When the Twin Towers in New York City were hit on September 11th, 2001, I was asleep in my bed in Melbourne. A third-generation New Yorker who did not relocate to Australia until I was 29 years old, I remember the feeling of utter desolation and panic I experienced when my husband shook me awake with news of the attack.

My panic went well beyond the immediate need to find out whether members of my family were still alive and uninjured. Even after I discovered that my own family and friends were alright, I remained anxious, unsettled, and distraught for months afterward. Given how far away I’d lived from New York for the previous 15 years, why should this be so?

One answer is that compounding the shock and sadness, fear and grief that many of us felt around the world - regardless of whether we had any personal connection with New York City or not - were my own very personal feelings of guilt about not being there when those towers went down. This may seem counter-intuitive: many friends and colleagues assumed I’d feel relieved that I lived so far away, unscathed in a personal sense by the trauma and terror that followed for New Yorkers in the wake of 9/11.
Yet most of us who live at a distance to the land of our origin know all too well that the opposite can be true. Our sense of belonging, of community cohesion, of feeling attached to a place and its people, to the landscape itself - including the dusty, metallic-smelling bitumen and pavement of New York City streets - remains a vital connection, forging a continuing link between our past and present many years and many miles after we have physically moved on from those early, formative times and places. Paradoxically, although an amazing, heart-warming number of people here in Australia - some of whom I knew only slightly - reached out to me because they knew I was from New York, I had never felt more alone and more of an outsider here in Melbourne than I did then.

At times of great collective trauma, the desire to feel connected, to stand shoulder to shoulder with those involved, to say ‘I was there’ as a form of solidarity, can be powerful, even overwhelming. Consequently, feelings of helplessness, and the sense that you have been treacherous by not being there with and for people in a time of great crisis or need, can be potent and long-lasting. This is but one of the hidden nuances of the complex business of how we respond to collective crisis and trauma, mediated by our cultural frames of reference, that remains largely unseen in both research and popular contexts, and it has direct bearing on today’s discussion around cultural resilience and culturally diverse responses to emergencies and crises like the recent Victorian bushfires.

Cultural resilience is a concept that originates in the research literature primarily around responses to the sustained trauma, suffering and will to survive of Indigenous communities in colonised territories like Canada, Australia and elsewhere. Cultural resilience refers to the way in which culture - a dynamic, interactive, adaptable set of beliefs, behaviours and reference points that binds people together in an understanding of how their world works, and how meaning is made by and within it - can sustain a collective group’s sense of identity and belonging in the face of trauma, grief and loss.
Not surprisingly, the rapid advance of globalisation, the steady rise of diaspora communities and human global flows, and the changes ushered in by intensifying modes of connectivity across time and space through new technologies have produced renewed interest in concepts and models of cultural resilience that move beyond the Indigenous populations and contexts in which this concept originally took shape. We are now more interested than ever in trying to understand what it is that makes some cultures, or cultural practices, more sustainable and enduring than others, and what factors we need to consider when thinking about how to strengthen and maximise the potential of diverse modes of cultural identity and practice to help us cope with crises and traumas, including events like the recent fires in Victoria.

I would like to emphasise this morning three things about cultural resilience among many that I think we can learn from the aftermath of the Victorian bushfires, and also look briefly at how the cultural diversity we have in Victoria and in Australia can be better harnessed in these contexts.

1: Empathy and connectedness - protective factors in models of cross-cultural resilience

Drawing on earlier research in this area, Arve Gunnestad in Norway has examined the role of protective factors in relation to cross-cultural models of cultural resilience. She has identified three domains of protective factors that help establish and maintain cultural resilience across a wide variety of cultural settings, including South Africa, New Zealand, Latin America and Scandinavia. In summary, these are:

1. **Network factors** - external resources and support through attachment to family, friends, neighbours, the local community
2. Abilities and skills factors - internal resources and support through innate qualities such as temperament, intellect, emotional stability, communication and cognitive skills

3. Existential factors - cultural and social resources and support through value systems, faith, and shared attitudes and understandings of the world developed in early or later life.

