

## Anthology Vol. 1: Chapter 10 Summary

### **CREATING A NEW STORY: Ritual, Ceremony and Conflict Transformation between Indigenous and Settler Peoples**

by Polly Walker

In both Australia and the United States, relationships between Indigenous people and the descendents of Settlers are often characterized by alienation and mistrust, and injustices against Indigenous people continue to this day. In this chapter, peacebuilding scholar and practitioner Polly Walker—who is of both Cherokee and Settler descent—discusses the ways in which ritual practices are helping to transform and strengthen these relationships.

Walker describes two rituals, one in Australia and one in the US, both of which bring together the descendents of victims and perpetrators of violence and their communities to commemorate and mourn the past and to commit to building a more just and peaceful future.

#### **Two Rivers Powwow, Twisp, Washington, USA**

In 1886, the United States Army drove the Methow people out of the valley in which they lived, giving them fifteen minutes to leave their homes, and forbidding them to take anything with them including food.

Since 2000, the Methow and other Indigenous peoples, along with Settler descendents and other area residents, have been holding a powwow in that valley, in the town of Twisp, Washington. One of the purposes, as Walker says, is to “celebrate the symbolic ‘coming home’ of the Methow.” The powwow is a three-day long ceremony during which people tell stories, listen to each other, share meals, and perform both traditional and newly-created rites and ceremonies. Rituals are performed to mark the births and deaths of the previous year. Participants drum, sing, dance, and give gifts. The campfires and communal meals are particularly significant since these were interrupted in 1886.

Through the powwow, Native and Settler people engage their bodies, minds, and spirits in the formation of a new community. Participants are encouraged to sustain their commitment to the community—to healing and reconciliation—long after the powwow is over. Walker quotes Spencer Martin, a Methow Indian instrumental in the powwows and the reconciliation process, who tells participants: “Remember what has taken place here today. Your part in this is to know and be able to speak about it. There’s no such thing as everybody just come and watch. You have a job to do here.”

#### **Myall Creek Memorial, New South Wales, Australia**

On June 10, 1838, thirty-eight Wirrayaraay people, including old men, women, and children, were bound in ropes and forced along a road toward Myall Creek where they were massacred by white stockmen.

Every June 10<sup>th</sup> since 2000, Aboriginal people and Settler descendents, including some of the descendents of both the victims and the perpetrators of the massacre, have walked along the route that led to the massacre site.

This memorial walk incorporates a number of Aboriginal mourning rituals, including the decoration of foreheads with ochre and the cleansing process of passing through eucalyptus smoke. Along the path, the walkers stop and read memorial plaques describing the tragic history.

At the monolithic stone memorial of the massacre, an Aboriginal bullroarer calls to the spirits of the dead. The assembled group recounts the history of the massacre, acknowledges the injustices still taking place against Aboriginal people, and commits itself to continued work toward justice and reconciliation.

The Settler descendents offer apology and the Aborigines offer forgiveness. “We will continue our journey, searching our own hearts and reflecting our own attitudes which alienate us from one another,” they say together.

### **Conflict Transformation**

“Persons in ritual are transforming the world.” Tom Driver

These two examples demonstrate how, within the framework of rituals—whether age-old or newly created—performance can acknowledge historical and contemporary conflicts and transform relationships marked by enmity and injustice.

Walker describes the positive impacts of rituals such as those performed at the Two Rivers Powwow and the Myall Creek Memorial:

#### *Relationships of mutuality*

Walker cites conflict-resolution scholar Michelle LeBaron, who explains that rituals can help people build more equitable relationships because they touch the “unconscious parts of the self where identities breathe, and meaning is made.” LeBaron writes that rituals provide safety to transition “from one identity to another, from one way of understanding a situation or relationship to another. This safety emerges because rituals are times outside ordinary time, when usual patterns of communication are suspended.”

In the flux of space and time that is facilitated through ritual, participants have the freedom to perform new identities such as that of kin, rather than “other,” which they may continue to nurture after the ritual or ceremony is completed.

Rituals and ceremonies facilitate conflict transformation at the interpersonal level by providing symbolic embodied ways for people to come together across difference.<sup>1</sup>

#### *Empowerment*

According to Walker, “Ceremonies empower people in a number of ways, enhancing their capacities for engaging in positive social change.” The ceremonies described in this chapter are not only about remembering the past, but also about making a commitment to working toward a more just and peaceful future. People who have participated in the rituals at Myall Creek and in the Methow Valley have gone on to pursue additional justice and peacebuilding initiatives in their communities.

#### *Respectful engagement with Indigenous worldviews*

The rituals and ceremonies described in this chapter are processes that are in line with Indigenous ways of knowing, in that they engage people’s minds, bodies, emotions, and spirits. They are powerful tools for facilitating reconciliation between Indigenous and Settler peoples partly because they communicate a respect for Indigenous epistemologies and cosmologies that may be missing from more conventional western conflict-resolution techniques. In both the U.S. and Australia, the colonization process included systematic suppression and denigration of Indigenous practices, traditions, and beliefs. By creating reconciliation processes that draw on these practices, traditions, and beliefs, participants are reversing the effects of epistemic violence done to Indigenous people. They are also developing participants’ ability to see the world through the eyes of another culture as well as one’s own.

#### *Healing*

As Carolyn Schmekel of the Methow Valley says, the healing power of ritual lies in the “atmosphere of safe haven” it engenders. When people feel safe enough to let go of entrenched views and open themselves to new relationships and understandings, they feel a sense of wholeness; individuals and communities that have been fractured and violated can be restored to harmony. Even the land itself in places where violence has wounded the earth can be healed and reclaimed through rituals of acknowledgment, truth-telling, apology, and forgiveness.

#### **More from “Creating a New Story”:**

- Walker’s chapter includes the reflections of a number of Indigenous and Settler people who have participated in reconciliation rituals, including community leaders and elders, and descendants of victims and perpetrators of violence. The chapter also draws on the writings of scholars such as John Paul Lederach, Lisa Schirch, Tom Driver, and Michelle LeBaron.
- By weaving together these voices, Walker creates vivid pictures of the Myall Creek memorial ceremony and the Two Rivers powwow, and the positive effects these two processes have had in their communities.
- She also discusses the limitations and potential risks of ritual as a tool for peacebuilding and explores how the risks might be mitigated.

- In a postscript to the chapter, Walker writes about the official Apology offered by the Australian government to Aboriginal people in February 2008. She reflects on the impact of this national act of reconciliation and the potential for justice and peace that it represents.

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<sup>1</sup> LeBaron, *Bridging Cultural Conflicts*, 279.