

## Part 3 Consequences of Removal

### Chapter 13 Reunion

*Going home is fundamental to healing the effects of separation. Going home means finding out who you are as an Aboriginal: where you come from, who your people are, where your belonging place is, what your identity is. Going home is fundamental to the healing process of those who were taken away as well as those who were left behind.*

Every reunion involves a variety of emotions and reactions on the part of all parties and is unique.

Just as there are many homes, there are many journeys home. Each one of us will have a different journey from anyone else. The journey home is mostly ongoing and in some ways never completed. It is a process of discovery and recovery, it is a process of (re)building relationships which have been disrupted, or broken or never allowed to begin because of separation.

#### Importance of reunions

Research in the field of adoption has revealed that information about one's natural parents and heritage is important to most adoptees. The Victorian Adoption Legislation Review Committee found that,

*The available research findings indicate that the desire to obtain information about one's origins and background corresponds to a natural, healthy need relating to the development of the 'psycho-historical' dimension of a person's identity. The psychological development of an adopted person is handicapped by the absence of a sense of genealogical history resulting from the lack of a known original family (1983 page 85).*

Similarly the NSW Parliament's Standing Committee on Social Issues recognised the fact,

*... that a significant proportion of adoptees have a deeply felt emotional and psychological need to know about their origins. Research in Scotland, Canada and the United States has identified the phenomenon of 'genealogical bewilderment'. This is a real and compelling need of adoptees affecting their total well-being (1989 page 39).*

A non-Indigenous adoptee told the Third Australian Conference on Adoption in 1982 of,

*... the fundamental need of some adopted people to link their natural heritage and identity with the reality of their present adoptive identity. To describe this need as mere curiosity is to denigrate a deep and natural need to know and understand oneself and one's origins ... it is a need to establish oneself as an individual (Lenne 1982 page 336).*

Reunion is the beginning of the unravelling of the damage done to Indigenous families and communities by the forcible removal policies. For individuals, their articulated needs to trace their families are diverse. People need to have a sense of belonging and a sense of their own identity. It is important for most people to know their direct and extended family. Reunion is often an essential part of the process of healing when the separation has been so painful. You have to know where you come from before you can know where you are going.

*The journey home is a journey to find out where we came from, so that we can find out who we are and where we are going. Going home is essential to healing the wounds of separation. At the core, going home means finding out who you are as an Aboriginal person, finding your identity as an Aboriginal person, finding out where you belong. It may or may not include physically going home and meeting relatives, but at a minimum it should include having sufficient information about where you come from in order to make that decision.*

Many people spoke of their needs for knowledge of and reunion with their families so that they would have access to basic family information. This is important, for example, in relation to health and inherited illnesses and in the context of developing intimate relationships.

*When I started to get to know my father and he was telling me about his family and who I was related to, my heart nearly stopped because I realised I had slept with first cousins on occasions ... I was nearly sick. I decided then and there I'd never go with or marry any Aboriginal woman in my life.*

## **Joyous reunions**

A number of witnesses told the Inquiry of their feeling of being 'home at last' when they finally met their birth parent, usually their mother.

*It was this kind of instant recognition. I looked like her, you know? It was really nice. She just kind of ran up to me and threw her arms around me and gave me a hug and that was really nice. And then suddenly there was all these brothers coming out*

*of the woodwork. I didn't know I had any siblings. And uncles and aunts and cousins. Suddenly everyone was coming around to meet me.*

[New South Wales: NT woman removed to Garden Point Mission at 3 days in the 1960s; adopted into a non-Indigenous family at 3 years; reunited with her birth mother in the presence of her adoptive mother at 21.]

## **Reunion impossible**

Tragically, many Indigenous people affected by removal have, for a variety of reasons, been unable to reunite with their families and communities. Some people discovered their parents had only recently passed away while others were denied by distraught parents and not given an opportunity to meet them.

