

Holding Men

Dr Brian F. McCoy

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the owners of this ancient land, their descendants and ancestors. Also a number of you who have come from other communities – I recognise and acknowledge your countries here today. I also acknowledge the men that I work with, and have worked with, for some time: the desert people of Wirrimanu, Malarn, Kururrungka and Yaka Yaka. The stories that I have to share with you today come out of this part of the Kimberly and the men that I have worked since the seventies really. Hence, I am talking about a number of decades. I acknowledge these men and their families and remind myself as I speak, that while I speak with them and they have taught me many things, I am not Indigenous. It is their stories that I respect and acknowledge here today. And finally, particularly for the women who are present, nothing I say here today is ‘secret men’s business.’ I am sometimes involved in ‘secret men’s business’ but nothing of that will be revealed here.

Holding Men

I want to open up the notion of ‘Holding’, a Kukatja word that is translated as *kanyirninpa*. *Kanyirninpa* comes back to a fundamental relationship in all societies that shows what it means to be born into that society and feel you are valued, held and grown up in that society.

Some of you may have seen the book that came out this year, ‘*Holding Men*’, that really describes my work with the men. The heart of the book is the relationship we have with other men and which exists in all of desert society. There was a turning point for me as a white-fella who was trying to understand for many years what this ‘thing’, this relationship, was.

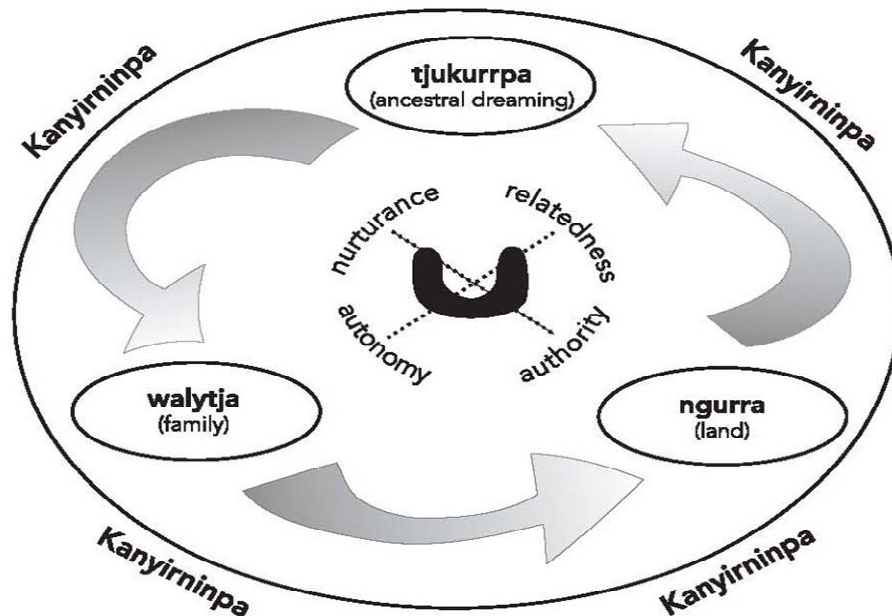
One day I was sitting in front of a community store with an old man, his wife and daughter and another older lady. I was sitting in the sand and people were coming in and out of the store and they were saying, the women in particular, how things had changed. The young blokes in prison, the young weren’t respecting the old anymore and things were really hard. The women were taking a stronger role than ever before. They went on to say it is really important that they look after the young people because they can be punished if something happens to them because the older people are considered to be ‘holding’ them, *kanyirninpa*. As they spoke I picked up a marble off the ground that one of the kids had been playing with and, ever since that time years ago, I often carry that marble around and think about what it means to ‘hold’, to be ‘held’ as a person in society. What does it also mean to ‘hold’ others and to grow them up?



The notion of 'holding' begins at the birth - this picture captures it well. The father is also 'holding' but is not the primary holder for this little baby. However, he does have responsibilities. It is interesting when Richard and Bourkie talked about fathers before. One of the issues that we are often dealing with is that health clinics deal with the mother and child but don't know how to deal with the father. In the desert the father also has responsibilities because he is sharing the 'holding' of that child and growing that child up.