As Gunnestad notes, culture cuts across all ‘three main protective categories. Culture affects the way we form networks and the importance we assign to them. Culture decides what skills and activities that are appreciated.’ And culture is clearly ‘part of the third group of protective factors, since meaning, values and faith are vital expressions of culture’ (Gunnestad 2004).

When we think about cultural resilience, we are really talking about domains 1 and 3 - what Gunnestad calls network factors and existential factors. The second domain, ‘abilities and skills’, which focuses on the individual’s innate capacity for resilience, is basically the luck of the draw - some people are simply born with greater natural resilience and endurance than others. However, even without some of these innate qualities, the ability to strengthen resilience through networking and existential factors remains a key element in how well communities are able to ‘grow’ and sustain resilience collectively amongst their members.

Socially and culturally speaking, we are better equipped to be resilient in the face of trauma and crisis if we have strong attachments to at least one or more groups along the axis of family, friends, neighbours or our local community, and if we have strong value systems, which may but do not always include faith systems, that help us anchor our responses to crisis and trauma in a coherent understanding of our environment, its challenges and our capacity to respond and act meaningfully when crises arise. This means that social inclusion - the process of forming durable social networks and attachments on some level between all groups in a society, from the longest
established to the just-arrived - is a major indicator of the potential for cultural resilience in times of trauma and emergency.

One telling cultural response to the bushfires came from Sudanese humanitarian new arrivals in Melbourne. Chatting with friends in this community about a fortnight after the fires had passed, I heard many fascinating things about fire management systems in Sudan, where regular bushfires are frequent in some areas. But what really got my attention was the reference to a recent mass prayer meeting held for bushfire victims and families at a local Sudanese church. This community had decided to come together to hold a special meeting of prayer and reflection to support those directly affected by the fires. I was struck by the double effectiveness of this, resonating as it did both as an act of empathy or reaching out to the broader community, and also as an act of cultural reaffirmation for Sudanese people themselves, a 'reaching in', if you like, to draw sustenance from culturally specific practices and beliefs.

By using what for many in this group is the clear efficacy of community-based prayer and faith as a means to intervene in events around them, their action provided a point of connection and witness even though no one from the Sudanese community was, as far as I know, directly involved in or affected by the fires. Yet my friends made it clear that they were affected indirectly, and felt it was incumbent on them to do something to connect to the broader community with which they now have common cause, if not always and everywhere common history or experience. Although quite different from the more pragmatic outpouring of financial and material donations that so many people at home and abroad made in response to the bushfires, this was no less an outpouring of another kind - of good will, of generosity, of empathy and of the desire to contribute in a positive way toward the healing of collective trauma generated by Black Saturday and its terrible losses.

It is important to acknowledge the diverse forms of giving and of connectedness - both within and beyond a specific cultural horizon - that
this represents. Put simply, the best way for the Sudanese community to signal their attachment and networks within the broader community at this time was to activate their own specific value and faith systems - and we can see here the clear convergence of the two culturally determined protective factors that contribute to cultural resilience in Gunnestad’s model.

2: Virtual communities: the role of media in creating cultural resilience through ‘listening positions’

No one who listened to local ABC radio as the constant, heart-sinking updates on the advance of various fire-fronts rolled on, or who heard the infinitely patient and often sensitive coverage of victim and family stories broadcast in the days and weeks following the worst of the crisis, should be in any doubt about the social benefits of having a locally attuned national broadcaster at such a time. These broadcasts served not just as a literal life-line for some of those who were trying to work out whether to stay or to go. It also served as a virtual life-line for those of us tuned in, far from the centres of the fires, because it allowed us to stay connected emotionally and psychologically even though we weren’t physically ‘there’. It created the opportunity, even the imperative, to relate to and empathise with a terrible experience not very common in living memory except for those who experienced the bushfires of 1983 and, even more remotely, 1939. The constant stream of updates and information created what cultural studies researchers call a ‘listening position’ that allowed for imaginative identification by listeners with those who were on the ground - residents, fire crews, emergency services and the media themselves.

It is impossible to overestimate the importance of this kind of identification and its contribution to cultural resilience in the midst and aftermath of crises like Black Saturday. It allows those who are not in the thick of things to try to orient and understand the dimensions of what is happening to those around them - and to adjust their responses, resources and support for those in need much more rapidly as a result. The ‘listening position’
also offers a kind of ‘protective factor’ against the irrational yet insidious survivor guilt that can accompany such events, however grateful we may be that we have not personally sustained such losses and traumas. By being there in a listening sense, we open ourselves to the traumas of others as empathetic individuals who are bonded together in shared acts of witness and response.

