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“As If” We Are Intertwined with Our Ancestors

So the whale rider uttered a prayer over the wooden spear saying, “Let this spear be planted in the years to come, for there are sufficient spear already implanted. Let this be the one to flower when the people are troubled and it is most needed.”

After school, I hear the sounds of children at play in different corners of the playground. The town boys are gathered at the fence of the pool. As Pai walks by, the boys show their power by making flatulent noises, alluding to their ruin of the previous night’s program. Pai moves alone in this young masculine world with even Hemi acting as captain of the team in his Magic Johnson 32 jersey yelling “Nerd” just to continue putting her down. Koro, on his bicycle, which is his primary mode of transportation, is a whale in the sea of children on his way for his daily ritual of taking Pai home. In this scene, the chief is a symbol of preserving the values and cohesiveness of the Ngati Konohi but is in the middle of its future, the children at play. Concerned with teaching the young males of the tribe the seriousness of their actions, he takes the opportunity to hit Hemi on the back of his head telling him to show more respect next time. Koro, in his Maori way, can address the issue that the village school cannot. As Koro puts the petite Pai on the front of the bicycle, I see an affection has grown despite resentment at her birth. A whistle blows, and Koro sees Pai’s teacher playing netball on the outdoor court. Looking for a wife for his son, a possible future leader of the tribe, Koro asks Pai if the teacher has a husband. Perhaps there’s a possibility for a future son, even though she still has braces on her teeth.

The playful sounds abruptly end as we move to the beautiful views outside the house looking east from Whanghara past the waka canoe toward the Pacific. Pai wanders between the windblown clothes hanging out to dry and the john boat loaded with old crayfish pots. As the summer breeze is coming in, we see a very typical New Zealand scene where Koro is working on the old outboard motor. Pai wants to write a speech about where their people came from. As she asks her grandfather, he is put off but answers her question that Paikea and the whale came from Hawaiiki, the legendary homeland. When she asks how long ago, he is still dismissive; but when she asks again, the pride of a teachable moment comes through. He smiles. He takes the old rope off the motor and elaborates on a metaphor. He first speaks in Maori, then in English. “Weave together the threads of Paikea so that our line remains strong. Each one of those threads is one of your ancestors—all joined together and strong. All the way back to that whale of yours.” Koro again smiles proudly. Pai smiles back.

Koro is the older generation teaching the young, whether it’s instilling respect on the playground, finding a wife for his son to continue the patrilineal descendants of Paikea, or talking with his granddaughter. He now shows his role by connecting the future and himself with the past. The tribe remains strong with the unity of the rope. He does not explain genealogy of relationships in a western manner by branches of a tree but by the layers and intertwining of the rope. The people today must reinforce each other, building on the identity and achievements of others in the past.

Ironically, the rope breaks. Koro slips from a chief disseminating wisdom to a man of frustration. His metaphor ends, “Useless bloody rope, I’ll get another one.” Koro misses his own point. But just as with the rope, Koro only sees the brokenness of the tribe with no one to

take over. As he slips away to get another one, Pai, perhaps a future whale rider, takes it upon herself to tie the rope together and start the motor. The joy of her accomplishment on her face, however, transforms to disappointment as Koro chastises, "I don't want you to do it again. It's dangerous."

As I reflect on this moment, I am reminded of Bateson's metaphor of a rope to describe participant observation in a Persian garden. "What I tried to do that day, stringing together elements of previous knowledge, attending to catch every possible cue, and exploring different translations of the familiar, was to improvise responsibly and with love" (6). Strands of family stories, cultural mythology and magical tales, experiences and emotions of individuals of the tribe are intertwined with memories and experiences of the observer. As I watch the interaction of generations and traditional expectations, I feel Pai's pain of achieving something and then being shunned. I have connected with Pai hoping she'll fulfill the promise of Wharanga by flowering when it is most needed for her people.