*I run into my sister at the school and I just happened to know that it was her because of the same family name. And that's when I found out about my Dad being sick. I didn't get to see Dad. He passed away a couple of weeks after I found my sister. I went back for his funeral. I took my kids.*

[South Australia: woman fostered at about 5 years in the 1960s.]

*I arranged to make contact with her as soon as possible. Now I blame myself for what has happened. Because after 52 years I was so anxious that my mother would accept me with open arms, put her arms around me and be happy that she'd found me again. I got onto the Salvation Army Missing Persons. They went around to see her. I believe she got very upset and was shaking and was crying and denying. She [said] she didn't know any woman that'd be looking for a mother. She was crying and shaking, didn't want to know, didn't want to see me.*

**X**

*My natural mother died of cancer in 1994. I had spoken to her on the phone, but she died before I had a chance to see her. She told me a lot of things I didn't understand at the time because I was 'brainwashed'.*

[New South Wales: woman removed at 11 months in the late 1950s with her three older siblings, made a State Ward and fostered by a non-Indigenous family.]

These people have 'lost something that can never be replaced' (Joyce Smith). Others told of finding their parents only to have them pass away soon afterwards or to find themselves unrecognised.

*When I was 20 years old I was reunited with my mother for the first time shortly before she died. I suppose I had a natural*

*curiosity to meet and know her. I had an urge to see my mother and when I met her she said, 'I knew you'd come'. I didn't know at this stage I was Aboriginal. My mother was the first Tasmanian Aboriginal person I had met. A few of my natural siblings were with her. I still haven't met some of my natural siblings.*

X

*I've seen the old lady four times in my life. She's 86 years old. We were sitting on the bench [the first time]. I said, 'I'm your son'. 'Oh', she said, and her eyes just sparkled. Then a second later she said, 'You're not my son'. Well mate, the blinking pain. Didn't recognise me. The last time she saw me I was three years old.*

X

*I went to Link-Up who found my family had all died except one sister. I was lucky enough to spend two weeks with her before she died. She told me how my family fretted and cried when I was taken away. They also never gave up of seeing me again.*

[Queensland: woman removed at 3 years in the 1950s.]

*I was in this four bed ward and there was myself [aged 9] and a lady, an old woman who was very sick with tubes hanging out of her. And she seemed really, really ill. And one of my relations who was a nursing aide told me that that old lady was my mother. I hadn't seen her since I was four years old. But she was so sick, and all she could do was just look at me and cry. But I just kept looking at her and I was just angry at her, I was feeling shame, I was frightened, I was happy, I was sad, I was all sorts of things. But I was also starting to feel guilty about feeling like that. Anyway, I stayed in the hospital about four days I think, and then I went back to Beagle Bay Mission. And two days later my Mum died. So that was the last I ever saw her.*

[WA woman removed at 4 years in the 1950s.]

## **Complicating factors**

People whose own Aboriginality was denigrated in childhood may be reluctant to admit to it or to make connections with their Indigenous family. People whose Aboriginality was denied in childhood or simply not revealed to them may be unable to overcome the negative views of Indigenous people instilled in them since childhood. When they trace their families, they may find themselves unable to accept them or rejected by them in turn.

*When I worked on the wheat bins at the age of 18 there was this Noongah boy and he says, 'My name's Jim Milner. What's your name?' And I said, 'My name's Tony Milner'. And I was just stunned. And he says, 'You're one of our people'. And I said, 'No, I'm not!'. 'No, you're one of our people'. And I had to fight it, and say, 'No, that can't be right'.*

[Western Australia: Tony was removed at birth in the 1940s; he was eventually identified by another relative who recognised his surname; he has been unable to trace his mother, locate his file or find out why he was removed.]

