

ELIZABETH PIKE

THE POWER OF STORY

SPIRIT OF THE DREAMING

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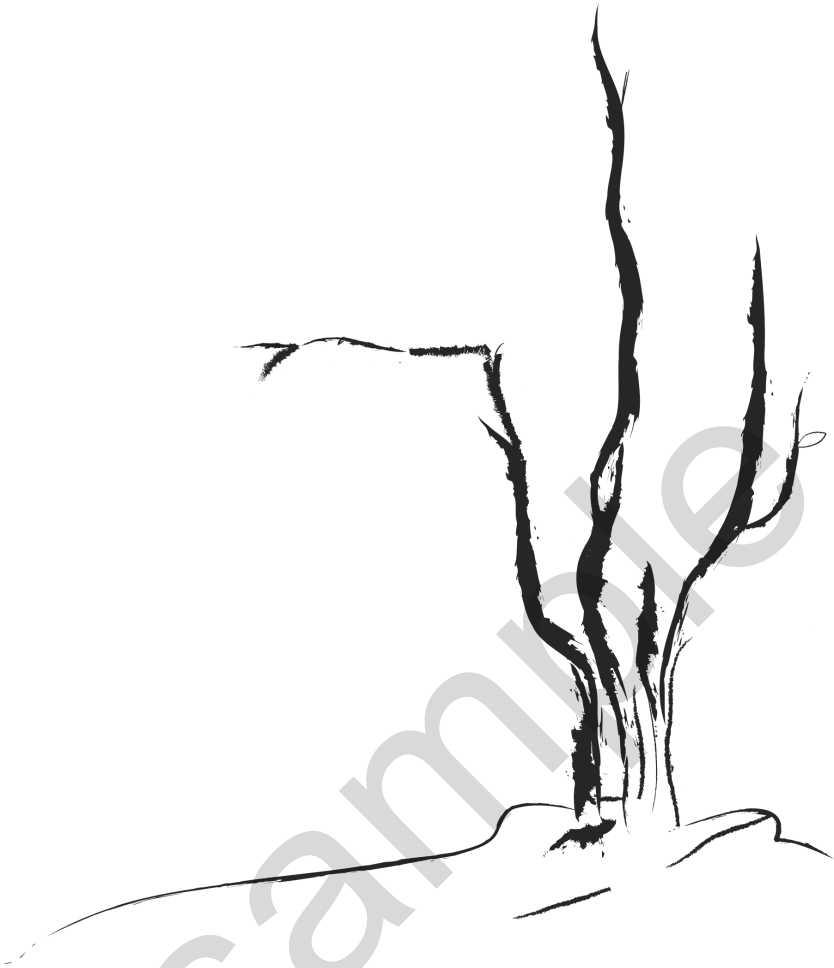
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If you stay closely united, you are like a tree standing in the middle of a bushfire sweeping through the timber. The leaves are scorched and the tough bark is scarred and burned; but inside the tree the sap is still flowing, and under the ground the roots are still strong. Like that tree you have endured the flames, and you still have the power to be reborn. The time for this rebirth is now!

(Quoted from the address given by His Holiness Pope John Paul II at the meeting with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at Alice Springs on 29 November 1986.)

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INTRODUCTION: MY STORY

The longing to belong
is a constant yearning.
Yet there's a faint memory
that still remains,
stored so deep, murmuring you do belong.
It's the Eternal Spirit born so strong
that gently whispers:
'You'll always be part of the Dreamtime song'.

I FIRMLY BELIEVE there is power in story. A culture's mythology is its living spiritual beliefs and is born within its stories; their loss is always a moral catastrophe.

It is also my belief that there is a process by which the Spirit uses a new experience to become incorporated into a person, an object, a ritual or ceremony, allowing the Spirit to be reborn in every age. This empowerment of the Spirit enables us to continue our search for the sacred. For there is a common psyche in all humanity that yearns for the Divine; this is the Creator's imprint left on us all and is within the realm of mystery. This belief has been strengthened in me as I have reflected on my own journey through the years.

So I will hold the door ajar now, allowing you to enter, while I share with you a brief encounter with my own story, who I am, where I have been, and who I am becoming. My personal heritage began like many other Aboriginal people in this land, with its roots in two cultures.

I was born in Subiaco, Perth, Western Australia. Much of my childhood was spent in the old gold mining towns of Coolgardie and Kalgoorlie in the midst of a small white and black population, without knowing I had an Aboriginal background on my mother's side.

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My Aboriginality was concealed because it was considered not only shameful to have any connections with Aboriginal people, it was also dangerous. This was due to the draconian government laws in Western Australia in those times regarding Aboriginal people. These laws affected those who were 'full blood' and those who were considered 'half castes', a term that shamed coloured Aboriginal people.

Unfortunately, coloured people were often disowned not only by white people, but even by full-blood people who were sometimes shamed to have a coloured child in their community. Coloured people suffered great humiliation, creating problems regarding identity and self worth. Denial of their background, if it was at all possible, was common.

