Aboriginal cattle stations and communities of the old time bush, bough camps Dick and I stayed in where we were greeted by the women bringing out long beads strung with hair and kangaroo was cooking on the fire out Nyrripi and Kintore way. The next day at a meeting Paul K said: "I hope I didn't offend anyone at the meeting yesterday but I thought it was important to have a discussion about ACTION and not just accepting sitting down with pension money..". What an understatement! I thought the Aboriginal leaders were furious and had to make a trip back at a later date to apologise on behalf of Congress. I said with feeling: "Paul I would never dare to ask people, what they might DO when they are living in terrible poverty, with no rights and in a state of anomie nor deny them material goods and services". He looked momentarily chastened, if not annoyed. Mohammed spoke up in support of what I said and spoke about victimising the victims and dispossessed. He made comparisons to the Palestinians camps of the dispossessed. The group continued on with its discussion attempting to find solutions for the Aboriginal people. Eugen and I left them to it. SOLUTIONISING! We were aware how we had begun to advocate loudly the day before and both positioned ourselves at the end of the table to try to maintain some analytic composure.

My colleague and I, on behalf of CASSE, took the Board for dinner to a Chinese restaurant. There was Helen, Vanessa Davis Joey Hayes, Stephanie, Brian Stirling, Betty and more. It was at this dinner that I realised there were strong family connections on the Board; sisters and husbands. Vanessa was Helen's sister and Brian was Stephanies's husband and the others were all inter-related. It was the first of many dinners but perhaps the warmest of all. There was lots of laughter about the group and I realised that we had all been observed very closely and no trick was missed; born psychologists! There was a whiff of whitefellahs being clever but not wise. The Israeli woman had got most people off side by her intent and relentless questioning. Vanessa and Helen were telling the group how they had decided to turn the tables on her on the return trip from Five Mile Bore and asked her questions. They all loved her in the end. We all roared with laughter. She had a sorry tale to tell and won their hearts. It was a lively affair. I was telling Jonny good humouredly about how I offered my daughter ice-cream to eat when she was getting selective about her vegetables when she was younger. We were all laughing. Suddenly Jonny said: "Oh I have a better story". He then proceeded to tell me how he grew up in the boy's home. He shared a room with another boy. One day the nun found him with stripy toothpaste. She yanked him by the ear and took him to the dining room for breakfast and filled his bowl with stripy red toothpaste and made him eat it for breakfast with a knife and fork in front of the other children. So cruel! "That nun was

one real cruel bitch". She used to check all the beds in the morning. We had to fold each end like a hospital bed and she would come along and bounce a coin three times and belted each morning with a piece of wood. They had a reunion a few years ago-who would go to reunite with that old cruel bitch? She should be in gaol". I had worked with Jonny 30 years ago. This was the first time he ever shared a story of his past with cruel whitefellahs. He had been taken from his mother as a half-caste boy. I felt whacked in the stomach. His words and images penetrated my brain for days.

At our final dinner I spoke with Helen and her sister Vanessa about the Anmatjrra words for healing the spirit inside. We finally, after much tongue twisting and conceptual twisting got to *Kurunna Mwarre*-make my spirit inside me good". I thanked Congress for the privilege of being on this journey with then this week and for the *kurunna mwarre* it might have achieved between us all. Jonny said: "well said" and I felt pleased. It took Aboriginal leaders from the Centre to bring us all together-the dispossessed Aboriginal people with the dispossessed Palestinians, the Israelis and even the Marxists and psychoanalysts to boot! I will never forget this week of travelling. Congress leaders were proud and rightly so. They had bought us all together to dialogue and to think about their predicament.

Trauma trails

Meanwhile my colleague and I had been meeting to draft a proposal on violence and trauma and we presented it to them over our last breakfast and reshaped it in some consultation. The project at the outset was intended to talk "trauma trails and recreate songlines", to make it rain and the country come back" for "its a crying shame to see the country like this" and "to make my spirit inside me good" (*kurunna mwarre*). My colleague shaped some parts the proposal and I remember being rather dubious about having a large sum of money proposed for therapists to fly up for monthly consultations. It was his belief that once the trauma was unleashed the pain would haemorrhage. I thought the pain was haemorrhaging already in anomie and violent skirmishes. I was unsure about therapists being used by the people. I questioned it but my colleague remained firm. The model was one of train the trainers, that is work with the leaders from the top down. I was aware however that the congress leaders were aware of our psychological perspectives. On the way back from Five Mile Bore Betty spoke to me about her worries about one of her family members who had isolated herself and was depressed and she feared for her life. "So much sorry business" they chorused. "Do you know how many funerals I've been to this year?" "Our people are killing themselves from grog and broken hearts".

