

“Ko au te whenua, ko te whenua ko au – I am the land and the land is me.”

With love for the whenua (land): Mingling the hau (breath) – a Takahiwai story

**Seasons of Creation 4
St Andrews on The Terrace, Wellington
27 September 2020
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We were taught at the theological hall at Knox College to always start a sermon with a story. The idea was that the speaker could hook the listeners to get their attention. But really, where does story start and finish? We live with story. We **are** story.

We grow up with stories about who we are, where our families came from and why. We create our own stories to make sense of our lives. They change over time, and that’s okay – it’s part of being human. Stories give us a place in the world. They can help us understand ourselves and others.

In the story we heard from Matthew’s gospel about the two sons, Jesus calls attention to the all too familiar reality that we may know the right things to say, but that what matters is what we do. As we say these days, we need to walk the talk.

This Season of Creation is a good time to stop and think about our actions in the face of climate change.

What changes are we making to resist the idolatry of wealth and possessions?
What are we doing to help ourselves and others better understand the systems of economy and development, of production and distribution and consumption which have abused and overused the resources of the planet, and are threatening its resilience and its regenerative capacities?

How can we act to address the terrible inequalities in our society? How can we help heal our one and only planet?

It can be overwhelming, can’t it? It can feel way too big. It’s easy to throw our hands up in despair, to give up and hope the problem will go away, which it won’t, or to hope that someone else will do the work, and some are.

Today I want to tell you a story about a group of people who are doing the work. It’s a story about whenua, about land – and about a group of people who refuse to be overwhelmed by the enormity of the situation, are thinking and acting local and doing what they can.

It’s a story of people who walk the talk. That’s why I want to share it. The group is a mix of tangata whenua and tauwiwi – of Māori and non-Māori – who live on a remnant of Māori land in Tai Tokerau Northland. I’m speaking of the Friends of the Berm at Takahiwai and their project O Matou Taonga, All Our Treasures.

But no story stands on its own. All stories are woven together in the web of life; they are all connected, so before I go any further with the Takahiwai story, there's another story to be told because it sets some of the context.

We are probably all familiar with the Māori creation story. It is a love story. Ranginui, the Sky Father and Papatūānuku the Earth Mother love each other passionately. They hold each other in a loving embrace – sky and earth together. From this love, Papatūānuku gives birth to all things – people, trees birds, animals. All of creation. In te reo Māori the word for land and placenta are one and the same. The land is Papatūānuku's placenta or whenua.

So Māori regard land, soil and water as taonga – treasures. They consider themselves kaitiaki – guardians – of these taonga. For Māori, land is their standing place, their turangawaewae. It is who they are, their identity. There is no separation between themselves and the whenua.

For them, whakapapa (genealogy) includes the land. As anthropologist Dame Anne Salmond wrote recently, whakapapa “is lines of descent tracing from a first surge of energy in the cosmos to thought, memory and desire, the earth and the sky, the sun, moon and stars, the sea winds, forests, crops and people, life forms linked together in a vast, all-embracing kin network.”¹

Hence the whakatauki or proverb:

“Ko au te whenua, ko te whenua ko au – I am the land and the land is me.”

So now we can go to the Takahiwai story. Takahiwai is a kainga – an ancestral village where people of the Te Parawhau and Patuharakeke iwi have lived for centuries. It lies on the shores of Te Rerenga Paraoa – Whangarei harbour in Tai Tokerau – Northland; south of the city of Whangarei and north of the small town of Waipu.

Takahiwai is not well known. It is not renowned for environmental or political activism. It is not represented by big organisations or legendary names. It does not have a lot of money behind it. The crown left local tangata whenua with this mere scrap of their original land after the systematic dispossession of Māori land in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Takahiwai is a community shaped, like many others in Aotearoa New Zealand, by what Dame Anne Salmond calls “the myth of benign, peaceful settlement” – which in reality is a history of conquest, thievery, and predation. But the Takahiwai spirit is strong.

In 2017, with fire in her heart and love for the land, Dr Mere Kepa retired from her academic position at Auckland University and moved back to her whenua at Takahiwai. She convened a group of like-minded people in the village – Māori and Pākehā – and the Friends of the Berm @ Takahiwai was born. Together they dreamed into being their project O Matou Taonga, All Our Treasures.

