

THE CORNER: CLOAKED IN LIFE AND DEATH: RE-SURFACING FROM THE LOSS OF A FATHER

**KAY INGAMELLS
ANITA IJSSELDIJK**

ANITA'S PROLOGUE

For my son this is and will be part of his life story. His mates will have had dads that take them to sports, give them advice, and tinker with cars, boats, or bikes. My son's story is final. His dad died when he was 12 years old. Final. End of story. No lingering in the shed, finishing tightening that screw when dinner is ready. No hope of reunion. No secret savings under the mattress to join dad on a trip to Australia. No father with whom to share his eighteenth birthday. No father to be with him at his 21st, a birthday that is celebrated with family and friends in New Zealand.

How best to assist him in his loneliness, his sadness, his fears, his withdrawals, his anger, his acceptance, and in his journey to becoming a man?

With this in mind, we arrive in the office of his family doctor to meet another counselor. He has recommended that this woman will not waffle.¹ That is what I am hoping for along with a wish that she will get us. She is on trial: will she be trustworthy enough that I can share my sadness with her? Will Connor respond? Will she help him? Will this process stir up more pain than he can bear or will these conversations give us the bridge that we need to pass beyond where we both now find ourselves?

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The first part of the article's title is borrowed from the title of a journal article referenced below.

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¹Chiefly British: to speak or write in a wordy manner.

Session One: How Do We Speak of Andy Through Our Pain?

“Here’s Kay!” chirped the receptionist, Dana, in the soft Californian voice that somehow did not seem out of place in a West Auckland doctor’s waiting room, perhaps because of its informality and welcoming warmth.

Dana gestured towards a woman in her thirties whose expression was unreadable behind large oval tinted sun glasses. Next to her sat a young man, his face haloed in waves of red hair, whose shy glance was so fleeting that I barely glimpsed his eyes before he returned them to his mother. Knowing that this seemingly shy and gentle 14-year-old young man had lost his father two years before, the tenderness I felt for my own son arose in my heart as I greeted him. On the way to my room, I silently uttered a prayer, perhaps to God, perhaps to his departed father: “Please help me to help this mother and son!”

As I was poised to begin my usual introductions, Russell, my cultural supervisor,² appeared in my mind’s eye. Through my conversations with Russell my relationships with Maori³ over the past 11 years both professionally and personally, and the challenges of working within a bicultural context, my worldview and my practice as a white, woman immigrant brought up in an individualistic culture has been greatly enriched. As Russell came into my mind’s eye that day I was reminded of some of what I have learned. I was reminded of how I now see people less as individuals and more as community members. My understanding is that for Maori, whanau or the greater entities of hapu and iwi/tribe and sub-tribe also extend beyond the domain of the living into the domain of the non-living and ancestors. Relationship extends beyond human beings to the natural and animal worlds and especially to the land. Maori who have been able to preserve such a relationship to life or to re-claim it following the ravages of colonization, see themselves and their relationships in a very different way from the way my individualistic culture has encouraged me to see life and others. For example, it is usual when introducing yourself to name yourself last. First comes the land that you were born in with their mountains and rivers, then your hapu and iwi, then your family and finally, you give your own name. Who you are exists inside of your relationships with land, your family, community, and ancestors. You do not travel alone. As I have come to see myself in this way, I have developed a commitment to meet my clients whether Maori or non-Maori, in a way that acknowledges that we do not travel alone in life. Who we are is situated in our history, our genealogical roots, and in the land that we call home.

²Cultural supervision is a requirement of my professional membership as a counselor. Cultural supervision recognises the importance of Aotearoa/New Zealand as a bicultural nation and is a recognition of the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi, the nation’s founding document.

³The first people of Aotearoa /New Zealand known also as Tangata Whenua, which roughly translates as “people of the land.”

So rather than introducing myself as I might have done in way I might have done a decade ago working in the UK, I introduced myself as an uprooted Canadian, taken back to my parent's homeland in the United Kingdom as a youngster and then emigrating to New Zealand as an adult 11 years ago. I spoke of myself as a daughter to my parents, a sister to my sisters, and the mother of my young son. As I introduced myself, an unspoken yearning arose in me for the moorlands of Yorkshire where as a child I rode my horses through the heather, bathed in the streams and climbed the Cow and Calf rocks. Where as an adult I rode my mountain bike across the sandy tops past the eerie Twelve Apostles standing stones and down to the welcome famous Dick Hudson's pub (named after the legendary highwayman), home of the "Secret Garden,"⁴ home of the Brontës.

