

Puckowe's story: an Aboriginal Woman - Staying Sober One Day at a Time.

And this is the shortened version! Ha!:-))

I went to my first Alcoholics Anonymous meeting in 1988 – the Australian Bicentennial year – or the "celebration of an invasion' as we called it! For a couple of years we'd been very busy organising for the "March for Truth, Justice and Hope" planned for Invasion/Australia/Survival Day! in January of that year – I'd also been very busy drinking and taking other drugs!

Before I came into AA I thought one of my problems was that I had too many meetings to go to! – suddenly I had all these other meetings to go to – of a totally different kind – terrified and wondrous at the same time – I didn't realise how much my life was about to totally change.

A lot of my story has to do with a particular woman, who had this article written about her on the front page of the Sydney Morning Herald in 1956:

"Column 8: Are aborigines dying out? If they are, the family of Mrs. Page of La Perouse, is doing its best to rectify it. Mrs. Page has 10 children, and now has 65 grandchildren and 22 great-grandchildren – total 97." Sydney Morning Herald August 27, 1956.

You see - I am one of the 97!

This lady was my great grandmother – she died in 1962, when I was 7 years old. She had – and continues to have – a profound impact on my life. It was my Grandmother, Ma's daughter, who died when she was 92 years old, (a good age for an Aboriginal woman) – who often told me "never forget where you come from". She saw the children being taken away, knew that I was fair and that there was a danger, that I would be sucked up by the whitefella system and forget who I am. That I would betray my people and forget what had been given to me so freely. And part of my story here is that this almost happened to me.

It was my grandmother's daughter – my mother, who gave me life and love – who drank alcohol for more than thirty years, and died at the age of 58 from Alcohol Related Brain Damage (Korsakoff 's syndrome). My mother had a generous loving spirit, like many Aboriginal people do, but many years of her life were destroyed by the effects of alcoholism, not only in her own life, but in the lives of many members of our family.

So when I talk it is always with the memory and respect of these Aboriginal women in my life. `I come from a line of strong Koori women'. Women without whose strength and courage and love, I would not be here today.

My people are from Yuin country (the south coast of NSW) and with the inter-marriage with non-Aboriginal families, we are what my Grandmother calls, "like the mini-league of nations". Despite the removal of children from families and the dispossession of land, which Aboriginal people across Australia have experienced, there is still a strong identification with our Aboriginal heritage in my community.

I grew up in an alcoholic family. My mum drank alcohol for over thirty years. My father – the son of an alcoholic – was a very violent man, who bashed my mother many times and betrayed her in many other ways. We were taught to feel ashamed of our Aboriginality, to deny it and that the white-fella way was the best way to live.

The years of my mother's drinking and the violence she and us kids experienced, built a great pain in my heart, which I dunno will ever totally heal – as anyone here from an alcoholic family, may identify with. Over the years my family tried to help my mum, but we didn't know anything about alcoholism, or AA or anything else for that matter, and I was fast becoming an alcoholic myself. These were years of terrible pain in my life – to watch someone I loved dearly, be destroyed by alcohol. I felt totally powerless to help.

I turned to alcohol and other drugs myself – getting that initial high that really only another alcoholic or addict can understand – that feeling that it really is OK to be here, that all was well in my world.

I chased that initial feeling for the next fifteen years –almost to 'the gates of insanity or death' – my own Spirit was just hanging in there trying to decide whether it was worth being around. I'm sure you know this feeling, when you have hit rock bottom so many times, you hardly have the energy to get up one more time. When you feel so full of chronic despair, shame and hatred that you have no hope in your life. Suicide was high on my agenda, as we all know it is today, for many young Aboriginal men and women.

It was at this time in my life when something wonderful and terrifying happened to me at the same time. I was taken to my first meeting. Someone reached out their hand to help, to pass on the message: that it was possible to live one day at a time without picking up a drink or a drug. As strange as this may seem – with all my white-fella training in the health system – this had never occurred to me before.

At this time, I was drinking heavily on a daily basis: bottles of overproof rum and taking other drugs as well. I never was a social drinker, a heavy drinker or even a problem drinker – and it took me a long time in the process of recovery to admit and accept that I was an alcoholic.