Beyond this, however, we might think for a moment of those people whose English is limited, or who are used to other kinds or registers of public communication at such moments. Not everyone may be assumed to have the same level of access or responsiveness to what we take to be the ‘common knowledge’ of mainstream public communication channels in the official language of the nation, and we need to find ways in such times to ensure that everyone in the community - here for five generations or five weeks - has the opportunity to understand and participate as fully as possible in dealing with the crises and traumas that emerge from such situations. Cultural resilience is only as strong as its ability to be transmitted and reinforced across languages and generations, particularly in a diverse society like ours.

I know that there remain mixed feelings about the intrusive nature of some media reporting on the bushfires. Yet whatever one’s perspective on the nature and ethics of media coverage of Black Saturday’s events, a critical factor in the way that the best of such broadcasting promoted cultural resilience was through eliciting and disseminating the voices and stories of those who were affected, often in real time or close to it. We heard women and men on the radio who could barely speak because of the emotion they felt in recalling their own experiences and losses as a result of the fires. We waited for them to gather their emotions and their thoughts, we wept with them as they broke down in moments that bridged the domains of public and private, and we listened harder than we usually do as they detailed what these fires meant for them. It is in the public voicing of the stories of ordinary people, what some scholars call ‘history from below’ - the ‘thick’
descriptions, the sounds and textures of events told from the inside of someone’s experience - that can cumulatively strengthen a community’s capacity for cultural resilience.

Narrative and story-telling are basic to virtually every culture in all places and periods - they are the building blocks for the sustaining and transmitting of cultural memory and cultural knowledge, and they map capacity for the future by preserving and sometimes revising an understanding of the past. The importance of allowing people to tell their stories, to serve as witnesses to their own and other’s experiences through story and testimony, is well documented in the literature on cultural trauma and healing. Increasingly, we are also starting to understand the importance of providing mechanisms for those stories not only to be told, but to be heard and preserved, rather than treated as incidental or ephemeral expressions of trauma that can be hurried away once we have all ‘got back to normal’. Crises and traumas of the kind signified by Black Saturday change our definition of what ‘normal’ is. To understand these changes, to respond to them with insight and purpose, to adjust our horizons and to be resilient in the face of this requires that we listen, really listen, in order to negotiate the challenges that new and unanticipated kinds of ‘normal’ demand of us down the road.

In a culturally diverse society like ours, the challenge of providing a range of avenues for people from many different cultural backgrounds to speak of their experiences and have these heard at large means we must be creative and generous in how we conceptualise such a task. We have recent evidence of the cultural importance we place on telling and listening in contemporary Australia through the National Inquiry into the Stolen Generations, and the community ‘Sorry Books’ that sprang up in so many localities thereafter; the myriad ways of recording community responses to 9/11 in the US and elsewhere offered something similar. How well we have in fact heard these stories, and responded empathetically and with purpose to them, is a separate topic of discussion. The point I want to make here is the critical importance of opening the door for all kinds of responses to be
made and heard - however far we have yet to travel in acting on what we hear.

Perhaps we need to consider how we can make such opportunities a routine rather than special-purpose part of dealing with crises and emergencies that touch us collectively. The relationship between telling and listening and the protective cultural resilience factors this brings into play is profound, and we need to ensure that we strengthen that relationship in culturally inclusive and innovative ways to achieve the breadth and depth of responsiveness we are capable of as a culturally diverse society knitted together in times of crisis and challenge.

3: Two-way traffic: sharing the spaces of cultural memory through of remembering and documentation

In this regard, perhaps the most important resource we have in relation to cultural resilience is the art of remembering, and of sharing our memories in ways that can be transmitted both vertically - across generations - and horizontally - across cultures. It is often said that people and cultures who are resilient demonstrate a greater capacity to ‘move forward’ by being clearly focused on the horizon of the future, on what lies around the corner and just out of sight. I think this is true, but I don’t think it’s the whole story. A truly resilient culture, like a truly resilient individual, has the capacity and the courage to look backward as well as forward; to face the past, its lessons, gaps and shortcomings, and to build on it in responding to present and future concerns and demands.

