

Our Deepening Connection to Country

By

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A newly born cicada that welcomed us to Country on the first night

When Pir Zia, the grandson of Hazrat Inayat Khan, was in Australia 9 years ago giving a talk at the North Sydney Community Centre, he said, 'Sufism always goes to the indigenous.' The 3rd Sufi thought of Hazrat Inayat Khan is: 'There is One Holy Book, the sacred manuscript of nature, the only scripture which can enlighten the reader.'¹ Murshid created the practice of Ziraat as a way to pay homage to that sacred manuscript.

As a person who grew up in an urban environment in the Eastern Suburbs of Sydney, it has taken me many years to learn to read this manuscript, as in my world, nature was hidden behind a mask of modern urban 'civilization'. My education was derived from that world with its primary focus on western science and technology, buildings and

¹ See comments on this:

<https://www.ruhaniat.org/index.php/hik-ten-sufi-thoughts/151-there-is-one-holy-book>

institutions, tarred streets and concrete towers, steel structures, manufacturing, administrative offices, on making money and owning property.

Nature had to find its way through the cracks of this world. Fortunately, I grew up near the beach and that was a big crack in the civilized world, like the many parks and gardens, in various places where I lived. Another crack that has just gained much greater significance after this weekend, was my family's picnics and outings to La Perouse, on the banks of Botany Bay. It was there I first saw an Aboriginal person who sold boomerangs and artefacts to the tourists and picnickers. There was the snake man whose show always fascinated me. As a child I was intrigued by reptiles. A skink just appeared on my front veranda in front of where I'm writing. Like the cicada above that welcomed us to Country, I'm struck by the synchronicity of my deepening relationship to the natural world.

Our Spring Retreat was held at Jamanee Gunyah, Uncle Noel Butler and Trish Butler kindly welcoming us to their beautiful property at Burrill Lake.

An unexpected connection emerged out of our opening circle of introductions at this year's retreat. We were all invited by Uncle Noel to introduce ourselves and say whatever we wanted people to know about us (see below). I spoke of not knowing anything about who these people at La Perouse were after 17 years of 'education'. It turns out that the boomerang man was Uncle Noel's uncle and that he himself often supplied snakes to the snake man. It proved a powerful beginning to my weekend experience.



One thing that I realised again this weekend, was that the people who are most able to teach me to read this manuscript of nature are the indigenous people of this land, who have been reading this manuscript for over 60,000 years. Little wonder then that I was drawn to make a film about Aboriginal people living at La Perouse as part of my film studies at Swinburne in the 70s.

One of the ways in which this practice has manifest in my world more recently is Dadirri, deep listening to country as presented by the Aboriginal Elder Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr.² It resonates strongly with the practice of deep listening that I learnt from the Vietnamese Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh.³

The theme for our weekend was **Making Peace through the Arts**. Here's the email sent out for participants:

This year our October Dance Retreat brings together the Dances of Universal Peace and the theme of creativity and the arts as inspired by Murshid Sam.

We will celebrate the universality and difference in all the arts expressions we engage with over the weekend.

Australia has a great arts story to tell with its roots in the world's oldest living culture, and in more recent times, enriched by an incredible breadth of diversity from across the globe.

We will explore a fusion of cross cultural encounters with Uncle Noel Butler, an Indigenous Elder of the Budawang people and a friend of Australia's DUP community. We will celebrate the distinct nature of Aboriginal art, music and dance and the deeper meanings in the stories and symbolism that it holds while participating in prayer, song, dance from around the world, sinking ourselves into the Dreaming and other faith based sacred stories.

Nature will be our canvas. We will create our own works of art inspired by visiting cave paintings and by indigenous arts and crafts. Participants will be invited to bring an offering to the group by way of an arts practice, nature based craft, books to explore, music to make, dances to offer, or any type of other art activities you feel might fit with our theme for the weekend, 'Making Peace through the Arts'.

