

Sorry Polly, woman's law still touches me

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In 1981, I was sitting in my home on the Warmun Community when Mrs Peggy Patrick, a community elder, called out to me, 'Jungurra, snake'.

When a snake slithers through sand or gravel, it does not leave a large groove in the dirt. Rather, it makes a slight dent as it finishes one twist and pushes into the earth to propel itself forward. This manoeuvre is done lightly and the snake usually does not leave a mark. Mrs Patrick had seen a dent. She then yelled, 'Woo, two snakes!'

Two king browns were intertwined in my backyard. Their heads hovered about two feet above the ground. One was gently pushing the head of the other down. I think they were mating.

It took time for the snakes to register our presence and turn to look at us. With the snakes still intertwined, one head moved toward us, then retreated. The head of the other snake came forward as the first withdrew. The snakes continued this beautiful dance.

It would have been wonderful to sit back and enjoy a rare performance. However, when a king brown decides to escape, it moves with speed. Mrs Patrick and I kept an eye on the snakes while a child was sent to find someone with a gun. The dancing snakes were shot and dumped in the creek.

I spent much of my 20s living and working in Aboriginal Australia. I was employed for two years as the bookkeeper and financial advisor to the Areyonga and Ikunji Communities west of Alice Springs. I was then engaged for four years as Community Advisor by the Warmun Community in the East Kimberley Region of Western Australian. Later, I would consult for the NSW Aboriginal Land Council in Sydney and the Northern Land Council in Darwin.

This paper was inspired by an incident where I became ill after inadvertently watching a sacred women's dance. Another dance was then performed to heal me. Although this event was dramatic, it was not an isolated incident. During my four years at Warmun, I lived and worked with people who related to me from a cosmology that was very different to my own.

Over time, I have begun to understand why those four years at Warmun, in particular, remain so alive within me. It was not just an interesting interlude in my life when I was introduced to fascinating things. That time with the people of Warmun changed me. The relationships we formed, and the experiences we shared, broadened my inner world. Without those people and those experiences, I would not be the person I am today.

In my efforts to integrate those four years into my inner world, I find myself increasingly drawn to the place where the two snakes dancing in my backyard was more than an instance of wild beauty, or horror. I have come to understand that those two snakes mating was a moment that encapsulated all snakes mating. The point where two beings come together to create a third. An expression of a creative force in which we all exist. The people of Warmun placed themselves within that creative energy, and, as I will show, believed they could work with those powers to heal and to effect weather events. Their taking me into their world has created an inner tension within me. I can feel the resistance of my rational western mind to how the people conceptualised their relationship to the world. However, I understand that if I remain too rigid in my thinking, I will miss something valuable. This paper is the part of an ongoing exploration. How do the two snakes of my western upbringing and my experiences in Indigenous Australia dance with each other?

My determination to psychologically sit within the cosmology of the people of Warmun people has had profound consequences. The first is that I now feel immensely grateful to the people of Warmun and the care they showed in taking me into their lives.

The second consequence can best be shown through a psychotherapeutic example.

Often a psychotherapy patient has a fundamental way of being in the world. They can be intensely driven, highly intellectual, overly self-sacrificing. Generally, they have turned their way of being into an ideology. Everybody should work hard, be rational or put others before themselves. Often, they have developed these ways of being in order to live functional lives despite suffering terrible, potentially debilitating, traumas in childhood. For example, the driven person uses their drive to stay away from their vulnerability.

For obvious reasons, the patient can be resistant to letting go of this aspect of themselves, even when its limitations become evident. It is how they have got through. The prospect of dropping into the underlying vulnerability is too confronting. The therapy allows the patient to gain a broader understanding of themselves. However, it does not necessarily lead to a fundamental change in their psychological make-up.

I would not say the snake of my western upbringing has stood completely steadfast against the snake of my time in Aboriginal Australia. However, my most recent examination of my time at Warmun has led to that snake giving up more ground than it had previously. It no longer sits so easily on top, playfully pushing the head of the other snake down.

