



# MANNA matters

Quarterly of MANNA GUM.

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# Living on Stolen Land

## 'The Voice' and the Legacy of Colonisation

by Jonathan Cornford

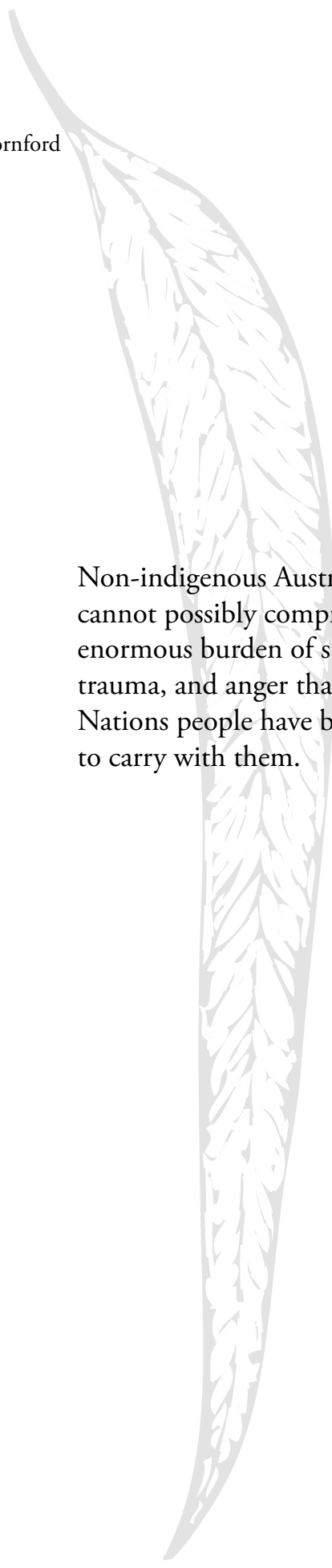
As I write I am looking out my window at bushland populated by golden wattle in full bloom, with a background of yellow gum and a foreground of *Melaleuca* scrub. Gold against eucalyptus green. The hillside we live on was devastated by gold miners in the 1850s but was recently ignited into new life by the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires. I am looking at a scene of beauty whose scars still lie as open wounds in the landscape for all to see. I live in a town that was founded on greed but which was built with visions of social commonwealth. This is Australia, and I love it.

Yet 'Australia' is the product of a colossal act of theft. This is a shocking statement, but there is simply no evading the truth of it. I hope to write more about the process of colonisation in later editions, as it affects how we should think about many things: the church, the economic basis for our affluence, and even our own rights to property in land. For now, let it suffice to say that the dispossession of the First Nations people was always a fundamentally violent process. It resulted in the almost complete erasure of a 'world'—the Indigenous population, language, culture, economy, and landscape—and its replacement by strange new world, flooded with strange new people, flora, fauna, and diseases. The settler colonisation of the nineteenth century was not like anything that went before. It was, in effect, an alien invasion, with all of the suddenness, devastation, shock, and bewilderment that sci-fi depictions of such events relate.

Non-indigenous Australians cannot possibly comprehend the enormous burden of suffering, trauma, and anger that First Nations people have been forced to carry with them. We do not see how this massive unseen tumour of history reproduces its cancerous cells in the data of Indigenous unemployment, substance abuse, domestic violence, petty crime, incarceration, and entrenched health and educational disadvantage. And so we have the perennial Australian habit of blaming 'them' for all 'their' problems, while complaining about all the supposed hand-outs 'they' get from the government. I have had such sentiments voiced to me a few times in the last couple of weeks, expressed in both subtle and crude forms.

Generally, *Manna Matters* has stayed away from adding to the cacophony of comment on current affairs, and focussed on the deeper subterranean issues that few talk about. On this issue I feel constrained to make an exception. In October this year, Australians will vote in a referendum on a proposed 'Indigenous Voice to Parliament'. This is surely an important moment in our nation's history, and I am worried that we will be found wanting.

My aim here is to try to do something that I have struggled to find in the media, which is to wrestle with difficult questions without being driven by a campaigning agenda. My overall concern is to



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show how the proposal for ‘the Voice,’ and some of the complexities in the debate over it, are all a product of the deep legacies of colonisation that have been festering unaddressed in our nation’s soul. We cannot imagine that dealing with such deep wounds will be neat or straightforward; it will always be messy, but it must be attempted.

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Let me lay my cards on the table. I am immediately and strongly disposed towards the ‘Yes’ case for ‘the Voice’. As an adolescent, it was the struggle for Indigenous justice that formed my awakening into social justice, and in many ways the issue set me on my present course.

Nevertheless, when Anthony Albanese announced that there would be a referendum on the proposal in this electoral term, my first reaction was dismay.

It is incredibly difficult to win a referendum in Australia. Out of forty-four, only eight have returned a ‘Yes’ vote, and of these successful instances, all had strong bipartisan support. Prime Minister Albanese announced this referendum at a time when Peter Dutton is the head of the

