

Reflections on “The Land Down Under” – A Half Century Later

Story told by Marilyn Crocker

At age eleven, I applied to the “International Friendship League” of Boston, MA for a pen pal. I was sent the name of Renee Beswick, who lived in Tasmania, Australia. I knew nothing then about Tasmania, an island state, off the southeastern coast of Australia, which unlike the mainland, enjoys four distinct seasons and has the cleanest air in the world, unique wildlife and rich history. I only knew from elementary geography that Australia was “the land down under”. My short-lived correspondence with Renee, then a busy young champion swimmer, was an ironic introduction to a continent that later captured my heart when our family spent memorable times living and working there on two separate occasions, now a half-century ago.

I

Joe and I met our first Australian colleagues in 1969 in Singapore when we were members of the Ecumenical Institute faculty conducting a 6-week church renewal training program at Trinity Theological College, for 120 church leaders from north and southeast Asia, India and Australia. The Aussie participants were lay and clergy from the Presbyterian, Anglican and Methodist denominations in Brisbane, New South Wales and South Australia as well as two Australian aboriginal gentlemen from the Mowanjum reserve in Western Australia. I was struck by the energy and “can do” style of the Aussies. Many had already taken EI courses at home and could well have served as faculty along with us. They were the kind of supportive participants any facilitator/teacher would appreciate.

George Winnigudge and Silas Roberts, the aboriginal men, brought a sense of deep wisdom and patience. They seldom spoke but listened attentively. Unlike other participants, they didn’t take notes – but they clearly remembered the crux of the lessons, deep in their souls. Their forebears populated the land now known as Australia 65,000 years ago; their wide variety of cultural practices and beliefs make up the oldest continuous cultures in the world. George and Silas brought their *didgeridoos*, wind instruments, played with vibrating lips to produce a continuous drone, like a bagpipe, while using a special circular breathing technique common to many wind instrument players. The instrument has a long, hollow conical form of about 4 feet. The aborigines refer to the didgeridoo as “the voice of God.”

The Dean of the EI, Joseph Wesley Mathews, had an uncanny gift for communicating authentically with and deeply understanding George and Silas. Our training program began each day with Daily Office in the college chapel. Within a week our experimental morning worship incorporated the rumbling tones of the didgeridoo, the voice of God.

II

Our family’s first assignment to Australia occurred a bit over a year later, in early November 1970, when Joe, I and our 3-month-old twins arrived in Sydney from Singapore to join the Australian EI staff. Although it was spring in Australia, we found ourselves freezing in the tropical wardrobes we’d lived in for the past 18 months. I immediately wrote an SOS letter to

my parents back in the States to send me some warm clothes. I was amazed to learn the continent of Australia is approximately the size of the US, but the population, then, 12 million, only equaled that of Louisiana. Eighty percent of the population at that time lived in the “boomerang” area, along the east and south coasts, from Adelaide to Brisbane. Perth, on the west coast, was the most isolated city in the world, its nearest metropolitan neighbor being more than half-way across the country. A great desert stretched across the interior and was virtually uninhabited.

Most of the aborigines then lived in the Northern Territory near Darwin, on “reserves”, run largely by the church. These people had to apply for a permit, like a visa, to travel outside the reserve. They were in a different situation from that of the Negro in the US – fewer in numbers; not possessing citizenship; not unified for action against the establishment due to their tribal system of organization; not mobile due to their concept of the land as “home, and the resting place of their ancestors.” There was a nascent movement among white Australians to preserve aboriginal culture – a reaction to the aborigines’ virtual extermination on the island of Tasmania – but although Black militants from the US had begun holding events on the mainland, it was questionable to what degree the aborigines would participate, at least in the immediate future. They came across as essentially a docile, gentle people who possess great wisdom about life in all its forms.

We found most Australians living around Sydney rarely had any relationships with aboriginal people. Most of the culture was transplanted England – the pubs, the accent, fish & chips, tea, and school children in uniforms. However, a new flavor was being added by the influx of “new Australians” -- migrants from Greece, Turkey, Poland, Russia and Middle Eastern countries. Their influence was felt in the restaurants and delis established in the suburbs around Sydney. Their children who spoke little or no English posed challenges to the schools and necessitated the creation of special remedial programs, putting pressure on the already inadequate supply of teachers. The immigration policy at that time discriminated against Asians, especially Chinese, which some worried would make it increasingly difficult for Australia to play a significant future leadership role in Southeast Asia.

Sydney was then a commercial and cultural center, as well as a resort area. Bondi Beach, one of the most famous on the East coast, was a 5-minute drive from Paddington where we lived. The huge cliffs that line the coast and entry into Sydney Harbor were the closest I had seen to Maine’s coastline in years. Paddington was like Beacon Hill in Boston, in terms of the way old brownstones were being reclaimed from decay, renovated and recognized as historic points of interest, as well as its appeal as a center for the arts. I was struck by the predominant dress styles – mini-skirts shorter than anywhere else in the East, long hair, and bushy sideburns. I wondered if this was an attempt to hold onto symbols of youth, or a desire to exaggerate styles that emerged from the West, in the face of the uncertain presence of the East elsewhere in the region.

