

# The Meaning of Being Aged and Being Maori

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## ABSTRACT

The human entity's co-existence in the world is fundamental to an ontological interpretation of the meaning of being (Heidegger, 1927/1962). Accordingly, being-in-the-world is always a mode of 'Being-with-Others.' Even when not in the company of others, Being-in-the-world always has a relational quality. It implies a person is never fully 'alone' in the world. Others are always 'there' in a contextual way. Such understandings of Being-with will be influenced by a peoples' world view. This paper shares three stories told by Maori elders within the context of a hermeneutic phenomenological study undertaken on Auckland's North Shore. Each story illuminates something of the spiritual meanings of being aged and being Maori. The study itself aimed to understand the meaning of 'being aged' through the everyday experiences of those who live in advanced age. Individual research conversations were conducted with fifteen community-dwelling elders; four Maori aged 71 to 93 and eleven non-Maori aged 80 to 97 years. The research conversations were focused on gathering the stories of particular everyday events as well as the person's reflections on aging. As a non-Maori researcher, cultural integrity of the text and the interpretations was enhanced through partnership with a Maori advisor. In this paper, the spiritual dimension of the everyday experiences of elder Maori are revealed as being-with as belonging, being-with as elder, and contributing to community.

## THE STORIED TEXT

The text chosen for this paper stands as a gift from three of the kaumatua and kuia who generously shared their time for the study and engaged in conversations about their everyday. This re-telling of their stories comes with their blessings. Self-chosen pseudonyms are used throughout the text. For the conference presentation, each chose an image to portray the deep meanings carried through their words. Interpretations of the text are presented after each story.

### Pani's Story

Pani's life story may echo that of many others in his generation of Maori (Walker, 1990). There was the growing up through a time of urbanisation and Europeanisation with the suppression of Maori language and traditional ways. There was the coming through the tuberculosis epidemic and losing both parents and many relatives at a young age. There was the moving away from tribal lands and learning to make his own way in the urban world of manual labour. And there was the irregular work and financial hardship while providing for his wife and children.

Pani and his wife live at home in their rented unit. It is a long way from the place his ancestors called 'home.' Pani tells of a journey he embarked on last year:

*I found out that I am from Tainui, that is Waikato, and Wai Poenamo, a South Island tribe. My dad was buried down at a little town there and, this is interesting, my daughter married a boy up North and she came down and she said Dad I want to go back so I know where my grandfather was buried. So they raised some money to take me back down South.*

*I hadn't been back for fifty-six years. Oh it was fantastic; we went across on the boat. It was rough and when we arrived into Picton we had to travel south to this place. It was quite late at night and we pulled up outside this house and it was straight across from the marae. I didn't even know we had a marae down there. And as we pulled up it was 10'ish at night and we saw the lights on and these people came rushing out. They introduced themselves and I knew straight away who*

*they were; they were my relatives. And they contacted other relatives of mine and as they all arrived we ended up going to the marae.*

*What a beautiful marae. That is where my Dad is buried and that was the first time I had been there. When we went into the marae, oh it was beautiful. It is my marae, and I didn't even know I belonged to it. It was so overwhelming. I think because, for the first time, I was on the marae. They told me it was mine. When I say mine, I mean I am involved with the family.*

*More so, they were overjoyed to see me. That was the overwhelming part, and the people that came around to visit; oh I hadn't even met them. But they knew who I was. Well it is just amazing. My son and my daughter, they couldn't get over the place [Pani, 71].*

As Pani tells his story of going back to the place where his father is buried, he first goes back in history. He speaks of *finding out* that he is from the ancestral tribes of *Tainui and Wai Poenamo*. In uncovering his lineage, Pani finds out about himself. At the age of 70, Pani knew who he was as a person, yet he did not know himself as being 'of' his people. His everyday disconnect-ness from his ancestral home and cultural knowledge meant he was spiritually standing apart. Yet the meaning of 'being-with' his people was always already there before it was opened up to him. *Straight away* he 'knew' the people he had never met. He already knew they *were his relatives*. In the event, Pani finds himself being with others who already know him as one 'of' them; just as he knows them as of being 'of' his family. They are forever bonded together in their common ancestry. The roots of connectedness, their belonging-ness, were always already there for them.

