

SPEAKING THE WHĀNAU ORA LANGUAGE - TELLING OUR OWN STORIES, IN OUR OWN WAY

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*"There is no substitute for telling your own story"
- Merepeka Raukawa-Tait, Chair Te Pou Matakana.*

A Story of Change

We are living in a story of change. Back in the day, my koro would tell me about how the pubs would close at 6pm... but how he would take my nana out for a kanikani at the local community centre until the wee hours of the morning. She was a Māori activist from the Far North, who loved to dance, studying to be a nurse. He was a pākehā fulla from the South Island, who played a good game of tennis, studying to be a school teacher. She walked into his flat one day with her sister, who knew my koro from teacher's college, and he fell in love at first sight. Along came my dad, an athletic Māori man, who moved from Kaitaia to Dunedin to go to university, pursuing a career in dance and performing arts. There he met my mum, a punk rocker with artist parents, in the heat of the 80s protest era, at a student pub, on the dancefloor.

On my mum's side is an ancestor, Richard Taylor, a famous missionary who bought up one of the largest land sales in the Far North, just so happened to be the tribal lands on my father's side. On my mum's side, the story told of him meaning well, buying it to allow the local Māori to remain living there. Though, on my dad's side, the story tells of the land being stolen from our people by a foreign man who didn't understand our people's connection to the land. My mum and dad brought these two worlds together again. And along came me. I live in Auckland, I love the theatre, I take night classes to learn Te Reo Māori, and am an aspiring writer in the social innovation and digital storytelling space. And my parents have no idea what that means so I say: *I write and curate stories that reflect the history and heart of a community. And to be honest, that is also met with a bit of an 'aha.....?'*

The tides have changed with every generation, but with the dawn of the digital era we are now living realities that didn't exist (literally) yesterday. Storytelling has always been central to understanding the changing world we live in. In Māori Oral history, storytelling is a vessel, carrying knowledge, passing between the generations, tūpuna to moko. These stories illuminate the present and inform planning for the future. Although historically, mainstream media stories have failed to adequately represent a Māori worldview. The digital world has opened the capacity for sharing our stories way open, it demands that we do things differently by its sheer magnitude of possibility. Social media has changed the game. We now have the opportunity to curate our own stories online and share in national and international conversations at the same time. Connections, ideas and real time reporting are driving innovation in all areas. Organisations are now able to connect with their audience online, strengthen relationships with stakeholders, and influence attitudes through storytelling. It is now clearer than ever that we need to rethink old attitudes toward news gathering, especially in marginalised communities. Applying fresh thinking to stubborn challenges is a natural state in Wai-Atamai, the innovation hub of Te Whānau o Waipareira.



Developing a Whānau Ora Voice

My role, as a writer, is embedded in this thinking, and furthermore, in the specific language of the Whānau Ora narrative. Because in this business, if we want to change minds, we must reframe the language around, not only the Urban Māori narrative, but our national story too. Looking at it with a Māori lens, it's about diving into the whakapapa of the narrative and asking: from who did this already established national story spring from?

Telling our own story in this new media landscape has never been more important. It has never been more important to ask: "who is telling the story?" In telling my own story I'm speaking to a story of this nation, it is one story in a solar system of stories that speaks to the great challenge of the two worlds that have clashed for generations under a colonial system.

It is interesting to look at these different approaches to storytelling together: a Māori approach of oral tradition and storytelling, and the mainstream media approach to sharing and developing stories and narratives and storytelling in general. So how are we taking these two approaches and creating our own Whānau Ora style of storytelling and narrative building online steeped in the specific language of resilience central to the Whānau Ora movement?

When I was a kid, I saw injustice all around and I wanted to change the world. So naturally, when I grew up, I wanted to be a journalist. I loved reading and stories and writing in my journal. What I loved about stories was going on a journey of all the different moments and experiences that transformed a character and made up their life, and that led them through a change, exactly to where they are. So, I followed my dreams to Massey University communications department, to a class of 20 journalism majors, consisting of two women and one Māori (me). I was lectured in "how to write a good lead", angles, framing and press releases. The business of journalism. The problem was, at a crucial time when the world was going digital and newspapers were desperate to sell copies, words like 'story' and 'voice' were considered wishy washy and us budding journalists were encouraged to write reports that sell.

