

A personal reflection on National Reconciliation Week

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Reflecting upon the invitation for staff and students to submit articles for publication within CSU during National Reconciliation Week, 27 May – 3 June, I decided it might be timely to take a brief look back, to reflect upon why we have this week and what I personally hope it might achieve.

The origins of this day are often claimed to have emerged out of the 1967 Referendum when the Commonwealth Government gained the power to make policy for Aboriginal peoples. Personally, as an Aboriginal woman, I would argue the ‘need for such a day’ is a direct outcome of planting the seeds that were transported on the First Fleet, that marked the 1788 Invasion of Australia. The germination process, has long been assisted by specific and horrific acts of cruelty, for example, the removal of children and, more recently, mandatory sentencing practices that enable political thinking to intervene in the judicial process and deny justice to many Indigenous Australians. The question is: “Where do we find replacement seeds and a different germination process that will enable us, as a nation, to grow new attitudes?”

I would argue that, due to the influence of what many term our ‘settlement history’, achieving the goal of reconciliation, the recognition of the First Peoples of this country as valued citizens of this land, will be an extremely slow and protracted process unless our educational institutions can rise to the challenge. And, what is that challenge? It is to develop the capacity to deliver leadership that will enable all Australians to engage in the open and honest dialogue needed to ensure we not only get to know and value each other for who we are, as individuals, but that, through that process we also discover ways in which we, at both the individual and collective levels, might effectively reconcile with each other.

But why is this needed? What exactly do we need to reconcile? What’s in it for all of us? I consider reconciliation, to be an active process, a journey we embark upon in order to discover the truth. This is a unique journey that will provide us with the opportunities to access the true stories, unique insights and deep knowledge about the land and its peoples, that will help us all to better understand and accept the long, often harsh, history of the land in which we live. This is critical factor for, while our ‘settlement history’ claims to cover the past 230 years, the historical and archaeological records pertaining to human occupation suggest Aboriginal peoples may have first arrived in this continent between 40 000-80 000 years BP. Head west on a journey through the centre of this continent and you will begin to appreciate what it may have been like for the oldest living culture in the world to ‘survive’ in this land for 50 000 years. No mean feat.

In a reconciled Australia, where a critical focus would be on creating national unity, the rights of First Nations peoples to their histories and cultures would be acknowledged and valued as a vital component of our shared national identity. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are the oldest living cultures in the world. Reconciliation involves all Australians valuing and recognising the rich and diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures that have existed in our nation since time immemorial and continue to this day.

Personally, writing this short piece I didn't know what I wanted to share - I simply felt a need to encourage you all to engage in the CSU journey of Reconciliation. Doubtless, my dilemma reflects my own history for when my mother was 6, she and her two sisters, were removed from their family. They were simply taken from their homes, herded into a long line of children the authorities had lined up down the main street, and marched, under police escort, out along the jetty onto the ship. When the ship arrived in Fremantle, the children were allocated into various homes around Perth. My mother was put out to work at 14 years of age and was 24 years old before she managed to save enough money to pay her fare back to where her older sister thought they had grown up. Their mother was illiterate, so, through all those years there had been no contact. They were never close . . . but at least my mother managed to 'find' her family again.