

Ko taau kete, ko taaku – our baskets of belonging

Na Piripi Whaanga

The grass-fresh taste of farm cream in an Agee jar and the phrase, “My hairy toe” are two sharp memories of my childhood. And the connection is that my Dad taught Maori language, to adults at night classes.

I remember Dad and I sharing the drive to Taumutu, just outside of Christchurch - just me without my three brothers. I guess Dad could have taken only us older ones, but I think Dad wanted to make each of us feel special. I was about seven or eight at this time. There was the smell of the car-leather seats and a lingering strong smokey smell and no sounds, as we settled into the silence. If we talked, it was Dad’s deep voice that wrapped me in.

After a long drive, we arrived at an old school room scattered with desks and bare light bulbs. Moths flapped around the bulbs, coming through the open windows. No-one noticed I was terrified of all flying insects – especially at night.

If I had forgotten to go to the toilet at home, the school had one but really scary. It smelled and the hole under the lid was deep and dark. And of course spider webs were everywhere.

I don’t remember how long the classes were but I do recall I couldn’t understand a word, nor read the textbooks that had stick figures in them.

But there was lots of laughter and other children I could play with outside and that’s where the cream memory appears. This farming community gave Dad an Agee jar full of the stuff as a koha each week and I found it went great on the Weetbix when we got home around midnight. There we were, just me and Dad.

As for the memory of “My hairy toe” - it was a mispronounced phrase that contributed to the general laughter. Dad told me later, it should have sounded like “Mear- high-ery tar-oo-a,” which means ‘let’s go.’

This was part of the fun and play of Dad’s night-classes, because we boys got to hear the Maori language spoken as Dad corrected the lessons at the kitchen table. But my grounding in the language and culture grew from the Maori ‘culture’ clubs he established so that his adult students could use the language in action songs. Of course his family was expected to be backup, which meant Dad bought a guitar and my older brother learned to play. Later I graduated from the ranks of warriors, to take over guitar-playing.

As a teen, I asked Dad why he never taught us children the Maori language. Dad said the adult students he taught had chosen to learn but if he had taught us from babies, we would have had no choice. It didn’t make much sense to me then but as I grew up, I learned it was a generational thing and that Maori were encouraged to abandon their culture and become like the Pakeha. Dad was not a success at being pakeha. He had learned all the trappings of things, like ballroom dancing, social etiquette and English language usage from his Dad - whom I never met. Grandad was said to be a real gentleman. I’ve got photos of him on the Nuhaka farm, milking the cows dressed in matching waistcoat and suit pants.

Dad never lost those Nuhaka roots - his belonging in the land. He knew his favourite swimming spots and the sheep trails on the farm hills where he rode his draft horse. We boys just loved hearing about the big strides his horse made, heading straight up the hills, rather than having to zig zag like the smaller horses. Dad would also talk about sitting on the back-door steps of the family home and looking down the valley, to a tall hill called Moumoukai.

This sense of belonging seemed to make him comfortable wherever he found himself. That place was Taita, a train-station in the Lower Hutt valley near Wellington, where we boys grew up. As children, Dad’s stories came from a world we knew nothing about. Maori was not a word Dad used often. I heard ‘Irish,’ as a more real word. I knew that Nana, living just around the corner, was Irish, as were the Presentation Sisters at Saint Michael’s school and the parish priest. I believe

the story that they had come from Ireland as teenagers to save our Kiwi children's souls. Part of the salvation was also teaching us Irish dancing and poetry.

So Dad's childhood Maori world was somewhere else when I was growing up. But not quite.

You see he was a sort-of 'undercover agent' in our pale Lower Hutt suburb. By day he travelled to the capital, Wellington, as did all the other dads. My Dad worked for the Department of Maori Affairs as an interpreter in the Maori Land Court. And at night there were those Maori language night classes.

After I left school, I read that Dad was part of a 1950's Maori generation who moved from the country into the cities to find work. That's because through the process of colonisation, they had 'lost' their own tribal land. The Pakeha, they 'found' in the cities had little knowledge or time for Maori culture, so most of Dad's generation chose not to pass on this culture to their children. They saw it as a block to 'getting on.' They wanted a better future for the next generation, which meant adopting Pakeha ways and dropping Maori customs. That's why Dad never spoke Maori language to us in the home as we were growing up.

Dad learned about belonging 'in his bones,' through growing up with his tribal land of Kahungunu ki te Mahia. This belonging was not just something he felt in his body, but also a knowing where his tupuna had lit their fires, dived for kaimoana and loved fiercely. As well, it was learning as a youngster about the do's and don'ts that kept things in their place and the community ticking over.

The hill of Moumoukai was one such 'belonging.' Here Dad's ancestor, Rakaipaaka, kept a stronghold to shelter the tribe in times of war. It is said that sometimes looking up at the hill, you can see the glistening of a spring that watered the gardens there. (I have seen this glistening). This food made it possible for the iwi of Rakaipaaka to hold out indefinitely against besiegers and even to throw food down at the attackers in contempt. This is the meaning of moumoukai, 'a waste of food.'

And so parts of the landscape of Aotearoa, of New Zealand, are intimate locator beacons for those

who know the tribal stories and choose to carry the mana of that larger picture.

I now understand a bit of the belonging that Dad had, because I know where I belong in the story. Dad and Mum established firm roots for the family. Mum's 'Irish' world was transplanted to New Zealand through the Catholic religion and surrounded us like a korowai, a big fluffy cloak. Dad's Maori world was more subtle but was more organically woven into my childhood, because even though New Zealand History and Maori culture were not taught in my time at school, I breathed it in through my whanau as *my* Maori learning. I also felt and absorbed the passion of the Maori and Pakeha grown-ups for our Maori culture club. I thought everyone had this fun in their life and so I learned to be culturally inclusive, as my Mum and Dad were.

On leaving school, I trained as a journalist, where I learned that everyone has a 'story' in them. The skill is to help them 'tell it.' In 1981, after ten years working for newspapers and radio stations, I went to work for the Department of Maori Affairs as the editor of Tu Tangata magazine. Dad was still working for the Department then. My cultural 'baptism' in Maori politics came as part of the 1980's Maori language struggle, where I helped establish Iwi radio stations and Maori TV and the first Maori news agency, Mana Maori Media.

Now that's a different belonging to Dad's rural roots, as part of my generation's growing up has been in an urban 'tribal land' that both locates and dis-locates me. By this, I mean I've been able to put down roots in most of the places I've lived, but am still drawn to the Maori world and Te Mahia as an ancestral homeland. I don't choose to live there as there's no work, just like Dad's generation found.

Instead I visit and write moteatea about 'home' with my cousins, as tribal songs to mark our adult learning. One such visit will be this Christmas, when I am running a whanau wananga, a learning school for our wider family of cousins, nephews and nieces. I hope that my generation has enough tribal knowledge to share, but I'll be bringing my basketfull.

That's another Maori language saying.

'Ko taau kete,

Ko taaku kete.

Ka ora ai te manuhiri.

With your food basket and mine, the visitors will be fed.'