I paused, allowing my introduction to settle and then began: "I know that you are here because of the loss of your father."

Connor looked down and Anita shuffled in her seat uneasily.

"Am I right in thinking that it has taken you both considerable courage to come here to talk to me, a stranger, given the pain you both feel?"

Although Anita's glasses still shielded her face, I imagined that tears were gathering behind them as her body seemed to stiffen. The tears in Connor's eyes had no such protection.

"Anita and Connor, would you please help me to understand how I might be of most help to you?"

Connor looked down at the scuffed toes of his standard issue school shoes. Anita swallowed, then summoning her voice, said: "We know that the pain is never going to go away completely but we would like to be able to talk about Connor's dad, Andy, without being overwhelmed by our loss."

As she finished her sentence, her shoulders sank back into the comfort of the well-worn easy chair as if she had some relief from merely voicing her concerns. "Connor, is your mum speaking for you too? Would you like to be able to talk together about your dad again?"

Connor glanced at me briefly and nodded as he scrutinized the worn grey toes of his previously black school shoes with intensity.

"Since Andy's death," I ventured, "have you lost not only his presence in your lives but also the freedom to speak of him? Has his loss cut you off from memories that, despite the pain, might also offer you some comfort if you were able to share them together?"

Anita turned to look at Connor who once again raised his head and met her eyes. Anita spoke wistfully:

It's hard to find people who are willing to keep his memory alive. Father's day in September was like a punishment. We went to Andy's grave at the cemetery at Huia.

⁴*The Secret Garden* is a well-loved children's classic by Frances Hodgson Burnett set on the Yorkshire Moors. It was published in 1911.

And since then Connor has turned inwards. I haven't known how to speak with him and have been scared of causing him more pain.

Knowing that the question now forming in my mind might scrape the surface of their barely covered wounds, I asked it with some trepidation: "If you were to help me to get to know Andy through your loving eyes, would this bring your memories of Andy to life again and enable you to speak of him together once more?" Connor nodded slowly and Anita, careful to follow his lead, nodded also.

As I suspected that Connor was only barely managing to stay in the room, I enquired with tenderness: "Would it be alright with you if we talk about something other than the loss of your dad for a while?"

Connor nodded earnestly, but looked at me out of the corner of his eyes. What else was there to talk about except his father's death? I suspected he was thinking.

"Could I begin with some questions that will help me to get to know and appreciate you both outside of the pain of your grief?"

"Can I explain?"

Mother and son glanced at one another, as if checking that the other was ready and able to bear my enquiries before nodding in unison. I assumed from this that if nothing else, they were in this together.

So often problems take over people's lives to such an extent that they can overshadow everything else about them, including who people previously knew themselves to be and who other people knew them to be. I know it might sound strange but it is almost as if the problems have tried to erase the past so that their lives should only be known from the problems onwards. That everything that came before the problems just isn't worth remembering or knowing.

Anita appeared to be peering at me more intently though her glasses and I wondered if she would entrust me to proceed. I thought it wise to introduce my next question quickly. "Anita, could I begin by asking you what I would come to respect and appreciate about Connor if I were to get to know him?" Anita appeared to stare at me through her dark glasses, her body motionless as she summoned her thoughts. Might she be willing to offer me her trust or would she bolt with her son like a spooked horse, unable to bear the pain of my questions? Connor looked at her nervously from under the waves of his fiery red fringe. Although only a few moments passed, they carried a weight that seemed to lengthen them. Her voice seemed at first uncertain then gathered strength as her description of her beloved son softly began to fill the room. "Connor is very sensitive and kind to animals and to people. He is great at fixing computers and he is very musical." For me, these few words said much about them both. In some ways, Anita was speaking of her son's character as much as anything else. I have found that I meet really interesting people by speaking and listening in this way. Just about everyone I meet through such questions become both fascinating and treasured.

Such questions bring more heart in to my practice and the tenderness of this bereft mother and son called for heart.

I took a deep breath and enquired: "Could you tell me a story about Connor's kindness to animals and people that would bring a rush of pride to your mother's heart?"

