

No Way To Be: Violent & Suicidal Youth

Gary Robinson,

School for Social and Policy Research,

Charles Darwin University.

This paper is partly biographical: it is about a young Tiwi man who died a couple of years back. It is partly a statement about what I think is missing in the way indigenous issues are rendered in discourse, as causes for action: political, bureaucratic, legal, clinical, remedial, therapeutic action. It is about whose voice is heard and about why and how we need to listen. Finally, it aims to illustrate some of the origins of my thinking about prevention.

I think there is a deafness in current discourse: a lack of orientation to meaning, to the things that are real and meaningful influences in people's lives. There is, as a result, an inability to communicate about those things. Politicians, interventionists, researchers, healers, black and white, talk a language of empowerment and development: this means, firstly, empowerment and betterment of the structures which *they* serve and their capacity to deliver meaning *for them*. Intervention is offered to communities to meet a need for meaning, for action stories coming from the *outside*. It is done with too much blind faith that community ownership or participation will make them work. Ordinary people, consumers, those in apparent need usually benefit at best ambiguously from such development and from the services which follow.

Does it matter what all the promised action means to people? After all, the signs of dysfunction and damage are clear: create organizations, get the new welfare economy going and the rest will take care of itself. The major developmental necessities are surely clear enough: develop communities, capacity, social capital, infrastructure; then add governance, that's what is needed. Extend the governance idea to households: structure budgets for householders, develop family plans for dealing with troublesome members. Fund it, let it fall and then let something replace it. This is the trickle down effect. Enduring gains happen almost by accident of circumstance. This is inadequate, as it stands.

Governments are after all doing this everywhere, in a rubbery short term funded welfare economy layered over the top of regular services. Despite its potential value, the short term economy is insufficiently harnessed to real outcomes and leads to little capacity for meaningful engagement with processes in indigenous communities. Perhaps not unsurprisingly, in the Northern Territory, as elsewhere, this is being done without critical analysis of the inadequacy of bureaucratic solutions to social problems.

These gaps in thinking and policy are a matter of concern. Intervention without any science of meaning, any articulation of the voice of experience is never appropriate. I say *science* of meaning. Far too little science is put into making interventions effective *both* in terms of the distinctiveness of indigenous cultures *and* in terms of the developmental experience of individual people. What are *meanings* of relationships, of the destructiveness and self destructiveness that one sees a glimpse of in films like, *Lonely Boy* Richard+(Haslem, this volume).

1. JB's Unexpressed Sadness.

I want to tell a little of my life together with my late brother-in-law, JB. This statement is my story about us. I could probably put the words I have spoken in conversation with him down in a page or two, at most three. That's the kind of man he was. In fact, he said a lot: just not in words. He was a person for much of his life struggling to be noticed, just not able to be noticed in words. He was in that respect most unlike me.

About 18 years ago, when JB was 16, he was a silent figure around the shack I shared with a group of young fellows on Melville Island. He would never speak and I might not have noticed him at all, had I not seen that he had become guardian of our shed's only key, which hung by a string around his neck. He had claimed a link. He had few friends, and was a loner who often went out hunting or fishing by himself, following other boys for brief periods, but a member of no-one's gang.

JB's mother then died when he was seventeen. I became a member of his family somewhat later, when his family as a whole was still adjusting to that loss. He was almost always at the house of his big sister, but sleeping mainly at a stepmother's house. One day my future stepson, JB's nephew, then about 7, was angry because adults were watching the television and he could not get his mother to have them turn it off for a video. He went to the kitchen and methodically threw every piece of crockery out the door, onto the ground, smashing it all in a heap, one piece after the other. No one raised an eyebrow. A couple of days later, JB grew angry while his sister was talking to their deceased mother's half sister. He went into the

kitchen and did as his nephew had done, smashing every thing he could find, throwing it all out in a heap. This means many things: similar child-like rage, tantrums and coercive bullying in a seventeen-year-old; difficulty tolerating, much less expressing his own emotions; inability to negotiate with adults or expect response from them; legitimating himself by mirroring his nephew's actions . he's got rights, I've got rights! - more importantly, even ominously, appropriating the place of his nephew in the coercion game. The difference was, my stepson had his mother. JB's mother was gone, but no one's needs were to be put before his.

Shortly after, it was noted by his sister that he later went and took the electric jug from his stepmother's house to replace the one he had smashed. A capacity for restitution is an important sign. The gesture was also a kind of acknowledgement of her centrality in the family now that their mother was gone.

