

**Australian Counselling Association
Annual Conference Inaugural Address
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Title

Our stories, Our medicine – Exploring holistic therapy integrating body-wellness, mindfulness, and spirituality: *An Indigenous perspective on healing, change, and counselling, and the social and political contexts of an emerging discipline*

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Abstract

This Inaugural Address for the Australian Counselling Association Annual Conference 2004 presents a holistic and Indigenous perspective on healing, change, and counselling. Social and political contexts are explored, with emphasis on placing current professional debates in the context of an emerging discipline. The strengths of ACA are highlighted, and a vision for a holistic approach to the culture and politics of counselling is shared.

Welcome to this important and prestigious gathering of practitioners from a wide range of disciplines, and a warm welcome to the conscientious members of the public who are joining us today. Thank you to the ACA conference team for inviting me to open this important event. I would like to offer respect in acknowledgement of the traditional custodians of this land now called Brisbane, and of this great land of Australia. As a First Nations descendant I ask for permission to be here, and I offer tobacco and prayer for the great waves of transformation that are moving across this land and here today, symbolised by our willingness to gather together, to listen to each other with respect, and to open our beings to new ways of perceiving.

It is also an honour to be here, because my growing association with ACA is a natural unfolding of my prior membership with the Canadian Counselling Association. I have fallen in love with Australia, and with my Indigenous Australian partner. The culture and life of this great country has filled my life with joys and new challenges that I embrace with complete openness.

As an overview, this morning I will take this opportunity to speak about two different topics: (1) the role of ACA, and (2) holistic therapy. Before I begin, at the awards dinner tonight it is my great honour to announce the launch of a new international research journal sponsored by ACA. So I hope you will join me tonight with the delegates and friends of this conference for this historic announcement.

It is not often that an opportunity like this arises over the course of one's career. I will therefore take the liberty of speaking frankly and from the heart.

It is important to acknowledge that ours is a new industry. There are issues we all agree with, like having basic ethical and legal frameworks for client safety. But there is much debate over other issues, including how much training is required to practice. Part of the context we need to remember is that the volunteer sector is the seed-bed of up-and-coming counsellors. A very many practitioners in Australia have a Diploma qualification or less. This is not necessarily problematic, as some would like us to believe. This is merely an historical context of a new profession. We need to remember that regardless the level of qualification, all members of an association are subject to the same ethical, legal, and moral guidelines, including disciplinary procedures.

Over time, yes, levels of qualifications will change as a critical mass is reached across the industry. But this is not a moral, ethical, or legal debate per se. This is an historical process. We need to exercise patience in these circumstances. Greater recognition of these contexts is needed by leaders of the profession. As well, educational providers, particularly those in public institutions, would be better placed to meet the research and educational needs of the industry and to avoid what could be seen as partisan politics.

What inspires me most about ACA needs to be clearly stated. We too often overlook our strengths, so as a new member of ACA I wish to highlight these strengths from my point of view.

ACA supports the culture of a one-stop shop, broad-based, inclusive, culturally diverse, non-discriminatory organisation based on the views of membership -- from the bottom up. This is how an association ought to function. Sadly this is not always the case.

Decisions facing the counselling industry need to come from the base of membership itself by clear processes of voting on central issues and other means of gathering member's opinions *directly*. Even in cases where "consultations" have been allegedly conducted by certain groups, major critiques of the process are warranted. At the moment, no group in Australia can speak unilaterally for the profession, to do so is false and misleading.

In contrast, ACA has a consistent track record of staying close to the views of membership, has an accessible leadership, and a centralised administration under one roof. ACA directly represents its members. These are profoundly important qualities that need to be supported and strengthened in the Australian context.

ACA has consistent national, state, and local based initiatives, a demonstrated practical influence in business and policy development, is non-mediated by levels of bureaucracy, and takes a professional and non-sectarian stance that acknowledges and shares resources with other groups in Australia; groups that could be perceived by some people as competing and antagonistic. ACA even has public education initiatives, its own member journal, and as of tonight -- the first ever international counselling research journal in Australia. ACA represents a very strong, viable, and growing relevance in the profession as well as in Australian culture and life.

