



ABSTRACT FROM GENERATIONS OF KNOWLEDGE

Dr Margaret Weir



I was born Margaret Rose Williams. My great grandfather was Gumbaynggirr and my great grandmother was Malera Bundjalung. Both are from northern New South Wales but we've gone with the Malera Bundjalung people way, from the Grafton area.

I'm one of ten children, and as the youngest life for me wasn't very easy. I had to learn to stand up for myself. When I was about

four or five my mother started my spiritual learning and my life changed. She told me that we came to earth for two reasons: one was to learn to be a better person and the other one was to do your job for God, which I call the sacred labour.

The primary school I went to was about five or ten miles outside of Casino. There were about fifteen children across grades one to six and there was one teacher who taught all the grades. He taught us how to read and write and do basic math and never anything else. But I had my love of learning, and I knew that I wasn't learning very much, so in grade 5 I used to sit out in the paddock, thinking I was talking to God, wondering what my job for God was, and I was told that I was going to go to university and be a teacher. Well, I knew that black people weren't allowed in the profession and I raced in and said to my mother - 'Mum, Mum, God said I'm going to go to university and be a teacher' and Mum said 'That can't be right, black people aren't allowed in university' so I raced back out and had my meditation with God and I said - 'Well you know that's what Mum said.' And the answer came back - 'Who do you believe?' and I thought 'Right' I know who I believe'. I was then told at school that I had to go into Casino to catch up on my work. I had to get into the top high school class because in those days you had to matriculate, you had to have a language, higher math, to get into university.

When I went to Casino Public School I was probably the only aboriginal person in the school of five hundred. The teacher disliked me on sight and so I was sent to the back of the room and treated like a leper. But my view was I'm on a mission for God, I'm going to university, I'm going to be a teacher and whatever was handed to me I just handled it. In our first exam I came fifty-third out of a class of fifty-five, but at the end of the year I came seventeenth so I'd improved.

When I went to high school I had a very supportive principal. He called me into his office and said 'What class do you want to go in?' and I said 'I want to go into the AB class and learn French and Latin' and he said 'Well, we've never had a black child in there' and I said 'Well that's where I want to go,' and once I got my foot in the classroom door I wasn't going to leave. I feel that the hand of God has been on my life and I have intuitively known what I need to learn and I've found the right people to help me.

My school days there were a great help because there wasn't racism among the girls, and I was very popular because I was good at sports. I was captain of the field hockey team, which was a big deal, and I was a prefect. I was just doing what I wanted to do. Then I matriculated and told my mother: 'Mum I'm going to university' and she said 'We've got no money' and I said 'Well that's okay, God said the moneys coming' and she said 'Well, where is it

and I said 'I don't know but it'll get here.' The money did come. At the end of January I got an Aboriginal scholarship and I went to the University of Queensland for one year. There was a lot publicity around it because I was the first Aboriginal student to attend a full-time university course, so it was a big deal.

I was doing Arts, which wasn't really what I was interested in, so I decided I'd change courses and go to the University of Melbourne to become a Physical Education teacher. I got into University Women's College which gave me a free place in college and I had my Aboriginal scholarship, so off I went and it was marvellous. It was at a great course and I finished that '59 and started teaching.

I've been fighting for Aboriginal issues all my life, and when I was in the University of Queensland my sisters and I started up an all Aboriginal Women's Hockey team and we played in the town competition. Then when the University hockey team played in the town competition I asked the girls - 'What do you want me to do? Do you want me to keep playing with you or should I go play with the university?' Being the first Aboriginal person to go to university was my underlying reason for the question. Do I make my presence felt in other areas of university, rather than just in studying, and everybody said 'You must play for the university', because then people will know that Aboriginals will know that 'You're there'. So, that's what I did, and in the August holidays we went on a tour from Sydney to Melbourne to Adelaide, stopping off at universities on the way.

