

Australian Aboriginal Elder's Thoughts On Truth and Healing

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Randy Kritkausky: Bozho! My name is Randy Kritkausky; I address you with the Potawatomi word for greeting, as I am a registered member of this Native American tribe, and our language is dear to us.

This episode of Indigenous Perspectives originates from the state of Vermont in the United States. This is not from my tribal homeland; it is the unceded traditional territory of the Abenaki people, who for thousands of years were, and continue to be, stewards of this land known as N'dakinna , which is to be found here in the state of Vermont and across the northeastern United States, and across the Canadian border in southern Québec province.

I begin by acknowledging where we come from, both culturally and geographically, as this program, Indigenous Perspectives, focuses on understanding our roots in Mother Earth and connections with our ancestors.

Carolyn Schmidt: Today's program guests are Grant Paulson and Christian

Domer. They are each on the line with us from Australia. So they were going to start first by giving some brief backgrounds on themselves, and Grant, can you tell us something about your family background and the variety of experiences that you've had that are both personal to you, and also reflect the experience of a lot of your people?

Grant Paulson: Thank you very much for having me. Quandomwatamolly, the greeting of my mother's people, from the Biri tribes of north central Queensland. I'm coming to you from Quandamooka territory, east of Brisbane in Queensland, Australia. And, I bring you greetings from my families to your tribes and families there, and the many places that you call home and where you listen from today. Thank you for having me.

My name is Grant. I'm a middle child of five siblings. I'm a father; I'm a husband; I work in faith and development at World Vision Australia in the domestic indigenous programs there. And, I'm also a preacher's kid, and have all the relative scars to prove that! My dad was the first ordained indigenous Aboriginal Baptist minister, ordained in Australia back in [19]67.

I was born while my folks were in ministry, in central Australia, to the tribal peoples there, called Warlpiri. And I moved in my mother's womb in Warlpiri country and they consider me as their - their child. And, so my "skin name" or part of my name in Warlpiri country is Jaboranga. And I have the privilege of traveling back there to work with Warlpiri people, on a faith and development program about family violence - and adapting it and adopting it, from the South African context to the Australian context.

Randy: This is fascinating. If you could back up and just give us a little bit more information about your family history. Christian had given us some hints about the encounters with the colonial settlers in Australia, which is its own unique story. It's one I had not heard before.

Grant: Australia was initially a penal colony where England had decided to send its criminals. It had been visited by the Dutch and Indonesian sailors

previously, but it was England who had decided to colonize in 1788 and recognize and sort of settle the place for king and country. They said it was “terra nullius,” meaning there were no humans there. So indigenous peoples - Aboriginal peoples, First Australians - were not recognized as fully human, but seen as part of the flora and fauna. So [*Europeans*] claiming land wasn't a process of needing to go through any treaty process.

So, unlike most First World nations, we - indigenous peoples - we don't actually have a treaty of any sort. Some people say that's good because no one's going to cheat you out of anything. But, just across the water from us is, New Zealand, Aotearoa, Land of the Long White Cloud, and their Maori people have a Treaty of Waitangi, spelling out the nature of the relationships.

So we actually don't have any treaties of sorts, no recognition that says there's a past, and here's the future, nowhere to draw a line. We have a number of recognitions. I think the [19]67 referendum recognized our inclusion into the census, which was another way of the recognition of our humanity. But, prior to that, we [*the Aborigines*] weren't seen as even fully human, so the need to enter into some kind of treaty arrangements was not seen as necessary.

Randy: Am I understanding correctly that it was not until fairly recently in Australian history that you were counted in the census?

Grant: Yeah. '67, 1967.

Randy: That's not 1867. That's nineteen sixty-seven!

Grant: Absolutely. Absolutely. And one of the ways - we were perceived to be a dying race - and one of the ways to facilitate that was to remove children of mixed heritage from tribes and to bring them into homes. We call that the “stolen generation” and that removal of children meant that Westerners and Europeans could eventually breed us out. And that was kind of seen as the

“pillow to soothe the dying race”, which is one of the phrases that were put in history, but we're still here!

And in 2007, our then prime minister issued an apology to the stolen generations for their removal from families and from tribes. And that was a moving time in history. And there've been several movements since. In 2000, there was the walk for reconciliation, where we had thousands of Australians around the country walking to show their solidarity with First Nations people for a better future.

