

- On Wings of Hope and Healing -

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April, 2009. In the aftermath of Black Saturday I asked myself both professionally and communally what I could do to assist those people who had experienced such terrible loss, destruction and trauma. Viewed from a long-term, multi-generational counselling or historical perspective, the survivors of Ash Wednesday, many of whom were re-traumatised by the Black Saturday bushfires, had much to offer. I knew they would have stories of courage and fortitude – and furthermore practical solutions – through which they could offer hope to other survivors and in their own healing, remind themselves of their own resilience.

My initial idea was for the township of Cockatoo to hold a healing and recovery festival. “On Wings of Hope and Healing” would be a festival to which any person who had experienced the tragedy of bushfire could come for support and inspiration. Personal stories would be told of the experience of the fires and beyond, including the decision to stay and rebuild – and the struggles and frustration in rebuilding – or leave the area. Stories would be told of the years following the fires, when the support and the compassion dried up. David Clode, one of the pioneers of “Firescaping” would advise on fire-retardant plants and landscaping. Emergency Services and community groups would be represented and stories in photographs and art would be displayed.

I knew that the Cockatoo community, 28 years after Ash Wednesday, would be able to offer their wisdom, resilience and guidance to the survivors of Black Saturday.

Out of this idea, during 2010, writing workshops were held for the Ash Wednesday fire-affected communities to assist the writing of their stories. Alongside the writing workshops, I counselled families and individuals as the process of remembering and/or writing about their experiences brought up deep and intense emotions. For many people, their stories had never been freely told. For example, one of the many CFA captains involved in leading the fire-fighters, told how he had never been able to tell of his experiences about what had been significant for him, personally. He had been rigorously cross-examined in the Coroner’s Court. He had written official report after official report for various organisations and government departments. He had given lectures. But what he really wanted to say was how ordinary his breakfast had been that day and how, in the midst of the chaos and danger of the fires, he remembered that he hadn’t finished his cup of tea.

In 2011, these stories have been published in a book, funded by the Victorian Public Record Office: **BAKED APPLES ON THE TREE: Ash Wednesday Reflections**. The publication of these heart-warming and heart-rending personal accounts is the beginning of another journey. The community have already taken up my ideas of a festival, now planned for 2013, to commemorate 30 years since Ash Wednesday. There are plans to create a museum, and community artwork to celebrate a town and its people. A thriving town and its courageous people for whom no newspapers were delivered on 17 February 1983, because it was reported that Cockatoo no longer existed...

Copies of the book, *Baked Apples on the Tree: Ash Wednesday Reflections*, are available at a cost of AUD\$25.00 each, plus PP&H from:

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The following is my counselling report, as published in the book, on the profound trauma suffered by the Ash Wednesday communities. I am honoured to have been of assistance.

- BAKED APPLES ON THE TREE -

Ash Wednesday Reflections

COUNSELLOR'S REPORT

Laya Ross

... As the counsellor to the project, I worked in the main with individuals and families who had left the area following the fires. By way of media releases, websites, counselling centres and "someone who knew someone", they learned about the availability of free counselling. Mostly, they either lived too far away or could not face returning to the area to participate in the writing workshops, although they wanted to tell their stories and have their voices heard. For some, sadly, they felt that their stories held too much shame to tell publicly or have their names known. These were the instances in which my services were of the most value – behind the scenes and out of the limelight. In the darkness of secrets held and hearts imprisoned by shame, fear and rage, the counselling process helped restore dignity and wholeness to fractured lives.

The importance of having a counsellor connected to a project of this nature should not be underestimated. Appropriate funding support for future projects where community members recount traumatic episodes is imperative.

My personal and direct experience of Ash Wednesday was in the days immediately following the fires. An infant welfare nurse and I desperately door-knocked the houses still standing in the burnt out areas in search of urgently needed baby supplies. The residents, shaken and in shock, gave what they could. They donated piles of nappies (and, thankfully, nappy pins!), money and unfortunately, occasional verbal abuse. When so much is lost, there can be little, if anything, to fall back on. People do what they can with whatever they have, from within themselves, their families and communities. While wonderful efforts were made to assist and counsel fire-affected communities in 1983, there was not the overwhelming global and community response as was evident following Black Saturday in 2009.

With the passage of time, the story of Ash Wednesday today is a different story to that of Ash Wednesday in February 1983. People have rebuilt, moved, and continued their lives in the years since those devastating fires. Some continue to struggle with the not-uncommon, long-term effects of trauma. Whether or not their stories are told, those stories exist within and the experiences of the fires and beyond have impacted on each and every person's values, choices and experience of life itself. The years which followed have in some ways changed everything and in other ways, nothing. Telling an Ash Wednesday survivor that "it happened years ago" and to "just get over it" can be heartless and cruel.

Everyone who lived through Ash Wednesday has a story. Many stories are profound and significant tales, often of sacrifice and resilience.

Many survivors – or "Thrivers" as one family described themselves to me – with whom I met are today only too aware of the long-term impact of having lived through a natural disaster of the magnitude of Ash Wednesday. They are also aware of certain effects that have been unintentionally transmitted to the next generation. Many survivors related, for example, that their children suffered tummy aches and night terrors prior to declared total fire ban days. Struggles with unemployment, drug and alcohol abuse, marriage breakdown, mental health problems and family violence were connected to Ash Wednesday, the time "when things changed forever". For some, the feelings of helplessness and hopelessness imprinted in those moments never left completely; they believed that they, themselves, were changed forever.

In the process of sharing their experiences with me of Ash Wednesday, survivors talked and cried about the effects of their trauma. Through and above the 'single' stories of horror, fear and loss however, there are always 'second' stories. In any way possible, people take action to minimise exposure to trauma and to decrease their vulnerability to trauma by finding ways to modify these effects on their lives. My counselling approach, influenced by the specialised theories of Narrative Therapy¹, was to build up 'second' stories. These are the skills and knowledge survivors had developed. Together, we explored how they had survived those traumatic experiences and the thoughts or actions that served to sustain them throughout the ordeal and the years to date. As the second stories began to weave a golden thread through the tattered cloth of the memories of shattered lives, the single stories of loss and trauma gradually became thickened with strengths and determination. The development of these practices of counter-power offers trauma survivors a new, "safe place to stand" and a stronger and expanded identity in relation to what they have experienced.

A family who have since moved from Cockatoo, offered a "safe place to stand", literally, on their property during the fires. 'Pindarie', on a hilltop and in a relatively cleared area (but nevertheless not guaranteed to be safe) was used as a refuge for the community to store their gas bottles and petrol containers. This same family also had the foresight to put up a 'BORE WATER' sign for the CFA tankers so that the CFA did not have to travel further for water refills. With pride, I record their acts of incredible courage and selflessness.

The stories in this book are rich, thick stories of resistance and action. To read this book is to stand in the position of the witness, which is an act of service at a deep, soul, level. May the heart-full intent with which these stories are written, assist you in naming, claiming or guiding you to your Place of Standing Safely!

Laya Ross²

1. For more information about Narrative Therapy, I refer you to the works of Michael White and David Epston, et ors
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About the Author: Laya Ross has extensive experience in counselling trauma survivors, including Vietnam Veterans, Holocaust survivors, victims of crime and survivors of natural disasters. She combines ancient wisdom with cutting-edge science and believes in the passion and resilience of individuals, families and communities. Laya is an accredited Family Law Mediator and is currently studying towards her Masters Degree in Social Science (Family Therapy).

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