

Some musings on a trip to the Pit lands

Contributed by Samara Pitt
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Over the school holidays I spent two weeks in the Red Centre. The first half was more of the tourist thing, but in the second week I spent five days on a tour with Desert Tracks in the Pitjantjatjara lands just over the border in South Australia. It was an opportunity to glimpse the life of the Anangu people who maintain ongoing physical and spiritual connection with their traditional lands.

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One thing I reflect on is how much stronger the tjukurpa (often translated as dreaming or creation) stories were when told in context. I have read children's stories mostly of the creation, and they are curious and non-Western in structure and often seem anachronistic. Being invited into 'inmi' - ceremony - with the traditional owners of the land who have been caring for the songlines for thousands of years is a completely different experience. Some of the physical features of the land that relate to parts of the story seem to have no natural geological explanation for their formation (so I'm told). But aside from the 'miraculous' element, I gained an increasing awareness and appreciation of the integration and complexity of the stories into the land itself and the fabric of the people's identity and way of life. We were getting the 'teenage' version of the stories, up a step from the children's stories told by tour guides around Uluru, but still not as involved as the stories for initiated men and women. It reminded me of how Bible stories can often seem like simple stories for children, but they continue to resonate with new meanings at different stages of life.

I've also pondered about the role of location in understanding scriptural stories for us. Urban Seed have taken stories in Mark's gospel and read them in places around Melbourne's CBD, often paraphrasing in ways that highlight particular perspectives on contemporary events. The bleeding woman becomes the injecting drug user. The temple becomes the casino. Urban Seed has a comparatively puny tradition of telling these stories over and over in city spaces, layering meaning on to them in the attempt to ask the question, where is God in the world around us? And yet Christianity has been a travelling faith. While initially grounded in the Middle East, with the apostle Paul it took root amongst the gentiles in 'the nations'. This must seem strange to a people who are still so embedded in the tjukurpa of their own country, although the concept of exile may now be sadly familiar.

I would like to discuss this with Peter, one of the traditional owners (or custodians, I get mixed up but they are different things) who has also been a Uniting Church minister. However, when we came to his place he had just left a few hours earlier, having suffered a suspected stroke, to drive himself to the health clinic at least an hour away. Brett, the white operations manager of Desert Tracks, has been shown sacred men's items by Peter that no-one else knows about. What is he to do with this knowledge? He's a white man with respect for the country and the people, but he does not live in Pit lands. Is there a role for non-Indigenous people in the handing on of culture? What is lost when the holders of the stories are separated from the land of the stories? And yet, does it mean all is lost or is a diasporic tjukurpa possible?

Samara