It is common, for example, for people who have been brought up in middle-class urban areas by non-Aboriginal families to experience a form of 'culture shock' in returning to a family home in a rural community. Similarly some family members may not meet social expectations, and their use of alcohol or drugs may be an affront to the 'newcomer's' standards. Others, realising their Aboriginality for the first time, adopt the red, yellow and black colours of the Aboriginal flag as the only accessible aspect of their Aboriginality, and may experience only a reserved approval from older and less politicised family members if, or when, they find them. Underlying the most traumatic of the possible problems of people reuniting as family members are the understandable tendencies for people to attribute blame – not only to the welfare system, but to parents who were unable to prevent their removal, or free them from institutions (*Learning from the Past* 1994 page 64).

*I felt different. I'd had an education – without trying to put them down. I looked around and I saw things that were different to what I had, without trying to be mean or anything. It wasn't what I expected at all. Just mainly silly little things. There's a lot of people in there, a lot of people, all the time. It just felt different. To me it was like everything was for everyone. They shared everything. It wasn't till I saw what they had that I thought, they deserve what I had. To me you feel crammed in, in Nan's house, like, you can't move ...*

X

*I've received a lot of hostility from other Aboriginal people. They're my own relatives and they really hurt me because ... they have a go at me and say that I don't even know my own relatives, and that I should; that I've got nothing in common with them. The damage is all done and I can't seem to get close to any of them.*

[South Australia: woman removed at about 2 years in the 1940s; ultimately fostered.]

*I had no idea – like I didn't mix with Aboriginal people at all. I had – and I've admitted this in public before that I was racist towards*

*Indigenous people. I learnt my prejudices from newspapers, from the television, from the radio ... and while my adoptive parents didn't go around criticising, you know, Aboriginal people in front of me, there was certainly no positive comments about Aboriginal people ...*

Language differences inhibit many reunions and make rebuilding true relationships virtually impossible.

*I could have at least had another language and been able to communicate with these people. You know I go there today and I have to communicate in English or use an interpreter. They're like my family, they're closer than any family I've got and I can't even talk to them. We may have upped and left but I can't imagine it because those people never left. That's their home, that's their country, they can't imagine ever living anywhere else and yet now when I go back I feel so isolated from it and I really would like to be part of that community and to work with them. But I find it very difficult. They accept me because of our blood link and things but I am not as good an asset to them as I would have been if I'd maintained all that other stuff.*

[Tasmania: woman whose mother was forcibly removed to a mission in Queensland.]

Locating family members has proven impossible for some.

*But a lot of girls didn't know where home was because their parents were moved and resettled miles away from their traditional homelands. They didn't know where their people were and it took them a long time to find them. Some of them are still searching down to this present day.*

[New South Wales: woman removed to Cootamundra Girls' Home at 8 years in the 1940s.]

## **Bonds broken forever**

Even for those who trace, locate and meet their families, the lost years can never be fully recovered and the lost bonds can never be fully healed.

*I couldn't deal with it, I couldn't accept my father and his family. They were like strangers to me.*

X

*... your siblings ... your family – you can never get that back once you've lost it. The people are there, yes, but you can never get it back.*

X

*I met my natural siblings at my mother's funeral but there was too much water under the bridge – 20 years – for us to have a real relationship. The biological ties were there, but that wasn't enough. We all tried to make a go of it but it just didn't work. I suppose Aboriginal people can get their land back but cannot get their family back. We are still strangers even though we have tried to reunite. We have barriers between us created by something other than us. Being taken like we were gave us all a sense of mistrust and insecurity.*

X

*I found my mother at the age of 13. I remember the day I knocked on the door and she was in shock. She did not want me to stay with her because she had never told her new man about me. So she sent me to Sydney to aunts and uncles. Even though I remembered them before the homes, and all the good times, it just didn't feel the same when I was with them. They also felt like me – that we were strangers ... The family was gone in only a short time when I was away in the homes. It could never be replaced now because it was lost.*

X

*I went with my sister to Redfern [aged 17]. I'm walking up the street and my cousin says, 'That's your mum over there'. I'm standing there against the wall ... I had no connection with her. None whatsoever. So that was it. Never bothered about it. Never said hello to her. I stayed against the wall. [Ten years later met her mother.] I didn't get close to her. I didn't do anything. But I spoke to her and I know who she was then. I didn't have any inkling for her. I didn't get near her.*

[Queensland: NSW woman removed in the 1940s at about 6 months to Bomaderry Children's Home; transferred to Cootamundra at 8 years; put out to work at 15.]

