

*It's 4.30am on a cool August morning in North East Arnhem Land and a group of women is making its way along a bush path by torchlight. No-one is speaking. Only the sound of footsteps and breathing breaks the silence.*

*The women are walking as one. Women together. Walking to a sacred women's place. A place held dear to the people who have lived here for tens of thousands of years.*

*Slowly the group finds its destination, a clearing that lets in the night sky. It is a star-filled sky, free from the big-city light pollution that cruels its beauty.*

*The women find a place on the ground and sit, looking out into the darkness. A lone star shoots across the night in its final dying display. Some of the women have seen it. Others are lost in an ancient dreaming. No-one says a word. They are gathered together, huddled in a quiet strength. United.*

*Suddenly there are noises from behind. Another group of women have arrived. Something arrives with them that is hard to describe. They take their place at the front of the group, lost in something older than time.*

*A soft, sorrowful wail rises up. It's sound so deep the earth seems to move with it. The wailing rings out across a still unseen valley and calls back in echoed consolation. The women start to cry. They are crying for their country. Crying for the lives that have gone before them. Crying for the heartache of the living and the uncertainty of their future.*

*The dawn breaks over something that is all-consuming for the visitors. They have heard the land tell its stories and felt something of the spirit of this place. It has seeped into their soul.*



Yolgnu women teaching traditional dancing to Reconciliation Australia Womens Group

“Seeing the sunrise this morning and sharing that experience with the indigenous elders really moved me and I wasn’t expecting to find myself crying. But I was just so moved. And I was trying to work out what it was and I was crying for my spirit, trying to find my spirit.”

When thirty-seven year old Melburnian Jane Pound joined a group of high-powered corporate women on a trip to North East Arnhem Land’s Garma cultural Festival in August this year she wasn’t prepared for the depth of emotion it would reveal.

“It’s almost like we’ve been too scared to allow ourselves to experience this country and the land and our indigenous people who have been here for so many years before we dropped by. There needs to be a willingness and seeking to understand rather than trying to find differences, approaching life like that could really help us heal our country.”

In her day job, Jane is a Director of Social Ventures Australia, an organisation that links philanthropists to people hoping to bring about social change. This is not her first experience on Aboriginal Land – many of her projects involve remote indigenous communities – but camping out with a group of city-based women in such an ancient part of the country has moved her.

“I guess I’ve been wondering what’s my connection to spirituality and this country and my parents’ background. I’m fourth generation Australian – I don’t even know - and I’ve never really been that proud of it. And having spoken to people here – indigenous and non-indigenous – I’ve realised there are lots of things to be proud of and it’s about finding your own identity and we need to start asking as a nation ‘What is our identity?’



Two way learning around the campfire

For 38-year old Sydneysider Amy Somes it is life-changing.

“The dawn walk was amazing. It’s about women being connected and being united and I really felt it. Black and white women sitting together and being a force together. It was powerful.”

In her day job at Perpetual Investment Amy is part of a team that manages in excess of \$20 billion in equities investments. A mother of two she came to Garma with limited knowledge of indigenous culture.

“It’s really eye-opening. It’s really beautiful. I really didn’t know much about indigenous culture and I still really don’t, I’ve seen such a small part of it. But I also have a sadness that I don’t know more about it. As a whitefella, we just don’t have any culture and the fabric that keeps people together to pass on like Aboriginal people do and I find that quite confronting. Especially as I have two children – two girls. I can’t stop sobbing.”

Sarah Sacks, a 38-year old mother of three from Melbourne, responded in a similar way.

“I’ve got three little kids and I’m bringing them up and realising that I don’t know enough about Australia, the culture and the heritage, and my kids are asking me questions that I can’t answer and that makes me really uncomfortable.

“And then it goes on from there that it’s not just me that doesn’t know enough it’s all the people around me. And at school the children aren’t learning anything about this stuff and why not?”

A strong commitment to community and a deep sense of inequity and injustice for indigenous Australians fuelled Sarah’s decision to come to Arnhem Land. But deep down it was also about Sarah’s own understanding of connection to country, which is something intrinsic to Aboriginal culture and identity.

“I grew up in country Victoria near Mt.Hotham, between Omeo and Dinner Plain. I’m very connected to that part of the world. It’s very strong for me. I feel a bit funny talking about it with most people. But I feel very connected to the mountains and that area and it was heart-wrenching for me when we sold and we left.”

It was this shared appreciation of the connection to the land, which Sarah believes many non-indigenous Australians find so hard to understand, that hit her the hardest during her visit.

“I’ve learned so much about indigenous culture and I just feel so privileged to have been let in. Just to be able to be present with the indigenous women who are just so pleased to be telling their stories – whether it be how we collect yams or about the stars or about why we’re crying for the earth. They’re very private things, on a very spiritual level.”

“There I was sitting around crushing leaves with the women yesterday because somebody had a cold. And I made the fire and they got me to boil the kettle and we made some medicine. I do have a sense of the ancientness of this. You’ve just got to look at their faces. Their hands.

“And then the other side is the politics. And there’s only so much of that that I can take, but still the people here are prepared to keep being open. Trying to engage. Being positive. They haven’t given up. I just find that extraordinary, considering what’s happened over the last 200 years. They haven’t given up. They haven’t been broken and that’s what so inspiring.”



Yolgnu women preparing for smoking ceremony with Reconciliation Australia Womens Group

Amy, Jane and Sarah were part of a group put together by Reconciliation Australia’s CEO Barbara Livesey.

