

WISDOM

Growing Elder

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"I'M AN ELDER-IN-TRAINING," I heard myself declare at the tender age of 32. I had no idea what eldership really meant—how could I? Still, I felt a quiet yearning stir inside me to be one.

At the time, I was working as an assistant activities director for a large Catholic retirement community, getting my first up-close look at institutionalized living for the aged. Although about half the population was there by choice, many had run out of other options, and I often found myself feeling overwhelmed by the isolation and quiet despondency of those I served. Ultimately, I found the most loving activities I could offer them were touch and deep listening.

I'll never forget Gladys, a wickedly sharp-witted 94-year-old resident who confided to me, "You die either from the head down or the feet up." She was definitely in the latter group, as her exquisite mind ruefully observed her bedridden body waste away. Blind and weighing no more than 80 pounds, Gladys confined herself to her room. Most of my other clients were in the "head down" camp, their bodies housed in a locked ward due to their tendency to wander off with no mind to stop them.

I thought a lot about Gladys's comment, secretly hoping I could avoid both options she presented. My early desire to be an elder was definitely mixed with the simple wish to not grow *old*. I longed to be of service, not to be a burden or be burdened, which was the only model I was given.

A few years later, in the Australian winter of 1998, I traveled with a friend to the UNESCO World Heritage National Park known as Kakadu, located in the Aboriginal territory of Arnhem Land. For over 40,000 years Aboriginals have occupied this primal and ecologically diverse landscape, which is roughly half the size of Switzerland and has six seasons, four of which describe rainfall.

Nestled in my backpack was a small, carefully wrapped package, entrusted to me by a Native American acquaintance. She told me when I got to Kakadu to "give this to Bill." "Bill who?"

"I can't remember, but if you make it there, everyone will know who he is."

She was right. Bill Niedjie—or "Big Bill" as he was known from his brawny younger days—was a highly respected elder of Arnhem Land. In fact, he was the reason that Kakadu was on the UNESCO map at all. Bill was instrumental in the decision to lease traditional lands to the Commonwealth of Australia, making it possible for sojourners like me to experience the primal beauty and ancient culture of Kakadu. Bill was the last native speaker of Gaagudju, his ancestral tongue. I was told his father was a child when the first white people arrived on horses.

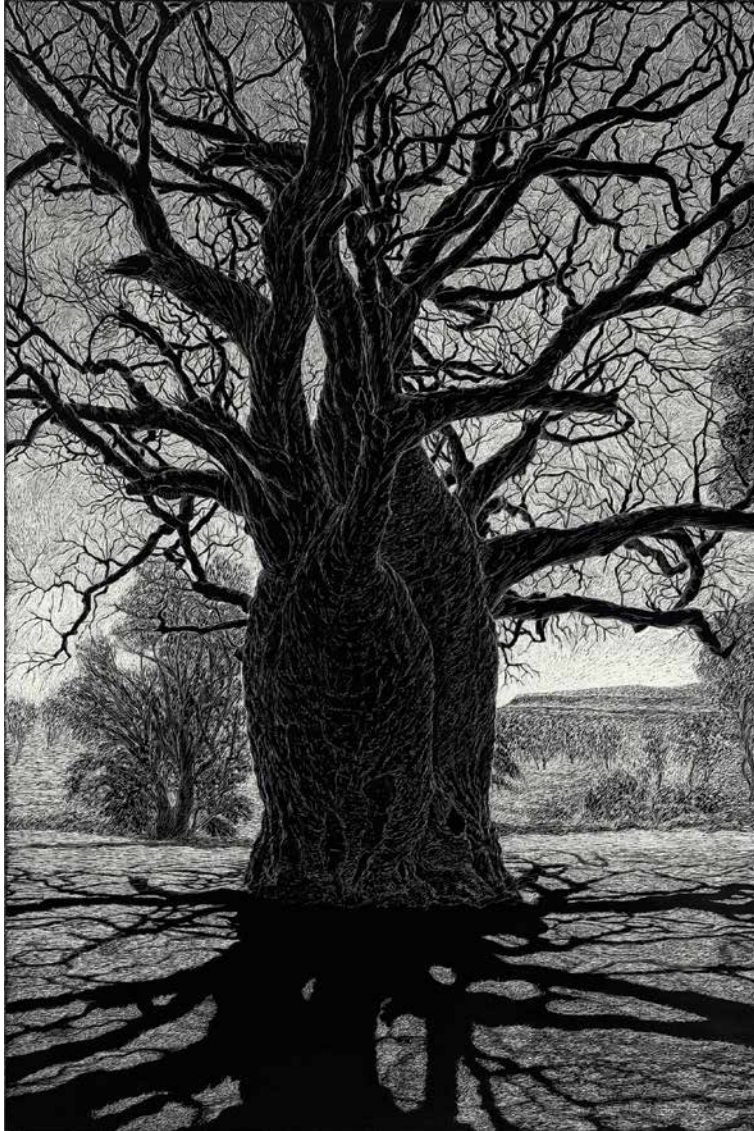
As well known as Bill was, locating him was a lot like trying to fend off the interminable "mozzies" (mosquitoes) that nosed on me day and night: exhausting and fruitless. Just when I thought I had him in my sight, he would seem to vanish. After over a week of near encounters, I surrendered to the possibility that I might not be able to accomplish my mission.

