

# Stories in a Park: Giving voice to the voiceless in Eagleby, Australia

By Wendy Sarkissian as told to Professor John Forester

I wanted to talk to you about *Stories in a Park*, a project for Queensland Health in the suburb of Eagleby, about 35 km from Brisbane and midway between the Brisbane CBD and Southport CBD. Eagleby is a small residential suburb with about 60% low-density public housing. Established in the 1980s, it has a population of about 8500 people and virtually no jobs.

In the Queensland Government's listing of disadvantaged places, Eagleby qualifies in the top thirteen. It has high levels of unemployment and crime involving young people, high turnovers in the school system and a large population of single parents and public tenants. When we started working there in 1999, the major issue seemed to be that the area had been forgotten. The community's values are not consistent with the "tourist and glitz" values of Gold Coast City Council, so this council and their predecessors sidelined Eagleby. In 1999 two State Government agencies started working in Eagleby and I was a community participation consultant with both agencies.

The Housing Department was implementing the Community Renewal Program, which involves the upgrading of the physical and social infrastructure in low-income public housing estates. It is not the "urban renewal" of dwellings and yards, but of the public spaces, streets and entire social infrastructure. Queensland Health had an entirely different project, unformed and not bureaucratized, whereas the housing program was quite formal.

Queensland Health had an entirely different agenda. They were influenced by a Heart Foundation program called SEPA (Supportive Environments for Physical Activity) that emphasizes getting people out and about, walking to the postbox rather than driving their cars.

While Housing thought they knew exactly what they wanted and were going to assess needs and come up with recommendations in a participatory way, Health had no idea of what they would find out.

In mid-1999, there was a cast of ten or twelve professional consultants ferreting around in Eagleby. On the housing side it was quite formal, but for Health, the bureaucrats were less structured. They wanted to know what we thought might work and how we might encourage people to get out and about in their neighbourhood. We tried to imagine what would be necessary to help local people reclaim a relationship with their public spaces, but it was clear that it wasn't reclaiming them from anything except fear and stigma. The Health project went on for a whole year and my relationship with the community continued in many volunteer capacities.

The health project was enormously enhanced by the young project manager's passionate love affair with the young Council planner for the Gold Coast. Their love affair enriched the whole project. It was very wonderful working with a couple of lovebirds. The partnership made our collaboration much easier with the Council: Rebecca could make it happen with Thor. If we had a problem with the Council, Rebecca would talk to Thor. Sexual politics often cause problems for consultants, but here it was an advantage.

In the beginning, we didn't know what we were going to do. We invented this project. We were opportunistic—we moved from one opportunity to another, kind of 'backfilling' it with a program as it began to emerge. We discovered our process.

We started in August 1999 and discovered that there was to be the *Spirit of Eagleby* festival in September: their first festival ever. Even though we were only a few weeks into our project, we changed what would have been our direction. Our initial plan was to scope the project via a search conference of professional stakeholders using our common methodology. We would have asked workshop participants to co-design the process with us and then develop a methodology based on their advice. We would have set up an accountability group—a really feisty working party—to work with us and then together figure out what to do next.

However, because this festival was approaching in a few weeks we decided to use a different approach and that was where our opportunism began. We set up a marquee, a large tent, at the festival and we used a model we use a lot, called a 'SpeakOut.' A SpeakOut is a bit like an 'open house,' but more intensively facilitated. We already had a core of issues about the public realm presented to the Council by the multicultural group in Eagleby—a small group of residents led by a Maori woman from New Zealand. This was little more than a preliminary list of complaints, a list of concerns. The list included cracked footpaths, poor sight lines, overhanging trees, damaged lighting, barriers to universal access and many safety issues. The concerns were not so much "We're just scared to go there" as "We just can't get there. I can't push my pram on this footpath because it's so cracked and broken," or "The footpath ends, I've got to walk on the road and I'm afraid I am going to be hit by a car."

