

The Spiritual Unity of the Tribes.

In the heart of spa country central Victoria, just out of Daylesford under the shadow of Lambargook (Mt Franklin), Dan O'Connor and Sue Ewart have offered their majestic property for Australia's first ever 'spiritual gathering' known as The Spiritual Unity of the Tribes. The property is known as 'Dja William', a name given to them by descendants of the original inhabitants of the land, the Djarra people; it means 'Earth Nest'.

It's early morning, dew is still on the ground and the birds chortle high in the forest trees. In the clearing by the creek the smoke snakes up and around the tipis as people stir to their early morning tasks. Up on higher ground a buffalo skull painted to represent the American flag, guards the sacred arbour, The ceremonial fire is set and waits to be lit. It seems homage is to native American culture rather than indigenous Australian culture.

People have gathered on the Easter long weekend from near and far to celebrate the Wisdom of the Elders, along with them Nell Bell, life member of the Australian Storytelling Guild, proclaimed shanacie, respected elder and loved grandmother

Nell represents the Guild and she has come in search of stories that reflect the aims of the gathering, ' to honour the spirit, the sanctity of the land and the wisdom of the elders.'

They say powerful songlines traverse the district that was once home to the Djarra people but now the district is renowned for it's invigorating mineral waters and spas, its plethora of New Age industries, great food and wine. But as Nell and friends pass through the cappuccino capital of Victoria and its streets teeming with indulgent tourists it seems more a hedonist's paradise than the site for serious spiritual reflection.

Onto a rough bush track off the back Glenlyon road and bush poles strung with a huge canvas sign indicate they've found the gathering. Cars are parked in a paddock, so a walk down to the house and camping sites is necessary.

Through the gates and down the rough driveway to the house and campsite, but before they can enter they need to be smudged, a process whereby smoldering branches of gum trees and leaves are passed over and around their bodies to cleanse them. People involved have a serious reverence towards these rituals.

During the morning people trickle down this road into the valley like grains of sand in an hourglass until a microcosm of the world's people are colourfully represented. Indigenous cultures represented by their elders include Native American Indians, Canadians, (June please add others you can think of) and the Djarra clan They are, however, outnumbered by numerous lean young 'ferals' with matted hair, bright beads and colourful clothing.

People sit and lie in small groups around the arbour waiting for the fire to be lit. As a mark of respect descendants of the Djarra people have been asked to light the fire but they haven't arrived from Bendigo for the official 11o'clock start.

Nell decides to seek out some of the elders, she is curious how storytelling defines other cultures?

Along with sound recordist June Barnes and permission from Dan and Sue they approach Kalieran, (Anak Agung Gede Oka Kalieran) from Bali.

Kalieran is still rugged up as protection against the early morning cool weather, nut brown face, snow white hair, twinkling eyes and a smiling face, he happily agrees to be interviewed. 'Bali' is a sanskrit word that means 'to return', a reference to their migration from Java in the 10th century and their belief that they will one day go back. Many of their stories revolve around the history and background to their life in Bali. Children learn of their culture through storytelling with a special emphasis and love for dancing and shadow puppets. Kalieran informs Nell that their religion is based around the importance of remembering ancestors. It is bad luck not to acknowledge them. Balinese strongly believe in Karma, the cosmic operation of retributive justice determined by your thoughts and actions. He laughs as he tells her that Balinese people are always doing good because they are afraid of Karma. Nell pushes him for specific stories and he mentions The Mahabharata. This is the sacred book of the Hindus and is the world's longest epic. Its central plot is about the conflict between spirits of evil (Kurus) and the spirits of good (Pandus). It is the source of thousands of stories. The Balinese use The Mahabharata on special occasions such as supporting families through a death.

During their conversation a young lad walks around banging his bodhran drum to announce lunch is on. Nell and Kalieran are feed first in acknowledgement of their status as elders. Nell comments, 'Beef stew on Good Friday!'

After lunch Nell and June wander over to where Brenda Kerr, of the Djarra people, is preparing a bush humpy to part of the opening ritual. She still waits for her mum and aunts to arrive. Brenda is nervous she has never been spokesperson for her family before she prefers to dance her stories. Nell quiz's her about stories of the surrounding district and beliefs of her people but is saddened that her knowledge is quite scant.

Late in the afternoon when the Djarra elders have all finally arrived the ceremony begins. Dan and Sue led the crowd of 500 down into the valley to address them. People are welcomed and then move off in single file, everyone passes through the fire lit next to Brenda's humpy, it seems aboriginal people use smoke for cleansing as well. Slowly steadily everyone circles the arbour and finds a place to sit under the shade of the gum tree branches that make its roof.

Nell and the other elders are given seats at the front and the fire is lit. The native American influence is strong, chanting, drumming and pipe smoking are the focus of the ceremony.

As the cool night air descends Nell decides to head back to town but will return the next day.

After chatting with Brenda and her family the previous day Nell is greeted by them like an old friend. When they are asked to take their time speaking at the fire Nell is invited to sit with them. But first the native Canadian elders. Nell is disappointed, she is hoping to be uplifted but their stories are downbeat and talk of troubled times. Where she had hoped for shared wisdom, only tales of woe.

Next, a very nervous Brenda takes centre stage. Nell offers words of encouragement, 'Tell them about your home land.'

'My people were always taught the three R's; Respect, Responsibility and Religion. We always learnt that we must look after the land and its creatures. We listen to the birds, they bring us messages'

Brenda struggled to find words, compared to the verbosity of the American elders, it was like a small flame slowly flickering. Next another indigenous Australian speaking for the first time, a woman from central NSW. There was much sadness in her heart but she acknowledged a circle of elders that was helping her through, she dreams of great things for her people.

That night when Nell and her party left there was an overwhelming sense of sadness amongst them. Sadness evoked by the passing of an ancient culture and a floundering sense of identity.

It was Nell's love and passion for stories that brought her to the gathering, her constant search for illuminating stories, her belief in their power and importance in defining cultures. She wondered why others had come.

People seemed to be desperately searching for spiritual enlightenment. Moments of ritual where fervently attended; arms by their side palms facing up, people hoping to share and receive healing energies. Solemn, fervent, respectful of the elders as they waited to receive the wisdom.

'I thought this would be more of a celebration,' commented Nell. 'Everything seems so gloomy and serious.'

On the final day Nell finally experienced a joyful shared moment, something to bring a glimmer of hope and understanding.

Brenda's Uncle and others of his dancing troupe had arrived after performing elsewhere to take part in the closing ceremony. In his loin cloth and decorative paint he made an impressive figure. People waited for his words of wisdom.

'Today I am going to perform an old sacred dance of my people. It is very special and all those who would like to learn please stand up. This dance has come down through the ages and it is very important to the Djarra people. We call it the Patcher Dance.'

People stood and prepared themselves, they waited for the understanding that would come through knowledge of the dance. Innocently hopeful the old man led them on.

'Okay everyone ready.'

Anticipation was high and the old man began,

'You put your right foot in.'

Nell did all she could to contain herself from laughing uproariously. Laughter, as always, the best medicine.

She watched, as it dawned on the participants the old man had strung them along with a joke. At last, light hearted sharing of cultures.

Before Nell left the gathering she swapped numbers with Brenda and her Mum Nola, she promised to keep in touch. Before it is too late Nell wants the descendants of the Djarra people to start preserving their stories. From this first flickering and representation at a spiritual gathering Nell hopes to urge them on and remind them of the importance of stories. Nell is adamant that Australians need the stories of our landscape and the wisdom of our indigenous elders.