Trauma trails make rainstorms inside us and create rivers of tears. I believed with this project that we needed to track and find, in the words of Aboriginal Alexis Wright, them rainmakers on the trauma trails-"*You know the rainmakers. They been make it rain and country come back. You got to look after the rainmakers. People need to listen. Listen carefully. Listen for the heartbeat—Rain storm*". The waters had dried up so we needed to gather together, move back to the rockholes, springs and soaks, and start the work together, sit it out and bring on the rainstorm to settle down country. The therapists never did fly up.

In a couple of days on my return I felt like I was back in my own skin. I felt like I had found a lost part of my spirit and reconnected with it. I was then later assailed by an overwhelming guilt. I felt I had been in a war zone. I hadn't been immersed in the Aboriginal world for many years although I had had visits and consultancies with congress over the years. I felt a terrible disjunction between

my world- a seemingly bourgeoisie one- and the one I had just left. Some of the stories of anguish lit my mind like neon signs. Stories of terrible cruelty and loss that were told with a matter-of-fact calm but which sat on the edge of an emotional cliff ready to be unleashed. Images of some of the shocking camps of poverty and anomie visited seared my mind. The hatred for the whiteman penetrated alongside such generosity, trust, resilience, intuitive perceptiveness and imaginative struggle; thirty years of struggle and it was more visible. That night I went to bed in a catatonic immovable state of complete exhaustion. The next morning I exorcised the guilt in a punishing regime of physical exercise. I beat myself up. I could barely walk for two days. I was in terrible pain. Most of it was their pain. Two days later I returned to my psychoanalytic books, which soothed. I recovered my psychoanalytic thinking. I had been in a mindless state for a week. Concrete thinking predominated. I spoke about the provision of basic services. At the end of the week I realise with some surprise that the word trauma had been deleted from mind. I realised with a shock that the world I was in was one of transgenerational trauma but I had the word 'trauma' had been obliterated from my mind in the week of reconciliation.

11 November 2011 – Outsiders and the couch

I returned to Alice for a scouting expedition and more immersion. I had a lot to learn and a lot of catch up to do. I spent the time gathering more facts. I spoke with some of the team leaders and managers from Congress at a meeting called by the Aboriginal leaders. The white staffs were mostly hostile. They had been sent some briefing notes on our proposal and on CASSE. Stephanie showed me a letter the seniors had written ten minutes before I went in. The words jumped the page. I was tired. I couldn't focus. I was nervous. I thought " I'm in the hot seat now and I have to turn this around because the leaders need me to". I started to speak. Their main concern, although veiled, seemed to be that CASSE was psychoanalytic in approach. "Who was I to come in and tell them how to suck eggs?"

I always felt a strange disjunction when I referred to myself as an outsider or I was referred to as such as deep down I considered myself still an employee of Congress. I remember at the recent funeral of *kwemenje Liddle* that I made a special trip to attend, the doctor told me to wait while the Congress staff who were all holding a yellow rose each stood in procession and walked to the coffin and left their rose. *Kwemenje Liddle* had been my boss a long time ago too. I wanted to join them. Congress had given me a life where I was not invisible and where I began to find my voice a long time ago.

I told the hostile staff that "The elephant in the room was psychoanalysis" and "that I was not about to get out the couch and put everyone on it and navel gaze. They laughed with relief. I continued saying: "That psychoanalysis in this work meant facilitating the Aboriginal voice to feel-come alive- become empowered and find a voice". I said: "It is about finding understandings and meanings to the violence and trauma of the lives of Aboriginal people and of recognising it". The hostility diminished. I had also been privy to an email that was sent by white clinicians saying that they worked in the Aboriginal way and in a way that was somewhat antithetical to psychoanalysis- they worked with evidence- and that they didn't need white outsiders coming in to tell them what to do including feeling guilty-and moreover they were angry that they had not been consulted in the developing stages of the project. The certainty of who they were and their professional roles and correct body of knowledge belied uncertainty. It served to highlight a sense of threat. I knew my input at this meeting was critical. I told them that the project was in its infancy and that there was not much to consult about, as the consultations had not really begun. The trouble was I could

barely string a sentence together at this time to describe what the project was about- I was filled with uncertainty- I didn't know how to ask the questions that straddled a known and unknown world of a world, which has been degraded, lost and taken over and ignored. This is what I said.

The people in the meeting then went on to speak of the feeling story-the Aboriginal people-and how they felt the trauma and the grief of their working and lived world. The white clinicians agreed that the feeling story had not been told nor had healing been achieved. They supported community empowerment, ownership of violence and the recognition of trauma, the Aboriginal way. The credibility of the project and myself was temporarily restored.

