

He kākano ahau – seeding peaceful futures

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The title of my presentation is a reference to the following well known whakataukī: *E kore au e ngaro, he kākano i ruia mai i Rangīātea. I will never be lost, for I am a seed sown in Rangīātea.* It is an undeniably uplifting whakataukī. But why does it resonate so strongly? For many of us, it is a form of reassurance, an important reminder that in spite of our disconnection and dislocation, we belong somewhere, we are part of a broader whakapapa. So how did we get here? How did we get to this point that we must be reminded of our interconnectedness, and of our whakapapa, of who we are?

As colonisation gained momentum in New Zealand, the imperative to assert colonial systems, structures and understandings became more pressing (Love, 2002). At the end of the nineteenth century, Māori traditional and cultural practices became the target of increased regulation (Williams, 2001). This included whāngai, a common practice where children were raised by those other than biological parents for a range of reasons such as the intergenerational transmission of knowledge, the cementing of relationships between whānau, hapū and iwi, the provision of respite to primary caregivers and enabling infertile couples to become parents (Ngā Ringa Rauhi, forthcoming). However, officials saw no value in this practice, maintaining that it led children to be brought up in conditions of disease, ignorance and poverty (Williams, 2001). Legal adoption was instead favoured; the Adoption Act 1955 introduced closed adoption, and simultaneously prohibited whāngai.

Approximately 100,000 adoption orders have been granted under the Adoption Act, including an unknown number of Māori children who were removed from their whānau and communities, their birth relationships permanently severed, their birth identities erased, often adopted by, and raised as non-Māori (Else, 1991; Ahuriri-Driscoll et al., 2022). There are clear impacts on whānau of the removal of children through adoption and this also occurred in the case of tamariki removed to state and faith-based care. As Child Welfare Officers expanded into rural districts from the late 1920s, and Māori began to move into cities, whānau were increasingly scrutinised and found by the State to be lacking. Some welfare officers held the view that children should be taken from their parents until they could “*prove they were fit to look after them*” (Labrum, 2002, p. 170). This sometimes occurred for the most trivial of reasons, such as truanting or shoplifting. Māori children and adolescents were much more likely to be channelled into the courts for minor misdemeanours, and thereafter more likely to be institutionalised, viewed by magistrates as better off there than with their own whānau (Savage et al., 2021). What is now known, reinforced by the work of the Royal Commission, is that once children were admitted to institutions or other care, they were highly likely to be abused, the effects of this trauma compounding that resulting from their removal.

An up-lifted colonised being – ambivalent and forced identities

Tamariki removed or uplifted from their whānau, hapū and iwi via adoption or admission to state and faith-based care had/have a distinct lived experience of colonisation. Our removal and how this was facilitated, re-positioned us, and not necessarily upwards as was espoused. Key attachment relationships were disrupted, with the ingrained feelings of rejection and abandonment, and resulting loss of trust in the world. We were placed with non-kin, and for some, with adults and others who administered abuse. Knowledge of whakapapa, that which is the very essence of being-Māori, was lost and for some this will never be known. The cultural disconnection that this generates is deeply felt, as a black hole, an abyss, a state of rootlessness, often reinforced in terms of judgements and microaggressions by other Māori (Ahuriri-Driscoll, 2020).

For adoptees, there is often a sense of being profoundly different that is denied through the legal fiction of adoption; deemed ‘as if biological’ children to our adoptive parents, who we are as bio-genealogical beings was rendered unimportant. The combination of racialisation and criticism for lacking cultural ‘authenticity’ can lead to a degree of ambivalence in one’s identification as Māori – with some rejecting a pan-Māori ethnic identity while embracing whānau membership and/or an ancestry-based naturalistic spirituality (Ahuriri-Driscoll, 2020; Ahuriri-Driscoll & Blake, 2024).