Joe’s work was extensive travel to teach EI courses – assignments that took him to Tasmania, New Zealand, Melbourne, Adelaide, Canberra, and spots as remote as a dusty sheep raising

town called “Broken Hill.” I was hired as a “casual” (temporary) teacher, and had the chance to teach for a semester each at two different all-girls high schools, one of which served extensive numbers of “new Australians.”

III

Our second opportunity to work in Australia occurred five years later, when Joe and I were part of a consulting team invited to facilitate a month-long project to shape and initiate a comprehensive socio-economic development plan with the residents of Oombulgurri, an aboriginal community in northwestern Australia in the Kimberley Mountains plateau. After a number of years in dispersion with consequent devastating economic and cultural distress, a group of 100 original residents chose to return to their homeland and attempt to rebuild and recover resilience and self-sufficiency. This effort was sponsored by the Bureau of Aboriginal Affairs and had attracted the participation of 25 US and Australian business leaders and professionals in multiple fields of expertise to join the residents as volunteer consultants in the planning process.

Our consult team flew from Sydney to Darwin, a major shipping port on the northwestern coast, where our connecting flight took us to Wyndham, a small inland seaport located on the mouth of the Forrest River. Wyndham in those days was a port to export beef and cotton. Its population was about 1800. The area reminded me of the setting for the Gene Autry movies I enjoyed as a child. The residents seemed to be living a pioneer, cowboy, rancher lifestyle, but with the benefits of electricity, trucks, boats with engines, radios and small planes.

Since Oombulgurri is located 40 miles up the river, the 30 US and Australian consultants gathered at Wyndham’s airport early in the day to be flown in a small 5-seat passenger plane, in a sequence of flights, up to the airstrip at the edge of the community. Joe Mathews and Joe Crocker, with three key Aussies were among the first group to leave, since they were eager to oversee set-up and coordinate the baseline data gathering process that would begin the next day. Flights continued throughout the day. I made the decision to step to the back of the line, and honor the Australian consultants to “go first”. Just as the final flight was about to load, the limo of the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and his wife screeched onto the airfield, and I and one other person were “bumped”! Thankfully the other person was a US consultant whom Joe and I knew well, and he could find me a room at a motel in Wyndham, and accompany me the next morning, on a barge-like boat, huffing and puffing up the Forrest River for the 40-mile journey to Oombulgurri, with crocodiles periodically checking us out.

The weeks of work that ensued were eye-opening for me. We met each day under a huge tent and divided ourselves into teams: Agriculture, Animal Husbandry, Essential Services, Education, Health and Community Life. Working at times individually, at other times in plenary sessions to collaborate and build consensus, we arrived at a two-year plan for Oombulgurri – based on the residents’ hopes and dreams, and the external consultants’ expertise re: “how to make it happen.”

Interspersed with our work were times of community celebration – corroborees – times of music, dance and costume grounded in spirituality. Typically, corroborees are spiritual rituals reserved for the Aboriginal people only, but we were invited to a form appropriate for outsiders.

We also learned of the deep connection the people have with the other living creatures in the outback – especially on two occasions, the snakes. When we arrived and were all housed in very rudimentary quarters, we were warned that if we went to the “outhouse” at night, we should bring a flashlight and first “raise the seat!” The venomous King Brown snake was known to curl up under the seat, so beware or be bitten. In fact, in the midst of one of the plenary sessions led by Joe Matthews a King Brown snake slid its way under the side of the tent and approached the front -- when a young Aboriginal man shouted, picked up a stone and threw it – killing the snake. He then stepped back, and the Elder of the people, Robert Roberts, came forward with a forked stick, and picked up the snake and removed it – to perform the ritual of sorrow and thanksgiving. On another occasion, Joe was part of the agriculture team as they walked out across the land. Suddenly Robert Roberts hushed the group, and began making low grumblings, unintelligible to the others. Then he turned and said, “I’m just assuring the snakes that you are my friends. We can continue.....”

IV

My love for Australia and its peoples still warms my heart. I continue to correspond with a number of Aussie colleagues who “worked in the trenches” of community development and teaching and social change with us.

Australia has sought to pay hundreds of millions in reparations to Indigenous “stolen generations,” the survivors who were removed from their families to federally controlled areas. Comparable to Native American boarding schools in the US and Canadian residential schools for Indigenous children, Australia’s program aimed to eliminate all traces of Indigenous culture from their wards. Their actions ended up scarring many of the children for life.

Despite efforts over the last 50 years to rejuvenate, resuscitate remote Aboriginal communities like Oombulgurri, WA Premier has backed a plan to close as many as 150 of the state’s 274 remote Aboriginal communities -- because the Federal Government will no longer fund essential services – like power, water, health and education – and the WA Government cannot meet those costs on its own.

Oombulgurri was closed down in 2011 when the state government deemed it to no longer be viable. This followed a coronial inquiry in 2008 that found high levels of suicide, domestic violence, sexual abuse and alcoholism. It was noted as an indictment on Aboriginal Affairs, in Western Australia. Subsequently rather than address the issues with the community, the community was closed.

Amnesty International described the forced evictions that took place, “Although many refused to leave, WA Government closed the health clinic, school, police station, shops and shut off the

town's power and water. Houses that remained were bulldozed so that people couldn't return."