



"Commitment of Care" by Safina Stewart

Yarn with Tim and Safina

TIM ARGALL AND SAFINA STEWART

Tim Argall and his wife Kris have known Safina Stewart for over a decade. Safina's artwork has been central to their "yarns". These works have prompted many conversations about God's goodness to us—specifically in the person of Jesus—and how that impacts our shared desire for reconciliation, healing, and oneness amongst all who live in this country we now call Australia. Safina has always been a practicing artist (www.artbysafina.com.au). God's gifting of her is seen in samples of her works that illustrate this article. This article is an edited version of a podcast episode they recorded for *The Joseph Network* in 2021 (thejosephnetwork.libsyn.com). It explores how God's joy and renewal can only be understood when God's plans for reconciliation and fellowship are explored by His people in humility and faith.

Tim is executive principal of Donvale Christian College. Safina is the relationships and storytelling coordinator for Common Grace "a movement of Australian people pursuing Jesus and justice". The article finishes with a prayer led by Safina—please join us in it as an appropriate conclusion to your engagement with this article.



SS (Safina Stewart): I've always been a storyteller ever since I exited my mother. I don't find it hard because both my parents are incredible storytellers. And they bring faith and life together so incredibly well. So, I think from a small girl, I was actually introduced to the idea that stories were to be found everywhere and stories could be told through any means and any mechanism. And when I found that joy in life through my artistic measures, through colour, through line, through imagery, and through story, it made sense to me to start sharing what was important to me in a very visual way.

SS: One of my paintings is simply called "Bunjil". There's a magnificent eagle (for First Nations peoples in Victoria the eagle is the symbol for our wonderful Creator Spirit) who flies over, always watching, always protecting. In this painting we see a big Bunjil flying over a river (which is a depiction of the Yarra River) and clusters of community clustered around campfires. In that image, I was portraying that our Creator is forever watching over us, has never lost sight of us, and knows exactly where we are, who we're with, and where we're going.

SS: I was selling it at a market, with all my other prints, many years ago. During a quiet period in the afternoon, a heavily tattooed biker made a beeline for me, with a dingo on a leash. He wanted to know about this painting. I explained

that I was an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person, and I explained the symbols and the connections of the painting.

SS: And then I'm telling him about how this Creator knows us intimately, knows our history, our pain, the craziness, the messiness, the bruising and scars all mushed together. Creator knows these lands, knows the past, and knows our place. And yet our Creator wants to know us, bring us through, bring us healing, bring us home, bring us future, bring us it all. And the man, he, well he started crying, he actually melted. Something had happened. He bought that print and a few others as well.

SS: But then the following month, he came back. What this man did—I believe that through him God was reminding me to not assume anything. God's Spirit is here for everybody, can touch everybody and anybody; only He knows how it will happen. I don't claim any fame for my art. That is completely because I just simply followed the instructions given. When I struggle with the work God has given me, I look at that painting of Bunjil and am reminded of God's truth, presence, and love.

TA (Tim Argall): *You've often said to me at the beginning of a new artwork, "Well, I have to talk to God and I got to see where His Spirit leads me in terms of what this is going to look like". You*

do this at the beginning of a process, and the middle, and at the end of the artwork's genesis.

TA: *You were born in New Zealand (your folks were at Bible College) to a dad of Scottish heritage and a mum with Wuthathi (Far North Queensland) and Mabuag Island heritage (Torres Strait Islands).*

TA: *And you lived as a family in Papua New Guinea, where your parents were missionaries.*

SS: Mum was a nurse and Dad a Bible College teacher at Christian Leaders Training College. I had no idea that I was different. Everyone was accepted and celebrated. That was God's gift to me. My skin colour made sense there, I belonged. My skin colour with my Christian faith made sense in Papua New Guinea and no one questioned it. Everybody celebrated it. To be honest, when I was ten and came back to Australia, I found that I was not welcome in what was called my own country.

SS: I have three children now. I have to teach them how to live and navigate in four worlds. There's the Western Christian world, there's the Indigenous world, there's the Western secular world. And the fourth would be living with an Indigenous Christian world—all these worlds I have to help my children to understand and navigate through.