“I think for many women it’s a sense of ‘Of my God’, what don’t I know? I’ve suddenly realised what I don’t know about people who’ve been living here for far longer than us and I don’t understand how I don’t know so much.

This is the second year Barbara has led a group of women to Garma.

“I’d come up here to Arnhem Land before and seen the women in the community and seen the strength and the depth of their culture and we connected as women, we connected as mothers, we connected as people who cared about our kids and our community.

“And I was working with a lot of women across the corporate, government and the non-government sector and I thought if they could come here just sit with the women and make that connection as women, as mothers, as aunts that we could break down some of the lack of understanding about what indigenous people are looking for and how to work with them.”

“My idea was that those women would go back into their own workplaces and their communities and be able to talk a bit more – with a bit more understanding and a bit more knowledge – about indigenous people and also see some of these indigenous women up here move between the two worlds and do that incredibly competently.”

One of these women is Reconciliation Australia board member, Raymattja Marika, the 2006 Northern Territorian of the Year and respected local elder. Raymattja’s family led the first land rights claim in North East Arnhem Land in the 1960s and painted the famous bark petition that hangs in the National Parliament.

While Garma was in full swing hosting thousands of people from all over the world, Raymattja was also busy meeting with fellow indigenous leaders from across the Top End preparing a response to the Federal Government’s Northern Territory National Emergency Response Bill 2007, (which would later remove the homelands permit system and dismantle key aspects of the Northern Territory Land Rights Act).

But she still found time to sit and talk and share stories around the campfire.

Jane Pound: “It’s amazing what a campfire does. Maybe it’s an ancient court to all of us no matter where we’ve come from. That fire and circle and being together and sharing and openness really helps bond people together.”

Barbara Livesey: “The women really appreciated the respect with which Raymattja is held in the community and the depth of knowledge she has about her own culture and what’s gone before her in her community.

“She could talk of the Land Rights struggle going back to the 1960s when her father was involved. She was setting off herself the next day to take a message to the Prime Minister about the impact of the legislation and she can do that very effectively because she can speak with that depth of understanding of what the changes potentially mean to her culture. But she can do it in the white world and she is a woman who these women can recognise can move very well between the two cultures, but she brings with her an enormous wisdom.

Moving between the two cultures has shaped the life of 32-year old Jodie Ryan, a Gunditjmarra woman from southwest Victoria, near Warrnambool. Jodie runs a consultancy business, specifically working with indigenous people and communities, and has a background in finance with Ernst and Young.

As one of three indigenous women travelling with the Reconciliation Australia group she found a keen sense of awareness and responsibility – both to herself and to her companions.

“They always say you need to know where you’ve been before you know where you’re heading and understanding how our history impacts on where we are today and understanding how our family history impacted on our family. How it forms who you are.

“I think what’s so beautiful about this is the ability here to be able to express and celebrate your culture. Because Aboriginal identity is very much a spiritual thing and being able to practice culture is about being able to make your spirit sing, so to speak.

“I think it’s really important for me to understand how diverse the culture is up here and understanding how that impacts on us down home.”

For each of these women this experience will stay with them forever – each in their own, unique way, appreciating the richness and depth of our own unique and ancient culture.

Jane Pound is already putting her Garma experience in action. “I’ve got a picture of that sunrise from the dawn walk on my screen saver. It’s really powerful and it really centres me about what I stand for and what I can do. I feel like a bit of a budding political activist. Like it’s a bit of my life’s journey. I’ve realised that we can’t stand proud as a nation until everyone works together – including business, not only to understand but it has to lead. The cost of inaction is too great!”

Amy Somes is involved in a charity that is helping to raise money to provide home based therapy to young aboriginal mothers and families. “We are supporting a woman called Norma Tracey (a psychotherapist who is working with young Aboriginal mothers and families in Redfern). Her organisation PIFA (Parent Infant Foundation of Australia) provides weekly therapy to those families most in need. Their goal is to provide them with self respect as a mother and person and inspire pride in their culture. This will hopefully help to break the cycle of despair and help the next generation have a better life.”

“I really feel that our generation is receptive and concerned and believes it is really important for (white) Australians to say “sorry”, to help heal the wounds of the past. So that together we can move forward and help build a better nation.”

Sarah Sacks is busy implementing plans to introduce more awareness in her children’s school. “Since I’ve been back I’ve been talking to my kids, they’re 1, 5 and 8, explaining why I believe in the importance of respecting our indigenous people. And I’ve been talking to their school, Elwood Primary, about incorporating indigenous knowledge into everyday teachings at school and working on a plan to make it happen.”

Jody Ryan is continuing her work, gathering her stories and reclaiming her history. “The experience at Garma, listening to the richness of the culture and the history, I sensed a real envy that we (indigenous Australians) have this. But we need to embrace that. Instead of seeing Aboriginal people at Olympic Games’ ceremonies we need to see it as part of our lives.”



Learning traditional basket weaving

And for Barb Livesey, the message is simple.

“We talk a lot at Reconciliation Australia about the need for the national conversation to really spread. I’d say to them go back and make sure that you keep learning. Don’t think that this is it. Learn about indigenous people where you live and work. Ask questions about why there might not be indigenous people in your workplace. If you hear people making racist comments feel strong enough to challenge them.”

*Just like that shooting star on that cool August morning in Arnhem Land these women have witnessed something older than time as they know it. The question each of them carry is whether they have seen something dying or whether they are part of preserving its future.*

Words - Tracee Hutchison.

Photos – Wayne Quilliam.