

THE STOLEN GENERATION - A WHITE MAN'S TALE

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY by Beverly Wam

SUBJECT: Children's Services EDM403 (1994)

While Australia's Aboriginals wait for a public Government apology, as the "Stolen Generation", I also wait, not for an apology but for the Australian people to realize that these atrocities committed on our indigenous people were also committed upon white Australian children. The Aborigines were not the only victims - we have our own stolen generation.

Too many children, as a result of over-zealous intervention, were deemed "neglected" during the mid 1950's to the early 70's. These children were made wards of the state because parents fell short of middle-class standards.

My life began in 1961 at Crown Street Women's Hospital in Sydney. I was, at that time, the youngest of six children.

My early childhood may be comparable, to a degree, to that of the Aboriginals until the 1970's. Aboriginal children were taken from their homes and their culture as their parent' were deemed "unfit" and the children in moral danger. The children were institutionalized or placed into foster care to learn white man's ways and forced to assimilate, often in appalling conditions. The Government believed it was in their best interests and that they had a better chance at life if removed from their natural parents (Ochiltree 1990). Whilst not Aboriginal, my early life was no different. I was taken from my family as it did not conform to the social norms and because there were not enough resources for my mother to provide adequately for a family of six children. Like the Aboriginal children, I was taken so that I may have a better chance at life.

My father was a drinker and disharmony between my parents was the norm. The police were frequently called to domestic disputes. In early 1963, the police were called, by neighbours, to a violent dispute between my parents. They seized all six of us and we were taken into 'care'. My parents reconciled and we were returned. Some time later, in that same year, my father left. My mother, unable to get any Government assistance, pursued kitchen work at a local hotel. Childcare was not readily available and we were, therefore, cared for by our grandmother, who suffered a physical disability and also by my eldest sister. When I was almost three years old, my mother left for work as was usual. My mother returned home that night to an empty house. As was the case with the Aboriginal children, the police had come during the day and bundled us all into a police van. My eldest sister, then eleven, had tried to run - to no avail. This was to be the last time I would see any of my family for twelve years. We were charged with "no place of abode" by the Department of Child Welfare in December of 1963. We were made wards of the state and institutionalised. The irony of the State's intervention was that I was taken from one situation where I was, supposedly in danger of neglect, but never abused, to settings

where physical and emotional abuse was repeatedly inflicted upon me. There was no attempt by the Department to keep any of my siblings together.

I was later told that my mother had remarried when I was about five years of age and had appealed on several occasions for our return. Whilst she was successful in the return of the three eldest children, they refused to reinstate the three youngest to her care. They told my mother that "I had a better chance at life". She was told that I was with a wealthy and loving family who were waiting to adopt me and that I deserved that chance. I was with no such family. My mother was repeatedly approached by the welfare and was made to feel guilty when she refused to surrender us for adoption - she was even approached at work. Finally my mother signed the necessary forms to relinquish her parental rights. At this time I was still being shuffled back and forth between different families and Bidura Depot at Glebe. The refusal of the department to return me to my natural family was not unusual. Studies have shown that once a child was in care for more than twelve months, it was unlikely that they would ever be discharged from care. The younger the child was when they entered care, the less likelihood that they would be reinstated with their family (Vardin and Brody 1979). In the 1960's the Child Welfare Legislation had total power of the child once they had become a ward - even the courts could not intervene on a parent's request. "The Department's power is absolute....." (Brown 1980 p. 228). Parents are now able to have these matters heard in courts.

My first memory of a family was at a place called Springridge, I was three years old. At first I thought they were my real family. One day, when I was about 5 years old, the Davidsons told me that they were going away on a holiday. After we had left her three children at friends' houses, they took me for a really long drive. Although I was so young, I remember the drive with great clarity. On the way, they bought me a little red three wheeler bike. I remember being so excited. I couldn't wait to get to where ever we were going so I could ride my new bike. When I arrived at Bidura Depot, the bike was taken from me. I remember the exact words stated "A state ward owns nothing". The Davidsons told me that they were only going away for two weeks and would pick me up as soon as they returned from holidays - they never came back for me. By the time I was seven and had been to many different families, I suddenly realised that their name was Davidson and mine was Warn, it was then that I realised they were not my natural family. Of course I had always known our surnames were different, but then again so were our first names, so I had never made any connection with that.

The following three years saw me with several more families - rarely lasting more than a couple of months. I have very clear memories of some appalling conditions. One family, that I recall with great clarity, forced myself and their other foster children to sleep on a shared double mattress out on a fly screened verandah. I remember that we frequently had vegemite sandwiches for tea, whilst their children had cooked meals and "takeaway". I also recall many bouts of physical abuse. On one occasion I remember hiding under the house, my foster mother hosed me until I was forced to come out. I was beaten so badly I could not attend school - I was 6 years old. I later learned some of the "reasons" I was returned: "stubborn" (I was four!), another family, the Murray's quoted "she talks too much and may even need glasses, if these peculiarities can be addressed I might keep her". I

recently read a psychologists (Bidura approximately 1967) report that stated I was a friendly child but "falsely gay, insecure and always trying to impress others.... this resulted in Beverly talking incessantly hence having the adverse effect to which she desires." It also said I was continually trying to mimic the actions others. In hindsight I do not understand how my behaviour was so misunderstood. I just wanted to be loved and belong and the only way, in a child's mind, to do that was become exactly like them in every possible respect eg the way I walked, spoke, ate, even crossing of the legs was closely observed and replicated. It failed of course. The end result was that I was continually "killing" the previous child and inventing a new one. By the time I was seven I had no idea "what I was" let alone who I was! I still don't know if I am the real me or not. I was frequently belted for this and told "Your just a piece of bloody blotting paper". This was at my last placement that reinforced a further seven years of emotional abuse and damage.