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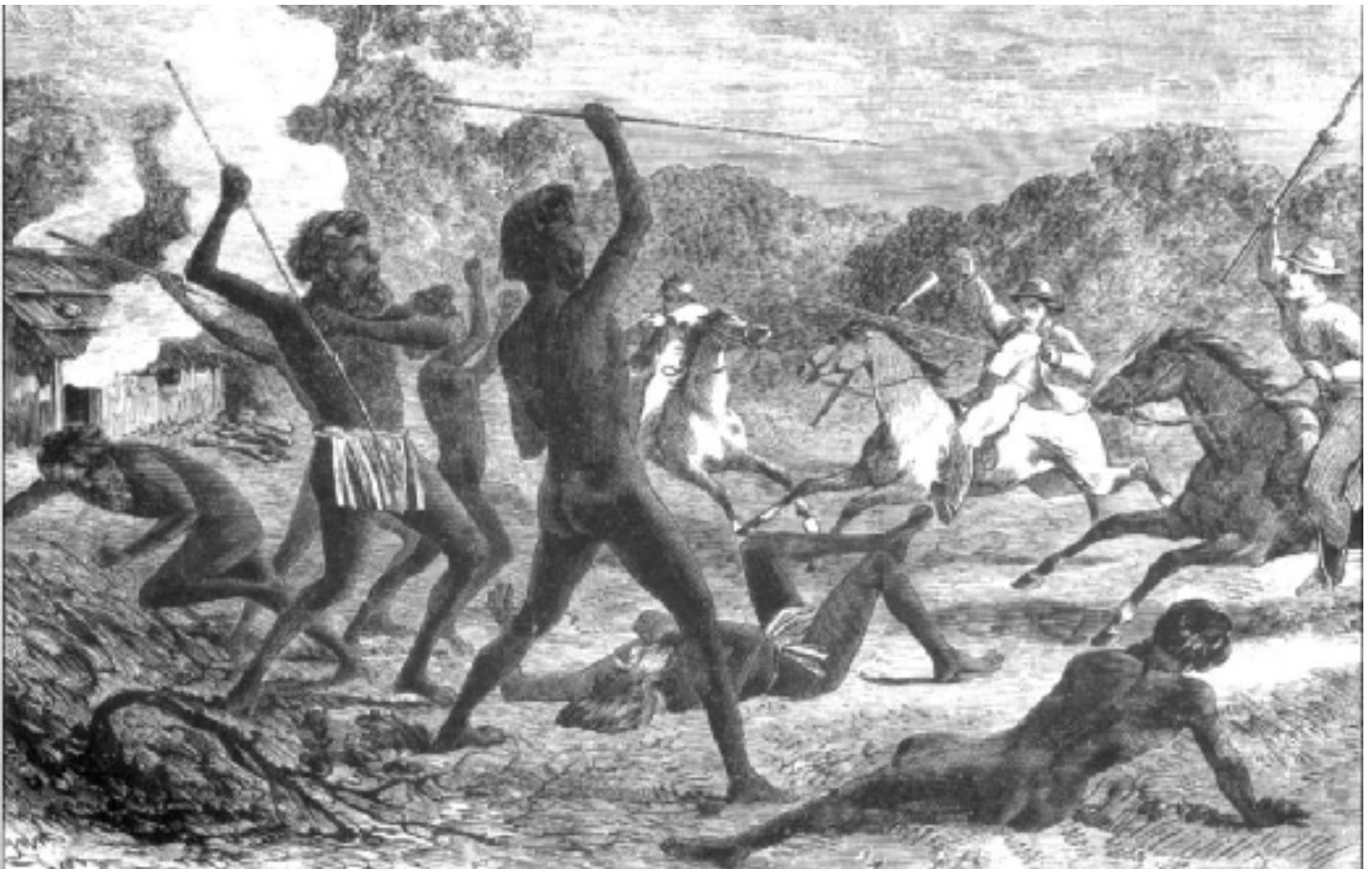
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Liberal Party and Barnaby Joyce the effective head of the Nationals, two men who have been distinguished by their hardness of heart—hostility, even—towards Indigenous voices. And this at a time when discussion of public issues is increasingly wedged into the ideological factions of the culture wars. I feared that the political climate was not conducive to a positive outcome for Indigenous people, and to an extent, this is being borne out.

On the other hand, I fully understood the impatience of some Indigenous leaders to act while there is a sympathetic government in office. Who knows when that will be again? The wisdom of the timing of this referendum will be a matter for later reflection, but what of the proposal itself?

It is worth giving a little background here. There is a long history of Indigenous activism that has sought some sort of recognition within the Australian polity of the particular rights and position of First Nations people. In particular, the Barunga Statement handed to Bob Hawke by Galarrwuy Yunupingu in 1988, called for a ‘national elected Aboriginal and Islander organisation to oversee Aboriginal and Islander affairs’.



Aboriginals fighting against the Europeans invading their natural homes, *Samuel Calvert, 1870s.*





*The Uluru Statement surrounded by its four artists: Rene Kulitja (lead artist, second from the right), Christine Brumby, Charmaine Kulitja, and Happy Reid. Photo: Clive Scollay.*

The particular proposal for an Indigenous Voice to Parliament had its origins in 2015 while Malcolm Turnbull was Prime Minister, presenting the opportunity that some significant step might be taken under a sympathetic conservative government, with strong bipartisan support. This led to the establishment of a Referendum Council and Constitutional Dialogues with Indigenous People that culminated in the Uluru Statement from the Heart in 2017. There is little doubt that, whatever else you may think about it, the Uluru Statement from the Heart represents a significant moment in Australian history as one of the most representative gatherings of Indigenous leaders ever.

The Uluru Statement issued a three-fold call to the Australian people for Voice, Truth, and Treaty. Of these, the conservative government judged that only the proposal for an Indigenous Voice to Parliament was viable, and, now under Scott Morrison's leadership, began a process of 'co-design' towards a referendum on the matter.

The irony, and perhaps the tragedy, is that the proposal for a non-binding Indigenous Voice to Parliament was a compromise gesture from Indigenous leaders specifically designed to be amenable to the Liberal-National Coalition, the very people who have now turned vehemently against it. There are any number of things

that Indigenous leaders might have pressed for, but what they have actually proposed is a very modest compromise measure. In light of the history of suffering they have experienced, this must be seen as a very deep offering of grace.

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Let me be frank in admitting that I am strongly predisposed to discount most of the objections to 'the Voice' coming from the Coalition parties. I was around in the 1990s when they went into histrionic scaremongering about the Mabo decision undermining the basis of the nation, and John Howard promised (and delivered) "bucket loads of extinguishment". Again and again, they have reacted with startling ferocity to any modest gains made by Indigenous people, so I am not kindly disposed to their arguments.

Nevertheless, if I am honest, the current proposal for a non-binding Indigenous Voice to Parliament is not public policy that stirs my blood. I have to admit that there is some plausibility to the concern that it may add another obstructive layer of bureaucracy to the layers of government, that it may be vulnerable to the politicisation of the Canberra bubble, and that it may be prone to legal challenges seeking to define and either limit or extend



its powers. I am not convinced that it will provide a watershed in the struggle to reduce intractable Indigenous disadvantage.

These things may be true, or they may not; however, for me, they do not present an obstacle to supporting the 'Yes' case. No significant political change is without uncertainty or risk (just think of the introduction of a GST). Moreover, as I said above, beginning to address the very deep wounds of colonisation will always be messy and we should not imagine that it can be a done without some 'cost' to the nation as a whole. The desire for some costless appeasement of Indigenous people—cheap grace—is but an extension of the ongoing wrongs of colonisation.

For me, the essential datum about 'the Voice' is that it is a proposal that has come from the most representative gathering of senior Indigenous leaders in our history. To the best of my knowledge, the proposal has the support of the majority of Indigenous people. If we are to begin to address the past, such a voice must be heeded.

Yet, I would be less than honest if I did not confess that any easy certainty about this has been discomfited by the surprisingly strong Indigenous opposition to 'the Voice'. I am moved less by the vehemence of the most prominent opponents (think Lydia Thorpe) than my growing awareness of the extent of the doubts of many ordinary Indigenous folk, although I lack the ability to judge what proportion they represent (I do not particularly trust the media estimations of these matters).

Of the various reasons for opposing 'the Voice' expressed by Indigenous people, there are two that have struck a chord with some of my own worries. The first is basically a sense of distrust in a proposal coming from what is perceived to be an elite group of Indigenous leaders who control the majority of Indigenous organisations. This is a voice of disaffection and disenfranchisement that is parallel to the disaffection of much of the broader Australian population with its political leaders. I am not competent to really understand or analyse these dynamics within the Indigenous community, however my limited experience is that there is some validity to a widening gap between those able to exploit new political and economic opportunities, and those who feel locked out.

