
‘Sitting in the fire’, an indigenous approach to masculinity and male violence: Maori men working with Maori men

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There were these three sexes, because the sun, the moon and the earth are three: and man was originally the child of the sun, the woman of the earth, and the man-woman of the moon ... He cut them in two and bade Apollo give the face and the half of the neck a turn in order that the man might contemplate the section of himself ... Each of us when separated is but the indenture of man and he is always looking for his other half ... Human nature was originally one and we were a whole, and the desire and pursuit of the whole is called love (Plato Symposium. Aristophane’s Speech, The Double Nature of Man, 16-18).

Introduction

I like what Arnold Mindell (1982) said about conflict and chaos: That they are ‘our best teachers’ in determining how to create and strengthen resilient communities. In our efforts to develop effective programmes to root out and eliminate violence from our neighbourhoods, our homes and our whanau we ought to embrace this paradoxical injunction, and, to trace it alongside the ‘concentric dualism’ thinking sketched in our traditional Maori hapu/iwi understanding of whanaungatanga (Kawharu, 1980). Far be it for me to suggest that community harmony and zero tolerance are plausible societal outcomes. I believe strongly that sustained emphasis placed primarily on the inner workings of Maori men – their wairua, tinana, hinengaro and whanaunga relationships – is the critical first step. The absence of conflict and presence of peace are ‘ideal types’ and indeed one might suggest they are one in the same, but I believe they are fundamentally dissimilar. The point I really want to make here is how I, and other Maori men, metaphorically speaking, begin the process of ‘stepping into the fire’, to work alongside our Maori men in liberating them, and ourselves too, from the despondencies, disappointments and oppressive ways (internal conflicts), and moving these towards reconciliation and a restoration of a content ahua about ourselves and our families (internal peace). As I see it we need to advance a new approach to decolonisation, to masculinity, to the validation of our indigenous ways and to appreciating nga matauranga Maori in support of meaningful Maori men’s education and mentoring group work; a para-

digm that incorporates freedom and openness of expression, reflection and introspection; a paradigm that also acknowledges the need to build self-confidence and self-respect which paves the way for change.

My purpose in writing this piece comes from two quite different directions and motivations: First, as an invitation and a challenge for more Maori men to have confidence to 'sit in the fire' and work to eliminate violence in our families and communities; and second, to dissect and critique the dominant cultural paradigm which places together Western empiricism, the endeared, but hopelessly biased public media; and election politics – the perennial 'law and order' drone (that is, to inject a fear of Maori insurgency and 'terroristic acts' into the timid mindset of the marginal swing voters) – all of which seem to justify a particular direction in public policy and public opinion. Indeed, I am deliberate in my aspiration to focus on 'strengths and assets' of Maori rather than on 'needs and deficits' and, in this challenge, I state a more salient 'political' juxtaposition to Pakeha mainstream which all too often places Maori in a iniquitous vis-à-vis romantic predicament. I'm less inspired by the kinds of policies that seem to stem from Maori being at the liability end of Aotearoa's bicultural ledger. Describing us through Pakeha strictures and their embedded cultural biases is unacceptable. I think given the scale and extent to which Maori men's violence has come to circumnavigate the nation many times over, we know enough to know its damaging effects on our culture, our whanau and on how we perceive ourselves. We are reminded constantly of everything that's bad about Maori men's behaviour. We have to radically change the paradigm – and also the practice – and work towards building new images of Maori men as real-life 'nurturing warriors'.

Making consequences

It is conscionable to contend that every man is responsible for the actions of other men, in public and in private, and it is time for us (as Maori men) to become impassioned and empowered voices of 'unreason'. An unreasoned voice echoes the wero to all men who hurt and violate their families 'Kati, enough already!' The unreasoned voice is that which embraces truth emanating from the fire; the voice of warriors who declare to act to eliminate excesses and immoderations among our men. Given that everything is connected, then the abusive actions, behaviours and choices of violent men are by design the actions and behaviours of all men, so too, then, we become responsible for the consequences. I've often heard the phrase 'we don't make decisions, we make consequences'. This is true in the case of understanding men's violence.

To address violence in what I see as the most appropriate way, we, as Maori men, must uproot ourselves from the insidious, somewhat intoxicating and enticing mix of power, privilege and dominance and liberate our hearts from these additive entrapments. If we are to make any difference at all in helping other men we must know first what is in our hearts. To do this we need to start to look at our excuses for behaving badly, whether it's the booze or the boys or money, we need to stop blaming. We need to examine our feelings – all feelings not just the good ones – from the places that control our rage – our puku, pito and raho. To be revitalised as well-meaning and respectful men we need to self actualise; we need to accept our past faults, our mistakes, our moments of weakness and let them go. To move forward requires forgiveness-of-self and self-confidence that emanates from liberating of minds also. As Freire (1972) says, from one's 'oppressive mind' so too must one

be freed. Understanding the complexities of our identities is a long, hard first step; educating and mentoring men is the next important step. And, the place that this can be fittingly done is 'in the fire'.

