

Exploring Exile

ABM National Reconciliation Week Reflections

By

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Introduction

When ABM asked me to prepare resources for National Reconciliation Week, I found myself asking *what word or phrase best describes the situation indigenous people find themselves in?*

The word that came to me is one I have been struggling with personally and one I understand as the key to reconciliation.

That word is exile.

Exile is the powerful disruption of the norm, something separating a person from what it means to be a human person.

Exile shifts the terrain underpinning our identity and moves us from being persons to being objects, from having power over our own destiny to being powerless and from self-respect to self-hatred and self-destruction.

Exile is often understood only in terms of the negative it brings into our lives. Yet exile is equally powerful in changing us from objects to persons, from powerlessness to powerfulness from self-destruction to self-empowerment.

The experience of exile shakes up all involved and disrupts how we interact, engage and dialogue. When all has been taken and there is nothing else to lose, then those in exile have the power and the capacity to act to change the world, not only their own world.

The experience of the Israelite nation in Egypt should encourage us to use this moment of exile as the place to begin the journey to the Promised Land, a land in which we begin to respect ourselves and our culture in such a way that it stands on its own, capable of withstanding the pressure to assimilate and capitulate. Instead we invite the dominant culture into story in a way that allows them, too, to hear the joy of being one with country, this country, our country.

How to use the resources

These five reflections can be used by individuals or groups and you may want to consider forming a group to discuss them.

Another way to engage with them is to begin a reconciliation journal.

Your journal can be written in a book, in an online journal, on your blog or wherever it is most appropriate for you.

Record your insights as you journey through this week. Jot down any thing that you see, hear or witness that is positively influencing the process of reconciliation.

There is much happening in our communities right across Australia. If we are mindful and intentional, we will recognise, talk about and focus on the positive. By writing it down in a journal it becomes front of mind for us and helps us to take creative steps to progress reconciliation where we are.

When you go to the daily reflections there will be an opportunity for you to note down your thoughts and reflections.

Join in and help us reimagine exile!

Author

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He is a Wiradjuri man with a particular interest the topic of exile and in the work of Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day, Czeslaw Milosz, Gustavo Guitierrez and others who have explored the experience of exile as a means to transform injustice.

He has written for 'The Merton Annual', 'The Merton Seasonal' and the online journal - www.contemplativejournal.com.

He has completed post-graduate studies in theology and is working toward a thesis on 'Thomas Merton and Young People'.

Reflection One:

Exploring Exile



"In the mind of a true snob there are certain limited criteria to denote the value of human existence. Jimmie's criteria were: home, hearth, wife, land. Those who possessed these had beatitude unchallengeable. Other men had accidental, random life. Nothing better."

— Thomas Keneally, *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*

Growing up on the land I remember its smell, the sandy loam crunching under my feet as I went bare foot from paddock to another. The joy of the bounding rabbits, the startled roos and the 'cah', 'cah' of the black crows overhead. Hours spent curled up in the old Moreton Bay fig or under the old gum tree down from the house.

I remember my father saying, as we wandered behind a mob of sheep, "Walk your land and you land will tell you its story". Years later I remember his sorrow and despair at having lost contact with his land. Circumstances prevented him from being able to own land and he was moved off the country he loved. As we drove past these places he would shed tears, not only because he was now distant from the land but because there was no way back.

In the small backyard of the housing commission house my mother and father made their own he tended his tomatoes and other vegetables with the same care he did his land, in some way trying to compensate for his being in exile. It wasn't the fact that he found it difficult living between two worlds that was the most distressing. It was the loss of land and his deep connection with the country that formed and shaped him, defining his exile.

His exile became my exile. My life has been one of constant movement, over 23 different houses, and almost as many jobs, in less than 60 years! The longest I have stayed in one place and job is 5 years. There seems to be this persistent search for home, for a place to call home. But there is no home to return to. Exile is home-less-ness, being without place and identity.

The Old Testament story of exile is the story of our people, even those still on country no longer have the freedom to be as they once were. Identity has been lost through the impact of white culture and the pressure to become one with those we share this land with.

Thought Starters for Your Reconciliation Journal/Group Discussion:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 5 : 3

- Take some time to reflect on exile and the times in your own life when you have felt homeless and exiled from the world around you.
- What brought it about? How did it make you feel? What did you miss the most?
- Try and imagine what it must feel like to be in exile for a long period of time or in the case of many of our first peoples, never being able to move on from it?

Prayer Suggestion:

For First Nations young people living into their identity without elders.

