Wrapped in Care: Narrative Therapy in the time of COVID

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"My nana died from Covid. She died four months ago. I am still crying every day. I am not getting over it."

That's what the email said. That's why Harper intended to meet with me. As a therapist I work for various organisations, and Harper's employer, an Australian-New Zealand company, was one of them.

I don't like Zoom at the best of times. To me, with my head-and-shoulders only view she looked a small, perhaps even plump young woman, her face rounded like an apple. It was only months later when I met Harper in person that I realised that the five foot three inches was in my imagination. Harper's face might be applely, but her stature was more that of a Kauri tree: She was tall, solid. She was dressed in Nike, growing towards the light.

Usually, I will begin by enquiring into a person's virtues (Pilkington, 2018)[1] and I will ask for stories to illuminate them. So often problems obscure from the person themselves the very attributes of their character which will be of most help to them in adversity. The problem weighs in on the person, forcing them to see only their troubles and rubbing their noses in inadequacy. But Harper was alone. Usually, I will ask others to speak for the person because it is so hard for them to do so themselves. For Māori this is likely to be even harder because to speak about oneself, especially with pride, can be inappropriate when the sense of self is primarily a collective one (Hermansson & Durie 1990.) This whakataukī (Māori proverb), speaks to this cultural tenet: "Kāore te kūmara e kōrero mō tōna ake reka", translated as: "The kumara does not speak of its own sweetness."

[1] A virtue enquiry is Sasha Pilkington's adaptation (2018), of David Epston's term 'wonderfulness inquiry ' which he invented at a workshop in Boston in 1996, and documented in numerous writings in including Marsten, Epston and Markham (2016).

However, Māori see themselves in terms of their whakapapa, described by Te Rito as "a genealogical narrative, a story told layer upon layer, ancestor upon ancestor up to the present day. There are parallel lineages of characters which run vertically side by side, era by era, and incident by incident." (Te Rito, 2007, p.1). To enquire about Harper's identity in terms of the genealogy of her character would be to enquire after her whakapapa, to site her character within her lineage. As Swann says, "whakapapa narratives also provide the individual and cultural context from which meaning-making, connection, and shaping of identity emerge." (Swann, 2012, pp. 8–9 quoted in Swann et al. 2013, p.13).

Sometimes I will interview people about their virtues even if they are on their own. I might ask them to imagine what someone close to them might say. I might have consulted with Harper about whether this would have been something she would like to have done, within the context of her whakapapa had her grief and love for her Nana not filled the screen. Instead, encouraged her to speak of her Nana and what she meant to her, and how they had been separated by distance, then by Covid, then by death.

I intuited that Harper's relationship with her would offer us our way through in our therapy conversations. Knowing that for Māori, our ancestors are with us in the here and now, that they "go with us" (Russell Smith, personal communication 13th April 2012), I asked her to tell me about her nana: "Harper, would you be willing to introduce me to your nana? Would you be willing to tell me a little about her and her life?"

Harper's hand went to heart. "Yes, I'd love to. Nana was born in the Hokianga[2]." She sat up straight in her chair. "She was Ngāpuhi[3] and full Māori. She had it hard because Grandad had an affair and left her with seven kids. My dad was the second eldest, and the oldest boy."

"And what is it that most stands out to you about who she was, Harper?"

[2] The Hokianga is in the far north of the North Island of Aotearoa New Zealand. It was from here that the descendants of the great Māori ancestor, Kupe made their home.

[3] Ngāpuhi (or Ngā Puhi) is a Māori iwi associated with the Northland region of New Zealand and centred in the Hokianga, the Bay of Islands, and Whangārei. ("Ngāpuh," 2022)

Harper looked upwards, as if consulting the heavens. “Even though she worked three jobs and had all of those seven tamariki[4] to care for, she always helped others.”

She went on to tell me her nana had had the misfortune to be admitted to hospital in Wellington after a fall. Then diagnosed with Covid 19, she found herself cared for by strangers as the rest of her devoted whānau[5] waited in lockdown. They were only four kilometres away, but heart-breakingly, hopelessly distant.

Harper was unable to see “the most beautiful woman alive,” whom she had visited every day of her twenty-three years. She had moved away to Australia only six weeks before Covid burst forth into the world. She was stranded by love, lured by a new relationship with Arthur which had begun online. Messaging had turned into long emails, which had turned into daily Zoom calls. Harper and Arthur soon realised that they had to meet and see if their online romance would flourish in the ‘real’ world.

Their first meeting in person was at Sydney airport. She saw Arthur before he saw her, waiting, hands in pockets, fretted brow, chewing a strand of silky black hair to soothe his nervous heart. In that moment, 2D became 3D, pixels became flesh, their love jumped from the screen into the arrival lounge. Arthur’s life had been wall to wall with challenge and worry, but his budding relationship with Harper had kept him afloat. Arthur’s father was waiting for a triple bypass. The mother of his eighteen-month-old son had departed with her boss for the Gold Coast six months before, and his mother had died of cancer two years earlier ago. Harper knew he was barely hanging on, so she stayed. Just like her nana would have done.