¹ Anne Salmond: Knowledge is a blessing on your mind, Newsroom, 14 September 2020. <https://www.newsroom.co.nz/anne-salmond-knowledge-is-a-blessing-on-your-mind>

The berm is the public area of the kainga; it shapes the view of the place. It's what everyone sees as they drive into the village. Until the 1970s, Takahiwai tangata whenua harvested seasonal foods from the berm. Since then contamination from vehicle emissions, agricultural pesticides, domesticated animals and fallout from industrial activities at nearby Marsden Point, together with infestations of foreign weeds and exotic trees made food gathering from the berm unsafe. It became increasingly messy and unattractive as the weeds took over.

Key to Mere's vision and at the heart of the group, is the concept that tangata whenua and tauiwi mingle the hau (the breath of life) as they work together to restore peace and beauty to village land.² In tribal matauranga Māori [Māori knowledge] the 'hau' occupies a pivotal position as the mingling of the breath of life among people, flora, fauna, and spirits.³

The vision of Friends of the Berm at Takahiwai is to transform the contaminated landscapes to places of abundant native beauty, food cultivation, and recreation. In mingling the hau of tangata whenua and tauiwi, relationships between the people of the land and the colonisers have the potential to be healed. As Mere says, small acts can proclaim the people's shared humanity.

Since its formation in 2017, the group has sourced funding from Whangarei District Council, Northland Regional Council and local businesses to clear weeds, plant native vegetation, and gardens. They work on revitalising the hau in the nearby forest with their pest strategy to rid the bush of pigs that were released solely for hunting, and damage the natural environment. They provide the hunters who are clearing the pigs with equipment to clean boots and equipment on entering and departing the forest, to avoid the spread of diseases like kauri dieback. They support the local wildlife refuge and the group that protects the coastal dunes at Ruakaka beach at risk from people and recreational vehicles. They work with national and local government agencies and environmental groups.

The Friends have restored two dilapidated bus shelters, now painted by local children to a design made by one of the tangata whenua who is an eminent art historian working in Paris.

Beside these bus shelters they have installed two story boards that tell the story of the local school, opened in 1902 as a native school and closed in 1973. So children can read some of the history of their village while they wait for the school bus.

That's where my story overlaps with the Friends of the Berm. I collaborated with Mere and her sister Kinny on researching and writing the storyboards about the school. A couple of years ago when I was still living in Canberra, I contacted tangata whenua at Takahiwai to offer my services pro bono to collaborate as an historian. As a descendant of the Highland Scottish-Nova Scotian Presbyterians who settled in nearby Waipu and surrounds in the

² Kapa, Mere. (2019). Mingling the hau [breath of life] in Aotearoa, New Zealand. Special issue 'Theorising indigenous knowledges' Dutkansearvi (Journal of Sámi Language and Culture Research Association). Volume 3, Issue 2. <http://dutkansearvi.fi/tieteellinen-julkaisu/volume3-issue2-2019/>

³ Kapa, Mingling the hau

middle of the 19th century, I grew up with the myth that there were no Māori in the area when my great-great grandparents settled there.

I offered to collaborate on writing history that hasn't yet been told – that there had been people there for hundreds of years when my lot arrived. I hoped to be able to give something back to the people from whose huge losses I and my family had gained privilege. The project about the school by the way, is now the basis of an exhibition at Kiwi North, the Whangarei Museum. It's an important story and a source of great pride for the Takahiwai community. In case any of you are up that way, it's on until 26 October.

The Friends have cleared weeds, planted gardens of fruit trees and stands of native trees, they have refurbished the bus shelters and beautified them with lovely art; they have installed history boards that tell a different story from most history books – a history to be proud of – of the tangata whenua's actions in the face of systematic oppression. They have done it with few resources, using relationships, establishing connections and thinking creatively.

They have seen the need, heard the land cry out, and they walk the talk. In today's Gospel story Jesus emphasises the importance of actions not words. Friends of the Berm at Takahiwai demonstrate how much can be done for the land with few resources apart from the will, and communal energy and good relations. Together they are changing the story of their village.

It's a story of hope and inspiration. I can't tell you how privileged I feel to be part of it. I'm going to give Mere the final words:

Restoring and beautifying the berm as a natural and spiritual landscape means having the courage to paint an image of a different public space, one which, even if the depiction exists only in the hau, can embolden the people as they see a better countryside, and set to work. Part of that creative labour is not just talking about the berm differently, but transforming the tainted landscape with their hau as they go. This is now a roadside where the group of Māori and Pakeha are working not only together but, also in communion with the berm's vegetation.⁴

⁴ Kepa, Mingling the hau