Pani mentions being *overwhelmed*. His words express the profoundness of his experience. They convey a sense of being engulfed; overcome by the meanings which pressed upon him. It was the powerfulness of standing on the tribal land, of being-with his ancestors and of being-with his people. Pani 'belongs' there. Thus, he was delivered over to the marae's *beauty*; not merely its physical characteristics but the beauty of its meaning. Its beauty was primordial in the belonging-ness. Within Maori culture, the "carved meeting house [is] the symbol of Maori identity, mana and tribal traditions" (Walker, 1990, p. 188). So in learning the marae is '*mine*,' Pani learns who he is and where he belongs. The belonging is with the land, the place and his people. Hence, Pani's being-with 'as belonging' is characterised by the past, present and future. Belonging is being-with his ancestors, being-with his living relatives and as forging a future for the being-with of his descendants.

So how does this anecdote say anything about the phenomenon of being aged? Pani is a legacy of his history; of being Maori in a predominantly non-Maori world (Walker, 1990). Yet being Maori meant the gift of finding he belonged always already awaited him. Now as he goes about his everyday, in spite of being geographically distant from his ancestral home, Pani's relational everyday is always one of being-with as belonging. In finding himself as of his people, the Being-with is always there with him in his everyday. His being aged and being Maori come together in the spiritual belonging.

### May's Story

Now listen to May's words as she dwells upon the previous day:

*Yesterday, now what happened yesterday? Oh I had a house full of grandchildren. That's right, they all came in. They were*

*at the school because they had a game of rugby and they all came back from there with their grandfather. He wanted to come back because he was starving, so they all came back together. I was sitting here watching TV when they came in and their grandfather said oh your mokos are hungry. There were heaps of them, there must have been about 24 of them, and they are all my mokos. Oohh, oh OK. I'll get something together. I said I will cook dinner for you to eat. That's what I was doing yesterday.*

*Well I just brought out what I had in the cupboard. I got out a big pot and I cooked six of these packet dinners which make up a lot. It didn't take long, only a couple of minutes. And they quite enjoyed it when I set my table up for them and it wasn't long after that they were all sitting down around the table. Some fitted around the table and some were sitting on the couch. There you are, there you are, and they were quite happy. They weren't worrying about the old man and me so I went out to the garage while they were all eating in here and when I came back in they had cleaned up and everything. Oh they were rubbing their tummies.*

*I felt good actually. I felt lovely knowing that all my mokos were all satisfied, oh thank goodness. But I did feel aroha for them because I didn't know what they were supposed to eat over there or maybe they didn't have any money to pay for anything. I was so pleased because they all came here and I fed them and I felt proud of that. I had them all here feeding them. That's what it was.*

*Well, there might be a time when they have got a family of their own and they do the same thing as I did for them yesterday. I gave them a lesson and hopefully that will come through for them in the future. Well on the marae, for the whanau that comes in, the old people always make sure that the family has kai. This is how we were taught [May, 77].*

May describes her day which suddenly changed from one of restful solitude to having a house full of grandchildren; all her mokos. Amid the unexpected, May's story reveals a sure-ness in what was called for. Without hesitating she knew to *get something together* to provide for her mokopuna. Her knowing reaches back into the past and to *how she was taught*. These teachings were not in a classroom. Her learning unfolded through being on the marae; through Being-with her Maori elders.

On the whole, May did not speak of a life steeped in traditional Maori ways. Yet she always already knew what she was called on to do in this event. Her 'Maoriness' opened the way for her to hear 'the call.' It was the call to be with her mokopuna as their elder. Thus May's preparedness for this event is situated in her ancestral past. Heidegger (1927/1962) interprets the silent call to do something as arising from one's conscience. It is an apprehending of what ought to be done. "Conscience gives us 'something' to understand; it *discloses*...it is revealed as a *call*....The call of conscience has the character of an *appeal*" (Heidegger, p. 314). Thus, when our conscience appeals to us, it summons us and we are aroused to do something. It is a moment, often without forewarning, of "intensification". The silent call evokes an 'amplification,' it lights up and clarifies what is called for. Interpreted in this context, May hears the call of 'how' to be with her mokopuna as their elder and as an elder Maori woman. The deeply held understandings of 'how to be' as elder in this circumstance are disclosed and make their appeal to her. In this way, "the call comes from [her] and yet from beyond [her]" (Heidegger, p. 320).