My problem wasn't alcohol - it was men, violence, unemployment, racism, sexism, I didn't like the Fraser Government and besides all that someone was going to drop the bomb tomorrow and blow the whole place up! So who wants to be here anyway? I felt totally

justified in drinking myself to death - what I felt was a normal and reasonable response to an unreasonable world! Needless to say – at the end - there was little joy in my life. I didn't understand that I needed to stop drinking to begin slowly - one day at a time - healing these other issues in my life.

Amazing Grace: I stopped drinking and taking drugs from my first meeting. And I have been blessed now, not to have had a drink or a drug, for just over 16 years, and having told you some of my history, I believe this is something of a miracle in my own life, as it is in the life of any sober alcoholic or addict.

So 1988 was the year I got sober – maybe an historic year for Australia, but a much more historic year for me in my own life. I remember being at the March for Justice, Freedom and Hope on Survival day, and although it was so wonderful to see so many Aboriginal people and our supporters in one place, inside I wanted to die - my illness had me well and truly in it's grip.

I also remember being at a women's talk in March of that year and listening to my Grandmother talk about the difficulties many Aboriginal people experience "living in two worlds". A story I had heard many, many times before but I can tell you, that right there and then, I thought I was going to keel over and die, right there on the spot – rum and coke in hand! Within three months, I was sober and had some hope in my life.

Many people talk about the journey to sobriety being a spiritual experience, and looking back over this time, I realise that my Grandmother's words to me and the other women there, was yet another reminder to: "remember where you come from". I think it was a case of remembering that I actually had a life, given to me by a power greater than myself, through my Ancestors, who from the beginning had been trying to teach me that I lived in a spiritual world: based in love and passed from one generation to another. My own alcoholism had come so close, to taking it all away.

So in the 16 years I have been sober, there has been a lot of time, to learn about my own illness and the process of recovery. I have had a lot of help from other people – both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. I have also been blessed to meet and share with many sober Aboriginal people, who have given me great hope and guidance over the years. I have had time to learn about the family illness of alcoholism, to watch my mother's alcoholism progress and to reach out to other Aboriginal people in recovery. There is no way I would have survived this time without the support of other sober people.

I have lived through my mother's illness and death, learnt to survive and heal my own grief and share this process with other Aboriginal people, I have lived through the deaths of three of my cousins, younger than me, from alcohol and drug abuse; one of my cousins has had a kidney transplant, from alcohol and drug abuse; and I believe that most of my aunties and uncles and their children, have serious problems with addictions. Some

time ago, my cousin attempted suicide, through a heroin overdose and lost the use of his right arm. Both of these cousins are now dead. And "there but for the grace of God go I".

Through all of this I have learnt that it is possible to endure pain and be grateful at the same time. These are things I would never have learnt if I was still drinking – that is if I was still alive. I have also learnt that these stories of alcoholism and addiction are very common in Aboriginal communities – in reaching out to other Aboriginal people, I can see many of the same stories in other Aboriginal communities.

I often think about the stories of Aboriginal people who have made changes to their life through sobriety: people who have gone on to make a difference in their communities, who have brought back the culture, who have returned to their families, and are an example to our youth who are struggling with addictions.

I often think too about the youth in our communities who commit suicide, or who get locked up with speed psychosis, or our Elders, who die with alcohol related brain damage – someone who died before the wealth of their experience could be passed on to the next generation.

And through all of these changes in my life – I have had to become teachable – to learn and practice the principles of the AA 12 Steps and Traditions in my life on a daily basis, and to be willing to really listen to other alcoholics.

Listening is very powerful. It changes lives. It has changed mine.

The listening I have learnt in recovery has enabled me to really listen to the voice of my Elders and Ancestors. And even though I have experienced a lot of physical illness in recovery my Spirit has grown strong. I live in my Grandmother's country and in the Spirit of our Ancestors. Amazing Grace.

Many Blessings
Puckowe ~ Grandmother Spirit
Yuin Aboriginal Nation
Australia.