So we've had little pockets of social movements from '67, sort of the seventies, to 2000 - we had a national movement of all Australians, black and white - and to 2007, when there was an apology issued. We also had a statement from the heart in, I think it was 2016 or '17, expressing the desire for a treaty and a First Nations representative body within our government. We don't have anything of that sort in Australia. We have expressions of good will, and policies and processes, but nothing that actually helps us move psychologically, spiritually, legally, to say: there's that: we've drawn a line and that was the past, and here's where we'd like to go as a nation in the future.

Randy: You've mentioned several themes that we'll pick up on over the course of the program. Some of them are familiar - painfully familiar - to my ancestors and my relatives. Others are quite new. And others, you know, I have to say, you know, I envy. I wish we had official apologies and national movements of reconciliation, [*like*] the Canadians do. In the United States, we're very much lacking that.

Just to back up one more time in your own personal history: you know, for Native Americans now, the residential schools, which are in the news constantly, involved churches. And Native Americans are deeply torn on preserving their indigenous culture. And sometimes - not always - some view Christianity as the cutting edge, the leading edge of an attempt to erase their traditional culture. Other Native Americans, which I write about in my book, have absolute comfort walking on both feet in two different spiritual

worlds. Can you explain how your family came to that particular path?

Grant: Well, certainly, the involvement of Christianity in the colonizing of Australia was strategic. And that shares similarities around the globe. I guess if you think of it from a British Empire perspective, they had it down to a fine art by the time they came to Australia; they've done China and India; they've done the Americas. By the time they get to Australia, in terms of colonizing approaches, sending in the missionaries to pacify the natives was a fine art by the time they got to us.

Even so, certain narratives within the Bible correlated, and values correlated, with our own stories of the creator: about being created in the image of our creator to have right relationships with God, right relationships with each other, right relationships with creation, and right relationships with ourselves, understanding who we are, in the world around us.

A lot of indigenous people, when they heard these stories, said, "They sound painfully familiar. You know, this is not - none of this is new to us. These - some of these narratives that you're telling us, are really familiar." Having said that, I've been asked by people at university when I was studying, "Brother, how can you bow down and worship the God of our colonizer, the God who colonizes our very interior, our soul?" And, you know, I didn't have the words when I was a young student, or the thought power to respond, only a sense of feeling - but - that stuff, my experience of the Christian God, the God who is revealed in Christ Jesus, to me, isn't the colonizer. Now that's a dreaming story, that's a bigger sacred story that, you know, is bigger than the one that came from Europe.

Certainly I can understand how the message of the Gospel was weaponized to take land, but we're also, like many movements in South America, indigenous peoples were able to - are able to - encounter these narratives and carry these sacred stories, you know, bypassing Europe and allowing these stories to resonate with us. We find that this is the God who did not come to take

away culture, to take away traditions; this is the Creator that comes to complete and restore.

And I guess it's that aspect of Christianity that I hold onto, that one that seeks to cosmically reconcile all things under himself. And I think that's the bit that's restorative. That restoration narrative is what some of our people really find connection and narrative to. And to be able to recognize the fact that the Creator was - it's the same Creator speaking.

I work with the Warlpiri people in Northern Territory, like I said earlier, and they see their traditional jukurrpa or dreaming stories and their currawarri, their law, as the same God speaking. The Creator God came, or Walparra as they call him, gave us the jukurrpa, the law and the dreaming, and then we've got the Old Testament and then the New Testament, but it's basically one conversation. Yeah. So it's basically Walparra speaking to us.

Randy: This is absolutely an outstandingly clear explanation of how you've combined, or found a common grounding, in two different traditions. This is the perfect place to bring in Christian Domer, because he's the person who introduced you to us. And his community is an intentional Christian community. So I would like him to pick up the story from the perspective of his community and how your two peoples encountered one another and found the very common ground that you're talking about. Christian, could you address that?

Christian Domer: Good day to our listeners. It's a pleasure to be on this show. I am a father of six and a grandfather of six, of German background. I'm a lifetime member of an intentional Christian community, which began in Germany in 1920 and has built up smaller and larger intentional communities in [North] America, South America, Australia, and other places in the world.