Of course the actual weekend had its own organic energy and took its own shape. I was keen to use a variation of Open Space Technology⁴

² <http://www.miriamrosefoundation.org.au/about-dadirri>

³ <https://www.lionsroar.com/listening-deeply-for-peace/>

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_Space_Technology

and follow Koori time so we would have time to connect with each other, with ourselves and with country. I wanted to challenge the western linear time model that relates more to a business-like approach. In spiritual practice cyclical time and timeless time seem much more appropriate and that seems to resonate with Koori ways of working. To allow deep listening we need to enter deep time!

On our first morning some of us met around 7am at the lake where I was offering session in Chai Gung⁵ and some dances to start the day. After leading Allaudin's Desert Zikr, I launched a new dance to the words:

Oh Great Spirit, Earth, Sun, Sky and Sea,
You are inside and all around me.
Thank you for the sunlight, thank you for this day,
Help now to guide us as we walk your way.

This version of words and music came from Barbara Swetina of the Findhorn Community in Scotland. She is a circle dance leader as well as a Dances of Universal Peace leader there. The dance provided a way to greet Grandfather Sun as Uncle Max had taught us to do at the Mumu Festival over Easter this year.



The dam

Other activities that emerged were that of sharing stories through shaping and painting boomerangs, clay work and creation dances. As Saturday was going to be wet, weather wise, Noel had organised for us

⁵ See the icon on my blog for this routine <http://www.socialecologysydney.net.au>
Or go directly to YouTube
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6A-MYdFSals>

to spend the day painting our stories onto boomerangs, a symbol of Aboriginality.

So, after the personal introductions, Noel gave each of us a boomerang shaped piece of plywood, showing us how to refine the form using a rasp and coarse and fine sandpaper. This engagement with wood working was intended to give us a sense of the indigenous tool making process that often involved intricate and time consuming work. For me it felt like a way to engage with the materiality of wood and create a deeper relationship with the artwork I was making. Once we had shaped our boomerang, Noel provided paints and brushes to paint our story onto it. As the photo below shows the results were greatly varied and highly creative.



In the evening of our first day Amrita and I led a session of dancing after dinner around the theme of blessing and ancestors. I lead a new dance inspired by the Bedtime Shema, which invokes the protection of the 4 Archangels and the Shekinah, the feminine manifestation of the divine in the Jewish tradition. The melody comes from Shlomo Carlebach, from whom we have a number of dances, and there's a beautiful version of the song by his daughter Neshama ⁶ on You tube.

The 2nd morning after breakfast we focused on creation dances from different traditions. We began with Murshid Sam's Introductory Bismillah, as a way to invoke the creator of the dances in the late 60s, as well as being the phrase that begins the Qur'an and is often used by Sufis at the beginning of something as a way to invoke the Sacred Unity. We then started the Aboriginal dance gifted to us by Uncle Noel and his family. As Karen was introducing the dance and I was demonstrating the moves, suddenly Uncle Noel appeared with his Didgeridoo and offered to play Didge for us. This was a wonderful blessing as he was also able to fine tune our dance and add more of the story of the Budawang way of Aboriginal dancing. In the Dreaming culture the totem animals are the ancestors and the dancer becomes the animal. It was a real affirmation of the work we are doing with the dances to connect us more deeply with country.

This was followed by Te Kore, which tells the Maori Creation story and connects us to the people and the islands of the Pacific Ocean, as Australia is geographically a part of the Asia Pacific region. Both Khannah and I attended the first Tihei Maori Ora weekend with Shafia Maryam and Wendy with the hope that by connecting to the indigenous people of Aotearoa we would be more likely to connect the dances to the Aboriginal people of Australia. There had been an earlier connection for some of the women with Wirrima Anne Thomas and the Women's Dreaming camps, at which Maria Eleni had led dances like the Beauty Way. And through her work at Inana, Khannah had made connections with the Darkinjung people of the Central Coast. There had also been a day called *Dancing the Land*, that I organised in 1996 with Sean Choolburra⁷ and Taryn Drummond from the group Naroo in Annandale, in the inner west of Sydney. This was a day of cultural exchange in the spirit of the tradition of theatre anthropology, that I've been involved in.

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U0nWR28vNQA>

⁷ <https://www.seanchoolburra.com.au>

As part of that day we were gifted the Peace Greeting -Yundu Wanjibo, in Yiddingi, an Aboriginal language from the Townsville area.