In a creative turn of phrase, I link these broad social and political issues closely with discussions of approaches to therapy. Therapy itself is a political process. Just as we front up about politics, so we need to be transparent about our approach to counselling. The social interaction of counselling takes place in a political environment, where the views of two people often clash, conflict, and otherwise may generate some positive change when the mix is right.

Let us take a pause... I need you to put on your thinking caps now, to concentrate and to relax deeply -- take a deep breath. I want you to grasp some of the gems of insight offered to you today. Notice that while you are relaxing, the experience of relaxing comes first, and then learning about new ideas comes later. Learning begins with relaxation and primary experience.

Our beings are expensive, untapped reservoirs of resources. We may form limiting beliefs over time, we may block, hinder, code, categorise, and build up laws that over time tend to backfire on us in personal and social ways. So in therapy we need to create opportunities for change. A basic presupposition I keep is -- the greater the flexibility in the system, then the more choices, and the greater the ability to adapt.

Healing is a form of adaptation. Not only to exterior environments, but more so, healing is often related to changes in interior states. These often subtle shifts involve mental,

emotional, psychological, and physiological parts of self that institute changes in a person's perception that somehow reorients their identity to their emerging reality. Experience of healing comes first. Understanding often comes later. A shift in deep abiding identity is experienced as either a crisis, or a great healing. Sometimes these experiences overlap, such as when a spiritual awakening causes a crisis of identity. Midlife crisis is a good example.

Therefore, power for healing may be activated by a therapist, but is generated by the client's core intentions. Let us look at a few examples from a wider berth. Let me ask you a question.

What do Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha, Bahá'u'lláh, Freud, Jung, C. Rogers, F. Perls, V. Satir, Milton Erickson, and Dr Phil all have in common?

I will give you a clue. It is not the fact that each of these people had a theory related to the human condition. And if you look closely at their work, you will see an underlying theory. Nor is it that each person was somehow interested in change, healing, personal or social transformation, which all these people certainly were in one way or another. If you search the narratives of each of these great "therapists" you will find the most curious realisation. For example, think outside the square. When the woman, who had suffered many years of haemorrhage, reached out through the crowd to touch the hem of Jesus of Nazareth's garment, energy flowed out of him into her.

In a different context, the words spoken by the Buddha caused such great realisations in those who encountered him, that their whole lives, and their very existence across time was altered forever. Similar stories continue today in people's narratives of encountering these great teachers.

During quite different social circumstances, those who encountered Rogers, Perls, or Milton Erickson reported life changing events somehow linked to the energy of the person and to the words, or gestures, offered by the therapist. But in all these narratives of healing or change, it is not so much the presence or words of the messenger that appears to be most important. We can see this because across all the narratives of these people's work, sometimes change or healing happens and sometimes it does not. Why is this? Let us return to the one from Nazareth for another clue about the common element linking together these diverse instigators of change.

Jesus did not address the women who had suffered for many years, nor does the narrative suggest he was even aware of her in any particular way. He was in fact quite preoccupied. The woman's desire for change was self-motivated. Her inner state of awareness was leaning toward change. Yet like most seasoned helpers, Jesus presence held a seed of hope for change and healing that drew the woman to him. She was seeking what she needed for herself.

It is interesting to note that Jesus reported incidents when his healing energy and words were not effective in producing change or healing. Indeed, he suggested to his disciples

that if people did not accept their message they should dust the sand from that town off of their feet and keep going. In modern times, all of the great therapists, if they were being honest, would report similar findings. That is, in some circumstances change and healing does not occur in the cases that we work with. So why does change and healing happen in certain cases and not others?

One of the reasons is that healing change appears to work only when the messenger accesses the individuals worldview, cultural framework, inherent beliefs, many of which are unconscious, and when the therapist understands the relevance of these personal contexts for producing change. Another presupposition that I hold is that when we access the underlying unconscious beliefs of others, we access a realm of possible change that is often overlooked but that holds enormous power for personal transformation.

In the example from the Gospels, Jesus did not do any direct preparatory work with the woman. She reached out to him. She had prepared herself for the change that she sought. His presence and the relationship she had with “him” in her heart were the catalysts for her change. As her inner representational systems of beliefs, values, and identity were open for a change, the work was immediate. The energy he felt leave him is not unusual in a therapeutic and healing context. Healing therapeutic work can often be exhausting for the therapist on many levels.

