

Dr Ross Ingram Memorial Prize 2012

The bright sides of assimilation

Winner Essay

Embracing the positive consequences arising from adverse circumstances underpins an optimistic future

Tracking and tracing through the roots of your life searching for the meaning inherent in the snippets of memory is challenging because it is uncomfortable, confronting and emotional, but it is ultimately a positive experience to be drawn on as the days go by.

Marjorie Woodrow (Nan) is my grandmother and has a quite extraordinary life story, and one not unfamiliar to many readers in relation to the Stolen Generations. In the foreword to her book *Long time coming home*, Bob Carr wrote: "There is pain and sadness in this story but the strongest theme is courage. Courage and resilience and determination."¹ That was 2001, but the small boy in Narromine in 1978 did not know this story when his Nan handed him a small silver cup trophy as a reward for academic success at school. She said, "learn the whitefella's ways and help our people", with a quick nod of her head and wiggle of her chubby brown arm as she rubbed my hair.

I was immensely proud and buoyant enough even to accept a reluctant hug from Mum as she said, "come 'ere ya little smart-arse" in a thick, smoky-phlegmed voice, with acrid breath left over from drinking the night before. Narromine seemed like a fairly typical country town — wheat, cotton and sheep — and with attendant country attitudes. I only received the downside of country attitudes when it was realised that I was "part Aboriginal" — a kind of disbelief as I was blond haired, blue eyed and fair skinned. Closer scrutiny would often accompany this discovery, with peering at my face in order to read into it the stamp of Aboriginal genetics — thick lips, medium broad nose and thick brow line. Then, as now, I was quizzed about what percentage Aboriginal blood I am.

Then, I did not have the intellect to mount any kind of argument, though thanks to Nan, now education enables me to critique the different stories of Australian history and better equips me to argue my case. Part of education is training for critical reflection and, in particular through the rigorous process of research for philosophiae doctor, an ability to induce meaning from disjointed pieces of information. This has resonance with the way I was raised, where moving house was also disjointed — by the age of 21 there were 28 different places — houses, caravans, apartments, farms, tents, cars and riverbanks. I credit this experience with a desensitising effect on the soul — never get too close to people, do not count on friendships, and trusting in the hope of somewhere to call home was always to be met with failure.

This of course is an extension of Nan's and Mum's stories. Nan was born under a tree, forced to move from



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Carowra Tank to Murrin Bridge, then to Parramatta Girls Home, thereafter many farms as a servant and cook. Mum remembered having to sweep the dirt floor of the tent clean before dinner — and there were six siblings in that tent. Hearing these stories gave some perspective on my family's movements, and I am not hard on them for it, but see it as extending from their history.

And being part of my history, as Ian Anderson wrote in 1993 in *Re-claiming Tru-ger-nan-ner: de-colonising the symbol*, "these patterns of history are embodied as one experience".² I embody Aboriginal, Scottish, English and European (Latvian from my father) heritage; I am colonial and post-colonial; I am white and black; I am a rainbow. The reconciliation within my mind for all these histories occurs thanks to Nan — she could be vitriolic about her treatment at the hands of "white" people or "government" and yet she had an undying love for, and many children to, a convict descendant of Scottish heritage. It is quite amazing, given the magnitude of impact on her life from non-Aboriginal people, that her feelings about this would be supplanted by the value of love.

This was also a lesson in the disjointed messages she gave her young grandson, which was about the conflict between political messages and personal beliefs. On the political hand, it was perfectly sensible to agree to messages of absolute difference between white and black — and how being white was a synonym for Western domination and control. On the personal hand, she would lament that we were not like "the real blacks" in the Northern Territory.

Behind the political rhetoric of absolute difference between black and white are many stories of genuine friendships, which indicate that notions of race differences disappeared in contexts of strong value consonance. I saw Peter Sutton's 2001 work *The politics of suffering* as being about a person in deep despair, and he provided the statement that "the trouble with culture is that it is neither fully conscious and subject to voluntary control nor wholly unconscious and beyond being brought to mind".³ I saw Yin Paradies' 2006 work *Beyond black and white: essentialism, hybridity and indigeneity* as coming from a sensitive soul, and he provided an important statement about "recognizing the fluid and contextual nature of all identities".⁴ The values of love, friendship, despair and anger are part of my indigeneity, and are also part of my whiteness. Whatever context I am in, my conscious mind seeks those of similar values, and so it is in this virtual space that there is somewhere to settle down, a home for the soul.

