



The John Wallis Memorial Lecture 2013

Spirituality in a secular society

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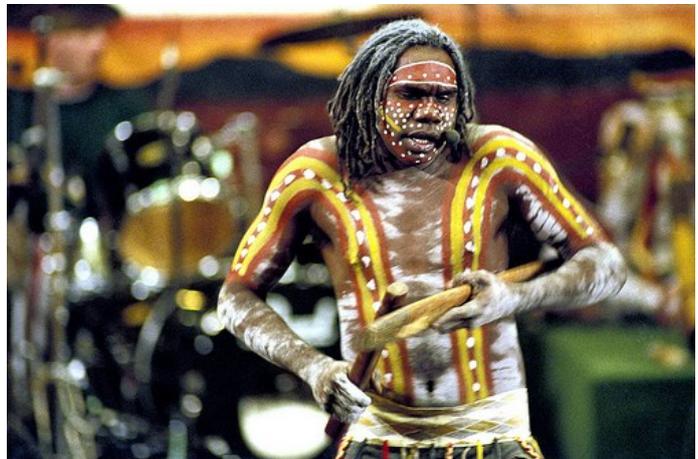
Can I start by making an admission? I can't define 'spirituality' – possibly the most important word in the title of tonight's talk. What's more, I don't want to try. But I will throw up a few ideas about what the word 'spirituality' means to me. I read somewhere that the world 'soul' – variations of which appear in lots of European languages with a Germanic base – originally meant 'coming from or belonging to the sea', because that's where souls were thought to reside after death and before birth.

That idea intrigues me, because Tasmanian Aborigines believed the souls or spirits of their dead went to the islands of Bass Strait. And I like an Aboriginal word I came across some years ago in Broome, West Australia – *liyan* meaning 'inner guide'. But from what I was told, *liyan*, the inner guide, is not something held on an individual basis; it is an individual glimpse of an intelligence, an intuition, held in common – like an elevated notion of common sense.

I also want to make it clear that I am not some sort of New Age guru. I am not speaking with the confidence of one who has reached a point of serenity, of one who has *arrived*. I most

certainly have not *arrived*. To quote Bob Dylan from his aptly titled album *Blood on the Tracks* – “Me, I'm still on the *road!!!*”. Or, again to quote the profoundly sincere Koori singer Archie Roach, “To see yourself, to lose yourself, to find yourself anew – that is the journey”. It's certainly been my journey, and ironically – perhaps even necessarily – in the course of writing this speech, something happened which caused me to lose myself.

That something was the hacking to death of Drummer Rigby in Woolwich by a young British-born Muslim who said he wanted to start a war, and, in my opinion, has gone some way towards doing so. In the days that followed, as I searched around for some sort of meaningful response to that incident, I was reminded of an essay on the civil war in Northern Ireland written by Seamus Heaney some years ago in which he quoted these lines from one of Shakespeare's sonnets: “How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea,/ Whose action is no stronger than a flower?”.



World's Indigenous peoples participate in Launching of International Year
by United Nations Photo, flickr rr

As you may know, I'm a journalist. The art of a journalist, in my view, is for him or her to know what they know, to know what they don't know, and to be able to tell the difference. To me, the mark of honest journalists is to identify for readers – or in this case, listeners – where it is they're coming from. Everybody is coming from somewhere – no-one comes from nowhere. With indigenous people, the first question commonly asked is – “where's your mob from?”. Knowing an individual's mob tells you a lot about the individual. So, where's my mob from? With the exception of one great grandfather who was an English non-conformist, they were Irish. The first Flanagan – indeed, most of my male forebears - arrived in Tasmania as convicts.

If I interview anyone, I want to know about the person's parents. Who were they? What did they do? What did they believe in? My father has been the biggest single influence on my life. During World War 2, he survived the Burma Railway, where 100,000 men of different nations employed as slave labour by the Imperial Japanese Army died laying 400kms of track. My father returned from the war with no formal religious beliefs. He really only had one criterion by which he judged his children or anyone else – did they have what he called humanity and what Buddhists call compassion? I called him a bush Buddhist.

My mother was a product of old-style Irish-Australian Catholicism, with its fierce loyalty to Rome. I never 'got' the Roman Catholic church – I never got its costumes and rituals. In particular, I never got how the Vatican, a centrepiece of medieval European pomp and privilege, saw itself as the mouthpiece of the itinerant Jewish rebel I read about in the gospels.

Having said that, I need to add that, as an adult, I keep meeting Catholics who excite me, and as someone who is asked to speak in lots of schools, I have often noted a special energy in Catholic schools, one that seems to derive from their emphasis on social justice. It's as if there is a Catholic spirit in the world that exists independently of the leadership of the Catholic church. That spirit, to me, is like an old welcoming ghost I run into now and then.