As the child and the boys become men the whole notion of 'holding' becomes a critically important relationship issue: who is going to 'hold' them and who is going to grow them up into adult men? Then we come to what looks like a complex model of what it means to be 'held'.



This notion of 'holding' is seen within the context of the whole of life within the land, the family and the spirituality that keeps people together. We talk to people from the east of Australia and other places. Guys say they don't use those desert terms but they know what it is about. Family is our family wherever we live. The land is where we grow up and where we have grown up and the country we know. Our spirituality comes out and is vibrant at special times – especially when people die or are very sick or when people are born. At the heart of all of this is nurturance with authority.

The desert people have taught me that they hold these two things in balance – the authority of the old men, the men who are in this male area, the men who have the wisdom and experience of life and ceremony. But it is also about authority always being balanced with nurturance. In white society we tend to separate authority from nurturance. We tend to give people authority such as judges, church people and politicians. In an Aboriginal society authority comes out of wisdom and experience. Authority comes out of what you have done in ceremony for others, and with others, and is always linked to care, always linked to the provision of care. It was interesting at a gathering of guys yesterday where we had a meal after our meeting. It is not possible in the desert society to have an important meeting without food, because it is part of the way people show they care for one another. It is why you hunted and gathered every day. Food was there to look after you. The land looked after you. The land held you because it is not just you 'holding' family. The spirituality is also holding you. The land is also holding you. We are all being held together so that nurturance and authority becomes a very important relationship about care and leadership and about the older people making sure that relationships are reciprocal. And out of that comes respect because

the young person grows up knowing that these older people are teaching, caring and looking after them. These older people worry about them - in ceremonies, for example. At times the father, the uncle, or the older brother will stand up for me and will be punished for me because he is holding me and he will stand up and share responsibility for the things I do.

The other part of the holding relationship is relatedness and autonomy. This is a complex one, especially for young boys. Particularly as they become older and after they enter into ceremonies and become men.



I am going to show you a slide that takes us back to the non Indigenous world where we struggle with this as well. When a young boy first goes into ceremony he is taken from his family in front of everyone – this is a public thing. He is sitting with his little brothers and sisters and the women and the men have moved away to a large common space. The older brothers come and take this little boy by the hand and lift him up. The women cry because the boy is being taken from them to now sit in the company of men. So, when he comes back – after the ceremonies finish – he come out of bush camp, and everyone is sitting on the ground, and he comes and sits on the back of his *panytji* (brother-in-law). One of his brothers-in-law has made a table by going down on his hands and knees. His brother-in-law turns him around so his back is facing the women who are behind him. Again they cry and come up to him and wipe him with branches; they cry for the boy who is no longer. That movement of boys into manhood we white-fellas do not know how to deal with it well in our own culture. Here in the desert there is a separation of responsibilities from women, from the women's world. After these ceremonies you have entered into the male world and it is up to the men now to hold you and grow you up. So the women often quite clearly will say to all of us who are standing around – you guys now have got to start looking after these young fellas and grow them up. And of course the young bloke who is 13, 14 or 15 starts to realise he is now becoming a man.

So you get this tension between autonomy and relatedness – the family is always calling you back, the family is always reminding you of the responsibility to everybody in your family. And the more you travel, the more family you have got, and you have learnt to live with, but you also have a right

to be your own self. That is the tension with all young fellas in all cultures. But it is held here within the relationship of family but also in your right as a young man to make your own decisions and carve the world out for yourself. So that in the same section there – the 'U' is the imprint that your bum makes when you sit on the ground – always holding together these tensions between my family and myself but also an authority that cares. What it does, as blokes start to realise their need for other men, they become aware how fragile that relationship can be in today's society. This is a result of colonisation. The communities that I worked in had dormitories where children were taken away when they were quite young and grown up by white people for some decades. So an older man here has painted the story of him at top of the 'U' there, sitting with his sons and his brother's sons, because his brother had died, and he is looking after these sons to put them in the ceremony. Here is the Law and ceremonies represented at the bottom of the painting. Clearly what happens here and what is strong about the male relationship is that it is generational. We, in white society, tend to be told when we get to a certain age, 'you are on your own mate – get to university, get a career, get out there, get networking, get your house, whatever'. But here the men are always reminding the young men of an intimate connection between the generations of men. And when we were talking about setting up a men's group years ago it was translated as something like 'listen to the words of the grandfathers'. It is always important to keep looking back. They also have this wonderful saying – 'if you want to walk forward you have got to look backwards'. It is a image that seems to be a paradox. But there is truth in it – you can only walk forwards in the desert way if you are aware of who you are and who your grandfather is. So that generational relationship is critically important where older men look after younger men. It is worth noting that in desert society a man's kinship name is the same as his grandfather's. The women's kinship system is different.