Working with our Maori women

In order to work effectively towards eliminating violence from our whanau it is important to work mutually with Maori women and support them in their liberation from male oppression. How we go about internalising, externalising and verbalising our emotions and feelings is not easy for us and is uncomfortable and frightening. Doing this will be difficult, but it has to be done in order to change us Maori men for the better. It will ultimately, in the long run, be self-fulfilling and rewarding. Because the thought of expressing love is difficult to articulate, perhaps even more so than expressing hate, 'sitting in the fire' is the appropriate metaphoric place to open up dialogue about these feelings. Such examination, experientially, with honesty, manaakitanga and awareness, amid the confusion, chaos and inherent chauvinism of dealing with male misery, guilt, shame, inadequacy and scars of the past is a sombre yet powerfully liberating process. It would be impossible to deal with this unless we appreciate the discomfort of 'the fire'. I'll be the first to admit I don't have all the answers nor am I any expert. The fire I speak of is not the fires that burn as in the realm of Satan's 'fiery pits of hell', but is the fire that lights our community's spirit. It is the fire that springs forth change. It becomes the beckon for transformation and the regeneration of a new masculinity.

'Sitting in the fire'

'Sitting in the fire' is a realisation of my own personal anguishes, my fears, hurts, distrusts and hatreds, and that these are the same kinds of feelings that plague interpersonal violence, conflicts and the oppression of other men. I am human, with lots of hang-ups, and at times I become emotionally upset (my kids call this 'Dad going psycho') but I have come to realise whatever it is that I dislike, fear or which causes me to become defensive or to be offended by is but a mirror of who I am and how I need to get over myself. If I have the courage to look these feelings and biases in the face, which are hard to see at times because they are often unconscious and unintended – but just as dangerous and destructive – then I would be able to work more truthfully and openly with men. Without awareness, compassion or courage that comes through dealing with my own stuff, it is impossible for me to offer help to others in any way. In probability, all I'll do is increase their measure of misery and aggravation and mine also.

In reflecting on what is happening, we cannot completely disregard the point that violence is partially the result of the character structures formed around our early emotional proximities to, and from, significant others. Studies in the United States which have been affirmed by traditional First Nation's healers reveal that the psychic structures of manhood are manifested at a very early age and for young boys today, with absent fathers especially, this is a deeply concerning sign.

We as Maori men have been conspicuously absent in our work with Maori women in family violence prevention. In many ways we have 'copped out' not just because of the weight of numbers of those men needing help and treatment, but because of our indifference. On

a positive note there are growing numbers of Maori men who are taking up the challenge and developing men's strengths-based approaches utilising traditional healing methods. Our invisibility is perhaps also because of the prevalent and symbolic influences of Pakeha male privilege. The unfortunate thing is that the benefits of this gender inequality engage us in politics that affirms us as gatekeepers of critical examination of ourselves. Violence, power and control are built into our ideologies and structures and we as Maori men need to begin to subvert these in deliberate and decisive ways.

I believe a starting point to doing this is by honouring all voices. The voices must be listened to with respect and humility. We all have different ways of expressing ourselves, which can vary in tone, use of words, volume and gesture and may not be the way we are used to, and cause us to react differently, perhaps negatively. At this point we have to choose how to react to the feelings, words and opinions of others. Do we respond with reflective insight or with shallow negativity?

We, as men, constitute a complex array of expressions, the common denominators of which being protector, breadwinner, decision-maker, leader and disciplinarian. Yet not all of us can claim to have grasped these well at all: in fact, we may feel completely inadequate in our fulfillment of such things. Who, dare I say, isn't plagued by their self-doubts or fears? In my admission I sometimes get sidetracked, even woefully neglectful of what's around me, especially my family, often when project deadlines loom (like getting this paper in on time). No one can possibly live up to all their ideals, particularly as we are socialised to believe we must. We need to learn to let go of oppressive thoughts and redirect our energies to the more important things in life. Notwithstanding, our ideals are necessary but it is the journey towards these that builds our character and which will ultimately determine our fate.

Subverting oppressive masculinities

Challenging Maori men requires an articulated response to dismantling the oppressive structures of inherent power and privilege, and in ending cultural and social permission in all its forms. If social structures perpetually support men's violence we cannot sustain effective interventions without guidance from our women, our kaumatua, our tamariki and the imperatives embedded in our marae protocols. We also need to work to actively redefine our narrative. Where Plato speaks of the reconnecting of the Child-Sun, Woman-Earth and Man / Woman-Moon we need to speak of manaakitanga and aroha loudly as unifying power. It is about dismantling archetypal psyche as well as social structures in order to create new possibilities.

The paradox of patriarchy is its inextricable abuse of power and control that impacts those we love; it is manifested in rage, frustration, isolation, objectification and fear Maori men suffuse on women. As long as we continue to ignore this it will be to our ultimate detriment. To reach out to our men our mahi must be premised on aroha, tika, pono and on working in the fire. This needs to be combined with a challenge to negate sexist behaviour and its destructive consequences. A Maori men's practice theory facilitates us to speak out, speak up and speak to issues. Organising and involving our men to work collaboratively with Maori women in reshaping mainstream gender politics within institutional and cultural forms is critical. This requires we ply greater emphasis on the importance of manaakitanga and shed our layers of insecurity.

