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***FEELING, HEALING,
TRANSFORMING, PERFORMING:
Unsettling Emotions in Critical
Transformative Pedagogy***

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Abstract:

THE UNCOMFORTABLE GAP

This thesis takes a snapshot look at the experiences of five members of Te Rākau Hua o te Wao Tapu Trust, in order to illuminate the role of unsettling emotions in critical transformative pedagogy in Aotearoa New Zealand. An initial exploration of the literature reveals an historical gap in interest and research into the role of emotion in education, particularly the role of uncomfortable emotions. However, discomfort has increasingly become an interest of a number of critics who question the pedagogical emphasis on rational dialogue, believing it impotent to achieve the emancipatory aims of critical education.

This thesis celebrates the unique contribution of Te Rākau to the healing and restoration of Māori communities and the transformation of the relationship between privileged and oppressed groups. Situated in a Kaupapa Māori methodological framework, the study positions the physical, emotional, and spiritual connectedness inherent to Māori worldviews as normal. A tension is therefore revealed between these norms and dominant Western norms, which are characterised by anti-emotional socialisation, compartmentalisation, and social fragmentation. This tension provides insights into the emerging interface between the fields of critical and transformative education, which stress the need to break down the Western dichotomies that separate human beings from nature, emotions from reason, and the personal from the political. The argument developed here suggests these dichotomies are seriously problematic for marginalised communities, who are not taken seriously until their circumstances reach acute crisis. These discussions reveal a pedagogy of healing, which is presented as crucial to the transformation of personal, social, economic, political, and ecological relationships, in which the contribution of uncomfortable emotions is invaluable. The heart of this work therefore urges us to embrace being unsettled in order to find the valuable messages and treasures discomfort reveals.

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To the sky and the stars, who remind me to dream
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The grief still fresh
And the courage to overcome great obstacles
To traditions lost and being reborn
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“Ehara taku toa i te toa takitahi. Engari he toa takitini”
“Mine is not the strength of one person. Rather, it is the strength of many”

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Prologue:
HEALING A LEGACY

Tears are like liquid love beyond space and time that navigate my soul's healing and remind me of the magic in all things.

This thesis arises out of a life long passion for individual and collective healing, and is inspired by many wonderful people. For someone who hated school as a child, it's ironic, or perhaps destined, that I've ended up studying education at university. My experience in mainstream schooling was pretty bleak. I met my one and only wonderful teacher at sixteen in my last year at high school. He was a hopeless teacher in the usual academic sense, who failed *me* for his failure to teach me anything about the curriculum. He was, however, the best teacher I ever had. He connected with me, listened to me, argued with me, raised his voice, ate lunch with me, showed his feelings, expressed himself. And although I failed his music class, music nonetheless remained an integral part of my life and work. However, my overriding experience of mainstream schooling radically contrasted this one, as did my later experiences in Kaupapa Māori education, which I explore in Chapter One.

The other disjunction that contributes to my interest in the unsettling emotions and critical transformative education involves the incongruity between the worlds of my maternal and paternal grandmothers. My working class maternal grandmother Connie Birchfield (born 1898), known to us grandkids as Nana, was a renowned public speaker who had an active political life. She was involved with workers' education, community action groups, and unionism. She also "contested six local body and five parliamentary elections" for the Communist Party between 1935 and 1954, until her and my grandfather's expulsion in 1957 for opposing the crushing of the Hungarian uprising (Birchfield, 1998).

As an elderly woman, Nana engaged us with her ideals from her armchair. In particular I remember a number of proverbial sayings she frequently used, which epitomise the teachings she passed on to us. "You don't look up and you don't look down", she would say. "Everyone's unique and has an innate gift to offer". She taught us that one is neither greater, nor less than, anyone else – that people are equal,

despite their wealth, class, gender, or ethnicity – and that each individual has something innate to give. However, in contrast to this belief in “nature”, Nana also believed in the power of “nurture”, and she stressed the idea that what happens in our early lives affects us forever. “If a tree is not nourished it’ll always grow crooked”, she maintained.