Other stories relate to great teachers and therapists working very hard to bring people towards states of openness. For instance, St Francis of Assisi is known to have become so upset by the stubbornness of his brothers, who resisted his insights and blocked any path towards personal transformation, that he went off into the country side and began talking to the birds. A large flock came to rest on the branches of the tree where he spoke, all remaining absolutely still, with their tiny heads turned just so, so that they could hear every word that he spoke.

Since the time of Freud, much discussion about resistance, transference, and countertransference processes suggests that we are all really fascinated with why change occurs, and why it does not. We still have relatively little understanding of these mysteries. Each therapist seems drawn to their own emphasis on change. But overall it seems that the one common denominator is that the disposition of the individual and the skill of the messenger to work with this disposition are vitally important parts of the change process.

What is a miracle after all? Dare I define it? (I will!) Miracles in healing and personal change come about by often very subtle changes in perception. Another presupposition: the smallest change in the system often makes the most difference. These changes facilitate radical shifts in mental, emotional, psychological, and physiological states of being. Change occurs first. Understanding follows. Miracles are at the heart of healing.

It is a well constructed miracle to help people change in elegant and effective ways. These processes can be systematically modelled, learned, and practised. Across the cases highlighted, healing seems to be more likely when the messenger accesses and works

within the belief structures of the person, or in doing so, embraces and confronts unconscious 'patterns of resistance' hidden within the belief structures of the person.

One very creative perspective here comes from world Indigenous wisdom. I am increasingly interested in the study and use of Indigenous methods in psychotherapy. These ancient technologies are about consciously working with unconscious awareness in ritual space, something we need to learn to do more effectively in modern psychotherapy. A big part of Indigenous culture is about honouring the wisdom of the environment around us. The environment always remembers the ancient People's whom the Spirit made Custodians of the land. If we forget, even the stones will cry out, remember who we are!

Whether you take these teachings as metaphor or as fact matters little to me. The point here is to be open, and to be flexible in how you perceive the world and other people. This is vitally important when working across cultures. To stop your self from change and healing is one thing, but to prevent miracles in other people's lives is a tragedy.

Unfortunately, the more counselling moves into "professional" contexts, the greater the pressure we have to resist labelling, coding, theorising, and moving away from raw human interaction that promotes transformation. Of course, it doesn't help that counsellor education tends to promote a focus on abstract theoretical critique of practicing quite limiting micro-skills. Holistic approaches, in contrast, will be better off working from an experiential model of learning grounded in intensive practice within a mentoring approach that returns to the value-added traditions of our discipline. Ideas about change are better placed after change occurs.

From an Indigenous point of view, modern psychotherapy has grown from largely materialistic and secular worldviews. These have emerged from some of the most limiting beliefs that are based in the traditions of psychological genocide and warfare originally coming from colonial Christianity. It has taken us the past three centuries for society to heal from these psychological hang-ups. We are only now beginning to envision different and more holistic ways of thinking about gender, sexuality, family life, and personal ritual.

Consider this metaphor... Australia is a living being woven together by the Dreamtime Serpent, whose body pulsates in subtle ways that sing the land and ocean into being constantly. Always evolving. Uniting separate clans together across this vast land. The Dreamtime Serpent's body is reflected in the deep water tables that weave their way across the continent. This Creator Spirit sings the land and people into being under the Ancient Black Swan who flies across the night sky. Colonisers renamed the Black Swan the Southern Cross. They turned her on her back, and stabbed her in her heart. The same is happening now with the forests and the land. Many people are seeking a change, but the issues are so huge that many of us do not know where to begin.

Imagine that the land is alive, which is true, and that you have a relationship with the land. A different worldview. One we are thinking more about as environmental issues get

worse. The land is like a spiritual DNA that becomes encoded in our bodies through unconscious association overtime. This is one way for all of us to identify therapeutically with Indigenous identity – we need to do so for our own survival on this planet.