Working from within the fire, so to speak, is an active commitment to taking on the challenge and responsibility of eliminating violence, period, while simultaneously challenging

embedded patriarchal assumptions and privileges. This is not about being sympathetic but empathetic to and critical of the processes that turn the innocence of a young boy into the anger of a violent man. Through guiding principles offered within our culture and traditional practices, and with the respect to tikanga processes and wairua, men, I'm confident, can adjust, recalibrate and rehabilitate to restoring mana tane to its principled form. This restoration of mana allows us to challenge and be challenged with respect and integrity. Without a deep wairua connection, mistrust and feelings of inadequacies will continue to plague and propagate within us. Education and mentoring that engage men are critical to our indigenous ways of turning lives around. Family violence prevention studies show most men genuinely want help to stop violence but they either don't know what to do, or where to go to for help.

Sitting in fire dares us to ask questions of who, how and what shapes Maori men's thinking. Every man has a responsibility to each other, to whanau wellness and to end unmitigated violence. Violence is not shaped, nor is it acted out in a vacuum but in our homes and in our communities, and what has given it its strong hold is the de facto relationship to the limited scope we as men have of how to build nurturing relationships and supportive social structures.

In the fire all 'opposites' happen at once. New possibilities are formed where we give voice to our grievances and to our desires. This is where we honour the meaning of our marae where Tumatauenga, the God of War (and Man) resides upon the courtyard – the marae atea, while Rongomatane, the God(dess) of Peace reigns in the sanctity of the whare tipuna. They are inseparable yet opposite, siblings who, with their many brothers and sisters – the deities of our corporeal – dance the creation and recreation dance, just as the burning flames lick the encroaching night. This represents the perfect metaphor for family relationships and unconditional love.

The way we as Maori men have imbued our social and individual relationships is, paradoxically, the bane and source of all our anxieties. Where our personal power is constructed as a capacity, or as an assertion – good or bad – in situations we determine a threat creates all sorts of issues. Sitting in the fire requires that we help construct a korowai for our men. This korowai is worn as a protector especially as internalised expectations of one's masculinity is exposed and open to challenge. In such a potentially aggrieving state, violence can quickly become the compensatory mechanism which is a way of re-establishing balance and of reasserting one's masculine credentials. Making consequences to address feelings is where it starts and ends.

Te Puni Kokiri's *Transforming Whanau Violence* 2004 report declared whanau violence to be an 'epidemic' in large measure because of 'generations of learned behavior'. The report advocates Maori practitioners being given the space to develop practice models for prevention without being 'mutated by legislation ... and a foreign paradigm or pedagogy'. What better place to begin for men, I would contend, than 'in the fire'.

Conclusion

I like to conclude by reiterating my view that Maori men must work in collaborative and supportive ways with others and that preparing to sit 'in the fire' is not only necessary but the expectation. Only from the inside can we collectively examine deeply and honestly our

emotions, fears, frustrations and strengths and intelligences. We need to envision our future. Our 'exalted dreams' that foresee our truths, morals and potential. We need to look at our disappointments and our sorrows – our 'disenchanted dreams' – which are our mistakes, how we react when things go awry, and when we lose control. I'm very much the optimistic practitioner, although I don't subscribe to any magic wand theory. I know few, if any, men actually manage to fully uproot themselves from the internal tyrants of our masculinity. As Mindell (1982) states 'it's time we learn to expect negativity and to move with it ... to no longer think it's a sin to be angry, or that only bad people [men, in this case] raise their voices'. To which Freire (1998) adds '... there are no themes or values of which one cannot speak, no areas in which one must be silent. We can talk about everything, and we can give testimony about everything'. When we come to the understanding of how things really are – for good or bad – these will soon become transparent, and as we appreciate this we become attuned to the positive energies both within and around us.

The important point to all this is learning not to get burned in the process. Engaging in mutual dialogue, the *korero*, is the key. In dialogue there can be no roles or expectations. Here men are free to move with the energies and forces in both linear and non-linear communications. Everyone gets to have their voice. It may be the voice of hurt, anger, fear or unreason. These voices tell us that goodness, love and sense of belonging never stray too far from our *marae*, and from what we commonly call home, our *ahi ka*. I end with Timaeus's plea.

For where the acid and briny phlegm and other bitter and bilious humours wander about in the body, and find no exit or escape, but are pent up within and mingle their own vapours with the motions of the soul, and are blended, with them, they produce all sorts of diseases, more or fewer, and in every degree of intensity; and being carried to the three places of the soul, whichever they may severally assail, they create infinite varieties of ill-temper and melancholy, of rashness and cowardice, and also of forgetfulness and stupidity. Further, when to this evil constitution of body evil forms of government are added and evil discourses are uttered in private as well as in public, and no sort of instruction is given in youth to cure these evils, then all of us who are bad become bad from two causes which are entirely beyond our control. In such cases the planters are to blame rather than the plants, the educators rather than the educated. But however that may be, we should endeavour as far as we can by education, and studies, and learning, to avoid vice and attain virtue. (Plato Symposium, Timaeus 40).

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