Nan found a home for her soul when she was reunited with her mother 60 years after their separation. The book of this story is not easy on the emotions — the system of control, health checks, tracking money, domestic training, government policy, administration, services, missions — it is testament to her strength to have survived. I am proud to

have that lineage of strength. It has sustained a determination to be educated, without which I would not know this story, being written in English and given an immortality through print and internet. That is a bright side of assimilation.

Of course, assimilation in the Australian Indigenous context is politically marketed as a wholly negative experience but the truth is much more nuanced, ranging from extreme violence to love. It is out of Nan's removal from traditional tribal life and the love of her non-Aboriginal partner that I am empowered to do health policy research. As Nan's "dear friend" the non-Aboriginal Dianne Decker wrote, "you cannot help but feel her pain and yet feel her wonderful love and optimism for the future of her family".¹ So it is that I draw on and embrace that optimism for the future of my family, people and country.

Nan's *Long time coming home* also fits within the broader movement in Australia to reflect on the identity of our country, an identity that evolves due to a culture that fosters critical reflection and proactively adopts antidiscrimination policies. It is from this context that I entered into an education system that provides many strategies and activities to enable disadvantaged people to gain an education. This is empowering, as those skills are now utilised to be critically constructive about how policy processes may affect the outcomes of all of multicultural Australia. Western education is a positive aspect of assimilation.

I am now able to read a swathe of literature about the evolution of Australia and the irony is not lost on me when I read Nan's book, as it is stamped with a logo of the "Centenary of Federation 1901–2001", when at Federation in 1901, the first legislation passed was the Immigration Restriction Act, which was central to the decades of practices referred to as the White Australia Policy.⁵ Immigration is still an incredibly powerful part of our evolving identity, as is the process for constitutional recognition of our first peoples. Notwithstanding the political games around these issues, at least contemporary

public administration (delivery of services to Australian citizens) is governed by legislation that counters discrimination in its many forms.

When in times of inner turmoil about the effects of past colonisation practices, I look to Nan's little trophy as a reminder that on my watch such practices will not be allowed again. It seems to be a positive side of assimilation that places me in that position. That is how I choose to take it. Then meandering through the points of this essay, it comes to pass that adding together education, value consonance, empowerment and optimism, within a multicultural and antidiscriminatory society, I conclude that the idea of "race" is reduced to one of many other endemic factors that one has to inoculate against in policy debates.

What does this mean for health policy processes? I refer to the lyrics of the iconic hip hop song *Days* (by Joellistic): "It all breaks down to pride, A search for what makes the ride worthwhile, Look for the content, look for the star, Strap your shoes on and run that mile". The term "processes" ultimately refers to the day-to-day interactions between people (the ride) that can result in strong value consonance (pride) and lead to an empowering society (strap your shoes on) where we can enjoy (worthwhile) a healthy life "enriched by a strong living culture, dignity and justice".⁶ The way we choose to run that mile is through the values embedded in the pathways which interlink the content of policies, strategies and programs that encircle our society. I look to my Nan as a star, and know that we can all be stars in making Australia a place to be at home.

¹ Woodrow M, Decker D. *Long time coming home*. Lake Haven: Court Press, 2001.

² Anderson I. Re-claiming Tru-ger-nan-ner: de-colonising the symbol. *Art Monthly Aust* 1993; 66: 10-14.

³ Sutton P. The politics of suffering: indigenous policy in Australia since the 1970s. *Anthropol Forum* 2001; 11: 125-173.

⁴ Paradies YC. Beyond black and white: essentialism, hybridity and indigeneity. *J Sociol* 2006; 42: 355-367.

⁵ Day D. *Claiming a continent: a new history of Australia*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1996.

⁶ National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Council. *National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health: framework for action by Governments*. Canberra: NATSIHC, 2003. □