



Good morning to you.

Thank you for the privilege you bestow upon me as I stand here before you, speaking of my life with, and what I have learnt from, the Tiwi women with whom I work.

I am here as a member of the Congregation of the Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart who have allowed me to work with the Tiwi people of Northern Australia for over fifty years.

The Senior Australian of 2017 award does not belong to me alone. It belongs to my sisters who have worked in the Northern Territory of Australia for over one hundred years ministering to the remote Indigenous people.

I would not have received the award if I had not been working with the Tiwi people. Bathurst and Melville Islands, the Tiwi Islands, are located off the north coast of Australia. They are home to around 2,500 people who speak their own unique language, Tiwi, a language that is not spoken anywhere else in Australia. Their culture is specific to the Tiwi islands and is not practised anywhere else.

When speaking of Australian Indigenous culture, we must remember there are numbers of different Indigenous groups scattered throughout Australia. There are similarities amongst them but there are particular languages, beliefs and practices that belong to each cultural group.

As I am speaking of my work with the Tiwi people I refer only to Tiwi cultural beliefs. Tiwi people's world views, their beliefs about the world, and the reality of their daily lives are as far from my English-speaking Australian culture and the Catholic religious culture, as is possible.

Yet many Tiwi have achieved a level of Biculturalism where both cultures sit comfortably in their daily lives. There is now a Tiwi Catholic culture that incorporates Tiwi language and dance in the Mass.

The women I have worked alongside, see the world and interact with others from a Tiwi cultural perspective. Even in such a small community where I was in the minority, I continue to see the world and work with others from my western cultural perspectives.

This impacted greatly on the nature of mentoring and facilitating Tiwi women into positions of leadership. In the Tiwi culture, it is traditionally MEN who lead culturally, who own land and who have 'political' power in family issues. The women of course have the most influential role in rearing the next generation.

When the Frenchman, Bishop Gsell arrived on Bathurst Island in 1911, the Tiwi people understood the world through their hunter-gather way of life. Their knowledge system was broad and deep and very closely linked to the land, kinship and a spiritual life symbiotic with the world around them.

Some important aspects of those ways of living and believing have been preserved to this day, along with the new knowledge and skills of 21st century Australia.

The latter involves relating to people in very different ways to those traditional Tiwi ways, thus my role as mentor and facilitator was to lead the women to a bicultural position, one where they added new ways of working and seeing the world to their own ways of working and seeing the world.

It is not our role, as temporary residents in Tiwi country to replace Tiwi people's knowledge and culture with our ways. We can teach them how we see the world so they learn to understand how we work and how we relate to others within our culture.

These ways are foreign to the Tiwi people but we can walk beside them as we and they become bicultural.

You will note that I haven't used the word "empowerment" as it is not within our ability to empower those who already possess the knowledge and skills of leadership and power. Just because we don't always recognise leadership in others' cultures, doesn't mean it is not there.

To me this word indicates that the people we think we are empowering don't have the leadership abilities until we come along. Yet the future of Australia's Indigenous people involves the rights of Indigenous women to leadership and positions of power that demonstrate the strengths they have. To lead in such a way involves intercultural knowledge by the likes of me, and of them, as they live across two cultures. This was what I had to learn. It was where my ways of doing things were challenged.

Let us ask ourselves: How do we see leadership in our own cultures? Who do we expect should be leaders in our cultures?

Our ideas of leadership are determined by (OR limited by) our social and cultural experiences of leadership. Tiwi leadership is far removed from our western mind-set.

"Parlingarri" is the Tiwi word for 'Long Time Ago'.

We understand that governance belonged to the male seniors of the Skin groups. As western ways have infiltrated their society, much of the authority belonging to the elders of the group sadly, has been lost.

Our standard western view of leadership is the hierarchical structure, where a number of people may have leadership positions involving power, but the ultimate powerful position in my culture is held by one person 'at the top'.

My first experience of needing to mentor and facilitate cross-culturally was as the Principal of St Therese's school at Wurrumiyanga on Bathurst Island. The school now has a Tiwi name "Murrupurtiyanuwu Catholic School".

I was the Principal and I had a leadership team that included an Assistant Principal, a Curriculum Co-ordinator and Senior Teachers. But I was REALLY the BOSS!

In reality, I HAD a leadership team, I was not a MEMBER of a leadership team.

It took many years of working in the school with Tiwi people for me to realise that it wasn't my job to make them into another version of 'Sr Anne'.

The western type of leadership, it could be said, is where the 'buck stops' with the one person at the top (the words 'buck stops' are Australian slang for ultimate decision-making).

This is foreign to the Indigenous Australians with whom I work.

Their way of solving problems, of making decisions, belongs to the group and groups must be arranged along kinship lines. Thus, their structure can be said to be one of shared leadership.