I was with a group of our members who came down here in 1999 to find land in Australia where we could build a community, and have been active for the years since then. As we bought the land and started to build up a village here in Australia, we very quickly got to know some of the local indigenous

peoples. And we also noted that they were recognized in any public ceremonies and their land, that they were here, the Gamilaraay people were part of recognition of that land.

And it intrigued me from the beginning that although there was this recognition, there was clearly a deep seated pain to be filled, in my relationships or in the times that I spent with the indigenous people. And so that has put me on a walk, a personal walk, which has led me to get to know many indigenous people, and of course, Grant, my dear brother Grant Paulson, who, with his family and others around him, have taught me a great deal both about their history and what they have gone through since my people - the white people - came to Australia.

But also have informed me about my faith and given me a better understanding of the universality and reality of the Christian faith that goes beyond just what we know from the Old and New Testament, just as Grant has so wonderfully laid out. So for me, it's a journey of humility, a journey of walking alongside and listening to my indigenous brothers and sisters, and, finding out that I have more to learn than to offer.

Randy: Thank you for the explanation. Once again, I think it's refreshing for listeners who may be stuck in the rut of reading superficial news stories about the antagonism between indigenous people and the Christian churches and missionaries and those who operated the residential schools here in the United States. They - they just assume that there's an unbridgeable gap and hostility. There've been news stories about churches being burned down on reservations. You know, it's really quite a tense situation.

But I love it when I hear explanations by people like you two, who explain that it's not about the differences, it's about, you know, the shared foundation at the very, very base of what the Creation is about. And you both explain it wonderfully. So have you - have you been reading about what's happening in the United States and Canada? Do you have a reflection on it based on your experiences working together and in your own communities?

Grant: Absolutely. I guess that shared grief and shared trauma gets triggered when we see some of those stories that emerged about, you know, children being buried and the horrific treatment. That bit, we share the pain there. It's like same sin, different soil. That's certainly our experience historically as well. We have - certainly - we know those treatments. And we feel with brothers and sisters over there.

Randy: Christian, how is this playing out in your community?

Christian: Are you speaking to me?

Randy: Yes. I was wondering how your community is looking at this from the distance of quite a ways away from North America.

Christian: Yes. Well, let me back up simply to the fact that I grew up in America, in upstate New York on land that was clearly under the caretaking of the Iroquois and other Indian tribes. And I grew up as a young boy spending a lot of time out in the fields and woods looking for arrowheads and other remnants of the First Nations peoples. And developed through that, a basic, I guess, awe would be the right word for peoples that were..... Just simply looking at an arrowhead and understanding what it would have taken to make them put in me an innate awe. So I've carried that through into my adult hood, and I and others in our community, as we hear about the treatment to the Native Americans, it certainly is painful for us knowing that peoples not only in America and, and now in our experience here in Australia, but really all over the world, as Grant said, were in a sense victimized by colonialism.

Randy: So on, on that very note, we're going to take a break and then return and talk about getting from being victims to forgiving. It's a long step for many, but it's an important step for all of us. We'll be back in a minute.

Carolyn: Thank you.

Segment Two

Randy: Welcome back to Indigenous Perspectives. Today's show is about the perspectives of elders, both indigenous and those of a European background, and how they are working together in Australia to help heal the legacy of a colonial history. For many of our listeners, the notion of healing is appealing, but the notion of forgiveness in the context of what we've been talking about might seem to be a far, far reach. Can each of you, in your own personal way first, explain how you have arrived at an understanding of forgiveness as it relates to the colonial history that you have uncovered or experienced in Australia?

Grant: I think the context of forgiveness is controversial here in Australia as well, as is the context of reconciliation; the term is controversial here in Australia as well. And it might not be the one that actually best represents the aspirations, but for want of a better term, it's what exists. Reconciliation assumes that parties were at peace at one stage, fell apart and then seek to reconcile and come back together. But, the truth in our colonial narrative is there was never any peace. There was never any position to start with. We're not operating from a sense of "togetherness and we're falling apart". We're still trying to get the initial phase of what it means to walk, profoundly and deeply, side-by-side and creating something new as equals. We don't have that quite yet.

What we do have is an aspiration for healing, and an aspiration to move forward. Many of our projects and programs are trying to be trauma-informed. We carry - we carry the wounds with us, into our advocacy, even into our community development aspirations. We're conscious of the fact that this is something we carry.

