

**RECONCILIATION BREAKFAST – FRIDAY 13TH FEBRUARY 2009 –**  
**ADELAIDE – SPEECH BY LILLIAN HOLT**

I will start by acknowledging the ancestral spirits of the Kaurna nation on whose traditional land we meet today.

I would also like to thank Reconciliation South Australia for inviting me to speak at this early hour of the morning on this momentous occasion, the first anniversary of the national apology to the stolen generations.

And whilst the apology was a landmark event in the nation's history, today, I have actually been asked to speak on the idea of "practical reconciliation". Thus the type of practical reconciliation I will speak of, involves not just a one off event but an ongoing personal journey in which we can all choose to participate.

Therefore, I don't come with a management manual for ticking off procedures and protocols. Nor do I come with watertight formulas nor answers for anyone!

Much of which I speak about today has informed my own journey which has been informed by my Aboriginality, but not necessarily confined by it or to it. And as it has been my journey and mine alone which have formed my opinions and observations in which I wish to share this morning, let me say that I speak on behalf of no other person, black or white, in this land.

Certainly, I speak not as an expert. And the best way to illustrate the latter idea is with a joke.

*There's a plane about to crash with five people still on board. The hostess takes a parachute and says, as she exits "ok fellas work it out amongst yourselves. There are three parachutes and four of you left". She then jumps out.*

*The first guy jumps up without hesitation and as he grabs a parachute he says "I'm the PM of the country. The country definitely needs me". He exits.*

*The second guy jumps up, without hesitation, and says, emphatically "well, I'm an expert, the country definitely needs me!".*

*There are two blokes left, one an older priest and one a young hippie. The priest says, without hesitation, "listen son, take that last parachute immediately and jump out. I've had my life, yours is just beginning."*

*The young hippie replies "Oh Father, that won't be necessary. Didn't you notice? The expert took my backpack!"*

Let me say, at this point, that despite the joke about the expert, I am not anti-expertise. But I am yet to be convinced that we necessarily need so-called experts when building relationships for Reconciliation, given that all are players in the process and we can call on our own strength within. Hence, our own expertise!

I am not convinced that we need leaders, either. Personally, I have serious qualms about the type of leadership practised in our society for it is most often hierarchical, individualistic and either appointed, elected and dare I say egotistic? Thus we look outside of ourselves, to others, for leadership which is in contrast to what I want to share today.

For if I have learned anything over the past 40 years from the arenas of the Referendum and Reconciliation, both of which speak to race relations in this country, it is that the spirit of the law is just as important as the letter of the law when it comes to human relationships.

However, in my experience in Aboriginal affairs over the past three and a half decades, the spirit has not always been honoured as much as the letter. Rather, it has often been reviled rather than revered (if indeed, it has even been remembered!).

Much has been written about the letter of the law of Reconciliation, which is widely and freely available through books, the internet, policies, publications, pamphlets, and all the prevailing theories.

To say nothing of the plague of **endless** research pertaining to the so-called "Aboriginal Problem" which seemingly needs to be solved and quantified, statistically.

This is in strong contrast to *the spirit of the law* which is qualitative and cannot be so easily captured and controlled. To which I say hooray for I am unashamedly and unapologetically, interested, first and foremost, in the spirit of the letter, for the spirit is in people.

So let us look within. For ***It is in You!!! It is in me! It is in US all!*** and is accessible when we wish to avail ourselves of it. Therefore, we don't have to look outside of ourselves!

Furthermore, the beauty of the spirit of the law as opposed to the letter of the law does not require committees, or bureaucracies; or hierarchies. Nor experts!

We don't even require qualifications, for all we need are the qualities of the spirit to begin the journey which are, namely, the spiritual qualities of *Honesty*, *Open-mindedness* and *Willingness* (hence the HOW of it all) which we carry within ourselves.

Indeed, for me, the spirit beckons us to ponder on *ourselves* as players in the process of the healing of race relations in this rich but racialised land we all share.

I use the word “racialised” because I have no doubt that the Referendum and the reconciliation process and all else pertaining to Aboriginal Australia, including the Apology, arose as a result of an underlying and un-interrogated racism.

A racism which I choose to call “the gangrene of the soul” of this nation. In which we are all implicated. And by which we are all diminished.

For “what has diminished me as an Aboriginal person has also diminished you as a non-Aboriginal”.

Now, some of the great spiritual visionaries of the world such as Mahatma Gandhi profoundly understood diminishment for as he said: *“when one is diminished we are all diminished”*.