One reason for exploring these questions in this forum is that although my time at Warmun provided material for expanding my inner world, it was through psychotherapy and psychoanalysis, both as a patient and as a practitioner, that I have been able to at least partially integrate those events into my psychological life. Without psychotherapy, the creative power of the Warmun snake would have been diminished. It would have remained a split off part of myself that would have been intriguing rather than life affirming.

In his paper, *Psychoanalysis, Colonialism, Racism*, Frosh (2013) argues that the primacy psychoanalysis gives to the rational mind and the development of the individuated self, can affect the way we observe other cultures. I accept the dangers Frosh is alluding to.

However, my experience of sitting within what could be called psychoanalytic thinking has allowed the snake of my time in Aboriginal Australia to grow larger within me. This experience makes me hopeful there can be a conversation between psychoanalysis and Indigenous Australia. As the two snakes mating in my backyard can be seen as an expression of all snakes mating, I am writing this paper from the position that my struggle to hold the two snakes in mind can be an expression of that wider conversation.

I am not a psychoanalyst, but psychoanalytic theory underpins much of my work as a psychotherapist. For ease in this paper, I am going to use the terms psychoanalysis and psychotherapy interchangeably. I will make reference to psychoanalytic theorists such as Donald Winnicott and Thomas Ogden.

In order to further the dance of the two snakes, I am going to suggest the manner in which the people of Warmun drew me into their world can be seen through a Winnicottian lens.

Donald Winnicott was a British psychoanalyst who worked as paediatrician before training as an analyst. Winnicott's early career allowed him to observe the relationship between mothers and babies, and how that relationship impacts on the child's psychological development.

In his paper, *On Holding and Containing, Being and Dreaming*, Ogden (2004) focuses on Winnicott's observations of how the mother helps the baby to make the transition from the infant's time to the time of everyday life. In infant time, there little sense of night or day. For example, feeds take place in the small hours of the morning. Winnicott describes how the mother creates a holding environment that allows the baby to make the transition to this new world.

Winnicott's work has helped me to understand my own childlike position of unknowing in the new world I found myself at Warmun. I was not so much living in my own time. More, I was living in my own mind. Winnicott helps me to see that, in response to my childlikeness, the people created a safe, holding environment in which I was encouraged to move deeper into their cosmology – an environment where I could gradually find my feet.

Another feature of Winnicott's work is his focus on the reverie that is created between mother and baby.

The mother's deep love for the child encourages a fascination with the child's development. This maternal reverie creates a psychological space for the child to become fascinated with the world around it. The mother's reverie creates and facilitates the development of the child's reverie.

The people of Warmun were intrigued as to how I reacted to what they offered me. They watched me closely, saw how I responded, and offered me more. In turn, this allowed me to be fascinated by what I was shown.

In order to set the stage for the incident that inspired this paper, and how the Warmun snake was born within me, I am going to offer a series of short vignettes that give some insight into the cosmology of the people of Turkey Creek when I was living and working with them, and why my introduction into the community reminds me of the work of Winnicott.

- Very soon after I arrived at Warmun, I was given the skin name, Jungurra. Skin name is the English term for a classificatory system consisting of eight male and eight female skins. One of the major functions of the skin system is to determine who you could marry, right way. By extension, given it was assumed that I had married right way, my partner of the time was a Nungala, my son a Jawalyi and my daughter a Nyaajarri.

I was not told how it was decided that I would be a Jungurra. It did mean that Mrs Queeny McKenzie, one of the elders of the community, was my classificatory mother. It may have been Mrs McKenzie's job to look after me and my family.

At the time, I considered being given a skin a generous act of inclusion. However, I now see that it was much more. The skin system established your classificatory relationship with everybody in the community. It locates you in the tapestry of life. Without it, you are a floating being.

I loved having a skin name and happily called my classificatory brothers Nudji, my brothers in laws, Wadoo, my fathers, Nubi, my mothers, Nudjil, my grandparents Kungkai.

Being given a skin was just one of the ways I was taken into the community. I was also encouraged to dance in public corroborees, I was taken to dig ochres for the artists to use in their paintings, on hunting and fishing trips, and to gather sugar bag (bush honey).