The multicultural group's agenda was all we had before the festival: a page of concerns. We were only convened as a team of consultants a couple of weeks before the festival so we met with these people, the community development worker in the community centre, our client and whoever else they could gather together initially. We worked up this list into something more than bullet points and members of the group took disposable cameras to photograph the issues that concerned them. The representativeness of this group was not an issue—we were desperate.

We prepared seven issues stalls for the SpeakOut marquee that each dealt with a major local issue. For example, one stall was about rivers: there was no public access to the rivers even though they bound the suburb on three sides. All land accessible to the river was privately owned and the public land was completely inaccessible. We presented each issue at the SpeakOut with a few points and a few photos underneath. That was all we had to display.

From the multicultural group and some others who had been involved in the community centre an initial group was formed, all women but two. I trained them in basic facilitation and recording practices. They staffed the seven stalls, with a listener and a recorder for each stall.

Lots of people came to the festival. As we were pretty unfamiliar with this community, we tried to make the SpeakOut as much like a workshop as possible, even though it was a 'drop-in.' When you came to complain about the fact that you couldn't fish in the river (even though the river was there) everything you said was recorded by the recorder, while the listener paid attention to you and drew out your comments.

When someone else came an hour late and saw all that you had said, they thought, "Ohh, and I've got more!" So we managed to replicate some of the synergy that you get in a meeting with the vertical recording on butcher's paper. This generated a huge amount of information.

What it also generated - the 'good news' story - were the foundations of what are now 'The Flying Eagle Facilitators,' a local community economic enterprise. They work all around the State (and even in other states) facilitating at public workshops and meetings.

This was their first experience of this type of work. They were very scared, very relieved, very happy, very affirmed and then delighted. We put a lot of effort into the training: we role-played it and we videoed it so that they would not be manipulated or embarrassed at the SpeakOut event. Perhaps it's my own stuff, but I've always felt that embarrassment is a huge issue in low-income communities. From a purely pragmatic point of view, if I want to do business with you and you're an Eagleby resident, I'd like you to be feeling good about yourself in this process—even if your life is going to hell in a hand basket. If the consultation process makes you feel incomplete, incompetent, silly or just uneasy then aside from the ethics of it—which are really important to me—I'm not going to get any good stuff out of you, because you're going to be sitting there thinking that you're wearing the wrong shoes.

Other planning processes are often elite and formal, and people speak in a secret language. The 'suits' are on the stage in a cold, drafty hall and the people are sitting in rows. You can't hear properly, there's no roving microphone and you feel like you're being toyed with, even when the planners are trying to gather information in a so-called 'participatory process.' Planners can get in their own way. Sometimes it's just plain ineptitude, not necessarily bad intentions. The subtitle of my firm is 'Planning with Care'—that's our motto. It's important to us that the seats are comfortable.

In Eagleby in 1999 the SpeakOut, with its issue stalls and the training of the listeners and recorders, was an alternative to some processes planners use that can embarrass and humiliate

people by using language to make people feel 'Other.' We were also trying to build local capacity. Sometimes, when consultants are trying to help make informed decisions, no time has been spent raising the community's levels of literacy or knowledge about the topic. For example, I've worked in a place where people told me, "We don't have global warming in our community so it doesn't matter that the methane's coming out of our park." It's important to put energy into helping people understand global warming if you're going to have an informed conversation and you must do it in a way that doesn't make somebody feel like a schmuck. Humiliation and embarrassment are major issues in the way people are treated by planners in this country—absolutely.

After the festival, we held the stakeholders meeting we would have normally held at the beginning of such a process—with representatives of schools, community organisations and all the professional stakeholders. The residents presented the results of the SpeakOut. The stakeholders worked with residents in sessions at tables, facilitated by the emerging 'Flying Eagle Facilitators,' to work out the process for discovering how people might be encouraged to get out and about in Eagleby.