So, the graduating class of 2008 went out into the world and wrote reports that would sell. I remember being told that journalists, along with politicians, were the least trusted professions in this country and I couldn't deny there was something fishy about the business of journalism. Even my well-meaning peers were producing reports that omitted important contextual information, deeming it not important due to their lack of personal experience on the issue. During lengthy class discussion and debate I often wondered how my classmates would report on my story if it came up in the news. I imagined a report framed around words like: "solo mum, beneficiary, mental illness, domestic violence", etc. Because where politicians have a voice, journalists have authorship. Being an author and having a voice is powerful. In fact, in te reo Māori the translatable equivalent to author is rangatiratanga, a right to exercise authority, ownership.

It is true that every story has a pulse that brings it to life driven by the author and today this can now form a narrative online shaped by the people. The struggle to bring indigenous stories to a wider audience isn't new or specific to New Zealand. The Māori side of the story, in mainstream media, has historically been pushed to the side or lumped into bite-sized easily consumed sound bites. The languaging we experience in mainstream news, on issues Māori, is a 'paint by numbers' landscape offering the same familiar narrative limited to the dying or irrelevant Māori language, cultural pageantry, disheartening living conditions, or troubling drug, alcohol or suicide statistics.



A significant voice in Māori academia and Whānau Ora advocate, Meihana Durie, recently shared a kōrerorero (interview) with E Tangata magazine's Dale Husband. Professor Durie spoke on these pressure points between Māori and the media: "The face of the media in this country has evolved rapidly, particularly in recent years. And, too often, there are discussions on Māori issues that don't include a Māori voice. It's critical that we champion quality journalism where Māori are concerned. We have some outstanding champions and advocates of kaupapa Māori across Te Ao Māori. And it's important that they are heard. The often, negative media coverage on the sovereignty of Māori is something that we've had to grapple with for a long time. Critically, there needs to be a more balanced media representation of things Māori."

There really is no substitute for telling your own story.

Coming into this innovation space with a rich history, the journalist in me was excited at the goldmine of stories in this, the West Auckland community. Real-life, juicy, beautiful, painful, stories of strength, courage and wisdom. The stories I felt a part of and wanted to tell. But not only that, stories anchored in a language that is so uniquely Whānau Ora – a language that is used to describe the experiences of Whānau, kaimahi, kaumātua and leadership. A language that is so in tune with the history of the community and the strategic vision of the organisation that it works as part of building positive futures for Whānau, the community and growing indigenous leadership everywhere. **It's a language of resilience.**

"Ko te reo te taikura o te whakaao mārama" - The language is the key to understanding.

This whakataukī is one I often return to when I'm struggling with an idea. The power of metaphor is obvious in Māori language and storytelling in that it can offer up great universal truths in a few words, by the sheer relationship of the words. Language is the vessel with which we carry our narrative as we navigate the future. Developed from the Wai Research Pou, Sir Mason Durie, and from the kuia and kaumātua expressing their wawata for the future, the language of Whānau Ora is Whānau aspirational thinking articulated. When you interview whānau and kaimahi working in this space they speak this way because there is a shared experience. Some of the words used to describe this vision include: Māori future makers; champions for future generations; whānau becoming influential leaders of change; working together with whānau through strategy, innovation, change and service provision to ensure we are all successfully living and breathing change; the key for building successful generations of whānau. The way Te Whānau O Waipareira approaches working with whānau is steeped in this very unique language of resilience, formed from a foundation of strong Māori values. My role in that is to actively practice whanaungatanga, spending time with kaimahi who facilitate these programmes, as well as whānau and even tamariki, to capture the Whānau Ora story in our own words.

