



Our People, Our Future, Our Way

Te Aho Summit Programme:

Maori Wellbeing - Defying the Oxymoron

1pm; Tuesday 14 October 2014; Te Wananga o Raukawa, Otaki.

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When Mother Teresa was asked how do you achieve world peace, she said, go home and love your family.

It is advice that I have been giving myself over the last week since I formally handed in my warrants as a Minister.

The great joy I have to talk with you today is because of the fact that I will never be required to hand in my warrants as a member of whanau. I am whanau, we are whanau, from the moment of conception and beyond.

I have called this contribution - Maori wellbeing: defying the oxymoron. An oxymoron is when two words directly contradict one another. I choose to defy the way that Maori and wellbeing have recently been interpreted as if they are a contradiction in terms.

In my view, being Maori - whether with a small m or a big - is all about wellbeing. To me, the words are one and the same. And yet over the course of the last six months we have heard quite the contrary - that the definition of being Maori is to live in the grasp of poverty, to be immersed in the context of violence, to be somehow wanting, lacking, needing.

Now it may surprise some of you here, but I find defiance a very constructive activity.

I'm not just thinking of defiance such as the decision to wear a purple bowtie, or the actions of my mokopuna in choosing to answer back. Those actions are both signs of developing the spirit of independence - actions which are best used in moderation.

The defiance I am thinking about is found in the readiness to resist, even when the opposing forces appear formidable.

It is the defiance of a young Pakistani teenager Malala Yousafzai, campaigning for the collective rights of Muslim girls to education.

It is in the coalition represented by Te Hono ki Raukawa to refuse to be split apart by competing claims, and to instead bring the histories and the aspirations of Te Reu Reu, Ngati Kauwhata and Ngati Raukawa to the table.

It is in the actions of Mrs Rosa Parks who refused to stand at the back of the bus and inspired generations of civil rights leaders to be bold, to be brave, to speak up for all those who face discrimination.

It is in the lifetime crusade of those who seek to restore Lake Horowhenua to a pristine condition

and refuse to allow their lake to die through the stagnation of pollution which kills the water quality.

It is in the decision of a Confederation of iwi, namely Te Āti Awa, Ngāti Raukawa and Ngāti Toarangatira, to create an educational pathway which would enable their descendants to live according to their values, beliefs and practices; from which was born Whakatipuranga Rua Mano - Generation 2000.

Defiance, then, can be realised locally, it can be modelled globally.

We recall that Mahatma Ghandi was inspired by the stories of Te Whiti o Rongomai of Parihaka; stories of passive resistance against the force of the state two generations before Ghandi.

My korero today, then to add to Te Aho, the Woven Strands, is to place the concept of defiance firmly on our agenda as a positive model of survival.

I look no further than my own mother, to understand that the power of defiance can be life-giving, life-enhancing. When Mum was diagnosed with terminal cancer she chose instead to believe that she could resist the sentence she had been given, and to the great fortune of our whanau she did exactly that - refusing to accept she had months to live and instead thriving for the next six years before she chose her own time to leave this world.

I want us to think actively about defying the interpretations, the assumptions, the deficit thinking, the restrictions which seek to constrain and reduce our potential to be.

Over the last eighteen years I have had the most incredible privilege of looking into people's lives at home and abroad, travelling to far off places like Russia, Canada or Hawai'i, spending time in the rugged isolation of Wharekauri or the lush depth of the Ureweras, being hosted on marae, in boardrooms, in hotels all across the world. I have seen so much; I have learnt so much.

And yet, when my mind wanders over the years, I'd have to say some of the happiest days in my life date back to the time when George and I were trained Ambreed Artificial Inseminators to develop our stock.

In those years we were dairy farming at Whangaehu; our marae was literally next door; we were raising our tamariki on tupuna lands. Our children had access to the richest archives of oral history; they knew who they were; we belonged to the land; our awa tupua was our place to heal, to swim, to be as one.