Reflection Two:

The Experience of Exile

EXILE I

*Once
He had a dream;
A few acres of their own.
A place to farm,
To use his skills and wisdom,
Make a future for his boys.*

*A place in society for her;
She deserved that.*

*It wasn't much
But it had potential,
They had to see that.
He had a plan,
He knew it would work*



*For he was the best farmer
In the district.*

*He dressed in his Sunday best,
She did too.*

*Off they went to the bank
Full of hope and*

They said no!

He knew why.

And he felt the shame.

So did she.

And the boys.

He went and got drunk.

What else can you do

In exile?

Being in exile is being locked out of the accepted way of being. Exile finds us on the other side, disconnected from the mainstream, unable to participate as an equal in the normal events of life.

Exile is defined by the little things those in the dominant culture impose without noticing that they do. The way people look at you, the unwritten boundaries, the unvoiced taboos and the barriers to the same opportunities others may have. It is the way people provide support and opportunities while simultaneously taking away the possibility of choice and respect. The failure to understand saying 'no' is as important as saying 'yes' to the others of help, assistance and unasked for programs or assistance.

Exile expresses itself in the demand to be responsible but takes away the possibility of doing so. This demand for responsibility is limited to fitting, playing your role, remaining in your place. It does not encourage you to move to another place, the place of hope and self-respect. Nor does it recognise there may be a way out, beyond, above, the place in which we find ourselves.

Exile gives rise to destructive behaviours. Alcoholism, drug abuse, domestic violence, self-harm and suicide are birthed in an exile without hope. When the way forward involves giving up your dreams and your dreaming then there is little left to do but to descend into the pain at your centre, the pain of homelessness.

Thought Starters for Your Reconciliation Journal/Group Discussion:

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Matthew 5 : 4

Psalm 137 speaks of exile and the anger and frustration of those who found themselves shut out of their homeland and their story. Read this Psalm and imagine what it was like for them.

- What did it look, feel and sound like for them?
- Is there a sense of desperation in their promise to always remember what had been taken from them?
- Is the threat of retaliation and destruction in verses 7-9 appropriate?

Can we find similarities with this story and the story of indigenous Australians who have had their land taken from them and whose traditional stories have been lost because they no longer have country on which to live?

Prayer Suggestion:

For all Australians as they continue their journey of understanding one another.

Reflection Three:

Exile



EXILE II

*I tried to find my way back home,
there is no home;*

*I tried to find my way back,
there is no way back;*

*I tried to find my way,
there is no way;*

*I tried to find my,
there is no me;*

*I tried to find,
There is no thing to be found;*

*I tried,
I no longer try:*

*I;
I am in exile!*

Dreams are often a way for us to process what lies behind the world in which we live. Recurring dreams, dreams that are consistently the same, have something valuable for us to understand and attend to. The consistent theme in my dreams is of not being able to find something of great importance to me or, alternatively, I can't find my way home. The things missing are necessary for my sense of well-being and belonging, but are consistently elusive. I am lost and without a map or compass, the necessary directions to find what I am looking for or to find my home.

There are parallels within my day-to-day life. For reasons best known to my family, our heritage has been ignored and never discussed. It has been the elephant in the room, obvious but not the subject of conversation. It was that way because of the history of the country in which they lived, a place where being black barred you from normal life. Most of the black people in our area were moved off country in 1900. My grandmother, a small child at the time, was left behind with a white family. My grandfather swore his family to secrecy and the rest is history.

Yet there was no history. It had been wiped clean. Without a story we are find ourselves adrift in the world, without a word to explain who we are, why we are here and where we came from. When our story is demolished by the need to survive, to fit in, to belong, we find ourselves powerless, alienated and lose the deep sense of who we are.

Injustice then becomes not an isolated act but a way of life. If we are disconnected from the stories our ancestors learnt, old and passed on, stories which grounded, explained and guided them and their ancestors, then we are malleable, rootless and without the fabric of hope, self respect and self worth. We are nothing.

This sense of being cut free from our story is shared with all who find themselves out of their homelands and searching for themselves in a new place. Refugees and immigrants understand this. Deep down those who came here from England in the early days also understood this and compensated by maintaining rituals, naming towns and cities and properties after places from the old country.

Thought Starters for Your Reconciliation Journal/Group Discussion:

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Matthew 5 : 5

- What do you know about your family's story and how important is that to you?
- How has the story of your family been transmitted to you? Do you spend time talking about it, has your family history been documented, and are there specific stories which are important to you?
- How have these stories defined your understanding of self, of your relationship with others and you sense of justice and hope?

Prayer Suggestion:

For all churches who are embracing the unfinished work of reconciliation.