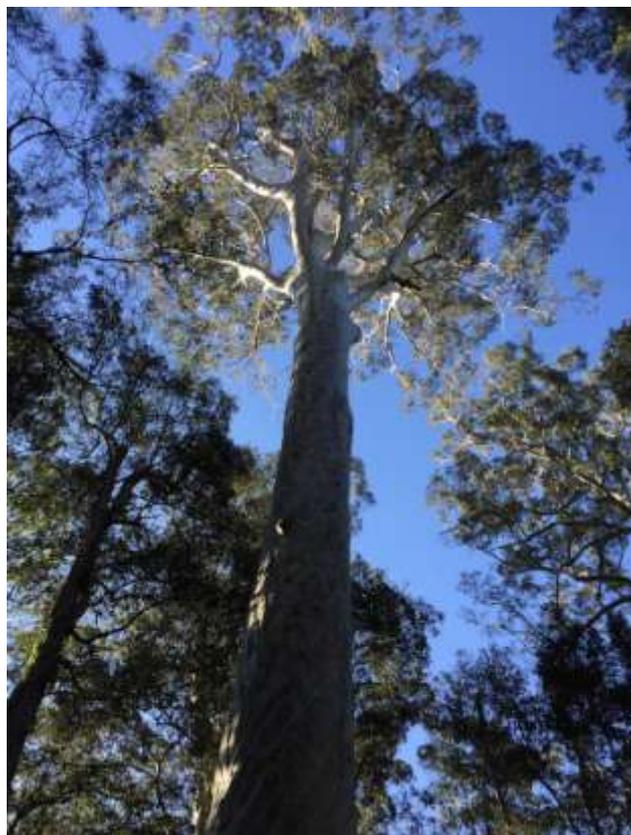
Clearly, the process has worked as this has now been our 5th Aboriginal inspired Spring Renewal with Uncle Noel and Trish. As always Uncle Noel generously shared the stories of his people and his life as well as teachings from his culture. One of these was on the subject of all his relations with all the creatures of the country including the ticks and leeches. Of these the King Parrot was one very beautiful one that visited him daily and followed him around as he worked in the garden.



After our morning session, Karen guided us in making Aboriginal symbols in clay as a way to express creation, which we did after morning tea.



In the afternoon Uncle Noel took us out into the bush to visit the Grandmother tree, Wajin Biddinga, in Budawang. This was my 3rd visit to this awesome giant Spotted Gum, in the Murramarang National Park near Bateman's Bay, NSW. It's a tree sacred to his people and is estimated at over 1000 years old.



We sat around there as Uncle Noel shared stories of the tree and then the story of Narran, the Lyrebird.



That evening on the 30th September, we had a fire and celebrated Rumi's birthday. We used the fire to fire the clay pieces we had made earlier that day and we sang songs and read poetry inspired by Jelalludin Mevlana Rumi, who has been considered in America to be one of the most read poets in the English language. This would have been his 811th birthday.

The following morning, we continued with the creation theme by dancing the first line of the Torah, which I led and of the Aramaic Lord's Prayer, which Amrita led. We also celebrated the great tree with the Tane Mahuta dance and Karen led E Malama celebrating the Hawaiian tradition and finally, Robyn led *I Am Alive* with its delightful niggun and her playful way of leading, which really felt 'alive'.

The morning session inspired the following poem:

In beginning-ness
the Great Mother
burst forth in
the cosmic womb
of creation

the great numinous
emptiness full of potential –
There was a spark
a flaring forth
and energy appeared
as a single point
a singularity
in the great emptiness
of space-time-consciousness –
That point began to grow
to expand
and a great fiery heat
manifest the first gas
of subatomic particles
as energy crystallised
into matter –

<i>Bereshith</i>	so the primal consciousness
<i>Bara</i>	gave birth to
<i>Elohim</i>	space-time-Being
<i>ET</i>	that gave birth to
<i>Ha Shemayim</i>	to wave-like energy
<i>V'ET</i>	that could
<i>Ha Aretz</i>	crystallise into matter
	and a Universe
	was created

After lunch we shared the story painted onto our boomerangs. This was a very rich way to end the weekend.





(See Jenny's photo story for more photos)