Harper told me of the trials of living with Arthurs’s family, how she felt both “homesick, and not at home when I am at home,” her outrage at Arthur’s siblings, and even Arthur himself, for indulging “a complaining old man'' who continued to mete out nastiness to all of them, whilst they bowed under the sway of his illness. Nothing new to this family, just a new reason. But in the background hummed the tune of a granddaughter's love for her Nana whom she would never set eyes on

[4] The Māori name for children

[5] The Māori name for extended family

again. Love was the bass line, even if grief for her nana had become a superimposed, unwelcome harmony.

She told me of her premonition the week before the world closed its doors and its airport runways:

"I wanted to go home to my nana. I asked myself what if I can't say goodbye? I wondered if I would ever forgive myself if I chose to be here, over the ditch, with a family that doesn't build me up. Then I got the call from Dad. Nana had tested positive. I just knew. None of us got to say goodbye. We had a full whānau Zoom. She was so happy. Then she rolled over and died. We think she did it then on purpose.

My auntie had a korowai[6] made by a woman near Rawene. It was arranged five minutes after she passed. We wanted to have the cloak on her so that she felt that we were with her as she began to leave her body, and to leave us. Afterwards the cloak had to go into quarantine. I watched the tangi[7] on livestream. How weird is that? The last thing I saw was my family hugging her. Of course, only ten of them could go because of the Level 3 Covid restrictions. All I could think was 'why am I here in Sydney?' I turned off the livestream and just sat there thinking 'now what am I meant to do?' Nothing felt real. The grief didn't feel real. I was on my own staring at a blank screen. All because someone gave her Covid. Covid robbed me of my nana."

Grief and love mixed with outrage at the injustice of it all. The injustice of losing "the most beautiful woman alive" to Covid, the injustice of not being able to say goodbye. The injustice of being away from her whānau, her friends. The injustice of having to "zip her lip" at the behaviour of this sullen old man, and the equally nauseating behaviour of a family afraid to name what they see as so many families do.

[6] A Korowai is the modern term for a Māori cloak in the Awawa tribal domain (Buchanan, Te Awekotoku, Nikora), made with flax and bird feathers through the art of whatu (finger weft-twining). They are given as esteemed gifts to honour relationships and to provide physical and spiritual protection

[7] Tangi is short for tangihanga, the Māori term for funeral. "The tangihanga is the enduring Māori ceremony for mourning someone who has died. It is commonly called a tangi, which also means to weep, and to sing a dirge (a lament for the dead)" (Higgins 2021).

Harper had said “unjust” several times. I thought to ask her, “Harper, if you feel you have suffered such injustice, would you say that you are someone who believes in justice for yourself, and also for others?”

“I am about justice. I speak out. I cannot stand things being swept under the carpet.”

How, I wondered, had Harper become an “all about justice” young wahine[8]? It is all too easy to take such insight into a person’s character at face value: to assume that this is just ‘who they are’. But virtues have stories. Perhaps some of it is genetic, but the choice to act on values is embedded in familial and wider culture, and in my experience have a story behind them if I am prepared to search hard enough with people. The story may have begun with the person, or it may have begun generations ago. A person’s virtues are rarely intrinsic to them. The cult of the individual blinds us to the context in which personal virtues and values are handed down to us. And more than that, there are ancestral stories, which for Māori, trace whakapapa. As Love says: “A view of individual selfhood is indivisible from the whanau (hapu and iwi) unit including the temporal and spiritual constituents of these. The boundaries of the self were drawn around the whānau, hapū and Iwi, unit, ancestors and the natural and supernatural world (Love 1999). Te Rito writes about his experience of researching the importance of tracing his own ancestry as he went about his academic research into the importance of whakapapa for identity. He writes: “...it has helped ground myself firmly in place and time. It connects me to my past and to my present. Such outcomes certainly confirm identity and a deep sense of ‘being’.” (Te Rito 2007, p.9). I was thinking of Harper’s whakapapa when I asked, “Harper, how do you guess that you have become someone who “is about justice, who speaks out, and won’t tolerate things being swept under the carpet?”

“It’s to do with my dad and how he has treated my mum all my life. I won’t stand for it.”

“How is it that your dad has treated your mum, Harper, and how have you gone about standing up to your dad’s treatment of her?” [9] Her presence on the screen

[8] The Māori name for women/female

[9] “When someone describes an action that they have taken which expresses a value or way of being that is important to them, I research it with them so that we can distinguish what it is from what it is not. From distinguishing what is, we can detect much that is hidden in the background, that made explicit, can reveal more to them of themselves and what is important to them.” (White 2000).

seemed to become larger as she said, “My father is a strong, proud, Māori man. He thinks that he doesn’t need to justify anything. Mum said he acts that way because this is how he acts. That is how proud Māori men are. Dad has never been abusive, but he does shut Mum down.”

