

SEEDS OF PEACE

PEARL WYMARRA AND 'RECREATING OUR CAMPFIRES'



'From time in memoriam, we have been dysfunctional peoples within the family of countries that make up our world...

Let us un-earth the treasures, these treasures are all of us.

We are all there in the tangled mess.

Let us walk and work beside each other as we untangle the mess

(Pearl Wymarra: address to the World Peace Forum 2003)



One of many Indigenous women offering inspiring leadership in addressing the crisis of violence experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families is **Pearl Wymarra** from Penrith, a distinguished teacher and researcher in the restoration of people's emotional health and social well-being. Born at Old Mapoon Presbyterian Mission in North Queensland, she grew up on Thursday Island in the Torres Strait and has worked in a variety of capacities in the healing and teaching of others. She holds a Masters degree in Health

Science (Primary Health Care), a Diploma in Primary Teaching and is an Honorary Fellow at the University of Western Sydney

Drawing on positive experiences

For Pearl, spiritual health is the secret of how we find love, joy and peace, and such spiritual health is found in reconnecting with the strength and power of our richest human and cultural experience. Like many who have grown up in the Torres Strait therefore, Pearl draws in her life and work upon a typical deep variety of family and cultural influences. Pearl's mother Marjorie, for example, was a descendant of the Stolen Generation with Aboriginal, Filipino, Japanese and Irish heritage, whilst her father, Nicholas, had both Aboriginal and Scottish ancestry. Between them they had ten children and later adopted and raised another child. Pearl is thus able to tell the story of powerful models of unconditional love which she saw demonstrated by her parents and community, encouraging others to seek and demonstrate the same models elsewhere.

Pearl's vision for healing is hence centred on what she calls 'recreating our campfires': renewing strength through cultivating the spirit, supporting community, and focussing on maintaining the good and proper ways of culture. As she puts it:

In every community be it urban, rural or remote, we are all struggling to live with the tensions of the times. We search and research for the answers, we adopt and adapt, some of us survive, some of us physically die, some of us spiritually die. Some of us in the spiritual death are reborn and in the process of rebirth discover our umbrellas, our safety nets. Indigenous Australians have weathered and are still weathering the storms; we do not have all the answers, but we have certainly had all the experiences. Together in our shared experiences, we will seek and find the answers.

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Recreating Our Campfires

Pearl's work on *'Recreating our Campfires'* earned her recognition in 1997 with an Inaugural Indigenous Award for Education, and she has developed her further in a range of projects, including addressing mental health in Penrith area.

In addressing the pain and legacy of violent memories in Indigenous hearts and lives, Pearl has thus used the concept of ***Circles of Healing*** in a very practical and spiritually refreshing way. Looking at modern Indigenous Australian experience as whole, Pearl suggests that it may usefully be seen as made up of a series of circles of violence and hurt: from an inner circle of experience *before European contact*, or pre-invasion, through successive circles of *contact*, *'protection, missions, reserves'*, *assimilation*, *integration* and more latterly, (halting steps in) *self-determination*. To experience healing, there is therefore, Pearl affirms, the need to peel back the layers of Indigenous experience, which can be done on a personal level also – journeying in and out on this, over the 217 years of modern Indigenous Australian experience or personal/family lifespan. The process of doing this then becomes a process of *Recreating Campfires/Reconciliation/Resurrection*. As people walk/travel inward and outward, so they meet others on their paths across. As the process continues, so the layers are peeled away, leaving reconnection and fresh possibilities of travelling onward.

Lighting candles and walking together

Pearl's teaching is interactive, encouraging participants to share stories, listening, learning and teaching each other ways of acting for justice, reconciliation, healing and peace for all. She frequently uses symbols in gatherings, for example, encouraging everyone to light a candle and take one away with them. In doing so, she stresses the importance of walking humbly and tenderly with others. It is not a case, she affirms of *'if there is no light in the tunnel, run to the end and light one'*, but *'light a candle with others and encourage/enable them to walk with you through the tunnel' (whatever that tunnel is)*. However, nonviolence, she believes, with Barbara Derham, requires the 'two hands': one to stop, as well as one to offer partnership, being crucial. Nonviolence involves being assertive, though not aggressive: 'discipline but not harm'. Or, as Pearl expresses it, using a metaphor from the Torres Strait, we can't walk with everyone if they are blocking; we have at times to walk away and leave them to God's time. We need to *'follow the wave'* like the TI ferry pilot: just as older people are frightened by speed on the ferry in bad weather, there is the need at times to slow down/not go out .

Journeying with others



In the spirit of peace, and of the Torres Strait, Pearl has also made important connections with others journeying from other directions. As she encourages her friends of other faiths and cultural backgrounds:

'Safe places, places of belonging are within everyone's reach and every one of us is responsible for creating such places.'