The bushfires that we experienced this summer in Victoria already belong to the foreign country of the past, temporally speaking, although they remain alive and present for those who continue to experience and deal with the traumas they initiated for individuals, families, communities and services on the ground at the time. What kinds of collective cultural remembering are required in light of these events, and how can we avoid losing the wealth of
rich and diverse knowledge and lessons - however terrible or unwelcome such lessons may be - that follows in their wake?

One proposal addressing this is the idea for a Victorian bushfire museum and research centre. As Gary Tippet wrote recently in *The Sunday Age*, ‘If Victoria is to have a memorial to the 173 people who died on Black Saturday – and the hundreds killed in other bushfires – we need to let the experience of fires past guide us to an understanding for the future in concrete terms. Why not a bushfire museum and centre for bushfire research?’

Such a museum and centre might contribute greatly to cultural resilience through linking diverse communities across the state, the nation and internationally in a greater understanding and appreciation of how a series of major bushfires that survive in living memory have influenced and affected our sense of who we are, and of our capacities and our limitations in the shared spaces we call home. It might promote discussion and debate about how such events are to be remembered - and in the course of doing so, provide a means of thinking through how we can address the complexities of cultural diversity that define the ways in which we live, and help each other live, to our fullest potential. It could encompass culturally diverse and even divergent perspectives on events that affect us all - whether we acknowledge this or not. And it could allow for the preservation and recording of the many voices and responses that, taken together, signal our willingness to find common cause, to be with each other in times of need, to retain our pasts and share our presents - diverse and differently textured as these are - in order to enrich our understanding of who we are and who we can be.

The three major Victorian bushfires of 1939, 1983 and 2009 took place in what are arguably three different historical and cultural moments of Australian life. An analysis of what has changed and what has endured culturally across these events could tell us a great deal about how we are travelling as a dynamic society, and how we might harness such knowledge
for the future. If I am right in thinking that an important feature of cultural resilience is the capacity to look back as well as ahead, across cultures as well as within them in thinking about how to meet the future, then such a centre could become a vital means of promoting enhanced cultural resilience for future generations.

Add to this the real opportunity to mobilise the wide array of culturally diverse communities we have in Victoria in order to gather information, resources and data on cross-cultural responses to and understandings of bushfires and fire emergencies more generally to better inform policy and preparedness for future crises and disasters, and we can begin to see how powerful such an inclusive response to a pressing set of environmental and social challenges might be. Yet if in pursuing such forms of remembering and learning we fail to heed the knowledge, social capital and cultural reference points that people from many different backgrounds can bring to all aspects of how we deal with crisis, trauma and emergency, we lose the opportunity to know ourselves fully across the diversity spectrum of our shared community spaces. The question we need to ask ourselves is whether we can afford to forgo or ignore such knowledge and the protective factors it can offer for a model of sustainable cross-cultural resilience, one that is embraced by and open to all.

4. Cross-cultural resilience and the retreat of community connectedness

When I finally reached my elderly father at home after the planes flew into the towers on September 11th, the first thing I said to Dad was how terrible this must be for him as a life-long New Yorker. His response surprised me, and it also broke my heart. Well into his 90s by then and already suffering some dementia, he said very philosophically that yes, it was terrible, but that was the way the world was going. In any case, he went on to say, ‘That was downtown, and I live uptown’. What broke my heart was the evidence this offered of his own diminished sense of connection with his place and people and time. It made me reflect on the social costs of the frailty and vulnerability that many elderly people experience as their daily
world diminishes and shrinks, so that their own ‘protective factors’ in relation to cultural resilience decrease accordingly and their connectedness to the broader community, and even to the idea of the broader community, retreats. This experience is not so different for those who are disengaged from or marginalised in the general community because the cultural capital of their diversity is not recognised or is under-valued. It reminds us that we need to ensure that all those in our communities - the vulnerable and the marginalised as well as the robust and well-established - are enabled to actively engage in building the kinds of cross-cultural resilience that will help us get through the long dark night of future crises together, and as best we can.

References
