

Listening to Country

I began writing this in Alice Springs in the heart of Australia having just returned from Uluru (Ayers Rock), one of the wonders of the natural world and a site sacred to the indigenous people there. Aboriginal society is possibly the most ancient on earth having been part of this land for possibly around 60,000 years. Prior to the coming of the Europeans their way of life was largely unchanged in that period. Colonisation was most destructive with massacres, forced assimilation, alcohol and drug addiction, and other abuses well documented. Despite well intentioned attempts to remedy the effects of the past, the gulf between the contrasting cultures remains. A recently elected conservative government in the State with a distinct law and order agenda has announced further promises to “remedy” the situation, even to incarcerating ten-year-old children.

Dotted around Uluru there are numerous sacred sites where visitors are requested not to photograph. At a few sites seats are provided for visitors to ‘listen to country’. This is simply an invitation to sit quietly in silence. The immediate reaction of Europeans to this invitation is to link it with Country and Western music, such is the disconnect between the cultures. Growing up ‘in country’ is learning the old ways of living off the land, knowing where to find water, where to look for food such as goanna, and how to capture kangaroo.

Listening to country or Dadirri is described by Aboriginal elder Miriam Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann [Compass 22 (1988) 9].

...Deep listening is the gift we can give to non-indigenous Australians...listening to God within, to the God in country, in others...It is perhaps the greatest gift we can give to our fellow Australians. In our language this quality is called dadirri. It is inner, deep listening and quiet, still awareness.

Dadirri recognises the deep spring that is inside us. We call on it and it calls to us. It is the gift that Australia is thirsting for. It is something like what you call "contemplation".

When I experience dadirri, I am made whole again. I can sit on the riverbank or walk through the trees; even if someone close to me has passed away, I can find my peace in this silent awareness. There is no need of words. A big part of dadirri is listening ...

(T)he other part of dadirri... is the quiet stillness and waiting. Our Aboriginal culture has taught us to be still and to wait. We do not try to hurry things up. We let them follow their natural course.

We wait on God, too. His time is the right time. We wait for him to make his Word clear to us. We don't worry. We know that in time and in the spirit of dadirri (that deep listening and quiet stillness) his way will be clear.

To be still brings peace - and it brings understanding. When we are really still in the bush, we concentrate.

Our culture is different. We are asking our fellow Australians to take time to know us; to be still and to listen to us

The contemplative way of dadirri spreads over our whole life. It renews us and brings us peace. It makes us feel whole again...

The Aborigines are now in recovery of a lost past. As one elder described their way of life, his grandfather's generation could sense danger because of their closeness to the land, alerted by a sixth sense. Now he locks his door at night just in case.

What has happened over time is that the landscape is gradually reforming the Australian psyche. As David Tacey describes in his book, *Edge of the Sacred: Transformation in Australia* (HarperCollins, Sydney, 1995):

Our spiritual way here cannot be...a work against nature. There is too much nature in Australia...The entire heroic fantasy about subduing nature...is a European fantasy, which can never work in Australia...The very notion that spirit is opposed to matter...cannot take root here. Our spiritual mode will have to be ecological (p. 23).

The story behind the recognition of the sacredness of Uluru is a good demonstration of this. Uluru was “discovered” by European explorer William Gosse in 1873 and named Ayers Rock after the chief secretary of South Australia at the

time, Sr Henry Ayers (*Wikipedia*). Its tourist potential was first recognised in the 1930s but this did not develop until the 1950s whereupon Uluru was seen as a rock to climb. In 1985 ownership of the site was handed back to the local Aboriginal people with the agreement that it be leased back to the National Parks and Wildlife Agency under a joint management arrangement. People continued to climb “the rock” but gradually the recognition of its sacredness became a deterrence. When the number of visitors making the climb reached below 20% the decision was made to fence it off and this was finally imposed in 2019. The Aboriginal people know how to wait. As an alternative there are walks around the base of the site; the best times to do this are around sunrise and sunset as the angle of the sun brings out the colours in the rock.

The remedial work that has taken place at Uluru has been in conjunction with attempts to remedy the damage that has been inflicted upon the Aboriginal people in Australia. The same process has taken place in my own country of Aotearoa-New Zealand where since 1975 there has been a process of reconciliation by honouring the Treaty of Waitangi which was signed between Governor Hobson, representing the British Crown, and Maori chiefs around the country. This treaty was signed in 1840 but within 20 years it was ignored as hordes of settlers immigrated to the country and were hungry for land. This led to the Land Wars and subsequent injustices.