This young fella told the story of three sorts of 'chapters' in his life – and I have found art a great way for men to tell stories as men are often shy and quiet and don't like white-fellas asking too many questions. But some like to paint and tell their stories and I found it a very helpful way for men to talk about their journeys in life. On the left panel he is painting himself walking (the footprint) with another mate and he is getting into trouble. So the mate who is

with him says 'no, no' and goes back. Then another bloke joins him and it's about the importance of companionship at a very young age, that young blokes are always seeking someone to be in companionship with – in trouble and out of trouble –and that social companionship gets them into trouble – petrol sniffing and breaking and entering and so forth. In the second panel he has been through his first Law and is starting to think as a young bloke – at 16 or 17 – where his life is going. He is walking along one day and an older bloke stops him and tells him to smarten up, you can't keep doing brother what you are doing. Turn around and get your life together – and he turns around and walks with him. This reveals a critical time for all young men, whether they are Indigenous or not. They really want an older man to grab them and say 'here is another road'. And it is getting that moment right for these guys that is very difficult for all sorts of reasons. This story remembers a turning point in his life when two older men, one Indigenous, one not, said to him that it was time to become and act like a man. The third panel is he and his wife and his child – but note the story is not finished – the footprints are still going. Here, he finds he has a future. So when he is young, life just moves around what he does. But with a wife he sees for a first time not only a future, but a future of 'holding'. That he now has a child to 'hold' and grow up and make him feel proud. The thing about holding is, it is not just the young person that needs to be held by the older person, but when the older person holds the young person they feel valued in themselves as well.



This image – I want now to shift it into some issues and difficulties – is an image given to me by Pat Dodson. Pat gave the image of a northern river swollen and running fast in the wet season. He says that what we are encountering at the moment is like a big river in the wet season with the young men on one side of the river and the old men on the other side of the river. They can't get across to each other. I think we understand what it feels like at times – this separation. Again with the guys yesterday they used the word 'separation'. There have been so many separations as a result of colonisation –separation of families and country, separation of children from parents, separation of traditional ceremonies from families and so forth. Here is a separation of generations. So the image is of older men on one side of the river, the young man on the other side. The older men have got stuff, they have knowledge and wisdom, to give these men but don't know how to give it

to them because of this big river that separates them. The young men want something from the older men but do not know how to access the gulf that separates them. So what we are trying to do, and I think what a number of groups are trying to do, is to break down this separation, to get across these divided generations.



I am going to spin into two different spaces out of the desert. Firstly, the Garma festival held last year (in Arnhem Land). At the end of each night, and this was around the time of intervention so it was a fairly politicised and fairly tense time, a community would dance and they would spend some time, and hour or two, dancing in a big sandy area. Now what you see here is classic, because this young boy, 2 or 3 years old, is dressed up with the men. Women are behind and around him – and he danced with them for almost 2 hours – he didn't cry, he didn't talk, he just went backwards and forwards, singing, dancing, backwards and forwards. This little boy – was being 'held', he was at school, he was being taught by the old people about life, singing, dancing, and his body is learning at the same time. He is learning the song, learning the words, learning to feel of the land, and it is all safe. When 'holding' works it creates safety. And when people are safe they learn trust. They relate and pass it on to the next mob. And the old men are proud of this kid – he didn't cry, he didn't run away, he didn't sit on the ground, he didn't want something to eat – just backwards and forwards with these blokes. He went on for over an hour or two. That is 'holding' at its deepest. When young people feel these old people are giving to them, embracing them, looking after them, teaching them, they see they have authority because a boy, like this one, has no authority. But this is all done in a context where the young blokes feel good about themselves. And that is what a school should be and should represent for all kids – safe places where the young want to be and will learn with older people around them.