But when I left school at the age of 16, I was, in spiritual terms, a young man without a map or a compass. I liked and respected my father, but he was the opposite of paternalistic – he never told me who I was or what to do. Nor did he tell me who he was or why he was. He just gave me the example of his living and a sense of life as a mystery. I read a lot, seeking answers. I read the Old and New Testaments at school. Later, I read the Koran and the Hindu holy book, the Upanishads, but probably the maxim that most struck me from the various holy books came from the Chinese book of wisdom, the Tao. The maxim was that those who say do not know, those who know do not say. I relate this to Jesus' remark that “by the fruits of their actions you shall know them”. To some extent, those two sayings have guided me.

At the age of 23, I left Australia, and spent two years wandering the world, desperately seeking meaning. I came from a place – Tasmania – that had no real memory of my folk, the Irish people who arrived in the 1840s as convicts. Because convictism subsequently became a source of shame, and convicts were blanked out of family histories, I didn't know from which part of Ireland my forebears came, whether they spoke English or Irish, nor any of their songs or stories or dances. In addition to that, I was from an island that had no real memory of the people who were there before my forebears, the ones who lived there for thousands and thousands of years. I'm a traditional man – but where was my tradition?

I left Australia and went to Ireland. I found I was like the Irish – except I wasn't. There was another part to me, the part that was Australian. The great Aboriginal footballer, Michael Long, talks about 'the jigsaw of Aboriginal identity'. In Ireland that first time, I was confronted by the jigsaw of my own identity. In truth, I had never felt more dangerously alone. In a cheap hotel room in Dublin, I had an existential moment,

and decided I had to do something. Anything. So I hitchhiked into Northern Ireland, then in a state of civil war.

At Newry, crossing into Northern Ireland, we were stopped by a platoon of British soldiers, weapons at the ready. A truck driver had picked me up an hour or so earlier. In that part of the world, they say they can tell whether you're a Catholic or a Protestant by looking at you. They also say you should never ask anyone their religion. I asked the truck driver his religion. He said he was Protestant. He asked me mine. Suddenly sensing I was out of my depth, I lied and said Methodist. But I knew the truck driver knew I was lying, that I was a Catholic, a definition which, in that context, has nothing to do with the divine but everything to do with your cultural grouping.

We entered Belfast, passing murals celebrating paramilitary groups, men in black balaclavas brandishing automatic weapons. We went past a street corner, a bare Godforsaken place. The truck driver said a man had been 'executed' by the IRA there the week before. Then he said, "Where are you staying tonight?". I said, "A pub in the middle of town". He said, "Don't you read newspapers? They've all been blown up". By this time, it was dusk. Everywhere I looked, I saw people rushing, anxious to reach home. I started to become scared.

So, what happened? The Protestant truck driver, one of whose kids was having a birthday party for which he was supposed to be home, took it upon himself to drive around Belfast and find me, this ignorant Catholic kid from Tasmania, a safe place for the night. And so I encountered a paradox – I'd come to Ireland seeking my Irish Catholic roots and been protected by one of their traditional enemies.

I travelled the world for another two years. I ended up in the Sudan, quite ill, travelling south from the Egyptian border to Khartoum by train. I was sick when I got on the train, and became steadily worse with the combined effect of desert heat and unsanitary toilets and bad water and people everywhere, even under your feet when you sat down. Nonetheless, I met a couple of young Sudanese lads who shared their food with me in return for learning some English. Then they said they were going to sleep on the roof of the train, did I want to come? I said yes, without thinking. It was like a scene out of a western, me clambering about on the side of the train with these two young blokes on top of the carriage pulling me up by the arms. But it sure was worth it – lying on the roof of the carriage under a big African sky illuminated by millions of stars, cool air rushing over my body, train rocking beneath my back.

Come dawn, however, uniformed men with batons cleared the sleepers off the roof, and I was back in the fetid hellhole below. We stopped at a station in the middle of the desert. There was one water pump on the station platform. By this stage, I was shitting water and had a pain in my head rolling about like a steel ball. Everyone made for the pump. I joined the jostling crowd and let it carry me forward like a tide. Eventually, it was my turn. I bent over and tried to wash my face, running a bar of soap through my hair. Pain echoed through my head and, with so many people waiting, I pulled away, the job half-done. Then I heard a voice. A young man in a white *jellabah* was motioning me forward. Everything had stopped, everyone was watching. Putting out his hand, he took the soap from my hand and washed my hair. I would describe his act as Christ-like, but he was probably a Moslem. At that moment, as with the truck driver in Belfast, I was the beneficiary of a common humanity that transcended race, religion, and colour.