Some people find it hard to reconnect with family because they fear being separated again. They don't allow themselves to become too attached.

*... I mean, you realise that basically apart from us, all we've got is sort of ourselves. Because you've got no real parents that you can get close to or relate to. That's sort of where it actually ends, that I feel. You're too scared to show any emotion towards any sort of – my remaining parent. Not because it's her fault or nothing like that. You sort of don't blame her. I think if you turn around and you try and analyse it, it's basically because you don't want to lose her as well, so you turn around and you're too*

*scared to get close in case there's something happens where she's off – she either dies or she decides to go again. I think that's been one of the causes why she sort of moved away as it is ... You just keep your distance. It's like someone that sort of manipulated you in a way that you want to turn around and make sure that it doesn't happen again.*

*... in the time that I've sort of known my mother I don't think I've ever actually walked up and actually showed any affection towards her, possibly because there's fear of her going again or even dying. But you just – most people have said after sort of the experience that you go through in life, you keep a wall against you, and you sort of don't let anyone in.*

## **Unwelcome news**

One obvious consequence of a reunion may be that the child finds out a great deal of personal and family background information which is unacceptable, even traumatic.

*It was a shock to find out my father wasn't Aboriginal. I didn't like it at all. It didn't seem right ... I thought it was the same father that we'd all have as well. It makes me angry, very angry. If I met him, I don't think I could be very nice to him. I don't know anything about it, but I feel he didn't care. He just got her pregnant and left her. I don't want any of his blood in my body.*

## **Unsupported reunions**

Many family reunions have taken place without supportive assistance and counselling such as that provided by Indigenous family tracing and reunion agencies such as Link-Up.

*... inadequate preparation of the parties in terms of understanding their own needs and expectations, or those of the other, is at the root of unsatisfying or failed reunions ... We believe that to accommodate the complexities of bringing together the seeker and the sought person, it is advantageous to involve the services of a third person to act as an intermediary wherever possible ...*

*... mediated contact is safer than direct contact in terms of reunion outcome, particularly in the reduction of unmet expectations or dissatisfactions amongst the parties (O'Dea, Midford and Cicchini 1992 pages 85, 86 and 88).*

There were reunions engineered by 'welfare' officers without any preparation of the child or young person involved, often in circumstances

where the reunion was the first time the child's Aboriginality was admitted. No counselling was offered for the after-effects of such reunions.

*I was in one of the cottages [in a juvenile detention centre] and they called me up to the head office and they said, 'Your mother's gunna come and visit you this weekend'. And I said, 'Who?' And they said, 'Your mother'. I said, 'Oh yeah, yeah, me mum from Greensborough [foster mother]'. They said, 'No – no, your real mother'. That just tossed me completely. I thought that she [foster mother] was my real mother, you know, because I didn't know I was Koori then. I didn't know I was a blackfella. I just thought I was something different – you know, just dark – tanned or something. I didn't know. And the day came, you know, and she walked down – you know. I was at school, and I seen them, you know – me mum and me stepfather. I seen them walking down and I've looked over and then they called me over, you know, and sat down, you know, talked. I remember I freaked out a little bit. I didn't know what to say, what to do, you know. And I was hiding behind someone else. You know how when you're – kids are kids ... Because you don't know who it is and they say, 'Yeah, it's your mum'. How the hell do I know...?*

[ Victoria: youth of 15 at the date of this incident, his first meeting with his birth mother.]