The second objection that resonates with me is simply the concern that Australia as a nation is not yet mature enough to deliberate on such weighty matters that are bound up with the claims of ongoing sovereignty of First Nations people. The concern is that trying to undertake such steps before the nation is ready will only result in

them being pushed even further into the future. But will Australia ever be ready? How can such things be advanced if they are not pushed? To such questions I have no real answer.

Ultimately, these are matters for the Indigenous community to wrestle with. Why should we expect that Indigenous Australians be characterised by a unity and harmony that no other human groups have achieved? What we are witnessing taking shape before our eyes, is the very difficult and messy process of the birthing of an Indigenous Australian polity, or polities, trying to salvage something of the diverse and ancient claims of First Nations so that they can take a place within the modern world system. Before 1788, there was no such thing as 'Australia', no understanding of a single landmass as a bounded entity, no sense of common peoplehood or common governance. Indigenous people are being

forced to somehow create these things in order to deal with the post-apocalyptic catastrophe of colonisation, and they are having to do so within the merciless and divisive pressure of our political-media system. We should cut them some slack.

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What I have tried to represent here is my own wrestling with complexities and doubts that the world of politics seems reluctant to admit. What seems clear to me is that followers of Jesus should be people who seek to address wrongs and heal hurt, impelled by love for the other that reaches across human divisions of race, gender, and class. In Australia, we live in the midst of great wrongs and great hurts.

In the final analysis, for better or worse, in October Australians must vote either 'Yes' or 'No' to a proposal that has been advanced by Australia's Indigenous leaders and is supported by the majority of Indigenous people. It has been presented in hope and in good faith. If there is any genuine interest in addressing the legacies of colonisation, then it seems to me that the only credible answer is 'Yes'. A collective 'No' from Australia will be incredibly damaging: another trauma in the long litany of injustices. I fear deeply for what a 'No' vote will mean for our nation's soul and the many destructive ways in which this will play out in our politics. A collective 'Yes' we will not mean that we have accomplished 'justice', nor done something that is without risk, but we will have signalled our intention to take the next step to addressing the legacy of the past. This would be one step towards healing.





*Flag 2023* by Sally Nansen, Linocut, 14x15cm.

*Sally Nansen is a writer, illustrator, and printmaker whose work considers the imprint of history upon today. She creates small-run art books, hand printed illustrations, and public narrative art. You can see more of her work on her website: [www.deardaisychain.art](http://www.deardaisychain.art).*

# Building a Good News Home

by Clinton Bergsma

My wife and I were both raised in families that loved the great outdoors - Michelle's family were coastal while mine had an affinity with the bush. But the Christian community we were raised in emphasised that 'getting to heaven' and the spiritual side of faith were priorities - the earth didn't matter in the scheme of things. Not only did this create a dissonance between our faith and our love for the great outdoors, but I remember early on in our marriage admitting that singing worship songs on clouds for eternity wasn't very appealing (it sounded like a slightly better version of hell!). But, as we read and reflected further, we realised that our love of nature wasn't a flaw in our faith but a reflection of God's intentional design for humanity to 'be strong enough to care for the rest of creation' as it in-turn provides and cares for us. This was hugely encouraging for us, and a significant step towards integrating our faith into the everyday.

Michelle and I were married in 2008 and had an opportunity to start building a home in 2011. We incorporated some sustainability designs into it: passive solar to capture the winter sun for heating, double glazing to conserve energy, we incorporated some recycled materials, and experimented with a reed-bed to recycle our greywater as well as with earth pipes that cool the home (by running air through pipes buried 3m underground).

We also got a few things wrong. I was able to build the home myself and went almost entirely solo on the construction work. This was unhealthy on a number of levels, and it meant we spent three years building a cheap-but-too-large home that we immediately felt uncomfortable living in (ha!).

We had included a self-contained unit in the design as we thought someone needing support could live with us. We also built a duplex rental on the block next door with communal veggie gardens in-between the two dwellings. We figured a Jesus-shaped landlord might flip the rental application process, so we selected

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tenants we thought might not normally get selected, and set prices proportional to the tenant's financial capacity.

We moved into the home in 2014, and I began a master's in transformational development that included a unit on climate change, justice, and sustainability. It rocked us theologically and practically by highlighting that much of our lifestyle was still unsustainable and well outside God's intention for his creation, and that folks like us were driving climate change and hurting the very same people we were aiming to assist through our involvement in international aid and development.

Uncomfortable in our too-large home, and regularly feeling overwhelmed by our solo attempts at supporting people in the three units, we sold the house and units in 2018. We wanted to downsize and be an example of what faith-integrated sustainability might look like in Perth that included some form of intentional community where support is shared and reciprocated between households. Drawing from our theology and experiences, we began drafting plans for a new home that incorporated three biblical concepts: 1) 'enough', 2) community with others and creation, and 3) being 'good news for the least of these.'

## Design phase

Michelle had experience in drafting house plans, so we had time to refine the layout. We wanted a three-bedroom, one-bathroom house that utilised a passive solar design (to minimise heating and cooling needs), included a self-contained wheelchair accessible unit (if we can, why not make it usable for the widest range of needs?), and had a small footprint. When we brought these goals together there wasn't much wiggle room in the design, which was helpful in its own way. The final plan ended up providing 26m<sup>2</sup> per person; the average Aussie home allows 95m<sup>2</sup> per person. Most new homes in Perth cover 75% of the block and host 2.5 people, our layout covers 26% of the block and houses up to eight people.

We opted for a loft home to reduce materials—particularly energy-intensive concrete—our ground floor is 60% of what it would be if it was single storey. This also allowed us to grow more fruit and veg and maximise habitat and space shared with 'the rest of creation.' We made bedrooms the minimum size permitted by the building regulations (we spend most of our time in there with our eyes closed anyway). We designed a laundry that could be shared by the unit and main house: previously, we had eight people and four washing-machines between our house and three units, now we share one washer between eight people.



*"We separated all waste on site during the building process, allowing about 80-90% of it to be recycled".*

We went for a rectangular footprint for ease of construction and to reduce building waste (more angles mean more offcuts of all materials). We chose a timber frame because it is a renewable resource, stores carbon

rather than creates it (as with bricks and concrete), is much easier to insulate and requires smaller footings (again, less embodied energy). We kept wardrobes and storage spaces

small to put physical limits on the amount of clothes and stuff we could have.