During my teenage years, I became a very turbulent and confused young person. My mother, who was of Aboriginal descent, and my father, who was white, separated when I was not quite six years old, my sister Shirley was four, and my brother Keith was two and a half.

This separation occurred during the years of the great depression. My father lost his own cartage and carrier business, and now had no regular job. He was put on Government Sustenance and had to go wherever he was sent for brief periods working on government jobs. The equivalent today would be work for the dole. He also suffered from a heart condition due to having had rheumatic fever. Consequently he was unable to care for his three young children.

For a short period we were placed with various relatives of my father. But people were unable to sustain this arrangement for very long periods because the times were very hard. Eventually we were separated. I was the eldest, and nearing school age, so I stayed with my father.

This was the beginning of a deep seated loneliness within me. My sister and brother were sent to other relatives of my father. My small brother Keith went to my Aunty Daisy in Coolgardie. I never knew who took my sister. When Keith was six years old he died of pneumonia. My aunty and my dad were so grief stricken, my dad finally sent me to stay with her. The remainder of my primary schooling was spent there.

In grade six I sat for a scholarship, but was not successful. However I was awarded an entrance pass to attend the Kalgoorlie High School.

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This entailed having to board with complete strangers during the week, with people whom my dad advertised for in the local *Kalgoorlie Miner*. I would then return to Coolgardie at weekends. This was another very upsetting time for me, because I was continually being placed in different people's homes, and now I would be living with people who were total strangers, where I just did not belong.

My schooldays were never really happy, as I was always being called hurtful names because of my dark skin, hair and eyes. I appeared different to other people and they thought I appeared European. (I find it strange that today people often ask me if I am Lebanese.) I was called wog, dago, nigger, boong or Jew. Naturally this hurt me and always puzzled me. Who was I really? I didn't seem to fit anywhere. I retaliated by fighting and throwing stones or anything I could find, so it was always me who was blamed and I was constantly in trouble.

Fortunately I developed a strong love for reading; this became my refuge. I used reading as an escape from loneliness and having no friends, but it also created in me a real thirst for learning. This was to serve me well in later years.

Then suddenly, my life took a strange turn and was about to change forever. It happened one Friday afternoon on the Kalgoorlie station while I was sitting waiting for the train to return to Coolgardie for the weekend. A lady who was very smartly dressed and wearing dark sunglasses came and sat next to me. She had a young baby in a pram and two small boys with her. I began to feel uncomfortable, because she removed her sunglasses and kept staring at me. Eventually she said, 'Is your name Betty?' When I said, 'Yes', she replied, 'Well I'm your mother'.

I was now thirteen. I did not recognise this lady and this was a very disturbing and traumatic occasion.

Then, due to a long delay of the train, she asked me if I would like to see my grandmother. Still feeling very bewildered I just said 'Yes'. She called a taxi and we arrived at my grandmother's. This was another shock. My grandparents were living on the outskirts of Kalgoorlie in a makeshift humpy composed of pieces of tin and hessian, with no water or electricity. My grandfather and their twin sons had to go into the

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town and bring water back. They washed in a tin basin on a tripod under a tree, and their lighting was kerosene lamps.

Fortunately, I recognised my grandmother, who had cared for me sometimes in Perth, when my mother first left my dad. So I began to feel a little more at ease, as my grandparents were so pleased to see me. This verified that the strange lady was indeed my mother.

After this experience I became more troubled, confused and rebellious, and kept running away to visit my mother. I was infatuated with her beautiful clothes, which she made herself, because she and her present husband were now professional ballroom dancers.

How I must have hurt and disappointed my dad, whom I had so much affection for. Now all I did was to cause him so much pain at my sudden reversal of behaviour. Eventually he had no alternative but to place me in Graceville, a Salvation Army home for delinquent girls in Perth.

My schooling ended and I was put to work. I had the choice of working in the laundry or the ironing room. I chose the ironing room and ironed very long white starched tablecloths, eight in a day. On Sundays we had to walk in crocodile fashion through the street to attend the Salvation Army Citadel.

I did not know then how much trouble I had caused, as my mother was on a good behaviour bond instead of a gaol sentence for a charge of bigamy. She had remarried while still married to my father, which was why my father was given total custody of his children with no access granted to my mother.

I was sixteen when I left Graceville, still confused about life and where I belonged. I was sick of always being asked what nationality I was. So I decided to go to the Registrar of Births and Deaths. I now uncovered some of the mystery of who I was. The government documents stated that my great-grandmother on my mother's side was an 'unnamed' Aboriginal woman. (Through later research I discovered my great-grandmother was from the Minang people near Albany.) My great-grandfather, Phillip Sullivan, was an Irish convict, sentenced to ten years in the colonies in 1863 for stealing a pair of trousers. He was

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twenty-one, was literate, a baker and a Catholic. On his release he lived on the outskirts of Albany with my great-grandmother. My grandmother, Mary Sullivan, was the youngest of their three children.

