

THE THINGS YOU SHOULDN'T SAY TO AN ABORIGINAL PERSON

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I recently spent some time on an outstation in the Northern Territory. Unless you have been on one, it is hard to understand the level of poverty in which some Aboriginal people live – sleeping on concrete floors, with little money, no luxuries. Life is supplemented with bush tucker and everyone works together and shares what they have. Amongst the basics of life, there is resilience. But there is also something else that is perhaps even more surprising. As I sat around the campfire in the evening, what rose up into the night sky mingled with the smoke was laughter.

This is a community surrounded by tragedy and hard social problems. This is a community where there are deep concerns about the impact of mining on sacred sites, concerns about the access to education, feelings of being disenfranchised and the stresses of having very little money to survive on. In nearby towns, there are issues of substance abuse and violence. So it is easy to fall into cliché and to see this laughter as being cathartic, an important release.

But there is something deeper than just the fleeting laughter that comes at the end of a funny story, a witty comment or a parody. It always strikes me in a close-knit community that there is something much more profound at work. Around a

campfire with shared resources – from food, clothes, blankets, to utensils, even shoes – there is a deep sense of contentment, a profound happiness.

A world away from an outstation, I recently sat around for a meal with another group of Aboriginal people. In a lovely Greek restaurant, a circle of young Aboriginal professionals shared our stories about ‘things you shouldn’t say to an Aboriginal person’. Mine was: ‘don’t worry, you can’t tell’. We were roaring with laughter at the ignorant barbs that had been thrown our way, and amongst each other these things that had been hurtful and humiliating when said by ignorant people were now a source of communal laughter and a bond of shared experience.

My dad grew up in an orphanage before becoming a street kid, and would always tell funny stories about his various antics and pranks. He would always choose to share an entertaining anecdote over telling you about his past hardships. It was only in the final year of his life that he revealed to me that he had suffered from physical and emotional abuse while living there. My father was an extraordinary man. From being forced to leave school at fourteen he ended his professional life teaching at a university as a leading expert on Aboriginal culture and history. Inspired by his own experiences of growing up away from his family, he was one of the founders of the organisation Link-Up that reconnects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people removed from their families. Although my father’s early life left him with his own emotional scars, he was never a person who would use that past as an excuse. Instead, he would always find the funny moment and I suspect that this attitude to life enabled him to eventually come to terms with the demons in his past, and live the last part of his life in a happiness that he deserved.

This experience of looking at the funny side through adversity is not unique, and it certainly seems to be an important survival mechanism. Sean Choolburra has worked as a stand-up comedian for just over a decade, and is now the best known Aboriginal comedian. His parents grew up on Palm Island – a place where curfews were imposed, and where segregation thrived. A leprosy colony was built on the next island. ‘But you wouldn’t know it was tragic or horrific’, he says, ‘my mum, dad and grandparents would tell all these funny yarns over tea and dampers. Hearing all these, you would have thought they had the greatest lives growing up. But you got the sense that they wouldn’t have survived without our sense of humour’.

‘The flip side of tragedy is comedy’, says Aboriginal stand-up comedian Kevin Kropinyeri. ‘We have had to learn to look at our situation. We never had much on the mission without. My nana would spend three month periods in gaol for being off the mission without papers. Laughter is healing and is a way of coping with life’.

The 1986 short film *Babakiueria* was based on a concept of Aboriginal people discovering white people and their sacred places (for example ‘the barbecue area’). A white family struggles to cope with the assault on their way of life as their world is taken over by Aboriginal people. It remains one of the most cutting satirical looks at the hypocrisy of white perspectives on Aboriginal people, culture and history – not just a humorous comedy sketch, but a film that provokes people to think about their prejudices.

Basically Black, which aired on the ABC in 1973, had an ensemble cast that included Gary Foley and Bob Mazza, who did sketch comedy. It explored ‘reverse racism’ and included

a character called Super Boong. It was ripe with parody of the double standards by which Aboriginal people were forced to live, and was confrontational about the overt racism that was still so prevalent in Australian society at that time. The cleverness of *Basically Black* was that it seduced its audience with humour – it delivered a powerful punch that engaged an audience who would not have tuned in if the tone were one of preachy self-righteousness. It managed to engage them in a conversation with Aboriginal people in a way they might not have otherwise.

It's hard to imagine such audacious and raw satire on the television screens at the moment. The coverage of Indigenous issues has become very serious and, while that is an appropriate way to deal with the serious issues that still face Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities around the country, we seem to have lost something when we lost our sense of humour.

