

Paying attention to wairua: Healing the intangible

Fay Pouesi with Rosemary Dewerse

This article discusses the crucial importance of two necessary priorities in the work of practitioners for addressing whānau violence that were noted in a 2004 report published in Aotearoa New Zealand by Kruger et al.: reconnecting a person's wairua to the other dimensions of their person, and doing so while being mindful of their whakapapa. The discussion is conducted via the autoethnographical reflection of Fay Pouesi, kaitiaki of Black Rain, a kaupapa Māori approach that pays attention to wairua across generations, which has been successfully addressing historical, intergenerational and current trauma. It also notes the challenges that arise for training others – as Fay is increasingly being asked to do – in healing the intangible within a western-influenced environment.

Keywords

whānau violence, intergenerational trauma, wairua, whakapapa

About the authors

Fay Pouesi (Ngāruahine, Te Atiawa) is the founder of Mātanga Oranga, a kaupapa Māori service based at Visionwest Waka Whakakitenga in West Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand, specialising in addressing historical, intergenerational, and current trauma. She is kaitiaki or knowledge bearer and caretaker of Black Rain, a kaupapa Māori approach. Fay has worked for over thirty years with whānau struggling with violence, in the community and in prisons. From 2000 to 2011 she was the founder-director of Westside Counselling Service in West Auckland, employing a Community of Care approach, which she developed, with women suffering from domestic and intimate partner violence. This work was documented in her Master of Social Practice thesis.

Rosemary Dewerse is collaborating with Faye to bring her wisdom and work to a wider audience. In recent years she has worked closely with women from Ngāpuhi/Te Rarawa and Ngāti Porou as well as an Adnyamathanha woman from the Flinders Ranges in South Australia, to see their knowledge and insight published, while also co-supervising doctoral theses by indigenous scholars.

In 2004, a report was published in Aotearoa New Zealand by the Second Māori Taskforce on Whānau Violence, chaired by Tamati Kruger. It presents a conceptual framework for Māori practitioners seeking to transform families. The report envisions the mauri ora, or wellbeing, of communities and the Māori within them. Violence damages wellbeing, bringing kahupō, “which can be described as having no purpose in life or spiritual blindness . . . [It] is the worst state that a Māori person can be in” (Kruger et al., 2004, pp. 15, 22). The Taskforce concludes that because “transformative practice is reconnecting the wairua with the other dimensions of the person and always in the context of their whakapapa . . . the role of the practitioner is to treat and heal the wairua first” (Kruger et al., p. 22).

It is difficult to describe this work due to the intangibility of wairua; intuition and experience are required of the practitioner and not all are skilled in this. While work has been done by others since to establish and develop Māori principles for and approaches to whānau care (Pihama et al., 2017, 2020; Dempster-Rivett et al., 2022), the conclusions of this seminal report resonate deeply with the work that I have been doing over thirty years, specialising in healing the impact of whānau violence by addressing the kahupō lying at its heart. In the last 15 years or so, I have been doing this using the Black Rain kaupapa I have been gifted with. This article is an autoethnographic reflection on the importance of whakapapa and of reconnecting the wairua to other dimensions of being, and the challenges of training practitioners in healing the intangible.

Ko wai au? Who am I? What is my story?

Ko Taranaki te maunga.

Ko Waingongoro me Waitara ngā awa.

Ko Aotea me Tokomaru ngā waka.

Ko Okahu me Ngāti Rāhiri ngā hapū.

Ko Aotearoa me Owae ngā marae.

Ko Ngāruahine me Te Atiawa ngā iwi.