We also drafted the landscaping during this time. We wanted to integrate play and food production areas and have separate courtyards for the unit and main house which could be combined when hosting larger groups. Our guiding principle for plants was that they should produce food for us or be a source of habitat and food for native animals and critters. We assumed that God created all native plants beautiful and that diversity would reflect his design for creation (where in God's design do we see monocultures?). We are within walking distance of two manicured ovals, so we kept lawn to a minimum.

We felt some real tensions during this phase. At times, it was hard to distinguish between needs and wants. We do a fair bit of hosting and home produce – if our kitchen is too small, would we do less of these? Our inherent fear of 'too small' surfaced regularly and was often encouraged by folks with whom we shared our designs. We also kept comparing our plans against Perth houses rather than the homes I visit in rural Indonesia; we have a bias towards measuring ourselves against people who have more. Lord have mercy.

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## Building process

I worked with three gents (two in early recovery from addiction) to construct the timber framing and still did a lot of the construction myself, but we were selective about where other tradies were involved. It was healthier working within my skillset and much more fun working as a team, plus the lads and tradies had plenty of great ideas we wouldn't have thought of.

In the months prior, we purchased recycled and left-over building products. At times, it was difficult to work out whether it was worth the driving, but about 65% of the timber for framing, and 80% of the steel, skirtings, door handles, floorboards, tiles, insulation, cement, bricks (for garden beds), light fittings and a lot of hardware was sourced in this way, saving about \$5,000. All kitchen, laundry, and bathroom benchtops were off-cuts and all basins and sinks were abandoned stock from builders.

To combat the hot WA sun, we installed double glazing and twice the Aussie standard of insulation in the roof space and on the eastern and western walls. We also installed 6kW of battery-ready solar. All appliances are electric, including an induction hotplate (30% less power), and a heat-pump hot water system which only runs when the solar panels are doing their thing.

Rather than install floorcoverings downstairs, we hired equipment and polished the concrete slab. It was cheap at \$15/m<sup>2</sup>, required fewer materials than conventional floorcoverings, and is brilliant at smashing op-shop

crocery. Upstairs, we used recycled timber floorboards from a nearby school which had been demolished (a symbolic triumph for home-schooling every time we climb the stairs for 'class').

We weren't happy with the direct-pump and reed-bed greywater systems we'd tried in the past. We found an anaerobic-aerobic treatment design, but our council wouldn't allow it ('You're only permitted the direct pump option or the \$5,000 plus \$300/month fully serviced option sir. Have a lovely day!'). Under the guise of being prophetic, we built it anyway for about the same price as a direct-pump system. We ordered a 23,000 litre rainwater tank, but they delivered a 28,000 litre (no problem!).

We separated all waste on site during the building process, allowing about 80-90% of it to be recycled, but we estimate that around 1.5m<sup>3</sup> still ended up in landfill. We learnt that educating (most) tradies on separating waste is in its early days and has a long way to go.

By the end, the house ended up almost cyclone proof—I'd read too much about climate change—and we were able to make lots of adjustments during the build (and incorporate recycled or left-over materials) because a builder we know permitted us to work under his license and supervision. We're keenly aware that this was a rare opportunity, and that signing up with a conventional (particularly large or project-home) builder would not allow the amount of flexibility we had: building differently will require finding a builder who not only agrees to your budget, but shares your goals and values.

## Dreams and reality

The build officially cost us \$180,000, but that didn't include my labour, or items given or heavily discounted. We also shared scaffolding and a lot of tools or machinery through our networks so we didn't need to hire them. Some work was done at or below wholesale prices because of family who are stubborn in their generosity (cabinets and electrical). It would have cost more around the \$300,000 mark if it was built conventionally, which is about what most people spent on a house in WA that year. But on a per-person cost, building our home conventionally would be under \$40,000 per person while the average WA home in that year was about \$120,000 per resident.

Our house never gets below 20 degrees inside in winter (it was four degrees outside yesterday morning!) and we have no heating beyond baking bread and burning candles. In summer, the temperature inside the house will rise three-five degrees on a 35+ degree day, and at night we open the house and use pumped ventilation to capture the night air when it's cooler outside. Even so, if we get a few hot nights in a row we start looking like something between a loaf of bread and a melted candle, so we've installed the smallest aircon we could find (1.5kW) to run on hot days while the solar panels are pumping, and it cools the entire house (the air-con guy recommended an 8kW unit. C'mon mate). Our house uses a fraction of the energy compared to a normal Perth house.

The rainwater tank keeps the whole house watered about ten months of the year, and the greywater system produces enough water for the fruit trees and 35m<sup>2</sup> of raised veggie beds. Water is recycled in the cooler months when we don't need it and we don't have the capacity to store it. So, on average, the greywater covers 65% of the annual water we use on the gardens. The Water Corporation tells us we use less water than 85% of Western Australians, even with the veggie patch and fruit trees (our biggest areas of water consumption).

Each year, the bucket-method composting toilet (also unapproved: 'You want to do *what*, sir?!') saves about 30,000 litres of water, 300kWhs of electricity, and produces about 60 bags of compost each year (which is more than we need, so we share it with anyone who wants some). The garden provides about 4kg of fruit and veg per week and we expect that it will increase to around 7kg per week as the soil improves, more fruit trees start bearing and the fruit fly get better at sharing.

We have people over for dinner once or twice a week, and a few times a year we host 20-30 people. Some shuffling of furniture is needed for larger groups, but it's really not an issue. NDIS messed with our plans for the unit—like many NDIS stories, it's too long to share here—but we've had a variety of people stay in the unit. The least number of people we've ever had in the house is six (our family), the most we've had is eight (a couple in the unit). Some noise travels between the portions of the house: some people don't like it, but most say it makes it feel homely.





As if we didn't feel lucky enough, 18 months after we moved in, the opportunity came up to build a house next door. It has a split design too: a three-bedroom, one-bathroom portion and a self-contained unit. The idea was both homes could support someone, and then house 'leads' support each other. It seemed like no-one was interested despite us praying like monks through the build, but a family rolled up in the weeks before it was ready, and they have been such beautiful neighbours—again, probably a story for another time. We're finding it's much more sustainable to support people this way, even with some challenging tenants we've had.

We love it here. People often ask us teasingly when we'll move and build again, but I'm not sure we will. It feels like home, and when it's just the two of us, we'll likely move into the unit and support people in the main house. We're incredibly thankful for this opportunity despite the conundrums it has created: even with our intentions, resources, and design, there are still a lot of questions.

For example, if our home is considered highly sustainable in the Australian context, what do we do about the waste that was still produced during the build? This house also isn't very recyclable at the end of its life (so many things are glued!); how do we—can we?—change construction methods? What about folks who don't have the time,

money, skills, or network to do this kind of thing? What is better: new builds, renovations, or being satisfied with existing homes as they are? I'd argue that each of these have a unique set of challenges, conundrums, and shortcomings.