The question of stakeholders is interesting. Private owners of some of the land through which you might get direct access to the river participated because of all the discussion we had generated about the alienation of the riverfront. Into the search conference we introduced an activity where the residents took the professionals and other stakeholders on a bus tour of Eagleby.

By this time, we had a core of residents who were advising us on the planning and we had a bit of money to pay them. They said, "We get professional people coming down here all the time and they have no idea where they are. This is a very diverse place, Eagleby, with a lot of rural land, and we've got a lovely river that we can't get to. We want to show them that so we'll take them on a bus and give them a guided tour, and they can eat their lunches on the bus." That was fantastic.

By the time we'd held the SpeakOut at the festival, we had a core of ten people who were keen to continue this process and wanted to be further involved. Some of them said, "when we get the professionals coming down here, the guys from the local cop shop, the principals of the schools and all those people in suits who are coming in to work in here, we have to educate these outsiders, including the local professionals, about what's really going on here and about what's important to us." Two Eagleby people saw all these as the Others, and they were determined to educate them. The bus tour was their idea, and a community leader, who had been the local Christian minister for years, led the tour.

It was great. On the 60-seater bus they had one resident for every Other. They sat beside them and explained things to them as they went. Everybody went from the whole search conference.

Afterwards, the professionals were shocked that rivers on three sides surrounded Eagleby and you could not even go there to fish. They began to see things through local eyes, which was very transformative. They were also impressed by how articulate Eagleby people were. We'd been helping them along in giving voice to things, teaching them to talk about it.

How did we do that? Just by listening. We hung out with them a lot, we went there a lot, we went to meetings and we sat with people. When we typed up the results of the SpeakOut at the festival, we brought it back and asked for their ideas about it. We were constantly handing things back and asking, "So what does this mean?"

We socialized with them and we went down and had lunch. The young project manager was very warm and open, a lovely young woman. Her warm energy really helped. We hung out with them a lot, and after a while they started getting this feeling that we were their friends, and that somehow we were between them and those 'Others.' We were different from the Others.

While the search conference was pretty formal, it did have one nice touch where a local woman, the minister of a local evangelical Christian church, got up at the beginning and gave a speech about language. She said that local people would prefer it if the professionals would speak in plain words. Her speech had an interesting effect on participants because it gave the facilitators permission to stop people if they were talking jargon in the discussions at the eight separate workshop tables. They felt empowered to say in the sessions, "I'm sorry, I don't understand what you're talking about," or, "You're speaking too fast and we can't write it down."

Language can be a great means of obfuscating or a great tool for reform. It's really mean to use a big word when you can make ordinary sense to people without dumbing it down. We can say, 'T-junction'—it doesn't have to be 'axis termination.' Everybody understands what a T-junction is.

I want people to feel that they are received, accepted and comfortable, and that I don't mind provoking them about the content and arguing back and getting very feisty. For me, it is best if we're all sitting down, comfortable and feeling like we are secure before we get into the hard stuff—because sometimes it gets pretty hard in community consultation.

The search conference generated a lot of information and the planning consultants started doing their formal studies of economics, landscape, and traffic and all that. We went off in another direction because we felt we had the opportunity to do something really radical, that these people liked us, they trusted us, and we'd been fair with them. They were ready to do something different, something real.

The people of Eagleby we were working with had started out depressed and disappointed, with very cool energy and not a lot of rage or anything. They were flat and dispirited. We knew that a lot of money (2.6 million dollars) was coming from the State Government for social and physical upgrading. Then, Health found a bit of unallocated money so we decided to see how deep we could go on the topic of the public realm and parks [with the SEPA program]. The other housing work, the formal plan, continued in a very conventional way. With Health's approval and a serious amount of money we hired a community artist and developed a new process that began in March 2000. The community artist, Graeme Dunstan, who worked with me, is a hippy who is about my age. He's a flamboyant character and heavily into drug reform. With Graeme, we developed this project called *Stories in a Park*, which was nested within a more conventional park planning process.