Melbourne University was fantastic. I was in University Women's College which was the college, and here I am, a little black girl in this great place. It was such a wonderful, free feeling. I was in with the children of the high flyers, Prime Minister Menzies' niece was there, the Lord Mayor's daughter was there. You know, the wealthy, the elite of not only Melbourne society but Tasmanian society and Canberra society, because in those days if you wanted to get Post Graduate courses you had to go to the University of Melbourne. So it was 'the' place to be, to learn about how the other half lived.

Having graduated from the University of Melbourne the world was there for me. My mother had always said get an education and you can do anything, go anywhere, be anything, and she was right because having that qualification opened up the world for me and I spent twenty years teaching in Australia, England and Canada. The big thing about travelling was that I was out from the cloud of racism that exists in Australia, and I was able to have the freedom to be who I am. When people met me they took me for who I was, for what I was. It was great to develop and grow.

I've always had a great sense of responsibility to the planet, I've never been just a little girl who grew up in northern New South Wales - I've been a daughter of the planet. I believe it's because I've always kept an eye on world events. My mother was right into unions and politics. We voted, our family voted at a time when black people weren't allowed the vote. When the sixties came along and people were saying 'Oh black people aren't allowed to vote' we'd say 'Oh well, that's news to us, we've been voting all our lives'.

We were brought up with a social conscience of politics, and our social responsibilities to our fellow Aborigines, the country as a whole, people as a whole. So I believe that you have to know how to defend your country. When I was in Canada the time seemed right to do that and I decided to

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join the military. I chose the Canadian Navy, because apart from anything else, Canada had the only defence force in the entire world with equal pay, equal treatment for men and women. Some other countries still haven't caught up with that.

I was in the Navy from 1966 to 1969 and then I met my husband. I was intending to come back to Australia but being married I stayed on for another nine years. After that we thought well 'We're getting older, the snow is getting higher' and we came back to Australia. We both joined the Commonwealth Teaching Service and we were posted to a remote Aboriginal community in the Northern Territory where we spent four and a half years.

Canada has got to be the cleanest place on earth, so coming from Canada to Yuendumu was a shock; we could hardly believe our eyes. You had people walking around in rags, very few people wore shoes, and in some of the camps you had two hundred people sharing one tap with no bathroom. It was really bad Third World conditions, but the people were so resilient and so happy. They're some of the loveliest people I've ever met. All of us worked so very, very hard to make things better, healthcare wise, education wise, just the basic services for the people. Slowly, year by year, it's improving. Now they even have pay phones in place. It was a wonderful experience. We travelled a lot and we learned their ways, their survival techniques.

After that I took a leave of absence and rested up. Then my husband saw this job in the paper for Aboriginal Education Coordinator for the Australian Education Union so I applied and went to work in Canberra for the next three years. I had to liaise with the state and territory labour councils and Aboriginal Education Committees, so I learned all about unions and politics, the way they really worked, and how each state and territory does things. Talk about a marvellous learning.

After I finished with the Australian Teachers Federation I was absolutely burned out and I needed a break, so I took three years off to concentrate on my spiritual learning and it was fantastic. During this time we went all over India, to Nepal, Kathmandu and Bangkok. This was very interesting higher spiritual learning over there. When I came back from India I got on with my spiritual learning. I also took on a research job with a national Aboriginal education committee, to provide the Aboriginal input into the Australian National Girls policy, and deliver the foundation paper as the basis of the National Aboriginal Education Policy for them.

Then a friend of mine, who was about seventy, finished his Bachelors, Masters and PhD and I thought, well if he can do that so can I. So I went back to university, the University of New England and I got an Honours Research Masters Degree, after which I did my PhD. I then went into Education and Military research, and served as the national coordinator of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Veterans and Ex-service Persons Association for the next six years.

Having finished my spiritual and post graduate training I set up my own business doing research projects for various education departments and government departments. Then my husband retired in 2007, so we left Canberra and moved to Grafton. I'm an active member of my local South Grafton RSL sub-branch and I do various education stints and lectures. I'm also a member of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander post graduate PhD forum. At the moment we have about 168 Aboriginal PhDs, so we're making progress.

That's mainly my life. It's a life story built on honouring God, learning more about God's laws, going where God sends me and learning to be a better person, helping the communities wherever I am and doing the best I can.

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