Anita gladly told me how as a young schoolboy, Connor had befriended, Simon, whose social skills were very limited given his diagnosis of Asperger's. In year two, aged 6, Connor was selected by his teacher to be a buddy for Simon, who had just joined the year one class. Anita believed that Connor was chosen to mentor Simon's adaptation to primary school because of his accepting nature and intuitive abilities. But the point Anita was at pains to make about Connor was that he kept up the relationship with Simon long after he was asked to do so even though he was not his choice for a friend. Connor had persisted with this one-sided friendship until he had coached Simon into having some confidence in friendships on his own. Anita also spoke of Connor's compassion and respect for people and all living creatures. She mentioned that Connor had once told her that he wouldn't mind living on a farm as long as there was no death generated indirectly or directly. The only options they could come up with were either egg-laying free-range chickens or possibly a stud farm.

In general, Anita considered that:

Connor will take someone as they are because whether they are grumpy, sad, or different because Connor is different himself. Connor has his own mind and if he believes something he will do it. This is something that runs in our family. We hold true to our values and find it hard to follow the crowd. We are not sheep!

Noticing that Connor was now looking up and a flicker of a smile had passed across his face as his mother spoke of the way he had extended a kind of generosity of spirit to Simon and of the absence of sheep in the family, I suspected he might now be prepared for me to speak again of his father. Mindful of the intensity of his sorrow, I directed my next question to his mother: "Anita, would you be willing to begin to introduce me to Andy by telling me what you appreciated and respected about him as Connor's father?"

Anita, inhaling and then holding her breath, then began to speak very softly.

I guessed that she had cultivated ways to speak of matters that might bring forth distress.⁵

Connor and Andy had a super close bond. Their relationship was very special. He did more than some fathers ever do in a lifetime. Did you know Andy raised Connor while I worked? He was very much an 'I am raising my son' kind of father. You see,

⁵Anita later told of her profession of nursing, specializing in medical and palliative care. "In my nursing practice, I have had many opportunities to relieve a patient's isolation by expressing the plain facts of their diagnosis, which then allows us both to begin to speak of their distress and the road ahead."

I felt I really had no idea how to do parenting and Andy held the reins for us both. He was 40 when Connor was born and felt he had been given an opportunity that he wished to seize with both hands. I can see him now, saying: "I am going to be a dad." He was so excited. His young niece was pregnant at the same time and she has always said that his excitement about being a father gave her the confidence she needed to go ahead and be a mother.

A glimmer of warmth had crept across Connor's face as his mother spoke of his father's love and dedication to being his father.

"Anita," I ventured, "would you say that Connor not only gave Andy a new life he had longed for but that he lit up his life?"

"Yes," mused Anita, "Connor was the light of Andy's life."

I glanced at Connor and thought I saw a frailty beneath his expressionlessness.

"Is it time to go yet?" he asked his mother.

"How about we finish up now?" I suggested.

We had traveled a long way in a short period of time. With Connor's consent, we made an appointment to meet the following week.

Session Two: A Father's Legacy of Honor

As I greeted Anita in the waiting room she seemed a little more at ease in my presence even though her sunglasses once again hid her eyes from mine. Connor remained diffident but met my gaze from beneath his red fringe. After a few moments of chit chat about the cyclone that had swept through a nearby suburb a few hours previously, destroying houses and ripping the roof from the mall, I turned to Connor:

"Connor, you know how people often leave their loved ones family valuables, treasures, or legacies?"

Connor blinked, perhaps wondering where this opening question could be leading.

"Did you know that there are other legacies that are not visible? Since we last met, I have been wondering if your dad left you a legacy that was never spoken of, a legacy that arose from his love and dedication to you."

Connor nodded pensively as if he were allowing my question to find a place in his thoughts. Encouraged, I continued: "Would you mind if I asked you and your mum some questions about what your dad may have left as his legacy to you?"

He emitted a pale "Okay."

Turning to Anita, whose eyes and perhaps her sorrows were masked by her dark glasses I inquired:

Do you think that Andy left Connor a legacy in the form of his hopes and dreams for whom Connor might become as a young man? Are there some qualities or attributes that Andy wished to pass on to Connor and that you are beginning to sense in your son?

Anita paused. The air seemed drowsy with her thoughts. She broke the spell of the silence: "Connor knows his own mind and that is because of Andy. Andy used

to say, didn't he Connor, that if you know your own mind then when you become a man, your word is your law."

"Are you saying that in teaching Connor to know his own mind, Andy was providing him with the foundation for becoming a man of honor?" I asked.

Yes, there are times that he would insist that Connor went ahead with things that he had agreed to do because he believed that if you make a promise, that's it. Do you remember, Connor, when you didn't want to go to soccer and dad made you so you wouldn't let the team down?

A faint smile crept across Connor's face as the memory made itself felt.

