From the Kitchen

24 August 2011

As I have said earlier, what we believe dictates how we live our lives. If you have a set of beliefs about someone or about a group of people, your relationships with them is based on those beliefs.

In history classes at school and through reading books, I learned that Australian Aborigines were nomadic hunter-gatherers; agriculture was unknown in this country until the white settlers arrived in 1788 and, apart from temporary 'humpies', the Aborigines did not construct homes.

I had no direct way of knowing about this, only what I was told. But the people who came to this country from England knew differently – they saw the extensive villages of stone houses, the elaborate fish races and traps, the cultivation of yam daisies and grasses. They needed to create a belief about the Aborigines, whose land they were taking by force and subterfuge, in order to justify their actions[1]. The myths these insurgents created became the generally accepted truth for around two hundred years. Not only did it justify non-indigenous attitudes to the Aborigines, but it created beliefs in the Aborigines about themselves.

In a similar vein, our beliefs about ourselves as the most evolved animal on earth colours our attitudes to every other living thing. We believed, until recently, that only humans used tools, were capable of language or could have any sense of self. We now know that many animals use tools and some even fashion them to their purpose. Chimpanzees have been taught sign language and used it not only for simple communication with humans, but used it to lie and to trick.

Myths abound in our society and we live by many of them. Some may seem so crazy as to be unbelievable, but for them to persist there have to be some believers. Other myths appear to be self-evident truths and are rarely questioned.

Whether something is a myth or the truth can depend on what one believes. There is ongoing debate about the use of nuclear energy to generate electricity and about the ability for this form of generation to reduce the amount of greenhouse gasses released into the atmosphere. Many believe this to be just a myth; they believe that if all factors are taken into account, using nuclear energy will increase greenhouse emissions; and there are the problems associated with dealing with the nuclear waste. Other people are convinced that nuclear power generation is the only thing that can save us from global warming. Much depends on which figures you use, what you include in the accounting equations and what you rely on as accomplishable in the timeframe you apply.

There are 'urban myths', which are things we believe to be so because we have read about them or someone has told us it is so. One such myth is the story, in the USA, of a horse falling on a car and killing an occupant, and the resulting court case and pay-out. Like many urban myths, there is some truth and much misinformation in this story. According to the myth, a driver hit a horse which had escaped from its fenced-off field, the horse became airborne and landed on the roof of the car, collapsing it and killing one of the passengers – a 'one-in-a-million chance'. Also, according to the myth, the car's manufacturer was held

liable because ‘it should have foreseen that a horse may fall on the car and injure or kill someone inside’. If one checks on the actual court case, one discovers that the horse did not become airborne, but rolled over the bonnet and windscreen and then onto the roof and that the roof collapsed under the weight. Much of the decision of the court in this case relied on the fact that in Oregon there is a collision between a horse and a car on average every three days; that the National Safety Board requires vehicles to withstand an impact of 5000 pounds (2268 kg) and the car concerned could only withstand 3800 pounds (1724 kg); and the manufacturer had destroyed records about vehicles which had failed tests.[2]

Other ‘myths’ stand up to scrutiny, such as the woman who successfully sued McDonalds in the USA after she burned herself on a cup of coffee.

How much more ‘incredible’ knowledge would we discover if we allowed ourselves to transcend our beliefs? Are you willing to live a more interesting life by allowing your beliefs to be malleable? If you answer yes, what tools do you need to filter the constant stream of information, both sensory and other? How do you allow your cosmology to be flexible and still remain sure enough of your world in order to operate effectively in it? What you believe is inextricably bound up with who you think you are, and how much fluidity you allow in your beliefs has much to do with how confident you are in yourself.

1. *Convincing Ground*. Bruce Pascoe, Aboriginal Studies Press, 2007
2. *America and the Law: Challenges for the 21st Century*. Stephen J. Herman, 1999, Gravier House Press, p. 213