

RECONCILIATION IS WHITEFELLA BUSINESS

Non-Indigenous people often ask: “What can I do?”

Lillian Holt

*Question time after watching ‘Still you keep asking asking’ and ‘Whiteys like us’,
Students for Land Justice and Reconciliation Film Festival, October 14 1999.*

Question:

Sometimes it feels so huge the problems and I was thinking about it today and in terms of being an individual, where can I start? How do I know where I should start? What I can do? It feels so big and I’m wondering where I can start.

Lillian Holt:

Yeah, sometimes I find it really hard as to why white people find it so hard to start. I don’t mean to be peevish about this but I think it is about ‘let it begin with me’ and I think actually as I said tonight, asking white people in this country to interrogate their own oppression. And that actually can be done with others and I agree with Charmaine [Clark] that Aboriginal people can’t be there all the time and it seems as though it’s so dependent on Aboriginal people.

You’re wondering where to start? Well I just actually want to finish. I’d love to be at home tonight. I’m just really pissed off at the attitudinal racism that manifests itself every day and one has to define oneself all the time and justify oneself. So I’m not too sure what the problem is. Where do you start? There’s books, there’s people, there’s sources of knowledge.

I think that perhaps, sometimes I think that its too easy for white people not to start, there’s a real luxury about whiteness, the power and privilege of whiteness that you can just walk away from it, I had an older white woman say to me during the week don’t give up the struggle, don’t give up hope. And I said Kooris in this country have never given up the struggle, and never given up the hope. Yet if you talk about these issues you often get accused of being negative. People don’t want to hear about it. I’ll tell you what I don’t feel negative at all, and I think that we

have to start a different type of language, we have to start a different way of thinking and it has to be holistic. And that there are paradoxes in it, because that's what life is about, life is about the dark before the dawn, there is a wilderness before the promised land, there's the yin and the yang and I think that we have to start and have a different language. And have some pain within it too I think that actually white people have to be pained out of their comfort in order to do something. And that's why I'm asking for more than just an intellectual shift. I think that's a start. It has to be an emotive psychic shift. I think the Greek word for it is metanoia or something, meaning a total and radical change of heart.

So in one sense I don't have answers for white people anymore, I don't have any watertight formulas I can't say go to page 369, paragraph 6 line 7 it will show you how to start, you tick it off it all becomes clinical and quantitative, because I don't believe that that's what the journey is. I actually have my own pain and I'm asking white people to look at their own pain. You may not feel you've got it but I don't think that you'd be here tonight if you didn't have it. It can be an amazing journey and to begin at interrogation of self.

Ask yourself if you really want to start, what does it really mean to be a white person in this country? How have you been diminished by the exclusion rather than the inclusion of Aboriginal people? How have you been diminished by the lack of connectedness, the disconnectedness?

I'll leave it there or it'll sound like a sermon.

Lillian Holt is an Aboriginal educator, academic and public speaker on the subject of ethnicity and race relations in Australia. Her work in Australia and internationally, engages in the public debate on Australian culture, civil society, and issues of reconciliation. She has over three decades of experience working in Indigenous education, including Vice Chancellor's Fellow at the University of Melbourne, and Director of the Centre for Indigenous Education, at the University of Melbourne.

Her articles and speeches available online include:

Speech at the Whiteblindfold Event, Melbourne, 2006
<http://www.antarvictoria.org.au/documents/HoltSpeech130806.pdf>

“Psst .. I want to be white”, from the Unmasking Whiteness Conference, 1998
<http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=1067>

“Reconciliation – rhetoric, reality and racism”, Reconciliation Victoria AGM, 2003
<http://www.reconciliationvic.org.au/index.cgi?tid=89>