When Mary was five years old, the children – being coloured – were taken from their parents and put on a ship called the *Rob Roy*, to an institution in Perth. When Mary was fourteen, she was sent to a white person's home in Collie as a housemaid. That was in accordance with government policy at the time.

I was very happy about discovering my roots, but it didn't alter things. People still ask me what nationality I am. When I say I am of Aboriginal descent, they reply, 'Really, you don't look Aboriginal'. People still don't believe me. So it continues and I am still struggling with my identity and where I belong even after all these years. Even in Aboriginal circles there are always question marks because I do not belong in an Aboriginal community. I still feel like an outsider. But I know who I am, which is what matters.

Australian historian Henry Reynolds calls us 'Nowhere People'. I say we are the 'Lost Generation', not the 'Stolen Generation': simply lost, rarely recognised and of no account. There are thousands of us, but without a voice. There my Aboriginality rested for many years.

After leaving the Graceville I had no place to live. My father was still away doing government work. I stayed for a few days with one of my mother's brother's family. However, when I asked if he knew we were Aboriginal, he flew into rage, saying, 'You must never let anyone know that, you would never get a job, and I would lose my job as a groundsman at Kings Park and never get another one. You are a wicked girl for dragging that up and shaming us. You cannot stay here, it would be too dangerous.'

Again, I had nowhere to go. It was 1943 and the war was still on, so I managed to get my father to sign papers for me to join the Air Force, regardless of being only sixteen. It would provide me with somewhere to live, and I also felt it was the patriotic thing to help in the war effort. My time in the Air Force was lived in fear of being found out. I was mixing with men and women who were much older, so I kept to myself as much

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as I could as I could not go with them on leave to hotels.

My first posting was in Melbourne to do an aircraft mechanics course. On completion I was sent back to Geraldton, Western Australia, to work on aircraft. Finally I was sent to Bairnsdale, Victoria. When the war finished I was discharged in Melbourne.

I obtained a position at Darrod's, a department store in Bourke Street, Melbourne, as a junior in the coat and fur department. I didn't like it and was not earning enough to keep myself without any family support. I was extremely lonely and became so deeply depressed I was suicidal.

Fortunately an elderly lady with whom I worked, Miss Virtue, came to my rescue. Through her support and kindness, I was eventually led into the Catholic Church. This wonderful lady saved my life, and I am eternally grateful to her.

My state of mind began to improve greatly. The strong rules of the Church gave me the direction I needed. I have the greatest admiration for Father John Connellan, the priest who instructed me at St Augustine's Church in Bourke Street. He became a powerful influence in my life. He introduced me to his own family and they welcomed me. His mother and his brother offered to have me stay on weekends, encouraged me and suggested that I might like to change my job. So I sat for the public service exam, and entered the Taxation Department. There I met many young Catholic people, but still suffered from an inferiority complex, due to my identity, which I was still hiding.

Later at parish dances, I fortunately met my future husband. We eventually married, had six children and finally moved to Geelong to live. Family duties took up my life, until my husband died of cancer many years ago.

By then my family were now all married, so I had to find a new direction for my life. My spiritual life was becoming complicated, due to the many changes in the Church. These appeared to be undermining the things I had been taught. The groups I joined saw the Church's laws as harsh and often cruel, whereas I had found them strong and found comfort in knowing right from wrong. I began once more to have a sense of loneliness and of not belonging. However, as I look back, I never cease

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to wonder at the mystery of the movement of the Spirit. At every turning point in my life the Spirit has been there, waiting for me to follow.

Strangely I began to feel a strong call to pick up my Aboriginal roots, after an apparently accidental meeting with an Aboriginal woman from Queensland, Jacqui Johnston, while walking in my own street one evening. Later, after visiting my home, Jacqui noticed my many books and saw my passion for reading. She then told me of an Aboriginal campus at Deakin University in Geelong and arranged an interview for me to apply to study as a mature-age student. I took my government documents recording my Aboriginal heritage, and fortunately I was accepted. The Koori unit did not have a suitable course for an over-sixty student, so I was enrolled in the mainstream Faculty of Humanities at Deakin. I eventually graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in the Humanities in 1993, majoring in literature, introduction to the arts, and comparative religions.

Later I was offered a position with an Aboriginal focus with the Catholic Education Office in the Archdiocese of Melbourne. When that contract finished, I began going to the Aboriginal Catholic Ministry office in Melbourne, and later completed further studies in theology at Nungalinga College in Darwin with Vicki Clark from the Aboriginal Catholic Ministry in Melbourne. Subsequently I began writing some reflections, prayers and articles with an Aboriginal focus to use in our liturgies at the Aboriginal Catholic Ministry and for publication in various magazines, especially the Jesuit's *Madonna* magazine.

It is my hope that you will enjoy the following collection of stories, reflections and poems that have helped shape my own journey into self discovery.

One particular myth created the spark that ignited the fire within me to continue this exciting, never-ending journey of finding the identity of my true self. It was the story of the origin of the Platypus, which I will share with you in the chapter that follows.