Nana valued family immensely. She was the only one of her immediate family to immigrate to Aotearoa New Zealand, other than an uncle who had no offspring. “If you commit a murder, still come home”, she’d say. “You’re always welcome”. We all had a place to stand, regardless of our actions – good or bad. Care was the centre stone of Nana’s life, and she kept an open door to anyone who needed company or accommodation, regardless of their age, social status, ethnicity, or religious beliefs – even in spite of her own ardent atheism and radical political beliefs. Nana took care of people by sharing food and space. She recycled everything, creating things out of nothing. Jerseys were unravelled and re-knitted. As a grandmother, she encouraged us to follow our own unique dreams. “You’ve got to do what you want – do what you believe is right – follow your path”, she stressed. However, she also cherished community, and reminded us that we are inherently interconnected and interdependent. “People are social creatures”, she said. “Alone you’re weak”.

Nana loved communication, discussion, dialogue, and story-telling, and was more interested in people’s philosophy, theories, attitudes, ideology, and values, than what they looked like or what social position they held. “Judge a person from the chin up”, she chuckled. She also had a deep concern for social justice, and her life’s goal and work was to help create greater equality. “Absolute power corrupts absolutely”, she declared. “People must own the tools, the means of production – we’ve got to challenge the status quo”! Nana believed we ought not accept things blindly just because they are familiar or normalised. Rather she emphasised the importance of critique, collective action, community ownership, consensus, and shared control or sovereignty. These ideals formed the foundation of my worldview and perception of justice, for which I am hugely grateful. However, in contrast to Nana’s utopian communitarian optimism, I inherited a totally different set of gifts from my middle-class paternal grandmother Marion Williams – otherwise known as Gran (born 1900).

In contrast to Nana’s love of dialogue, Gran was not much of a conversationalist, and although it was never overtly acknowledged by her, she suffered extensive periods of depression throughout her life. Nonetheless, she possessed amazing determination

to cope with life despite having little support. She separated from my grandfather, who according to Dad, suffered from alcoholism, and she raised her two boys during the thirties and forties as a single mother. As an only child of parents who had both died, Gran did this with virtually no family support and the criticism of friends who disapproved of her separation, which was 'not the done thing' in those days. It was as if she developed a philosophy of disappointment. The support of others could not be guaranteed and it was deemed better to do things by oneself. She loved gardening and sport, and she travelled solo to Canada, South America, and parts of Asia. However she rarely talked about these things. My contact with her as a child was always uncomfortable. But at the same time I had a huge empathy for this mysterious, controlled woman, who seemed so deeply sad.

This provided the counterpoint that has been equally influential to my arrival point at this thesis. Whilst I admire the idealism that drove Nana's life, it didn't provide me the answers I needed in terms of the uncomfortable emotions that were clearly a part of Gran's journey, and my own. In fact, I believe Nana concealed her emotional troubles, and like Gran, a hidden subtext of disappointment lay beneath the surface, also stemming from a belief that the support of others could not be totally relied upon. Her husband (my grandfather) was a particularly gentle man, who despite having many other gifts, was not endowed with a sense of practical know-how, and it was Nana who ended up fulfilling some of the roles men of that era would be expected to do, in addition to her role as a woman. Nevertheless, she didn't make much of her frustration and disappointment. And although I've certainly inherited Nana's idealism, I have also been unable to maintain the level of positivity she achieved. Rather, like Gran, my internal demons presented me with different lessons. This brought my life to a major crossroads as a young woman.

I left home at seventeen and began to search for answers to the questions that resulted from the incongruity between my two inheritances. Ongoing physical, emotional, and spiritual crises demanded I find some way to negotiate this legacy, and my quest led to me befriended a number of people, mainly women, who began teaching me how to heal. I learned that uncomfortable emotions, for the most part, have been viewed as things to overcome, ignore, rise above, take control of, and conquer, within the dominant traditions of both the West and the East. However this approach never worked for me. Ignoring my uncomfortable emotions never made them go away. Rather, I became increasingly imprisoned by them. And the more imprisoned I became, the greater the negative impact became upon all those around

me, including my family and close friends. My hurt began hurting others. However, various mentors and teachers uncovered another path – one that involved embracing these uncomfortable emotions and uncovering the gifts they bring. They too have had an important part to play in contributing to this thesis. I also acknowledge my immediate family, who on many occasions found my choices difficult to understand, yet supported me regardless – sometimes baffled about how best to do so – but never giving up. This means a great deal to me. Finally, all these experiences and relationships planted the seeds that led me to Te Rākau Hua o te Wao Tapu, the group that forms the focus of this study – to be discussed in Chapter One.