

Conference Paper – Finding a Path to healing

[Intro]

Finding a path to healing

I am Trudy Hanson and I co-ordinate the Centre for Loss & Grief in Dubbo NSW Australia.

How would you survive if you had to bury 17 of your loved ones in a one year period? What are the pathways to healing? I am here today with Dot Martin, an indigenous Australian, who has survived this experience.

[Australia]

To give this presentation some perspective, I need to tell you a little bit about NALAG, where we live, who we are and what we do.

[NALAG logo]

NALAG is the National Association for Loss & Grief (NSW) Incorporated, a not for profit public benevolent institution, whose aims include the promotion of professional and community education and support to those suffering the effects of loss and grief. There are 11 Chapters of NALAG in the state of NSW. Membership totals 400. The membership is made up of volunteers and professionals who offer their services free of charge.

[Australia]

The NALAG Chapter I am going to speak of is in eastern Australia, the town of Bourke, which is a small inland town remotely located 800km from Sydney, the capital of NSW. Bourke Chapter has 10 members. The population of Bourke is 3000 and indigenous people make up 80% of the population.

History

Grief is a human experience; while the expression of grief and trauma on occasions of loss varies with the individual, manifestations of the emotions appear universally across all societies and cultures. My focus for this paper is indigenous Australians' grief experience. Professor Beverley Raphael Director of Centre for Mental Health NSW in 2000 stated 'Indigenous Australians experience similar emotions when in grief as any other race of people. The difference lies not in their human emotions but grew out of a range of losses since settlement in 1788. These losses contribute to their psychological, social and economic status.' Following on from this statement and to give you a true picture I need to present some historical background to the nature of indigenous grief.

In 1788, many cultures of the world including the people who colonized Australia (mostly English) had developed their own spiritual beliefs dealing with loss and grief. So too, had the Aboriginal people. Their grieving was processed predominantly through the use of their language, sacred ceremonies, and their strong connection to the Land and their Spiritual Ancestors.

It can only be assumed that colonizers did not recognize the significance of Aboriginal culture, as not only have indigenous people suffered lack of recognition and loss of culture, they also suffered the loss of their land and rituals (which enable them to deal with these losses.)

[Macquarie Dictionary]

The Macquarie dictionary defines bereavement as *'to deprive ruthlessly, especially of hope and joy, to make desolate through loss, to take away by violence'*. This is an apt description of the world of many of the Indigenous Australians up to and including today.

Australian Indigenous people suffered under the earlier policies of colonization. They were seen as being inferior; their rights to their land as nil under the principal of *terra nullis* (no inhabitants). As a result policies were geared to breaking up their culture and communities. Again quoting Prof. Raphael 'Aboriginal people experienced the arrival of European settlement as an invasion, and the policies and practices of the settlers as genocidal. This experience and the separation which continued until recently, lead to an enormous load of trauma, grief and dislocation, all psychologically damaging.' Prof Raphael continues 'It is a tribute to Indigenous people that they have not only survived, but sustained and developed their cultures and communities'.

Victor Frankl (1962) in his exploration of surviving the holocaust, in *Mans' Search for Meaning*, has made vital contributions to our understanding of the strengths of the human spirit. Archaeological evidence proves that Aboriginal people in Australia are the oldest surviving continuous culture in the world. For at least 45,000 years, they have survived with warmth, strength and personal courage and a commitment to community and their land.

In the rural and remote towns in NSW with large proportions of Indigenous Australians, whose life expectancy is 24 years less than the National average, death is a common occurrence. It is not uncommon for Aboriginal people to attend several funerals weekly. In our day to day work, NALAG sees the devastating effects of unresolved grief and trauma on families and communities.

In Bourke and some of the smaller surrounding towns where populations are between 200 and 400 they can experience in each community 1 death every week. This makes for a society where grief is continual and generational.

[Bourke cemetery x 2]

Well, how could we help? Well, we can't change history, but we can share the present journey and offer support.

[Group training]

How did NALAG become involved?

