

## A sincere form of love – stories that need to be told

6 February 2008 - Waitangi

Ruth Gerzon

He honore, he kororia ki te Atua  
He maungarongo ki te whenua  
He whakaaro pai ki nga tangata katoa  
Amine

Speaking here today is a privilege, and I thank you for this opportunity. Not only am I provided with a chance to speak, but this is a significant forum. All wharenuui resonate with the voices of those who have gone before, and this marae is synonymous with a history of struggle and dissent.

As I see it, with Pakeha privilege comes responsibility, and some of my journey and my stories are about learning how to try to live honourably, actively supporting tino rangatiratanga. I don't always get it right. I leave infallibility to Popes, and just keep trying.

My parents immigrated to Aotearoa after the Second World War. My father was Dutch Jewish, and met my English mother in London during the war. I am Tangata Tiriti. I identify with this country, but I don't want to live here at the expense of others pain and dispossession. I will comfortably live here only when there is justice for us all.

My background is not in academia or law. I am a grassroots community worker in the Mataatua rohe, in the Eastern Bay where almost half the population are Maori. I am also an adult educator, interested in the power of stories, of interlocking and sometimes opposing truths, and how the stories we weave help us explore issues of social justice.

There is no one truth, but there are facts. One such fact is that Te Tiriti was signed here on 6 February 1840. 168 years ago people, Maori and Pakeha, stood here debating, and then signing a document that has a pivotal role in the past, the present and future of all New Zealanders: the reason we are here today.

This solemn compact charts a way for us to live together honourably but is still largely ignored by people in positions of power. As a grassroots community worker I know the vibrant Maori cultural renaissance masks continued underlying poverty and distress caused by greed, capitalism and globalisation.

How will justice come about? Do the powerful ever willingly give up power? Sometimes our task seems daunting, especially during a year like we have just experienced. Yet at my most pessimistic I think of the words spoken by the anthropologist, Margaret Mead:

*"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever does."*

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But how can we grow the number of thoughtful, committed citizens needed to make the changes we desire? There are plenty of tangata whenua pushing for change, but we need more Tauwiwi willing to share power.

My own journey began with story telling. In 1982, sixteen years after I left school I started to learn the history of our country. That indefatigable Pakeha Mitzi Nairn who then worked for the National Council of Churches, came to our small town to give a workshop on the Treaty.

Canadian novelist of Cherokee and Greek descent, Thomas King, in his clear eyed book on colonisation says:

*Don't say in years to come that you would have  
lived your life differently if only you had heard this story.  
You have heard it now. Do with it what you will.*

From 1982 to mid 1990's, as a result of Mitzi's story telling, Pakeha worked alongside Maori in an organisation we called the Whakatane Association for Racial Understanding. Understanding is sorely needed in our town where ignorance abounds and Maori and Pakeha mostly meet on the sports fields. We worked tirelessly, holding workshops to increase our learning and that of others, raising issues of town planning, supporting Black Power on an issue of justice, producing a booklet on the history and pronunciation of place names, challenging Council and government. How effective was all this frenetic endeavour? The jury is still out.

Ten years later, a year ago today I sat in my comfortable home with a Pakeha friend, Kate Abel, drinking coffee, feeling relaxed and yet uneasy. Both of us talk about justice, the responsibility that comes with privilege, aware that we live on stolen land. And on Waitangi Day we were in pursuit of pleasure, deciding whether to read, walk or swim at Ohope Beach.

What could we do, in our corner of the country to mark this day, as Pakeha trying to live responsible lives? We had recently met some local people, sharing outrage at the building of large multi storey flats for the rich, at the mouth of the river, beside the landing place of the Mataatua canoe. I had protested at the Council hearing about this development. We picked up the phone, made connections and began a new journey, weaving new stories. Sadly, as usually happens when we delve into the past, and re-examine the present we learn more about injustice and dispossession.

Clark Jaram, Poihaere Morris, Mereana Heta, Henry Hudson, and Bonnie Savage, all tangata whenua, worked with us to set up a new organisation Coalition for Community and the Environment to tackle the issues. Efficient and busy Pakeha, Kate and I ensured we had agendas and minutes, meeting timeframes to enable us to quickly get home to our countless other family commitments. But in this endeavour we were stymied by the story telling. Every time, just as we were leaving, Clark would begin another story of the complex and fascinating history

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of the area. Inevitably we stayed and learnt more. These stories give us the passion and energy needed for sustained action.

In 2007 my life was immeasurably enriched by Clark's story telling and the new relationships built through our Coalition.