In the case of admission to state/faith-based care, children did not necessarily lose their legal/birth identities, but many were made State wards, also disconnected from whakapapa. The differentness of survivors’ families saw them targeted for removal to care/custody – not assimilated, but rather marginalised and stigmatised in the most abhorrent ways. Survivors found themselves at the margins of both ‘mainstream’ as well as Māori society – neglect and harmful treatment in care impacting their access to social determinants such as education and employment, for some their experiences forming a pipeline to prison. The identities they then live with are cast upon them rather than having been formed by them (McIntosh, 2005, p. 49) *(These are broad distinctions between adoption and state/faith-based care. For a number of survivors their experience was of both – abuse in the context of adoptive families, or adoption and then admission to care. Importantly, under the Royal Commission scope, adopted people are also survivors.)*

I’ve taken the time to unpack these experiences and the consequences in terms of being and identity because unless we understand what and how harms have been experienced, we don’t know what is needed for the purposes of healing. And moreover, being seen, heard and understood on and in your own terms is a critical first step. Seeing these consequences in a broader frame is part of de-pathologising survivors – re-locating the pathology in what happened to us instead.

Te hokinga mai ki Rangiātea

The kākano, the seed, is an important analogy for who we are, and our pathways forward. Like the seed, whether known to us or not, we always embody our whakapapa, it is within us – the taonga tuku iho that we have inherited from our tīpuna, our genetic blueprint can be realised. Within the seed is the potential for growth, beauty and fruit. Within people are the regenerative powers or capacities for healing, our strengths that may be harnessed, with external support and the right conditions to enable our flourishing.

Followers of te reo and Māori philosophy will recognise the synergies in the term rongo in relation to this kōrero. Rongo is both a noun and a verb – on the one hand, the name for the state and atua of peace (also called Rongo-Hīrea, Rongo-marae-roa and Rongo-mā-tāne), and on the other, to listen, feel, and intuit. The deep perceptiveness of whakarongo in its fullest sense requires a state of peacefulness, calm and serenity. These skills and states are at the heart of both ‘hohou te rongo’, the conflict resolution processes that bring about healing and collective peace, and rongoā, traditional healing practice. These practices will be instrumental for survivor healing journeys going forward.

Hohou te rongo – the issue

Hohou te rongo aims to restore mana through re-balancing and repairing relationships that have been diminished by a violation. Questions to address in the process include: What is the reality? What is the truth? (pono) How and why did it happen? (Te Tāhū Hauora Health Quality & Safety Commission, 2023).

Over the past six years, the Royal Commission, as a mechanism for truth-seeking and truth-telling, has been engaged in answering these questions around the issue. Survivors have been able to provide testimony of the harms they have endured, institutional representatives have testified to their institutions’ role in perpetrating abuse, and expert witnesses have submitted historical, contextual and other evidence.

The Royal Commission final report *Whanaketia – Through Pain and Trauma, from Darkness to Light*, was tabled in Parliament in July and the response by members of parliament was astounding. Senior politicians demonstrated their engagement with the Commission findings, in some cases admitting their failings as part of previous administrations and professing their deep regret. The Prime Minister addressed survivors directly, stating that we are seen, heard and believed, and there would be action to put things right. These commitments are in the public record.

But we are not yet in Te Whare o Rongo – at this early stage in the process we are at the marae ātea, the domain of Tūmatauenga, the atua of courage and conflict. The tūkino and mamae must still be recounted and accounted for. November 12 marks the next step in that process, the date of the Crown’s public apology to survivors. The importance of this cannot be understated; building on the Royal Commission report, it

will introduce survivors' experiences into the broader societal consciousness so that prevailing narratives may be confronted and rethought, a critical step in restoring the reputation and mana of survivors in the eyes of the public.

According to philosopher and ethicist Janna Thompson (2008, p. 42), *“an official apology is supposed to constitute a watershed in the history of relations between a government and a group of wronged individuals. It is supposed to separate a past of injustice and indifference into a future of just dealings and respect.”* Something must change post-apology, there must be a shift. The apology must lay a foundation of truth, openness and genuine commitment to change, as survivors embark on the next stages of redress, currently under development.

Hohou te rongō – reciprocity and resolution

What is right? (tika) What is compassionate? (aroha) How can we restore diminished mana and tapu (utu)? What will it look and feel like to be free of this harm from now on (whakawātea)? (Te Tāhū Hauora Health Quality & Safety Commission, 2023).

