

# *A Brighter World*

*Jeff McMullen*

How many of us dare to believe that our children's children will live in a world that is truly a paradise?

Some will say that we have paradise in Australia today.

There is no doubt that this land is blessed with beauty. I have just been out under the stars at Beswick Falls in the Northern Territory where the women sing like angels and the songmen lead the *Walking with Spirits* corroboree under the paperbark trees and around the sandy banks of one of the most beautiful waterfalls in the world.

When the earth is singing under your feet it can seem hopeful that some day our human family will put life back into balance again.

Many other people find it hard to be optimistic. They will point to the massive uncertainty surrounding the global financial crisis, the threat of climate change, the environmental decline on so many continents, the struggle for food, water and energy and a stressed human population swarming towards 8 billion by 2025.

It is certain that no species has ever had a permanent tenure on earth. Yet the greatest threat to our future most likely will be our own predatory instincts. Only a fool would deny that there is still a constant danger that our species will resort to violence to settle disputes.

It is hard, therefore, for many people to have faith in humanity with so much gloom about the future.

So consider this very gallant display of optimism in the talents of the youth of tomorrow from a very wise elder:

***“Earth, by the twenty-second century can be turned, if we so wish, into a permanent paradise for human beings, or at least the strong beginnings of one. We will do a lot more damage to ourselves and the rest of life along the way, but out of an ethic of simple decency to one another, the unrelenting application of reason, and acceptance of what we truly are, our dreams will finally come home to stay.”***

One of the world's most celebrated earth scientists, the American biologist, Edward O. Wilson, makes this sweeping gesture of faith in the latest of his two dozen brilliant books, *The Social Conquest of Earth* (Norton publishers, New York 2012). The man once described by novelist Tom Wolfe as “*the new Charles Darwin*” eloquently sums up his life's work, explaining where humans come from, why we are here and where we are headed.

***“By any conceivable standard, humanity is far and away life’s greatest achievement. We are the mind of the biosphere, the solar system, and – who can say? – perhaps the galaxy...We have learned the history of the universe and look out almost to its edge...Language, literacy and science-based technology give us the edge over the rest of life.”***

I admit that after more than half a century of world wandering I share Ed Wilson’s passionate interest in a new enlightenment, one built on the collective wisdom of the world’s greatest elders and the youthful energy and imagination that can indeed still create a brighter human dream.

In recent weeks I have been inspired by the old and the young, right here at home.

In western Sydney I shared some remarkably honest yet optimistic yarning with a group of the most courageous men and women you will find, but, as is often the case, many of them are largely unknown to our nation.

There’s the Darug Traditional Owner, Aunty Edna Watson, winner of the 2012 NSW Schools’ *Nanga Mai Award* for love of learning. Another Darug elder, Aunty Sandra Lee has won an accolade for her leadership in building up the capacity of the largest enclave of Aboriginal people in Australia, the western parts of Sydney. Uncle Wes Marne was there, still telling great stories after more than forty years working in classrooms and communities. Some of the elders like Uncle David Williams (RAN) and Uncle Harry Allie (RAAF) served in Australia’s armed forces to defend this nation and others. Many like Aunty Mae Robinson devoted their life to educating Australians, not only Aboriginal children but all of us who need to know ***“how we got here”*** (as Ed Wilson Puts it). Aunty Norma Shelly, Aunty Rasme Prior, Aunty Thelma Quartey and Uncle Rex Sorby are typical of those strong community leaders who lead not by rhetoric but by example. Aunty Fran Bodkin has toiled away at a body of published work that has brought the Darug understanding of seasons and environment to a wide readership. This will benefit all of those who share the responsibility for managing the future of Sydney and its environs. Finally, among these passionate voices was Uncle Ivan Wellington, a warm hearted man who has worked with some of the most troubled young people, entering the prisons to share his experience and his belief that it is never too late to change.

All of these wise and experienced elders, and a list around this country too long to mention them all, are part of a growing Australia-wide network of Aboriginal wisdom. At the University of Western Sydney they have been honoured as *“Elders on Campus”* to value and utilise their considerable experience and wisdom to mentor staff, students and community. The talented and determined Melissa Williams is taking great care of this very special program.

There is something hopeful in seeing at last the recognition of Aboriginal knowledge on a Western knowledge campus. This will no doubt help make a great deal more sense of the world to younger Aboriginal people, pulled in different directions by global trends and fleeting fashions.

When I spot the distinctive hoodies of AIME (Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience) cross crossing the country, I know we have proof that young Australians, black and white, are getting on with a very powerful collaboration, expressing this fervent determination to improve our society for everyone.

When Sydney Aboriginal graduate Jack Manning Bancroft and his AIME team appeared recently on ABC Television's *Australian Story* you could see how the young are building these new bridges between schools, communities and universities.

The linkage in all of these projects I have mentioned is a conviction that knowledge is the great engine of humanity. Our future is built on sharing good ideas, celebrating our diversity and understanding that this common sense is the key to building that paradise of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Century envisaged by the old American thinker, Edward O. Wilson.

Believe me, optimism and youthful courage are unstoppable.

In the midst of their climactic years at high school, two young Sydney women have demonstrated their conviction that every one of us can share and invest in the education of other children. Hanalei Bickley and Harriette Poiner approached the principals of 28 schools along Sydney's Northern beaches and invited them to support the Aboriginal literacy program led by Ian Thorpe's Fountain for Youth (of which I am Honorary CEO).

Now you know how hard it is to organise support for community learning projects. These two young women gave up their own play and study time to find out how to organise, how to fundraise, how to inspire others.

We do need to rage against injustice, to fight policies that crush our shared human rights and we need to raise our voices with courage and consistency to believe in fairness and equity.

I have hope that some day, that glorious day will come.

You see the real beauty and strength of our human family, to go back to Ed Wilson's words, is that we are all "*part saint, part sinner*" and yet through "*an ethic of simple decency to one another, the unrelenting application of reason, and acceptance of what we truly are, our dreams will finally come home to stay.*"

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