

NAIDOC ARTICLE

'It's pretty black and white' **Clayton Cruse & Phill Pallas**

This article has been co-written by two great mates with a shared history
Phill's contribution is italicized and Clayton's contribution is in standard text

My year four teacher sold me a lie, and yours probably did too...

It wasn't that she was a bad person; after all, she was just passing on to me what had been passed on to her. To a room full of impressionable young minds, her words hit my ears with unsettling confidence. 'Australia was discovered by Captain Cook, and on 26th January 1788 Australia was established as a nation.' In that classroom I heard inspiring stories of Captain Arthur Philip leading the first fleet into Botany Bay (apparently singing 'Too-ral-li, oo-ral-li, addity'). The men who started this new colony were fierce. Featured as mountains of strength and muscle, they were the heroes of this story. The kingdom of Australia expanded quickly to the Blue Mountains and beyond. It was a joyful, exciting, pioneering time. There was, of course, a problem with this story. At best, it was a thin story, a partisan and discriminatory representation of our history, at worst it was intentional deception. A lie. And a lie that changed everything.

I learnt nothing about the Indigenous history of Australia. I learnt nothing about what was happening prior to 1788. I learnt nothing about what it was like for Aboriginal people to see these ships come into their harbor. I learnt nothing about what has happened in the years since.

I decided I wasn't going to sing the national anthem anymore...

From about year five onwards, my sister and I made the decision that we would not sing the national anthem at school. I keep this 'tradition' to this day, simply because it was written for a specific group of people, and that group did not include me.

Through primary and high school in Adelaide, it became obvious to me that my people were nowhere to be seen in any of the work we would do in class. Anything to do with Indigenous Australia, anything to do with me, apparently was not something to be valued. There was plenty of information shared about the arrival of Europeans in my country, about the 'discovery' of this place, but no information about my people, my culture, and our experiences. Why was this the case? Had we done something wrong?

There was, and still is, somewhat of a general consensus that the history of a whole group of people, people who actually occupied this place longer than any group of people had occupied any place on earth, farmed this place, and looked after this place, people who had stories and knowledge about this place, would be omitted from school curricula. Even though there have been changes toward a more inclusive history taught at schools, Aboriginal Studies is not a compulsory stand-alone subject in the new national curriculum. While teachers are now required to 'weave' Indigenous perspectives into their subject areas, this still does not provide a comprehensive vehicle for our students to have equal access to the same information. Do we not think our students are mature enough to be able to handle this change in thinking?

After a while, even though I think I already knew, I figured out why there was no representation of my people in the curriculum I was exposed to, and it wasn't through anything that any teacher had taught me. I had essentially moved through the entirety of my formal schooling without learning anything about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, or the way we had lost access to land, language and culture. Instead, I learnt of the people who took that away from me, as if they were to be my new heroes. The suffering of my people, at the hands and policies of the 'new people' would not be shared, because it made people feel... uneasy. Uncomfortable.

The red dust became my classroom...

What I didn't learn in my formal education has been imparted to me through more than a decade of relationship with Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara people in Central Australia.

Whilst dysfunction and grief are common features of the landscape in many remote Aboriginal communities, paradoxically in that space I have found a great sense of community and healing.

By sitting in the red dust and listening, I have learnt of the great loss that Indigenous people have experienced: the loss of culture, the loss of language, the loss of land and the loss of human rights. As the new settlement from the other side of the globe advanced, whole communities of Aboriginal people were displaced, disease ravaged entire tribes, and whole communities were violently massacred. As time progressed, many children were stolen or forcibly removed from their parents simply because of the colour of their skin

The government was so overt about their treatment of Aboriginal people that they were included in the Flora and Fauna Act; the act that governed the treatment of animals and plants. It wasn't until 1967 that Aboriginal people were considered Australian citizens. Fast-forward to 2007 and the Howard Government initiated the Northern Territory Intervention, suspending our nation's Racial Discrimination Act in order to pass the inherently discriminatory legislation.

For me, all of these stories and more are true and sit with me deeply. As I have sat and listened I have learnt that Aboriginal people know a lot more about the way forward than I do. As old men have graciously sat with me and shared Tjukurpa, the stories and laws and principles that have been present for thousands of years and continue to provide answers for Aboriginal people today, it is in these moments that I have become more integrated - with myself, my God, humanity and creation.