I do think what we've attempted is in many ways a step in the right direction, even with these questions - the narrow path is winding and messy right? But the biblical

narratives remind me that God so often chooses the poor as exemplars, educators, and leaders: the likes of Moses, David, Rahab, and Mary.

While wanting to avoid a romantic view of the economically poor, the communities in rural Indonesia that I often visit live in homes built from very local materials, have tiny

footprints, are almost entirely compostable, and have a high degree of communal ownership.

What might we learn from the economically poor on living sustainably in community? What might have changed in our design and build if 'following the example of the economically poor' had been one of our key design principles?

*Clinton lives with his wife and four children near Fremantle, Perth. He works for Amos Australia, assists with the Master of Transformational Development at Eastern College Australia, and is undertaking further study.*

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# Until We Are Equal

## The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (Matt 20:1–15)

by Deborah Storie

**Author's note:** this article draws on work previously published in *Encountering the Parables in Contexts Old and New* (Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2022).

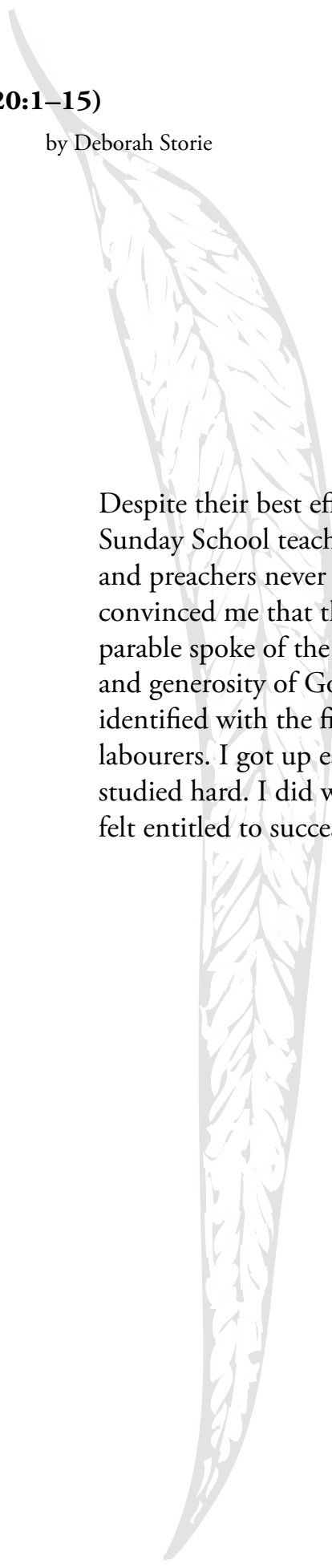
Growing up white in middle-class Melbourne, the Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard (Matt 20:1–15) always left me with an abiding sense of injustice. Despite their best efforts, Sunday School teachers and preachers never quite convinced me that the parable spoke of the grace and generosity of God. I identified with the first-hired labourers. I got up early. I studied hard. I did well and felt entitled to success. Why should those who coasted through receive the same reward? I deserved more. I did not want to be equal.

Unburdened by questions of audience and context, I read the parable through the individualistic dualistic lens of my culture, hearing it in isolation, as if spoken into empty space. I never thought to listen to the parable *as if* among the audience to whom, according to Matthew, Jesus first told it. Nor did I pause to consider how the parable may have intersected with the lives of its earliest hearers, or whether the worlds it portrayed and that I inhabited were in any way analogous.

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Things changed when I moved from Australia to rural Afghanistan. Well before dawn, men arrived at the bazaar and squatted, their tools of trade before them, waiting, hoping to be hired. When there was little work, they waited until nightfall and returned home empty-handed. Those were seasons of acute hunger. During peak agricultural and construction seasons, the strongest or most skillful were hired first. The infirm, the elderly, the not-quite-able were hired last, if at all. Hiring these last men delivered them from the indignity of begging and saved their families from hunger—if only for a day. Maybe the parable did speak of the generosity and grace of God.

But that was not the whole story. Sitting with extended families during lamp-lit winter evenings, I listened to folktales, legends, and memories of how things used to be, of how they belonged to the land, God's land, sat beneath their own vines and fig trees, ate the fruit of their own labour, built houses and lived in them, and were not afraid. *Enshallah* (God willing), those days would come again. One day, maybe soon, cash crops would give way to barley, vegetables and grazing lands, families would till their fields with joy, and the land would flow with milk and honey. *Enshallah!* So, yes, the workers are grateful to be hired and grateful to be paid. And, yes, they are angry! The householder's defence, "Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with what belongs to me?" (20:15), rekindles the rage of peasant farmers driven off ancestral lands and



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exacerbates the humiliation of begging for work on lands that were once their own.

But neither is that the whole story. The parable tracks the play of power in the hiring process. The householder contracts the first workers for a denarius (20:2). He tells subsequent groups, “You also go into the vineyard, and I will give you whatever is just” (20:4), thus seizing the prerogative to determine what is just. He sends the last workers into the vineyard without mentioning payment at all (20:6–7).

But that is still not the whole the story. A *manager*, not the householder, pays the workers (20:8). As far as we know, the householder-now-lord of the vineyard gives the manager only one explicit direction, “Call the workers and give them their hire, beginning with the last and then to the first” (20.8). Most landowners expect their managers to follow the usual rules of business: give as little as possible to get as much as you can. Did this householder direct his manager to give each worker a denarius? We are not told, but I suspect not. Had the lord of the vineyard expected all workers to receive a denarius, he would have been unlikely to direct his manager to pay the first last, a strategy guaranteed to provoke complaint. Was it the manager who practiced a different ethic, paying the last-hired workers the same as the first? Did the householder/lord of the vineyard know what his manager was doing *before* the first-hired complained? We are not told, but I suspect not.

The parable alone does not tell the whole story. It belongs to one scene of a much longer story. The Gospel writer invites us to imagine hearing the parable *as if* among those who witnessed an encounter between a young man and Jesus (19:16–22) and overheard or participated in a subsequent conversation (19:17–30). Did Jesus tell the parable in response to the questions of the young man (19:16, 20) and the disciples (19:25, 27), to illustrate his statement of 19:30, or to reflect on the entire preceding scene (19:16–30)? Jesus’ challenge/question to the young man was not one of possibility but of will: “If you *wish* to enter life . . .” “If you *wish* to be perfect . . .” (19:17, 21). Rich people sometimes do sell all they possess and give to the poor, but might Jesus have told the parable to endorse other less dramatic forms of discipleship, discipleship open to those who, not rich, are indebted or enslaved, discipleship that works best unnoticed? Might it be the manager and the manager’s (off-stage) actions to whom and to which Jesus invites those listening to attend?