“Does your commitment to speaking out against injustice extend to others beyond your whānau, Harper?”[10]

“I confront my dad, and I confront others, but it’s hard doing this for everyone else.”

It wasn’t just Harper’s love for her Nana that shone from the screen; it was her willingness to speak out on love’s behalf: “Is speaking out one of the ways that you show your love for people?”, I asked her.[11]

Harper stopped as if putting her foot to the floor at speed.

“Yes, I speak out because I do love people. I don’t want people to feel hurt.” Looking down, she changed gear: “I try to fix things for others, and for myself. Death hurts but I can’t fix it.”
We sat in silence for a moment or two.

“Harper, is this what your nana did? Did she fix things for others?”

The words that followed sounded like the final knell of a church bell :

“My nana used to say, ‘while we are living we have the chance to turn things around.’” Her voice softened, as she confessed: “I don’t respect my dad because of how he is but I do want a better relationship with him. He was always physically present, but he wasn’t there for me emotionally. I have told him that I want him to be in contact with me more often.”

[10] In asking this question, I am inviting Harper to consider that this commitment to speaking out against injustice may be a significant facet of who she is in the world that may have a broader reach and importance than she may have realised. Questions such as these and the preceding one are designed to story her identity, so that these facets can become more visible to her, and hence can play a bigger part in the story of who she is, both now and in the future.

[11] I am suggesting that Harper’s commitment to ‘speaking out', is an expression of a bigger intention. The way she has responded to her father, potentially becomes part of a larger description of who she is.

“Harper, are you trying to turn around your relationship with your dad around just as your nana would have done?”[12]

Her closed hand came to rest on her lips. “I realised that I wouldn’t be okay if my dad were to die and we were not okay. I told him, ‘I recognise that you have your own way of showing your love to me.’ He was shocked. He just said, ‘I try to make sure that you come along with me to the rugby club, but you just don’t want to come.’”

Father-daughter love had been conflated with going to the rugby club. I felt for her even though I realised that this was a father who loved his daughter and was expressing it in the best way he knew how at that time. However, I marvelled that this twenty-three-year-old, aggrieved by her father’s treatment of her mother, was willing to take the side of love.[13]

“Harper, even though you say that you do not respect your father because of the way in which he has treated your mother, why is it that knowing him as you do, you reached out your arms in love to him, even if it seems as if he has kept his by his side?”[14]

“It’s Nana, through and through. She never took sides. I spent a lot of time with her growing up. Dad always used to take me and my brothers to her. It is one of the best things that Dad ever did for me.”

My ears pricked. “Did your nana teach you how to take the side of love?'' I asked her.

She reached for a tissue as tears began to swell.

[12] Harper’s intentions are being storied alongside her nana’s. The story of who she is is situated inside of her whakapapa. This storying of her identity alongside that of her nana’s, brings her closer to her nana.

[13] Even though I have not said this out loud to Harper, I am formulating a counter-story about how Harper has been choosing to ‘take the side of love,’in her life. The work of this emerging counter-story is to contextualise Harper’s struggles with her family inside of a story that can enliven her and her relationship to how she is choosing to act, leaving her with a fuller version of who she could be said to be.

[14] By investigating the ‘why,’ I am inviting her to look beneath her actions to find intentions that may not be visible to her. These intentions may story who she has been for herself, and so open up a larger possible sense of self that she can find pride in.

“Could you tell me a story which would help me to understand how it is that your Nana taught you to take the side of love rather than to take sides?”[15]

“I would get sent there to her place as punishment when I was in trouble. She would sit me down at her kitchen table and tell me stories about her life and the hardships she suffered like ‘having to walk for eight kilometres to school every day after milking the cows and tending to the farm.’ The stories made me realise how I might have overreacted at home, or why my parents did what they did. There were always lessons in her stories, and it always came back to ‘do you know your parents love you? There is a reason why your parents do what they do.’ I was so wrapped up in her care that I didn’t hear it as a lecture.”

“Harper, would you say that your nana taught you to take the side of your parents' love for you, no matter what, and did so in such a loving way that you were able to hear her?”

“Yes. I know she sympathised, but she never said anything against them. She always directed everything back to their love for me.”

“Has your nana taking the side of love rather than your side or your parent’s side inspired you to continue to believe in your father’s love and to continue to reach out to him, even if at times you do not experience that love in return?”[16]

“One-hundred-percent,” she affirmed.

“And are there any other ways in which your nana has taught you to love?[17] For instance, you chose to leave your whānau, to move overseas when you had never even been out of Auckland before to be with a partner with a baby son and a sick father. And you told me earlier that your nana was always there for others even

[15] Calling for a story of how her nana ‘taught her to take the side of love,’ connects Harper to her nana, but more importantly, it explores the whakapapa of the commitment that she has. If this commitment is brought to life with a story, it will live much more powerfully for Harper.

[16] The story of her nana’s love for her and for her parents is now being woven back into the present and connected to how she continues to express her love to her father; The story of ‘taking the side of love,’ is now being told across generations.

