



Auckland Unitarian Church

Love beyond belief

## The art of walking upright here

Rachel Mackintosh © 14 February 2021

### Reading: The Skeleton of the Great Moa in the Canterbury Museum, Christchurch

The skeleton of the great moa on iron crutches  
Broods over no great waste; a private swamp  
Was where this tree grew feathers once, that hatches  
Its dusty clutch, and guards them from the damp.

Interesting failure to adapt on islands,  
Taller but not more fallen than I, who come  
Bone to his bone, peculiarly New Zealand's.  
The eyes of children flicker round this tomb

Under the skylights, wonder at the huge egg  
Found in a thousand pieces, pieced together  
But with less patience that's the bones that dug  
In time deep shelter against ocean weather:

Not I, some child born in a marvellous year,  
Will learn the trick of standing upright here.

Allen Curnow, 1943

### Musings: The art of walking upright here

Last week was Waitangi Day. Marking the signing on 6 February 1840 of Te tiriti o Waitangi. So it may seem as though today's service is a week late. To adapt a Christmas poem:

“When the waiata on the marae is stilled,  
when the sound from the megaphone is gone,  
When the rangatira and the manuhiri are home,  
when the workers are back in their workplaces,  
Then the work of Waitangi begins”

The work of Waitangi is the work of all of us, no matter how much we feel we know or don't know.

I opened this morning, as we do every Sunday, with a karakia. My understanding of the meanings of this karakia comes from an article by Karaitiana Taiuru, an interdisciplinary Maori academic and activist. The karakia has been translated in different ways.

Whakataka te hau ki te uru  
Whakataka te hau ki te tonga  
Kia mākinakina ki uta  
Kia mātaratara ki tai  
E hī ake ana te atākura  
He tio, he huka, he hauhu  
Haumi e, hui e, Taiki e!

Translation one:

Be still the winds of the west  
Be still the winds of the south  
Let the breeze blow over the land  
Let the breeze blow over the ocean  
Lend the red-tipped dawn come with a sharpened air  
A touch of frost, a promise of a glorious day.

Translation two:

Get ready for the westerly  
and be prepared for the southerly.  
It will be icy cold inland,  
and icy cold on the shore.  
May the dawn rise red-tipped on ice,  
on snow, on frost.  
Join! Gather! Intertwine!

In the first translation, the whole karakia is a request for what is wanted. This mimics the structure of a Christian prayer to an omnipotent and interventionist god. “Let ... let ... let ...” we beseech.

The second translation follows a pre-colonial structure:

The first section of any karakia acknowledges the great forces that are at work connecting us to the atua, the spiritual powers. In the above example this is expressed by the Westerly and Southern winds. The second section expresses a loosening of these forces’ harmful bonds, and a strengthening of their helpful ones. In the above example this is expressed by referring to the aftermath of the howling Southerly storm, a frigid, but windless night will follow. The third section is the naming of what is required for oneness with the atua. In the above example this is expressed with an awe-inspiring dawn transforming the icy snowscape.

It is easy for Unitarians to hear about and rail against the imposition of Christianity on lives and on realities ... we can fairly easily see that the Christian idea of prayer has erased a Maori reality of karakia, because this is our story too.

We acknowledge the interconnected web of all existence and we believe in a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We reject a dogmatic Christianity and few of us relate at all to an interventionist god who will “let .... let .... let ...” good things happen to us.

As well as Unitarians, we in this church are almost universally tauwiwi, people in this place who are not tāngata whenua. It may be harder for us as tauwiwi to hear some other things, to hear that we still have difficult work to do to share power and to have harmony in this place.

In the UK, a history textbook about the British Empire that is still in use for teaching to 11-year-olds, describes an illustration of the signing of te Tiriti like this: “The Māori tribesmen are signing over their land to the British. They are exchanging their whole country — New Zealand — for guns and alcohol!”

We can be outraged by this racist and ignorant telling of what happened in 1840. I am not sure it is too far different from what those of us who grew up here learned about Waitangi when we were 11. And for those of us who didn’t grow up here but who are in other ways part of a story that involves domination, colonisation and a history told by the victors, I suggest that the experience almost certainly translates. I have seen cowboy and Indian movies. I don’t know the stories the Dutch tell about what is now Indonesia but I am hazarding a guess that they aren’t too different.

And even if we no longer believe this colonial version of history, it is massively difficult to erase the traces of old ideas about an inferior race that really didn’t know what they were doing until we came along with our “civilisation” and writing and alcohol and guns and disease.