- Then there were the ways I was introduced into what could loosely be called the Dreaming.

We were once out a place called Bungle Bungle, an area that is now part of the Purnululu National Park. To strengthen the claims of the Traditional Owners to be considered in the ownership, development and management of the park, we engaged anthropologists to record the Aboriginal association to the area. It was November, the beginning of the wet season. We were 70 kilometres from Warmun along a bush track that could quickly become impassable. I was known as a mad driver because I drove fast along bush tracks. It still took me three and a half hours to travel the 70 kilometres back to Turkey Creek.

Suddenly, the sky grew dark and heavy. I had witnessed fierce monsoonal storms but never seen a sky like this. The men went to the back of the trucks and pulled out their boomerangs. They sat in a circle, clapped their boomerangs and sang.

After about half an hour, the men stopped singing and we left. The sky remained heavy but it did not rain.

When we arrived back at Turkey Creek, Mr Hector Jundany said to me, 'Nudji, we bin sing dat rain longa you.'

I said, 'I know, Nudji. Thank you.'

'Next time, maybe you be little bit careful.'

There were many moments like this when people related to me from a cosmology that was very different to mine. I increasingly see these times as educational. Not in the formal sense, but in the everyday manner in which parents introduce a child into the world. These moments were supported by the more formal times of instruction. The elders would sit me down and tell me Dreamtime stories and take me to sacred sites.

- On another occasion, we were driving back from Bungle Bungle and stopped in a gorge for lunch. A goanna wandered into the camp as we were eating. I always carried a gun and shot the lizard for food. As we were leaving, the goanna was still lying untouched. I was told that the goanna was too old and bony.

When we arrived back at Turkey Creek, we heard wailing coming from one of the camps. We went over to see what was happening. An old man had died. I was told the goanna had come to tell us about the death. No one said, 'And you shot him', nor did the accusation hang in the air. I think people simply accepted that I did not know my way round what loosely could be called the Dreaming.

I have no idea how many mistakes I made like this. However, I do think this last vignette is an example of the generosity and care in which the people took me into their world. A holding environment that reminds me of the work of Donald Winnicott.

- There was also another world the Warmun people introduced me to.

The first pastoral lease in the East Kimberley was granted over Ord River Station in 1884. In 1885, gold was discovered at Halls Creek. The rush did not last long but it brought a large influx of people into the area. Over the coming years, pastoral leases were taken up over most of the East Kimberley. It was a time of shocking violence.

Not long after I arrived at Warmun, I was at a place called Chinaman's Garden, 100 kilometres south of Turkey Creek. A group of people were wanting to move from the larger township of Warmun, back to their traditional lands. They were part of an exodus from the major townships that was happening all over central and northern Australia. This phenomenon was referred to as the outstation movement.

It was mid-afternoon when Mr Paddy Springfield, the elder of the group, said to me, 'Jungurra, you come now'. A number of us drove through the bush to a grove of trees that grew in sandy soil near a low escarpment. We stopped the Toyota and walked into the grove. Mr Springfield bent down and picked up a bone chip.

He indicated that we should all do the same. He then explained that we were holding the remains of people who had been shot and their bodies burnt, in the early days of contact.

I remember being numb. I was confused as to why I had been brought to this place and what was expected of me. We stood in what I experienced as an awkward silence for some time. Mr Springfield placed the bone chip back on the ground. He indicated that we do the same. We quietly left.

After this initial period, often referred to as the killing times, Aborigines were forced to work as indentured labour on the pastoral stations. They were largely paid in kind; basic accommodation and food, and a small amount of cash. Each station had what was referred to as its 'blacks camp'. This appalling period of exploitation of Aboriginal labour lasted until the 1960s, when it was disturbed by the coalescence of a number of factors.

Improvements in both the quality of roads and the capacity of trucks, led to cattle being shipped by road, reducing the demand for drovers. Increased use of helicopter mustering meant less stock work. In 1968, the Pastoral Award was extended to include Aboriginal stockmen, making their labour more expensive.