But it was what happened after I arrived home that probably influenced me most. When I returned to Australia, I still had many of the questions I had left



Rally at Garema Place 14 July 2007 by pierre pouliquin, flickr cc

with – particularly How did I fit into this place when my spiritual heritage came from elsewhere? How did I belong here? When I finally met people who understood the questions I was asking, they were Aboriginal people. On the basis of the Australian history books I'd read in my youth, they had every reason to view me as the enemy, but I found that if I approached them in a spirit of humility and respect I was, by and large, accepted.

I've learned so much from Aboriginal people. It intrigues me, for example, that many western artists from affluent backgrounds depict the world in dark and often violent ways. Then I look at paintings by traditional Aboriginal artists, people whose lives have been subjected to violent change on so many levels, and see colourful, ordered worlds. Notwithstanding the insults and injuries inflicted upon their culture, so many Aboriginal people I have met have been compassionate human beings, and with that quality comes a shrewd understanding of their fellow human beings. And, so often, Aboriginal thinking as I've encountered it comes back to an idea of oneness – the sense of an ultimate common origin. And in Aboriginal Australia I have met some great spirits.

Reg Saunders was a Gunditjmara man from western Victoria. He was such a good soldier that in 1943, when Australia was under threat of invasion from the Imperial Japanese Army, the Australian government had to promote him to the rank of captain. This was at a time when Aboriginal Australians weren't even counted in the census, and were subjected to all manner of discriminatory laws. The effect of his promotion to the rank of captain meant that he had authority under military law over men of whom, under Australian civil law, he wasn't the equal. But the country was in such a state of dire need that all that became secondary. It was my great good fortune to meet Reg Saunders in the 1980s. What I met was a man who had been comprehensively subjected to racism who had no racism in his heart. Reg Saunders told me something I have never forgotten. He said, and I quote, "People say my beliefs are soft, but I've tested them against every reality I encountered". And so, I would like to think, have I.

Uncle Banjo Clarke was an old Kirraewurrung man who lived in a hut on the edge of the Framlingham forest outside Warrnambool. Uncle Banjo was a great storyteller, and when I say 'great', I mean a man who, as he spoke, opened your mind so much you forgot where you started. When he was only 13 years old, he carried his swag outback. *Smoke Under the Bridge* is a Paul Kelly song based on an Uncle Banjo story – if he saw smoke under a bridge on the outskirts of town around sunset he knew there were blackfellers around and he'd be all right that night. He told me how one day he approached a farmhouse for food on the Bendigo road. There was no one home except a boy aged about nine or ten. The kid gave Banjo half the food in the kitchen, and then said he was coming with him. Banjo had to talk him out of it. Banjo eventually continued on his way, but he kept turning round, and every time he looked back he saw the kid still standing there, still watching him.

Listening to Uncle Banjo tell stories was like reading Huckleberry Finn. He'd seen plenty of bad things. He'd been to prison. He said to me, in the old days if a blackfeller pleaded not guilty they give him an extra three months for being a smartarse. But Uncle Banjo told me that when he was a youth, carrying his swag, the thought that kept him going was that there'd be a good person over the next hill.

I know that between us lies a common humanity we all intuitively recognise. And, in that, lies my confidence for the future

Curiously, the day Uncle Banjo died in 2000, I met Rajmohan Gandhi, grandson of Mahatma Gandhi. He told me Gandhi, one of the great figures of the 20th century, believed the trend of history showed that most people were good. Dad believed it. So did Weary Dunlop. Dad was with Weary during the war, and it was my great good fortune to know Weary and spend time with him. He said to me once, "There's quite a bit of

God in the ordinary bloke". My father lived to within a couple of months of his 99th birthday. About ten years before he died, he told me God is all the good people that have ever been in the world.

Men like Dad and Weary and Uncle Banjo have been my elders, and partly because of their example I don't fear people from other cultures, races, religions. I know that between us lies a common humanity which we all intuitively recognise. And, in that, lies my confidence for the future.

Then something happens like the hacking to death of Drummer Rigby in Woolwich. After apologising in a rather English manner to any women who might have witnessed the outrage he had just committed, the young man with the bloody hands said he wanted to start a war. His statement that British soldiers were performing equally brutal acts in "our lands", meaning Muslim countries, was the biggest boost the European far Right and fascist groups have had for years. Here he was saying what they had been arguing, that ultimately Muslims give their loyalty to Islam and not to their country unless it's an Islamic state. The young man said he wanted a war, and he went a long way towards provoking one. How did I feel watching that? Hopeless.

