

# A Personal Experience of Pentecost

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 19 May 2024

A Reflection by Gillian Hunt

Day of Pentecost B

**Acts 2: 1-4, 6, 14-18; Contemporary Reading *Blessing in the Chaos* by Jan Richardson.**

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

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We have just heard a scripture passage about a day, I imagine, of powerful spiritual experiences for many of Jesus's followers. An experience that took them beyond themselves, way beyond what they ever imagined being possible.

Today I have been asked to share what I might claim as a personal spiritual experience, or even two.

Come with me if you will to Central Australia. We are part of a group at Uluru.

Two of us choose to walk the 9.4 kms around the base of the Rock. We set off early one morning before the day's heat becomes too much to walk at all. The path from the Visitors Centre hides our destination until the moment it makes a turn. Suddenly we are before the first face of that monolith. At that exact moment, we both gasp. A powerful bodily sensation of being drawn in to its very core. Simultaneously we ask, *did you feel it? Yes! Me too!*

Now you may wish to speak of some metallic quality in the red earth or the Rock itself, although my latest Google search describes its composition as non-magnetic. I cannot offer you a scientific or even rational explanation for what we both experienced in that desert quietness.

We had set off for the pleasure and satisfaction of a lengthy early morning walk around a majestic icon, taking in the Indigenous stories we had heard the previous day. The experience we were given was vastly more than we had expected. It remains as powerful now as it was then. A turning point in my appreciation of the significance of connection that indigenous people feel to land. How connection is belonging, a form of healing for them. But at the time I saw deep connection to land as a healing experience for Indigenous people, not me.

Up to this point, what I have said was written before I'd heard the Revd Dr Garry Warete Deverell speak here last month. Garry's invitation to think of all creation as animate, that is, imbued with ancestral spirits, has given me a new appreciation of our experience at Uluru that day. Garry asked: *what if God is the Rock? What if the Rock was inviting us both into a deeper, healing relationship with itself?*

Joy Hario captured this relationship in her poem *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings* when she wrote 'The land is a being who remembers everything.'

It felt as if my world view had slipped out of its old skin, taken me beyond myself and opened me to a new understanding of my place in creation. For me it was not then a healing, but a deeply spiritual experience.

Most, if not all of us, experience moments when something turns, changes direction, purpose or meaning. In the context of a poem it is called *volta*, the Italian word for 'turn'. What has begun with one thought has now become something other. Something new is being revealed, understood or recognised for the first time. I found it in Dawn Markova's poem, *A lived Life*.<sup>1</sup> The first 10 lines describe letting go her fear of living a lesser life and choosing to live more openly. Then the next line changes, does a turn. She says;

*I choose to risk my significance.*

Not my insignificance.

That brings me to a second experience that I call spiritual and healing.

In her book *Bright Shining, how Grace changes everything*, Julia Baird tells the story of an indigenous woman, Auntie Lorraine Peeters, who is removed from her family and sent to the Cootamundra Girls' Home (p197). She is four years old. She spends her childhood years there and emerges deeply scarred. Eventually she knows she needs to return and address her pain. With great courage she does so. The most important part of healing [she says] is spiritual well-being, 'the core of our being for us mob.'

To me, Lorraine Peeters was claiming the value of her story, her need for, and right to, spiritual well-being. She too, chose to risk her significance.

Auntie Lorraine's story reminded me of a *Walking on Country Tour* that I went on, organised by people in the Uniting Church. This one took us to NSW Wiradjuri country, on which stands the Cootamundra Girls' Home. It was a strange connection for me, as I discovered that the house where my grandparents lived was only a couple of streets away. They raised their six kids there, my father included.

Cootamundra Training Home, also known as Cootamundra Domestic Training Home for Girls, Cootamundra Girls' Home and Cootamundra Home for Orphan and Neglected Children, was established by the Aborigines Protection Board in a disused hospital building in 1911.

Aboriginal girls were removed from stations and reserves and taken to the Home after being reported to the Aborigines Protection Board by station managers or police, or spotted by the Home-Finder, Miss Alice Lowe. The Board would remove the child, sometimes after taking her to the Children's Court to be prosecuted. Girls were described on Board records as 'of an age to be apprenticed' or taken 'for training' or, if their parents resisted, as 'neglected.'

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/13545>

They were there to be trained to become domestic servants and farm hands in wealthy non-Aboriginal households. Girls in the homes were referred to as 'inmates' and parents were unable to regain access to their children until they turned 18, and in many cases never again. The Girls experienced systematic racial discrimination to remove their Aboriginal identity and alienate them from their families.

In 1940 the Aborigines Protection Board was replaced by the Aborigines Welfare Board. The regime at the home became slightly more liberal, although it must be said the Aborigines Welfare Board instigated these changes to provide opportunities for Aboriginal girls to assimilate with white mainstream culture. Cootamundra girls began to attend the local high school and enter their produce and craft in the Cootamundra Show. Cootamundra townspeople became more involved in fundraising for the home, and girls began to attend dances and socials. They also had more training and employment opportunities, although domestic service remained a priority until it closed in 1969. In 2014 the renamed Bimbadeen was still in use as an Aboriginal-run Christian training centre.

All this information however does not include Lorraine's story, or stories of a babies' cot room and toddlers as young as two being taken there. Or of the ones who waited at the end of the drive every visitors' day for someone to come for them, but someone never did.

On our visit we were told that parents were often prevented from visiting; or they may have lived too far away to be able to visit.

My father's sister Roma, now approaching 102 years old, told me she and her sisters knew of the girls and were warned to keep clear of them. My grandparents, father, aunts and uncle were living with the stories they had been told, not the full truth of the lives of those girls in the Home.

The day I visited the Home turned into a very personal recognition of the pain of First Nations People when they are separated from their culture, land, family and kin. My father and his siblings were not removed from Grandma and Grandpa. Dad lived a hard-working, honest life, unaware of the truth of those Aboriginal girls.

Questions unexpectedly arise in me – *Why am I telling this second story?* I thought it was connecting my experience at Uluru and my day in Cootamundra. Both had reminded me how vital is connection with the ordinary mystery of the natural world. And how basic is my need to belong to our human family.

Feelings of discomfort persist but I can't put my finger on them. The occasions I describe happened some years ago. If they were of such spiritual significance, what have I done to share their impact, other than to speak of them today? Words from a recent reflection our minister Revd Dr Josephine Inkpin gave are occupying my mind. '*You are beloved*', she said. Those words do not come easily from my mouth, from my heart. We can say them, but not fully know them.

And so, like Auntie Lorraine Peeters, I'm surprising myself. I'm choosing to risk my significance. To own that, as with every other part of creation, I am beloved; that I have a voice; that speaking today may even carry the potential to change someone else's world view and sense of connection.

On the day we now call Pentecost, ordinary people were caught up in something powerful, life-changing, re-orienting. Such experiences can take us beyond ourselves, beyond what we ever imagined being possible. And they can also take us deeper into ourselves, to a place we had not known we needed to be.

I recently found a poem by Mary Oliver<sup>2</sup>, a favourite poet of many of us. It is called *Moments*. Let me read it to you.

See: <https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/44222696-felicity>

*There are moments that cry out to be fulfilled.....*

The disciples went headlong into Pentecost. Collectively they had experienced doubt, denial, deceit and despair yet on that day their lives took a significant, unexpected, healing turn.

I like to think they realised that they were beloved.

Today has turned into a spiritual and a healing experience for me too.

Moments of grace for which I am utterly thankful.

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<sup>2</sup> Mary Oliver, *Felicity*, Corsair UK 2018