

Searching for God in Adelaide

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In June I visited an animal conservation park and stared into the face of a koala. They resemble a 30-pound bear with soft gray and white fur. They remind me of the character Yoda in the *Star Wars* movies. Their calm faces and the far away look in their brown eyes suggest serenity and wisdom. Like Yoda, I imagined a koala speaking to me in backward sentences saying “For God, you are searching?” I thought to myself, if I were to paint the face of a wise gentle God, say on the ceiling of a church with a hand reaching out to a human being, I might paint the face of a koala.

However, looks can be deceiving, even in Australia. Some researches say that koalas are the only living creatures that have brains that do not fit their skulls. Instead they have a shriveled walnut of a brain that floats in a fluid filled cranium. Other researchers have contested this finding, arguing that the brains of koalas may have shrunk before the scientists examined them, because these organs are so soft. Whether soft-brained or empty-headed, the koala is definitely not the Yoda of the animal world. Scientists believe that the koala has sacrificed its brain to energy efficiency. Koalas only eat eucalyptus leaves from seven of the seven hundred varieties of eucalyptus trees. The leaves are so toxic that they use 20 percent of their energy just to remove the poison from their food. This leaves little energy for the brain, so the

dreamy look in the koala’s eyes is because nobody is home.
(Source: *Lonely Plant Guide to Adelaide & South Australia*, 3rd Edition, page 31)

I was in Adelaide, a city of more than a million people, during the winter, June, July and August, to serve as the interim minister of the city’s Unitarian church. I learned from the congregation that Unitarianism has more than a two hundred-year history in Australia. The first Unitarian minister who traveled to Australia was the Reverend Fyshe Palmer from Dundee, Scotland. The government tried Rev. Palmer for circulating a pamphlet that attacked the corrupt practices during House of Commons elections. Convicted of sedition, he was one of the thousands of convicts shipped to Australia. Arriving in Sydney in 1784, at the age of thirty-seven, the British authorities would not allow Rev. Palmer to preach. However, he had brought with him the only encyclopedia in the colony. With it he taught himself to make beer, which he sold to support himself. In the hope of returning to England, he looked up “ship” in the encyclopedia, and after some trial and error, he built a small trading boat. Next, using the encyclopedia as his guide, the first Unitarian minister in Australia refitted a Spanish ship and tried to sail her to England. The sections on shipbuilding and on navigation in the encyclopedia may not have been as carefully written as the section on beer because soon Rev. Palmer found himself shipwrecked on the island of Guam, then controlled by the Spanish. The Spaniards put the Unitarian cleric in jail where he died of cholera at the age of fifty-five. Because he was Unitarian, the priests refused to give him a Christian burial, so the Spanish authorities buried Rev. Palmer with the pirates. In 1804 an American ship captain dug up the body and brought it back to the United States for burial in a Boston church yard. (Source: *The Fatal Shore, The Epic of Australia’s founding*, by Robert Hughes pages 177-180)

My own visit to Australia was less difficult than Rev. Palmer's. Historically, Adelaide is known as a "City of Churches," because it started in the 1830s as a planned city where persons fleeing religious persecution in Europe would find a safe haven. The people of Adelaide are proud that theirs is the only Australian state that convicts did not found. Twelve immigrants from England established the Adelaide Unitarian Church in 1854. In 1856 the founding Unitarians built an attractive Unitarian church in the center of the city. Membership of the Unitarian Church reached 747 adults in 1881. By the 1960s the church had grown too expensive to maintain, and was on prime downtown land. So the congregation sold the 19th century church and built a modern building 2 miles east of downtown that included the much loved stained-glass windows from the old church. The congregation built a manse (that is a home for the minister) next to the church. Both the church and the manse have window walls that look out onto a garden courtyard. Members of the congregation can sit in their pews Sunday morning, look to their right across the courtyard, and see inside the minister's living room. Some previous ministers have commented that living in the manse is like living in a fish bowl, but for the three months I was there I liked being close to the church.

Today the congregation has about 110 members with about sixty people at worship Sunday. They have a small religious education program for children, with about ten children attending. Their new permanent minister is a 40-year-old Australian woman, who trained for the Unitarian ministry in England. The Rev. Jo Lane, moved into the manse this past week and she will deliver her first sermon next Sunday. Her husband is an Australia scientist and they have two young children, so they will increase the size of the church school by 20 percent!

The Adelaide Unitarians supplied my airplane ticket, housing and a car. In exchange I preached each Sunday for eleven weeks. I also

attended meetings and visited members who were in the hospital, and I had many meals in the homes of church members. In my free time I explored the area.

At first, frightened by the fact that everyone drove on the wrong side of the road, I walked everywhere. I walked through Victoria Square and sat by the fountain designed by John Dowie, a famous artist and member of the Unitarian congregation. He also painted the picture of the Queen that hangs in the parliament building in Adelaide. The Queen let him pick the gown that he painted her in, and he selected the one with the most glittering sequins. He said the queen laughed and said "John you're going to make me look like Liberace." Although now ninety-three years old, John came to church every Sunday that I was there.

I walked through the city's museums, its botanical Garden and the shopping district. The walking was good for my body and for my spirit. I walked down a street taking everything in—the colors of the storefront advertising, the smells of the food, the sounds of the cars, the feel of the cool air, the touch of the pavement against my feet.

When I tired of walking, I went to the movies. One afternoon in June I saw the movie *Ten Canoes*, a movie that has not yet come to the United States. There has never been an Australian film quite like it. It is the first movie ever made in an aboriginal language. *Ten Canoes* begins with an aerial view of a beautiful river and the narrator, David Gulpilil says, "I am going to tell you a story. It is not your story. It is my story."

