A journey of Indigenous identity

Marshall R Watson

Tearing down the road on a mountain bike that was three sizes too big (or at least that's what it felt like) on another 40-God-knows-what degrees Celsius day in Karratha, the heat reflecting off the road, I was stopped by a familiar voice booming from the weatherboard house on the corner.

"Hey Esme, what you doin'? You wanna come fishin'?"

It was Ritchie, a Torres Strait Islander bloke my age, and a good mate.

"Nah, mate, goin' to mow lawns — besides, don't have a rod, unless you got a spare", I replied.

Ritchie smiled. "What you want a rod for? It's much better this way", and held up a fishing spear.

"Well, if you change your mind I'll be down the back beach" he added, and I continued on my way. I had Ritchie to thank for the nickname "Esme", after Esme Watson of *A Country Practice** — he liked it so much he even named his dog Esme. Now I didn't liken myself to my namesake at all, and could not be stuffed with gossip, but the name stuck like mud. Ritchie was part of a big Torres Strait Islander family in town and had rellies around Karratha, Roebourne and Wickham. His dad had a bloody good reputation as being one of the best trades assistants around. Ritchie was not the academic type, and went to school if and when he liked. When I look back, I realise he taught me a lot about Indigenous identity and I have a lot to thank him and his family for.

My family moved to Karratha from Perth when I was 12, as my dad Noel got a job with Hamersley Iron. Even though Noel is not my biological dad, nor is he Aboriginal, he always said to me, from when I was a young age, "You're Aboriginal ya know, and it's something to be proud of". I had no idea what being Aboriginal meant. All I'd learnt about Aboriginal people was what I'd seen on TV and snippets from other family and friends, neither of which were positive. I always knew I was different, but couldn't define how. Growing up is hard enough, but growing up in a country town during adolescence and trying to find your identity as an Indigenous Australian is even harder.

This is where it gets a little complex, but follow as you can. I knew who my biological father was, and it was his brother and his family that I grew up around in my younger years in Perth. However, I was like the secret, the "black sheep" of the family, if you will — the one who was not spoken about in a family that denounced their Aboriginality. Just as my biological dad was not spoken about when mum was around. So how did this young kid — who knew he was Aboriginal, knew his family was Aboriginal *and* knew they did not accept it — have a hope in hell of figuring out his place in the world? I didn't know where to start; all I had to go by was what I'd heard from my family, such as "you're only part Aboriginal", and sneaking in looks at photos of my grandmother (because I was too afraid to ask any questions). The only Indigenous family I had contact with was Ritchie's. This is how it remained for several years.

During my university years I found it tough going at times. Don't get me wrong — I have some great memories of my uni days. It was funny that while all the white mob were discussing TEE† scores, the Aboriginal mob were more interested in where you were from and who your mob were. But still I didn't know much more about my Aboriginal family and in some ways I felt isolated and sad, but my stubbornness and anger at my biological dad held me back. There were those who accepted and understood my viewpoint and others who did not. Occasionally I was called a "coconut" (black on the outside and white on the inside) because I hadn't found my family. Of those who knew my pain and helped me over the years, two stand out. Both are Indigenous, one a doctor and the other soon to graduate in medicine. Furthermore, it was another friend's mother who gave me hope. When I mentioned my Aboriginal grandmother's name, she replied, "Edith Oldridge, I remember her from the AMS [Aboriginal Medical Service]. She was a Holmes."

Jackpot! I had a connection and it all seemed to steamroll from there for a short time. Although I found out that the Holmes were related to the Williams, any other information that I wanted to get required me to go through the Department of Indigenous Affairs, and to do that I would need to get the permission of my biological dad. This I was still not ready to do. I became scared that, if I didn't find my family, all the elders would die and I'd be forgotten and I wouldn't find my country — a fear that would make me cry and keep me awake at night.

But what I was to learn in the years to come was that I was not forgotten. As people do not forget, neither does country, and I was to discover that returning to your country is both embracing and healing. I visited the mission at New Norcia recently; this was where my great grandmother was in her younger years. To walk the same ground as my ancestors was a very restorative experience, even if it *had* been a mission.

