

Awhi mai Awhi atu

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A rather crude translation of the above title is, if you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours. But seriously, in thinking about a title for this article, these words came to me simply, awhi mai, awhi atu, assist me and I will assist you, embrace me and I will embrace you. Voluntary work from a Māori perspective is about giving. In this giving, one feels much contentment. Whakatauki (proverbs) are an amazing insight into Māori thinking and morals. This one in particular identifies what is most important:

He aha te mea nui o te ao, he tangata, he tangata, he tangata

What is the most important thing in the world, it is people, it is people, it is people.

This whakatauki aligns well to how Māori conceptualise voluntary work and why they do it. I don't believe there is an actual translation of the term voluntary work, however, concepts such as koha (the process of giving and receiving), manaakitanga (care), whanaungatanga (kinship) and matemateāone (profound link to the land), define from a Māori worldview, commitment and the will to give one's time freely for the benefit of people. I'm wary about generalising Māori beliefs and behaviours, but I write as a Māori woman drawing on my experiences about these notions and hopefully from my perspective, give light to these concepts in relation to voluntary work.

Such notions are distinct but are inseparable in meaning and practice. Because, from a Māori point of view, holism in thought and collectivism in practice is a common phenomenon. And so, in this article, I write about voluntary work applying the above concepts drawing on personal experiences and beliefs I have grown up with in my whānau that extends to my hapū and iwi. In this collectivised whanau structure there resides the communitarian desire, willingness and commitment to work for the benefit of one's people.

Voluntary work generally means working in your own time for free. This doesn't necessarily fit comfortably within a Māori framework. Let's consider the first concept of koha, translated simply as contribution, and look more deeply at what the word means in practice. Koha goes beyond just contribution involving a process of reciprocity and maintaining social relationships. If we were to put this idea into the context of voluntary work, it would mean this in a real live situation:

After three days of tangihanga, the tupapaku (deceased) has been buried and the hakari (final feast) is over, the hau kainga (people of the marae) transverse from a state of wairua to the more earthly and practical matters of coming together to sort out the bills. This is done collectively with the whānau pani (bereaved) in an open and supportive forum. All the koha (contributions of money and food) given to the marae and bills paid and unpaid read out for all to hear. The koha at this particular tangi was able to cover all payments incurred by the marae. The whānau pani thanked the hau kainga for their aroha and manaakitanga over the three days and offered a substantial koha back to the marae.

Sometimes, the koha does not cover all costs. I have known the marae to absorb the loss so the bereaved family not incur further grief. This to-ing and fro-ing is about maintaining a balance like on an accounts ledger. But the ledger is a special one that ensures a balance of cultural transactions and relationships (whanaungatanga). Each koha contribution is noted by the whānau pani so in the future, the same amount is returned.

The koha also includes the work the people do willingly over the three or more days of grieving. This work is by no means easy. It requires preparing the marae for the arrival of the whānau pani and tupapaku and ensure pōwhiri protocols secured. Whānau give their own labour selflessly, because, this is a show of aroha and, in any case, without the people, the marae ceases to function as this whakatauki reveals:

Tangata takahi manuhiri, he marae puehu

A person who mistreats his guest, has a dusty Marae (meeting house).

In other words, people who disregard their visitors will soon find they have no visitors at all. This accentuates the importance of manaakitanga and hospitality and maintaining the mana of one's marae.

The underlying motive to continually maintain contact with one's marae is whanaungatanga based on whakapapa (genealogy) and connection to the whenua (land). For Tūhoe, matemateāone captures the link one has to the whenua. If I could put it this way and supported by Wharehuia Milroy (Tūhoe kaumatua), it is the manner in which Tūhoe organise themselves, socially, culturally, politically and spiritually. Matemateāone stems from within the group, where people get to know each other and where ideals and morals determine how the people behave. They share a subtle code of knowledge that goes to make up matemateāone. This is not unlike voluntary groups who come together for a common cause, except, this is based on whakapapa. It is also based on physical identity cues such as mountains, lakes and rivers, all factors that activate matemateāone.

The desire to volunteer also comes from a desire to protect the critical resources that include the language, culture and whenua. Over the years, colonisation has affected these resources and so the kindred connection fosters a collective responsibility of solidarity and mutuality that strives to protect what Māori hold dear. The pursuit, protection, revitalisation and regeneration of traditional knowledge practices and beliefs requires the people to be present, kanohi kitea (the seen face) at the marae, at hui and involved. This is voluntary work on a major scale that motivates people in protest to protect taonga (those special gifts) lest they be ruined or lost. The entry criteria for this group is whakapapa and extends to those who know and understand the devastating effects of colonisation and so join in solidarity with the movement.

Survival of practices and beliefs also extends beyond whakapapa and involves both national and international indigenous voices converging influencing global thinking and action in relation to care of people, animals and the environment. As with the united voices for rights under the Treaty of Waitangi, and those who gathered at the base of Mauna Kea to protest the start of construction on the site for the Thirty Meter Telescope and the thousands of people in Australia protesting against the national celebration of Australia Day, voluntary work for indigenous peoples are acts of survival and communitarianism. These acts of bravery are about being present and involved, having a role and

responsibility to play in order to maintain balance and harmony for the wellbeing of taonga. A coined word, survivance encapsulates the ability to not only survive but most importantly, the ability to transform and adapt.

As a Māori woman of Tūhoe descent and more specifically, Ngati Raka situated within the valley of Waimana, voluntary work from my perspective is about working for the benefit of my people that will contribute to the well-being of present and future generations. It is about the act of giving and thus receiving ten-fold a strengthened kinship.