

A personal reflection on the spiritual relationship with country.

Audio extract from Sherry Balcombe's talk at the Catholic Earthcare Convocation, 3 September 2020.
Sherry Balcombe - Coordinator, Aboriginal Catholic Ministry Victoria (ACMV)

Sherry is a proud Western Yalanji, Djabaguy / Okola woman from Far North Queensland, born on Wurrundjeri Country. Sherry has worked with Aboriginal Catholic Ministry Victoria for more than 12 years, and previously in welfare and foster care with the Victoria Aboriginal Child Care Agency. Sherry is passionate justice issues, and strives at the ACMV ministry to continue to fight for Justice for all Aboriginal People.

I have written a paper on aboriginal spirituality because we have a lot of people asking what it is and what does it mean. It's a difficult feeling or connection that's not easily explained to somebody that's not aboriginal. For us it is born in us, it's something that's handed down through our bloodlines from generation to generation. It is the unspoken knowing that all aboriginal people possess and for this we are truly blessed, because it is in our souls from the time of conception. It's something that our ancestors passed on to us without even knowing, or needing to know; it just was.

We are born the spirit of this country, it is where we're conceived, it's our home and it's where we belong. The earth is our mother and that is the easiest way to explain it. We have a deep connection with the creative spirit. You must always respect and protect your mother for it is linked to our survival as a race.

God gifted us with a unique connection to the plants the animals and the waterways, not just for our survival, but for us to be fully part of everything that he created. Part of his dream for a race of people, to live as one in peace and harmony with the world.

We have a totemic relationship with all things thereby creating a deep respect for all living things and non-living things like mountains, hills, soil. We knew that we had to care for these things and that they were sacred to the creator spirit too, and as caretakers of the land, we learned how to care for it properly like using fire to rejuvenate and enrich the soil for future generations.

Our totemic relationship with the birds and the animals connects us to both the physical world and the spiritual world, and this is underpinned by reciprocal obligation to care for each other and the natural environment. It is our responsibility as the first peoples. It is the gift given to us by the creator spirit and what an amazing gift it is. Unsurpassed by any other material or spiritual belief or item. From the beginning of time we have we have worshipped the creator spirit and listened to his calling of us. We realised that for our survival we had to obey the laws that were given to us at the beginning of time. All of our rituals, corroborees and celebrations are to pay respects to the creator spirit and to acknowledge and say thanks. For aboriginal people we believe that if we did not perform particular rituals or ceremonies that there would be consequences for the whole tribe, so our worship is also connected to our pride and dignity as a peoples. We consider the land to be alive, it carries a deep sacredness for us all. It is holy land. Our songlines, our dreaming, our past, our present, and our future are deeply entwined with the land. It is a belonging that has sustained and guided us for thousands and thousands of years. So our spirituality, our faith, our culture, our laws, are all part of the oneness that all aboriginal people possess. What an amazing gift it is.

Today we try to share our sacredness of our gifts with all Australians and the Catholic church as it enriches and deepens everyone's connection to God.