I descend from two iwi from Taranaki, in the North Island of Aotearoa New Zealand. My great grandfather, Robert Tahupōtiki Haddon (1866–1936), was descended through his mother from Titokowaru, a visionary chief of Ngāti Ruanui. Tahupōtiki “was selected for training in the ancient traditions and sacred lore of his people. When he was in his mid-teens he was adopted by Tohu Kākahi, one of the two prophets of Parihaka”, a community founded in Taranaki in 1865, which practised non-violent resistance to colonial confiscation of Māori land, and which was eventually violently invaded in 1881 (Pouesi, 2012, p. 1). Tahupōtiki was taught by Tohu Kākahi and other learned elders. T.G. Hammond, a Wesleyan minister, met my tupuna Tahupōtiki during visits to Parihaka and was given permission to take him north for theological training at Wesley College in the late 1890s. In 1900 he began work as a Methodist probationer in Pātea, an area in South Taranaki. According to an article in the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, this was initially very difficult as he was regarded as a traitor to his people (Ballara, 2015). Over time, however, he became a distinguished orator and, because he advocated for the return of confiscated lands, was slowly accepted. He also became a significant figure in the temperance movement across the country, a strong supporter of the Rātana Church, founded by his kinsman, and a key ally of Princess Te Puea and the Māori King movement.

The stories that are told amongst my whānau...speak of a man who had witnessed many things in the days of Te Whiti and Tohu’s rise and decline at Parihaka. It is also known that he did valuable work in improving social conditions of people throughout the North and South Island. His many years of service to Māori ... identified him as one of the greatest leaders in the Māori world of Taranaki. (Pouesi, 2012, p. 1)

This significant narrative is embedded in the tragedies, contradictions, and violence of colonisation, which impacted my tupuna, and Māori across Taranaki and Aotearoa. This legacy is woven within my whānau. It was the personal story of my grandfather, one of his sons, and was the lived reality of my mother, as well as dominating my own experience growing up. This story is also significant, however, because it is imbued with wairua, intrinsic in what it means to be Māori. Moreover, Tahupōtiki had spiritual gifts and insight recognised by Māori and Pākehā alike. The visitations by tūpuna and the visions I have experienced since childhood now bring for me a profound awareness of the spiritual dimension and a sense of being watched over. They affirm my whakapapa and shape my life and work.

It is important to note, however, that for as long as violence, physical and sexual, was my reality I was essentially in a state of kahupō. I was so caught up in my own life, in the fear and the not knowing if I was going to live until the next day. At that time I had no context for the spiritual; “What the hell was that?”.

I had always had premonitions and they happened periodically. I had a knowing, but I did not think of that as spiritual. I just thought that there were ghosts, but I had no understanding or context for that. If you had asked me to unpack these experiences, I would not have known how to.

As Kruger et al. writes, “The existence of a spiritual truth/realm is fundamental to well-being from a Māori cultural frame of reference” (Kruger et al., 2004, p. 22). While this truth is within us it is also greater than us. I have come to understand that there has to be a connection to a higher power if mauri ora is to be true, and the only higher power that I hold my hand up to is God, Atua. This is how it is for me. When I first chose to believe this, I said, “If you’re real, then you can fix me. If there’s anything that needs to come out of me, tip me upside down and shake me out.” I went to bed that night, and next thing I felt my body go rigid. I was lying straight out in my bed and my mouth was pulled wide open. I could feel this rumbling in the lower part of my stomach. It was like something was trying to wedge out. This branch started to come out of my mouth. It had all these other branches. I was wide awake watching this. I could feel every movement, everything that was happening, from the lower part of my body, my stomach, all the way through. All these branches came out, but they were hanging with names like deceit, addiction, etcetera. The whole thing was reaching the ceiling and curling over and then finally the root of all of that came out, and I have never tasted something so foul and so disgusting. I spent two hours after that in the bathroom washing my mouth.

Whatever happened that night, I know that something got out of me. I know it has had a huge part to play in what I do today. The journey out of kahupō happens in the spirit, and yet I got to see it, experience it and feel that healing process. The intangible was made real for me.

Whakapapa: Our context

My own story and work over thirty years confirm the truth of that 2004 report. Transformation for Māori is about reconnecting us to wairua, always mindful of our context, of whakapapa. While we are individuals, and our experiences and choices are unique to us, we are integrally connected to the experiences of those who have gone before us and who live alongside us. How we live our lives will impact the next generations. Within a Māori worldview, when we speak of whakapapa we understand this to be the generational layers that make up a person and a community's story, stretching vertically and horizontally, recited and narrated or storied. Our identity is collective and time spirals; the experiences of our ancestors are our own. Their knowing, grounded in the dimensions of Sir Mason Durie's model, Te Whare Tapa Whā, is our knowing, in all the joy and the pain of that (Durie, 1998; cf. Lawson Te-Aho & Liu, 2010).