*I was out of control. They [foster parents] wanted to get rid of me. So they packed us on a plane, and dumped us at our mother's place, which we'd never really known. And she never knew we were coming. We were just there and she didn't like us. She didn't talk to us for three days. There was just no connection there. Home never became a home.*

[ New South Wales: woman fostered as a baby in the early 1970s; rejected at 13 years and returned to her mother by welfare officers; rejection by her mother forced her onto the streets.]

## **Community reunion**

Another critical aspect of the reunion experience is in reuniting with the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities. For people who were separated from their families, reunion with the Indigenous community operates on two levels: reunion and possibly reintegration with the particular community of origin and reunion and acceptance by the Indigenous community at large. However some witnesses spoke of being rejected by the Indigenous community.

*You have to be accepted by the community and accept yourself. And I've proven that and yet they still won't – they won't do anything about it. They have these big meetings about stolen generations ... 'We want these children back'. And when you're*

*there on their doorstep they're saying, 'Piss off because you can't prove you're black'.*

X

*The other rejection came, of course, from other Aboriginal people in the community. They called us 'whitewashed', 'coconuts' and things like that; also 'Johnny-come-latelys'. You then had to justify your identity, or try and find a place amongst all that.*

[South Australia: woman removed as a baby to Koonibba in the 1940s.]

Graham, who was adopted as a baby into a non-Indigenous family in 1972, explained that the rejection came from his side, because of his upbringing.

*The only problem which I had at that [Aboriginal] TAFE was that the Aboriginal community there wanted me to go to these dances and get involved in Aboriginal dances in the community and all that sort of thing. But I couldn't do it because I hadn't had any contact with people before and all the whites told me they were this and this and that I should stay away and all that sort of thing; they're bad people. So it was sort of very difficult to get involved with Aboriginal people at that stage still.*

Others speak of the rewards of perseverance.

*... it took me a long time to be accepted back into the Aboriginal community. Actually I hadn't had any contact with the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre until I was approached about some part-time work and from there on I felt that I started to get back into the community. I often felt at times people thought I was different. I feel proud that I'm accepted into the Aboriginal community and that I can stand up and be counted now. It makes me feel worthwhile. I've certainly lost a lot of time.*

X

*For the first time I actually felt like I had roots that went down into the ground. But not only into the ground – that went through generations. And it was like I was connected through. And instead of being disconnected as the person that arrived earlier that week, by the end of the week I was connected.*

[New South Wales: woman removed at 5 months to Cootamundra Girls' Home in the 1950s.]

## Impacts on foster and adoptive families

Adoptive and foster families have also been victims of the assimilation policies.

*We would never have deprived any mother of her child, nor any child of its mother. This business has been very painful to us, ever since his natural mother told us she had asked for him back. The doctor told me how this child's mother was very young, first pregnancy plus the baby was never wanted right from the start. If this was true, why did she take her poor little frail baby home for three weeks or so? His mother was nearer 20 than 16 ... She took her baby home. He would not feed. [He had cerebral damage due to mother's prolonged labour and his breathing difficulties at birth.] She took him back to [the hospital] and it was the last she saw of him. She said they would not give him back ... We have the saddest situation one could possibly imagine – a total bereavement – the whole lot of them are grieving. He is very fair, somehow someone made this decision and ruined his life.*

[Victoria: adoptive parents of boy born 1965; mother unsuccessfully tried to rescind adoption 'consent'; fostered by Community Services until 21 months in very disadvantaged circumstances; happily adopted; independently located his birth mother at 16 but not accepted by her family.]

When people who were separated undertake to reunite with their natural family, an impact is also felt by members of the adoptive or foster families. Those adoptive and foster families who supported and cared for the child and were able to establish a loving relationship with their adopted child generally supported the child through their reunion. There is respect and understanding of the need for reunion.

