

Cultural Justice and Ethics: From within

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I didn't really prepare something to speak about today because, when I was asked by Brian to talk about something to do with ethics, a whole lot of things went through my mind. I thought oh no! I don't want to talk about ethics. This is because when I talk about ethics I have to read and learn about it, and then try and remember it. Today, I want to talk about something that's more personal, about something that's coming from a space within me, that means something to me and will maybe mean something to other people.

As a community advocate or as a person that seeks to bridge gaps, I started to think about my own life. I started off first coming to Wellington as a PPTA as Te Reo a Rohe delegate, which is a little ironic as I can't speak Maori. Being born in 1951, I wasn't brought up in the Maori culture, but perhaps brought up through similar social times to that of Donna [Awatere-Huata].

When I was three, my parents split up. Although she doesn't speak much about it, my mother has said to me that she wanted to give us a 'better' life. She remarried and she gave us a 'better' father, and we then had a 'normal' family. I heard that over and over that I was 'normal', we had a 'better' life, right from 1954, through until I went to university in 1969. I had this 'better' father and I should be grateful. I was. I was very grateful.

My mother's father (talk about Victorian ethos!), was born in 1871. He was 60 when my mother was born. He came from Ireland and there are stories in the family of him getting off the ship and calling for a boy to carry his luggage - that was to one of the Maori that were walking passed. But we're not a *racist* family - I used to think.

I had a Maori father but I didn't know what that really meant. I didn't actually really think about it, although I knew it. But my grandfather asked for a boy to carry his luggage? I started thinking. Was I racist, or wasn't I? I don't know.

I got to university and I left my 'normal' family and came here to Victoria. First time I'd ever come to university and it was dislocating for a start. I came from a working class background and I found that it's not like that at University. I felt marginal, whatever that means. I never felt like I fitted in here. I couldn't lay claim to being Maori and to being able to say "okay I'm Maori and that's what it's all about".

So, my journey became an inward journey. I started looking for self-realisation, you know, self-actualisation. I started going to psychotherapy. I stood up there outside the counsellor's office feeling deeply, deeply ashamed, frightened that somebody might see. This prospect was too awful. After many attempts, although I didn't intend to, I eventually ran.

I met my father. He had come to Victoria University as he knew people here and he rang me up. Here was this voice from the past saying, "hello dear". (I thought, who's this?) "Hello dear, this is your father". Thinking it was my father that I had known since age three I said, "oh Dad, what are you doing here?". It was my real father.

He came around and he stood on the door step. I just started shaking, my whole body shook, and he cried, and cried and cried. He said to me, "oh I just love you to pieces", and I thought, well, that's pretty accurate about how I'm feeling!

At the time there were a lot of feelings there and my mind started dividing. What if mum knew? She'd be so upset. And what if Dad knew! How could I get rid of this man? But my heart was saying this person was real. Part of me was

becoming real and I was really terrified. So, I got rid of him. I hated doing it, but I got rid of him.

I was engaged. I broke my engagement, ran off with a guy I hardly knew and married him. It didn't work out very well and I shifted to Dunedin. There I was in Dunedin, still thinking, god I need psychotherapy. I needed something. So I went to see a psychotherapist and I saw him for years and he was wonderful. He was like a signpost in my life and he really did help me a lot.

Anyhow, I never addressed the issue of being Maori. It never occurred to me that what was happening to me was part of being Maori, until I went to work for Social Welfare. I worked for them as a front line interviewer and they always gave me the Maori people that came in because I was a nice person. I was kind. These Maori people complained to me saying that they didn't want to be interviewed as individuals and I said well I'm part Maori so I'll understand this. My spirit understood, I didn't know much about it. I started learning the language and that was when I discovered there were some fatal flaws in my personality. My lecturer in history said to me, there's something wrong with your personality, and I thought, 'oh god'. Anyway, when I started learning the language every time I stood up to say anything in Maori I'd start crying. I didn't know why until a psychologist suggested that it might be shame that I was feeling.

I went to Training College and stood up on a marae (never been on one before) and I didn't just cry that time. I fell flat on my face and lay there on the floor feeling that I didn't ever want to get up again. Anyway, I was okay speaking at school. I could speak to Pakeha audiences in Maori. That I learned in my head. But when it came to Maori people, I couldn't even speak. I suppose it must have been an immense grief from way back that was overwhelming me. You might know better than me, but that's what I thought.

In 1985 Puao-te-ata-tu came out. We were going through a lot of consciousness raising in social welfare and there was hostility from everybody, including a hostility from within myself. I had to start challenging what it was to be Pakeha; what it was to be Maori; what it was to be racist.

I was teaching. I started teaching tentatively about where our mono-cultural society was at. I thought, oh my god, can I say this? Now it's easier to say that we are a mono-cultural society as there have been so many processes that we have gone through. Though I think it's probably dangerous to extrapolate from the specific or the personal to the general, I feel like my experience of having to find some sort of unity within myself, is what has to happen in New Zealand. For me becoming Maori has been important, but it isn't easy. It's painful, it's difficult, and it hurts.

Where I eventually got a lot of support, awhi, aroha, was from the PPTA when I became a member of Te Huarahi and they helped to see me through the tears and the confusion. It wasn't because I was Maori, it was because I was a human being. I think the process I have gone through is a process of becoming human, and becoming real in thinking; yes, my experience is valid. I'm not just Maori, I'm Pakeha too. I want both of them, I am both of them. I don't have to get up and speak fluent Maori right now. Perhaps it will come. I hope it does because I want it to, and I'm going to work on it. But I do feel that people like me, and there are many of us, are not marginal. We are bridges between cultures. This diversity has to be acknowledged, honoured and respected.