[17] This love is not something that has just come to her, it has been taught. By asking for stories of this teaching, the story of being someone who ‘chooses the path of love,’ becomes more substantial.

although she was a single parent with seven children to care for and worked three jobs. Did your nana hand down to you your generosity to others?"[18]

"I'd like to think so. Her love was like this river that flowed to everyone in her path. And her love ran through me too. She was me and I was her. Or that is how it always felt to me."[19]

All too aware that guilt was likely to be troubling Harper because she had made choices for her own life that took her from her nana not long before she fell sick, I asked her, "even although you were so far away from your nana, how did you make sure that your Nana felt your love for her through her illness?"

"I spoke to her every day on the phone and on Zoom, so she did get to see and to hear me morning and night. I formed a relationship with her head nurse. I remember one day hearing singing as I was joining her online. It was the nurses. They had written out songs and they sang them to her, and they weren't even Māori. They worked out our family tree and knew who each of us was. It nearly broke my heart when I realised that they had done all of this for my nana and for us."

I was suspicious that there was more to this than met the eye. Not every team of nurses would find Māori songs and sing them to a patient, especially if they weren't Māori themselves, and especially during lockdown in a pandemic. Was it Harper and her love for her Nana that had inspired them? "Harper, would you agree that what the nurses did was pretty unusual? Do you think that they also felt your love for your nana and your nana's love for others and got pulled into the river of her love as well?"

"They certainly felt my love for her, and I guess no one escaped her love, even when she was in hospital. I have always believed that I was her favourite, and maybe they realised," she bubbled. She looked up wistfully, and said, "although

[18] By quoting examples of how she has been expressing this 'way of love' that her nana has bequeathed her, I am providing a storied preface to my question which allows the 'story of this commitment so far' to move forwards with us, and further substantiate it. It also allows for Harper to be drawn closer to the nana that she is grieving.
[19] You could say that the story that we are weaving together is a river that runs from her nana to her, and back again, as well as having tributaries that run to others.

the dementia took part of her away, her wairua[20] remained just as it had always been. They must have felt her wairua."

We sat for a few moments in what felt to me to be reverence. Then her brow furrowed. She told me that she had been feeling overcome with anger since she had had a phone call from her auntie.

"I have this righteous anger. My auntie said she heard a rumour that it was a nurse who was sick and didn't go for a test. Someone made a choice and brought the virus in and caused her death. I keep asking myself 'what is going to be done about that?' Then, I was sitting in the walk-in-wardrobe in our bedroom, which is where I go when I need time out, and I heard her voice saying: 'you are not me.' I didn't feel belittled at all."

"Why not," Harper? What was it that you heard in your nana's words that was not a criticism, not belittling in any way?"[21]

"I knew what she meant because she told me this many times. She was letting me know that it was not up to me to seek justice, that I didn't need to replace her, and it was okay to be angry even although she would feel differently. Sitting there on my bed, I realised that she was giving me permission to be myself, just like she always did. I sat there for a bit and then I realised that I do want to be like her. I so respected my Nana. I can be like her and be me. Then, for some reason I turned on the TV, and on the news there was a clip of Jacinda[22] speaking about the New Zealand response to Covid. I felt for her. She has had so much flack. And although what she has done was not successful for my nana, there could have been thousands more deaths. As I watched her, I felt my nana's presence."

"What was it about Jacinda that felt so much like your nana, Harper?" She looked up as if taking herself back to the moment.

"My nana's strength came from her love of people and that is how Jacinda is for me."

[20] The Māori name for spirit or soul

[21] This practice of repeating what the person has just said inside of a question, allows for their words to be taken forward into the storying and invites storying in a way that the shorter alternative of, "why not?", does not. I call these questions, 'close questions' because they stay close to the person and to their words.

[22] Jacinda Ardern, serving Prime Minister of New Zealand. First elected 2017.

I was surprised to hear what she said next. It is one thing to feel a connection, another to act. I wondered whether her nana was also a woman who acted when she felt strongly, and especially if motivated by contributing to another. It certainly seemed so.

“I decided to write to Jacinda. I told her about my nana. I told her about how I believed she loved people in the same way. I told her I didn’t blame her. I didn’t need a reply, and I didn’t expect one, so I was so surprised when one came. She said that she was ‘moved to tears by my letter’ and that ‘she was proud to be compared to my nana.’”

A calm had descended. It is strange that even though we were thousands of miles away from one another I felt it palpably, as if we were in the same room. I also felt as if Harper’s nana was with us. Perhaps she was in the spirit of the way in which she lived: in service of her love for others. Enamoured with the idea that our lives are all ‘peopled’ at all times with those that have ‘gone before us’ (Russell Smith, personal communication, 6th May 2015), I felt the urge to include Harper’s nana in our conversation, and asked a question that I might often ask when I felt that a loved one, no longer present in their physical body, might be knocking on the door, waiting to be asked to contribute:

“Harper, if your nana was looking down on us right now[23], and felt your love for her, what do you think she might say?”

