



... that all souls shall grow in harmony

Rachel Mackintosh © 27 July 2025

In this place, in this community, we covenant to serve humankind in fellowship, that all souls shall grow in harmony.

We face challenges in this endeavour, though we repeat the statement every week.

Certainly, we believe that all souls *should* grow in harmony.

You may know this story of former Auckland Councillor, the late Efeso Collins. This story takes place at the swearing in when he was first elected to Auckland Council in 2016. I have never been to a swearing in ceremony, but I can imagine a solemn and reverent event. The mayor in robes and chain, the council members dressed in their best, taking on the awesome responsibility of serving their city, with their intentions fresh — intentions of doing their best to make this place somewhere we can all live well. The town hall cleaned and polished to its finest, perhaps some organ music, dignitaries present, VIPs in the audience, there to lend weight to the moment and to pay respect to our elected leaders. A ceremonial occasion.

In 2016, when Efeso Collins was being sworn in, a council usher refused to believe that his wife, children and elders were entitled to sit in the VIP area. Efeso had to persuade the usher to let them take their seats.

Efeso was appalled and embarrassed. His family was humiliated. It was 2016, for goodness' sake. Weren't we beyond that kind of racism?

How do we respond to this story? We clutch our pearls and we are horrified.

That usher could not conceive that a Pasifika family belonged in our system of government in roles other than rubbish collectors or cleaners, could not believe that they could be VIPs.

Efeso was appalled and embarrassed. We are horrified. This is not a story of all souls growing in harmony. We feel that uncomfortable clang of discord in our souls.

Let's dig a little deeper underneath our horror at this story.

Are we so different from that usher?

Is our horror partly because we wonder if that usher could easily have been us?

A few years before that swearing in, I was in Animates with my family, buying a puppy. As you may know if you are a pet kind of person, mostly Animates sells dog and cat toys, leads, pet food, treats, blankets, bowls, that kind of thing. And then fish, rabbits, and maybe guinea pigs. So if a customer is looking to actually buy a puppy, that's a significant purchase. You probably don't even think about it but you want to be dealing with the senior staff member who will have the best ability to answer your questions. So, in a nano-second, I scanned the staff, and then approached the middle aged man and asked for his help. It was my unconscious expectation that he was the duty manager. He was very happy to oblige and helped with getting the puppy out from behind its glass, etc etc. But when we got to the counter, he had to defer to a young woman staff member to get information about the breeder, vaccinations etc.

I was horrified. At myself.

I don't know whether the young woman was actually senior to the man in the hierarchy of the staff, but she was clearly the more knowledgeable. I was able to see it when it smacked me in the face, but I hadn't been expecting it.

My son-in-law is in his early thirties and is a recently qualified nurse. At the hospital where he works everyone wears the same coloured scrubs. He is constantly addressed as "Doctor."

How often do you have experiences like this? How often do you ask — usually in relation to a doctor or a lawyer — "and what did he say?" And then have to say sorry when your interlocutor says, "she, actually."

How often do you see it when it smacks you in the face and realise that you weren't expecting it.

This is not the sound of all souls growing in harmony.

This doesn't make us bad people.
We expect what we have seen.
And as such, we are part of perpetuating it.

To the extent that we are comfortable ourselves, we feel that our comfort is right. We might even think we somehow deserve it. In which case, because we believe we deserve what we have, we must believe that there is justice in the world, at least where we are concerned. It's not much of a stretch to imagine that that justice is spread beyond us, that, even if we work to improve society and create greater justice for the unfortunate, there are nevertheless some people — us, our families, our friends, people like us — who live in a part of society that is working, where souls are growing in harmony.

This feels right *and* it is what we expect, and it is what we have seen.

And why is this what we have seen? Why do we feel this is right?

Because of a history of "might is right". This is not to say that we use violence ourselves, and yet ...

It is what we have seen because, in western culture, we have had 6,000 years of patriarchy, and for 4,000 years of that, that patriarchy codified in Abrahamic religion, with men atop the hierarchy.

It is what we have seen because, in a globalised world, we have had 500+ years of colonisation. And because the dominant Christian strand of Abrahamic religion blessed colonisation with the doctrine of discovery, with papal bulls granting Christian colonisers the moral and legal right to subjugate and dispossess the people they encountered in the New World because they considered those people inferior.

But then they had to enforce the doctrine with war, violent dispossession and, in many cases, genocide, bringing the doctrine into early doubt if you thought about it too much but — no problem: might is right.