Shared leadership that is representative of their cultural structures, the skin groups, is what they work with, what they relate to, and let us not be afraid to say, what they succeed with.

Their complex kinship system determines who and how decisions are made and anyone in the wrong kinship relationship cannot make decisions that affect those outside of their right kinship group.

This makes leadership a challenge, especially for women learning to operate in a western cultural context within their own communities.

Intercultural knowledge by me as a westerner, of Tiwi knowledge, and by the Tiwi women, of western knowledge was necessary.

So how did we do it? Not easily...

The additional western knowledge and practices they needed to know to achieve what they have done, came about as I worked alongside them and not through 'Show and Tell'. If you are a teacher from previous years, you will know what I mean by that.

The Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory were moving towards a position of 'self-determination' through the 1980s and 1990s. I needed to look to a future that involved Tiwi leadership of the school.

I initially thought that this meant handing over the keys one day, when I was ready. However, the Tiwi teacher whom I thought would take on the position came to me one day and said "Anne, I can't be a tall poppy like you".

It was then I realised how little I understood of their cultural life. I wanted to know 'why' she couldn't be a tall poppy like me!

I didn't know what I didn't know. More importantly, I didn't know what the Tiwi didn't know! It was more obvious that I didn't know what they did know either!

I had been in that community for over 30 years at the time.

So how does one enter discourse with the Tiwi women regarding leadership when we have one idea of leadership and they live with another form of leadership?

First and foremost, if we are serious in working cross-culturally with others (in my case, Tiwi women) as they take on leadership roles, we must be prepared to listen to what they are really telling us, so we can begin to communicate cross-culturally.

They will tell us of their fears, the pressures they carry in belonging to a family with strict rules regarding who they can and can't talk to and in what ways, one consequence being that they cannot refuse a request from people in particular relationships to them. To step outside of the group is very scary and requires a high degree of risk-taking.

What are these fears? They would say:

- 'Shame' ('I'll feel ashamed')
- 'Others will talk about me'
- 'I might make a mistake'
- 'What if I fail?'
- 'I can't tell my mother/brother/uncle/grandmother what to do, so how can I do this job?'

The last fear is linked to the kinship structure where a same-aged peer, or even a child, may be recognised as a 'brother' or 'mother or grandmother'. The kinship system for example, does not allow a sister to talk, let alone to tell, a 'brother' or 'father' what to do.

This is complex. I don't have time or the full knowledge to explain the Tiwi kinship system, even after all these years!

However, a small example is a mother's sister's children are regarded as siblings (not first cousins), as are a father's brother's children. As a result, to keep the kinship system strong, a daughter of one mother cannot be seen to be friendly with the son of the mother's sister, or the son of a father's brother. She calls him brother and cannot tell him what to do, nor in fact can she associate with him.

How would this work if a Tiwi woman was the Principal of the school and one of the Tiwi male teachers (in a wrong-way relationship with the Principal) needed a 'wise word'?

How would her role as Principal, or even Senior Teacher work, if she had no influence over many of the children due to her relationship to them?

To mentor Tiwi women into leadership positions and to facilitate the process, one must have a clear understanding of their culture.

There are deep and solid foundations in Tiwi culture:

- Family relationships come first, as determined through a complex kinship system
- Country, that is, family and clan-owned land has a strong link to identity
- Ceremonies that mark major life events and developments, involving skin groups and dance.
- These are the means for handing down the cultural knowledge and skills to the younger members of the culture. If these were to go, then the young people would lose strength in their identity.

Unfortunately, this has happened in some families with tragic outcomes such as youth suicide. Hindrances to individual female leadership include issues of alcoholism and gambling that weaken the previous strength of family authority.

These are not faults but rather the result of contact history with broader Australia when their own cultural ways, beliefs and knowledge are replaced with poor, inadequate knowledge of our culture.

We need to know how to work WITH their culture, not against it.

When Tiwi people are taught how to really understand our culture and how to work within it as additional knowledge to their own, they are not weakened but rather strengthened by knowing two ways of working. I had to learn this over many years.

Tiwi women carry Tiwi cultural pressures with rules and roles that are different to mine, to ours!

Family ties are very heavily respected, one of those fears mentioned previously; 'how can we stand out from our own relations?'

How can Tiwi people refuse a person when culturally it is wrong to do so?

How can a Tiwi person refuse to give some money to a relation that they are obligated to?

How are they meant to interact with other Tiwi with whom they are not permitted to associate?

Alternatively, where group leadership reflecting cultural structure is created, one person in the group can speak to those with whom the others cannot. The group leadership that evolved in the school was known as the Milimika, a group of four women. Each woman had responsibility for a certain aspect of running the school and together, the four made one.