"Bunjil" by Safina Stewart

TA: *I speak on behalf of many people in my community who would love to understand the intersection of the faith we share with the way in which you're raising your children, and how you move from the life that you've experienced to equipping them for the world ahead that has hope in it.*

SS: I love my kids so, so much. They are the most beautiful and creative and dynamic people that I have ever had the privilege to connect with. I thank my God so much for making me a mum to these amazing three.

TA: *If you feel comfortable, talk to me about how the Jesus (the Lord of all peoples) of our Australian Indigenous culture "comes to play".*

SS: Yes, the Lord of all peoples. Well, I start by putting my Indigenous personhood and my believing in Jesus personhood together. I see them working together beautifully. To be an authentic follower of Jesus requires me to fully embrace and appreciate the beauty of my heritage. Sadly, however, in my youth, I was told by some Christian leaders that there was a clash and that my Indigenous heritage and cultural expression had to be put aside for the sake of a "Christian faith". This messaging came overtly and subtly.

Sometimes I was told directly to keep my "blackness" out of church or school. Sometimes I was told subtly that I should be ashamed of myself. One silly example was that I was told I shouldn't have my big curly hair out. It had to be pulled back, neat and tamed. Sad, hey?

Anyway, I brought it up in deep conversations with Jesus. When I prayed and asked Jesus, "Why did you have made me a mistake? How could you make me, at this time and in this place, a black woman?"

Jesus assured me and told me, "You are not a mistake, you are exactly how I made you to be, I needed someone like you to step into this world. I needed someone like you to be here at this time at this place right now, saying what I give to you to say, doing what I give to you to do. So go with confidence that I have commissioned you to go and that's all you need. That's actually all you need."

I said, "Could you help me? Could you help me to understand how my Indigenous heritage and my faith can actually come together? I grew up in Papua New Guinea and New Zealand, witnessing the flourishing of living out Christian faith and multiple cultures together. Please show me the obstacles and strongholds holding this back here in Australia, as the land of my mother's ancestors."

I was only 18. I asked Jesus to show me the story of how Creator God had been with and loved our Indigenous peoples. And He gave me a painting to paint. It took ten years of processing before this one actually came out of me onto the canvas. But over that ten years, between the time of 18 and 28, there was something gurgling deeply inside. It came out in the form of my "Seven Days of Creation" painting. If you go to my website, artbysafina.com.au, and you look up Seven Days of Creation, you'll be able to see this image. It was seven panels, one representing each day of creation, and I express in it the biblical story of creation from an Indigenous perspective.

The colours in that are the colours of land, the animals are native to Australia, the plants are from here, the symbols are our sacred symbols, our traditional symbols of people, or animal tracks. Even Creator, Saviour, and Spirit are adapted from the traditional symbol of person to three "U" prints joined to depict the trinity.

Through that painting, and through the process of pondering and painting, there was a dialogue between my Creator and myself. Well before it got released to the public, my wonderful wounded Healer met me in my questions, uncertainty, and wounds. And He said, "I have known

and loved this Land and its people from time immemorial. I have never abandoned them. I sit with them in the injustices. Jesus is for everybody, I came for my Aboriginal people, I came for my Torres Strait Islander people, I came for my really messy Australia who is confused in its story and identity. I am calling everyone back to who they are. They struggle to remember who their grandmother is, can't even remember who their country of origin is, can't remember the stories of their family, can't remember who they have the potential to be. But I know who they are and I am calling them back to themselves and to me."

Somehow, my art is a method for God to connect people to each other, themselves, their history, their identity, and to Creator. My art is utilized as a teaching tool for so many educators wanting to share Indigenous perspectives and highlight connections between our Christian foundations and the richness of the cultural values of the oldest living continuous culture of the world.

I feel like my art has been a gift of healing for me. And then, more so is bringing this truth to the Australian church, to the Australian people. So many churches have my art adorning their spaces. I am profoundly amazed that so many non-Indigenous people connect with my work ... if they are curious and willing to listen. There are many people who do not of course, it comes with the territory.