*... they made a date to meet in Melbourne. When J. told me, I was pleased for him. I felt it was his right to know his background. 'Do you want me to help?' 'No', he said, 'I can do this by myself'. And he did.*

[Victoria: adoptive mother]

## International removals

An unknown number of Indigenous children have been removed by foster families or adoptive parents overseas. They are likely to have lost their Australian citizenship and their descendants would not usually be automatically entitled to return to Australia. Jack's experience illustrates the difficulty. His grandmother was forcibly removed from the Torres Strait in the early 1900s. Her brother believes she was taken by missionaries to Fiji to work as a domestic servant. Jack was born and raised in Fiji and entered Australia on a tourist visa in 1988. Having overstayed his visa he is liable to deportation. Although he has re-established family and community links, working for the community and accepted by relatives and other community

members, he cannot satisfy any of the criteria for citizenship or permanent residence. Jack's great-uncle told the Inquiry,

*... the Australian Government owes a historical debt to Jack's grandmother (my sister) which it can only repay by granting Jack the right to remain in this country. Jack's birthright was stolen from him by Missionaries acting with the consent of the Queensland Government at the turn of the century and he is morally entitled to compensation. The least that can be done to compensate him would be to grant him a right to reside in his own country.*

For those living overseas, locating family and re-establishing family, community and cultural links is extremely difficult, if not impossible. The importance of doing so is likely to be as great for them as for people living within Australia.

### **Karen**

I am a part Aboriginal woman, who was adopted out at birth. I was adopted by a white Australian family and came to live in New Zealand at the age of 6 months. I grew up not knowing about my natural Mother and Father. The only information my adoptive parents had about my birth, was the surname of my birth Mother.

I guess I had quite a good relationship with my adoptive Mum, Dad and sisters. Though my adopted Mother said I kept to myself a lot, while I was growing up. As I got older I noticed my skin colouring was different to that of my family. My Mother told me I was adopted from Australia and part Aboriginal. I felt quite lonely especially as I approached my teens. I got teased often about being Aboriginal and became very withdrawn and mixed up, I really did not know where I belonged.

As a result of this I started having psychiatric problems. I seem to cope and muddle along.

I eventually got married to a New Zealander, we have two boys, who are now teenagers. One of our boys is dark like myself, and was interested in his heritage. I was unable to tell him anything, as I didn't know about it myself.

My husband, boys and myself had the opportunity to go to Melbourne about 7 years ago on a working holiday for 10 weeks. While in Melbourne I went to the Aboriginal Health Centre and spoke to a social worker, as I had a copy of my birth certificate with my birth Mother's name on it. The social worker recognized my Mother's surname 'Graham', and got in touch with my aunty, who gave me my Mother's phone number.

I got in touch with my birth Mother and made arrangements to meet her. I have a half brother and sister. My birth Mother and Father never married, though my Father knew my Mother was pregnant with me. My Mother did not know where my Father was, as they parted before I was born. My sister decided to call a local Melbourne paper and put our story in the paper on how I had found them after 29 years.

My Father who was in Melbourne at the time, saw the article and a photo of my Mother and myself in the paper. He recognized my Mother and got in touch with her. My Mother and I had been corresponding, after we returned to New Zealand.

For her own reasons, she would not give my Father my address, so my Father went through the social service agency and got in touch with me two and a half years ago. I have met my birth Father, as I had a family wedding in Melbourne shortly after he made contact with me, so I made arrangements to meet him.

We kept in contact with one another, but I feel we will never be able to make up for lost time, as my birth parents live in Australia and myself in New Zealand.

I still feel confused about where I belong, it has been very emotional and the result of this caused me to have a complete nervous breakdown. I am on medication daily and am having to see a counsellor to help me come to terms and accept the situation, where I am at right now and to sort out some confused feelings. My adoptive family really don't want to know too much about my birth family, which also makes it hard.

I feel that I should be entitled to some financial compensation for travel purposes, to enable us to do this.