The resultant crash in the demand for Aboriginal labour led to the owners and managers forcing the people off the stations. At the time, Turkey Creek was one of the few areas of Crown Land on which the refugees could settle. Warmun resident, Mr Clifton Gilmarrie, had lived with his family on Bedford Downs Station, to the south west of Warmun. One day, using Pidgin English, the lingua franca of Aboriginal East Kimberley at the time, he told me,

'We bin' huntin'. Come back longa camp. Our dogs. All dead. Manager bin shoot lot of dem. Dog lying everywhere, poor bugger. One lying dere. 'nother one, dat way. We bin pick up swag. Walk 'em longa Turkey Creek. We bin sittin' 'ere long time. No one lookin' out for we. We struggling.'

That is the background against which the main incident of this paper takes place.

In the 1980s, the Kimberley was sparsely populated. There were about 15,000 residents in an area of approximately 425,000 square kilometres. However, in 1979, diamonds were discovered at Smoke Creek, about 40 kilometres north of Warmun, leading to the eventual development of the Argyle Diamond Mine. Just to the south-east, the tourist potential of the Bungle Bungle Range had been discovered, leading to the subsequent proclamation of the Purnululu National Park. Both these developments were part of a general economic expansion that threatened to alienate the Indigenous peoples further from their Traditional Lands.

As the development of the Argyle Diamond Mine and Purnululu National Park gathered pace, a three-day meeting of Aborigines from all over the East Kimberley was held at Crocodile Hole, a beautiful pool on the Wilson River, just after it emerges from a gorge. As Warmun had been the main community responding to these developments, I was heavily involved in the discussions.

By the end of the meeting, I was exhausted. Needing time out, I sat apart from the others, enjoying the scenery.

An important shift was happening throughout the Kimberley at the time that my western mind conceives as a feminist push. Kimberley Aboriginal women were increasingly asserting themselves in the politics of the communities. This shift could have been conceived differently in the minds of the Turkey Creek people. However, I find it hard to believe these developments were not in some way stimulated by the general movements in gender politics throughout the globe at the time.

One way in which female power was expressed was through the dancing of dangerous ceremonies in public places. On one occasion, I was told that I could not drive on the Great Northern Highway because the women were on the move. My car would flip over.

The women from Ringers Soak, a small community near Halls Creek, started dancing. The men had been told the dance was dangerous and to only watch the feet. Being away from the main group, and therefore not hearing this instruction, I lay back and enjoyed the dancing. The next day, I was too sick to get out of bed.

I lived in a Queenslander style building, up on stilts to catch any breeze. There was a caravan in the backyard that accommodated the overseer for the community building project. I thought I heard country and western music coming from the caravan. I lifted myself up to look out the window, but there was no music. I had barely settled down when Mr Paddy Tjumpinji was standing in my bedroom. Mr Tjumpinji was an elder of the community. He would point things out to me, and tell me stories. He would say:

‘Dat’s la *nurringuny*. You know, Dreaming.

‘Jungurra’, Mr Tjumpinji said to me, ‘You bin dreaming about those women?’

‘No, but I can hear singing.’

Mr Tjumpinji would have thought I was referring to the Ringer’s Soak women, not country and western music coming from a nearby caravan. I suspect I was disorientated.

A half an hour later, my house was filled with women. Mrs McKenzie came to my bedroom and said, ‘Hey boy, dem girl bin get to you. No problem, we fix you.’

I was taken down the creek, and painted with ochres in the pattern of my Jungurra skin. My head, arms and legs were decorated with bands of wool, and twigs of gum leaves were slipped between these bands and my skin. I was placed on a seat of sand and the women danced for me throughout the afternoon.

As the sun was setting, Mrs McKenzie brought the dancing to a close. She told me to sleep in the ochres. ‘I collect you mornin’ time,’ she said.

I woke feeling fresh and alive. Mrs McKenzie came and said, 'You wash 'im off, now.'

These events caused a great deal of excitement, especially among the women. They would say to me, 'We fix you, Jungurra. You good now.' It was accepted that I was now immune from women's Law. I could watch women's dancing without getting sick.

