

# SNAICC NATIONAL CONFERENCE

27-29 July 2010, Alice Springs



**FOR OUR CHILDREN**

Local Strengths,  
National Challenges

**AMPE ANWERNEKENHEKE**

Rlierrke Akwete  
Aneye



## Accepting the inheritance, building the legacy, and passing it on: Leadership and honouring the Ancestors and our future generations

By: Kerrie Tim

Keynote presentation by Kerrie Tim to the SNAICC National Conference Thursday 29 July 2010. Kerrie Tim's speech can be heard online at [www.snaicc.asn.au/policy/conference](http://www.snaicc.asn.au/policy/conference)

**Kerrie Tim is a Senior Executive within the Australian Public Service Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. A graduate of the University of Queensland, Kerrie's extensive experience in the public sector includes the former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services and its predecessor, ATSIC, the Australian Public Service Commission, the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, and the Department of Education.**

Kerrie is a former Executive Director to the Queensland Government, having worked within the Department of the Premier and Cabinet and, before that, led the Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy.

Kerrie is actively committed to social justice and for the past 20 years, in her spare time, has focussed her efforts towards ending racism and developing leaders. Kerrie's international experience includes representing Australian governments in discussions in the Philippines, United States and Canada, and leading peer counselling workshops on ending racism in South Africa, Israel, and New Zealand. Kerrie is a former Director of the Australian Indigenous Leadership Centre and the National Alternative Dispute Resolution Advisory Committee.

Raised Kalkadoon on the land of the Mitakoodi, Kerrie's culture is at the heart of her efforts.

### Introduction

- The inheritance we receive from those who have gone before us
- The conscious decision to accept that inheritance
- The responsibility that then goes with building that inheritance
- Creating our own legacy, and
- taking action to pass it on to those who follow us.

### Baby girl

Have you ever held a baby and looked deeply into her eyes? Have you seen her intelligence, her bright, keen mind eager to engage with yours? Have you talked with her, with kindness, delight, high expectation? Have you welcomed her and told her of her place in the world and how much better off we all are because she was born? Have you listened to her response?

Have you heard her talk and laugh and eagerly demonstrate her engagement with bright, intelligent eyes and active hand and arm gestures? Is this not the most awesome, human thing to do – looking for another human, another mind and seek a connection?

### Won the prize

We humans won the prize. Of all the life, the species to have lived and died throughout the four billion year history of the Earth we humans are sitting here in this room today. It took life million of years to evolve to us humans. And it took us humans millions of years to evolve. And it has taken us just a couple of hundred thousand years to evolve to the humans we are today - you and me and the rest of us we see and interact with daily.

Even more extraordinary, each and every one of us in this room, along with our fellow sisters and brothers living and breathing across the world, we hit the jack-

pot. Do you know just how many millions of times life tries to create itself before just one of us is conceived? We, you and me, made it to conception, we are the one in millions that tried; we are the lucky ones.

Today us humans are the smartest we have ever been. We know more about ourselves, our planet, our universe, than ever before. And we have learnt this relatively quickly, especially when you think about the length of time it has taken to create the earth and how relatively short a time we humans have been around.

If you can imagine a piano and that the first key on the left is the start of life you would almost be at the end before we reach the time of the dinosaurs, and they died out millions of years ago. The last key on the right is where we sit; we would be about the width of a decent fishing line, over on the far right of this last key. Another way to describe it is if the history of the Earth was squashed into a single year, dinosaurs would have shown up in August and disappeared



**SNAICC: Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Inc.**

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at the end of November. Us humans, who have been around for about two million years, showed up on the last day of December, late in the evening.

For all the knowledge we do possess, for everything we do know and understand about ourselves and this Earth, for all we do know about the universe, there is still so much more to know and we are still using only a small part of our brain. Our capacity to grow our mind may be limitless. There is no human that we know of who has ever used the full capacity of their brain.

### **Ancestors and the development of the mind**

About 40,000 years ago the first humans to take a thought and communicate it as an image, the first of us to take what we were thinking and show it outside our minds, were our Aboriginal ancestors. It was our ancestors who first drew a line in the sand, who first painted the cave wall to express a thought. And this began a revolutionary development of the brain that continued with civilisations across the world.