And so I come back to the word association between Maori and wellbeing.

In those times before iphones, ipads, ipods, tablets and on demand tv, our whanau were all we needed.

And in the ultimate act of defiance for my days post the beehive, I restore to myself, that nirvana - the state of bliss in which whanau fulfill all my needs.

We can be, and we will be, the leaders of our own destiny.

I have a passionate interest in our collective ability to generate new leadership - whether that is academic, business, political or tribal leadership. It is time for us to defy those who tell us to sit and wait for the state to feed our children, to remove our children from our homes, to redefine who we are.

I believe we are growing leaders who can look beyond their own self-interest. Leaders who sit comfortably within their own tribal narrative, while at the same time being able to grasp the complex dynamics of the market-place. Leaders who can imagine a future based on the very best of our past. Leaders who want us to lift our sights, to imagine better.

Throughout the election campaign I listened to many people talking about poverty of material resource. I suggest instead that the biggest poverty that we face today is the poverty of spirit. That poverty of disconnection from the essence of who we are. That is the greatest poverty far more than material poverty. I know that for many of our people that poverty of spirit has come about from living outside of their tribal lands and trying to cope and manage in places where they don't belong or where they're not from.

Whanau Ora has been our response - to have faith and trust and belief that things can change rather than just accept the situation that we are in. Whanau Ora has definitely been our way to create a path forward for us as a people, helping us to reconnect; to revitalise ourselves through the power of liberation.

In all my travels, I didn't need to visit Brazil to witness the impact of Paulo Freire's insights on the power of education to overcome oppression and shape our realities. For just down the road in Otaki, Matua Whatarangi and the ART Confederation had a vision about what could be achieved when an iwi sets out the future that it wants for its children.

For Ngati Apa/Nga Wairiki, we have been following your leadership in the spirit of the Apa Rising: Te Tapikitanga o Apa. We are restoring to ourselves the practices that are ours, relearning our waiata, reinvigorating our sense of self. And the most wonderful thing for me is that it is our mokopuna that are leading that.

So I come back to the concept of Maori wellbeing and what it is that keeps us well.

My commitment to our future is to ensure we take a much more comprehensive approach to the health and wellbeing of families; to focus on health and wellbeing rather than sickness and illness.

When I was coming to this hui today, I had the thought of three wise men in my head.

The first is the master accountant, Matua, who has done so much to define the indicators of success that count for something in our story of survival. Matua has helped us to understand quantitative and qualitative measures of how we take into account the value of roopu tuku iho; how we recognise the learnings inherited from our common tupuna; how we ensure the maintenance and enhancement of the mana-a-whanau; mana-a-hapu; mana-a-iwi.

The second man is the great doctor, Sir Mason, who has inspired us to diagnose our success by ensuring our plans seek outcomes for whanau to be self-managing; living healthy lifestyles; participating fully in society; confidently participating in Te Ao Māori; economically secure and successfully involved in wealth creation, and cohesive, resilient and nurturing.

And the third is my Dad, who taught me everything I could hope for about the power of unconditional love, the importance of security; the wisdom of learning about your whenua, your whakapapa, your whanau.

Essentially my message to us all, is don't let anyone define us other than ourselves. Outside critics looking at the circumstances of my childhood - raised by my grandmother, my aunt and uncle, with cousins I thought of as sisters and brothers; in different homes, and in different communities may well have categorized me as somehow deficient.

But in truth, the experience I have had of being handed like the most precious gift from one to another within my whanau, has taught me so much about the healing power of whakapapa to keep us grounded, strong and forever certain of our past, our present, our future; knowing how to do that which is right.

Whanau transformation isn't just about lifting the quality of life or improving the outcomes we experience. It is also about rewriting the narrative; consolidating our survival as tangata whenua; sourcing our success in our own strategies.

It is about our people, our future, our way. It is my lifework and the next chapter has only just begun.