Research results, cited in Vardin and Brody, indicated that my experiences as a foster child were fairly typical of that time. Children were frequently separated from their families needlessly, no effort made to maintain contact - the children were better off this way. Most children were moved from place to place and the treatment inappropriate. The irony of the situation was that the money paid to foster parents to care for these children was often not spent on the child and often the foster parents would, consequently, be in a better financial situation than the natural family. If this money had been paid to the biological parents instead, then it is likely they would have had a far better chance at retaining their own children. Due to the extreme government intervention and the high demand for foster parents, they were rarely screened and children frequently went from one form of 'abuse' to another - the system's abuse.

I remember like yesterday, an occasion, at the age of seven, when I saw some people watching me from the verandah at Bidura, they were talking and the matron was pointing at me. I was so scared that they might decide they wanted me. At the time, Bidura had been the only secure place I knew - I had been to so many different families already. I recall the matron of Bidura telling me what a lucky girl I was because there was another family who wanted me to come and stay with them. I remember it so clearly. I ran into the dormitory and jumped on the bunk bed. I remember grabbing the rails of the bed and screaming that I wouldn't go. I was dragged free and told that this was my last chance to be with a family and that I had to be a good girl. When I first met this family I said, "I just need a place to stay until I grow up and I promise to grow up really fast" - I did my best to keep that promise. I stayed with them until I was fourteen.

Materially, I was catered for very well but I never developed any sense of belonging or was I shown any love. When preference or favoritism was shown to their own daughter, my foster mother would frequently remind me that "blood is thicker than water". I didn't understand what that meant at the time. My foster sister was two years older than me and all of the girls at school knew that she did not have a sister. They continually teased me and reminded me that I did not have any parents, they said some very cruel things about my real family. The only memory I had of a family was the Davidsons, who I had lived with from the age of three until I was five. I had recently come to the realization that they were

not my real parents like I had thought. However, I survived the taunting by telling the other children that they were in fact my real family and that my parents had to go away for work and that I did have my own sister but she had been run over by a train. I lived in a world of fantasy and I wasn't sure whether I really believed these stories or not. I told everyone, including myself, that they would come back for me one day. When these stories came back to my foster parents I was belted for lying. They didn't understand what I was going through and neither did I.

By the time I was thirteen they had taken me to a child psychologist. The psychologist said that I was suffering an "identity crisis". What a surprise! I had changed from Beverly Anne Warn→ Beverly Anne Davidson→ Beverly Anne Murray→Beverly Anne Valvur→ Leanne Demaris Valvur et al!!!! The latter change of Christian name to Leanne Demaris was because I wouldn't allow my foster carers to call me Beverly. The children at my new school teased me all the time because I was not as "educated" as they were and they referred to me as "The Beverly Hillbilly". I insisted on being called Beverly Anne. My foster parents refused stating it was too long. I asked to be called Bev but they said it was a prostitutes name. I didn't know at seven what that meant, I just knew it had to be really bad. Even my name was bad. They chopped off the Bever and called me Leanne. I had lost the final part of that little girl who had slowly been killed by the system for the last seven years. What was left of her I killed so that I could finally belong. It didn't work and I am still struggling back through the trauma to find her again. In response to the psychologist's findings, my foster parents helped me begin the search for my natural family. This was quite easy initially (though the final member took more than thirty years to find) as my natural father still lived in Sydney. My father had no interest in meeting me but was able to put me in contact with a brother. I was shocked to learn that I was one of six. I managed to locate my three eldest siblings within a very short time as they had been returned to my mother's care and were, therefore, in contact with each other.

When I was fourteen years old, I caught the train to Sydney's West to spend the night with my eldest sister. I was dragged into an empty house and repeatedly raped by three offenders. No charges were ever made against the offenders and, as a result, my foster parents would not have me back. The revolving door of institutions began again. I WAS CHARGED! "EXPOSED TO MORAL DANGER" I was never seen by a doctor even though there would have been extensive damage. Some **6 weeks later**, whilst still in Minda for being raped, a doctor finally examined me and his findings were "that I had not been a virgin prior to the ALLEGED RAPE"!!!! Apart from the fact that this was grossly untrue (I was painfully naive) I do not know how a doctor can make that summation. I have since been told he would have had no way of actually knowing how "old" his findings were by that stage.