I met the Aboriginal woman who would become my wife several years ago and moved to Adelaide from Melbourne to be with her. It was coming to know her and her family, whom I absolutely adore, that made me truly understand the fundamental nature of Aboriginal family. Nobody was perfect but everybody was loved, and all efforts were made to locate family members who were lost. It was from this that the fire to find my roots was rekindled. I was no longer angry, just bloody curious and had had a gutful. I wanted to know about my family and I wanted to know yesterday!

In January 2005, I made contact with Alan, my biological dad. He and I both had lots of questions, so we organised a meeting. It was emotional, but when we met I learned more from him about my family in the first 10 minutes than I had in the previous 30 years — he knew it all. Being Aboriginal, however, did not mean a great deal to him at this time. He grew up as the youngest of 10 children and remembers being taken away to Sister Kate's (Parkerville) Children's Home with his other three youngest siblings. Eventually he returned to the family, but as a matter of survival the family denounced their Aboriginality, claiming that they were either Afghan or Tahitian. For reasons that are another story altogether, dad became separated from the family and, over the years, joined the army and then became a member of the Patriots Bikers Club. This may make some uncomfortable, but the core business of the club was raising money for children's charities. The point is that both of these became the extended family that my dad didn't have but yearned for.

* An Australian television drama series.
† Tertiary Entrance Examination.

Since I have known him over the past year, he has come out of his shell, to say the least. He has embraced his Aboriginality and is on his own journey of identity. He has returned to Parkerville Children's Home to face his demons, met people who remember him from his early years, and met cousins that he never knew he had. As a result of this, he has changed as a person and is much more at peace with himself now that he has found his place — unlike his brothers and sisters, who are not yet ready to do this. My sister, who until a year ago was unaware that she had an older brother, is now also on her own journey of identity.

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are unaware of their family relationships, their kinship structures, that are the strength of Aboriginal society and that place them in the context of their family, their country and their culture. This is a result of the process of colonisation and assimilation policies. Current understanding of the determinants of Indigenous health highlights the negative effects of the denial of sovereignty, cultural dislocation, dispossession and disempowerment, particularly in relation to social and emotional wellbeing.[1] Our children need to have a nurturing and loving environment to grow up in, with family on all sides; our adolescents need to be able to learn how to be young adults and parents; our young adults need to be active members of the community, rearing children and caring for others; and our elders need to be able to pass on family stories and traditions to educate the younger generations. All of this has to occur in a society that, in many instances, has been unjust to Indigenous Australians.

As an Indigenous health professional, and because my people are the "statistics", I know all too well the reality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health. It is not all bad, however — we are a resilient mob. What keeps us going is our love and respect for one another and our land. The titbits of information I had when I was young were precious to me and sustained me through difficult times. I lament for those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who know nothing of their history. I know I am not the first — nor will I be the last — Aboriginal person with a story about discovering identity. As health professionals we need to be aware of its significance for social and emotional wellbeing, recognise the effects of "missing" or "lost" identity, and understand how the smallest amount of knowing can heal.[2]

In response to loss, all humans grieve. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been deprived of their normal grieving processes, and this has resulted in an overwhelming burden of grief, both recognised and unrecognised. A reconnection with identity is one pathway to resolving some of this burden.[3] Finding the self and coming to terms with individual loss is a prelude to communities finding their collective value in the richness of culture and reconciliation. I am first and foremost an Aboriginal man, then a son, brother, husband, father-to-be and doctor. This all started with a young Aboriginal bloke wanting to know more about himself. There's no rocket science in it, just a hunger for identity. It's fortunate that my children will grow up from Day 1 knowing about their history, family, connections to country, and place within the world.

So, what about Ritchie? As I remember him, he was a proud man and, in hindsight, someone who was (and I hope still is) looking out for family, especially his nieces and nephews. He came from a strong family who loved and supported him in the way that Indigenous families do. I'm sure that many outsiders would not have seen his family's dynamics as their cup of tea, but, looking back on it, I realise that none of those kids ever went without food, shelter or clothing, nor love or spirituality.

This is my journey to date. Take from it what you will and learn from it. The discovery of identity and the journey of reconnection is one that many Indigenous Australians travel at some point in their lifetime and it is fundamental to our wellbeing. I hope my story gives readers the courage to search for the truth with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the strength to be a lifeline for those struggling in the abyss of the unknown.

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