15 years ago NALAG was invited by Bourke's Aboriginal elders to respond to the death of a child who had drowned. NALAG members spent a week in the community supporting grieving Aboriginal children, adolescents, adults and community members. The layers of grief were multiple and so profound that it overwhelmed our NALAG support volunteers. The volunteers returning home sought the help of their NALAG members to put a plan of action together to help the Aboriginal people of Bourke. Aboriginal Elders and the stakeholders in the community welcomed our involvement. One of those local Aboriginal Elders was Dot Martin (who is here today) and who was instrumental in setting up the first coming together of NALAG members and members of Bourke community both indigenous and non indigenous to address the grief issues in the town.

[Dot with family]

I now invite Dot Martin an Aboriginal women to tell you some of the stories of her life

"I am Dot Martin a Ngemba woman born at Bourke close to Gundabooka which is a National Park and is sacred to Aboriginal people.

I am one of 9 children, five of which are still living. I was educated in Bourke, generally treated well, a very shy girl who did not speak to anyone. People did not speak to me also.

At around 15 I wanted to leave school, I was discouraged from this by some of the teachers who could see some potential in me. Thus I then became the first teacher's aide in Bourke – a position specially created for me.

After about 12 months I went to work in a café in Bourke and still wanting to spread my wings further I moved to Dubbo to live with my Aunt. I worked cleaning houses and eventually secured a position of Governess at Gilgandra (45 miles from Dubbo).

Upon hearing that Nurses Aides were needed at Bourke Hospital I moved back and was successful in obtaining a position where I worked until I was married 4 years later.

Then came a break in my 'official' working life. When first married I lived in a small tin (corrugated iron) house on a Bourke property, no floor (only dirt), no power, no

running water, a wood fuel stove, open fire, and walls were not lined. We had a copper for washing, no bathroom and a kerosene fridge. You can imagine my excitement when we had saved enough money to buy a small generator for power and eventually a petrol washing machine. My five children were born whilst I lived in this house.

Some 16 years later when I was visiting one of my children in hospital, I was approached to return to work in the hospital. This I did and worked in all areas of the hospital including permanent night duty for some time.

After several years I felt the need for a break so I undertook some work with Aboriginal health and then the next 8 years in Community Nursing. Following that I took a part time position with Host Family Respite Care and after 2 years added another part time job with Family Support Service to my busy life.

My own children have all grown up and I can proudly say are either in their own business or individual professions.

In my own life I have not experienced a lot of discrimination, however, I observe constantly the way others are treated. Aboriginal people are looked down on by the white community. If an Aboriginal person is in a shop and a white person walks in after them the white person will be served first”

[\[Gundabooka\]](#)

“Some of my family were born at Gundabooka and in the early days when the troopers came to round up the Aboriginal children my great grandmother would take her 2 daughters up into the caves and hide them until the police left. This went on until the girls were about 16. One of these girls was my grandmother. The girls were then placed to work on a property where they met their life partners. One met up with a man by the name of Williams who was a blacktracker working for the police and the other a man named Wilson who was a Scotsman, came to Australia on a ship and worked on the western properties. This man was my grandfather.

The government people would just turn up and take your children. Two of my brothers were wagging school so they were picked up and taken away and educated at Forbes, a town 350 miles from Bourke. This was both good and bad. It is a terrible experience to have the authorities turn up and take your children from you.

Grief has been a constant part of my life, my first brother was involved in a fight, fell back and hit his head and died of meningitis; my second brother was drinking, a fight broke out, a knife was produced and he was stabbed; my third brother died with a burst ulcer; my sister from cancer. My grandmother on my father’s side died whilst on walkabout: there was a flood and they were unable to get her to a cemetery so they buried her next to a fence – we are still trying to find her grave.

1990 was a particularly difficult year for me as in that year 17 members of my family died. 2005 is not shaping up to be a good year also, in the last 4 months I have had 4 family members die and 3 other close friends.

Funerals of indigenous people in Bourke are the cause of a great gathering of family and relatives. If it is known a certain relative is coming, the funeral will be held up until that person arrives. It is not uncommon to have over 400 people at a funeral, the church is full, people wait outside the church and others go straight to the cemetery.”

