

From Essence to Presence

Conversations Around the Campfire... and More

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Experience 1

I am sitting in a circle of sixteen Elders, gathered around a campfire, sharing our stories: "What attracted us to come to Santa Casa for three days of 'yarning', as our Indigenous brothers and sisters would call it?"

As I listen to the stories with which each of us introduces herself (yes, we are all women), a common theme emerges - each of us brings the experience of brokenness or lostness. The old certainties don't hold any more. We are searching, or perhaps we are part of the Earth and Universe searching, for its larger story, because the old stories are not able to sustain us in this current time of crisis. Our world is unravelling. The institutions that have brought us to this moment are crumbling, with disastrous consequences for all living beings and for Earth's life-systems.

Perhaps our small stories are the living words in which this new story is being written - words of hope, vitality, of a vision, not yet clear, yet urging us on. Our small stories are building bridges of love, compassion, forgiveness, into each other's lives. We are no longer alone. In our yarning, opening ourselves and our vulnerabilities to one another, a new communion is forming among us and within us.

Experience 2



St Martin's church, Dunalley, Tasmania. Photo credit: realestate.com.au

Recently, I watched the story of a small sandstone church in a small fishing village in Tasmania.ⁱ It was built a hundred years ago as a memorial to the seventeen young men from that district who lost their lives in the First World War. The sandstone was donated by the parents of one of those young men who did not come home. The Anglican Church sold the building because it was under used. The local people desperately wanted to keep their church but couldn't raise enough money to buy it.

The more I reflect on details of the story of St Martin's, the more parallels I see to what is happening to the Christian Church in the western world, to other religious traditions, as well as the world's political, economic, and social systems. They were built for a time that is no more. People are desperately trying to hang on to them, but they are no longer fit for purpose. The more we try to hang onto our dysfunctional systems, the more chaotic our world

becomes. Until now, the predominant response to that chaos is an exaggerated obsession with security and safety.

The sandstone of St Martin's has its own story. Over eons of time, Earth formed this stone as a substance of beauty. Its soft colours and patterns give it a warmth that reaches out to us. During Tasmania's early colonial years, convicts were set to work, cutting sandstone into building blocks. They then built these blocks into the prisons in which they would be held, and housing to make the coal mining town of Saltwater River on the Tasman Peninsula. Some solitary confinement cells were built in the



mine shafts, where prisoners were locked in absolute pitch darkness. The stone of St Martin's church was salvaged from the ruins of the decaying buildings. It embeds something of that dark story.

Over the years, the mortars binding the stones of St Martin's gradually crumbled and needed to be replaced. The cheapest available option was to fill the gaps with cement. This is not good for the sandstone, and it spoilt the beauty of the church's interior. The Holloway family, who bought the building to make a holiday home for their extended family, got to work with chisel and hammer and prized out all the cement - a huge and time-consuming task. It was replaced with a lime mortar, as would have been used in the original structure. The effect was astonishing. The beauty of the stone once again warmed the space and is appreciated all the more by the family members who put in the work to restore it.

The story of St Martin's can be seen as a parable for our religious traditions, and perhaps for civic society as well. The wisdom of the founders of the great traditions of the world is like the sandstone. It arose out of the lived experience of peoples, their joys, sufferings, celebrations and triumphs. With deep reflection, the founders and their communities distilled these experiences into the core teachings of those traditions. Over the centuries, many of their followers lost touch with the vibrancy of that core wisdom. Authorities shored it up with laws and practices, trying to hold the tradition together. But the more they tried, the more distant became the heart of the tradition, the vibrant wisdom that inspired the founding communities. We need to prize out the accretions, just like the Holloways prized out the cement from sandstone walls of St Martin's, so that once again the essence of the heart can radiate in its full charisma, beauty and vibrancy, now in a new context, a new Universe.

This takes me back to our 'yarning' circle. The theme of our days together was *From Essence to Presence*. What is essence? What is the essence of a tree or a mountain or a human being? How and where do we experience essence? One participant, Margaret Broadbent rsm, shared a story of an experience in which the country around her became alive with amazing immediacy.

The baobabs were dancing, the mountain range was looking at her, really seeing her. She was caught up in the *essence* of the country through which she was travelling, she was immersed by it, became one with it. As she shared that experience in her group, those listening caught, or were caught by, its energy, its aliveness.



The Dancing Baobabs, Margaret Broadbent RSM

Margaret captured something of that energy and aliveness in a beautiful work of art, depicting the dancing baobabs and the mountains' eyes. Her painting became a 'participant' in our gathering, a *presence* contributing its *essence* of aliveness and beauty.

Later in the day we enjoyed a happy hour, celebrating the experiences of the day with drinks and nibbles, music, song and dance. In the midst of one dance, three women found themselves before Margaret's painting. They became the dancing baobabs while the rest of the group spontaneously formed a circle, clapping the rhythm of the dance. We became the dance, one with the mountains and baobabs, with the *presence* and aliveness of Country here and now in *this* place. We experienced *essence* in its most immediate *presence*, vibrant and forever young, in the oneness of the dance.

What is the relationship between our dance and the restored St Martin's church? It seems to me that *essence* manifests when we are in touch with the *real*, stripped of all accretions, superficialities, dishonesties, assumptions, defences and so on. When we can let go of everything that keeps us separate and we are truly *present* in the moment, the beauty and vibrancy of *essence* reveals itself spontaneously. We cannot plan it or orchestrate it. *Essence* itself takes the initiative. Once we experience it, in whatever way it catches us, we become more *real*, more ourselves, in our relationships. Our *essence* becomes *presence*, and in turn, we become more open to the *essence* in the *presence* of another, whether human or any of the other beings who belong in, and make up the Universe we call home.

We humans are the only beings in our part of the Universe who have the capacity to reflect and come to know the story of our Universe. This gives us tremendous power. The advances in science and technology enable us to harness the world's energies and potential to our own advantage. But caught up in the power of our knowledge, we forget and lose touch with the *essence of being* at the heart of all that exists, something the wisdom of our ancient traditions appreciated so well. This wisdom is concerned with the wellbeing of the whole Earth and every living being, human and other than human, and the conditions which enable all beings to thrive. Every news bulletin tells of the consequences of our forgetfulness: extreme weather events, floods, fires, droughts, extinction of species at alarming rates...

Our daily CEN meditation invites us to open ourselves to deeper awareness of our *essence*, which in turn will open us to the *essence* of every other being in the Universe, and of the Universe as a whole. That is our mission: to awaken to that *essence*, become alive to it and bring that aliveness to our *presence* within our world, our Universe. When we do, we become one in the Cosmic Dance wherein the Universe continually unfolds its inner potential along its evolutionary journey until it reaches its fulness, the fulness of God.

When enough of us consciously nurture and live our *essence* as *presence*, we trust that our world as a whole will awaken to its *essence*. When that happens, we, our world, our Universe, will truly become a new creation.



ⁱ Restoration Australia, series 5, no. 7, ABC iview.