In recent decades there has been increasing credence given internationally to the notion of historical or intergenerational trauma and its consequences. This emerged initially from studies of survivors of the holocaust and Japanese concentration camps of the Second World War and has since been argued for by Native scholars in America (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998; de Graaf, 1998; Duran & Duran, 1995; Nagata, 1991). In Aotearoa, there has been acknowledgement that such discussion is needed here so that we might better understand the trauma experienced by Māori as a result of colonisation (Pihama et al., 2014). Native American psychologist Eduardo Duran is an influential thinker in this field.

Duran (2006) spoke about the crisis he faced when he tried to apply his western training, with its focus on individuals and the micro-social, in native communities, only to be rebuked. By listening he learned that historical and socio-cultural factors must be taken into account in any attempt to bring healing. What he heard was people expressing the notion of a "soul wound" with roots in their ancestors' experience of genocide and the wounding of the earth, the consequences of which, left unaddressed, were accumulating over generations in an intensifying sense of disconnection and decreasing health, violence, and addiction issues (Duran, 2006). Duran noted, however, that talk of a soul wound was foreign to western psychology, with its focus on cognition, and would make many uneasy, despite the word *psychology* literally meaning "study of the soul". Tracing the source of this unease to the Cartesian separation of the physical from the spiritual,

he noted, “The fact that the soul has been eradicated from our healing circle is indicative of a collective wounding process that has never been grieved or healed” (Duran, 2006, p. 20). This affirms the call by Kruger et al. (2004), two years prior to the publishing of Duran’s book, for practitioners to pay attention first to reconnecting Māori whānau to their wairua in the context of whakapapa to facilitate transformation.

My own practice in paying attention to wairua has been informed by a vision I received as Black Rain. Black Rain honours the collective, while acknowledging the truth of the soul wound, by utilising a deceptively simple tool. The person is invited to talk about their whānau while the practitioner draws a genogram or a variation thereof. When the time is right, they are then asked to narrate the violence they have experienced and/or perpetrated, noting from or on whom, as well as that of their tūpuna and their children. All of this is drawn as black clouds raining down from one generation to the next. Time and again, by giving the person a visual expression of their reality, of the whakapapa context, this tool has unlocked conversations that have enabled change. That whole picture, when the person sees it, opens a spiritual window, making visible the content they cannot see, cannot touch, and have been unable to make sense of.

Using the Black Rain process, I have had whānau move quickly to being able to speak about the trauma of violence in their lives and so begin their journey to mauri ora.

Reconnecting whānau to wairua

“Violence is not just about poverty, it is about poverty of spirit” (Kruger et al., 2004, p. 22). More is now being published on the importance and legitimacy of spirituality in addressing trauma. Key wisdom and learning for facilitating spiritual healing that resonates with my own practice is emerging in research published in recent years.

Acknowledgement of the spiritual realm creates safe space for whānau to express their experiences of this, as well as to be met as whole people who can then tell their whole story (Pouesi & Napan, 2018). It is in having that legitimised, in a deeply open and relational space, that they can then make choices for transformation. Wiremu NiaNia is a Māori healer, and in his practice, he is mindful of three concepts related to wairua: mauri, tapu, and mana (NiaNia et al., 2017). Mauri is life force and can be trampled or enhanced within relationships.

When abuse occurs, it is a violation of tapu, of sacredness, of mana.

Mana is the spiritual authority, energy or power embodied in a person or whānau that comes from their relationship with Te Kaihanga (The Creator) and other key relationships. It gives them the authority to have control over themselves, their circumstances and other entities that may be impinging on them. (NiaNia et al., 2017, p. 3)

In an article detailing his work with a Pākehā psychiatrist to support a young Māori-Sāmoan woman and her family, NiaNia is clear that “any healing has to start with the wairua” (NiaNia et al., 2017, p. 89). He also notes his sensitivity to “things flowing down the generations, good and bad . . . [and particularly to] unresolved current or intergenerational matters”, as well as his expectation that the Creator will be guiding the conversation (NiaNia et al., 2017, pp. 89, 84). In meeting with the young woman and her family, NiaNia requests that they begin with a karakia, and from there on it is evident that both in his perception and his person he is a key contributor to the creation of a safe space for a profoundly spiritual conversation the young woman later admits was “‘not easy’ for her but ultimately helpful” (NiaNia et al., 2017, p. 87).

