

TREADING LIGHTLY: AN ECOLOGY OF HEALING

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In 1988 I went to live in a coastal town in south-eastern Australia. This is a very beautiful place but very vulnerable to wildfire. Some years before I moved there, there had been a devastating fire that killed a number of people and destroyed more than 700 homes. These fires became known as the Ash Wednesday bushfires of February 1983. Around my home were blackened trunks of trees, scars of those fires. I was aware that a large number of people, who lost everything in that big fire, had chosen to stay and rebuild. I wondered how they had managed to get on with their lives when they are reminded every day by these fire scars and when every summer they are as much at risk as they were the day of those terrible fires. I was interested in whether these people see themselves as healed and if so, what helped them to heal; how they managed the experience that so disrupted their lives. Finally, I wondered what their experiences might teach us about healing.

This was a qualitative study where I interviewed 40 people: 26 people who lived in the area and who had loved ones killed or lost everything they owned, and 14 health professionals of one sort or another who either worked there or were sent there to help after the fire.

Exploring the stories

When I examined the stories these people told me, their memories fell into two time frames:

- the time of the fire and the early stressful experiences; and
- the aftermath — the 'getting on' with life.

Initially, I used the salutogenic framework created by Aaron Antonovsky (1979, 1987) a framework that concerns itself with origins of health rather than disease, to make sense of what I was finding. I grouped the first lot of information into the notion of entropy - the tendency to disorder that results from a reduction in available energy in open systems.

I grouped the second lot into negative entropy - the regaining of order and harmony when energy can be restored to the open system. The fire certainly caused disruption and people needed to find ways of gaining the energy to go on, to cope and to heal.

Not unexpectedly, the entropic data was mostly about loss:

- loss of friends and relatives.
- loss of homes, business, personal possessions.
- loss of animals, pets and wild life.
- loss of environment, the destruction of nature.

Others were about

- separation, and tensions of relocation
- emotions like guilt and resentment and greed
- conflict, which somehow always seems to accompany disaster.... and many more.

Stressful experiences like this wildfire can cause long term harm. It is also possible that people recover and the effects lessen until over time it becomes mostly a bad memory. Other people actually gain something positive from a stressful experience. Antonovsky's model looks at how people recover and remain well. Antonovsky believed that recovery depends on what he calls the SENSE OF COHERENCE. He outlines three components that make up the sense of coherence:

1. **Comprehensibility** is the ability one has to perceive the event as making sense either because it was predictable, or if unpredictable, can still be explained and understood.

People knew and understood the risks associated with being there. Bushfires have occurred there many times before and people have suffered hardship and loss. People express the belief that fire in itself is good for the land and that it is only because people choose to live in dense bushland that is vulnerable, that bushfire could be perceived as disaster.

Many who chose to rebuild, shared a way of seeing the world where they live in their space with all other things of the environment. They expected no favours from nature and they did not perceive their personal loss as more tragic than the devastation of their environment. So fire here makes sense, we don't like it much but we understand it.

2. **Manageability** refers to an understanding that adequate resources are available to help people to manage the event, to make the experience at worst bearable, at best –an experience that changes them in a positive way.

The resources people identified were:

- families who allowed time and space for grief
- the sense of community that developed amongst people who were burnt out.
- the sense of being cared about as assistance came from everywhere.
- internal strength found in local churches, groups and individuals
- the courage and determination in everyone, to restore the place to 'normal'.

Nature was a resource mentioned by everyone. People described how they walked amongst the regreening, how they painted it and photographed it. One woman wrote a piece of music, which she called her Lyric Suite, to celebrate the recovery of nature. For many people there was a sense of "if nature can do it so can I" and the regreening of the trees was a significant turning point.

3. **Meaningfulness** is the motivational aspect of an event. When one sees that life generally makes sense emotionally, problems are seen as challenges worthy of an investment of energy.