I've had art rejected, I've had stories rejected—but for those who have ears that can hear, and hear really deeply, for them there is a remarkable and magical gift of wholeness, freedom, courage, and community.

I often tell people that my best ears are actually my feet. I listen to the Spirit of the land through my feet. I take my shoes off, so that I can listen to the land knowing that the land speaks truth from the Spirit and knows the heartbeat of the Creator. So I listen to the land, I listen to my wonderful Creator. And I listen to fellow humanity, knowing that Jesus speaks in so many different ways, through so many different forms, and I can recognise His voice. And my hope is that others will recognise His powerful healing voice that harmonises with this land and its peoples and will have the courage to join us on the journey of deep justice, truth-telling, and love.

SS: I'd encourage those who are non-Indigenous Christians to consider what it might be like to step into the shoes of "the other" and not "overstep" the other. I could give you a long reel of ten points that you can do to help you become a wonderful holy executor of friendship to our Indigenous people. But I'm not going to do that here. Our Elders and leaders have been giving answers to those questions for decades. Our traditional owners have great wisdom. Our communities know what they need. There is no shortage of resources to learn and reflect on.

I would instead appeal to your posture and purpose. You can't have reconciliation without justice, truth, and humility. I would say be humble and be on a mission for seeking holy justice, to make things right, to not look for tokenistic reconciliation, but to look for restoration of the rights of our Indigenous peoples where we have the power to determine our own wellbeing and futures. From the very beginning, God's name was used against Himself and used to justify and defend a whole heap of horror and wrongdoing against creation and kin. If conviction is simply to placate white fragility it won't go well. We've got to go deeper as Christians and be the living sacrifice and example of God's justice, grace, and restoration. It's costly love for the sake of others.

SS: What I'm going to ask you to do is actually go into your quiet space and ask God to step in and lead you through the relationship and the journey to a right way with our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

We all need to do a whole heap of confessing to God first because He's the one that has been wronged first. Once this has happened, restoration of our relationships can take place fully.

I can ask you to pray. I can ask your community to get down on your knees. I can ask for confession, for humble friendship, for listening ears and open hearts. I can ask you to passionately seek justice, to use your skills in education to



"Seven Days of Creation" by Safina Stewart

involve your staff, classes, students, and families to engage authentically in these processes of listening to, learning from, and loving our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

I would ask you to listen to your Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Christian leaders, because unless you hear it from our voice first, it won't be authentic. One word of caution—make sure that your source is the people most affected by the intended outcome of your engagement. Go to the ones with the lived experience, the backing of their communities, and a track record of integrity, humility, and resilience.