By early 2000 we had a formally established community body, the 'Eagleby Residents Action Group,' or 'ERAG.' Volunteers were sought at the search conference in November 1999 and the group was formally constituted in February 2000. We pitched the idea of *Stories in a Park* to ERAG. We pitched it to the client, Health, and they agreed.

In this project we asked two big questions. We wanted to know what the deeper story was about why people felt the way they did about Eagleby's public spaces. We thought it was not about the physical, but about some elusive thing called 'stigma.' We thought people were not going out because the whole place had a bad rep.

As I had just finished a Ph.D. in deep ecology, I was interested in asking another question, "If we are asking how we can make Eagleby's parks more conducive to human use and enjoyment what about what Nature thinks about this, in its own right?" This was the environmental ethics question we asked from an eco-centric perspective. What if you asked, in terms of their inherent worth and intrinsic value, "What do the parks want?"

Graeme and I decided, as we're both deep ecologists, that we would see whether the Eagleby people could wrap their minds around that environmental philosophy question. Could we make it part of *Stories in a Park*?

Another of our objectives was to tackle the need for local people to understand basic concepts of human behaviour in parks: the play needs of children at different ages in childhood, the fundamentals of social design, to raise their levels of literacy so we could all have a better conversation.

It was difficult to explain the 'green' arguments, which the client initially saw as airy-fairy. It took a lot of chutzpah, but we managed it. The whole process lasted only three and a half months. It was like being on a speeding train.

Our program in the local high school involved teaching Year 10 students about social behaviour in public open spaces. Our model was fine, but our relationships with the schools were too rushed and we learned a lot about life in the modern Australian high school.

Although we began teaching about environment behaviour the whole discussion ended up being about stigma because that's what the kids knew about Eagleby. We taught them everything from basic research methods—how to interview, how to video-interview—to child development material about play. It was a bit like urban sociology 101. The residents' group liked the idea of working in the

high school and many adults came to help and be involved. That was an important feature for them.

Everybody had been talking about stigma and from the very beginning people were saying, "Eagleby's a nice place and it's a nice place to live, but our biggest problem is that other people look down on us." There was the classic problem: "You have to give a different address when you are applying for a job," and "You don't admit that you live here."

While the school project was continuing, Graeme began working directly with the residents in a widening circle of probably 30-odd people. He was asking what this Eagleby stigma looked like. Finally someone said, "It's an eagle that's lying down, and the thumb of other people's judgment is holding it down so it can't fly." We had asked for months, "What's the bloody stigma?" and they finally said, "Well, this is what it is."

As part of the celebration stage of the *Stories in a Park* process, Graeme and the residents built 'the Stigma,' an eagle with the thumb of judgment holding it down. Made out of cardboard, it was 5 metres long, two and a half metres tall and two metres wide. It took four men to carry it on bamboo poles integrated into the structure.

Creating 'the Stigma' lasted several weeks. Graeme moved into the most defiled Eagleby park in his van. What was interesting was our occupation of the so-called dangerous park. We stayed present with the residents—it was important to me that they didn't feel we were studying them, or using them. We rented two shipping containers and borrowed electricity from a neighbour. Local people and classes of primary school children came and made lanterns for the community celebration and all were involved in the building of "the Stigma".

It is not common in this country to mix community cultural development and planning, and I was really battling to help my client understand that our requests for fifteen bales of straw, or of fencing wire or bamboo poles were truly related to "supportive environments for physical activity." I spent a lot of time explaining things to the client, who had their own project steering committee. We were working pretty much at the edge. Either the project was going to be a success or it would fall over and we wouldn't actually be able to achieve an outcome. We were afraid that might happen.

What did we have in mind that we were doing? We were purging, cleansing Eagleby's negative perceptions of itself and we were trying to contribute to healing an ancient problem. We knew there had been some terrible massacres of Aboriginal people in Eagleby. We sensed that we were healing something larger about Eagleby that we didn't even understand by giving voice to the local concerns about stigma. In a huge fire ceremony we burnt the Stigma.

