

Vignette

Elizabeth Pike

MY LIFE-LONG SEARCH TO DISCOVER WHO I REALLY AM and where I belong has been a painful and traumatic journey and I am sometimes tempted to believe that it would be easier not to belong anywhere. Even in the midst of family and people, I have always felt a deep seated loneliness and a sense of not belonging, like a dis-ease that simply does not go away. But there is something within that compels me to keep going.

My first experience of abandonment occurred when I was five years old. My mother left my father with three children and remarried bigamously. She was placed on a good behaviour bond. Without access. Later, my school years were filled with rejection and racist comments because I was considered to be Italian, Greek, Spanish, or Jewish, and I couldn't understand why I was called names like wog, dago, or boong. This identity question became a serious problem.

When I was thirteen, I was sitting on the Kalgoorlie railway station waiting for a train, when a lady came and sat next to me. She kept staring at me and eventually said, "Is your name Betty?" When I replied "Yes", she said, "Well, I'm your mother". The shock was so great, I just felt numb. She then took my hand and we went to see my Aboriginal grandmother who was living in a makeshift humpy made from hessian and pieces of tin. This meeting with my mother created a lot of trouble and has taken me on many strange and unforeseen journeys. It began with my continually running away and wanting to be with my mother and her family. This was not allowed because of her no access agreement with my father. Naturally, my father became frustrated and angry with me for wanting to be with her. Finally he placed me in a Salvation Army Home, Graceville, in North Perth, for delinquent girls.

When I left the Home, my father was working in the South West with a gang of men in camps, so there was no home for me to go to. One of my mother's brothers said I could stay with his family. But this became a disaster, because I decided to settle the question of my identity by going to the Registrar of Births and Deaths, and discovered that I was

"Australian of Aboriginal descent". I was happy about this. It was the awakening of my Aboriginal Spirit, but it did not solve my problem.

Now when asked about my nationality, I said I was of Aboriginal descent, but people said, "You can't be, you don't look Aboriginal." The greatest shock came when I told my uncle what I had discovered. He was furious, denying strongly any Aboriginal connections, saying I was degrading his mother and was very wicked for delving into such things. As a consequence, he said I could not stay with them; it would be too dangerous. Coloured people were so afraid of the draconian laws existing in Western Australia during those early years that denial was very common. In fact, it was imperative if you wanted to survive and work in the white world. So my new-found identity had to be hidden once more. But the knowledge that my grandmother was removed from her family in Albany, West Australia, and put on a ship, the Rob Roy, and sent to an institution because her mother was Aboriginal and her father Philip Sullivan was an Irish convict deported to Albany for stealing, stayed with me, waiting to resurface when the time was right.

During the second world war, I decided to join the Air Force although I was only sixteen. My father signed the papers. I had somewhere to live. I was sent first to Melbourne then Geraldton and Bairnsdale. When the war finished I was discharged in Melbourne. Then began a period of deep depression. I found work in Darrods department store, but could not exist on a junior wage without family support. Finding boarding with strangers was difficult and I wanted to end my life. But an elderly lady I worked with took me to St Francis' Church in the city. Although I had no religious beliefs, the beauty of the candles and flowers and the presence in the church stirred me deeply. After six months instruction at St Augustine's in Bourke Street, I became Catholic. A couple of years later I met my future husband at a Catholic dance. We married, moved to Geelong and had five children. When he died of cancer in 1989, I was alone once more. My children were now married with their own families and I did not seem to belong again.

*The pain of all these experiences left their mark on me. I felt there was no one and no place where I truly belonged. I developed a very poor image, lacked self-esteem and had a deep sense of insecurity. Much of this I have unwittingly passed on to my children, thereby becoming what I perceive to be the "lost generation". Can we claim our heritage, or do we forget the whole sorry saga? Where do we fit in? There are so many more Aboriginal people in our society who have a story similar to mine. Some give up the struggle, saying it is just too hard, and become totally assimilated. Others like myself seem to be still struggling to belong. Henry Reynolds has called us "Nowhere People". I think Vicki Walker's DVD **Knowing Home** highlights our problem. We are people without a place; to belong you need a place.*