The story takes place before the arrival of Europeans to Australia. The actors themselves speak only in their aboriginal language, with English subtitles. The actors, men and women, are naked. The movie shows how aborigines gathered food, how they court and

marry, how their justice system works, how they mourn their dead, and how they make jokes and laugh together.

The next time I had dinner with church members, I mentioned the movie. The reviews at the table were mixed. Two of the people loved the movie for the insight it gave them into aboriginal life. In contrast, their spouses said they were disappointed in the movie. “You just cannot count on aborigines,” one man (who had run a business) said. “You hire them, they show up for a few days and then without explanation they disappear for weeks.”

For many years most Europeans dismissed the aborigines’ nomadic culture as primitive. However, in the past forty years white Australians have grown in their appreciation of aborigines. They value the way the aborigines have lived in harmony with the environment of Australia for more than 40,000 years. And they realize that the aborigines have rituals from which we can learn. I heard about a coming-of-age ceremony that takes place between mothers and sons. When a son reaches the age of about twenty-three or twenty-four, he gathers with other young men in a retreat setting. The mothers of these sons also gather. They each do certain rituals at the end of which the young men are declared adults and are told to refer to their mother not as mother anymore but by the woman’s given name. The mothers have finished their role of being the mother to these young men, and although they remain friends, the mothers now have no more special responsibility for their sons. The women are free to resume the identity they had before they became mothers. The aborigine women say it is a liberating experience. I wondered how mothers and sons might receive this ritual in the United States. (Source: heard on an Australia Broadcasting Cooperation radio program, Sunday 5 to 6 pm July 23, 2006, while, I was driving.)

The members of the Unitarian Church of Adelaide have placed a sign on the front of their church that says “we acknowledge the

Kaurna people as the original custodians of this land.” This made me think that I do not even know the name of the native Americans who lived and hunted in these woods before the Europeans arrival here. In the same way, I know of no major movie made in the United States done completely in the language of Native Americans with English subtitles. People in both the United States and Australia said to me that Australians are behind the United States. However, I found that in trying to come to grips with the relationship between aborigines and European settlers the Australians are ahead of us.

Eventually I adjusted to driving on the left side of the road. I drove away from the city into the outback. As part of my search for God, I visited a place called Sevenhill in the beautiful Clare Valley. The Jesuits had migrated to Australia from Austria in 1848 seeking a life free from religious persecution. They called their settlement “Sevenhill” after the seven hills in Rome. In 1851 they planted grapes to provide sacramental wine for religious use. Today the settlement includes a beautiful Catholic church and a large wine tasting room offering twenty-one different types of wine. I sampled the wines and bought a bottle, so I would be ready in case the Unitarians in Adelaide asked me to serve communion.

While the wine industry is thriving, with more than 250 vineyards in the area, religion has not fared as well. According to the 2001 government census, which included a question about religion, of the twenty million people in Australia 838 are Unitarian, although it is not clear how seriously the fun loving Australians took the religion question. Several hundred thousand Australians wrote Jedi in response to the question about religion.

In a poll conducted for the Christian Research Association, 85 percent of Australians said they were not involved in religion. Fifty-one percent of young people in Australia say that they do not believe in God. The researchers found that many people believe

having anything to do with church is an admission of personal failure. The researchers concluded that many Australians see Christianity as being for losers.

I read that in August of 2005 a public-relations campaign in Adelaide tried to counter this perception that religion is for losers. The TV commercials, the radio spots, the billboard advertisements and direct-mail all tried to give the message that Jesus was a gutsy speaker who pulled no punches. Jesus, the ads suggested, was a cool, tough talking no nonsense philosopher, a friendly fearless tough guy who if he lived in Australia instead of Palestine would have fearlessly tamed crocodiles. A year later I saw no evidence in Adelaide that the image of Jesus or Christianity had changed.

Did I find God in Adelaide?

- I loved touching the koalas and other amazing animals of Australia. They are evidence of the miracle of evolution.
- I loved meeting the people in the Unitarian Church in Adelaide. They were gracious hosts.
- I loved exploring the city of Adelaide, with its fountains and streets, its bookstores and parks. It is an example of excellence in city planning.
- I loved learning about the aborigine culture. They have their own wonderful rituals and stories, their own beautiful art and music.
- I loved tasting the foods of the Adelaide Hills and the Barroso Valley. While I declined the chance to eat Kangaroo meat, in moderation I did enjoy the wine and the cheese.

But did I find God?

God, I think, is the mystery that connects us all. I felt that connection in the new friends I made on my journey. I felt it in

seeing the art and hearing the music of Australia. And I felt the mystery that connects us all in the beauty of nature that I found on the continent down under.

One Saturday, I joined several members of the congregation for a “bushwalk.” We drove northeast of the city for about an hour. We walked across creeks, past abandoned farmhouses, over sheep fences and around rocky outcrops and ridges. I watched a flock of about two hundred white and reddish pink parrots fly across our path. In the distance I saw wild kangaroos bounding across the countryside. Amazing, strong, fast, beautiful animals, the kangaroos moved quickly across the landscape sometimes alone, sometimes in groups. We walked for ten miles that June day. For a little while we got lost, but we quickly returned to the trail. In the afternoon the sun was low in the winter sky and we crossed a creek lined with big eucalyptus trees, some hundreds of years old. The late afternoon winter sunlight was beautiful on the trees. The kind people from the church, the parrots, the afternoon sunlight, the trees, the Kangaroos—for a moment it all came together perfectly and moved me in a very profound way.

And I felt the mystery that connects us all. I felt God.