Later, J.B. shifted into the house where I lived with his big sister and other members of the family. He grew increasingly anxious about recognition from me, and flew into rages if I seemed to do anything to acknowledge others, at his expense. There was a continuous undercurrent of aggression towards his nephew, my stepson, who was also anxious about recognition from me. J.B. stole things. He broke in, he vandalized; he already had a lengthy criminal record. He took little boys out on raids to steal and destroy. His room was littered with misappropriated, aimlessly stolen, forgotten junk. He daubed the walls of the house with the words, "Fuck off from this house". He demanded that I throw people out, deny them access, exclude their demands, their crises and problems. He wanted me to fix the boat, to

drive off his clansmen who wanted to use it and had broken it. He wanted me to manage things.

Once I got annoyed with his insistence about fixing the boat. It always seemed always at the point of being wrecked through misuse. Seconds later, rocks were landing on the roof, louver glass shattering. So instantaneous were his rages.

Later on, another sister and her children moved in with us. She reacted to his bossiness towards them. He got my shotgun and fired a shot into the ground outside, marching up and down in a rage. I ran outside at the shot. He at first took aim at me, then marched up and down. I got him to put it away, then dismantled it. His sister's partner came and punched him. He put his fist through the wall, tried as if to cut himself with a knife, then ran up an electric pole threatening to grab the wires to teach them a lesson, demanding to be saved, at once admitting and disavowing responsibility for his actions.

Donald Winnicott, paediatrician, psychiatrist, psychoanalyst (Winnicott 1982), described what he called the antisocial tendency (in today's jargon, a form of conduct disorder) as having two components. *Stealing* is a search for something lost. The child is not searching for the object stolen but is searching for the mother over whom he or she has rights. *Destructiveness* is a striving to find reliability in the environment, an attitude that can tolerate greed, impulsiveness, mess, provocation, strain, anger without reaction, something parents in early childhood provide. The antisocial tendency is a response to early deprivation: At the basis of the

antisocial tendency is a good early experience that has been lost. Surely it is an essential feature that the infant has reached the capacity to perceive that the cause of the disaster lies in an environmental failure.+

After this crisis, JB's eldest one grandfather %brother+. *ngara aminijeti* - told me how, after JB's father was murdered, people were at the funeral. They saw the three year-old JB. He had been walking out alone through the bush, miles outside of the town and turned up out of nowhere. After this little boy lost his father, he survived at the fringes of other boys' households. He survived in the struggle around his mother, fighting to control the many demands on her, not least those of his many older siblings, resisting and reacting to his mother's delegations of responsibility for him to others. The disaster, then, according to JB's *aminijeti*, was the loss of his father, compounded by strain in the pattern of relationships around his mother.

However, the antisocial act can also be a sign of hope that the person can regain that response, find that attitude of tolerance again. JB's stealing and destructiveness and sensitivity to slight escalated precisely as his hopes and wishes for my recognition grew.

Another meal time, and 10 or 15 people were sitting in the noisy living room. My stepson had already eaten. JB came in and demanded food. I complied, but with annoyance. He disappeared momentarily, suddenly reappearing with a stolen rifle in his hands, and fired a shot through the wall. At the storm of criticism from others, he threw a knife which hit the wall next to my arm, and withdrew.

My stepson came into my room the next day and told me that he had had a dream. *The big buffaloes were crashing through the bush. The little wallaby was shot in the eye.*

I asked whether that little wallaby was he, eyes shut, afraid to look in case JB might shoot me. Yes, he said.

The next day, I was in a crowd watching football, tears of outrage and confusion in my eyes. I couldn't bear to be in the house. JB came and stood quietly behind me, almost touching my back, unable to speak. He eventually told a little story to a companion, about going out shooting, about wounding a wallaby on the arm . pointing to his upper arm - saying that it was all right, the wallaby got away. Shortly after, while I was holding my baby daughter, his niece, he came and made a funny face at her, conspicuously grasping my upper arm as he did so, holding it for a few seconds. In the following days, he was irritable and anxious . when we were out hunting he shouted at other youths to watch where they pointed the gun - clearly struggling with recognition of his own capacity for violence.

My partner and I talked. We decided to handle these crises and dangers in a specific way. We bought a new motor for the boat. I made JB its primary user, and kept him at it. It was almost a full time job managing JB and the boat, getting his clansmen to back off and accede to his and my joint control, keeping it in fuel, letting him go out whenever he wanted, taking him out around the bays, doing it all on his terms, even making him go out in the boat when he was reluctant. It was a strategy based on an almost absolute anticipation and mirroring of his every intention. I read his moods

and cut them off with plans for action, or with an intervention to prevent a possible provocation by his sisters.