We have the opportunity put down new ideas where those traces were and are. We have the opportunity to understand what harm those traces have done, as we understand already what harm the imposition of Christianity has done.

So what does this opportunity really look like?

I suggest we have the opportunity in this country for a different relationship, a relationship that is harmonious and not built on the power of one party over the other.

I found a recent interview with Moana Jackson from Ngāti Kahungunu, noted Māori lawyer and public intellectual. He offers the following, to understand what te Tiriti means:

“[L]ong before 1840 our people were treatying with each other, because that’s what independent bodies do. And in Ngāti Kahungunu, the phrase we use is mahi tūhono, and so treaties are seen as work that brings people together, and I think that’s a lovely description of what a treaty should be.

“And at home in Kahungunu, and in many other iwi, there are long traditions prior to 1840 of treating one with another; whether it was to make peace after a conflict, to regulate borders, to make a trading arrangement or whatever.

“So treaties were part of the political landscape in this country prior to 1840, and to presume, as some historians have done, that Māori didn’t really know what was involved in the treaty-making process, is simply untrue. If you are an independent polity then you treat as part of that independence, and that’s what our people did....

“I don’t know of any independent country, any state, if you like, that has done or would do what the Crown has maintained since 1840, that hapū did; that is that where we had jealously guarded and stated our independence for hundreds of years, that according to the Crown suddenly on the 6th February every Māori in the country woke up and said, ‘We don’t want to be independent anymore. We’ll give it away to this lady in London that we’ve never even met.’

He goes on to say:

“So I think the Treaty is fundamental, because it establishes that interdependence, which is such a fundamental corollary of our understanding of independence. It established the framework in which people who come here could have a relationship with us, in which we would be free to continue to exercise our mana....

“The Treaty to me has never been about Treaty rights, it’s always been about the rightness that comes from people accepting their obligations to each other.”

I believe we need to listen and listen and listen to what tāngata whenua are saying. And in the recently established tradition of the #MeToo movement, we need to listen to believe. Believe women. Believe Māori. In the Unitarian practice of circle groups, we listen without interrupting, and we listen to understand. It is not too much of an extension of that concept to have us listening to believe.

And when we hear and we believe, we can often feel very uncomfortable.

When we hear how our Christian forebears have erased Māori spirituality, it is uncomfortable. When we hear the Maori rates of unemployment, imprisonment, homelessness and premature death, it is horrific.

When we hear about how our ancestors lived on stolen land, where we continue to live, it is shameful.

So this discomfort and horror and this shame don’t feel much like opportunity. It is possible to get stuck here and to turn away.

In a relationship, we need to keep going. We also have the opportunity to offer something. In a treaty, we have the opportunity to do the work that brings people together.

Beyond the possibility of treaty settlements to restore resources that were stolen, we have the possibility to consider who we are, what our stories are, and what we can bring.

In the words of historian Lydia Whiting, we have the possibility to work towards “a complex intertwinement of identities to be appreciated rather than appropriated.”

To do this, we must consider what our own identities are.

I close with a poem by another Pākehā poet, Glenn Colquhoun, published 56 years after Allen Curnow’s poem. This is called **The trick of standing upright here**

The trick of standing upright here  
is the trick of using both feet.

Being born is casting on a row of stitches.  
It is a whenua in a plastic bag in a freezer.

Bread is walking back from a dairy with milk.  
It is the smell inside of tea-towels.

Red is the sun burning at dusk.  
It is kowhaiwhai curling around a rafter.

Meeting is the grip inside a hand.  
It is the sound of wet lips.

Black is the colour of the sky at night.  
The clothes of old women at church.

White is the sun’s paint.  
Flax drying on a fence.

A feast is the warm order of plates on a tablecloth.  
It is a fat kettle of tea squeezing between tables.

Seafood is a fish on the plate with lemon.  
It is the rattle of cockles in a pot.

Singing is the wind in the trees like a choir.  
It is Tom Kelly crooning at three in the morning.

Laughter is the sound of hands clapping.  
It is a row of cans falling off a shelf.

Sleep is the feel of clean sheets on skin.  
The soft gaps between people on floors.

The sky is a lid left off a tin of biscuits.  
It is a man making love to a woman.

The sea is an uneven playing field.  
It is the blue eyes of god.

Remembering is a statue in a park.  
It is a face carved in wood.

Growing old is a pattern fading on a dress.  
It is collecting pipi at low tide in an apron.

Dying is a casket in the shape of a keyhole.  
It is a long walk north to the cape.

The art of walking upright here  
is the art of using both feet.

One is for holding on.  
One is for letting go.