It was only about 7,000 years ago that at least five civilizations that we know of started writing with symbols, a significant tool that has today given us humans a short-hand to summarise our thoughts – which we all recognise as the development of an alphabet and the written word.

An Aboriginal man we all know, probably more because of his image on our fifty dollar note than for his incredible mind, is David Unaipon. Now this was a man who dedicated his life to developing his mind. David was a Ngarrindjeri man, an inventor, preacher and writer and just in case you don't know he is also known as Australia's Leonardo da Vinci for his mechanical ideas. A couple of those mechanical ideas include his anticipatory drawing for a helicopter based on the principle of a boomerang, and his research into harnessing the secret of perpetual motion. David, like the rest of us, had a fine mind and he spent his life growing it.

Another man I want to mention who spent his life growing his mind is my Dad. He was an extraordinary fellow, thoughtful, always taking the learnings from his life experiences and using them to inform his next thinking and action. Dad was what I would call a lay philosopher. This legacy he gained from a Chinese father and an Aboriginal and Chinese mother. He married my mother, also someone with a fine mind; strong, generous and gutsy,

an Aboriginal woman who lived her life modelling the values she held dear, even in the face of extraordinary challenges. She was gutsy and she had grace.

A couple of years back when my father died he left me his papers; they were notes that he wrote, intermittently but over his lifetime. Among Dad's papers were notes on the effects of living under the legislation that governed the lives of Aboriginal people in Queensland, the laws that were the model for South Africa's apartheid laws. He was in the middle of writing about the effects of those laws on my Mum's life when he moved on to what happened afterwards. He wrote, 'after the laws changed we had nothing, no jobs, no education, no roof over our head, no money' ... but I had read enough of his papers to know Dad had paused, and on the next line he wrote, 'but we had our minds'.

I tell you this story because I was incredibly privileged to be born to these two people who had a perspective that no matter what the rest of the world held out for you as the kind of life you deserved, and usually for our people it was to be a life less than others, that you could use your mind to imagine a world good for yourself and others and you could then spend your life using your mind, influence and capacity to act to bring this about.

### **What they wove into the lives of the rest of us**

I thought I might talk a bit about the legacy my parents passed on, what they wove into the lives of the rest of us.

My parents made a conscious decision to raise us as Aboriginal, Kalkadoon, on the lands of the Kalkadoon and the Mitakoodi. They did not make these decisions lightly. They thought through the impact of the racism that we would face, both personal and institutional and as best as they could they prepared us for dealing with it. My parents also placed Aboriginal culture at the heart of our upbringing.

And at the heart of Aboriginal culture is humanness, translated best as 'respect' – for oneself, for others, and for country. The life lessons they taught were aimed at developing our body, our mind, our spirit, and our emotions. The whole of our life experiences were used as a lesson. Up to age five decisions about our growth were led by Mum and supported by Dad and the focus was on ensuring that we were raised healthy and strong – plenty of nourishing food, lots

of exercise, and games to keep our body and minds active.

After age five, our Dad became our primary teacher, supported by Mum. We had to go to school to learn to read and write and to speak English. They wanted us to learn how to learn in a world that was set up for others, not for us. They didn't just want us to learn the things they could teach us; they wanted us to also learn the things that they couldn't teach us, to have experiences they didn't have but knew were there. Mum and Dad wanted to grow our minds beyond anything they experienced or could imagine. They wanted us to understand the importance of balancing culture and change, or outside influences.

We had to go bush with Mum and Dad and learn to hunt and collect food; to learn the cycles of the seasons so we would know when to collect the ripest berries, when to hunt the fattest turkeys, and when to fish the waters. We had to know when to do these things and when to let the land and waters replenish.

My parents taught us these skills by games. We had to learn to track each other, to know in whose footsteps we followed and how to make any sign of us disappear. We learnt to fake our tracks and the tracks of the animals we hunted. Through our parents' lessons the land became our friend and provider and we learned to respect its power and all that it offered, and to pay homage to the Ancestors for this gift. I listened to my parents talk up the country as we walked it, pointing out what we needed to know to survive and to just have fun. The sun and sky above and the land around us were guides by day and the stars and moon the guides by night.