Our town is shaped by our landscape: the Whakatane river, the cliffs, the Rock, the waterfall, and most of all, the Heads, the landing place of the Mataatua waka. For over a thousand years people lived in harmony with this landscape.

The stories we heard spelt out how not only the landscape but a whole community can be destroyed by Council action and inaction. As well as high rise development there is dioxin pollution at the Mataatua Reserve, the taking over of the river by some boaties who endanger and push out children and other swimmers, the rising rates that mean that kaumatua may soon no longer be able to live near their marae. These are stories that are played out in many coastal communities around the country.

In our town, as in others, certain groups of people have power. Developers are welcomed and rarely face restrictions. A small number of boat owners have more power than a hundred swimmers and their families. Communities need to stand together to ensure that the greater good prevails and the less powerful have a voice.

Together we made links with people who had been part of this struggle for decades, some for generations: Ngati Hokopu, Joe Harawira of Sawmill Workers Against Poisons, Forest and Bird, Ngatiawa. We learnt about the struggles of others, such as the people of Mahia, watching the DVD: [The Last Resort](#).

Our vision is one of healthy local communities and a healthy environment for present and future generations. Our mission statement says: Aroha ki te whenua, aroha ki te tangata - caring for the environment, regard for all people. Our role is to actively advocate for inclusive decision making based on human rights and Te Tiriti.

We have held public meetings, given submissions, and continue to explore options to ensure people's voices are heard. Our Coalition is growing in strength and numbers.

But while we devise tactics to reach the ears of the powerful locally, we are also drawn inevitably into national debates. The first one concerns our knowledge of history, of Te Tiriti and The Treaty.

Thomas King, reminds us that stories are wondrous things, but they are dangerous too. Stories can heal, stories can divide. Around the Tiriti there are many truths, many stories, and many silences. For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, among Pakeha, silence reigned supreme. The history I was taught in a private Auckland school in the fifties was of England. What a huge change there has

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been since then. In 1984 Donna Awatere's paper on Maori sovereignty was published by the feminist magazine, *Broadsheet*. Then the term was largely unknown, the concept voiced only on marae. Now it is openly debated, and frequently mentioned in newspaper editorials. But are we any nearer to achieving it?

Certainly our collective understanding of history is way ahead of those dark days of my mid century schooling. I tautoko those historians, Maori and Pakeha alike, who have delved into the past and brought new stories to light.

I have been a Treaty educator, co-facilitating with Maori for nearly 20 years, enough time to see trends and patterns emerging. Throughout I have noticed a strong sense of fair play is part of our Pakeha culture. This might seem at odds with the way the government has, and still is treating Maori. Yet at Treaty workshops I have consistently found that once people know the history, they feel the injustice and understand Maori resistance. The most unlikely people say to me, "If I were Maori I wouldn't be so patient." Just as happened in my life, I have seen a two day workshop start some people on the journey, not just to understand but also to take action, to support tino rangatiratanga.

During those 20 years I have also seen a lessening of the resistance participants bring to workshops. But one thing has not changed: most adults, even recent school leavers, arrive knowing nothing of our shared past. I am reminded of the famous words of George Santayana, philosopher and poet

*'Those who cannot remember the past, are condemned to repeat it.'*

And history is repeating itself only too often. We have recently seen the new raupatu of the Foreshore and Seabed Act and the uncanny resemblance of police behaviour at Ruātoki so resonant of the raids on Rua Kenana and his followers.

So, in mid 2006, along with people all around the country I was gobsmacked at the Ministry of Education's proposal to take the few references to The Treaty out of our school curriculum. What an irony: of all government departments, our Ministry of Education, charged with ensuring our children can take their place as contributing members of our communities was proposing to bolster already shocking ignorance of our shared history. I am still unsure of their motive. Did they fear the power that comes with knowledge?

So 2007 began with good news: the outrage from myriad organisations and citizens all around the country ensured their proposal was ditched.

Now the curriculum vision reads: *young people ... will work to create an Aotearoa New Zealand in which Māori and Pākehā recognise each other as full Treaty partners, and in which all cultures are valued for the contributions they bring.*

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We wait with bated breath to see how that statement affects the education of our children. We must be vigilant in monitoring how these fine words are manifested in action.

That was a small but important victory, but we have still a long way to go as was clear when our government refused to support the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and indeed, worked to derail it.

In a recent interview on Te Ahi Kaa, that most articulate of Tuhoe spokespeople, Tamati Kruger, said "There is no love without justice. And we are still waiting for that." It's been a long wait and this last year was one when government actions made it seem that the wait will be interminable.