But happiness isn't just laughter. Happiness is a broader concept.

I wonder what can be learnt about happiness from the Aboriginal women on the outstation that can illuminate the world for the rest of us. They look at the world around them and they see its riches. They look at the sky and understand its meanings. They look to the land and sea around them and see additional sources of food. They look at the people who make up their family and community, and they see the blessings in what they have. They tell stories of their fishing and hunting trips, of great romances and funny anecdotes. Their world is full of rich stories, of song lines, of music, of dance. Amongst this, it is impossible not to be struck by the deep interconnectedness that they have with each other and with the world around them.

When you have so very little, you are reliant on the people around you. You rely on them to share resources, to help you get from one place to another, to join together to confront a school that is not working with the community or a land council that has not been negotiating properly. And through this meaningful reliance on each other – where you don't just take, but give what you have – there is a deep human connection.

This interconnectedness with other people is essential for a sense of self and a sense of self-worth – a grounding in one's own identity, one's own value, one's own place in the world. And there is also interconnectedness to the natural world. The women on the outstation have been hunting turtles and fishing in the waters since they were small girls. They know which plants are edible and they know what fruit is edible. They know the stories about the creation of the world around them, how the constellations in the sky were formed, and the songlines about great trips across the country. In the world around them, there are stories and legends, and a knowledge of the seasons and an ability to read the landscape and the weather.

There is something else that engages the women on the outstation that is linked to their culture but also seems to be a basic element in fundamental happiness. They have a very rich creative life. The women of this community – and some of the men – are gifted painters. They translate the stories told by their parents and grandparents into vivid canvasses. They express themselves as eloquently through their brush strokes as they do with their words. And between the painting, the dancing and the music is a rich tradition of storytelling that is as old as the culture. These women are natural storytellers.

They are the expression of the vibrancy of the world's oldest living culture.

These are women who, although amongst the poorest in socio-economic terms, are about the richest in culture, community and creative expression. They value their relationships with other people. They are resourceful. And they find the beauty – and humour – in the simplest things in life. And there is something in the heart of these traditional values that gives rise to foundations for a deep contentment that comes from being grounded in one's self and situation.

There is one other element in the contented happiness that I find in the world of the outstation.

Living in close proximity to others isn't easy, and this is a community where there is overcrowding. On fine nights, people sleep under the stars. But there aren't enough rooms for the number of people here and so people share concrete floors when they have to. So life is not without its arguments and disagreements, its jealousies and bickering, and all of the other things that happen between people who live closely. But the generosity and openness of the women who have the moral leadership in this community is defined by the love they have for their families, especially their children. This is a very real part of the way of life here – happiness is love.

I recently finished a three-year study with colleagues of mine looking at six Aboriginal communities in NSW. Three had high crime rates and three had low crime rates. The purpose of the study was to try to identify the dynamics that separated the communities that thrive from the ones that are dysfunctional. The study was complex and the findings complicated, but one

key factor that emerged from the research was that communities that do well often have a group of people within them – mostly women – who assert a kind of moral authority over other people. When they speak or act, others respect them, listen and pitch in. It allows them, as a community, to address issues such as substance abuse and school attendance. In the communities with high crime rates, this moral authority has been eroded long ago. While there are wise, hard-working and reliable people in the community, they do not get the respect or are not able to lead cultural change, especially amongst the younger members of the community.

This finding was not surprising though it was interesting to see it articulated so clearly. The finding is consistent with what I have observed in other parts of Australia, including the Northern Territory. The communities that have the most entrenched social problems are the ones where the moral authority of the Elders has been undermined long ago, and with this unravelling of the social fabric, there is little ability to lead by example, or be an agent of change within the community. But in the communities that are healthy, there is leadership. These are the communities which find solutions to their problems when they arrive. They are usually communities, like the outstation I visit, which are dry by choice. They are the ones who have developed community buses, programs for children, who look after the elderly and have devised a number of practical solutions to the problems they face. With this ability, which is self-determination in action, comes a strong sense that community members have the capacity to deal with the issues that life throws at them. It is a stark contrast to the communities where social problems are

so tenacious and rife that most feel they are powerless to make changes to improve life for the better.

There is no romance in being poor, but there is happiness to be found when you can find the richness in life. This is the abiding lesson I learn from my visits to this other way of life.

And as the laughter rings around the campfire, and I listen to the women, all sisters, sing their songs, teach the children to dance, tell their ancient stories, gently tease each other – and me – I am reminded that there are ties that are deeper than blood and that lightness of spirit is the measure of happiness.