On the shortest day of the year, Winter Solstice, traditionally Children's Day and when the light begins to increase, we held a day of community celebrations in this dangerous park—it was the 17<sup>th</sup> of June, 2000.

During our day-long celebration we showcased local dancers and singers, ballet classes and musicians. All the community organisations had stalls and sold food. During the entertainment on the day, we had people with microphones telling stories, telling good stories, telling bad stories, telling hopeful stories and just telling stories about Eagleby. For the last few weeks, primary school kids had been making paper lanterns to be carried on long bamboo poles and we had a number of large bamboo standards with six lanterns hanging off them. At sunset on the Celebration day the children collected the lanterns they had made and painted. We had four hundred lanterns, each with a candle, and some large lanterns the high school kids had made to represent different features, like ducks and rubbish bins they wanted in the park. One held thirty-nine candles. "The Stigma" stood in the middle of the park during the Celebration, this huge big white bird.

During the day, I went around with a basket of pre-printed sheets and asked people to write their disappointments on the sheets and then put them in the belly of the Stigma. Then we could burn their disappointments about Eagleby and their dreams that hadn't been realized.

How did we get the idea to burn it? Fire ceremonies are quite common in community cultural development practices. Graeme has managed lots of them in other communities, and we knew about the Burning Man festival in the USA. Planners don't generally know about this work, which is sad because it enriches planning. It's another discipline; we're cross-disciplinary here, we're across a dozen disciplines.

Where to begin to explain how this was part of the planning process? Our shared values involve using myth, archetype and story, which is why we called it *Stories in a Park*. The whole time people were telling stories about Eagleby and Eagleby's parks. Our belief is that cleansing is possible, that symbolic acts of healing can make differences to communities. We were influenced by a shared community development philosophy and an interest in ritual.

Graeme and I believe that ritual can be re-introduced to communities in ways that can be cathartic so that people could feel they'd given voice to the bad stories, and that there could be a new beginning marked by this event. Not that it would take away their problems, but that it would be, symbolically, the return of the light, which is why we used lanterns.

The stories told by the high school kids identified the local stigma. The kids interviewed and video-interviewed their neighbours and other kids about Eagleby and the use of park space. We had worked with an actor who used socio-drama, tableaux and body movement to represent different negative stories about Eagleby, stories of muggings and crime.

We were collecting stories the whole time, but wherever we went we encountered one big story - everything bad in Eagleby was caused by stigma. It's like somebody saying, "Well, you know, the day the house burned down, that's when everything started going to hell in a basket." Everything basically came back to stigma. People thought that if we could get to this stigma, whatever it was, they wouldn't have this depressing feeling that they were trapped.

This was an overriding theme and we didn't hear many hopeful stories. The Stigma became the dominant story, the big daddy of the stories, the Stigma story. When we evaluated this study from the residents' perspectives they said, "We loved all this stuff about the Stigma," or "We loved making it"—it required a lot of men doing it, a complex engineering job.

Although they loved it, when it got right down to it they said that it was basically Graeme's idea to create this gigantic sculpture. The participants felt that because the process was pretty rushed, they would have preferred to have co-designed it and then made it happen with him, rather than having Graeme and I design the process, pitch it to them and have them agree to it.

At sunset, we had a lantern parade with four hundred lanterns. In the parade, we reckoned, for every child there were probably two or three adults. There were maybe fifteen hundred people there, walking through this dangerous park. In a suburb of 8500, that's a lot of people. The lantern parade wound through the park just after the sun went down. I was standing on a hill with Pastor Bob, who had been the local Christian pastor, and he was crying, openly.