The practice of karakia opens connection to the spiritual realm, though it is not always appropriate to offer it. My daily practice of karakia heightens my own sensitivity. When tāngata come into my office, they come in knowing as they walk through the door that there is a feeling of safety. There is an unspoken word, an unspoken message, an unspoken action, to just be you. My role feels like that of a navigator of conversations. As tāngata speak and hear themselves speaking, a connection to the heart occurs. There is a freedom and a truth that they meet.

Significantly, the ten-year suicide prevention strategy of the New Zealand Ministry of Health speaks of the importance of poipoi wairua, or spiritual nourishment, recognising trauma damages spirit as much as body, emotions, mind, and relationships (Ministry of Health, 2019). It is important to note that “[t]he relationship of people and place through connection to whakapapa (ancestry) and land (whenua) is central to indigenous Māori wairuatanga (spirituality)” (Kiyimba & Anderson, 2022, p. 351). One could say the focus is outwards and upwards rather than “inwards and downwards” (Durie, 2003 in McLachlan et al., 2017, p. 46).

Pā Henare Tate speaks of how Māori see everything through a lens of Atua (God), tangata (people), and whenua (land); mauri ora or wellbeing is true when all are being enhanced (Tate, 2012). For colonised peoples, alienation from our land issues a particular challenge to the journey toward mauri ora, not least because Papatūānuku “gives birth to all things, including humankind, and provides the physical and spiritual basis for life” (Royal, 2007; Moewaka Barnes, H. & McCreanor, 2019). While our struggles are ongoing, because they are core to our identity as Māori, the rejuvenating power of time spent in the bush, in the mountains, at a river, in the water, or on a beach is not to be underestimated (Dempster-Rivett et al., 2022). For myself, a walk at a particular beach nestled between hills, following a lagoon through bush and grasses to the sea, replenishes me after attending to particularly dark or difficult stories.

I provide cultural support to others, and it seems the significance of this connection to whenua for Māori is not often understood. A common refrain I hear from those I support is about the struggle to engage with some clients. I suggest that they do what I do and take the person to go and visit the whenua, the moana. “Really?” they say, “can I take them out of the office?” When this cultural advice is followed, it is beautiful to see the smile and energy from the therapist. I later hear stories of the birds coming to meet their clients, the normally crashing waves being calm and still and even fish jumping out of the water. In the journey of returning from the water there is transformation. The person takes on the breath of life. Tīhei mauri ora.

These stories usefully bring to light the challenges for western-trained practitioners in reconnecting whānau to wairua – constrained as they are by rules of engagement, often lacking understanding of a holistic worldview – and highlight the urgent need for training that prioritises wairua. Cartesian dualism, the philosophical base noted by Duran as informing western thinking, has elevated the physical over the spiritual, relegating the latter to the realm of the “Not Real” (Duran, 2006; Wertheim, 2011). “It follows that if the healer is split from her soul, she will not be able to facilitate the integration of soul in her patients” (Duran, 2006, p. 19).

In my experience of teaching students and supervising other practitioners, there is a disconnection. They come in, do their training and sit with people. But if you do not know *that* piece, if you have no knowledge of what is going on in *that* space between you and your client and you are just concentrating on what is going on in your head, then how can you do anything about *that* piece?

In an article that detailed discussions over a twelve-month period with nine mental health professionals in New Zealand, Peter Bray noted an ongoing struggle to integrate spirituality – whether a practitioner’s own or that of their clients – into professional practice, as well as the fear of either being found wanting in the face of “medical materialism” for trying to do so, or of unhelpfully projecting spiritual explanations into therapeutic conversations (Bray, 2016, p. 28). This reflects the dilemma we are in as a result of one worldview long dominating our training and the struggle, even now, across the helping professions for the spiritual dimension to be understood as essential for wellbeing. This reality highlights the importance of indigenous models for workforce development, especially for serving indigenous clients for whom paying attention to wairua is necessary for healing.