Harper’s eyes widened. She looked up and away, and then answered as if my question was one that she was asked everyday: “She would say, remember that Jacinda is healing her whānau too.”

Harper’s nana had been the matriarch of her whānau, its spiritual leader, its healer. Harper was her most beloved grandchild. I had the sense that Harper’s nana may also have seen in Harper her spiritual successor. This sense, along with the Māori belief that our ancestors walk with us, led me to ask, “Harper, would you say that your nana has passed on her ability to love people to you?”[24] The absence of hesitation gave me her answer before I heard her reply:

[23] The question is borrowed from David Epston (personal communication Novemer 11, 2010)

[24] By uniting Harper with her nana in this way, I am bringing her closer to her in her grief, inviting her to presence her nana’s ways of being in her own life right now.

“Yes. My uncle says, ‘you have so much of her spirit and essence’, and I feel closer to her when I talk to you.”

“And Harper, you said that your nana found her strength in her love of people. Would you say that you do and will find your strength through your love of people also?”

Harper blinked away a tear. Our first meeting had come to an end. We held on for a few moments, and then we both reluctantly pressed ‘leave meeting’.

Whilst we are living…

Harper’s face popped onto the screen. She mouthed something but the caption told me that her microphone was still connecting. Harper wanted to tell me about the memorial she and her whanau had been planning for her nana. She had put together a slideshow of photographs from her nana’s life. The bubbliness which had shimmered on the screen in those first few moments burst, as she told me that the purposefulness of her slideshow-mission had given way the moment she had finished it.

“I just cried. It was the first time that it came home to me that she was really gone. Until that moment, her loss had not fully made its way to my heart. It is so hard to accept that ‘that is that.’”

An emptiness sat between us, and then, like a visitor who senses the awkwardness of the moment and attempts to fill it, a suggestion intruded.

Harper said, “I want to write a speech for the memorial.”

What could be wrong with this suggestion? Nothing. Of course she would wish to speak of her nana at the memorial. Yet it seemed that at this moment the suggestion was here to fill the pain. I felt the emptiness. Harper had been ripped away from her nana by distance as well as by death. How might I help to bring her closer to her nana, even in some small way? How might I help to salve the pain of this chasm even mildly so? The words materialised in the air between us before my reasoning had taken full shape:

“Harper, would you consider writing a letter to your nana rather than writing a speech about her? What if you were to read it to *her* at the memorial?”

Harper's hand fled to her heart and sat there like a nesting bird.

"Ohh" she exclaimed

There was a moment of silence, and then she said:

"Judging how my heart feels about the idea..."

"And what might you say?" I asked. Harper's reply delighted me.

"I have no regrets with Nana. She knew how much I loved her. I would like to talk with her about some of the good times, some of the funny times we had together, especially towards the end. I'll think about what people want to know about her, and what I want them to see about our relationship."

As a narrative therapist I cannot ever pass up the chance of a story [25] so I asked her, "Could you tell me a story about one of those funny times that you shared with your nana?"

Harper's eyes danced as she told me about how she had to "keep seeing her through dementia...I had to find a new way of seeing that spark in her so that I could see a bit of her, even for a moment. She loved the Silver Ferns[26] and she was always very proud of me when I played netball for my school team. One day, I told her that I had been picked to play for the Ferns. It wasn't true, of course. I said 'Nana, guess what? I've been picked to play for the Silver Ferns.' She exploded with joy and pride. 'Really?' she said. 'Yes, really,' I said. 'What position?' she asked. I said, 'Goal Attack (that was that I used to play).' I was so surprised when ten minutes later she remembered my fake Silver Ferns selection, and asked me again, 'what position are you playing?'"

We laughed together. I was touched to be privy to this moment in Harper's relationship with her nana. "Harper, I would love to see your letter to your nana after the memorial. Would that be okay?"

"Of course," she said. "When I have finished reading my letter to her, I will blow out the candle that will be lit for her. This signifies that we will be going on

[25] People's relationships (with themselves and others), exist for me as 'stories', and it is through asking for these stories to be told that we can enter into a landscape together in which these stories can be, embellished, cast aside in favour of previously untold stories, or take different turns leading to new or rarely visited destinations.

[26] The New Zealand National Netball Team

without her, but it doesn't mean that the light needs to go out 'in here,'" she said, as she laid her hand across her heart.

Another idea crossed my mind: "Harper, do you think you should wear the korowai?"[27] She replied with a solemnity worthy of the feathered cloak itself, yet without the expectation that she deserved it.

"Maybe I could ask my uncle. He is the keeper." She mused, "I would like her to be with me as I read to her. I would be wrapped in the korowai, and it was the last thing that she was wrapped in."

Harper's gaze drifted somewhere off screen. A moment passed until her gaze returned. She looked troubled. I waited for her to speak, aware that there was something in the wind that was about to change the direction of our conversation.

