

‘All there is is belonging’

Kennedy Warne’s talk at Hauraki Gulf Marine Park Seminar, October 28, 2015

If this event were being held in Australia, each speaker would probably begin their talk like this: “I acknowledge the traditional owners of this land and pay my respects to its custodians past and present.”

On this side of the Tasman we tend to have a mihi and get it over with. But I have come to believe that acknowledgement of the land and its caregivers is essential.

It is not a trival thing, to acknowledge. Maori do it every time they stand and speak on the marae, situating themselves according to their geographical coordinates—mountain, river, sea—and their human coordinates—their key ancestors. All of it, animate and inanimate, is part of whakapapa.

This kind of acknowledgement declares and inscribes a relational exchange with land, and diminishes and refutes the prevailing transactional exchange people assume towards land and sea—land and sea as “resource,” to be shaped and exploited as humans see fit. Land and sea as something to be overwritten with each generation’s new agendas, as subservient to human interests.

I reject those formulations as the entire story, or even the main story.

This is the land to which I belong.

Out there is the sea to which I belong.

The Jewish philosopher Levinas writes that one comes into being only through relationships, and that therefore one is always indebted to the others who precede us; one is always in ethical relationships that call for response. So let me speak of a few of my predecessors and precedents.

My grandfather was a boat builder and big-game fishing captain in the Bay of Islands in the 1930s. Those were the days of catching a dozen marlin before breakfast. He used to speak of schools of kahawai and trevally stretching from one side of the Bay to the other.

My very earliest memories are of the sea that brings us here today: the Hauraki Gulf. My family took holidays at Auckland’s Whangaparaoa Peninsula, staying in a fibrolite bach near Stanmore Bay. It’s all suburbia now, but I recognised the location when I went back there the other day, and found the track to the beach. I can picture my father carrying the red wooden

dinghy down that track. He carried it on his back, turtle-fashion, and that is how I have carried dinghies ever since I was strong enough to lift them.

My earliest underwater memories are also of the Hauraki Gulf. I have loved the undersea world ever since I began snorkelling in the kelp forests of Takatu Peninsula, north of Kawau Island, finning through a labyrinth of golden trunks. Since then, I have had the good fortune to have dived in the tropical waters of New Zealand's northernmost territory—Atafu, in Tokelau—and taken a dip (an extremely short dip, without a wetsuit) among icebergs in Antarctica. I have snorkelled with caramel drummers in the Kermadecs—fishes as golden yellow as slices of papaya—and watched crested penguins streak past me in the subantarctic. I shared a moment with a seven-gilled shark in the bottle-green depths of Fiordland and saluted a squadron of eagle rays on dusk at the Three Kings Islands.

I have a Masters degree in marine biology, earned at the university [Auckland] across the gully from here, but I feel that I am only beginning to come to know the sea. Only beginning to understand what it means to be a saltwater person.

The American poet Robert Frost, best known for his road not taken, said towards the end of his life: “All there is is belonging and belonging. . . . You belong and I belong. The sincerity of their belongings is all I have to measure people by.”

Belonging is at the heart of the expression Maori use about the land: “Ko au te whenua, ko te whenua ko au.” I am the land and the land is me. The startling fact, of course, is that the Maori word for land—whenua—is the same as the word for placenta. I know of no more powerful declaration of connection to land than to adopt the same word for each person's beginning.

Yet we are told that we live in the age of extinction, an age of disconnection, displacement and alienation. These may be the most connected of times—with our ubiquitous cell phones and devices—but they are also the least connected of times.

How do we find our way from disconnection to connection?

I wrote about this sense in an essay called “I, whenua,” which began like this:

In sub-zero temperatures, squinting against the sunlight reflecting from freshly fallen snow, 86-year-old Robert Frost stood at the East Portico of the US Capitol on January 20, 1961, to read the poem he had penned for John F. Kennedy's inauguration. He started, faltered, then started again, peering at the pages he was holding. But the type was faint and the snow was dazzling

his ageing eyes. He abandoned the reading and recited a much shorter poem of his, one he knew by heart. It was “The Gift Outright,” one of Kennedy’s favourites.

