

Lillian Holt's Speech at the White Blindfold Event
Melbourne Town Hall
Sunday 13TH August, 2006.

I'd like to acknowledge the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation on whose traditional land we meet today. I'd also like to thank the organisers for their invitation to speak on this bold and joyous occasion. An occasion of asking non-Indigenous people to remove their white blindfolds and look at themselves, that is, to look within and own their whiteness as opposed to looking without and seeing blackness.

Let me say that I do not speak on behalf of any other – black or white – and the observations and opinions that I will share in this short conversational corroboree are mine and mine alone.

I'm buoyed by this "bold" occasion, for I believe it will take boldness to do what is required. As Goethe said, "boldness has magic, power and genius in it". I welcome, wholeheartedly, the interrogation of whiteness. I see it as the next and necessary step in a two-way healing process, for I believe that it's the missing ingredient in the Reconciliation process.

Very little, if anything, about the interrogation of whiteness is talked about in the discussion of Reconciliation. Very little, indeed, is said about racism: the gangrene of the soul this nation, possibly because much politeness has pervaded the pretty pamphlets and the policies. It's a kind of "tyranny of niceness" to use the words of a Quaker woman. In speaking of the "tyranny of niceness", which for me, is often part of the power and privilege of whiteness, I do not wish to denigrate the good work done by all, to date. Neither do I wish to offend.

But, in my experience, there is still “something rotten in the state of relations” in this country (with apologies to Hamlet). A Senior Bureaucrat once commented that most of his staff members were very willing to go to workshops on Reconciliation and to hear of the problems of Aboriginal people, but were reticent to talk about racism – including their own. I guess this is understandable, given that there is no racism in Australia, as I’m constantly corrected, reminded and reassured thereof.

Enter the idea of interrogating whiteness.

I’m buoyed by the idea of interrogating whiteness because as Ruth Frankenberg said, it may be more difficult for white people to say “whiteness has nothing to do with me - I’m not white” than to say “race has nothing to do with me - I’m not a racist”. To speak of whiteness is... to assign everyone a place in the relations of racism (Berger quoting Frankenberg: 1999: 164).

I’m tired of being considered “the problem” and that I’m the one who always has to be either “fixed up” or “filled up”, which perpetuates the syndrome and stereotype that somehow only Aborigines are deprived and most often defined by deficit language. As Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher said, “When you label me you limit me”.

Rather, in interrogating whiteness non-Aboriginal people will be looking at themselves. Hence, a “Process of Physician, Heal Thyself”. In doing so, all that is required of you is to answer the questions: Am I white? Am I not white? Am I not white enough?

Significantly, such interrogation ensures the inclusivity of assigning everyone a place in the relations of racism as Frankenberg says. Frankenberg’s words are, for me, truly about inclusivity. They’re truly about a process of seeing and

seeking self involving interiority. Hence, the inclusivity involved in interrogating one's own whiteness will require reflection as well as action.

Now the path to enlightenment is not always paved with gold and it will be both painful as well productive as my whitefella friends tell me. Ultimately, it is about the power of one, the beauty of it is that we don't need committees, bureaucracies, structures or statistics to begin. The only ingredient required is willingness.

A willingness to interrogate who we are and what we have become as a result of historical legacies in our culture and country. A willingness that requires courage to interrogate the idea of implication and diminishment. For as Mahatma Gandhi said, "When one is diminished we are all diminished".

So I say to you today, what has diminished me as an Aboriginal person in this country, has also diminished you, as a non-Aboriginal person.

Such understanding comes with a call for change. Change, which is often difficult, indeed painful, hence, Nelson Mandela's words on his visit to Australia that "one of the most difficult things to do is not so much to change society but to change ourselves". An interrogation of one's own whiteness calls us to "be the change we want to see", as Mahatma Gandhi advocated.

In closing, I want to say that the call for the interrogation of whiteness is nothing new. The Black Panthers in the early sixties in the US understood only too well through bitter experience and analysis that white people always saw "the other" as the problem. So they coined the phrase, "if you are white, that's alright. If you are brown, stick around. If you are black, stay back".

I remember their words resonating with me as a young Aboriginal teenager growing up in what was then a very mono-cultural and lily-white country, and, I

have always wondered why we (the Aborigines) were always considered to be such a problem - then and now.

For me, it is indeed a new beginning, as it beckons one to begin with asking oneself: Am I white? Am I not white? Am I not white enough? Such simple questions by which we can know ourselves rather than research others, I believe.

Most importantly, for me, it honours Mahatma Gandhi's maxim of "let it begin with me".

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