Christmas, weddings, births, deaths. All events that bring family together. And with the togetherness come the ghosts. The ghosts of all that has been said, the ghosts of all that has not been said. The ghosts of resentments, the ghosts which carry secrets under their grey gowns. There had been "a lot of family drama around the memorial," and the winds of these dramas blowing through the whānau had disturbed her and had been "piled on top of my grief," making it hard to feel, hard to find her nana. Harper wanted to talk with me about how she might navigate her way through this.

I knew I would need to understand what was coming to the surface in some detail, and so I asked Harper if she would "tell me the story of these whānau dramas?" A fifty-year saga of 'black sheep', drugs, prison, dodgy dealings, cheating, and financial losses at one another's hands took shape before me. However, the rift that had split the whānau into two very unequal halves, with one of Harper's dad's cousins and her brood on the one side, and most of the rest of the family on the other, with a few undecideds wandering around in the middle, had led to a nasty physical fight in which a younger male cousin had been seriously hurt. An allegation had been laid against Harper's father by Doreen, the young man's sister. Harper had first heard the rumour a few years before. She

[27] I asked Harper whether she would like to wear the korowai, not only because it would bring her closer to her nana and offer comfort, but because it appeared that she might be her nana's successor as the spiritual leader of her whānau.

had never met her father's cousin, Doreen, who had been faded out of the family, partly because of the rumours, and perhaps partly because of her "troubles with drink," but somehow word had gotten around as it always does. In the spirit of her commitment to "speaking out" and "standing up for others," which Harper had been practising in her father's company for some time, she had confronted him:

"My dad was so angry, and he refused to answer. He just said that you don't need to know.

Then one day not long before Harpers' nana became ill, Doreen rampaged on Facebook. Messages were sent to random family members, including Harper. Terms like "swept under the rug" were used, and "stuff was said about my mum."

Harper had replied saying: "It's not my business, don't talk to me about it," and Doreen had replied with, "Do you condone physical abuse and violence?"

Harper had blocked her.

And then when Nana became ill, Doreen had made an appearance in person. Harper's uncle had spoken with her and apologised for her treatment over the years. The views of the other aunts and uncles were that "she needs to get over it."

Doreen was refusing to come to the memorial because the family had been unwilling to involve her. But she had been close to Nana. Nana had been as important to Doreen in her early years as she had been to Harper. Harper's troubles were double-edged. She wanted Doreen to be able to take her rightful place at the memorial, to be able to grieve Nana and at the same time she was angry with Doreen and with her father. As she then said to me,

"This is why I don't respect my dad, quite apart from how he has treated my mum. He hasn't explained. And I don't want to get close to him…but if anything should come out of Nana dying it should be restoration."

Family members often become invaluable co-therapists in therapy conversations and have been especially helpful to me when there has been an impasse. This time, I realised that the person I needed to call upon was Harper's nana. This was the first time I had asked for a co-therapist to join me who was not physically alive.

Sensing the bridges between what Harper had already told me of her Nana's way of being in the world: her love of people, the saying "while we are living we have the chance to turn things around," and now Harper's conviction that if anything should come out of Nana dying it should be restoration," I asked her, "Harper, if your nana was here with us now and you were to ask her what she might wish to do about this whānau drama, what do you think she might say?" She took my unusual request in her stride and her answer came as soon as the last syllable left my lips:

"Nana would tell them 'It was forty years ago. You all have to get over it.'"

Sensing that Harper needed to hear what her nana would say to her directly, I asked: "And what would your nana say to you?"

I am sure I could see the answer descend as her face stilled, but it was a moment before she shared it with me.

"She would say: 'your father is a strong, proud Māori man. He won't ever tell you. He won't ever apologise. That is the way that he is." Harper blinked.

I had a sense that there might be more. "Is there anything else you think your nana would say to you if she were here with us? Would you be willing to close your eyes for a moment and see what comes?"

Harper's eyelids gently lowered. Her cheeks seemed to take on a warmer hue. She waited and then:

"There is something else she is saying to me. She says: 'I want all my whanau there at the memorial, but good luck getting them to hear you. You might just have to let it be.'"

Her now open eyes stared ahead into space. They seemed to say, 'but wait, isn't there more?' A pause, and then Harper announced:

"Anyone can change. I want to believe this. I want to believe that Doreen can change. I don't just see her as an alcoholic. I see her as someone who was hurt. I believe my dad can change too."

It seemed to me that Harper found herself straddling two worlds, two possible paths to restoration: that of 'letting be' and that of being a direct agent of change

for others. Her Nana's path was clear. Harper's belief in 'speaking out,' her commitment to justice, her commitment to not allowing things to be 'swept under the carpet,' left her uncertain. Harper's nana had told her "you are not me," she had given her permission to be herself, and yet Harper walked in her nana's footsteps and perhaps had been doing so all of her life, and one day might be recognised as her nana's successor as the spiritual head of the whānau. There was another way, I thought to myself. Nana was Nana, Harper was Harper, but they shared whakapapa,[28] their wairua[29] was entwined. How might I ask her a question that might help her to discover a path between?