It was so poignant—this park had such a bad reputation and here were these little kids walking through it with these beautiful painted lanterns and everybody's laughing. Although it was winter it wasn't that cold, so we all gathered in a small central space in an overgrown part of the park. The children sat in the grass and Graeme told them fairy stories about loss and redemption. It was the most charming moment. They're sitting around on the ground with their little lanterns burning and he is standing there with his long white beard telling Grimm's tales, his version of a redemptive fairy story.

Then we all walked back through the park. We took the Stigma, which by this time had been tethered upright to a giant scaffold and we torched it in front of the crowd chanting, "Burn the Stigma. Burn the Stigma." I could feel all that disappointment going up in smoke. It was palpable.

After the Stigma had burned, the high school kids threw their large lanterns onto the bonfire. The people were yelling, "Burn, burn, burn, burn," clapping and chanting.

Working with an artist to create a grand gesture gives a loud voice to the softer voices. By its dramatic nature, fire is very powerful. People said things like, "Well, standing there and seeing all those little kids, the primary school kids, walking through that park, I thought, we can be here, we can be in our parks, we can..." The biggest thing people said they learned from this process was the distinction between perception and reality. "We thought this was a dangerous park. Now there's Graeme camping in his van for three weeks and Karl (my husband) sleeping in his car and all the people coming and going, sitting around the campfire and they never had a single intruder." They were never ripped off, nothing was ever stolen, nobody let down the tires, they never saw a syringe, a junkie, nothing. The police came around and sat around Graeme's campfire and people drank beer with him—that was about the most illicit behaviour that occurred in the park during that time.

Eagleby's parks needed upgrading, but crime wasn't all that bad. It was mostly in people's heads. We were trying to change their perceptions so they could see what wasn't there. So that we could demonstrate in an embodied way, in an active "occupation" almost, that "We can occupy this park with legitimate activities, see! See that kid, three years old—you can have this. And it's not us, you know, it's you. There are thousands of you. This is possible."

To be quite honest, I think we worked with powers that were stronger than we realized. It was a "love fest," a bit like deep therapy without a re-entry strategy: people were really opened up. Graeme and I were used to being opened up in spiritual processes but a couple of the residents were blown away, but they were more let down that there were not clearly identified deliverables later. That is all happening now, but the timeline was hard for them. A dose of the stigmas can really blow you away. The community emotion and the insights were huge.

One woman, Heather, said, "Wendy, I will never look at a park the same way again." Nested in that sentence is everything. Heather's head was basically rewired about parks. All of a sudden she is park-aware. Heather just got it.

Months later we had a meeting with the local people we had worked with so that they could hear each other and build on what they had said. They were very touched: it was a very emotional time for them and they were very provoked. Sometimes they were a bit scared because it was moving fast and they didn't always know what was happening.

They felt capable—they were able to make a lot of things happen and organize a lot of things. Organising the big celebration made them feel competent, because we had to have a cast of hundreds helping, and they learned a lot about what was involved. As consultants we were very open about all our problems, so the local people learned a lot about managing a complex project and a community celebration. But more than anything they came to understand the difference between perception and reality. The high school kids said, "Yeah, so that's your opinion of Eagleby, and that's what you think, but I live here. Let me tell you what happened on Saturday, when somebody got into trouble down the street, all the neighbours came out and helped them. What you're saying isn't true, it's just your opinion. I live here and my views count." We helped them give voice to those views. Our facilitation of the voicing of non-stigmatising views was very empowering, but also frightening. The Eagleby people learned how to talk to bureaucrats and how to manage them.

The 'Stigma' yielded a speaking of the unspeakable. We gave it voice, a big voice. In effect we said, "You wanted to talk about stigma -well, this is the biggest goddamned stigma you'll ever see." Speaking the unspeakable is something we've encountered a lot. We often try to write it down or say it out loud or whatever, because people are often too frightened or just hesitant to say anything themselves.

Opening up the conversation about things that people hadn't spoken about was very important. Helping people to see that their problems, their park problems, were never going to get sorted out until they came to grips with this stigma business. Now, all the parks are fixed up, there's public access to the river, there's a new pontoon and a new wharf. So many changes!

