

## **He Haerenga Whakapapa: Tracing the footsteps of my tūpuna to find the origins of our collective wounding**

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Over the last few months, I have been having conversations with my whānau (family), trying to understand more about our tūpuna (ancestors) – who they were, how they lived, and what shaped their realities. Recent conversations have focused predominantly on my nan and whether she could speak Te Reo Māori. While my uncles and aunties are adamant that she could not speak Te Reo Māori, my cousins remember differently, having heard her speaking Te Reo Māori across various periods of their lives. When I brought up these memories to my uncles and aunties I was met with a firm rejection of the authenticity of my memories. Their response is that those memories could not be real, because they themselves did not hear Nan, *their mum*, speak it. In seeing their reactions, numerous questions ran through my mind. What was so hard to believe about Nan being able to speak Te Reo Māori? Why could these memories not be true? And why were they so adamant in their rejection of these memories? In reflecting more deeply on these questions, I realised that I only had to look at my own journey over the last few years to begin to answer them.

My PhD focuses on uncovering the origins of trauma in my whakapapa (ancestry). While the journey so far has been a healing one overall, it has also been filled with confrontations in identity and deep explorations into understanding not only my own whakapapa, but the essence of what whakapapa is. Whakapapa, as I have come to understand it, not only encompasses tūpuna (ancestors) but also recognises that everything in the universe has an origin – every emotion, thought, word, worldview, object, mineral, place, and person. It recognises the relationship between all things – that everything within the universe is tied together in some way, shape, or form. It also recognises human beings are comprised

of numerous layers, physically and spiritually – layers that have been inherited from the generations that have come before (Mahuika, 2019; Roberts, 2013). Layers that comprise both the beautiful and the ugly.

In my own reality, in the exploration of my own layered self, it is the ugly, the trauma, that has held my attention over the last few years. My childhood is perhaps best described as an era marked by sorrow and tears. I grew up in a household where fighting was the standard state of existence. Sundays were the worst days. All morning there would be barbs being shot throughout the house. By the time lunch came around the storm had arrived, an all-out war had been waged, and I was the one that ended up getting caught in the middle. While these experiences were painful, I do recognise that they played a vital role in influencing my current lived reality. As I began delving into these experiences to better understand why they occurred, I found that my story and my experiences were part of a larger story of trauma shared across the generations of my whānau.

Intergenerational trauma is the term that I now use to understand the *why* of my childhood reality. This collective “wounding to the body/mind/soul/spirit” (Atkinson, 2002, p.52) means my experiences and my feelings were also experienced by my parents. This shared wounding continues further back, connecting to the generations that experienced the beginning of colonisation (Reid et al., 2014). In the process of gathering these intergenerational stories about my whānau, I came to realise that not only do I not know the full layers of my own self, but I also do not know the essence of who my parents are. Nor do I know the essence of my grandparents or any of my tūpuna from previous generations. What were their lives like? What sort of reality did they grow up in? What are their layered selves made of? In not knowing these layers, not knowing the full essence of who they are, what does that say about me? Do I truly and fully know myself?

Thinking about my conversations with my aunts and uncles, I wonder if these same questions were running through their heads as I revealed information that did not fit into their understanding of their lived reality. For myself, I have had a few years to adjust to and become familiar with the discomfort that comes with having your reality challenged and changed. Uncovering these hidden stories and memories of our whānau means that I am better understanding what I have inherited – both the trauma and the beauty – and how these inheritances have been transmitted to me through the generations. The stories about Nan being able to speak Te Reo Māori, but not speaking it in front of her children, is another piece of the puzzle helping me understand my own struggles with my identity as Māori. My nan not only grew up during the period where you were beaten at school for speaking Te Reo Māori, but also had her name changed by her teachers because they did not like the sound of her Māori name and having a Pākehā name meant better prospects for the future. In this sense, being Māori and all that is associated with being Māori was seen as a detriment, as a barrier to succeeding in a Pākehā world. These ideas are ones that I know well as they are ones that I grew up hearing day in and day out. I remember as a child being told that while a Pākehā may get 100 percent on a test, I would have to get at least 120 percent to even be considered as somewhat of an equal. That being Māori automatically negatively impacted my chances of succeeding in the world. While I now know better, know that these ideas and beliefs were a consequence of colonising processes and assimilation policies (Reid et al., 2014), they still impact the way that I see myself and my worth. These inherited narratives have become a part of my layered self – another part to be explored, unpacked, and healed.

These conversations have become an important waypoint in my PhD journey – an opportunity to stop and reflect on what has happened so far and a reminder that this journey is an interconnected one. That I will be taking my whānau and tūpuna along with me, and it is their stories, journeys, and lived realities that I will be compiling. It was also a reminder of

how far I have come – of the layers that I have had the courage to peel back and take a deeper look into, even while knowing that what I will find will likely cause me pain and discomfort. It is a reminder of the need to heal the past so that the same sufferings do not affect the future. So that each generation that comes after me will have a lighter load to carry until one day that load is no more.

## References

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