In 2020, a report arising from a series of meetings with Māori providers and practitioners across the country was published by Te Kotahi Research Institute. *He Oranga Ngākau* details Māori approaches to trauma-informed care and establishes kaupapa Māori principles of healing. It is important that we chart our own path.

Black rain

I have been using Black Rain in my work with whānau impacted by violence since the mid-2000s, in prisons and in the community, through Westside Counselling Services and now Mātanga Oranga at Visionwest Waka Whakakitenga, a kaupapa Māori service specialising in addressing historical, intergenerational, and current trauma. It is a visual revelation of intergenerational soul wounds and more. Black Rain is opening up the spiritual realm with karakia that speak to the un/spoken; respecting and honouring mana, mauri and tapu as described by NiaNia; observing tikanga (cultural customs); connecting to whenua (land); listening to wairua; and enabling meeting.

A letter dated June 2020 reveals what is possible:

I am writing this letter to inform you of the amazing, and at times magical work that Faye is doing with me, and 100% for me.

Since being referred to Matanga Oranga ... I have had more breakthroughs in the past 7 months than I have had in the 25 years dealing with the Mental Health and other DHB institutions. I have been prescribed and passed on, causing me further injury and setback, leading to more prescribed medication, which led to further addictions and emotionally erratic behavioural problems.

Since working with Faye and following the process of healing, I have made what I believe is, major progress for my hinengaro (mental well-being), my wairua ora (spiritual wellbeing) as well as my 'self-awareness'. The learning and support I have and am receiving ... are helping me to become much more aware of myself, and my triggers and I am learning how to manage them. I have also managed to reduce my addictions and prescription intake to almost nothing, a feat I never ever thought possible.

This letter is an acknowledgement from me ... for the opportunity I have had and continue to have to heal and break the cycle of intergenerational trauma and abuse over my life and the life of my whanau.

Tena koutou, tena koutou, tena koutou katoa.¹

In recent years I have begun giving workshops on Black Rain to groups of counsellors and community workers, as well as to students training to be practitioners. I receive feedback on their application of Black Rain and how transformational it is. I am also being asked by more and more therapists to provide in-depth training. There is a hunger for a truly holistic approach that is trusting, discerning, and prioritises wairua.

Plans have begun to establish wānanga over nine to twelve months, with supervision and reflection in between, taking participants on their own journey, even as they are trained to guide others. This will be my contribution toward charting a path beginning with wairua, in the context of whakapapa, believing that many more whānau can journey from kahupō to mauri ora. Just as I have.

¹ Permission to publish this letter was granted on 27 September 2022.

References

- Ballara, A. (1996, updated 2015). Story: Haddon, Robert Tahupōtiki. In *Ngā Tāngata Taumata Rau: Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*. Te Ara. <https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/3h1/haddon-robert-tahupotiki>
- Brave Heart, M.Y.H., & DeBruyn, L.M. (1998). The American Indian holocaust: Healing historical unresolved grief. *American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Research Journal*, 8(2), 56–78.
- Bray, P. (2016). Mental health therapists consider the relevance of spirituality in their work with addiction and trauma. *New Zealand Journal of Counselling*, 36(1), 21–46.
- de Graaf, T. K. (1998). A family therapeutic approach to transgenerational traumatization. *Family Process*, 37, 233–234. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1545-5300.1998.00233.x>
- Dempster-Rivett, K.L., Masters-Awatere, B., Roen, K., & Starkey, N. (2022). Māori voices in healing childhood maltreatment and breaking the cycle of family harm. *New Zealand Journal of Psychology* 51(1), 36–45.
- Duran, E., & Duran, B. (1995). *Native American postcolonial psychology*. State University of New York Press.
- Duran, E. (2006). *Healing the soul wound: Counselling with American Indians and other Native peoples*. Teachers College Press.
- Durie, M. (1998). *Whaiora: Māori health development*. Oxford University Press.
- Durie, M. (2003). *Ngā kāhui pou: Launching Māori futures*. Huia.
- Kiyimba, N., & Anderson, R. (2022). Reflecting on cultural meanings of spirituality/wairuatanga in post-traumatic growth using the Māori wellbeing model of Te Whare Tapa Wha. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 25(3), 345–361.
- Kruger, T., Pitman, M., Grennell, D., McDonald, T., Martin, D., Pomare, A., Mita, T., Maihi, M., & Lawson-Te Aho, K. (2004). *Transforming Whānau Violence: A Conceptual Framework: An updated version of the report from the former Second Māori Taskforce on Whānau Violence, 2*. New Zealand: Te Puni Kōkiri, Ministry of Māori Development.
- Lawson-Te Aho, K., & Liu, J. H. (2010). Indigenous suicide and colonization: The legacy of violence and the necessity of self-determination. *International Journal of Conflict and Violence*, 4(1), 124–133.

