**Relationship with place and community and personal growth**

Sometimes we need to accept change in order to grow.   Our relationships with place and community are critical to our personal growth.

“Small steps of change: Making a difference” by Jason Smith, (*Johnston News*)

Jason Smith, is a Youth Leader at Johnston Extended Family Group; (this group is a family support group sponsored by the Johnston Council). This is Jason’s second year as youth leader, and he, like the other three youth leaders, must contribute two articles a year to*Johnston News* (the Shire’s local magazine.)

I will never forget my turbulent and rather unusual friendship with James Drey when I was in Grade 5 at Johnston Primary School. James was a young rebel despite himself and when he came to our school he had attended up to 15 primary schools, which I thought was a remarkably fun thing to do. So many different friends and teachers. However, for James, it was a matter of changing schools every time he had a difficult encounter with the teacher. Nobody wanted him. Once, he tried to throw a desk at the teacher in a fit of rage because he strongly resented teachers telling him what to do and when to do it.

Perhaps as a mark of my fear and admiration of James, I became involved, as soon as I was old enough, in Johnston Extended Family Group. Its aim is to reach out to members of the community who lack a strong sense of family, perhaps because of a tragedy or because of dysfunctional factors. There are “big family” outings, “family” games and “family” barbecues.

I have been exposed to a wide range of diverse community and ethnic groups, which has made me aware of the obstacles to growth.

For Mahmoud, a refugee from Afhganistan, his new home represents a place of security, warmth and love. It represents an absence of war, grief and death which to someone like me, I take for granted. His mother, Fatwa, always tells us, her love for Australia is even greater than ours; they love it “more and appreciate it more” because it is a country at peace. Every time I visit them, they are sitting in their small garden, admiring the flowers as they blossom. Today some daffodils; tomorrow the marigolds. Like mother, like son, they both enjoy planting flowers which helps them plant new roots and celebrate beauty in the new country.

Another of my close “family” friends, is Scott who so reminded me of my earlier horror and fascination of James and his rebellious nature towards authority. Scott’s mother is aboriginal; he does not know his father (he died when he was three). In many ways, Scott is not unlike Mahmoud – his dysfunctional family background was akin to a war zone and place was always characterized by fear and anxiety. His mother was a drug addict, and her string of boyfriends stole his toys as he grew up and treated him with suspicion. However, like Mahmoud who finds security in a new place, Scott has found security, love and trust in a new home thanks to our extended mentoring programs. His room metaphorically represents the love he has found and it’s always a source of amusement to me, because it is full of cuddling teddy bears and postcards.

I have since found out that nursing a strong sense of rejection, he read the mother’s diary after her death. He did not realise the extent to which is mother struggled with her very low sense of self esteem arising because of her inability to care for her children.

There was one story in her diary that made an impression on Scott. As an aboriginal, her totem is the snake, and she used to speak of the Creator Snake draped on the huge gum tree on the top of the hill that was at times warning her, and at other times suffocating her because of her neglect.

Recently, Patti Miller attended one of our sessions to talk about her own search for the “truth” about her origins and how a knowledge of place and its stories is critical to who we are. Patti Miller is one of several authors and artists recently engaged by the council to help many of the young people in our support group write and draw their stories. Patti Miller  believes that critical to a sense of who we are is who we weave together the different aspects or themes of the story of self, family and ancestors.  In other words, what matters is how we interpret our different stories about self and past. “I knew for certain .. that identity and connection could only be found in the telling. It wasn’t the threads of the story that really mattered, it was the weaving of the threads.” 239

During her talk, Patti spoke of her friendship with Wayne Carr. Wayne is typical of those aborigines who suffer from a lack of purpose, a lack of connection and a lack of pride in their origins. He suffers a near identity crisis because he is removed from family and place. His own immediate family is dysfunctional and, sadly, his daughter becomes institutionalised because of her drug taking and associated criminal activities. (Wayne married a Kempsey woman but went “absolutely mental”.  He was molested when he was a child. As the author states, “a wound that never properly heals”. He tried to blot it out, drugs and alcohol.

Significantly, Wayne’s obsession with the land claim reflects the metaphorical and spiritual journey of an aborigine who seeks to rediscover their connection with land and community. For Wayne, he becomes enshrouded by the “cloak” of Aboriginal identity; it circled away from family and into the wider community touch the politics of land and power.” For Wayne, his own personal and family identity is connected with that of the tribe. “It was always about protecting Wiradjuri identity”. He keeps going because of “identity; because identity is the most important thing. It gives you self-esteem, it gives you something to live for.”

Although Wayne’s story was typical of so many aborigines, it was not so different from James difficult journey with his teacher or Scott’s with his dysfunctional mother.

For this reason, at the Extended Family Group , we try to instil a sense of pride, and purpose in so many of our extended family members.  The role of our group is to provide support for those who lack warmth and friendliness in their daily lives. According to Patrick McNamara, associate professor of neurology at Boston University being part of a group is very important psychologically. In fact, research shows that the lack of a supportive social network can be more harmful to health than obesity, alcoholism and smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

Wayne records how he gains a certain confidence and passion because of his sense of continuity with place and the continuity of culture The knowledge of his 10,000 year old ancestors “coursed through him, made fire in his veins and his heart, illuminated him.”  (Patti suggests that although he is not part of the modern mainstream story, his historical and spiritual connection with the land gives him a much strong sense of place than the white settlers such as Patrick Reidy will ever achieve.)  For example, Wayne takes pride in his Wiradjuri historical background; the Wellington Wiradjuri were one of the most feared tribes in the west.  Wayne believes that his life story is typical of so many other Aboriginals who have squandered their opportunities because of incredible adversity. However, he believes that his capacity to deal with his hardships has strengthened him and given him a purpose: “it’s made me who I am now”. (233)

At first my relationship with Scott started because he needed a Big Brother. I helped steer him in the right direction; I guess I was one of the few positive role models in his life and he became close to my parents as well.  But in many ways it’s Scott who has also taught me a different perspective. I am amazed at his strength and ability to move on. Rather than dwell on the past, and all the things he has missed out on, he often said that he was grateful at a glimpse of a life that he was so keen to discard. We reinforce each other in many different ways, and it’s true for us both, “the power of friendship is life changing”.   I wish I had known that when I was at school.