This is the situation I met when becoming a mentor/facilitator to Tiwi people in leadership. Yet my knowledge of leadership was and remains, a hierarchical one with one person at the top, and women are the exception in this, even in my culture!

After my experience of mentoring at the school, I have since been involved in working cross-culturally to mentor and facilitate Tiwi women into other leadership positions where the additional Western knowledge and practices they needed to know, have come about by *walking and working alongside them* and not through 'Show and Tell' or 'I do and you follow'.

You will see on this slide, a photo of one of the exhibits (Pukamani Poles - sacred burial poles) in the museum at Wurrumiyanga. This project started as a small tribute to the missionaries who worked at Wurrumiyanga since 1911.

It soon grew to exhibit important features of and developments, both past and current in Tiwi lives, their culture, language and their achievements in both cultures.

There came the time when I needed to handover the Patakijali Museum. This is the Tiwi accent and way of saying Father Gsell.

When I came to this, my second mentoring/facilitating experience with the Tiwi women, I remembered the lessons I had learnt at the handover of the school and proceeded in a totally different way.

This time I remembered to go a bit slower. I remembered that I needed to make time to listen. I had to remind myself that:

- The women don't think at the rate I think in English, they do that in Tiwi. They are being asked to engage with the new cultural knowledge and skills in a language that is not theirs.
- Their world view does not feature temporal deadlines; their understanding of time is sourced from nature and the seasonal changes along with moon and sun cycles. We have artificially chopped our days up into bits and given the bits numerical names.
- They needed time in their own time to think about what I was asking them to consider.

I didn't want to impose on either of them, something that put too much pressure on them culturally, physically or mentally such that they would regret what they had taken on.

This played a big part in this second mentoring to leadership. I was now more aware of their socio-cultural reality and that our idea of leadership is asking them to act in very different ways to those they grew up with.

When beginning to discuss the idea of me working with them to eventually manage the museum themselves, I had to be patient and wait for three days for reflection and thinking (I call this the silent time) before any response.

They were the first to speak, they said "we need to talk". They said, "We can't do it" and I listened for once in my life and this is when those fears mentioned previously, surfaced.

That morning I had read a quote 'true courage is when you are really afraid to do something but you go ahead and do it'.

I explained what that meant in my life and we went into two more days of silence.

Because I had learnt how to listen, I'd learnt how to communicate.

It may have been silent but communication was happening.

They came to me again and said, "We want to give it a go".

Each one carried the quote of courage – they'd written it out.

They gathered their strength and were very courageous and willing to give it a go – they have succeeded. They have succeeded.

Why? They did it their way. They'd seen me do it my way, they did it their way, using skills they already possessed.

They used these skills cross-culturally in a western context. The museum hosts numbers of tourists daily.

These women had to learn how to interact with English speaking 'strangers' in a western non-detached way as they hosted visitors in the museum. They also had to take responsibility for managing the money, the upkeep of the exhibitions, the computer programs. This might not sound like much but when you know the cultural context in which these women live, they do not engage in any activity like this in their home culture.

They learnt new skills and knowledge and I learnt new skills and knowledge.

It's a two-way thing, a bridge where we come from our own side and meet in the middle, cross the bridge to visit other cultures and return to the safety of ours when we want/can.

Leadership of both the school and the museum required that these women move easily, with strength and confidence, between two very different worlds on a daily basis, all the while, living with the social pressures of their own culture. No wonder they expressed those fears at first. They took ownership in their own time and in their own way.

It is not a Tiwi way. It is not a western way. It is an intercultural way where there is room for aspects of both cultures, without one threatening the other.

They use both Tiwi and English in their interactions with the tourists and local people.

They are competent bilingual and bicultural leaders. Much more than I!

This talk so far sounds as if everyone lived happily ever after. However, under the surface, and you would only know this if you lived there, are all the problems of a third world disadvantaged population. However, these people live in a first world country - mine!

Since contact with the western world, the Tiwi have experienced disempowerment. They were no longer expected to live out leadership in familiar ways but to take on ours, or not be in control of their own lives.

As it turned out, attempting to adapt to our ways has left a path of despair and hopelessness in many cases. Wurrumiyanga suffers the socially negative issues of addiction to alcohol and drugs, youth suicide, and violence.

These women are very brave to take on leadership roles that are so far outside their culture.

The lessons I've learned?

- We have to be able to learn to listen and be ready to communicate.
- We need to realise that we don't know what we think we know; that other people's knowledge and skills are as legitimate and effective as ours.
- There is not only one way in this world.

St John the Baptist: Jesus must increase, I must decrease.

I can say Tiwi women must increase their leadership in domains where our cultures come into contact, and we must decrease ours.

This is a challenge for people from either culture. I applaud those Tiwi women who did it.

Thank you.