Addressing these questions requires a different approach, and on the basis of the Royal Commission recommendations, survivor-led engagement. To this end, in 2023 a group comprised primarily of survivors was established to undertake the high-level design of redress. The resulting report, subject to Cabinet decision, will inform a detailed design phase, with implementation planned for 2025.

In this mahi we were asked to consider the principles and underpinnings of an independent redress system, how redress ought to look and feel for survivors, and provide feedback on monetary payment and personal apology frameworks. To this work we each brought our own lived experiences as survivors as well as analyses born from our professional experiences and insights, and advocacy.

Our overarching vision was that of ‘Pūtahi te mauri, he waiora e - connected we find vitality’. This vision recognises mauri and wairua as two fundamental elements of life that, in the case of survivors, have been significantly impacted by tūkino. Redress must support survivors to restore and heal so that they may move towards optimal states of wellbeing, mauri ora and wai ora.

Pūtahi means to converge or come together, and pūtahi te mauri means that through connectedness and collective support, all parts of the individual, the whānau, or community are whole and thriving. This can involve survivors healing themselves to move forward and/or connecting with whānau or communities to strengthen each other. Survivors get to decide what they need, and what elements of redress – personal apology, monetary payments and/or support services – they wish to engage with.

A question we repeatedly asked ourselves and each other was where and what is our Hawaiki, our Rangīātea, what does that look like? That will differ for every survivor. In the

decades-long wait for redress, many survivors have already embarked on their own healing pathways, many are now engaged in supporting others, and working for systems change. This in no way negates or diminishes the need for Crown-funded redress but underscores the point that redress will need to be flexible and responsive to a range of needs, it will need to meet survivors where they are. So, apology and redress are not end-points in themselves, they are way-points toward or back to Rangīātea, a state or space free of obstruction, where our potential may be realised unhindered.

Psychology taking action for survivor healing

Redress for survivors entails a number of workforce implications; psychologists and those from the broader mental health field will have an important role to play, but there are unique competencies and understandings required.

Adoption-competence: It is important that therapists working with adopted people have a trauma lens and understand the lifelong impacts of relinquishment in infancy—the grief, loss and low self-worth, but also the role that societal narratives have played in denying this experience and the complexities that this presents for adoptee identities. Familiarity with adoption microaggressions (Baden, 2016; Garber, 2014) is important to understand how these narratives can surface in subtle and often unintentional slights and invalidations, even in therapeutic interactions.

Locally grounded trauma-informed care: Working from a trauma-informed base will be a critical attribute for those working with survivors in redress, and this is better understood and practised than adoption-competence. This does, however, need to be specific to context, and so all of those working with survivors ought to be familiar with the scale and magnitude of abuse in care in state and faith-based settings as it has happened in Aotearoa New Zealand. Similarly to anti-racism and cultural safety work, a structural lens must shift us beyond a view of abusive acts committed by individual perpetrators, to comprehension of its systemic nature, enabled and maintained in and through our institutions. The Whanaketia report should be compulsory reading, and abuse in care part of health professional training more broadly.

Recognition of the nuances for Māori survivors: although there are commonalities between Māori impacted by colonisation and coloniality generally, there are additional layers to the experiences of Māori survivors. The dynamics of assimilation and marginalisation will play out differently for different cohorts of survivors, and Māori survivors may as a result have tenuous connections to their whānau, hapū and iwi. While it is a truism that our culture is medicine, and connection/re-connection is the ultimate rongoā, this comes with additional sensitivities for survivors. The healing many of us seek is not only for the hurts we experienced in te ao Pākehā, but for the sense of abandonment by our own.

Adoption of the principles of hohou te rongo and rongoā Māori: Māori are disproportionately represented among the survivor community, which has shaped our approach toward and design of redress. However, we are confident that tikanga grounded in and responsive to survivor realities can serve Māori and non-Māori alike. Kaupapa Māori organisations are a step ahead in being grounded in such tikanga and mātauranga Māori, but this must be matched with appreciation of unique survivor realities.

Rethinking equality: Finally, this is less a recommendation for psychology and more for our legislators and policymakers - the history of abuse in care demonstrates powerfully that denying people their culture and their being in the name of equality does not work, particularly while inequality, prejudice and discrimination persist.

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