The land was ours before we were the land’s.

She was our land more than a hundred years

Before we were her people.

Frost called his poem “a history of the United States in a dozen lines of blank verse”. It is the history of New Zealand, too. It is the history of every settler nation. First the possession, the grabbing, the greed. Then, later, a long time later—and for some, perhaps, never—the belonging, the preserving, the respect.

Contrast this gap between owning and being owned with what Tamati Kruger, a spokesman for the Tuhoe iwi, said when he was speaking to the Waitangi Tribunal about why his people’s land must be returned to them, he said: “We are this land and we are the face of the land. Wherever those mountains come from, that’s where we come from. Wherever the mist emerges from and disappears to, that’s where we come from.”

In a conversation I had with Tamati while working on my book *Tuhoe: Portrait of a Nation*, he said: “Everything about Tuhoe is entangled in this place called Te Urewera. Our cuisine, music, poetry, proverbs, sayings, even the lilt of our language, is almost befitting the rugged isolation and wildness of Te Urewera. Our self-image, as well as our values, are part and parcel of this place. And this is something that Tuhoe people have decided they must not give up.”

Maori have modelled this this sense of belonging, for anyone who has eyes to see. And it was the land that generated the belonging. Ngati Wai kaumatua Hori Parata says, “When we came to Aotearoa we were Polynesian. The land made us Maori.”

Ko au te whenua, ko te whenua ko au.

The land naturalises us, if we will let it. We think of that term as referring to someone from overseas, but naturalisation is for all of us, if we choose, becoming part and parcel of a place. I think of myself as a citizen of Auckland, but also of Tamaki Makaurau, of Owairaka, the maunga I see every morning, of Te Auaunga, the river I visit on my evening runs, of Waitakere, during cycle rides and visits to a certain kauri tree I am coming to know. I am a citizen of the quarter-acre section that I till, the orchard I tend. And I am a citizen of the Hauraki Gulf.

The Tongan-born scholar Epeli Hau'ofa, a lifelong ambassador for Oceania, wrote: “There are no more suitable people on earth to be the custodians of the oceans than those for whom the sea is home.” Then he added wistfully, “We seem to have forgotten that we are such a people.”

That is surely the worst kind of forgetting.

Our poets and writers call us back from the forgetting to the belonging.

Hone Tuwhare wrote:

Dear *Karirikura*, beloved ocean,
we should be lost without you.
But you are here beside us, very close:
soft thunder in our ears.

Patricia Grace has a beautiful short story called “Fishing,” about a girl who spends what she knows will be the last good day of summer casting a line from the rocks. As the sun sets she puts her line away because there is something else she has to do—“because how could you be really sure of coming there again next summer? Any why should you come if you didn't let the place know you? It wasn't enough just to hold the end of a line The mothers were right about needing to go beyond the shore.”

Here is what the girl does to let the place know her:

She walked out into the half-tide and let herself gradually into the water. She squatted for a while with her skirt floating up about her, then she pushed forward and down, pulling herself along the stony sea bed for as long as her breath lasted. When she came to the larger rocks where the weed grew thickly, she stood and pushed her way through. Once in the clear water again she lay on her back, letting herself go the way the water moved her. It was a familiar place, and she knew she could lie there like that quite safely.

She lay there for a long time watching the sky redden as the sun went down.

It is a tender moment of affection and attachment—of cherishing the ocean for what it is, not what it gives.

These feelings of kaitiaki responsibility have come to feel important, even indispensable to me. And this is exactly the conclusion the Waitangi Tribunal came to in its report on Maori intellectual property and matauranga Maori—the so-called “Wai 262” hearing. The tribunal found that kaitiaki relationships are sources of identity. “If hapu are unable to exercise their

kaitiaki obligations, they are deprived of a core aspect of their culture. . . .Without the Maori traditional knowledge that lives in the conservation estate, kaitiakitanga is lost. Without kaitiakitanga, Maori are themselves lost.”