With this strategic vision in mind, building on the generations of knowledge held by our kuia and kaumātua, a highlight for me in my role is that we have developed this narrative through our unique hashtags through social media use. When you click on the '#UrbanMāoriProud' hashtag you can see a mixture of historical, current, and research-based stories and dialogues which when woven together tell the collective story. This is an ongoing, reflective and timely story of Whānau Ora. A multi-authored online narrative including the voices of whānau, kaimahi, community leaders, partners and ambassadors.



We started this hashtag in 2016 with a story circulating in mainstream media questioning the value and effectiveness of our urban Māori community. Hearing our kuia and kaumātua speaking on their experience coming to the city from the hau kāinga gave a real insight as to why this community is so important to whānau. The story that emerged was of a struggle and loneliness, the importance of holding on to cultural values and always with a view to the future.

Authoring our Own Change

Wai-Atamai has been instrumental, not just in gathering and disseminating our community stories through social media, but also in facilitating strategies for whānau authoring their journeys, telling their own stories in their own way. As part of an organisational shift to outcomes measurement, the Strategy and Innovation Team followed a group of parents enrolled on a parenting programme who for one reason or another needed extra support and were seeking positive approaches to raising children and creating happy homes.

Some had lost custody of their children through crises. Some had been through separation with their partner. All wanted a better life for their children.

This project was a unique approach, driven by authentic whānau voices. We spent time with these parents at different stages on their journey through this Waipareira service. Though we provided prompts for whānau to speak to, we invited them to interview each other with these prompts and take turns to record the interviews with an iPad. The result was that we got to witness a story of change unfold as the course went on. Whānau were able to articulate their own story of change as they reflected on their journey with their peers. It was an uplifting process for all involved. This again was another chapter in the Whānau Ora narrative – a story of overcoming adversity and struggle and a story that looked to the future with hope and ambition.

"I'm here because I want to be a better dad. I used to be relying on the way I was brought up but now I'm learning better ways. It means my kids are going to grow up being constructive members of society, and have a shot at a better life than what I ended up having and be able to do whatever they want to do in life."

"My children deserve the best that they can get from us as parents. Even though I've been a parent since I was 15, every day I've learnt something new. I'm here to upskill my parenting and understand my bad behaviours."

What I've learned from working in this very uniquely Whānau Ora way is that whanaungatanga is crucial to building stories.

Whānau Ora 'Coming-of-age'

When I was a little girl who loved to read, growing up between grandma and grandad's place in Dunedin, Dad's place in Auckland, Mum's place (wherever that was at the time) and koro's place up in Kaitia, stories helped me explore the world from a soft and lumpy armchair on a rainy day as the radio played out reports in the background. I distinctly remember those first really transformative stories that imprinted on me. One was Bryce Courtney's *The Power of One*. I read this at age 12 and the story of the little boy, in a racially divided environment, and the importance of mentors who were like family and who guided him to triumph, had a profound impact on me. The story of resilience and overcoming against all odds and adversity to emerge a hero.



I think in my own life I saw stories of struggle, pain, crises or heard about them, and this narrative gave strength to hopelessness. I remember thinking “this is a real-life story”. Stories are what began to shape my ideas and thoughts about real life, real people and the real world. I think there is something really inspirational in a coming-of-age story, where you get to see the beginnings, the details from the beginnings that shaped and created the struggles and strengths of the present character. News reports can’t come close to the transformative experience of a well-told story that paints in detail the landscape and context around a character. We can now do this in our own creative way online, in a very Māori way with a collective voice. Personal experience creates a shared story: a coming of age of the Whānau Ora movement.

Whānau Ora is a movement developing a national narrative from the voices of so many people telling a shared story of growing resilient families together. These stories are powerful in strengthening the movement – stories that get to the heart of the matter, from the kitchen to the boardroom. These stories need to become versed in this language of resilience, which is currently lost in translation in mainstream reporting. I’m glad to be here to share in this growing narrative creating social impact. For the future, for our children. Because who knows what the next tide will bring? Hopefully lots of beautiful, big, juicy kina and pāua.