Our spiritual growth was always a part of our lives and an extension of us – we didn't know where it began or ended. It was part of an ongoing cycle of our life lessons and always centred on respect. And this was to be a lesson we were to take on for life – each day you learn more about yourself – who you are, where you come from, and where you are going and you learn this by always considering what it means on this day to respect yourself, others and the land.

Many of my early fun memories are of the games we played to learn the skill. I remember having to select the right wood to work a strong, accurate spear and the stories that were told by the fire as we worked the wood to shape and strength. I remember practicing to throw and feeling delighted as my accuracy improved. I remember making my first shanghai,

selecting the fork, cutting it, peeling off the bark and heating it to dry it out. Often as a little one my fingers were not strong enough or deft enough to pull and tie the band and my big brother would reach over to help, adding to my learning and encouraging my abilities.

These years laid the foundation for story telling and each night our parents sat outside under the stars and we would eagerly gather around to hear the next tale. I loved the stories about the moon and stars; the tales about our family and our people. I loved the stories about Mum and Dad and their experiences and what that meant for us.

My folks raised us to take responsibility for our life-long journey. They did this by modelling the behaviours they expected of us. They taught us to do this backing each other. They provided guidance and love and caught us when we fell and cheered us when we succeeded and pushed us when we wanted to give up. They created a large and extended family and tied us to our own destiny, to each other, to those around us and to our responsibility for this country. They provided the encouragement for us to lead beyond our comfort zones.

And by blood they tied us to the destiny of all our people whose veins pulse with an ancient connection to each other and this land. This is not something to be taken lightly nor something you can walk away from. A challenge for us, just as it was for them and all our Ancestors, is to figure out who we are, where we come from, and where we are going with the legacy of the Aboriginal world view that we inherited, and to live a life figuring out how to pass on an enriched legacy to those who follow us. Balancing culture and change, and much more, is what Mum and Dad wove into the lives of the rest of us.

### **Baby girl**

Have you ever tried to look into the eyes of a little one traumatised by the violence she was born into? Have you watched her lie quietly, not engaged with the world around her, not expecting a look or a touch or even that she will be changed and bathed when she needs it or to be fed when she is hungry? Occasionally she opens her eyes and looks out and the depth of despair, the lack-lustre in her eyes is inter-mitten with fear as she struggles to find her place.

Have you ever stayed with her through this, looking lovingly at her, with delight and high expectation? Have you spoken

quietly and assuredly and told her how much she matters, how delighted you are that she was born and is with us? Have you told her how sorry you are and that for the time you are with her, she can feel what she needs to feel and that you will stay with her? Have you stayed long enough with her and spoken kindly enough that she can tell you are there, at least for the moment?

Have you noticed that as her safety grows she starts to cry? Occasionally she will look up through her lashes to see if you are still there and if you are, the crying gets more intense. She will struggle, cry hard, push against you but she will also look out to see if you will stay with her through the tears and the feeling of the fear. Have you ever stayed with her long enough that she can cry as long and as hard as she can and then start to shake?

Have you watched her face start to relax as you stay relaxed, loving, kind, encouraging? Have you felt her nestle into you, start to yawn and then fall into a deep sleep. Have you stayed with her through the sleep and seen her wake happy, more aware of the environment and looking for that interaction she had before she slept?

### **Internalised hurts**

One of the most insidious effects of the hurts our people have faced over the years from being treated disrespectfully, demeaned, excluded, and ignored is when we start to believe these messages and begin harming both ourselves and our peoples – we internalise it. An example of what this looks like includes when we criticise and beat our children in misguided efforts to ‘discipline’ them and keep them from openly displaying pride or pleasure in themselves; attempting to make them less vulnerable to the hurts but instead leaving them more beaten down.

Other examples include when we

- think of ourselves or each other as stupid, lazy, unimportant or inferior
- criticise or verbally attack each other
- physically attack or kill each other, playing out our rage
- put our individual well being last – we are unable to think about our physical and emotional health, making us vulnerable to heart disease, high blood pressure, obesity, diabetes, HIV/AIDS, ulcers, and more
- feel hopeless, despairing, and angry which can make us vulnerable to the lure of alcohol and other drugs

for ‘relief’ from those feelings, even though we know that this does additional harm to ourselves and our families.