The narrative to which the parable belongs is still only part of the story. Matthew’s Gospel continues the story of Israel as interpreted by the Jewish Scriptures. Listening *as if* among the crowd, I recall the tragic history of Naboth (1 Kings 21) and the word with which Elijah was sent to confront Ahab: “Thus says the LORD: Have you indeed killed and taken possession?” (v. 19). I remember a vineyard parable the prophet Isaiah spoke against the elites of his day (Isa 5: 1–7), “heroes at drinking wine”



Afghan workers waiting to be hired. Unemployment rates have risen since the regime change in August 2021.

(Isa 5:22), at least some of whom were “lords” of actual vineyards: “Woe to you who add house to house and field to field . . .” (Isa 5:8). How, I wonder, did the parabolic householder acquire his vineyard?

No prophet appears in the parable of Matthew 20:1–15. The lord of the vineyard has the last word: “Mate, I do you no injustice; did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go; I wish to give to this last the same as you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what belongs to me? Or is your eye evil, because I am good?” (20:13–15). Whether or not the householder initiated the equal payments, he claims that decision as his own. Listening *as if* among the crowd, I hear arrogance, derision and, possibly, fear. The lord of the vineyard frames the dispute in terms of his (claimed) goodness and our (alleged) evil. He flaunts his ability to do as he wishes with what he claims to own: the vineyard, employment, denarii and even we workers. The lord of the vineyard might have the last word but the manager silently testifies that the word of *that* lord neither defines nor determines the story.

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How should we interpret Matthew 20:1–15? This parable is most often interpreted allegorically with the householder/lord of the vineyard representing God. This is the interpretation I received as a child and young adult. The allegorical identification of the householder exerts a decisive influence on how other characters and their actions are judged, the parable understood, and connections between the parable and its narrative, historical, and reception contexts explained. If the householder/lord of the vineyard stands for God, everything he says and does must, by definition, be good and just and true (as would be the case for God). Allegorising this character requires other aspects of the

parable to be allegorised too, rendering the parable unable to speak about the historical economic, social, political and ecological realities it depicts.

Matthew 20:1–15 is sometimes read as a fictional abstract yet realistic story about economic and political structures that facilitated the growth of large estates, forced peasant families off ancestral lands, and reoriented agriculture toward profit and trade rather than the sustenance of local populations. Imagining ourselves into the story, we hear the parable as if among the crowds and the disciples. This enables us to attend to the fraught history and power dynamics of interactions between the householder/lord of the vineyard and the workers, question their perspectives and probity, and critique the structures that render the workers so vulnerable and the householder so rich. Heard this way, the parable presents a familiar situation as a problem that we listeners can identify, question and, potentially, transform. How then

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Having many possessions has a history; it doesn't just happen.

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should we interpret the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard? Jesus' example prohibits the categorical endorsement or exclusion of either approach, allegorical or realistic/political. Although Jesus leaves most of his parables unexplained

and uninterpreted, he explains the Parable of the Sower (Matt 13:3–9 and parallels) allegorically (13:18–23) and the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–35) politically: “Go and do likewise” (10:37). Might we not interpret the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard *both* as a realistic fictitious story that critiques exploitative systems and structures *and* as an allegorical story that speaks of the reign of God? After all, much well-crafted communication functions on more than one level.

When read allegorically *and* in narrative, historical and canonical contexts, the parable counters the desire for pre-eminence evident among the disciples, implicit in Peter's question (19:27) and explicit in the request of the mother of the sons of Zebedee (20:21). There are no hierarchies in the kingdom of the heavens (19:30; 20:16). Jesus assures the twelve that they will be rewarded (19:28)—as will all his followers (19:29; 20:9). *If* the parabolic lord of the vineyard represents God, God is indeed gracious and God is indeed good. God is indeed entitled to do what God likes with what belongs to God: “The earth is the LORD's and everything in it; the world and all who live therein” (Psalm 24:1).

When read as a fictional abstract yet realistic story *and* in narrative, historical and canonical contexts, the parable reminds the disciples, the crowds and, possibly, the young man listening from a distance, that having many possessions has a history; it doesn't just happen.



Workers on the field (down) and pay time (up). Byzantine Gospel illumination, 11th century, National Library of France.





According to Rome, property rights were absolute and elite interests determined what was right: the lord of a vineyard is entitled to do as he wishes with what he owns. The Scriptures, on the other hand, insist that the land—all the land—belongs to God and that people—all people—are accountable to God: it is *not* lawful for the lord of the vineyard to do as he wishes with what he so blasphemously claims to own!

What of the manager? Most interpreters overlook the manager or treat him as an extension of his master without independent agency. Few interpreters notice the gap between the householder's direction (20:8) and the payments the last-hired workers receive (20:9) or consider the possibility that the equal payments might not have been what the householder intended. The Greek noun (*epitropos*) translated "manager" occurs only three times in the New Testament (Matt 20:8; Luke 8:3; Gal 4:2). In Roman administration, the term refers to specific legal roles or positions, most often a person responsible for the care and instruction of children as a guardian (where the father is dead) or a tutor (where the father is alive), sometimes one responsible for household, organisational, or state administration. Its usage in rabbinic literature is similar. Matthew's decision to have Jesus use an unusual term, one designating a person into whose care someone or something is entrusted with significant decision-making responsibilities, should at least give us pause.

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Since returning to Australia, the parable still leaves me protesting—at the unjust loss of lands and livelihoods, at the injustice of businesses who choose to be generous to some while paying inhumane wages to all, at the brutal social and economic systems that the parable exposed and the equally brutal systems operational today. But now, with anger comes hope.

The rich can repent and sometimes they do, but the kingdom neither waits for nor depends on the rich. Repentance, as another Gospel reminds us, has practical implications across the economic spectrum: "Whoever has two coats shares with those with none; whoever has food does likewise" (Luke 3:3–14). Repentance continues until all have enough and none have too much, until we are equal. This, I suspect, is where we so often stumble. Like the young man, we are blind to structures that enrich us and dispossess others and have inflated views of our own achievements: "I have kept all these. What do I still lack?" (Matt 19:20). Like Peter, we focus on personal sacrifice

and anticipated reward: "Look, we left everything to follow you. What then shall we have?" (19:27). Like the vineyard owner, we claim entitlements and attributes that belong only to God, "Mate, I do you no injustice . . . Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with what belongs to me? Or is your eye evil because I am good" (20:13, 15). Like the first-hired workers, we do not want to be equal. We do not want to be equal, but neither do we want inequality to happen. Inequality increases, despite and against our wishes: "To those who have much, more will be given, and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away" (Matt 25:29).

In one sense, we are all rich young men. The parable challenges us to push back into the history of economic relations: present hierarchies of wealth and power didn't just happen; they have a history: how much have we/our ancestors taken? How much are we taking away?

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Repentance continues until all have enough and none have too much, until we are equal. This, I suspect, is where we so often stumble.