It is what we have seen because capitalism took the hierarchies of patriarchy and colonisation and used and entrenched them, distorting efforts at egalitarian democracy to recreate increasing wealth inequality.

It is what we have seen because neoliberal capitalism is accelerating the inequality as the rich-list reporting this year shows us, with 119 Kiwi individuals and families having a total wealth of \$102.1billion, up from \$95.55billion last year.

It is what we have seen because, as Lupematasila Melani Anae said last week, the three Cs of Christianity, Colonisation and Capitalism have got in the way of all souls growing in harmony. The three Cs have taught us to believe in exceptionalism, and to mistake success for merit. The three Cs have taught us to believe that we merit the personal success we enjoy.

We look around and we see other successful people. We may admire some of them. The Obamas have been pretty successful. Seems alright.

And yet, Michelle Obama reports on her mother's philosophy: "[She] likes to say that while she loves us dearly, my brother and I are not special, either. We're just two kids who had enough love and a good amount of luck and happened to do well as a result. She tries to remind people that neighbourhoods like the South Side of Chicago are packed full of 'little Michelles and little Craigs'. They're in every school, on every block. It's just that too many of them get overlooked and underestimated."

And so now we see Pasifika people and do not expect them to be in the VIP seats.

This doesn't make us bad people.
We expect what we have seen.

And yet we are a thoughtful community. We strive for justice. We recognise that Pākehā enjoy privilege and that our society would be better if we had gender and ethnic pay equity, if we had leadership in all institutions that reflected the demographics of the communities those institutions serve.

It is likely that most of us see the value in employers having diversity, equity and inclusion policies when hiring, in order to improve the diversity in their workplaces.
We probably also believe that people should have positions and responsibilities based on merit. That a person should have the required skills and attributes to fulfil whatever role they are in.

We might feel that there is a contradiction there. We might feel a discomfort because of what we have seen. We might feel that it is unfair that a Pākehā man has been able to develop the skills and attributes for a role because of his privilege; that is unfair that a Māori woman has been unable to develop the skills and attributes because of the dispossession and racism of colonisation. "And yet," we might say, "isn't it also unfair if the man doesn't get the job?"

For example, we might have seen Tory Whanau, mayor of Wellington, and feel that —unfair media depictions notwithstanding — she did not have the ability to establish public confidence in her leadership, and feel that Andrew Little is a much better prospect.

This doesn't make us bad people. It probably makes us uncomfortable. Because we also probably want to feel that the comfort we enjoy is something we deserve. That we have the positions we have because of our own merit. That exceptional people *should* succeed.

So let's see if we can reconcile this apparent contradiction. Diversity, equity and inclusion policies actively support people from marginalised communities to succeed, including through affirmative action (appointing a minority candidate, all things being equal), flexible work arrangements (so people with caring responsibilities can participate more easily), training to increase people's skills, and, in more sophisticated cases, seeing the merit in skills and qualities that have erstwhile been overlooked, such as emotional intelligence, expertise in te reo, etc.

Diversity and inclusion policies take the view that Michelle Obama's mother had — that people who *could* succeed are "in every school, on every block. It's just that too many of them get overlooked and underestimated."

This is why we need diversity, equity and inclusion policies.

Such policies are loudly under threat in America. In the United States, a growing number of companies are either pulling back from, watering down or removing their policies and commitments to diversity, equity and inclusion. The move follows the July 2023 decision by the US Supreme Court that outlawed affirmative action in university admissions, and the return in January 2025 of Donald Trump to the White House.

Diversity and inclusion policies are also under threat here. From the NZ Herald on 7 March this year:

Winston Peters and New Zealand First are hoping to follow the anti-DEI path being laid by Donald Trump in the United States, proposing new legislation today to rid "Diversity, Equity and Inclusion" regulation from the public service.

Senior National MP Chris Bishop said his party would consider the bill if it were pulled from Parliament's ballot and put up for debate, saying that, overall, it believed in meritocracy and quality over identity politics.

However, he also said that National wanted "a public service that is reflective of modern New Zealand."

And so we have something to defend and something to fight for. Imagine the merit we could enjoy if all souls could truly grow in harmony.

Imagine a world where we value all work, we value everyone's contributions, and our government and employment institutions reflect the communities they serve.

And finally, my question to those in power, and Trump is just the most caricatured example, "You want appointments based on merit? After 6,000 years of patriarchy, 500 years of colonisation, and 300 years of capitalism, *now*, suddenly, you want to change to appointments based on merit? Really? Have you thought this through?"

Amen.

Meditation / Discussion Question:

How will you support DEI, that all souls shall grow in harmony?