I asked people about what meaning they made of the Ash Wednesday bushfire so that they had the motivation to get back on their feet, and many people told me that they "think it is Australian", that "things happen", "life is tough" and basically Australians just "get on with it". One woman said "Good comes from bad. We are prone to bushfire here and you have to accept that ... being in a place like this is worth it. Be sad sure, but we are Australians, it's just nature." This notion of 'being in a place like this is worth it' captures the essence of meaning for the majority of people interviewed. Nature was the reason for being in such a vulnerable place, it was the reason why they would never leave and it was responsible for much of their healing.

Places can be disrupted by many things, usually to do with other people or uncontrollable events. Disruption can be caused by forced relocation to another area either temporarily or permanently —a hospital or a nursing home for example — or it can occur when one is still living in one's own home. The death of a loved partner alters the home place forever. Disruption can occur through the invasion of the place by burglars, by vandals bent on destruction, by a neighbour's disrespect for other persons or for the environment. Disruption can occur because of industrial pollution, ugliness, smells and noise or countless other things. In my study disruption was caused by the powerful and destructive bushfire, over which no human had control and which simply took everything in its path.

How on earth do people reconstruct their lived space following such a disaster? David Seamon, is a phenomenological geographer who presents a pattern which he thinks depicts the transition from old to new place. I used some of his ideas as I explored the journey from loss to creating a dwelling place again for one woman in my study:

This woman, who I called Elizabeth left when the fire had almost reached their house. The flames were so close that she knew her husband, who had run back to the home, could not possibly survive. She returned three days later, sick at heart by what she knew had happened. For a time she lived in borrowed houses or with family members whilst she sorted out what she would do. She experienced a deep sense of outsidership, having lost her home and her husband, and needing to relocate outside the region even if just for a time. Homeless and alienated from people and place, there was no sense of attachment to wherever she went, there was no place to be herself.

Even though she was mostly with loving family, she suffered this deep sense of uprootedness and so it was not too difficult for her to move from losing her dwelling place, to arriving at the decision to rebuild on the same block of land.

Making the decision to rebuild was easy compared to what followed. She engaged an architect and told him what she wanted, but was unhappy with the resulting plan. She tried another with the same result. She knew that both of these plans had been fine and that the problem lay within her. Eventually she planned a smaller version of her previous home, the building commenced. Elizabeth did not speak of the actual building process except to say that at times she felt angry at having to make decisions by herself when all previous decisions had been shared with her husband. She felt deeply angry about his death. However, she chose the tiles and what ever else needed her attention, and sometimes this focus was helpful. Then when it was ready, she moved in.

The process of moving in brought her great relief because, though she was grateful, she was also very tired of living in the round of temporary locations. She said that at times she 'had been desperate for a place of her own'. Once she was alone and in her own new place, however, she realised that this replica was not a replica at all; as she gazed about her she realised that 'there was no soul'. Settling and developing a sense of this place as home took a long time. She had to find the energy to do the work that was needed to turn this space into her at-home place, a place with a sense of warmth where she could begin to heal. Part of the work was physical, including buying furniture, arranging rooms and beginning to establish a garden again. Much of this work of settling and becoming at-home had to be done alone, or with the help of

those few she could admit to her space at first — her family and a few intimate friends. Reaching out to move beyond her door, and those few people at first was hard, but eventually she did recapture the strong sense of being part of the community that she held deeply but unconsciously before. Once she reconnected with the community, the shared nature of their experiences strengthened her progress and many people spoke of her as a role model for their own recovery. Eventually Elizabeth got to the point where she could say that she was ‘living with loneliness in a way that left her powerful’. The at-homeness that she had been building in her physical space she was now locating within herself and this altered the at-homeness of her physical space also; the two blended. She now loves her home and could not imagine being anywhere else though she remembers the fire, the death of her husband and the loss of her home and possessions with deep sadness.

