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HERITAGE TRUST INC

GNOKAN DANNA MURRA KOR-KI

A Safe Space in Isolation

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June 2020



An invisible and ambiguous threat keeps us isolated in our homes. Isolated in a government enforced lockdown that conflicts with our natural desire to connect with those closest to us. There is stress. How bad will this get? How long will it last? Writing groups have popped up all over the place to help people mine their experiences of this new way of life.

Isolation is familiar to me. The sense of treading water in a faceless ocean with no-one to hear me. See me. Know me. This is why I became a foster carer.

My mum was familiar with isolation too. Taken from her family at six months old, she spent her childhood institutionalised, isolated from mother, father and siblings. Later, on the morning of her fourteenth birthday, she was taken from the only world she knew, and delivered to a doctor's house to be their family maid.

Sometimes, the quiet of isolation gives voice to pains and shames we don't want to remember.

I was also just a baby when I was first put into out-of-home care. There's a story of me red faced screaming on an aeroplane. There are other stories but not many memories. There are dreamlike memories of fear and happier flashbacks of kindness, gentle voices, lunch boxes brimming with unknown treats, and an archway home renovation. This is also why I became a foster carer.

Sometimes the quiet of isolation is the time we need to understand behaviour and learn lessons.

The first time I met another foster kid was watching Big Brother on TV. Like me, the girl had lots of energy, and in her awkward way tried super hard to bring happiness to the world around her. As I've got older, I've learnt that optimism and trying really hard can really piss people off. On Big Brother, the foster kid was singled out early in the competition. In the way that feelings are contagious, one person found a small crack in her armour and the swarm pressed and stretched, punched and poked.

Sometimes the quiet of isolation is what we need to hear our heart.



When the cruelty of the other contestants became too much, the foster girl would go to the rear yard of the house and skip around the garden border singing. She showed us resilience and the transformative effects of nature and music. The swarm inside the house, laughing at the foster girl's 'absurdity', showed me that just because people don't acknowledge evil and ugly actions doesn't mean they can't see them. This was a light bulb moment. For 30ish years, I truly believed that I was the only one who could see the evil and ugly behaviour of 'nice, well behaved' people.

After nearly 50 years of unpacking emotional baggage and a spare room in my house, I announced to a group of friends that I was in training to be a foster carer. There was an audible gasp from a woman who struggles with the behaviour of her son and grandkids. With a 'mother knows best' tone, her attack was quickly mumbled to mute: maybe she remembered I knew about the things her son did, or maybe she remembered that I was a foster kid. The other women were smiling politely or looking elsewhere.

What these ladies of inner Melbourne privilege don't get is that kids are not their parent's actions. Sure, we might take a little longer to unravel the trauma and confusions in our homes but we are capable, diligent and generous. We are also awesome fun!

That's the joy of opening my home to kids. They come for a day or a week and they might return. I put different types of food to choose from in their view. There will be no forced feeding at my house. We will pick and eat from a veggie patch, take eggs from a coup and see bees in a hive. I will take them to playgrounds, museums, zoo rangers, Scienceworks, and the beach to play in the sand. I will do all the things I missed out on. I will read books and listen to questions. I'll try to answer them.

When the kids go home, we celebrate. This is the best outcome. No one will ever know and love them like their parent. If they return to my house in a month, year or decade, that's okay too. I'm already planning.

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Monique Grbec is a child of the Stolen Generations. With an interest in identity, the generational effects of institutionalisation, and the White Australia Policy, Monique's lifework is fundamentally text based and addressed through the lens of Indigenous Standpoint Theory. A regular contributor to Witness Performance, her current visual work is multimedia installation and video.