*Thank goodness* May says in knowing she heard and measured up to the call. She fed all her mokos, and she saw them *rubbing their tummies* in satisfaction. May searches for words to express the deep fulfilment she in turn experienced. She speaks of *feeling good*, *feeling lovely* and of *feeling proud*. May's repetitiveness discloses the salience of this event for her as grandmother; as Maori elder. Her

proudest is in her knowing she followed her elders' teachings and served an ancestral tradition. She experiences a sense of fulfilment. In turn, her ancestors would be proud of her. And her proudest is in *giving them*, her grandchildren, a lesson.

Looking to Maori customs, male and female elders in a family group "were the storehouses of knowledge, the minders and mentors of children" (Walker, 1990, p. 63). Accordingly, elders played a crucial role in their grandchildren's upbringing including their learning about customary ways. Thus May's being-with as elder is in her past, present and future. The always already there understandings meant May simply went about providing for her visitors, her mokopuna, while at the same time showing the way for *them in the future*. In the event, some of the threads of the past are drawn forward, passing on the potential for the ancestral ways to be taken up and practised by her descendants.

### **Matelot's Story**

And now, hear Matelot's story.

*A good day is when I have got something to do or somebody rings me up to do something. Because I am a kaumatua, I go and do those things. It is landed on my shoulders. For example, on Thursday I went with some ladies to Te Awamutu for a powhiri. It was for their project teaching the young children how to talk English. I hadn't thought about what I was going to say, I waited until I got there and then I got up and said what I had to say.*

*I was looking forward to it but I was disappointed when I got there. They were so casual with the powhiri. It belittles what the Maori used to do. When he was doing his karakia for instance he was scratching his nose and bending down and picking stuff off the floor at the same time, and I thought God Almighty. It made me angry but at the same time I could see that he was only stuck there to see the job out. And he was only a young joker, so if I had have growled at him it wouldn't have made any difference anyway. But I was angry with the wananga for handing him that. They didn't have the right people there.*

*But if I couldn't go as kaumatua, well I suppose that is not the day I am looking forward to actually. No. I would just sit at home I suppose and think about what is going to happen and that is about all" [Matelot, 74].*

Matelot tells of it being a *good day* when the call to *do something* comes because *he is a kaumatua*. In doing so, he communicates the depth of respect he is afforded by the Maori community. Being a kaumatua is not achieved merely by being aged; it reveals Matelot as knowledgeable and practised in Maori language, customs and rules. The words point to Matelot's being in the everyday as anticipating the call to perform ceremonial functions which are the reserve of kaumatua. Through saying *it is landed on his shoulders*, he signifies an observance of the customary passing on of kaumatua functions. Those who have been before him have handed down responsibilities to him. So, by saying he goes to *do those things* Matelot speaks of a sense of duty in making himself available to be called upon. He discloses the acceptableness of the responsibility settling upon his shoulders. In signifying a good day as one in which somebody rings him, Matelot indicates being in the 'mode of possibility' in his everyday as kaumatua. This mode takes precedence over other things within his everyday world.

Philosophically the notion of mana Maori motuhake offers an understanding of Matelot's having a greater purpose in his everyday. It has its foundations in Maori resistance to full assimilation as a colonised people. Through the twentieth century, new urban marae were established as Maori migrated from their rural homelands to work in the industrialising cities. "Accordingly, for landless Maori, the marae was their remaining turangawaewae on which to hang their identity as the indigenous people" (Walker, 1990, p. 187).

Contemporary affiliation with marae and other Maori associations perpetuates traditional knowledge and customs by way of passing responsibilities on to kaumatua and kuia, the male and female elders (Walker). And as Matelot talks, he naturally weaves Maori language into his story spoken primarily in English. Walker suggests the upholding of cultural difference, such as through their native language, “impelled the Maori to dwell in the dual world of biculturalism” (p. 198). Thus, through his storytelling, Matelot reveals a fluency in moving between two worlds. Mana is the Maori word meaning “authority, power, prestige” (Walker, 1990, p. 296).