Some who made the decision to stay and rebuild, could not recapture the spirit of the place they had lost nor were they able to 'grow' a spirit for the new one. Others quite like it, but in their refusal to ever collect again as a reaction to the fire, they will not collect a new home in that same deep sense ever again. For all of those who stayed and struggled with recapturing their sense of dwelling, the natural environment, which after all was their reason for being in this place, fed their souls and *every* resident in the study spoke of owing much of their healing to their connections with nature.

The healing effect of nature was not only evident in those who lived there, but it was important to the relief workers who went in to help also. One of the social workers said that whenever things got too much for her, she would lock the caravan, get in her car and go for a brief drive around the forest and drink in the silence and the

peace. That would restore her spirits enough to go on with her work. The Red Cross manager described going to the top of a mountain after the fire when it was completely burnt out. She said:

It was very eerie but there was great strength to be there, like the trees are so insignificant to the earth, they will grow again. It was the earth: still there; still strong; still under your feet. And the paths were still there; the road was still there. That was magnificent. And I went up there when it was brilliant sunshine and I could hear the crack of the blackened trees as the timber had heated and expanded, I could hear these enormous cracks on a very quiet day, just sitting there listening to it. There was no rustling of leaves because there weren't any leaves. And then to go there when the fog was in and it was very eerie, very ethereal being there with that lovely fog in amongst the trees, that really ... I was really captured by that; it was fabulous.

Sometimes within the fire stories, words used to describe the environment and the things people did to manage their pain and to heal express a sense of sacredness. The words of a local doctor provide an example: *'this land is where the soul is. I mean this is special country so your soul very quickly gets lost in it'* Nature is frequently aligned with soul, spirit and sacredness, and all of those, with healing.

Thomas Berry (1988) is a cultural historian who considers we are now living in an ecological age, which fosters an intense awareness of a sacred presence within the universe and returns us to a creative communication with a deep spirituality that resides in nature. He calls for all of us to experience creation as a source of wonder and delight rather than as a commodity for our personal use. And he wants us to move from being a disruptive force on the earth to being a benign presence.

He argues that despite overwhelming evidence that life is often tragic, that suffering and death are all around us, we exist in an environment which is not

negative. This essence of religion is a ‘basic confidence that the ultimate environment of our lives is trustworthy and fulfilling rather than indifferent or hostile towards us’. There is an ecological postmodern spiritual view that sees the universe as a ‘graceful, caring, enlivening environment’. We can experience that environment when we sit in quiet reflection, when we gaze in silence at a scene of great beauty, when we hear the happy laughter of someone we love.

The Polish ecophilosopher Henryk Skolimowski (1992) writes that the ecological person recognises the awesome history of evolution, clearly sees the universe as a web of relations and cannot help but be reverential toward all of creation. He equates living a life of reverence with living in grace, and to live in grace is "to walk in beauty", aware of being alive and being enchanted by the cosmos. The reverence for all things gives rise to an awareness of values that could guide the ways in which humans live.

So ... is there something for nursing in all of this? I think so.

Healing is the remit of nursing, and to connect the bushfire data to this healing role and to incorporate notions of ecology, it is necessary first to see healing not only as caring for the damaged physical body which is an important part of nursing's work, but as caring for the whole person. Nurses who have an expanded awareness of the environment, of nature, of their place in the universe, of sacredness and who allow this understanding to create a sense of humility – enact their nursing in particular ways.

Our consciousness determines what a caring environment will look like, how it is managed and what occurs there. Nurses work with technology and physical care as a necessary part of their skill repertoire, but for a nurse operating from an ecological

consciousness, this would never be sufficient. If we think of healing as spiritual work we would know that living in awareness of the spirit, is to live daily in care and compassion and to participate in creating healing space (Skolimowski 1993). To work with a conscious awareness of this is to work in a very different way than would be the case if one's cosmology were about individualism, disconnection, illness as an enemy and death as final.

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