I am going to go to North Queensland now. This is a project I have just finished. Twenty-five years ago I was living in Townsville and these young blokes came to me – they were Aboriginal guys – and they said ‘we want to go to Melbourne and play footy’. I said ‘oh yeah’. ‘Yeah, we want to watch the grand final and we want to go down there’. And it became a community project. These were 15 and 16 year olds, mainly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Eventually we got down to Melbourne and we played three games and we stayed at the Collingwood clubhouse. It was the community project that got them there and that was the interesting thing. We have just done a report twenty-five years later – all still alive and none have been in prison – but there are some health issues. They are not in perfect health. But what we learnt as we looked back twenty-five years ago was how important the football club was for them at that time. The Garbutt Magpies Football Club no longer exists but, at that time (it started in the 1950s), there were some Indigenous men and women who worked with non-Indigenous people. And then it became a completely Indigenous-led organisation. This is before there were legal services and the health services in Townsville. It was before reconciliation where black and white worked together and under the leadership of Indigenous people. So these young guys grew up, over a few decades, into a cultural and sporting space where all these older men and women were. So, when they went to play footy and when they went to school, it wasn’t just their fathers and dads that kept an eye on them, it was all these other men as well.

What we have learnt twenty-five years later was how important it was at that time, especially where some young kids were struggling with issues at home, to know there were these other men out there for them. If they saw them walking down the street or not doing the right thing they would kick them up the arse and say ‘you go back’. And they were allowed to do this because all these other men were considered to be ‘holding’ them. They didn’t use that word then, but the strength of the club was its ability to have strong and nurturing generational relationships. That is what ‘holding’ is about. To have men and women offer it in separate ways, but often supporting a particular sporting or social structure, and the young men feeling safe. And so they want to play football, they want to keep coming back, playing rugby league and Aussie rules. They felt safe enough to say to the community that we want to

go on this tour. The Indigenous community got that tour to Melbourne. If you did it today it would cost you \$75,000, but they did it then.

This report is looking at and recognising the value of sport. Sport offers the possibility of men being in safe places where the older men can feel supported by one another, where young blokes feel these older men can teach them things, and where it can work both ways. When the club was expelled from the league it wasn't just the young blokes that suffered, the old blokes lost something too. So the notion of passing it on is not just a desert notion, it is everywhere. How do we pass onto men what is important to the young ones coming up? At the heart of it is just going back to that idea of 'holding'. How do we keep together that authority? Young boys need authority. They need direction of life. The authority that says this is what you do but that comes with care, that comes with worry, and hurt, and the relatedness that keeps you with family, that also enables you to fight the fight, to do the right thing, to do the job you seek to do in life. The 'holding' notion is keeping this all together; Keeping it safe, keeping it in place, keeping the men and women together at times – each having their own spaces, but bringing it all together so the children are growing up and feeling valued and nurtured.



I am going back to white fellas to finish. I don't know if any of you saw this image last week in the paper. This is my old school. They had an end-of-year party at the end of the HSC and what happened got out of control. The headmaster sent them all home and it got on the front page, even onto American TV. It was pretty embarrassing for the school and the families because, as happens with a bit of grog, you can see the parents get blamed, the school gets blamed and so on. We do not have ways of taking boys into manhood, adulthood, in our white society. However, we actually have many rites of passage in our society today – coming into university is a rite of passage, getting married is a right of passage, entering nursing homes is a rite of passage – where we are offered the possibility of being personally transformed, coming through a stage or period that can be quite difficult.

Leaving school is one rite of passage. What this image and event shows is an enormous gap in our own white society about looking after our young fellas and helping them make the transition into responsible adulthood where often there is nothing there to help them make that transition. What I suspect, and what I acknowledge desert people for teaching me, is that if we understand 'holding', we understand what is right through the Torres Strait, through Aboriginal communities and other Aboriginal societies – namely there is a relationship that keeps the young with the old, where young are 'held' together with older men and women who have their own separate spaces but are together. This, I believe, is an enormous contribution the Indigenous community makes to the white community. Finding the connection of men's company on the land with each other and being 'held' for life.

Thank you.