I told them I was here for the long weekend and if they wanted to make contact here was my mobile phone number. Ben and Pip Duncan were the first to ring and invited me to dinner on a Sunday night. Ben had been a doctor at Congress for many years and Pip was an old friend of mine, a nurse by training, who had also worked at Congress off and on for many years. Pip made an authentic curry and Ben talked a lot and filled me in on the goings on of Congress. Then others, one by one, rang including John Boffa –the current doctor who was at war with Stephanie-and a couple of the psychologists. I also looked up Kenny Leichleitner and he invited me to his home. He was the son of Dick. I asked for his help on the project. He gave me a big bear hug when he met me and he had the photo of his father in the lounge room-the one used on the funeral notice –he was wearing his akubra hat. Kenny spoke to me about customary law and its continued importance to Aboriginal people out bush and in hushed tones told me about paybacks at communities that went unnoticed by the white law enforcers. He spoke about being an uncle to the offenders and how it is not a cruel process but one of holding wrongdoing and standing by family to cop the punishment. He got the constitution out and spoke about the discriminating clauses still allowed. He was studying to be a lawyer.

I left feeling that it had been a successful trip and that the project was in its beginnings.

The Work Begins 2011-2012

December 3rd 2011-The Rains- MOU and the partnership

My colleague and I returned in early December with the CASSE Board to meet the Congress Board and to sign a memorandum of agreement. We had agreed on a proposal and a brief summary of main points follows:

Congress/CASSE project

- CASSE's aim is to support and empower Congress to achieve its core objective of promoting health and social and **emotional** well-being for the Aboriginal people of central Australia.
- CASSE's approach to empowerment is to help Congress recognise and address the underlying emotional issues - the demoralisation, anger, hurt, pain and trauma caused by colonization - dispossession and the continuing experience of disempowerment resulting from government policies and other socio-cultural-political issues which lead to violence, suicide, drugs, drinking and a lot of sorry business. CASSE'S approach is to "make the spirit inside me good", by working with the people to live and heal their way, with strong voices and with strong minds. Hence the project is called *Kurruna Mwarre*.

- CASSE is committed to working with Congress for at least a 5-year period.
- The task of identifying and developing cultural and contextual approaches, models and programs to health and emotional well-being is to be undertaken by a joint CASSE / Congress steering committee.
- The task of providing feeling stories to be told on the ground in country-by providing individual emotional and de-briefing support for Aboriginal leaders and Aboriginal staff which will facilitate a collective feeling, thinking, healing community.
- CASSE will proceed with the facilitation of focus groups to consult with staff and community and facilitate the holding of a summit in the first year and in the second year develop some demonstration projects.

The partnership was born. It was a full program. The traditional owners took the CASSE Board members-Robert Springhall (lawyer), Caroline Aston (Director bullying program), David Rose (principal school) and Anne Kantor- on a tour of the sites of Alice Springs. The Deputy, Leshay Maidstone, with the aid of power point gave the members an introduction to Congress and its programs. A lunch was held with the Congress staff and Congress board and everyone circulated and talked hard. It was a welcoming trip.

Late the first afternoon we were all invited to a Congress barbecue at the back of *Ingkintja*-the men's health service. There was a welcome ceremony and we all had to walk in file through smoke before entering the premises. The old women had prepared the smoking and sang and danced for country. We felt honoured. Jonny's mother Bessie and Helen's mother, Renee was among the old women I had not seen for a long time. There were kids making beaded bracelets from the seeds of the trees and I bought a couple of them. We sat down to kangaroo tails and the old ladies took Anne in their care and Anne was beaming. Mick Gooda, the Social Justice Commissioner, newly appointed was there too. There was lots of good will and chat. There was a banquet of salads. I wandered over to the stall of jars of emu oils set up by the Healing centre. There was an interesting painting I had never seen before. It was very detailed and looked Asian. Four spirit like creatures holding objects on their heads adorned the canvas. Helen came over and said this is the women's dreaming for *Kurunna Mwarre*. Eugen came over and then he said we could buy it for CASSE and have it as an emblem for the project. Anne paid for it. I asked the artist if she could paint another one for me. The healing painting seemed to be a very good omen for the project.

The next morning we met over lunch to sign the MOU. There was a sense of occasion. The painting held centre stage. All of us signed the back of it. My colleague and I spoke on behalf of CASSE and Helen spoke in Aranda and spoke to the painting and to the hope of healing her people. .

The MOU was signed and there was a sense of mutual embrace, accomplishment and celebration.

Pamela Nathan-2013

This resource and further information about Creating A Safe Supportive Environment is available to download at www.casse.org.au/resources.

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