

Christmas celebrates birth: new life, new love, new hope

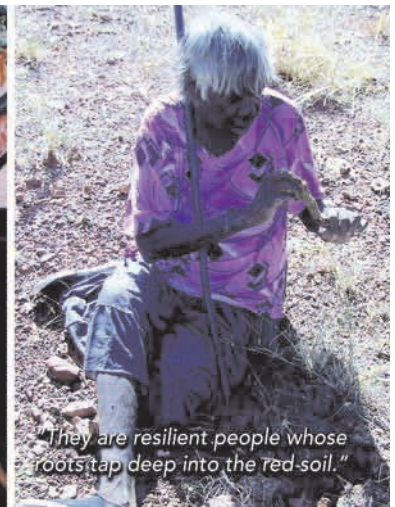
Colette L Livermore



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A child is born to be cared for, loved and nurtured. However, the hope that birth brings is not to be taken for granted. Where, and in what circumstances, the new life takes hold is a lottery that some win and others lose. I have worked for some years in both East Timor and Central Australia. I find the burden of despondency and disease heavier in my own country than in East Timor.

Non-Aboriginal Australia is tired of hearing of the problems of Aboriginal Australia. A culture, they say, of handouts and victimisation — why can't they just get over it like every other ravaged and decimated people? The domino effect is in play — one generation is knocked out and the effects are felt in subsequent generations. Try to imagine losing your land, your language, your way of life, your mother and father.

I reflected on all of this when I went out to a mission settlement, Kumanjai Creek (near Tennant Creek, in the Barkly region of the Northern Territory), with three sisters, Connie, Joyce and Theresa. We stood on slabs of cement as the women explained:

This was the "half-caste" dormitory; this was the kitchen; this is where we were locked in; this is where the boys slept. We had to carry out toilet buckets past the boys in the mornings and they mocked us.

The old women swept away the dirt to reveal a date — 1945 — that they knew was scrawled in the cement.

We sat around a camp fire under an ancient gum tree, which stood as a silent witness to past events, and ate kangaroo tails, witchetty grubs and seeds the women had collected. They told stories of the day Joyce was taken away.

I tried to imagine:

- being a child who had to run away with my family for hundreds of kilometres because a white man was killed and I might be killed in retaliation;
- landing at a mission, being locked in at night, being beaten, eating only flour, rice and goats milk, eating no fruits or bush tucker, and little meat or vegetables;
- being that "half-caste" child separated from those I loved and locked up with others of lighter skin in a separate dormitory;

- being sent away because of my colour, while those who remained banged their heads with rocks as if in mourning for the dead.

In the last century, a large percentage of the women's kinsmen were killed or displaced. The old people had mastery of the language of the land, but it was hard to regroup in a new and alien world. They were powerless, landless and their ancient skills were not valued. The keepers and owners of country became outcasts and margin dwellers. They knew each plant, animal and water soakage. They knew medicinal bark, the goanna holes, bush raisins and tomatoes, and the roots that harbour witchetty grubs. They survived in one of the harshest environments in the world. They are resilient people whose roots tap deep into the red soil. The old people of Central Australia still remember how to survive. They also remember what happened to their people.

The wheel keeps turning. Now the old people can't sleep at night because younger people are drinking too much alcohol. What can be done? They don't know; no one knows. They care for others' children because part of a generation is lost. What will happen when they are gone? A 3-week-old baby, his mother, father and sister, his grandmother and 89-year-old great-grandmother live in a tin shed without power, water or sanitation. That newborn doesn't have a fair chance.

Too many children in Central Australia struggle as no child should have to. A child has a right not to be blighted with fetal alcohol syndrome, not to have rheumatic fever, not to have kidneys destroyed by glomerulonephritis, not to suffer intractable otitis media, not to have scabies so badly that to walk or make a fist is nearly impossible. Children deserve to hear, to be sent to school and to live in safe and clean environments.

A young woman is angry because she needs to nurture her child, and yet her future is uncertain — like many others, she has end-stage renal failure. In her early twenties, she is facing a long period of exile in Alice Springs (the nearest major town to Tennant Creek about 500 km away) because of a shortage of dialysis beds where she lives. In our town, you often see wheelchairs used by people missing limbs because of diabetes, or by children with congenital

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abnormalities. There is a high rate of substance misuse, with all its consequences for the individual and their family.

We hope there will be funding for ear, nose and throat surgeons to visit regularly so that the hundreds of children of the Barkly needing surgery will be spared the long waiting lists and midnight bus trips to Alice Springs. We hope for more dialysis beds so that the incoming wave of patients with renal failure will not be faced with the choice between exile in Alice Springs or death. We hope for more public health staff to tackle scabies, strongyloidiasis, alcoholism, diabetes and the other medical curses of the inland. We hope for more social workers and child protection officers to help and follow up children at risk.

I have worked in East Timor,¹ where, despite enormous poverty, the people are rebuilding their communities after a long period of destruction (related to the Indonesian occupation and resulting civil conflict). They have regained their sovereignty, and preserved their language and beliefs. They retain their hope while many of our own people do not. In East Timor, the thread of culture is not broken. The spirit and structure of society survives. The indigenous people still plant their corn, tend their caribou and thatch their houses as before. There are changes at the margin but the fabric of their society is not torn asunder.

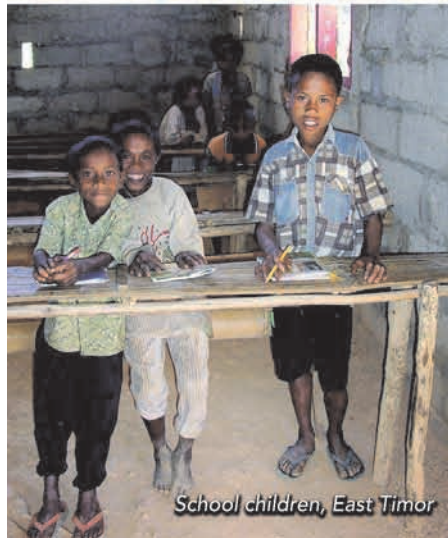
Many towns in East Timor now have “sister cities” in Australia. There is contact and connection between East Timorese and Australian communities. What stops similar connections being forged within Australia itself, between coastal communities and the outback? Should we not face our history a little more squarely and admit that the atrocities were real, and not a delusion perpetuated by the “black-arnband set”? Could a new understanding be reached between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians, who for too long have sat in opposing camps? The welfare of the people of Central Australia has been thought of as a “government



Indigenous women, Kumanjai Creek, NT



Tilling the field, East Timor



School children, East Timor

issue” that the ordinary citizen, business sectors and non-government organisations have stayed out of, but this is changing. No one knows the way forward. It is a way we need to forge together. There is anger and suspicion to overcome; people have been hurt and damaged. Nothing will be easy.

The problems of the outback are social, but the consequences are medical. People need suitable housing, but ideally they should be involved in their design and construction and so have pride and personal investment in the buildings. They need support to maintain their buildings. Education is offered as a way out of the poverty trap of “sit-down money”, but still many children attend school irregularly and leave as soon as they can. Traineeships and apprenticeships are few, and work in general is scarce.

Poor physical health is a symptom of a deeper illness at the heart of Australia. Change will take a long time, but a groundswell of support and small projects may do more than top-down intervention. To paraphrase Marcus Aurelius: to work for change and stay on our feet, we don't need the fancy footwork of the dancer, but the determination of the wrestler. If enough people, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, stay engaged, we can work together towards healing. Then, perhaps, love will be reborn in the heart of our country.

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Reference

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“... despite enormous poverty, the people [of East Timor] are rebuilding their communities after a long period of destruction”