"Harper," I ventured hesitantly, unsure of my footing as a Pakeha,[30] and concerned lest I should be culturally clumsy, or just plain wrong, "even if the actions you may wish to take may be different from those your nana would take, what is it of her wairua that she has handed down to you? What is it that you and your nana shared and always will share?"

Harper put her head in her hands. She pulled her fingers down her face, speaking as they parted: "It is her selflessness. She wanted to help people; I want to help people. She was big on family and wanting to mend things. She came from love."

I felt as if I were venturing out onto the limb of a tree, although I felt it was a well-rooted one, as I asked: "Is this love for your family trying to be here?"

"Yes.''

Harper's hands cupped her young face. "I can still love them regardless of their grievances and their stubbornness. I can love them fiercely."

[28] "Whakapapa is a taxonomic framework that links all animate and inanimate, known and unknown phenomena in the terrestrial and spiritual worlds. Whakapapa therefore binds all things. It maps relationships so that mythology, legend, history, knowledge, tikanga (custom), philosophies and spiritualities are organised, preserved and transmitted from one generation to the next.
Whakapapa is the core of traditional mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge). Whakapapa means genealogy." Taonui, R (2015.)

[29] Spirit or soul in Māori.

[30] A Pākehā is a New Zealander of European descent.

It's not my time

I heard the beep of Harper joining the call. I hurriedly snatched my tea bag from the packet, poured the water from the kettle which had just had time to boil between sessions, danced over to my computer and clicked.

Harper had rushed too. There was a faint buzz of excitement. She began, telling me that she was "proud to have stuck to what she believed." Her family had asked her to make some changes to her contribution to the memorial, and she had refused, but offered an alternative. She said with pride:

"I can say 'no' and still honour my nana, and how she would be. I needed to hold my ground and also to remember that these are her children as well. It is not my time to take on 'being Nana' in my whānau. I can't replace her, but I can still be like her. She often didn't need to say much, and it still said a lot. I believe I can honour her in my own way, in my own time."

Updating me on the whānau drama, Harper told me that her uncle had "tried to meet with Doreen to apologise, but she had refused to let it go." Her face froze for a moment on the screen, and her voice distorted to Darlek tones, but I was still able to make out her words:

"Even though she is not prepared to let it go, it came to me that we can."

She continued this time in tones that rang clear:

"You know, I have realised that one of the reasons why I have cared so much about people being held to account and I felt I had to hold on and have control was because my previous partner used to hit me."

Harper looked at me with a slightly dazed, yet innocent expression. Perhaps the expression of someone who has spoken the plain truth to themselves and to another for the first time finds themself in awe of the words that float dangerously in the air before them. I too felt awed. Not only by Harper's insight and her willingness to speak it, but by being in the presence of something so beautiful.

She looked down. I thought I saw her lip quiver.

“I want to honour my nana, and she always told me ‘Respect your parents: they love you.’ I have been thinking that if I am going to honour my nana then I need to respect my dad.”

Love takes many forms of course. At times, respect can be challenging, even ruthless or accepting. And perhaps, I thought to myself, true love needs to be able to turn on a dime: to express itself in whatever form is needed to do the work of love in the moment. My thoughts shaped themselves into a question which I hoped would speak to Harper’s nana’s expression of love:

“Harper, do you think respect is an expression of love? And do you think acceptance can also be an expression of love?”

As I spoke a Piwakawaka[31] danced into the house, into the bedroom, and back out again through the front door. I wondered at its meaning.

Harper gazed seemingly into space. All of a sudden, she seemed smaller, like a little creature looking for somewhere to nest, as she spoke:

“Is it okay for me to love my dad just because he is my dad?”

Her words hung between us like a line of spider’s gossamer which might just be the first thread in a work of miraculous, yet everyday beauty. There was silence for a moment. But not an everyday kind of silence.

“What do you think?” I asked her. “Could it be okay for you to love your dad just because he is your dad?”

She pondered.

“It would be a relief for my dad. After he watched the slideshow I made for Nana, he called me and he said, ‘I am so proud of you.’”

Her face now seemed to widen, just as a few moments before it had seemed to shrink, as she said unbelievingly:

“He said it five or six times”

[31] A Piwakawaka is a bird that is native to New Zealand/Aoteraoa. It is also known by many other names, including Tīwaiwaka. The English name is Fantail.

I felt as if we were suspended together halfway across a bridge: a bridge to somewhere worth getting to. I asked a question that I hoped would take us a step or two closer to the other side: “Do you think your dad could be feeling constrained at the moment?”

Zoom is a strange medium. How often ‘in real’ might you be close enough to someone to see the very beginnings of a tear beginning to form. I saw it. And then another. Harper spoke as her tears fell.