I, personally happen to believe that if we can grasp Gandhi’s words “when one is diminished we are all diminished” we can have not only practical reconciliation but profound reconciliation.

Hence, I am hopeful that if we can understand the inherent issues of implication and diminishment, spiritually, rather than merely intellectually: that is not just from the head but from the heart, we are well on the way to moving away from disconnectedness to connectedness. A disconnectedness which has feasted upon denial, shame, guilt and fear.

I speak this way not because I am a victim, but because the issues need to be **identified, acknowledged** and **accepted** and then **acted** upon. In other words, they need to be brought to the light in order to be healed.

And regardless of what form reconciliation takes, it will need to undertake an understanding of who we **ALL** are as players in the process and how we have been both implicated and diminished by this disconnectedness.

In any case, there are no innocent bystanders in the reconciliation process. But neither should there be any terrified ones.

But it seems to me that those who perceive themselves as innocent or terrified bystanders have prevented themselves from participating in their own necessary process of “Physician, Heal Thyself”.

Such privilege has not necessarily been available to Aboriginal people who, in my view, have been expected not only to identify the issues but also supply answers to problems which we never created.

Thus, the focus remains on only one half of “the problem” i.e. the ‘blackfellas’, whilst the other part of “the problem”, i. e. ‘whitefellas’, are let off the hook. Neither feeling implicated nor diminished.

*(Please note that I use the terms “whitefellas” and “blackfellas” both descriptively and endearingly).*

But as with the Chinese word for crisis, which represents both danger and opportunity, the crisis of implication and diminishment can point to opportunity to understand that if we are **all** part of the problem then surely we are also **all** part of the solution!

However, this is where it gets tricky because another great visionary: Nelson Mandela said on his visit to Australia that “One of the most difficult things to do is not so much to change society but to **change ourselves**”.

As a follower of Gandhi, Mandela was echoing Gandhi’s great words of “**be the change you want to see**” and “**let it begin with me**”.

Simple but not easy, for the change Mahatma Gandhi was calling for, was not merely cosmetic. It was a deep and profound change which requires one to look within one’s self. Thus it is of the spirit and calls for a qualitative process rather than a quantitative one.

Such process, in the case of white Australia, I believe, will require a walk through one’s own whiteness in order to discover how deeply one has been both implicated and diminished by the ravages of racism, in this country.

### **Why whiteness, one may well ask?**

Well, as Ruth Frankenberg, a white American wrote :

*“it is more difficult for white people to say “Whiteness has nothing to do with me - I’m not white” than to say “Race has nothing to do with me - I’m not racist”. To speak of Whiteness, she says, is to assign everyone a place in the relations of racism.<sup>1</sup>*

Wow, I was utterly buoyed by that statement coming from a white person because it relieves me, as an Aborigine, of being perceived always as ‘the problem’ and the feeling that I am the one that is deficit or deprived and thus needs ‘fixing up’ or ‘filling up’.

For, in assigning *everyone* a place in the relations of racism, the interrogation of whiteness holds for me the promises and possibilities for attitudinal healing.

Without which, I believe we will remain a **rich** but racialised land, a clever country rather than a wise country.

Yet very little, if anything, is said about the interrogation of whiteness in discussions about reconciliation despite the simplicity of the three questions: Am I white? Am I not white? Am I not white enough? Initial questions which can help propel people into the profound process of “Physician, Heal Thyself”.

Personally, I see the process of Physician, Heal Thyself, as a necessity, rather than an option, if there is to be any **deep** discernment and discussion on race relations relevant to reconciliation. That deep discussion can be difficult for the topic of race is often fraught with both denial and defensiveness.

However, I happen to know that it is possible as I am blessed to work in a place called Relationships Australia, South Australia (RASA) which has the spiritual courage to walk through the prickly patches of whiteness and race relations.

*(And I would like to acknowledge the presence here today of Judith Cross, the CEO of RASA and two of my colleagues, Pamela Dawn and Joanne Willmot).*

I’ve recently been in discussion with members of the management team of Relationships Australia (SA) about these difficult and delicate topics and I have been heartened and uplifted by its fearless approach.

For without such fearless and courageous approach, I believe that we are merely skimming the surface, with safe language and statistics and so the status quo remains.

And speaking of language let me say that when I first started working in Aboriginal education over three and a half decades ago, I was both pained and perplexed by the deficit language of the prevailing policies.