Reflection Four:

The Power of Exile



WRONG SHOES

*Shoes, wrong shoes
Why are you wearing
Wrong shoes?*

*Who put them there,
Who said wear these?
They pinch the toes
Compress the soul
Rub at the heels.*

*Shoes, wrong shoes
Why are you wearing
Wrong shoes?*

*Take them off,
Let your feet out,
Hear them breathe
A sigh of hope;
Hope in the dirt,
Dust,
Depth,
At home in the earth;
Wriggling presence,
As a serpent signs the desert sands,
Uluru connected
Deep in creation's Genesis.*

*Spirit whispers,
Welcome back.*

*No shoes.
Walk at one in this holy place.*

Exile can be both the end and the beginning. The end as it symbolizes the lost of what we had; the beginning because it asks of us questions we would otherwise never have confronted. What is important? Who am I? What is my identity? Where do I belong? Where am at home? Is where I am now where I am to be forever or is this beginning of something different and new?

Exile has the power to unbalance, challenge, empower and transform both those who are in exile and those place and keep them there. Unbalanced because we no longer have certainty about our place in the world; challenged about whether we are going to take responsibility for the position we find ourselves in or to just let it go; empowered by the uncomfortable place where find ourselves in to take action and move toward reconciliation and a new place of being and, finally we are all transformed, even if only minimally to begin with, and start to live out a new relationship with self and others.

For indigenous people exile holds open to us the possibility of reclaiming our place in our country and challenging and transforming all of society, not just ourselves. As we find new ways to express our heritage and our history, to tell our stories and to build new paths from our past into the present we hold open the same possibility for all whom we share this country with. Exile works for us when we find ways to dream our way into life instead of determining to stay homeless and isolated. Each little step of taking responsibility for our responses to the past and the present reimagines both and ensures us of a future.

Thought Starters for Your Reconciliation Journal/Group Discussion:

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Matthew 5 : 6

How can/does the experience of exile:

- Unbalance self and others sufficiently to recognize that an issue exists?
- Challenge us to respond to the situation in which either we or others find themselves in exile?
- Empower action on behalf of all involved to change the situation in whatever way that is necessary, be that politically, physically and/or spiritually?
- Transform our understanding of ourselves and others, so that what was torn asunder can be reconciled and repaired?

Prayer Suggestion:

For all elders and leaders of the First Nations as they work to retain identity and autonomy for their peoples.

Reflection Five:

Personal Reflection



KNOWN

*Being known
Lying naked on the plains,
Open,
Free,
Vulnerable;
Shivering with each touch of sun,
Each whisper of breeze,
Exploring places
Previously hidden,
Private,
Unknown,*

*Those covered by your own hands,
Embarrassed.*

*Yet you are warmed
In the awareness of being known
For the little you are,
Fragmented,
Whole,
Shimmering with life;
Blossoming
As wattle bursting into colour
Transitioning the seasons
From slumber
At the dawn of spring.*

*Being known,
Stands beckoning,
Midwife at the Easter tomb.*

During this National Reconciliation Week we have been thinking about the experience of exile shared by many of the indigenous people in this country. These are people whom have moved off country, found themselves powerless and homeless and have struggled with the challenge posed by the dominant consumer society.

Exile is not just an indigenous issue. It affects us all in some way or another. Most of our ancestors have come to this country from another place and culture. Many of us retain a connection to our past and, in a sense, are in exile. Our language refers to the challenge living in this country is – we have ‘tamed’ the land, ‘battled’ the elements, ‘fought’ the outbreaks of fire and ‘survived’ raging floods and devastating droughts. This is not a place we are comfortably at home with! We have wrested from this land our place in it and claim to have made it our own.

Each of us in our own way is living in exile, individually and culturally. The loss of place for those who were at home here, and the failure of those who took it from them to make it home, leaves us all in the same place, exile. Reconciliation, the action of coming together to make this country our country, requires us to deal honestly with the past, to acknowledge its failures and tragedies, and come together to build a future out of the ashes of exile.

Exile, as we have noted previously can be the end or the beginning. It is up to us which it is going to be.

Thought Starters for Your Reconciliation Journal/Group Discussion:

'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.'

'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.'

'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.'

Matthew 5 :7-9

Take some time to reflect on the type of exile you may find yourself in and what is required of you to change the situation.

How do Matthew's beatitudes influence your thinking?

Where would you place yourself, church, community and society in the beatitudes?

Prayer Suggestion:

For all First Nations people who have lived a lifetime of exile and are seeking return to their country