And then, a few days later, I remembered something funny. About ten years ago, I awoke one morning with a similar feeling of hopelessness. Somehow, I knew that somewhere, somehow, hope would cross my path that day, even if it was only in a tiny way. The trick, I decided, was to record it, to commit it to memory. That day, I was interviewing an Irish artist named Robert Ballagh at the Celtic Club in the centre of Melbourne. Robert Ballagh was a significant supporter of the Northern Ireland Peace Process. I was about to begin the interview, when an old Irishman walked up to us and said, "Can I buy you men a drink?". We said yes. When he returned with two pints of Guinness, I assumed he knew Robert Ballagh and was being polite to me, but in handing me my drink he said, "Do you know Father Bob Maguire?". I said I did. He said, "Father Bob says when there is men like Martin Flanagan in the world, there is hope". I went home that night, not necessarily feeling more hopeful, but knowing nonetheless where hope lay.

Sometimes, hope isn't a feeling – it's a choice. Sometimes, to use a sporting metaphor, we have to make the play. But looking back further on that afternoon at the Celtic Club, I also remembered what Robert Ballagh said about the Peace Process in Northern Ireland: "In the end, there is no alternative to dialogue". This I believe. We've got to keep talking. There are people of goodwill on all sides. We have to reach out and find those people and make connections.

Australia is changing before our eyes. One in ten Australians is now of Asian origin. For the first time, most Australians between 25 and 34 don't identify as Christian. My daughter teaches English in the western suburbs of Melbourne in a school in which two thirds of the kids either don't speak English at home or don't speak it as their first language.

Can we make a picture and get everyone to fit?

I'm going to digress now by referring to Paul Kelly's great song, *To Her Door*. It's about a working man, who's had his troubles, flying back to Melbourne to see if he can make another go of it with his wife and kids. As he sits in the Yellow Cab, being driven to her door, the song puts us inside his anxious thoughts: "Did they have a future? Would he know his children? Could he make a picture and get them all to fit?". That's where we are in Australia right now. Can we make a picture and get everyone to fit?

One of my spiritual fears for the new Australia forming around us is the rebirth of terra nullius – the idea that this is a place with no heart and soul, no spirit, which a lot of people then feel free to use as a cash register and a rubbish dump.

Nationalism can be a dangerous force, but so can apathy and indifference. One of my spiritual fears for the new Australia forming around us is the rebirth of terra nullius – that is, the re-birth of the idea that this is a place with no heart and soul, no spirit, which a lot of people then feel free to use as a cash register and a rubbish dump. In 2011, I went to Israel. That part of the world is called the Holy Land. Australia is a holy land, too. It has hosted life for many thousands of years, and, if it is properly cared for, will do so for thousands of years more.

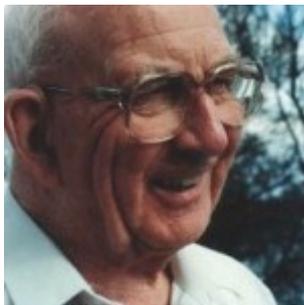
And to engage with Australia is to engage with its first people. People who walk the reconciliation path between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australia are routinely accused of acting out of guilt. I don't know anyone who has walked the path of reconciliation any distance who acts out of guilt. Guilt's not a strong enough fuel for what's required. Guilt will only carry you as far as the first crisis. So why hang in after that? Because there's a reward. What I've gained from my engagement with Aboriginal people is a deepened connection with the land of my birth – a rich view of it as a place of myth and human drama with a nature like nowhere else on earth.

As I indicated at the start of this talk, my heritage is Irish; this means that I am fully aware of the downside of British colonialism. Nonetheless, I am grateful for the British system of parliamentary democracy and its belief in the rule of law. The only alternatives to that system, from what I have seen, lead to torture chambers, and torture is a spiritual issue for me. I wish to preserve our environment, I wish to preserve our democratic traditions. I expect both causes will involve a fight. Endless fights, in fact. I once said to the chaplain of the Footscray Football Club, Ian Corlett, "There's no lack of good in the world – it's just not organised", and he replied, "Yes, and the other side always is". The battle never ends, but I believe there is a spirit in this land that recognises people doing the right thing for the right reason, and in those people coming together lies our hope for the future.

Martin Flanagan is a well-known journalist for the Melbourne *Age* newspaper, writing on sport, Australian culture, and relationships with indigenous Australians. The author of ten books, Martin is one of six children of Arch Flanagan, a survivor of the Burma Railway. He is descended from Irish convicts transported in the 1840s, and grew up in Tasmania.



The John Wallis Foundation seeks to support the formation of individuals or groups for leadership for a just and compassionate world, through experiences and/or courses that facilitate and encourage the mission of God.



Fr John Wallis (1910-2001) was the founder in Tasmania in 1944 of the order of Catholic sisters, the Missionary Sisters of Service, who have worked particularly in remote country areas and with marginal groups.



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