I found it all extremely disturbing for I knew that Aboriginal people were more than the description of the labels. And yet, a whole industry had seemingly grown up around this deficit and dichotomous labelling and language.

It maddened and saddened me then as it does now so the best way to illustrate my point is yet again through humour.

*“There’s this old Aboriginal man of about 70 years old, sitting on a slag heap and reflecting on his life. He says: ‘well, first of all, they called me uncivilized, then a savage, then a pagan, then a heathen, then I was called handicapped, hopeless, then I was called disadvantaged, deprived, deficient, derelict, then I was called marginalized, then a victim, blah, blah, blah.’*

*As he recalls further labels, he suddenly stops and says: 'you know what, my position in life hasn't changed, but I've sure got one hell of a vocabulary!'*

And, yes, we need to laugh – but remember also that Kirkegaard, the Danish philosopher, said: “when you label me you limit me”.

The abundance of those labels of limitation speak to me of the need for deep attitudinal change.

Acknowledgement of attitudes is pertinent to the process of Physician, Heal Thyself, for, historically, attitudes have insidiously moulded, wounded and informed us all.

The late Aboriginal leader and statesman, Charles Perkins understood this when he said words to the effect that “whilst we don't live in the past, the past lives in us”.

Personally, I see the past as an elder to the present and, additionally, as the Old Russian proverb states “dwell in the past and you lose one eye. Forget the past and you lose both”.

The past is about historical legacies and requires honesty as we address them, an honesty which is liberating rather than enervating.

An honesty which can be combined with other qualities needed for the journey such as humour.

Ah humour! It's been part of the spiritual survival kit of Aboriginal people for so long!

Humour comes from the Latin “umere” to moisten which, for me, is a wonderful image. Being moistened and loosened up by laughter and humour. Humour can send a deadly serious message and allows us all to laugh at our limitations.

I think that humour is a first cousin of humility as it pricks pomposity and brings perspective. Personally, I need a daily dose of humour to stop taking myself too seriously.

Edward De Bon says it's the most under-utilised faculty in western, academic education. (And if you don't know who Edward De Bono is, he's the guy who gets paid hundreds and thousands for thinking and talking the way I do!).

And, of course, we must never be without another word beginning with H and that is, Hope. For as St. Augustine said “Hope has two daughters: Anger and Courage. Anger at what is wrong. And courage to change it”.

I need those two daughters of Hope in order to do what Kerrie Tim, an Aboriginal woman from Queensland describes as “wanting to help grow up my country”.

For I want to see a wise country as opposed to a merely ‘clever’ one. It is easy to be clever. Cleverness clings to the surface. But wisdom dwells in the depth of discernment.

Lastly, I am on the lookout for kindred spirits to “help me grow up my country”!

Kindred spirits who have the courage to look within and not just without and thus understand themselves, spiritually, rather than researching others, statistically.

Kindred spirits who are prepared to take that road less travelled and look at how they too are implicated and diminished by racism, the “gangrene of the soul of this nation” as I choose to describe it.

Kindred spirits who have the ability to laugh at themselves and who come armed not only with a glimmer of hope but also an ounce of courage and a pinch of indignation.

Why Indignation one may well ask? Well, George Sand, the writer, once said words to the effect that “indignation at the world’s woes, is the most passionate form of love”.

Why courage? Well, as someone once said “courage is fear that has said its prayers!

Furthermore, I need kindred spirits who are prepared to embrace the unpalatable as well as the palatable questions of history entailed in the arenas of reconciliation and the Referendum. People who are prepared to learn from the lessons of history and not resile from nor deny them.

People prepared to understand profoundly that what has diminished me as an Aboriginal Australian has also diminished them as a non-Aboriginal Australian. For therein, lies the connectedness of the commonality of our human condition.

Being an opportunist as well as an optimist, I am looking for kindred spirits to join me in the fearless journey of Physician, Heal Thyself, in which both the **spirit** of Reconciliation as well as the **letter** of it is equally honoured.

Equally honoured as exemplified in the following wise words written on a 17<sup>th</sup> Century English tombstone which state

*‘A VISION WITHOUT A TASK IS A DREAM’*

*‘A TASK WITHOUT A VISION IS DRUDGERY’*

*‘BUT A VISION WITH A TASK IS THE HOPE FOR THE WORLD’*

Thank you.

**Lillian Holt**

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<sup>i</sup> R. Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 6.