### **Reconnecting Ceremony**

One of the greatest successes in Eagleby was using a deep ecology process, which we called "the reconnecting ceremony." It was a shortened, modified version of the deep ecology ritual, the Council of All beings developed by John Seed, an Australian and others. In this process you allow yourself to be chosen by some non-human element to embody it for the ritual.

Our aim was to help Eagleby residents think beyond human needs with respect to Eagleby's parks. Twenty people, Eagleby residents, consultants and client representatives, arrived by boat to this ancient corroboree [Aboriginal meeting and ceremonial] place at the junction of the Albert and Logan rivers, where we had prepared a place for sitting in a circle under the trees. We used a series of consciousness-raising exercises to remind us of our interconnectedness with the rest of life as humans and the long lineage of life that brings us here.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Seed, Joanna Macy, Pat Fleming and Arne Naess. 1988. *Thinking Like a Mountain: Towards a Council of All Beings* Gabriola Island, Canada: New Society Publishers.

My husband Karl led us in a poignant exercise called “eco-milling” where people move around in a big circle and stop in front of a partner. You hold their hands and look into their eyes and imagine the long evolutionary journey that brought them to this human form. You imagine you may be looking into the eyes of the person whose commitment might save the Earth. It is eloquent, poetic work.

After some of these opening-up rituals, the centerpiece of the day involved people going off individually and asking to be chosen by non-human Nature so that they could embody them in the Council. This was done by means of a mask that they hold in their hand. Everyone left the circle for half an hour and waited for something to ask to be embodied. Then we made masks to represent the nonhuman life forms that we were invited to embody and sat in a circle and spoke on their behalf about Eagleby’s parks and open spaces.

At the Council were an eagle, the river and fire. I was an egret, a bird whose name I didn’t even know when I saw it wading in the river. What was special for me was the way we were able to modify the model to suit local circumstances. I negotiated this with the church leaders, who are really the core of Eagleby’s community development. They are creationists and this is an eco-centric process. However with no difficulty at all we were able to rewrite the process by removing all references to “evolution” because they said they couldn’t accept that -they don’t believe in evolution.

We made the whole process more mythic -and less scientific. We rewrote the ritual about the long lineage of life to make it quite clear that we didn’t emerge from the primordial slime, we emerged from the essence of creation, from the creation beings. We gave the process a somewhat “Aboriginal” spin, without appropriating Aboriginal cosmology. The church members came and participated fully. There was absolutely no problem. Pastor Bob held his painted mask and spoke on behalf of the eagle. As the eagle, he was looking for more opportunities for safe refuge and nesting and for the natural environment to be protected so that his (the eagle’s) life would be safe.

People spoke in very revealing ways. Mike, the river activist chosen by the river, spoke largely about the loss that was associated with not being able to use the rivers, how the rivers wanted things that were natural for rivers—commerce and activity and people in boats and fishing and recreation –to be part of life, rather than separated by sugar cane fields and private ownership.

A touching aspect of the Council is that it starts out with each person speaking on behalf of their Being in a rather formal “policy position” way. Then it becomes very spontaneous. When it was over, we buried the masks as we didn’t want to continue to represent the Beings in a formal sense.

What were we trying to encourage? We were demonstrating, partly by the beauty of the place, one of the emerging planning principles: how wonderful it is when you have access to the river. We were demonstrating ways to ask deeper stories about the natural environment, ways that still can have planning outcomes. We came up with a list of suggestions about how we could improve Eagleby’s parks and public spaces. We moved from the meditative state into an analytic mode and asked participants to record their commitments on a large banner. That was very powerful.

The day had a simple structure: people had arrived by boat and we had morning tea. We sat down in a circle and the program was explained. We did some of the connecting exercises like the ecomilling exercise. Some affirmations of commitment to this work were made, as well as asking Nature for protection. Then people went off alone into the forest and when they came back there was the silent mask-making period.