[Bourke]

“Before NALAG I was not given any advice on how to cope with death. Over the years I guess I have just tried to keep going, keep moving, find things to do. Sheer willpower gets you out of bed each day. NALAG has made a difference in Bourke. Grief is out in the open, we can talk about it. We are an education chapter at this point in time and are focusing on educating the general community. We are educating ourselves. Members are speaking to service providers, community groups and we are planning a 3-monthly dinner get-together.”

[Flowers on river]

“Last year we conducted a ‘remembering day’ which will now become an annual event. A small ceremony allowed family members to throw flowers in the river at Bourke in memory of their loved ones. This was followed by a meal and an opportunity to talk.

My own path to healing has taken me down many roads. My family and those I love have been there for me. The Australian bush, the lifeline of the Darling river and my indigenous background allows me to find comfort. Those who have gone before me give me courage to find meaning in the road ahead.”

[Flags]

[Working creatively]

The first intervention was to hold training in loss and grief support for Adolescents. State president of NALAG Julie Dunsmore and myself supported by other NALAG members held a 2 day workshop followed by a night Healing Ceremony. The Healing Ceremony was a simple ritual held in a backyard around a campfire. It brought together the Aboriginal and wider community in a sharing of our grief stories, expressing our hopes for the future to support those grieving in Bourke. Strong friendships and bonding with the community had begun.

Not too long after another tragedy happened. Two young children were killed in a horrific truck and car accident. Again the community was hurting but especially the children and adolescents. A Healing Camp was organized at a sacred Aboriginal site called Gundabooka over three days. The young people of Bourke and their adult mentors were brought together with NALAG members for support.

The Challenge

NALAG volunteers sought a way to help our Indigenous people. The challenge to help has been on-going, over many years. Finding a path to healing has led us on many journeys of sadness but also of hope and resilience.

[\[Bringing them home\]](#)

Bringing them Home the report from the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families, i.e. forced removal for assimilation into the white community. The removal of these children from their families is commonly referred to as 'The Stolen Generation' The opening remarks of the report state:

[\[Quote\]](#)

And I quote ***Grief and loss are the predominant themes in this report. Tenacity and survival are also acknowledged as most significant; the actions of the past resonate in the present and will continue to do so in the future.*** For individuals, their removal as children and the abuse they experienced at the hands of authorities or their delegates have permanently scarred their lives. The harm continues in later generations, affecting their children and grandchildren.

Bringing them home (1997) tells the stories of Aboriginal Australians and graphically demonstrates the terrible effects Government policies and practices have had on their lives. Aboriginal people who were removed from their families during childhood are at much greater risk of depression, post traumatic stress disorder and deliberate self harm (McKenrick & Thorpe). Our experience as NALAG volunteers supporting Aboriginal people reflects those comments.

[\[Girl and baby\]](#)

When I look back on my good fortune and listen to the stories of our Indigenous people and compare it with what I have experienced in my life, I am deeply moved and concerned, as are many of our NALAG volunteers. This has challenged us to seek a way for shared healing.

What then of the loss for our Indigenous Australians?

For the purpose of this paper I will look at two categories **historical** and **contemporary** and those which are **recognized** and **unrecognized**.

[Historical losses]

Historical Losses which are Recognised

The experience of Aboriginal Australians since European settlement is abundant with:

- Suppression of culture and cultural practices.
- Outlawed and forbidden use of tribal languages - our indigenous peoples were forbidden to use their native language
- Sickness Introduced by Europeans (Measles)
- Land
- Laws (Traditional)
- Traditional medicines
- Traditional foods
- Many ceremonies, particularly grieving ceremonies
- Deaths and dying by massacres. Many are now recorded and form part of the shame of Australia's history

“Praise the Lord” This happened in my lifetime. An older Aboriginal person was always heard to say after every sentence “Praise the Lord”. It became a bit of a joke until one day this man's story unfolded. As a small boy he lived on a cattle station. One Sunday morning following the church service at which all Aboriginals were required to attend, they were given a special treat, a meat pie. The person this story is about, had his pie taken by a dog and he was angry that he did not get to eat it. Later in the story he revealed that all the people who had eaten a pie died, (the pies were poisoned). He was the only survivor “PRAISE THE LORD”. This is just one of the many stories heard as a NALAG volunteer.