Back in the Mataatua rohe, our heads down, beavering away on local initiatives we never guessed that the police had us in their sights. One moment life is chugging along as we do our best to effect positive change. Then came October 15<sup>th</sup>.

You will all have seen the images of masked men with guns. You will have heard how, that morning, people were ordered from their homes with loud hailers before dawn, made to lie on the road, others made to hold up numbers while they were photographed.

With a Jewish father, some of my passion for justice comes from knowing that family died in the Holocaust, numbers tattooed on their arms.

Well, let me tell you how this story played out in our middle class Pakeha home. I was not home that morning so this comes from my husband and my daughter. Two friendly men in blue, no masks, no loud hailers, knocked politely on our door. Assuming they were there about recent burglaries in our district, my husband offered them a cup of tea. While he put the kettle on, another seven police followed the initial two, rousing his curiosity. But they remained professional and courteous, talked to our daughter and insisted that she accompany them to the police station. They did not visit our neighbours, they did not stop cars coming past our farm, nor photograph their occupants. They did return with search warrants, took our computers, but returned them two days later. Tuhoe are still waiting for theirs.

So that is how I was catapulted into the role of 'mother of an alleged terrorist'. No warning, no job description, no training and no mentor. And not just me, but up and down the country people were labelled as 'terrorists' or families of terrorists.

New stories began that day that are still being played out. Police stories, stories of resistance. Stories can kill, stories can bring life, what will these stories do?

Back in the days of the Springbok tour we had our networks, our instructions, our roles. As with the Foreshore and Seabed raupatu there was time to organise a response. But October 15<sup>th</sup> came out of the blue. The raids were horrifying, terrifying for Tuhoe who bore the brunt, but the response from around the country was heartening.

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Strong networks of people working for justice in Aotearoa, of lawyers and academics, of organisers and activists sprang into action. New technology may enable high levels of surveillance but email and websites also benefit activists, especially those of us living in small towns.

Now my career as an activist is long but not especially meritorious. I can't even claim to have been arrested. Half a dozen years ago I said, to Tame Iti, that reaching 50 without being arrested, was a bit like being a virgin too long. In the '70's, although some Pakeha women were arrested, the reality is that we were less at risk than Maori. Protesting with Tame and his ilk we were immune from the cops who were attracted to him like bees to a honey pot.

I never thought my daughter would be immune. Her courage and sense of righteousness would not allow her to avoid arrest. With two other women she travelled the world to video environmental issues; she protested the G8 in Edinburgh. Yet I never dreamt that she would be arrested on terrorism charges in her own country.

She was home at the time. She had recently fractured both arms in a street theatre stilt walking accident. She had come home because she couldn't feed or dress herself, much less lob a Molotov cocktail.

I believe that all experiences, good and bad, bring not only stories but also lessons, if we are open to them. She had worked in the disability field so, after her accident, I had abused my power over her ruthlessly (pardon the pun).

"I would like chocolate," she would say.

"No, carrots are better for you," I responded.

"Can you open the bathroom door?" she asked.

"Just wait ten minutes. I'm busy right now."

Brief lessons in disempowerment.

Little did I know that the police were about to do that job for me. Two nights in a police cell and two weeks in prison and sudden media attention, probably taught her more than she would learn in a year at university.

A fortnight later my role as 'mother of an alleged terrorist' was taken from me as quickly and capriciously as it had been bestowed. Now she is merely up on gun charges.

As a jeweller, my daughter had been making beautiful kowhai flowers from shell casings, delighting in turning metal made with destruction in mind into something beautiful. Those casing were taken by the police as evidence. Her work in the disability field came to an abrupt halt, but she enjoys being 'pit girl' at the local dump. The rest of this story is still to be played out.

I return now to the importance of stories. These days a key medium for recording stories is through film. After the raids I invested in a video camera. I

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believe this should be the weapon of choice for today's activists and I rejoice to see readily available cellphones with video functions. If the police knock on your door, greet them with a camera in hand. Let's be eternally vigilant, keeping the powerful under surveillance.

More than ever in 2008 and beyond we need to be story tellers, weaving powerful stories that inform, arouse passions, energise. Stories that ensure that each year we gain more thoughtful citizens, committed to justice in Aotearoa.

In the bone people Keri Hulme wrote

*They were nothing more than people, by themselves.  
Even paired, any pairing they would have been nothing more than people by themselves. But all together, they have become the heart and muscles and  
mind  
of something perilous and new, something strange and growing and great.  
Together, all together they are the instruments of change.*

I pray that the long wait for justice will be one day over, if not in our lifetime, in that of our tamariki.