I have learnt that the past lives in the present. And with that learning, comes responsibility. And that responsibility is to continue to listen deeply.

For me, it's pretty black and white...

As someone who is so proud of my people, for what we have endured, I need to believe that we as a nation are ready to face our past head on, with an open heart and focused mind. I need to believe that people want change. I need to see those beautiful smiling faces of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students smiling in the classroom, and succeeding in the workplace. Education is no foreign concept for Indigenous Australians. Education is the means by which our culture has survived for 60,000 plus years.

We need to give our young people credit to be able to accept the new history. Inclusivity is needed in our classrooms. Lack of inclusivity only serves ignorance and serves to maintain the gap rather than 'closing the gap' between us. Without it, we cannot move forward as a nation, and we will remain 'the petulant child' instead of 'the mature teenager' that we should be. The lack of inclusivity not only denies Indigenous students their rightful place and a sense of belonging in our classrooms, it denies non-Indigenous students the right to a more accurate history of their country's, a country for which they will no doubt be encouraged to be proud of. In saying this, I would like for the whitewash of history to be cleared from the dominant white psyche of this country. I want to be proud of this place, but it is hard. I am not religious but I have faith in us.

Will you be part of a better future?

History has happened, but the future is before us. The journey now must be grounded in genuine relationship. So, what can you do to support Indigenous people in their fight for recognition, equality and justice? Here is a list of things I (Clayton) generally tell people to do when I get asked 'what can I do?'

1. Watch something (SBS series' First Footprints and First Australians, The Tall Man, Utopia, One Generation, Babakiueria, Kanyini)
2. Read something (Start with The Koori Mail, Blood on the Wattle, The Biggest Estate on Earth, www.australianstogether.com.au)
3. Get in contact with an organization (Local Aboriginal Land Council, Aboriginal Health Service, Aboriginal Youth Service) and volunteer some of your time.
4. Go to an Aboriginal festival or event (eg NAIDOC events, Survival, Yabun)
5. Listen to Aboriginal artists (eg Archie Roach, Kev Karmody, Frank Yama, East Journey, Gurrumul)
6. If you genuinely believe that there are issues in Australia around the treatment of Indigenous people, talk to your family and friends about them. You could even consider hosting a screening of any of the films named above, or start a book club centered on Indigenous Australian literature.
7. Using some of the resources/activities mentioned here, spend time formalizing your own thoughts around some of ideas we have mentioned.

We (Clayton and Phill) have walked a decade long journey together after meeting in Alice Springs. A journey of shared understanding that is very much represented in the process and presentation of this article. We hope you too can step into a personal and collective journey of understanding and healing.

Clayton bio:

My name is Clayton Cruse and I am Adnyamathanha. My land is the Vulkathunha Ranges in South Australia. I've spent a large part of my life on my country, learning from my Nan and Pop, Aunties and Uncles. I have a strong connection to my land. My people have, and continue to be pushed to the edge. We are not taken seriously, and we have, and continue to be traumatized and marginalized by a society that values power and money over the pricelessness of spirituality and connectedness to the earth. This breaks my heart.

I am an Aboriginal Language Worker at The University of Adelaide, where I am currently studying Linguistics. I have almost completed a Bachelor of Education (Secondary; Aboriginal Studies), and I enjoy working with the Adnyamathanha community on projects focused on maintaining and preserving our language and culture.

My beautiful wife Sarah has English and Scottish heritage, and we have two beautiful children that we absolutely adore. I love bodyboarding and table tennis.

Phill bio:

Phill is an experienced Social Work practitioner dedicated to working in ways that promote practical conciliation with Indigenous peoples in Australia. Unique cultural connections spanning over a decade with Indigenous people in Central Australia have informed Phill's approach of working alongside communities from frameworks that privilege Indigenous knowledge, culture and principles. As Director of Spark Australia, Phill facilitates alcohol and other drug education and diversionary projects in the southern region of the Northern Territory of Australia. Phill has an ongoing research interest in culturally born, rather than culturally adapted, practice. Phill is also a pastor at Narara Valley Baptist Church and lectures at the University of Newcastle. He is married to Monica and is enjoying his first year of being a father to his beautiful daughter Lucinda Flora. Of Greek and English heritage, Phill is an initiated member of the Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara people and ceremonial law.