Then I made contact with a Kakadu park guide who served as a de facto assistant to Bill. He took my friend and me to where Bill was making an appearance at an Aboriginal art class being held out under a huge boab tree. The ancient boab, dated at over 1,500 years old, double-

downed my elder experience that day.

Approaching Bill, I felt suddenly shy and self-conscious. After a brief introduction, I gave him the slightly tattered package, explaining its origins. He eventually nodded in recognition. Then he looked at me, and it was as if time stopped. He wasn't so much looking at me but into me,

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it's as if a library is burned. This is my take:
**Experience happens;
wisdom is tended.**



IN THE WORDS OF “BIG BILL”

*I speaking story
and this story you got to hang on, no matter who you,
no-matter what country you.
You got to understand . . . this world for us.
We came for this world.*

*And all my people all dead
but we got few, that's all.
Not much, not many . . . getting too old
and young-fellas I don't know they hang on this story.*

*So I'm saying now,
earth is my mother or my father.
I'll come to earth.
I got to go same earth
and I'm sitting on this dirt is mine
and children they playing.
Tree is mine.
In my body that tree.*

—BILL NIEDJIE

Excerpted from *Story of Feeling* by Bill Neidjie.

« *Boab Tree Near Wyndham*
Rachel Newling

through me, and I felt a vastness in that looking. In his seeing, I caught a glimpse of Reality beyond my limited understanding.

A handful of us visitors sat mostly in silence all afternoon with Bill under that enormous tree. As I painted a clumsy rendition of the X-ray-style art his people are famous for, I felt quiet awe for the timeless transmission I received that day.

Twenty year later, my notions of eldership keep maturing as I do. As I inch toward it, I have less fear and more curiosity about my physical destiny and demise. I find that as my awareness expands, I am more accepting of my ageing body and mind. As I become more invisible in our youth-oriented culture, I also recognize my inherent value to those who seek me out for guidance. I wonder where I will be living and who

will be caring for me if I make it to dear Gladys's age. My hope now is to accept my limitations, receive graciously, and fully express what I came here to express.

It's been said that when an elder dies, it's as if a library is burned. This is my take: Experience happens; wisdom is tended. It wants to be harvested. When we reject our wisdom keepers, the wisdom they carry becomes a burden.

The most powerful elders I've known have a dignity born of a deep respect for all life—and for their place in it. Liberated from proving themselves, they are aligned with playing their part, no more and no less. They are keepers of the past in service to the future.

At least that's my story now. Talk to me in another 20 years.

—JOY HOSEY