In the same way, the environment is naturally associated with Aboriginal People's in Australia and in other countries. You see, we do violence to ourselves by ignoring these metaphors of ancient truth. What you do to the environment you do to yourself, and to your children, and to your great-grandchildren for seven generations... What we do in counselling also falls under these same ancient laws.

Counselling is a space to acknowledge that holistic healing and personal change needs to be congruent with the environment. Inwardly. Outwardly. In the Great Oneness. Counselling has a part to play in honouring these stories, religious, Indigenous, or secular. You see, our stories are our medicine. Take away this gem of insight, because our work in counselling can be holistic when we honour each other's stories. Our stories are our medicine.

In contrast, the game of 'Monopoly,' played with obsessively controlling intentions, is like one spirit that covers the counselling industry at this time in Australia. We need to break and subdue this spirit. Beware that this dominating and contaminating spirit wants to claim all of the real estate around the Monopoly board to the exclusion of others. The positioning of counsellors as just another powerful professional lobby group in national politics is not my personal hope for the counselling industry or for Australian culture. There is another way for us to go.

I am reminded of the words of John Ralston Saul who said, "Canada is above all an idea of what a country could be, a place of imagination". In these words you will see that the environment of a country becomes part of its people's identity, and influences their aspirations and hopes. In the same way, our idea of what a country is becomes manifested in ways that either work congruently with the environment and Indigenous wisdom, or comes to dominate and cause harm.

The same can be said for a process like counselling, which often works to articulate and reframe personal and cultural meaning. People's identity is often changed as a result of this personal and transformative process. I would like to rephrase John Ralston Saul's words and be remembered in Australia as having said that *counselling is above all an idea of what a profession could be, a place of imagination*. Somehow the spirit of these words needs to be an integral part of our Australian counselling culture, and the process that we envision with our clients.

The dominant 'Monopoly' paradigm or spirit, as I have called it, presents counselling well enough. But this spirit and drive for professionalisation and power through recognition also has a shallow side. Some might say that this spirit has the potential of presuming to define people's mental, emotional, psychological, social, and spiritual reality. Others will say this spirit seeks to further colonise people's beliefs such that traditions of psychological genocide will continue unmitigated. It could also be observed

that these controlling tendencies play out in approaches to industry politics that seek to diminish other groups.

I believe in the power of therapy. This is all the more reason to beware, and to front up about our approaches to change, and to acknowledge our bias.

Legal recognition of counselling in Australia under legislation will likely bear no direct correlation to the availability of quality counselling and psychotherapy. Those who use this argument mislead practitioners and the public, because the argument is based on ideology rather than probability. We have only to witness the issues facing the allied health sector to see the logic here. Indeed, the greater the power of counselling and psychotherapy as a profession the more pressure there will be to justify, protect, and hide behind professional codes that may have no relationship with processes of transformation. Be that as it may, history suggests that professions grow and gain seats of power in social democracies.

Under the 'Monopoly' spirit, Indigenous people and other minority groups will continue to be treated according to mainstream presumptions, based largely in social and political agendas, some of which may be unconscious, but that seek to define the normal verses the pathological. This spirit seeks to consolidate the power of the therapist socially and politically. If we are not careful, professional counsellors have the potential to become the chief instigators of psychological warfare. Don't be too surprised by these comments. Research suggests that therapists use their status to influence clients according to their own beliefs, bias, and prejudice. Many of us overlook how we use our values and beliefs in working with our clients. Let this be food for thought.

Of course counselling also has the potential to access people's innate abilities, to be holistic, inclusive, allowing, affirming, educational, nurturing, caring, practical, effective, expansive, integrated, honouring, and acknowledging of people for who and what they are, without driven agendas to change or alter people's lives. Counselling may be one of the rare circumstances where professional interaction could become a protective space for the soulful, very human qualities and capabilities of people to communicate beyond manipulation, in a respectable, safe and frank dialogue that challenges people to grow and to find the changes they want in life.

So how could we weave together all of these ideas? An Association. A job to do. A vision of holistic healing and change. A culture we are a part of creating. This is Australia. This is the Australian Counselling Association. Many challenging issues. Many, many more unresolved questions. The point is to live the questions themselves, and then one day, along some distant path, we will find ourselves walking within the answers. Our stories are our medicine. Thank you for listening.

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