[Contemporary losses]

Contemporary Losses which are Recognised

The impact of many of Australia's policies inflicted upon the indigenous people include:

- The forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families ie, ‘The Stolen Generation’.
- The assimilation policy an explicit strategy of indigenous assimilation through forced removal of children from their family of origin and placement with Europeans. This was the most critical assault on Aboriginal social structures central to cultural practice.

[Aboriginal children]

“You spend your whole life wondering where you fit. You're not white enough to be white and your skin is not black enough to be black either, and it really does come down to that.”

Bringing them home confidential evidence 210

[Priest and Government official]

“I remember all we children being herded up, like a mob of cattle, and feeling the humiliation of being graded by the colour of our skins for the government records.

Confidential evidence Bringing them home 332 women removed in the 1950s to Cootamundra Girls home

ONGOING IMPACT ON FUTURE GENERATIONS OF THE CHILDREN BEING REMOVED FROM FAMILIES

[Effects of separation]

The effects of separation from the primary carer. It has been argued that early loss of a mother or prolonged separation from her before age 11 is conducive to subsequent depression, choice of inappropriate partner, and difficulties in parenting the next generation. Antisocial activity, violence, depression and suicide have also been suggested as likely results of the severe disruption of affectional bonds. (Australian Association of Mental Health submission citing Bowlby 1988 supported by Dr. Nick Kowalenko, director of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at Royal North Shore Hospital NSW evidence 740)

[Unrecognised losses]

Unrecognized Emotional, Historical & Contemporary Losses

These are hidden amongst the recognized losses.

- o Loss of one's sense of identity
- o Separation anxiety
- o Unresolved grief and trauma are also inherited by subsequent generations. 'Parents convey anxiety and distress to their children' (Prof. Beverley Raphael).
- o Loss of a sense of self
- o Loss of a sense of power – feeling powerless to change a given situation/control
- o Loss of trust
- o Loss of confidence
- o Loss of self esteem due to abuse inflicted on the children and adults as a result of their removal from families and the assimilation policy. The abuse, physical and emotional, mental and sexual. Physical loss may lead to emotional losses and these may create mental health problems later in life.

[Sadness]

The Effects

“why me; why was I taken? It's like a hole in your heart that can never heal.”

Bringing them Home Confidential evidence 162

[Boys and priest]

My feelings throughout life, of hurt, pain and neglect began as far back as I can remember....I was taken from my family... along with my biological brother.

[Quote]

‘Actually what you see in a lot of us is the shell, and I believe as an Aboriginal person that everything is inside of me to heal me if I know how to use it, if I know how to maintain it, if I know how to bring it out and use it. But sometimes the past is just too hard to look at.’

Bringing them home confidential evidence 284

[Quote]

“I’ve often thought, as old as I am, that it would have been lovely to have known a father and a mother, to know parents even for a little while, just to have had the opportunity of having a mother tuck you into bed and give you a good-night kiss- but it was never to be.”

Bringing them home confidential evidence 65 a child fostered at 2 months

What is grief in indigenous terms?

Aboriginal activist Pat Dodson says ‘Trauma and loss are everyday experiences for Aboriginal people who are dislocated from their land, severely disadvantaged in all spheres of life, marginalized and subject to racism.’ (Dodson 1990).

A number of prominent Indigenous spokespersons believe that unresolved grief associated with multiple layers of trauma – often spanning many generations – become internalized within the family. This expresses itself in destructive behaviours such as family violence, alcohol and drug abuse, and depressions and suicide (Atkinson, 1994; Pearson 2000; Robertson 2000)

Rosemary Wanganeen, a traditional Aboriginal woman, states that traditional culture had a belief that major loss creates “live energy” within the body, that could kill, like electricity, except more slowly. Grief can be trapped and circulate in the body, if it is not expressed constructively such as by sacred ceremonies. For many indigenous people, this “live energy” has been circulating for two centuries. This live energy has possibly created the many diseases within the indigenous communities that never existed previously in the culture.

