



February 2020 Green shoots bring healing and hope

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Image: Photographer Dale Brueggemann, Flickr

**As Ash Wednesday approaches, may we take a moment to contemplate our intimate connectedness to all of creation, to all of humanity and to the land, writes Monica Dutton.**

### **By Monica Dutton**

As you wind your way down the Brown Mountain on the far south coast of New South Wales, the scenery is breathtaking. Tall, dense stands of old-growth trees, pristine waterfalls cascading over rocky outcrops, hairpin bends and sheer drops into deep gullies below. After coming off the volcanic plains of the Monaro along the Snowy Mountains Highway towards the coast, the cool, fern-strewn rainforest of the Great Dividing Range is a welcome breath of freshness and beauty.

Stopping halfway down the mountain at the Fred Piper Lookout has been a longstanding tradition in our family. From there, a clearing opens to reveal an expansive view of the spectacular valley below. Bush covered ridges and rolling hills, rivers babbling through lush dairy country; cattle and horses grazing contentedly; and in the distance, minuscule farmhouses and outbuildings along the winding road leading into Bemboka.

This tiny 'village in the valley' holds a special place in our hearts. There is a real sense of returning home. My mother was born and grew up here. Many wonderful childhood holidays were spent in and around Bemboka with grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins educating us 'city kids' in the ways of milking, shearing, horse riding, rabbit-trapping, cow-pat throwing, cooling off in the shallow, sandy river crossings, and most importantly – avoiding snakes!

Tank water, wood-fire stoves, freshly laid eggs and feeding poddy calves, all presented such a different way of life for us. The neat rows of delicious home-made jams, chutneys, pickles and preserved fruits in the pantry belied the amount of work involved in stocking up on provisions in a pre-supermarket era. Up with the sun, the days were long and very active; while the evenings were spent playing cards, learning to knit, and listening to long-running serials on the wireless as the burning logs popped and crackled gently in the fireplace.

Those glowing embers I remember so well have this year transformed into the most devastating bushfire season on record. The view from Fred Piper is now completely obliterated. Like most of the south coast of New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and other parts of our country,

Bemboka has been decimated by devastating bushfires. Through the smoky haze from the lookout, the ridges and rolling hills are now scorched and burnt; the watercourses have been muddied by ash; cattle, horses and wildlife lie dead in their tracks, and scores of houses and outbuildings have been razed to the ground.

During the height of the New Year's Eve fires, children and families evacuated to safety, while the men banded together to defend each other's stock and property. Seared into the town's collective memory is the heart-stopping anxiety of waiting to see which way the firestorm would rage; whether the latest wind change would morph the fire-front into friend or foe; and whose property would be randomly selected for destruction while others were spared. This year has been a particularly difficult one for Bemboka. While these are strong, resilient people, they are still reeling from the impact of fires which ravaged their tiny community less than 12 months ago.

These extreme conditions are as unprecedented as they are unpredictable. They are beyond living memory, and take a huge toll on individuals, families and communities – financially, physically, mentally and emotionally. An ABC News report from Bemboka in January revealed the once-thriving township and its people to be fragile, vulnerable and losing hope. Even drinking water now needs to be trucked in. So much of people's lives has been reduced to a fine grey-white powdery dust, which scatters and disappears at the whim of the whirling wind.

We are living in a time of ashes.

Accounts from those who experienced the full onslaught of the fires are of biblical proportions. Armageddon, apocalyptic, cataclysmic. So many recent devastating events unleashed across the globe involving the four elements of nature – earth, air, fire and water – demonstrate that we are powerless in the face of these phenomena.

While we may choose to believe we control the world; and whatever personal views we might hold on climate change, fuel reduction, back burning, drought relief, and the politics of it all; these four natural elements contrive to remind us of our place on the planet.

Rebuilding will be slow and painful. Losses to property, stock, machinery and business take years to recover. Losses of life, bushland, habitat and over a billion native animals are incalculable. Relentless media coverage of volunteer firefighters sacrificing all for their communities; heart-wrenching interviews with families sifting through the remnants of their lives; and achingly sad images of toddlers being presented with medals for bravery at funerals honouring their heroic fathers, are indelibly etched into our national psyche.

This time of ashes we are living in touches us all.

The choking smoke, ash and dust shrouding our cities has now circumnavigated the globe and is a constant reminder of the devastation in our regional areas. Let us not forget them when the smoke has cleared, and the ashes and dust have disappeared.

Ashes and dust. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. This time of fires followed by floods is a stark reminder of our own transience, and the transient nature of all creation. As Ash Wednesday approaches, may we take a moment to contemplate our intimate connectedness to all of creation, to all of humanity and to the land – and in particular, what this connectedness calls from us, and calls us to.

Our place at this time is to stand with, for and beside our sisters and brothers across the country. We weep with them in their loss, we mourn with them in their grief, we support them in their long and difficult road to recovery.

As tiny green shoots eventually begin to reappear from this time of ashes, may the Easter message of rising from the darkness ultimately bring healing and hope to all those suffering the ongoing effects of our national tragedy.

As a postscript to this story, Bemboka has suffered yet another blow. The much-anticipated rains that have wreaked havoc up and down the east coast of Australia in recent weeks have visited

further damage upon this exhausted little town. Torrential rains have caused a landslide on the Brown Mountain, sending two massive boulders crashing on to the roadway below, closing the Snowy Mountains Highway in both directions just west of Bemboka. The impact on the community is immediate and crushing. Supplies are delayed and increasingly costly, and the lifeblood of passing trade disappears completely.

While there have been joyous scenes as demountable shops roll into Mogo, tourists return to scarred regional districts, and the Fire Fight Australia fundraising concert in Sydney inspires hope, the people of Bemboka are left wondering when their time will come...

## Monica Dutton



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