### **Ending the hurts**

From when we are little our peoples have fought as long and as hard as we dare to maintain a sense of ourselves as good, smart, strong, important and powerful. We should not blame ourselves and each other for any of the negative and destructive attitudes or behaviours I just spoke about. But we can increasingly understand them and take steps to end them and to heal from the damage done to us by these hurts.

We must also make sure we don’t let anyone else blame us for these attitudes or behaviours. Instead of blame we must find intelligent policies and solutions that will actually move us forward.

Any time the media or others focus on us as ‘dysfunctional’ and ‘violent’; any time our communities are labelled as ‘dysfunctional’ and ‘violent’ then I ask that you understand that desperate, destructive acts are done by people who have been terribly hurt by the conditions in which they have had to exist. We know that as long as desperately poor, dangerously unhealthy and oppressive conditions exist for any of our people we will be in danger of someone’s irrational acts of violence. We can lock these people up, and our prisons show a disproportionate number of our young, our men and our women are locked up, but it will not stop more people from the suffering that creates any one of us who harms another.

But no matter how brutal and overpowering any of this ‘dysfunction’ or ‘violence’ is it cannot destroy the longing present in our people and in all Australians for all our young ones to have a life of justice, free from poverty and oppression.

### **Developing policies good for all of us**

We must develop policies that end poverty and oppression for all of us.

The lesson I learnt from my Dad, from many who have gone before me, is that we humans have both the intelligence to develop these policies and the resources to carry them out. We, together, have to develop and pursue policies that will value every person, no matter where they live, no matter their religion or race or background. This is something we are capable of. There is enough food, there are enough resources, there is enough for all of us.

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Developing such policies cannot be left to governments alone. Such policies will not develop and be sustained without the active thought and participation of us all. We all have a responsibility to see that good policies are developed in the interest of us all.

I know that sometimes we feel like it should be someone else's responsibility. I know we sometimes feel that our thinking does not matter. I know we feel like the things we have to handle in our lives already is enough. And I know that sometimes the mistreatment we have received in our lives might get in the way of us feeling like we can contribute.

But no matter what has happened to us, we are still capable. We are capable of understanding ourselves, our circumstances in this country and of our place in the world. We are capable of being courageous, and of contributing our thoughts and understanding and effort to the development and implementation of good policies, for ourselves and for others.

No more criticism and listen well

To do this, we have to stop criticising each other, no matter how ingrained the habit may have become. We have to

support each other's efforts to overcome the disempowering treatment we have received. We have to encourage each other's efforts to play a full role in thought and action.

We must listen to each other, and listen well. We must listen to each other's thoughts about what should happen. We also need times to listen to each other about the mistreatment we have received, mistreatment that has sometimes made thinking and acting difficult for us. Just doing this will make a significant difference to our ability to think and act together.

### **Summary**

Each of those young ones, the baby girl who is completely delighted with life and the baby girl who is despairing but looking for hope, each of them no matter their background or the circumstances into which they were born deserves to have a meaningful life - of opportunity, love, closeness. They both deserve to inherit a world with fresh air to breathe, nourishing food to eat, plenty of exercise and fun and activity to keep their minds and body active.

It is possible for each of us in this room to join forces with everyone else we know and to build alliances with others and to

contribute our thinking and efforts towards building a society that is good for every one of us.

We are capable - of being courageous, of contributing our thoughts and understanding - of contributing our effort towards building a society that is good for every one of us.

What was the legacy, the world view you inherited? In what way have you grown this legacy so far and what will be your next steps? What is the legacy you will pass on?

I want to finish with the words of Robert Coles in his book, *Lives of Moral Leadership*, "We need heroes, people who can inspire us, help shape us morally, spur us on to purposeful action – and from time to time we are called on to be those heroes, leaders for others, either in a small day-to-day way, or on the world's larger stage."

The lesson for us as we accept responsibility for the legacy we inherited, as we grow it and pass it on to those who follow, is that for our children, "For most young people, their heroes are their parents." (Australian Childhood Foundation, *Every Child Needs a Hero* report).