

Submission to Yoorrook Justice Commission

From: Dean Lusher

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Submission:

The Coin: Loss & Joy

I feel a profound sadness for my great grandfather, Frederick (Fred) Moore (1865-1952). The fact that he must have felt it would be better if he denied who he was – Aboriginal – in order to protect his family and himself. The fact that, unlike his brother who had darker skin, Fred could pass as 'white'. What else could explain why someone who knew they were Aboriginal could pass as 'white'. What else could explain why someone who knew they were Aboriginal never passed this information on to his children?

Why he moved from Deniliquin in NSW to the suburb of Footscray in Melbourne, Victoria. Why he allowed his knowledge of Mob and Country, and his connections to both, to be extinguished. Fred knew through his run ins with the police, such as being on trial and acquitted for stealing sheep skins, or his brother arrested for riding a bicycle through town, that being Aboriginal meant you were in for 'special' treatment – special enough to have your kids taken away from you as the White Australia policy kicked in.

Was some knowledge of who he was, a Wamba Wemba man, passed on in the family but that it was considered so shameful as 'not to be discussed' and was forgotten, laid at the bottom of some lake? I cannot comprehend living in Australian society at that time for Fred that pushed him to this. I feel ashamed of White Australia – of which I am part or felt part of for 50 years – for this. How can one group of people do this to others? How can we strip people of their culture, claiming superiority? It's racist. It's ignorant. It is shameful.

All of the things White people could have learned. Instead, they were so enamoured by their own superiority (or presented with the opportunity to raise their social standing by standing over Indigenous people just as upper class Europeans had stood over them) that they did not see the opportunity before them. To learn from the world's longest continuing culture. I also feel a profound sense of loss for myself. Only in digging in the past did our family find he was the son of an apical Wamba Wemba ancestors, John Moore and Eliza Edwards.

Only in 2021 do we realise our connection to People and Country. Only now do we meet relatives for the first time, some of them so close to the end of their lives. I feel enormous grief and a gaping hole where interactions with my Mob would have been, where my knowledge of Country and Culture should be. I do not know the details – it is like my memory has been erased of such details – but the feeling that this was something wonderful that I now do not have overwhelms me sometimes.

The flipside is that I now get to find out these things that I did not know, and that I have a wonderful opportunity. This is true and I will. But I cannot deny or forget the feeling of loss. My wife's family is originally from Italy. There is such a celebration of Italian connection and heritage in her family. Nonna's ravioli, Zia's lasagne, Nonno's vegetable garden, language, sharing, connection to the old country, visits to relatives in Italy, frequent and joyous get sharing, connection to the old country, visits to relatives in Italy, frequent and joyous get togethers – always over great food. Beyond this, my wife has work friends that arose in part

because of their shared Italian heritage, one even coming from the same village as her family. Jokes about them being related.

I have friends with different backgrounds – Irish, Chinese, Vietnamese – their stories are similar. Joy in connection and culture. Think of these memories. The best memory ever of your culture, then the next best, and all the ones after. Add all of these memories together and think of what richness and joy they give you. Then take each of these memories and remove them one by one. Your favourite relative. A trip to the homeland. Your favourite food. That funny aunty. Those trips away together. Take them all and erase them until there is nothing left. In their place, add one single memory. The memory of something so important, so lovely, so kind and warming, so much a part of you being taken away. Make this memory a yearning of things you miss, that you cannot remember, but that you want back so much.

If you could choose to retain all of your memories about your culture, your family, your connections, or you could choose the single memory of them lost and the deep grief at not being able to remember them – which would you choose? When I saw my (new) Aunty at the Kuli Kurrek gathering on Wamba Wemba Country and got speaking to her and the knowledge she shared with me, I just felt such a sense of loss at all of those connections that I do not have but could have had. I feel there is a hole inside. There is such a sense of loss. Of what could have been. Of people who are my family but I do not know them. Of love, of support, of connection. All this seems broken.

Also meeting [REDACTED] who was taken from parents, last seeing mother at 4 years of age. [REDACTED] shows me the photos of what looks like a normal, happy family. Normal and happy until taken away to a home for kids. “Don’t just act like White people, you better look like us too. Because if you don’t, we will take your kids away.”

My greatest struggle in life has been the PTSD that followed on from a scenario of thinking my own child had been taken away or drowned on a day we lost him for 45 minutes at the beach (but thankfully got him back unharmed). What sort of people takes other people’s kids off them, and puts them in an institution, just because of the colour of those their skin?

When I look at my cousin, I feel “There, but for the Grace of God, go I”. How would I have survived if I had gone through what my cousin had? I am not sure I would have. The flipside to this gnawing sadness is that I feel so privileged. What a 50th birthday gift I received to learn of my Aboriginal heritage! While I have profound sadness, I also feel so lucky to be given the opportunity to create new memories, to engage with People and Country and Culture.

These two contradictions are present together inside me like different sides of the same coin. I feel like I see it spinning in the air. There’s the joyful side, there’s the sorrowful side.... There’s the joyful side, there’s the sorrowful side.... What I would like is for people to hear this, to listen and acknowledge my sadness and grief at what I’ve lost. No apologies. No compensation. No feeling bad personally. Just an appreciation that I have lost something and the empathy to understand this must be difficult for that me. “I hear you and this must be difficult for you”. And I want them to be joyful for me about connections to People and Country that have just begun and are already adding so much to my life.

END OF SUBMISSION