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In another sense, we are all managers—of households, relationships and lifestyles, playgroups and churches, workplaces, businesses and institutions, of superannuation accounts and our individual and collective ecological footprints. In today's world, economic justice doesn't happen; the logic of acquisition and accumulation reigns. The parable reminds us that, however we are enmeshed in networks of power and privilege, we are not extensions of our masters or cogs in the wheel: we have agency; we need not play by the usual rules. Salt, light, and yeast: we can work within the system to reverse the usual balance of trade. As disciples of Jesus, we are managers in a different vineyard and serve a different LORD. We have influence... How will we use it?

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#### Further Reading:

- Schottroff, Luise. *The Parables of Jesus*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006.
- Ukpong, Justin S. "The Parable of the Shrewd Manager (Luke 16.1–13): An Essay in Inculturation Biblical Hermeneutic." *Semeia* 73 (1996): 189–210.

# Entrepreneurship Through an Ecological Lens

## An Unexpected Journey into Mushroom Farming

by Tom Allen

On October 31st, 2021, I became a mushroom farmer, and I've been on a journey of sorts ever since. I haven't traversed vast distances or scaled great heights, but I have grown a lot of mushrooms, cleaned a lot of buckets, and had a lot of time to reflect on life in the process. The most enduring lesson from the whole thing has been a greater sense of the interconnected web we all exist within. Not just a web of people but a web of history, world events, tastes, and sensations. This is a story about the power of small business to raise our awareness of how truly interconnected we are. It's a story that makes me wonder what society would look and feel like if it were no longer dominated by corporations and supermarkets but instead filled with small, highly interdependent enterprises with a true sense of belonging to place.

It's difficult to say where a journey really begins. Is it when the idea forms in your head? Or when you set foot on the trail? Or is it somewhere in between, some difficult to place 'decision point' where the inkling coalesces into a concrete determination?

My mushroom journey began with an inkling in early 2019 when my new housemate and I started developing our rented Norlane (Geelong, Vic) block into an urban farm. I thought

This is a story about the power of small business to raise our awareness of how truly interconnected we are.





one of our sheds could make a great ‘mushroom zone’ although I had never grown mushrooms before. Those plans stayed in the ‘maybe later’ basket as I focused on other things, though I did get a taste of mushroom growing in early 2020 when I babysat some oyster mushroom buckets for a friend who was going travelling when they were due to fruit. The taste and texture of fresh home-grown mushrooms was amazing!

## Creating space

Fast forward to July 2021 and I had just left the job that I moved to Geelong for. I had felt a wave of relief every time a lockdown had been called and I had to close the doors. It took me a few runs through this cycle to see it was time to move on. I wanted to *desire* to do the work I was doing, and that desire had faded over time. It was a challenging and scary decision motivated by what can only be described as a ‘gut feeling’. I didn’t have another job lined up, and I didn’t want one. I knew it was time to try and create a business of my own, something I’d dreamt of doing since I was sixteen. I was now intentionally unemployed and at a loss for what I would do next, but also determined to explore whatever options presented themselves. I tried briefly to resurrect some shelved business ideas from my previous role, but contacts had moved to different places and phone calls were never returned: it felt like I was knocking on the wrong doors.

Four months passed of this wandering in the desert, and then I met a guy who offered me his entire commercial mushroom growing business, just like that. One Saturday in October, a message arrived in the Facebook inbox of The Farm Next Door in Norlane, an urban farming collective I was a part of. He was offering some free mushroom growing gear and worm farms, so naturally I said we were keen. The next day I headed out to see what this guy Ernesto was all about. It quickly became clear that he had a lot of ‘mushroom growing gear and worm farms’: he was growing forty kilograms of oyster mushrooms per week in his two-car garage and servicing about ten restaurants across the region. He gave a tour and I was thoroughly impressed. The real shock came when I asked him how much he was giving away.

“All of it.”

It was one of those moments where time seems to stretch and quiver because the quality of attention

has suddenly become very sensitive and focused. I realised in that moment this was exactly the kind of opportunity I had created the space in my life for. Yet I was also overwhelmed as I wondered if it would even be possible. I didn’t know where I would put everything, for a start! But I said ‘yes’ and figured things would work themselves out one step at a time.

My friend Jenny, another member of the Farm Next Door crew, offered to have the mushroom farm in her garage, so two days later we’d trucked it all over to her place in Norlane. I’m not sure she knew what she was signing up for, but she’s been an incredibly gracious host for the last eighteen months, especially for someone who doesn’t like mushrooms!

Ernesto gave me his list of restaurant contacts and, as my first harvest approached, I excitedly called the restaurants, one of which said they would happily take the full ten kilos that I was expecting based on Ernesto’s advice.

Then the first harvest arrived: a measly 500 grams. I called the chef apologetically and asked if it was worth bringing them down. It would barely pay for the fuel. He said he’d take it: if I aspired to be a mushroom farmer, I figured I might as well start with what I had.

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It was up to me to learn most things by trial and error or YouTube-iversity... Half the time I didn’t even know what questions to ask.

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## Learning curve

I’ve since discovered mushrooms are incredibly difficult to grow in a reliable way. I had been given a crash course by Ernesto during the handover, but he didn’t have much time and made it seem super easy. As problems cropped up later, it was up to me to learn most things by trial and error or YouTube-iversity, although I did have a couple of WhatsApp calls with him after he’d settled in Colombia. Half the time I didn’t even know what questions to ask.

A year later, I was still scratching my head about the inconsistent yields I was getting: thirty kilos some weeks, zero in others. I was making just enough money to keep going but not enough to get ahead. Any time I had a couple of bad weeks I’d be wondering how to pay the rent.

Fortunately, from very early on, one of my mates, Cameron, became passionately interested in everything about growing mushrooms and began regularly helping out on a voluntary basis. Not only did this give me someone to bounce ideas off when troubleshooting issues, but this arrangement transformed over time

into a business partnership. Wherever things went next, I knew it would be Cameron and me doing this together.

We knew the problems we were having meant we badly needed to find help close to home, so I reached out to a grower in Melbourne I'd seen on Instagram. This farm ran in two twelve-metre shipping containers with three split systems maintaining a constant temperature, filtered fans controlling the airflow, and beefy humidifiers spreading humidity evenly around. In contrast, my garage setup had gaps everywhere and the temperature was all over the place (despite my attempts to insulate it). Slugs were rampant, chomping on the mushrooms and leaving slime trails everywhere, and the wooden rafters harboured moulds whose spores clog the air and discourage the mushrooms from fruiting. Before entering the garage to fruit, the buckets incubated in an open-air lean-to where they quickly became infested with fungus gnats. My farm was a mess, and I knew I wanted some shipping containers. The issue was the money and the land: I had neither.