Hunting has powerful moments: acting in concert, eyes only on the environment, everything else displaced. Although it does not resolve anything in relationships, for me and I think for JB, it created a possibility of momentary clarity outside of them. Hunting was one of the points at which there was least ambivalence between us. There is also the act of feeding others, the hunter's ability to recreate and sustain society.

We had barramundi, snapper and bream; mud mussels. One day, we were chasing after dugong on the rough, seaward side of a long reef: a large crocodile eased up alongside of the boat, looked at us, then passed us and went out to sea. We chased dugong and turtle across the sandy bay, coming home slow in a heavy boat. No one at home had food. Twenty or more kinsmen and women, old ladies distantly related, young men sobering up, stood off from the house, coming down one at a time to ask us for meat, each with a story about why they had come. There is a simple power in viable relationships.

The idea of using the boat had come from the evidence of JB's own preoccupations. Some time earlier, at one of the explosive crises, some men had taken JB out hunting directly after. They took him out after turtle, and made him stand up as *amporti*, the chief hunter who has first use of the spear. He had previously at most had a bit part, even in our own boat. This had been their acknowledgement, their therapeutic response, their help to him and to me. Other things came into it: I assisted him with painting up and with dancing in certain ceremonies, something older

brothers in law are supposed to do. He had been ignored in these respects, and looked to me.

The concerted use of the boat, the primary household resource, took place over two or three months, and it brought change, change in JB and change in me too. I could not withdraw in anger from these repeated crises: I simply had to make things work.

In the course of the intense preoccupation with the boat, there were other crises, but of diminishing explosiveness. He would still get anxious with any perception that he had been excluded or ignored by me or his sisters. There was an instance of rage. I went outside to find him throwing chairs over, up and down. I said to him, "Don't chuck the chair." He said to me, sobbing, "You mob chuck me!" This was the first exchange in which he was able to use words to directly advert to his own feelings in response to a perceived humiliation - words first expressed in action. There were times when he went for the gun again. I called out to stop him, told him to listen; he would turn and hear what I had to say, then leave off. He now seemed to be able to listen rather than be driven by instant rage. He now *needed to feel restraint* as a kind of assurance. Fewer things made him wild. He spent more time with men his own age and seemed happier to live with his uncle and cousins next door, rather than in his room full of mainly stolen junk. He now no longer needed so much to communicate by bossing, cajoling or persecuting his nieces and nephews or to inflict outright deprivation on them. He became their adult uncle.

2. From Destructive Rage to Sadness

What happened after this? We went to Darwin. JB would come and stay with us, usually flying over after crises at home. Later on these became more urgent. He came in to hospital injured, his hands and hips and feet burned deep after clutching at the electricity lines. He died in his mid twenties of ~~un~~determined causes, following fights while drinking. It was a day after he had been seen, solitary, cleaning his mother's grave. He had progressed from rage to sadness, but could not, it appears, go any further. Viable relationships remained out of reach.

JB's conduct was an extraordinary mix: destructive, antisocial, organized in dissociated bits; withdrawn and uncommunicative except in drastic extremes of action. He would walk into the house as a tough guy, wearing army combat dress, then tear a child's toy from his nephew's hands and lie on a mattress playing with it, making little bubbling noises as he did so. He was capable of sympathy; he could at times be the most responsible person in his sibling group. He often appealed directly to his missing mother, sometimes crying out aloud for her, when asking for my help. Perhaps, in a psychologically more disorganized way, there was the wish for his missing father: a father he had once loved . as only a three year old child can - but had never really known; a father no longer an organized memory, but a disorganization of fragmented wishes and needs. His conduct became more provocative and dangerous the closer he came to expressing what he needed: my tolerance, and my non-reaction to his expressions of need had become the key to any progress. The dissociations, the fragmentation largely disappeared after the extended,

intensive involvement over the boat. The sadness, perhaps despair, remained.

According to Winnicott, correcting early failure requires an extraordinary mirroring adaptation, an intensive re-parenting which can allow the individual to discover his or her underlying capacity for constructive action, his or her capacity for separation and independence (Winnicott 1982). However, people often can not (and perhaps can not be expected to) tolerate the strain or the danger such an adaptation would expose them to. If unable to escape, they withdraw and avoid, less indifferent, than defensive. The withdrawal of others under this strain can intensify the person's experience of abandonment and produce further rage, or, as in JB's case after my withdrawal to Darwin, contribute to an underlying sense of futility. There can be severe consequences for the quality of relations between others in the person's family group.