It's not that forgiveness isn't part of our culture. It's just that we need justice to be able to move forward. It's the concept of Christian grace. And "Christian", as applies in a colonial context, often cheapened the cross of Christ and often seeks to minimize the loss and the pain and the suffering in order to cut to the - you know, let's cut to the resurrected bar mitzvah, the lovey bits, the fun bits, let's bypass the suffering and the pain and focus on our

happiness and being together.

And so early missions never equipped us well to deal with that, because we were teaching the kind of forgiveness - almost cheap grace - that avoided brokenness and avoided the suffering of humanity. And it didn't always provide the tools to move through, because it was never set up to do that. At first - in the initial part of the colonial process - it was about pacifying, not justice. And so a lot of theologians, once they encountered a Bible from an indigenous perspective, thinking, "Hey, wait a minute. In the Old Testament, God is clearly a God of justice." You know, Jesus spends a disproportionate amount of time with those who are on the fringes. That's where God is, not with the powerful, but identifying with the wounded and the suffering and the marginalized. And so, struggling with colonial hypocrisy is part of the experience of many indigenous peoples. But forgiveness is still important, I do want to say that.

We have a father - a guy we call the grandfather of reconciliation. His name is - I just had a mental blank, sorry, his name will come to me - he's a Parliament *[member]*; he's a Senator now and in the Labour government - Pat Dodson. So Patrick Dodson says that advocacy without an imagination for what life looks like on the other side, is short-sighted. We need to have a vision of what things could look like beyond this current conflict. Otherwise we forever see ourselves in - define ourselves in terms of advocacy and reaction.

And we get an insidious form of colonized indigeneity creeping into our consciousness, where we define ourselves, not in terms of land and language, law, ceremony, and kinship, but we decide to stand - define ourselves in reaction to the colonizer. You know, we stand up for justice. And even when you see young people going to jail early, "I'm proper, proper black form, proper Aboriginal; I've been to prison now, like my grandfather and my father and my uncles before me." And these imposed colonial reactions are a cheap form of cultural identity because they're still not how the Creator made us to be or meant us to be. And that's why forgiveness is important.

Randy: You just taught me things that I have not had presented to me as an

indigenous person. This is an amazing learning experience. I'll have some more questions that we'll pick up on the next segment, but I want to give Christian a moment to talk about forgiveness and the path that he and his community have walked.

Christian: As we got to know the Aboriginal indigenous folk here, it was clear to me that residing within them was both a deep pain and a difficult past, but also a great warmth and welcome from the first day. And so that started us on a path of wanting to better understand where they were coming from and what their experiences had been. And one of the important things for our community was that we would take care of the land that we have - several thousand acres - and develop it. It had been badly degraded by European farming practices, which are not appropriate here in Australia. And so we've done a great deal, planting trees and doing other things to improve the land and as Grant's people saw some of what we were doing, it was obvious that it increased their appreciation for who we are. And that started us on a path of talking about the difficult things, and allowed us to also start reaching out to them, too, in our way, and ask for forgiveness for what our peoples have done to them over the last hundreds of years.

Carolyn: Okay. Well, thank you, Christian. Thank you, Grant. We'll be back in just a few minutes, a few moments with the third segment. Everybody stay tuned.

Segment Three

Carolyn: Welcome back to Indigenous Perspectives. We're speaking with our guests today from Australia, Grant Paulson and Christian Domer. And we're going to pick up a comment that Grant made in the last segment about the importance of five dimensions of identity for Australian indigenous peoples: land, language, law, ceremony, and kinship. Could you comment briefly with a couple of specific examples, why these are such an important starting point for continuing identity?

Grant: Yes. In the Walpiri peoples of central Australia, they call the - they refer to those five things as mujruculu, literally, meaning, home and land, homeland, but it means to be at home within the land of your ancestors, to be at home within yourself. And they talk about these five things as being critical for understanding the land from where you come from. Everything at the center, is, where we are based, language, because it connects us, and enables us to speak the - to use the words that connect with people and with our home land. And they're all interrelated. So our language informs and carries the ideas and aspirations of the heart and the soul, family and, kinship, connects us all. And it's not just a human kinship, it's a kinship between creation and animals and plants.