When we completed the ritual, and the masks were taken off and buried, we reconvened and I facilitated the discussion about lessons and recommendations. The recommendations were very similar to what we had been hearing, with emphasis on the river and the rights of the river to flourish. For example, we had a recommendation that involved the quantum of vegetation that a suburb needs: “Eagleby needs to be green not only for aesthetic reasons, but because it’s healthy, it’s right, it’s the natural order of things.” We heard quite a bit about the “natural order of things,” for instance, “It’s natural and right that we should have a bit more emphasis on wildlife.” There wasn’t much emphasis on human use and enjoyment.

The banner and the masks were tangible representations of abstract things that people rarely give voice to. The lack of embarrassment and resistance by participants at the Council did not surprise me. I’ve pioneered a lot of bold approaches in my life. This was pretty bold. I believe that

things are changing, that we can do deeper work now in community engagement. Last year, working with a team of planning consultants, a representation of non-human Nature was built by the consultant team to sit with them for the next fifteen years while they plan a Melbourne suburb. They made this Being out of objects they found in the forest. People seem more open now to radical processes than they were ten years ago.

I would do this kind of work in every planning process for several reasons. In team development work, where people have been able to look into each other's eyes and say uncomfortable or disagreeable things, it is wonderfully reassuring to get those issues out of the way and get down to business.

I feel that professionals are yearning for deeper meaning in our work. I get it because I make it, but sometimes I see a poor guy in a suit and I feel like putting my arms around him. Like all of us, he may need a deep experience in his workplace and opportunities to experience deep rituals that connect you with the matrix of life. When you work with your colleagues as co-conspirators creating things that are more ecologically responsible, it is wonderful and heart warming.

This work is often chastening. Things are in dire straights and if you listen to non-human life and give voice to it, you get some pretty unvarnished, angry feedback to the humans. In the feedback we heard that things are not pretty at Eagleby. "You think this is a nice river? Would you drink it?"

What I've described here is the poetic side of community engagement. If you came to my office and saw the boxes and boxes of materials we used to facilitate these processes—there must be thirty labeled boxes of different materials—you would realize there is a practical aspect to this work. The behind-the-scenes stuff protects people and ensures that you've taken care of everything so that people can flourish in these processes. The Council of All Beings is a ritual designed to open you right up, with a series of processes that continually deepen until you are finally able to hear the voice of Nature in its various guises. It is tightly structured.

My passion for participatory planning is to give voice to the softest voices, even to the silent voices. As a feminist planner I've sought ways to create forms in which women and children, older people and people with a disability have had a chance to participate openly. In the land professions we have a massive impact and we are hugely powerful in our impact. We are also at a time in the history of the Earth where we have had more impact than we have ever had before. I don't care who says that planners don't have influence. We do! We have lots of influence if we care to take it. But in most of our work the voice we can't hear is the voice that we have no ears to hear. We are saying, "Listen with your third ear."

That's what this perspective on planning is really about. It requires a training of the body-mind to be able to hear the voice of Nature. We are technicians of the sacred, of some other way of hearing; we try to find a way to hear the other part of the story. After a community is given the opportunity to hear the whole story, then they can decide whether the rights and values of the river should be given more prominence than the rights of fishermen.

If we only ever get the occasional letter from Greenpeace speaking on behalf of non-human Nature in planning conversations it will be drowned out by all these other competing human voices. This is only one way of seeking balance. In the early days of the women's movement, I used to say: "When we [women] have parity, I'm happy to talk about equity. But we are nowhere near parity yet. And I feel the same way about nonhuman Nature and disadvantaged communities. The voiceless I encounter in my work are truly voiceless. We are seeking new ways to give them voice and listen to them.

*Note: this story is an edited version of a taped interview conducted with Wendy Sarkissian by John Forester in Brisbane in 2003.*

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