In many parts of traditional and contemporary indigenous culture, death is not the end of life, but is the last ceremony in this present life: then the soul is reborn. Thus all living people are reincarnations of the dead. This belief in reincarnation provides a direct link back to their ancestors. With the coming of colonization and Christianity this became one part of the desecration of their culture.

[\[NALAG intervention\]](#)

So what did NALAG find helpful for healing indigenous grief?

Education

- Created the opportunity for Aboriginal people to learn about the impact of losses and unresolved grief through education, workshops and establishment of NALAG Chapters in communities.
- Consulted and collaborated with Aboriginal people to create grieving ceremonies and rituals suited to today.
- Introduced Seasons for Growth, a peer support program for children, adolescents and adults about change, loss and coping.

Healing Days

Healing days are gatherings of grieving indigenous people focusing on addressing grief issues and finding a hope for the future. These take the form of group education about loss, sharing loss in the group, exploring ways of expressing grief through art, music, drawing, collage, and having the group develop; a closing ritual symbolic of the grief shared, and movement towards new hopes and dreams for the future. Sometimes, for example after a traumatic death, healing days have a whole-of-community approach.

Healing days for the Bourke community are now being conducted on a regular basis. This has taken a long time to implement as when deaths are experienced in communities weekly, coming out in public again to be exposed to grief is hard. However the Bourke community, with the help of NALAG, has found the courage to face grief publicly and remember.

[\[Good Grief Camps logo\]](#)

Camps

The NALAG Youth Camp Model is short-term outdoor educational or therapeutic program, structured in a camp setting utilizing the group process. The Camp Team is made up of:

psychologist
nurse
cooks
mentors

[\[Camp structure\]](#)

The Camp Model is based on enhancing resilience. Resilience may be defined as ‘the ability to bounce back, recover from, or adjust to misfortune or change (Burns 1996). It is the capacity each person has in varying degrees to cope with change and

challenge and to 'rebound when things get low and to maintain their sense of who they are as a person' (Fuller 1998)

Bernard identified four key characteristics of resilient youth:

- Social competence
- Problem-solving
- Autonomy
- A sense of purpose and belief in a bright future

Our Camp Model generally follows research from (Rutter et al 1998 cited in Newman and Blackburn 2002) Promoting Interventions for Resilience.

Intervention outlined by the Model

- Young people will benefit through the opportunities to take part in demanding and challenging activities. They will become sensitive to risk and more able to cope with physical and emotional demands.
- The model benefits where children are in situations of conflict at home. Contact with a reliable supportive 'other' benefits children who are in situations of parental or family conflict reducing their exposure and impact of the conflict. (MENTORS)
- Facilitating contact with helpful others or networks can provide activities and opportunities. (NALAG & MENTORS)
- The benefit of exposure to manageable demands and opportunities promotes self-esteem and self-efficacy.
- By teaching coping strategies and skills participants can be helped to review negative experiences positively (ROPES CHALLENGE, PROBLEM SOLVING GAMES)

[\[Learning the ropes x 4\]](#)

The Camps are experiential in nature and adventure based, featuring outdoor activities. One such activity is the ropes course which is an outdoors activity designed to promote team building and bonding, self-challenging, problem solving, trust, self esteem and communication skills. A major activity includes education about Loss & Grief, the aim being to encourage the expression of grief in a safe supportive environment. Youth are encouraged to learn about loss and grief, the effects, and ways of coping.

[\[Making a collage\]](#)

Additional ways of expressing grief are explored creatively by drawing, writing, making a collage and telling personal stories in whichever way the participant youth finds acceptable. Often bush scapes are used to make the story and tell of the grief - young people would use stones, bush flowers, sand, rocks and bush timber to tell the stories.