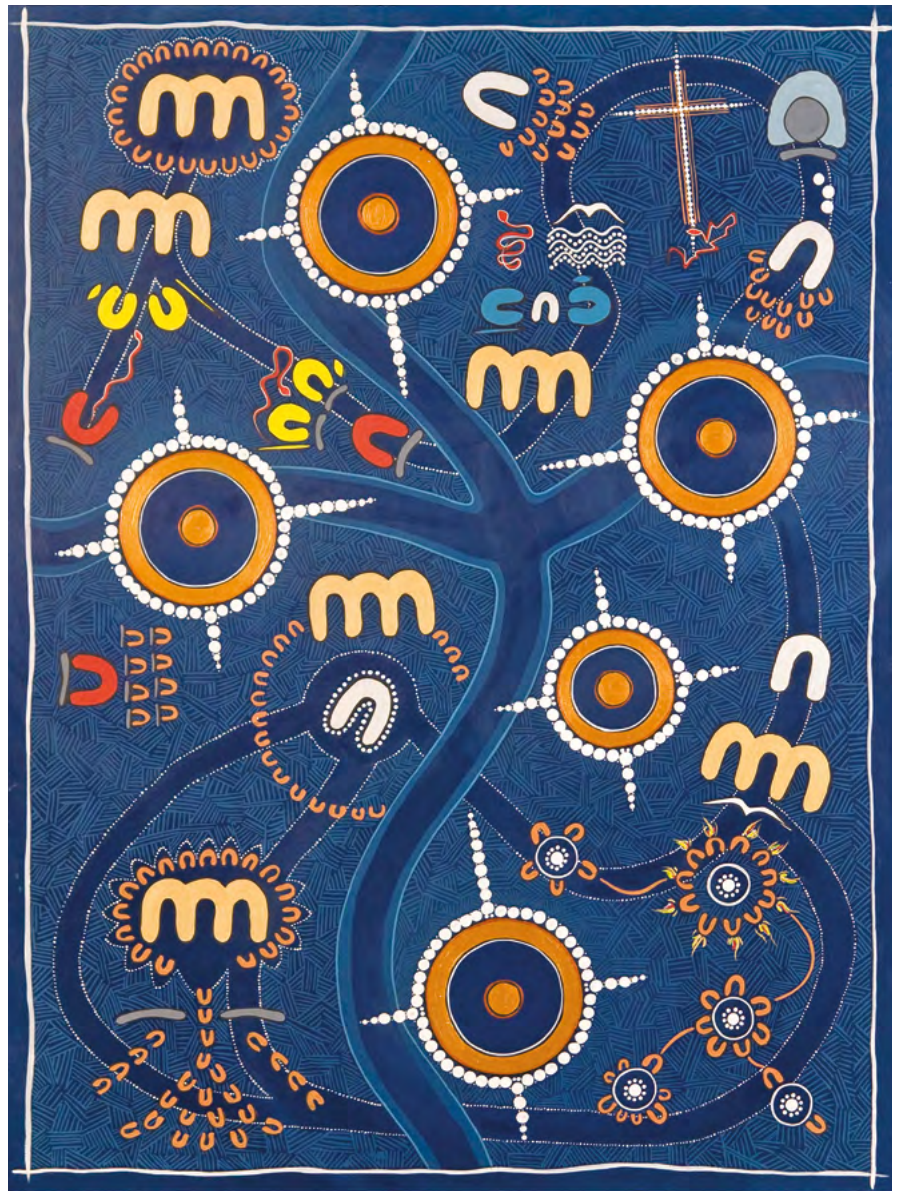
Doing the same with Indigenous people gives us that same dignity of voice. Listen to Indigenous theologians interpret the Bible. See how the Bible speaks of Australia: these lands, our history, and our current context. Listen to our Indigenous Christian leaders as we share with you how the Holy Spirit (the Spirit of that indwells the land, the water, and the sky of this place here) was already here tens of thousands of years ago, explaining so much to our old people, so that we could share God's wisdom with each other and with your peoples who are guests on our lands.

As well as living in harmony with each other, we need to live in harmony with all creation. We need to remember that our planet, and this continent in particular, is in dire straits. Instead of caring for it, we are killing it. One of the absolute mandates that our Creator gave us as He formed us from the land, as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, was to look after this fellow creation. He revealed that He would be checking always—He sees all we are doing. This was one task He has asked of us—to look after His creation, just as we look after His children.

TA: Can I invite you to pray for us, as a way of finishing?

SS: I would love that. Let's do it.

SS: Creator God, beautiful Saviour, Jesus, and Holy Spirit. I thank you for your sacredness. And I thank you for the sacredness of the spaces that we have here to walk on, to swim in,



"Propa Good News, Eh!" by Safina Stewart

to commune in. I thank you for all the people who have read this today, and deeply engaged. And I ask that you bless them. I ask for this Christian Education National community, that you would ignite in them a heart for justice, where truth would be their pillar and love their foundation—a love like a possum-skin cloak, embracing, unifying, and keeping them safe, warm, and focused.

I thank you for the testimony of people, the sharing of truth, and lived experience. I thank you for the

opportunity to share some of my story and journey. I ask that it would encourage and not lead into any sort of dismay. Instead, may it point people to a hope and a future of life and love and right relationship with our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and to all creation, that we would care for it as though it is a beautiful child.

May we nurture it as though it depends on us in the same way that we depend on it and on you. Thank you so much for your love, in Jesus' name. Amen.