Over the next few years I went in and out of Children's court, hostels and institutions. I continued to find other members of my natural family but it was not what I had always dreamt it would be. At fifteen I went to live with my natural mother and her husband but it lasted little more than a month. I did not 'fit' into my foster parents' culture or my natural parents' culture. The system had turned me into a cultural misfit with absolutely no sense of belonging. My foster mother used to tell me that "Blood was thicker than water". My real family were my blood but in the eyes of the law we were not legally related. I was unable to form any kind of relationship until my twenties. This was to be an everlasting one. For the first time in my life I felt like I knew how to love and be loved in return. This was not with my partner but with my own children. I was finally a complete person -I had family that were both my blood and legally related. At the time of writing this autobiography I am still searching for some missing links. I have another brother called David, who I will never find. David was given up at birth, about one year before I was born. This was after a temporary separation between my natural parents. Records indicate that my brother died before his third birthday. I am still pursuing the cause of his death.

(2004) additional information.

After making many enquiries about my brothers death, as was indicated on births, deaths and marriages records, I finally discovered him alive and well in Queensland! By this time I was in my late thirties and we had been kept apart unnecessarily for all those additional years through a "clerical error". Unfortunately my struggle to form a relationship with most of my natural family has failed, we are strangers. I never gave up the longing to bond with my natural mother, however, it is too late now as she passed away last year at the age of sixty five.... I thought we still had time.

This article was originally written as part of a university assignment – subject Children's Services. We were required to discuss our own childhood and compare it the childhoods of today ie Children's Services. It was an extremely difficult and traumatic task but was done with the ongoing support of my lecturer. I have since made some alterations and additions to the essay as I was asked to make a submission into the Senate Enquiry into Children who had left institutional care. The poems were not a part of the original essay. The first was written partly as a teenager (additional verses as a mother) and the second shortly after I commenced psychotherapy as I traveled on my journey back. These were included as a part of the Senate Enquiry.

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WHO AM I?

My little sister Cathy got run over by a train
I'll never get to see her, not ever again
I had two Shetland ponies that ran around our farm
One fell over and broke his leg, the other broke his arm.

My daddy is a scientist and studies all the stars
We have lots of money and 20 Rolls Royce cars
We own a great big mansion, surrounded by a moat
We have lots of horses, cows and a billy goat.

I don't know where my mummy's gone
But she'll be back one day
I hope they won't be all that long
Why did they go away?

They took me for a big long drive
And left me at some place
How will I know if they're alive
Unless I see their face?

Was I really all that bad?
Or was it that I made them sad?
It's two years now they've been away
Are they really just on holiday?

Did I have a brother or a sister out there?
There must be someone, someone to care
Someday I'll have a family that will love me just for me
That day will come one day, I'll have to wait and see.

Here comes another family, just to look and stare
Thinking that they'll save the day, their happy home to share
Well, I'll muck up merry hell, I'll put them to the test
Then I'll know if they're for real or only like the rest.

No our purchase is no good we'll have to send her back
Was I really all that bad or did they lack the knack?
They didn't really want me, if they did they'd try
I sit and stare and hurt inside, sit and stare and cry.

Oh to have a family just to call my own

But I must reap the seeds that my parents have sewn
The times I used to wonder and the times I used to cry
I didn't even know, "Did my parents die?"

Here's yet another family, this time I will not go
I'll yell and scream, kick and shout, I'll yell and scream NO NO
This is my last hope they say, this time I must be good
Was I really all that bad or just misunderstood

Now I have two children, so special just to me
They will have what I have missed, a loving family
They will reap my seeds, the seeds that I will sew
They will have all my love, my love for them they'll know.

Bev Warn

WHY AM I? (2003)

The sun shines brightly down on me
But thick black clouds is all I see
Reached rock bottom my mind is blank
Who do I have but myself to thank?

At times I can't arise from bed
Alive in the body, but not in the head
I'm all mixed up and something's wrong
I've felt like this for ever so long.

I feel such a failure, I'm going no where
Sometimes I wonder, does anyone care?
Likes books out of reach, high on a shelf
There's so much inside but its kept to myself

If just I could say how sometimes I feel
But I don't know my feelings, just that they're real
It's there on my lips and it hurts in my heart
But how do I say it? And where do I start?

At times I cry but I don't know why
And it doesn't get better as days drag by
The guilt and the failure can overwhelm
As I search for answers in another realm.

I use what I can to numb the pain
But in the end no benefits gained
I question God and ask him why
He cannot simply let me die.

God has a purpose, that I know
I wish he'd reveal it or let me go
I've been through so much with no reason why
I search for his answer when often I cry.

Sometimes I feel he's so close to me
His warmth and love, I can feel and see.
But at other times I feel there's no one to share
And I question "God are you really there?"

There's times when the desire to die is so strong
But I love my children and I know it's wrong
This adds to my guilt and makes me feel trapped
With no escape, like my life's been mapped.

For my children I smile and pretend all is well
But my mind and heart is going through hell
I wonder how long the pain must last
As I try to focus on the present, not past.

Why do some just sail through life?
Yet others are filled with sadness and strife.
What is God's purpose for all this pain?
Is there some reason, is there a gain?