- McLachlan, A.D., Wirihana, R., & Huriwai, T. (2017). Whai tikanga: The application of a culturally relevant value centred approach. *New Zealand Journal of Psychology*, 46(3), 46–54.
- Ministry of Health. (2019). *Every life matters – He Tapu te Oranga o ia Tangata: Suicide prevention strategy 2019–2029, and suicide prevention action plan 2019–2024 for Aotearoa New Zealand*. Manatū Hauora, Ministry of Health. <https://www.health.govt.nz/system/files/documents/publications/suicide-prevention-strategy-2019-2029-and-plan-2019-2024-v2.pdf>
- Moewaka Barnes, H. & McCreanor, T. (2019). Colonisation, hauora and whenua in Aotearoa, *Journal of the Royal Society of New Zealand*, 49(1) 19–33, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03036758.2019.1668439>
- Nagata, D.K. (1991). Transgenerational impact of the Japanese-American internment: Clinical issues in working with children of former internees. *Psychotherapy*, 28(1), 121–128.
- NiaNia, W., Bush, A., & Espton, D. (2017). *Collaborative and indigenous mental health therapy: Tātaihono – Stories of Māori healing and psychiatry*. Routledge.
- NiaNia, W., Mana, Rangi, Bush, A., & Epston, D. (2017). Restoring mana and taking care of wairua: A story of Māori whānau healing. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy*, 38, 72–97. <https://doi.org/10.1002/anzf.1205>
- Pihama, L., Tuhiwai Smith, L., Evans-Campbell, T., Kohu-Morgan, H., Cameron, N., Mataki, T., Te Nana, R., Skipper, H., Southey, K. (2017). Investigating Māori approaches to trauma informed care. *Journal of Indigenous Well-being*, 2(3), 18–31.
- Pihama, L., Smith, L., Cameron, N., Te Nana, R., Kohu-Morgan, H., Skipper, H. & Mataki, T. (2020). *He Oranga Ngākau: Māori approaches to trauma informed care*. Health Research Council of New Zealand Te Mata Punenga o te Kotahi.
- Pouesi, F. (2012). *Te Puawaitanga o Te Ngākau: A case-study of Westside Counselling Services in West Auckland. A “Community of Care” approach to working with Māori women and their whanau who have been impacted by domestic violence* [Unpublished Master’s thesis, Unitec Institute of Technology]. Pouesi, F., & Napan, K. (2018). Weaving the strands of spirituality in recovery from violence. *Socialno delo*, 56(3), 225–234.

- Royal, Te Ahukaramū C. (2007). Papatūāmuku – the land. *Te Ara – The encyclopedia of New Zealand*. <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/papatuanuku-the-land/print>
- Tate, H. (2012) *He puna iti i te ao marama: A little spring in the world of light*. Libro International.
- Te Kotahi Research Institute (2020). He Oranga Ngākau: Maori approaches to trauma informed care. University of Waikato.
- Wertheim, Margaret. (2011). Lost in space: The spiritual crisis of Newtonian cosmology. In B. Bryson (Ed.), *Seeing further: The story of science and the Royal Society* (pp. 59–82). Harper.