## New horizons

While I'd intended to live in Geelong long-term, the pandemic had me questioning these plans. I now dreamed of moving to the ancestral farm in South-West Gippsland where I would be closer to family and could let my passion for regenerative agriculture roam free. The advent of mushroom farming felt like a puzzle piece falling into place, and I could finally see myself with a farm enterprise adjacent to my parents' cattle and agroforestry operation. This shift in priorities led me to sell my house in order to invest in a new mushroom farm in the Geelong region: Cameron and I would own it in partnership and he could keep it running when I left for Gippsland to set up a second mushroom farm. So that was the money sorted, but the land was another question.

I started talking about my plans for a shipping container mushroom farm to anyone who would listen and, lo and behold, through a friend of a friend of a friend, I met someone who was already freely lending their land to a market garden and was keen to host a mushroom farm too. Like Jenny, I don't think Matt quite knew what he was offering his property for either. He lives off the grid and a mushroom farm draws a lot of power. But he's a problem solver and seemed to relish the challenge.

At around the same time I met Matt and agreed to set up on his property, there miraculously appeared two separate shipping container mushroom farms on Facebook Marketplace. The house sale hadn't settled by this point, so I borrowed funds from family and friends to put deposits on both of these.

When the sale settled, I took a holiday while Cameron got to work moving the containers. We created a 50/50 partnership called Bellarine Fungi, and we started planting our first small batches of buckets in May 2023. By June, we were harvesting our first flushes of mushrooms. Now, in August, we've had a few harvests and we're seeing how things average out before we scale up.

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The most significant insight has been how much I need to broaden my view as I go about my day-to-day life.

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We have plans to reach at least forty kilos per week of oyster mushrooms and also explore other varieties of gourmet and medicinal mushrooms such as shiitake, enoki, lions mane, reishi and *Cordyceps*.

## Looking forward, looking back

It's been a wild ride, and I love telling the story: I've been on a two-year crash course in mushroom growing and business management that I never expected.

The most significant insight has been how much I need to broaden my view as I go about my day-to-day life. I find it easy to treat myself as a problem-solving machine, or as a consumer, or any other of the many modern terms that collapse the wholeness of a human being into just one thing. But we are not these singular characters. While my tendency is to go about life as though the possibilities open to me are confined to what I can immediately perceive, there are in fact many more possibilities that lie latent, awaiting perhaps a little conversation here or a bit of reflection there. When I left my stable full-time job to go it alone, I essentially followed a single inkling: 'I can't paint without a blank canvas'. None of this could have unfolded without the opening which that launch into the unknown provided. I have since discovered that we are as enmeshed in history, community, and possibility as a tree is enmeshed in a forest.

When I hear most people talk about the business they started, it all sounds very engineer-like: "I did A, so B happened", and so forth. In my experience, the process of starting a business has been far more organic, and I wonder if the extension of organic metaphors into the way we organise our commercial and economic systems would go some way to alleviating the disconnection that drives so many modern maladies.



This mushroom farming venture is not simply an executed plan. It is both a product of its environment while also having its own impacts on the people and landscape which surround it. It vitally depended on people like Ernesto, Jenny, Matt, Cameron, and a whole cast of others, each of them depending, in turn, on a vast network of people and past experiences. The process of farming mushrooms has now, in turn, deeply affected those people, not to mention the soil created from the rapid decomposition of organic matter by the mycelium itself. Additionally, this venture depended on my grandparents who saved up such sums as they could never spend in retirement, leaving an estate to my family that enabled me to invest in my own business.

It depends, too, on the history of the land. Our current site in Drysdale was a commons in early settler times, and that has influenced the way Matt thinks about his land and the uses to which it is put, including leasing it to people like me in return for fresh produce rather than monetary rent. I could go down this track forever, listing the myriad forces relevant to the growth and development of this little business: wind; waves; soil chemistry; biology; human wilfulness; community; finance; on and on!

Starting my own business has been an eye-opening, horizon-broadening journey: the more I've looked, the more I've discovered the interconnectedness of

all things. It's been one of those experiences in which I feel at once big and small. I feel proud of those decision points that demanded a firm stance in favour of what I would really love to do with my life, and I feel simultaneously humbled by the notion that I didn't really 'start' anything at all: I'm merely the steward of a creative process that seems to guide me as much as I guide it.

We would all do well to consider life through this kind of ecological lens. The subtle ways we each influence the warp and weft of our shared fabric are incredibly significant. The assumptions that guide each step we take can send vast unseen ripples through that fabric which then affect outcomes for other people, creatures, business, and watercourses. What mushroom farming has taught me about myself and the world is to remain open to possibility and simply hold to the character of people, businesses, society, and economy that I wish to see more of, and let the course of life fill in the blanks.

*Tom Allen is a Victorian farmer, creator, and educator who believes in the power of small scale enterprise to create much needed shifts in our ecological awareness. He loves to share his hard-won knowledge and support others on the journey, so if you want to know more, just reach out! Email: allen.tom.c@gmail.com. Ph: 0421 102 154.*





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## News from Long Gully

A major new work that has begun in the last couple of months is the building of a new Manna Gum website. The website plays a linchpin role in Manna Gum's ministry, however, it has been limping along without an upgrade since 2009 (!) and is well and truly on its last legs. Building a new website costs a fair bit of money and we are looking for suggestions from *Manna Matters* readers as to how we can fundraise to help pay for it. If you have some thoughts, please get in contact.

A highlight of the previous few months was a public lecture I gave in Eltham, hosted by the Southern Cross Community Church. The lecture was entitled 'Towards a Downshifting Economy' and provided me with an opportunity to expand the range of ideas I have been discussing. For over a decade, Manna Gum material has focussed on reclaiming a Christian practice of everyday economics. In this lecture, I was able to begin outlining how the outlook that underpins such practices can be extrapolated into a larger political and economic vision. The lecture was recorded and is now available as MannaCast ep. 18.

Lastly, I unfortunately have to announce that, for personal reasons, we have to cancel this year's *A Different Way Week*, that we had scheduled for November. This was a disappointing decision to have to come to, but necessary. Sorry to those who had been hoping to come.

**Jonathan Cornford**

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MANNA GUM seeks to live within the economy of God – frugally, ethically and through the generous sharing of abundance within the community of faith. If our work resonates with you, please consider becoming a monthly financial supporter or making a one-off donation.

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### About Manna Gum

Manna Gum is an independent non-profit organisation that seeks to:

1. *Help Christians reclaim and practise Biblical teaching on material life; and*
2. *Promote understanding of the ways our economic lives impact upon ourselves, others and the earth.*

Manna Gum is motivated by a vision of renewal of the Church in Australia as an alternative community that witnesses to the Kingdom of God.

Please contact us if you would like us to speak to your church, group or organisation; or if you would like more information about our work; or to discuss how we could support you and your church/group/organisation to explore some of these issues.

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