“He may feel hurt that our relationship is like this. He said to me that he was ‘too young to understand what happened with his cousin’. He said to me, ‘why do you think it is that when your grandad died, we gave Doreen’s son our share of the inheritance?’”

I felt it was time to ask Harper’s Nana, my co-therapist, to join our conversation again. “Harper, if your nana was with us now, what do you think she might wish to say?”

Harper looked upwards, the trails from her tears glistening like streams running down a New Zealand mountainside. She spoke slowly but surely through closed eyes. “She says, ‘your dad has always been pinpointed for his mistakes all his life, and the one thing he doesn’t want to make a mistake with is you.’”

There are times as a therapist when my eyes begin to burn with tears. I feel them wanting to find their way out as my therapist's face prepares for them. This was one of those times. We were both silent. I heard the piwakawaka’s chirping through the open window. Then I saw it swoop and dance. Some people would say that when a piwakawaka enters a house it is a harbinger of death. Others would say it sometimes signifies a visit from an ancestor.

Harper’s mouth opened, then closed, then opened again, as she found her words. “I don’t think I need to say anything to him. I just think I need to take a different perspective. I have seen him as this authority figure, and myself as someone who always does wrong in his eyes. I need to change that. As I spoke to Nana, I saw him as a little boy. I wouldn’t want him to think that he has made a mistake with me. He says, ‘I have a lot of Nana in me.’

“Remember, he always sent you to her.”

“Yes”, Harper replied. “Maybe he knew what I needed.”

Postscript

Four months later...

I emailed Harper after we had last met to ask her whether she would be willing for me to write the story of our conversations, and I had, of course, enquired after her. I was delighted to read her reply a week or so later:

Hi Kay,

I am so sorry I haven't got back to you sooner! Everything was crazy at work after the memorial and I actually resigned from my job and have accepted a position at the Sydney Zoo, which I am really happy about!

The memorial was so beautiful and reading my letter felt so right and I felt so much closure from that day! It is so crazy how much our sessions helped and have helped with things with the family since then!

Also, if you are still keen on using my story for your book I am still more than willing to help. And guess what? I am back in Auckland for the next month, so if there is anything you would like to ask I'd be happy to meet…

Eight months later…

My desk was piled with papers. I had read through my detailed scrawlings from my sessions with Harper numerous times, and intrigued by some unanswered questions, and wanting to know more about how life had changed for her since our sessions, I decided to take her up on her offer to meet.

The autumn sun flitted across the now sun-tired garden of my practice building as I waited for Harper, accompanied by Abigail, my landlady's attention-seeking little cat. I heard steps on the path, and there she was!

There was much I wanted to ask her. I wanted to know how it had been to read her letter *to* her nana rather than to deliver a eulogy. I wanted to know whether her relationship with her father had altered. I wanted to know in what ways she was continuing to connect with her nana. Harper told me about the memorial: How there had been two hundred people present, who had all joined the whānau

afterwards for a hangi[32] that had cost all of $260, partly because of donated meat. It was, she told me, “The cheapest memorial ever!”

“Nana would have loved the hangi but she would have hated the fuss,” she continued.

Harper had read her letter to her nana to me at our third and final session, but I was longing to know how it had been received.

“People laughed so much when I read the letter to Nana. They weren't expecting it at all. It was sad and heavy until then. I wouldn’t have wanted her to be upset so it was full of jokes and funny stories.”

I found myself thinking of how Harper had described her nana “wrapping her in care,” and I found myself asking her, “Did you wrap your nana in care? Not only with how you wrote her letter, but in how you cared for her, especially in her final days, even although you couldn't be by her side?”

Harper’s eyes shone with tears. She smiled as she said: “I was hoping I wouldn’t cry so early on. Yes, I think I did. Even organising the korowai was a mission in itself. I felt she would have known that it would have been killing me and my family not to be there, because no one could visit her at all in her final days. She knew how much we respected her and how much we wouldn’t have wanted her to be on her own. I think the Zoom call was for us. She was singing and talking to her sister in Māori. We all left in such high spirits. It was about her giving peace to all of us. That is what she would have wanted. I heard later that she was holding the hand of one of the nurses as she passed. The nurse had the same name as me, and the head nurse told me that Nana wouldn’t let her out of her sight.”

Abigail had found her way onto Harper’s lap on the garden bench, and her purring filled the silence between us. As if reading my mind, Harper began to tell me about what had transpired in her relationship with her father since what she described as “the big revelation.” “Before I was trying to mould him into being the kind of dad I wanted him to be, and he was always falling short. It has been a journey of acceptance, finding the positives in who he is, and loving him for those things.”

[32] Hangi refers to food cooked in an earth oven.

"The biggest thing was after I had been on at him and mum to sort out their wills, because there was a lot of drama after Nana died because she hadn't written one. Mum loves rings. She has several on most of her fingers. She sent me and my sister a 'who gets what rings list', and then Dad said, 'I want to give you this. I want to give it to you now.' It was his greenstone, carved with our family emblem. It is the one thing I know is him."

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