In his recent example of being kaumatua at the wananga, Matelot tells of being there before knowing *what he had to say*. Thus he uncovers a practised wisdom. He ‘knows’ that the right things to do and say will be there for him in the event. The ‘thrownness’ of being in the moment means the words which will carry his message forward are always already there as he *gets up* to speak. His tribal wisdom comes before him. Ontologically, Matelot’s standing and speaking is then a being in his past, present and future. And in saying the powhiri’s casualness *belittles what the Maori used to do* he speaks of being there, not as an individual carrying out a job, but as representing Maoridom and its traditional customs. In the same way, the young Maori man’s mistakes were not seen to be his own failings but those of the people who passed the responsibility on to him. In closing, Matelot tells of not *looking forward* to a time of not being able to *go as kaumatua*. He emphasises the purposefulness experienced in contributing as a Maori elder to something so much greater than himself.

## BEING-WITH-OTHERS

Heidegger’s philosophical writings on the ontology of being throw another light on the meanings behind these stories. Philosophically, the human entity’s co-existence in the world is fundamental to an ontological expression of the meaning of being (Heidegger, 1927/1962). Accordingly, being-in-the-world is always a mode of ‘Being-with-Others.’ Even when not in the company of others, Being-in-the-world always has a relational quality. It implies a person is never fully ‘alone’ in the world. Others are always ‘there’ in a contextual way. Such understandings of Being-with will be influenced by a peoples’ world view. For Maori, membership of the extended family and tribe is thus interpreted as a societal mode of Being-with-Others. According to Maori customs the whanau or multi-generational family is the fundamental unit in Maori society, being related back to a common ancestor (Walker, 1990). Hence, in Maoridom, attachment to generations of family and the land settled by ancestors are deeply held sentiments, essential to wellbeing.

## THE STUDY ITSELF

A review of historical and contemporary social policy documents in New Zealand pointed to a lack of understanding of the experience of aging. Yet, within the context of an ageing population, understanding elders’ lived experiences is becoming an increasingly important social endeavour. Interestingly, twenty years after an emphatic call within the gerontological literature to listen to older people’s experiences of aging, what remains “missing is a distinct view of the *everyday life of older people*” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000, p. 3). Studies which take account of elder’s understandings and the meanings they attribute to everyday experiences are called for. This suggests an ontological exploration of the ‘being’ of being aged has the potential to throw a new light on that which is already ‘known.’

The stories brought forward in this paper were gathered as part of a hermeneutic phenomenological study which aimed to understand the meaning of ‘being aged’ through the everyday experiences of those living in advanced age. It began by asking “how do elders experience aging in their everyday lives?” Enfolded within the question was the assumption that the phenomenon of being aged exists but is ordinarily hidden or taken-for-granted. Individual research conversations were conducted with fifteen community-dwelling elders; four Maori elders aged 71 to 93 and eleven non-Maori elders aged 80 to 97 years. All

were living in private residences on Auckland’s North Shore. Maori elders were recruited through the Kaumatua for Te Puna Hauora O Te Raki Paewhenua (Te Puna Hauora), a local Maori health and social service, while non-Maori were recruited by way of the general electoral roll. The research conversations were focused on gathering the stories of going about the everyday. In particular, elder’s pre-reflective accounts of everyday moments and events, as they were lived, were encouraged. Research conversations were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. This enabled the identification of discrete stories within the transcribed text.

A hermeneutic analysis of the stories continued throughout the data gathering phase of the study. Interpreting the storied text was a mode of letting it speak in its own way; a mode of being receptive to what it was saying. Dwelling with what was spoken and what was unspoken was a way of uncovering the meanings within the text. As a non-Maori researcher, cultural integrity of the text and the interpretations was enhanced through partnership with the Te Puna Hauora kaumatua who walked the journey with me, guiding my steps along the way. This paper did not aim to be a comprehensive overview of the research methodology and methods; rather, it profiled three stories as a way of revealing a spiritual dimension of being in the everyday for elder Maori.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study’s philosophical grounding in Heideggerian interpretive phenomenology focused on the ‘being’ of being aged in the context of the everyday. Each of the participants in this study had experienced a lot of that which has gone before. Many more yesterdays lay in their past than did tomorrows in their future. Stories told by the Maori elders illuminated a deep spiritual sense of being aged and being Maori. Their words disclose how purposefulness matters. Having a purpose is a reason for being; it gives meaning. It is about bringing the past into the present and about being hopeful toward the future. It is about feeling a sense of contributing to something beyond the self; of giving for a common purpose. It is about making a difference in ‘the world’ in some way, no matter how seemingly trivial. Purposefulness showed in doing things for the sake of others, in passing something on and in the readiness for leaving something behind. Being closer to the end of one’s life may bring feelings of purposefulness into the light.

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