Tacey (*ibid* p.129ff.) observes that a shift has taken place in the Australian consciousness from the early colonial days and the European mindset upon the land and its indigenous people to a recognition that such a mindset is spiritually bankrupt. The roles are now reversed; the Aboriginals are now the bearers of the sacred. A similar reversal has taken place in Aotearoa-New Zealand. Whenever there is a tragic accident, a karakia (prayer in Maori) is prayed over the site. Similarly the construction of a new public building is marked by a dawn blessing on the site led by a kaumatua (Maori elder). Even church buildings observe this ritual, a recognition of the spirituality of the people of the land. Tacey sees this shift as a projection of the sacred upon the indigenous peoples as a refusal of whites to “accept responsibility for their own souls.”

Can Europeans learn to listen to country?

As an example many years ago I underwent a vision quest in the United States. A vision quest is a Native American rite of passage ritual. This was according to Lakota nation and under the supervision of a shaman. It involved a sweat lodge, four days of fasting from food and drink except water, and for the last 24 hours going into a wilderness area where I would stand in the one spot and pray the whole length of time. Tobacco is important to Native American ritual. We were given some material and from this we created 200 small tobacco pouches each representing a prayer intention. They were joined together with string and in the wilderness area they defined the medicine wheel which was to be our individual space for the 24 hours. For the first part of the night I was in intense psychic pain. I was burnt out in my ministry and this experience was included in a creation spirituality programme led by then Dominican theologian, Matthew Fox. At the time I was dealing with intense anger and a real sense of betrayal, the feeling of having wasted my life. This state of mind lasted for a number of hours until suddenly the cloud lifted and I was filled with an overwhelming experience of peace. It was like heaven and earth coming together in me.

Early the next morning two coyotes passed near me. In Native American mythology the coyote is the dawn catcher and the trickster, in much the same way as the devil is in our tradition. The experience of peace was an enormous breakthrough but I was to beware of the trickster.

The key to this experience was the ordeal. After the 24 hours were up we returned to the campus for a closing sweat lodge. The rocks which were heated were river rocks. They were not inanimate objects as Europeans would describe them but the rock people, that is they were alive. The whole experience takes one to the limits physically and emotionally, into a liminal space where one is super-aware and open to the promptings of the Spirit. It is not without risk. One person on the quest was hallucinating and seeing wild animals all around. As a safeguard there was someone within reach available if necessary.

For the next four years I modelled an annual personal retreat on this experience. I was fortunate to have as a support a farmer who also understood the transition I was going through. The vision was never in “technicolour”. It was usually a word or some natural happening that conveyed meaning. For instance, on one occasion I was feeling desperately lonely and lost. I always began the experience asking for what I needed. At the end of one particular stint I was desperate for an answer, when suddenly a blowfly started pestering me. I just burst out laughing. The

message was simply not to get caught in self-pity. This annual practice continued until I had a new sense of direction. By then I was meditating regularly on a daily basis.

Tomas Halik (*The Tablet*, 7 September 2024) views the role of the Church in this present age as not only reading the signs of the times but re-reading them by becoming “a school of the contemplative approach to reality.” This new reading of reality of necessity involves “cooperation and a responsibility” in the ongoing process of creation. To facilitate this he sees the development of a ministry of spiritual accompaniment. The model for this is “**listening, openness to the action of the Holy Spirit, spiritual discernment and a common search for the right choice,**” (emphasis added) based upon the process of synodality currently being undertaken in the Church. Such a process is foundational to a new model of being Church, in harmony not only with other Christians but with all humanity, and with the earth.

Here the poets lead the way. Rainer Maria Rilke writes (letter of 12 November 1901):

Most people do not realise how beautiful the world is and how much radiance reveals itself in the tiniest things – in some flower, in a stone, in tree bark, or in a birch leaf. Grownups, being preoccupied with business and worries and tormenting themselves with all kinds of petty things, gradually lose the capacity to see the riches that children, when they are attentive and good, immediately notice and love with their whole heart. And yet the greatest beauty would be achieved if everyone could remain like such children, simple and innocent in feeling, and if they did not lose the capacity for delighting tenderly in a birch leaf or a peacock’s feather or the wing of a hooded crow as in a great mountain range or a magnificent palace.

Also John O’Donohue, (*Divine Beauty, The Invisible Embrace*, 2003):

The graced eye can glimpse beauty anywhere, for beauty does not reserve itself for special elite moments or instances; it does not wait for perfection but is present already secretly in everything. When we beautify our gaze, the grace of hidden beauty becomes our joy and our sanctuary.

In the spirituality centre of the Catholic mission, Saint Teresa, outside of Alice Springs, there is a beautiful painting of the Holy Spirit by an Aboriginal woman, in the form of a large dove embracing the red earth of the Australian interior, indicating the Spirit has always been in the earth, not hovering above it. Here indigenous wisdom is teaching us that we need to make a new beginning by going back to the source, the earth, and to recover that relationship lost so long ago, but which is recoverable by learning to listen.