[Theatresports]

Theatresports and use of Drama is a popular event at the Camps. Theatresports is improvised theatre. It enables individuals to explore their creative side, promotes team work, allows participants to play and to have fun and laugh. A sense of humour along with optimism and the use of metaphor, is useful in the enhancement of the coping process (Frydenberg 1997). Humour has a healing and levelling effect upon the group. Laughter underlies a sense of mastery, self-esteem and confidence that accompanies a humorous response to a stressful situation. (Frydenberg 1997 p.181)

In ending a camp, ritual is a way for young people to express their grief meaningfully and state their hopes for the future. The young people are encouraged to make their own rituals. Adults only participate by invitation.

[Healing Rituals x 5]

Ritual Zulli (1998) maintains that “ritual is sacred” and that rituals can help restore a sense of balance to life and further suggests that “A ritual is a simple function for getting in touch with that which brings wholeness and meaning”.

Dr Geoffrey Glassock states “rituals become a powerful way to enable society to cope with loss and grief”(2002) “Finding the right words to say or how to relate to a grieving person is fraught with difficulty for most people, so participating in a ritual is a tangible way of identifying with grieving people”.

Ritual has been part of traditional Aboriginal culture for over 60 thousand years. In finding ways for healing for modern-day Aboriginal people, NALAG helps Aboriginal people develop rituals for healing . This is just one example:

[Love wraps x 3]

LOVE WRAPS These are blankets made with unique knitted squares representing the individual nature of grief. Many are knitted by people who have grieved. No two LOVE WRAPS are the same symbolizing that grief is unique, and our response is individual, as are all the knitted squares in the blanket.

This ritual is used to end a Camp or Gathering and a Leader “wraps the recipient in love” with the presentation of the love wrap. People often say grief is a “cold” place to be, so we wrap the person in love and warmth to keep them safe on their grief journey. On returning home the young person has only to wrap themselves in the blanket to feel connected to the group, love and warmth. Camps are always concluded with the release of balloons on which the young people have written their hopes for the future.

Our Good Grief Camps allow Aboriginal young people the opportunity to share their grief experiences with each other in a supporting non-judgmental environment. Often we just sit in a circle and use an object as the “talking stick or stone” who ever takes up the “talking stick” has the attention and support of the circle until the story is told and heard and the “talking stick” is passed on or placed in the centre of the circle for someone else to take a turn.

Fun - lots of fun and food are also experienced.

Camps are often designed to address the current local issues in Aboriginal communities. Prior consultation with community stakeholders give us ideas on the issues and what methods to use at the Camps. Sometimes drugs, alcohol, teen pregnancy and other issues are focused on at the Camps with Loss & Grief always the main component.

[\[Typical losses\]](#)

Some typical losses for young people attending the Camps

- Parents
- Grandparents
- Siblings
- Home
- Pets
- Moving
- Incarceration of parents and siblings
- Job opportunities
- Self esteem
- Identity
- Accidental death

As well as experiencing these losses, many suffer racism, suicide, abuse, (physical, sexual, mental), and live in poverty because of lack of job opportunities.

After the camp the young people come together, for the next six weeks as a group supported by their mentors.

Good Grief Camps have been a successful intervention and continue to be used in our work in Aboriginal communities. This is what some of the young people had to say:

[\[Camp comments\]](#)

What did you like about the Camps?

- The crazy “old people”
- The fun activities especially the ropes course
- The food
- Learning about grief stuff
- Its OK to talk about stuff that hurts
- Other kids feel the same as I do

o

[Camp rules]

Typical camp rules.

- o No weapons
- o No put downs
- o No drugs
- o Have lots of fun
- o No fighting
- o Its OK to cry
- o No stealing
- o Everyone gets a chance to speak and be heard
- o Respect each other

[Finding a path to healing]

In conclusion, it has been a learning journey, each person finds their own road to healing, no two are the same.

[Desolation]

Along the road is desolation and aloneness. NALAG undertakes to walk that road to healing, encourage the person to wholeness and hopefully during the process alleviate some of the pain and aloneness, our indigenous Australians experience. It has been a privilege to share the journey. We have a lot to learn.