And knowing that we're all made by the same Creator, that we are all made fearfully and wonderfully made - it's not just a human and a human centric concept of kinship. And law because it frames everything in the right relationships, because we need a legal framework to say where the Creator wants us to live in a right relationship, and not one that is destructive to ourselves or each other. So laws are important to set and frame things.

Language, law and ceremony - ceremony is that sacred way of doing business, but also the way we network with our kinship, with our creation, that we are called to look after. We need ceremony, because we need to remind that it's a sacred trust that binds everything together. Ceremony is the way in which we need to navigate, and tie all of these concepts of language, law, ceremony, and kinship together. And ceremonies are also critical for navigating things like grief and loss, post-traumatic stress. We need ceremony to help us navigate through trauma. And the aspirations of forgiveness - really needs a ceremonial pathway for us because we need the sacred drivers to navigate us through appropriate spiritual and social change.

Randy: You're anticipating my second question for the segment, which is about the difference between forgetting and forgiving, because you're reminding us that we don't forget - that would be the absolute travesty. It's actually about remembering in a different way. But for a lot of people, the notion of forgiving means, oh, I just forget about what you did to me. I'm

talking about domestic abuse - you know, I just turn the other cheek and let them hit me again. You know, this is not what anyone here on this show is talking about. So I'm going to ask you to elaborate a bit, and Christian jump in if you'd like to participate in this discussion - what is the difference between forgiving and forgetting, and how can we keep them separate in the public's mind?

Grant: I see ceremony as key to the process of forgiving, but also commemorating that things come at a cost. That's what Easter is. We don't - in the Christian message, I'll just pick up an analogy - mainstream, Christian theology - we don't go through a process of spiritual amnesia as soon as we choose to follow Christ. Every year at Easter time, there's a ceremony that we go through, a sacred ceremony of remembrance, of breaking bread, of drinking the wine, and when all those ceremonies are done, and this is looking at those ceremonies through an indigenous lens, we're actually saying: I'm remembering that forgiveness costs, I'm remembering that the pain of making right relationships isn't cheap. And it's not spiritual amnesia. It is the process of - it's an active process of choosing healing and choosing a pathway of reclaiming our humanity and reclaiming our - our purpose as from the Creator. To walk around wounded is not our - it's not our purpose, I don't believe

Randy: So, Christian, I now understand your earlier comment about meeting Grant and others helped you to be informed about your own religion. Would you like to pick up and run with that?

Christian: Yes, I'd like to describe an event that happens every year at the site of a massacre of a number of indigenous people, near where our community is. Called Myall Creek. Because it amplifies exactly this, that it's really in both the white community and the indigenous folk getting together and remembering, commemorating a horrific event where they suffered. And I certainly haven't suffered. But in understanding that by bringing together descendants of both the indigenous peoples and the settlers who perpetrated this massacre, and reaching out the hand of friendship in simply

remembering, helps to both heal the wounds of the past, but more importantly, as Grant said, turn us toward the opportunity of looking to the future. Looking beyond knowing that we can't get stuck in the past, victimhood on their side, or a feeling of guilt on my side, with no answer to a future that moves past that and brings redemption to both of us.

Randy: Thank you for the clarification. This is - this is really exciting. We're going to take a break and we'll be back in a few minutes for the fourth segment.

Segment Four

Carolyn: Welcome back to the final segment of Indigenous Perspectives. Again, we're talking with Grant Paulson and Christian Domer on the situation of the Australian indigenous people. And particularly in the last segment here, we'll talk about ideas for ways to move forward, ways to heal, the kinds of reparations, the kinds of commitment needed from all sides to find a better way.

So, Grant, I know that Australia, the governments have done a number of things. There's "Sorry Day", there've been apologies. A number of places have paid reparations to members of the stolen generations, the indigenous children forcibly removed from their homes by government policy during a lot of the 20th century. Can you comment on what specific actions, especially actions that the mainstream white Australians can take, that have meaning for you and for Australian indigenous communities?