Families are not just a chaos of individual wills actively and passively expressed; they are not simply dysfunctional or broken down by drink. JB was a non-drinker until after the time with the boat; indeed, when it happened, I was relieved, because having a drink with men his own age was a positive sign of release from his anxious preoccupation with me and the others. Families are structures and systems as well as sets of individual life histories. There are systemic effects acting through the organization of kinship and the patterns of dependence between members. The systemic effects can express themselves in impacts on children, on mothers and babies, in the failure of households at times to provide basic cohesion for dependents. The sheer force of preoccupation between adults can impose

a deprivation on the young which returns in the future at renewed cost. Such was the impact of my struggle with JB on his nephew, my stepson.

Over the last two years, I have been working in a team of Tiwi and non-Tiwi practitioners with families and children referred for behaviour problems: many of the children have suffered losses, deprivations, some the withdrawal of parents or other important people (Robinson 2005; Robinson and Tyler 2004). A few of these children show signs of potential for the pattern of distress described here. For these children, the effects of death, separation and abandonment work themselves out in their families in complex ways, as powerful, but hidden, unacknowledged forces in their lives. Families are resilient, they offer potential for adjustment and hope: but often not without the sorts of triangulations which target children as the unseen third parties of conflict between adults, which can keep some children semi-permanently at the margins of access to viable, rewarding relationships.

We need to find a language for the here and now, a way to talk with families about these themes underlying their everyday troubles. In the intervention program, it is clear that with the right encouragement, some parents are able to respond to a troubled or naughty child's behaviour with an intensification of their response, something like the intensive parenting I was forced to undertake with the older JB. This has had striking effects in a number of cases. However, other parents withdraw further from the child as the child probes for response with naughty or destructive behaviour, and as our team tries to encourage recognition of the child's needs. This withdrawal is hard to prevent and has sometimes escalated. The project

aims to identify processes which can support both the child and the parent, despite the lack of likelihood of strong parental response.

We also need a language which resonates with deeper sources of meaning: meanings locked in the individual's past experience, but meaning which is and can only be expressed in present relationships. We need to understand the languages of action. Some of the 9 and 10 year olds we see in our program have few words . other than teasing and rebuke or threat and counter. They have a minimal tolerance for strain, particularly when emotional recognition by an adult is at stake. At the threshold of most urgent need for acceptance by an adult they must act things out without talking. JB's sobbing, "You mob chuck me!" showed how hard it can be to bring language and feeling together. It showed the risks in trying; it showed that something can be achieved. To talk to such children, to show them recognition, is to be able to tolerate needs expressed through a language of feelings mirrored in action. I mean mirrored, because sometimes hope of something good is expressed in nuisance behaviour, provocation and destructiveness; it is in this sense back to front.

Some of the things described here are at an extreme. We need to be able to deal with those extremes. But really, we need a language just good enough to penetrate beyond the everyday, beyond the need to deny, the need to disavow and the need not to see.

Of fifteen to twenty youths and young men I got to know well when I first met JB, at least three have committed suicide, many others have threatened or tried; around four have died ambiguous deaths, some of them leaving trails of violence; one has killed someone; a number have

been in and out of jail. Ernest Hunter wrote of the suicides in the eighties in the Kimberly, that they reflected the impacts of suddenly escalating alcohol misuse on families and parenting fifteen or so years before (Hunter 1993). Intuitively this must have truth as a sociological observation. However, it is also an oversimplification, worse, a displacement of the problem. Why? Because, however important the response to substance misuse might be, blaming it all on the grog+leaves no place for the meaning of relationships or for the meaning of action as communication of hope or despair, for the adjustments people are trying to make, and for the disasters which sometimes arise from those very adjustments. For intervention to have any validity at all, it must occur at the level of meaning, not epidemiological generalization.

This story could conclude a number of ways. To take aim at politics and the research bureaucracy: much of the public political response to the challenge of indigenous society fails to understand the internal forces at work in families and communities and what their broader outcomes could be. Some of these can and should be anticipated, just as the points of intervention can and should be understood. Most of the research on the determinants of indigenous social and psychological wellbeing lacks credible science. Leadership discourse is dismally preoccupied with attaining power in that bureaucratic reshaping of community in which we all seem compelled to participate. Amid all the talk of capacity building, community development, governance: we should also find the capacity to speak and to listen. We should build our investment of effort on that.

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