There are two postscripts to this story.

I was certain I was one of the few white men who had been healed by a sacred women's dance and was now impervious to women's Law. I took pride in my special position. It became one way I defined myself. A few years later, I was brought back to earth by Mrs Polly Widaljil, who had been part of the healing. We happened to meet in the West Kimberley town of Derby. She said, 'You right now, Jungurra. That women's Law can't touch you. Anytime we have ceremony, you cut wood and carry water longa we.'

The second postscript occurred a few days after my healing when I discussed my illness with a doctor. He said I had suffered a bout of the flu. Before I had fully recovered, I had gone back out bush. Already weakened, the second dose of the flu hit me harder. A day in bed was exactly what I needed.

At the beginning of this paper, I said that my time as a psychotherapeutic patient and practitioner has helped to integrate my experiences at Turkey Creek in a way that has allowed the Warmun snake to grow bigger within me. This process has encouraged me to believe my experiences could add to the wider conversation between psychotherapy and Indigenous Australia.

Still, after nearly 40 years of sitting with these stories, I still find the immensity of the task challenging. To some degree, I feel I should simply be the goanna that brings the story and leaves the interpretations to the elders of the profession. Having said that, here are some preliminary thoughts.

When I first wrote this paper, I was awed by the sustaining power of the Dreaming for a people who had been under attack for close to a hundred years. Revisiting these events, it is the intensity of the community's fear that I was in danger that draws my attention. Mr Tjumpinji coming unannounced into my bedroom was a serious statement of concern. As was the sacrifice of time by a large number of women who responded swiftly to my condition. This was a large-scale emergency intervention. It has taken me a long time to realise the level of anxiety the situation created.

Another tension created by these events is that although I accepted the doctor's explanation for my illness and recovery, it was Mrs McKenzie's intervention that substantially added to my life, and expanded my inner world.

This leads to a question that has intrigued me for some time. To what degree is the value of a psychotherapeutic interpretation dependent on its accuracy and to what degree is it an expression of courage, faith, or reverie? To what degree is it an expression of the therapist's knowledge and insight, or their willingness to barge into the bedroom and spend the afternoon dancing down the creek?

There is a way of thinking about psychoanalysis that prioritises the unconscious communications between analyst and patient and sees an interpretation as a co-creation that emerges out these unconscious exchanges. My introduction to this way of thinking was through the work of Thomas Ogden.

In one instance, Ogden (1999) wrote about being disturbed during a session by jackhammering outside his office. At first, Ogden determined not to be distracted by the noise and concentrate solely on the patient. The point came when Ogden gave up the fight and incorporated the jackhammering into the process. Ogden then found he was more in touch with the internal disturbances within the patient and could make a useful interpretation.

This psychoanalytic focus on deep links between people and people and their environment, might be a starting point for bringing the two snakes together.

Earlier in this paper, I suggested the way the Warmun elders introduced me into their cosmology could be seen through a Winnicottian lens. To the degree that I accepted my childlike position, I was rewarded by being caringly introduced into another culture.

However, that experience of being psychologically young, vulnerable, naïve and confused was profoundly disturbing, a disturbance that I am still working through and may never resolve. When I said to Mr Hector Jandany that I knew the singers had sung the rain, I did not know. I have no idea of the healing qualities of Mrs Queeny McKenzie's intervention. Having been brought up in western rationality, I can feel my resistance to accepting the Warmun elders' interpretation of these events. At the same time, if I stay within my cultural boundaries, I lose something important.

Starting with the image of the two snakes dancing, I have tried to explore whether the relationship between my experience with the Indigenous people of the Warmun Community in the early 1980s and my experiences with psychoanalysis, could be part of a conversation where one snake does not dominate the other. I believe this to be a useful process, even if at times the dance might be awkward and can lead to painful moments of confusion. At the same time, dancing snakes need to be treated with care and caution. They can bite you in unexpected ways, creating a psychological disturbance that can take a lifetime, at least, to resolve.

Sorry Ms Polly, women's Law still touches me.

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