I found myself thinking a lot about kaitiakitanga when I researched a *New Zealand Geographic* story about the wreck of the *Rena*—collecting oil-besmirched seabirds on the rocks around the Mount at night, watching penguins being de-oiled in the rescue centre, laughing as I watched them zooming around in portable swimming pools while their feathers regained their natural waterproofing.

At the end of my field work I visited the settlement of Maketu. Maketu had been hit hard by the contamination of shellfish beds and loss of fishing access. When Maori speak of the sea being their food cupboard or supermarket, they don’t mean going there for a recreational top-up. It’s part of daily life. And it’s part of being a kaitiaki.

As I was leaving Maketu I passed a roadside memorial that honours the final resting place of the waka Te Arawa. The commemorative plaque names two ancestors: Tamatekapua, the navigator, and Ngatoroirangi, the tohunga. I looked at the plaque, got into my truck to drive away, drove a hundred metres, turned round, drove back, got out and had another look. That combination, navigator and tohunga, struck me as oddly significant. One negotiated the seen world, the other negotiated the unseen world. A voyage on the waters of Tangaroa required both as “officers of the watch.”

Environmental philosopher Mark Sagoff makes a similar point, drawing on a story from the Judeo-Christian tradition, the story of Jonah.

When lightening the ship of its cargo failed to overcome the danger—the tempest only worsened—they looked for a moral rather than a physical explanation of their plight. They found it: Jonah confessed his crime in fleeing from God’s commandment. When the sailors transferred Jonah from the ship to the whale, the seas became calm. Today, we are all aware that the seas may rise up against us. Like the mariners, however, we might consider not just the weight of the cargo but also the ethical compass of our biospheric ark.

And let me add one final story, from still another tradition, that of the Inuit. This story exists in many forms across the regions of the far north. I first heard it in a movie called *Village at the End of the World*, set in the north of Greenland.

Here is my paraphrase:

A girl goes fishing with her stepfather. When they are a long way offshore, the stepfather, a cruel man, throws her overboard. She struggles to climb back into the boat and begs him to save her. As she grips the gunwale in the freezing water he takes an axe and chops her fingers off so that they fall into the sea.

They drift downwards, and so does the unconscious girl. But as she sinks in the green-dark depths she awakens and realises she is not drowning. And she is amazed to see that her fingers have turned into animals: walrus, seal, whale, narwhal.

At the bottom of the sea she finds four paths leading north, south, east and west. She realises that she can see everything that happens on land. So she builds a house with two rooms: one for herself and one for the sea animals. And although she has been treated brutally, she loves her Inuit people and gives them the animals for food. The people rejoice, for now they no longer have to rely on just fish and birds. They have skins for clothes, fur for warmth, blubber for oil, meat for food. They recognise that these good things come from the girl who is now a grown woman, the mother of the sea.

In time, however, they forget. And they grow to disrespect the sea, allowing refuse, garbage, all many of filth—nitrogen runoff from intensified dairy farming, heavy metals from industrial infrastructure—to enter the sea. All this detritus drifts down and tangles in the hair of the mother of the sea, turning it into a clogged and clotted mass. So she calls back the animals to her house at the bottom of the sea. And so the people begin to starve.

And as people are apt to do when the environmental chips are down, and global temperatures are warming, and carbon dioxide concentrations are going through the roof, they say to each other, “I think we screwed up.” So they hold a summit. They decide that a shaman needs to go and visit the mother of the sea. After days and nights of spiritual preparation, the shaman dives through a hole in the ice and descends to the depths. And what does he do? He combs the hair of the mother of the sea.

And that is what I think kaitiakitangi is about. It is the story of sea change that needs to occur in our hearts as well as in our marine spatial plans. And it is what I want to spend the rest of my life doing, in my writing and storytelling: Combing the hair of the mother of the sea.