

TRUTH-TELLING WILL HELP OUR HEALING

The reality is that trans-generational trauma runs deep in the Aboriginal community. So for proper healing to occur, the source of these issues must be acknowledged and understood by all Australians, and not shied away from. However, this truth-telling process should not involve anyone being made to feel a sense of *'racial guilt'*.

Since about the turn of the new millennium, we have thankfully been able to move away from the myth that Australia was a vast, empty and peacefully settled continent. The reality is that since 1788, Aboriginal people have experienced a plethora of **d's** - devaluation, disease, dispossession, dispersal, discrimination and disadvantage.

Devaluation was deeply and insidiously embedded in the whole idea of Terra Nullius and Aboriginal people were dismissed as simple, primitive, pagan, nomadic stone-age people, who did not use the land. However, it was disease that had the most immediate and profound impact. European diseases, especially smallpox, not only wiped-out 90% of the Australian population, it also severely damaged the fabric of indigenous society. This issue has virtually been ignored by historians.

Early estimates of the pre-1788 population were about 300,000, but the latest estimates, based on the carrying capacity of the land, show that this was how many were left **after** the smallpox plague. That is, based on the permaculture farming practices that were present throughout Australia, the Australian population was at least three million people. So, this means that the death toll from the 1789 smallpox plague alone, was about two and a half million Australians. It is by far and away the greatest holocaust in Australian history, yet it barely rates a mention in the history books and its impact on indigenous society has scarcely been considered.

The problem immediately faced by indigenous society with this rapid depletion of population, and with more women dying than men, was that the generation-ahead marital planning was suddenly thrown into chaos. Elopement and wife-stealing suddenly became prevalent, causing inter-tribal tensions and payback to escalate to completely unprecedented levels.

On top of this, then came the rapid dispossession and dispersal that resulted from British occupation. Tribes were now being pushed off their lands and onto that of other tribes. Internecine conflicts escalated and social order continued to break down. Unfortunately, this disorder that was being witnessed by the colonists, was assumed to be the 'natural' state of affairs.

Any killing of settlers by blacks was always well documented, but the reverse was not. Although atrocities by settlers were often not recorded, they nonetheless became vivid components of Aboriginal oral history and fuelled the trans-generational trauma. These stories are still retold by Aboriginal descendants in vivid detail.

For instance, famed Gunditjmara Elder, Uncle Banjo Clarke, told me about how in about the 1830's, some Aboriginal children were playing on the beach at Warrnambool. They were captured by some colonists, buried up to their neck in the sand, then had their heads kicked off. Similarly, Aunty Iris Lovett also told me of massacre of scores of people at Lake Condah about 1852, with the bodies being thrown into the lake. Iris' great-great grandmother survived, because her mother hid her in the swamp.

Gunnai Elder, Uncle Phil Pepper told me how, in about the 1840's, poisoned had been handed out at Orbost. Then, when the settler responsible was killed, a reprisal massacre of more than twenty Aboriginal men took place at Snowy River. Such accounts are usually pungent with personal meaning and the trauma is still there.

From the time of extinguishment of tribal life in eastern Australia in the early 1850's and for more than the next century, Aboriginal people were subject to an apartheid system that sought to extinguish their cultural heritage. On the Missions, traditional culture was repressed and only English was allowed to be spoken. Mission residents had to attend church, not just every Sunday, mind you, but every single day. In other words, serious brainwashing was practiced and backed up by deprivation of food and liberty, as well as physical punishment.

This repression of all traditional culture had two effects. First, it drove Aboriginal culture underground to survive. Second, traditional values of caring, sharing and elder respect came under pressure from the more competitive and individualistic values of western society.

So, just as the mental scars of Jewish holocaust survivors were passed on to their children, so too have the scars of the colonial era been passed on in Aboriginal families. On top of this, Aboriginal people today have their own personal experiences of exclusion, discrimination and disadvantage to confirm and consolidate their trans-generational trauma. We need to understand the historical depth to these issues, but without feelings of blame...

However, as was said at the outset, it does not help the healing process to see these realities through a lens of racial guilt. We can take neither credit nor blame for the virtues or sins of our forebears. We are each only responsible for what we do in our own lifetime.