Grant: I find enshrining processes of healing in ceremony critically important for me. Sometimes there are deep – there are deep places to travel; there are deep wells to drink from, that we can't do it just in a singular legislative process, an act of parliament. Those things are all good, but they're - they're mechanical processes for legal entities. They're all colonial instrumentalities. For me, the idea of doing ceremonial business around fire together transcends all of those things. Now from a legal, technical post-colonial advocacy,

spirituality is probably weak. But for me, it's actually the hub, the real power source that actually gives legal frameworks and treaties any kind of meaning.

We need spiritual ceremonies that anchor our time together. So the ones that have meaning for me are ones that are like the ceremonies that brother Christian talks about, where they remember massacres. They've done it also in the Northern Territory - Coniston Massacre, between Walpiri and mounted police, where the descendants choose to meet together, to remember and do ceremony business together.

So where those places intersect, where people come back together to remember and to do ceremony together, is where that deep transaction, that real - that currency for sustainability comes from. I mean, we can do it around Remembrance Day for wars and whatnot. I'm thinking we need those "Lest We Forget" around our narratives of healing and our narratives of pain. So we don't - [so] we remember that the kind of community we co-create together is built and shaped in the remembrance of those who are lost along the way. So I think healing is critical. Forgiveness is critical. I think we need sacred drivers for social change, and, and that needs to be embedded in our way going forward.

Randy: I love your phrase about enshrining acts of healing, and not depending on colonial instrumentalities. I will not forget those words. I want to go back to Christian's retelling of the Myall [Creek] Massacre ceremony that happens yearly. I would like you each to revisit that event and tell it through the eyes of your particular cultural background. And Grant, let's start with you. How would people who are indigenous, who attend that ceremony, experience it slightly differently than people from the colonial settler background? And how can you teach the others to enter your spiritual space?

Grant: I'm not sure how to bring someone into that sense of horror and disempowerment. and almost - this might sound weird, but the Aboriginal in me really doesn't want people to have to experience the trauma just like us. You know, some people say, "I want to put them through exactly the trauma." Really?! I don't think you could equate this, you know, unless we had an alien

force come in from out of space, moving us on. What we've been through is horrific.

But I do want people to stand with us. I do want to enter into the "Sorry" business of remembering those ancestors lost, the pain, the shame, and just pausing to enter into that space. And I think it's important that our colonizers enter into their pain and shame with their ancestors as well, and stand with them. And sit with the discomfort.

So when life outside of these ceremonies revisits us, we remember physically, emotionally, spiritually, what happened when we stood together to remember, when we stood together in pain. And we - when we go through the pain of trying to rebuild something better - we remember the pain of what it feels like to stand in the historical space as well. It's probably the difference between clean pain and dirty pain. It's the *[clean]* pain that reminds us, we're trying to build something better rather than the dirty pain of avoidance and attacking and dehumanizing .

Randy: Christian, do you have - I mean, we have literally like a half a minute, but I'd love to know if there's something you can add to that, or if that's the final word, that's pretty powerful words.

Christian: For us it's the journey, which we need to travel together. On our property, we have a creek, and if Grant and I are walking up that creek, one on each side, we are slowly coming together step by step. So in ceremony, whether it be at Myall Creek or breaking bread together, spending time around a campfire, although there is experiences that we've each had that we cannot share, or pass on, there is the shared walk as we move forward, which brings us closer together and understands that the end of the journey will bring us into true understanding and brotherhood.

Randy: I think the respect that you have for one another's differences and historical experiences, and the desire to spare one another pain, is one of the

most extraordinary forgiving and kind things I've ever heard. I thank you both.

We're running out of time; we're going to have to wrap it up. I want to thank you, Grant, and Christian for this. This has been a great learning experience for me. I hope at another time we can continue this discussion, but to our viewers right now, I want to say Migwetch - thank you - for listening.

I hope that this broadcast has given you time and space to reconnect with your roots in Mother Earth and with your ancestral roots. Before your busy day distracts you from this moment, I encourage you to take a few minutes to reach out and feel the presence of living flora and fauna, and perhaps even that of your ancestors. Allow yourself to touch their presence, capture that moment and hold onto it. And if you might, write to me and let me know about your experience. I can be reached at randykritkausky@hushmail.com or through my website, randykritkausky.com, where you can also find transcripts and supplemental materials for Indigenous Perspectives radio programs. And there will be a transcript for this program that allows you to read as well as listen. Thank you very much. Thank you.

For audio: (56 minutes)

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