Anita continued:

Andy was a real gentleman. His parents were very English so he was brought up with manners. When he was 15, he went into the navy. Connor has a strong sense of justice and I think he has inherited this from Andy.

Eager to rekindle the presence of such a devoted father and husband for this mother and son who had felt bereft of the freedom to speak of him, I enquired: "Would you be willing to tell me a story about how you think that Andy handed down his 'strong sense of justice' to Connor?"

The corners on Anita's mouth rose slightly as she recalled the time when Andy had taken Connor back to his primary school to apologize for kicking the detective sergeant's son:

It turned out that Connor had kicked him because he had been defending another boy that the detective sergeant's son had been hitting. Andy made him apologize regardless and I think that Connor understood that he still needed to take responsibility for his own actions, didn't you, Connor? Andy believed in integrity.

Noticing that Connor was listening attentively, I felt I could hazard another question: "Anita, would you be willing to help me to understand how Andy's integrity was experienced by others around him?"

Anita smiled as she recounted how despite Andy's conservative background, his best friend was a cross-dresser. "He would just accept people the way that they were."

Anita, I remember you telling me about how Connor had befriended Simon and how he is able to "put himself in other people's shoes." Do you think that Andy has passed on to Connor his ability to "just accept people the way that they are"?

Anita replied:

Yes, absolutely. Andy was a hands-on father to Connor from the age of 8 months old. I believe children absorb how their parents are into their being and I believe that Connor learned about how to be with people from Andy. Andy treated others

with integrity and Connor picked up on this. This has been passed down to Connor from the both of us.

Connor was sitting upright and leaning forwards with an attentiveness that I had not witnessed before and he seemed to welcome the next question I directed to him:

Connor, were you aware that your father had left you these legacies of knowing your own mind so that you could become a young man of your word, of being someone of integrity who has a strong sense of justice? Would you say that you have begun to take on these legacies that have been left to you and are beginning to claim them as your own?

Pausing for some moments before he found his reply, Connor slowly and carefully said: "I can probably do it but it would take longer and it would be easier if Dad were here to help me."

Noticing that Connor's eyes were downcast and his body had sagged in the chair, I wondered if we had reached the threshold of his tenderness. "Should we finish here for today?" I proposed.

Connor nodded in agreement.

Session Three: A Mother Reborn

As Anita entered my room, she had a spring in her step I had not witnessed before. Connor's eyes seemed brighter and his bearing more upright. Before she had fully lowered herself into her seat, Anita still partly hidden behind her glasses eagerly told me that they had just returned from a trip away.

"It was mum's idea!" Connor chimed. "She wanted to get me out of the house. . . ."

"I couldn't really afford to go," added Anita "but Connor said he would add some of his savings to mine and so off we went to Miranda for three nights. We went to the hot pools; we played tennis; and we went dirt biking."

"Mum went on a quad bike," burst forth Connor. "I never thought she would because she is usually terrified of bikes and things."

"And you should have seen Connor," Anita effervesced, "he went hooning down a ridge. I was so proud of him."

Anita's enthusiasm melted into contemplation as she thoughtfully stated:

You know, it's only recently that Connor and I have got our groove on. I used to compare myself to Andy and I failed myself as a mother. You see, Andy was so capable. He was very well organized and the house was always so clean. He had such good boundaries and he was always consistent. There were times when I just felt surplus to requirements and I even moved out from time to time.

A few moments passed in silent recognition of the weight that such a sense of failure could place upon a mother's heart. I waited until I found my direction, and then asked: "Anita, would be willing to teach me how you have passed from failing

yourself and feeling surplus to requirements, to being a fearless quad biking mother who has a groove on with her son?"

Anita appeared to lighten momentarily at the mention of being a "fearless quad biking mother," but then her voice became solemn once again:

At first after Andy died I was in crisis mode. If I made it through the day and got my head onto the pillow, it was a job well done. It was overwhelming to start with. I've discovered over the last two years though that I am quite capable.

Turning to Connor, who had been listening so intently that he had been perfectly still rather than shuffling in his seat, I asked him if he agreed that his mother was "capable"

As Connor nodded his chair rocked back and forth in time with the fervent movement of his head.

"Connor, would you be able to describe to me some of the things that your mother does well as your mother?"

Connor responded so enthusiastically that it was if he had been waiting for me to ask this one question:

Mum helps me to go to school. I am not sure I would even get there otherwise because I just want to stay at home all day. She wakes me up, takes me there, and makes me lunch if I am late. She is a bit stricter than she used to be and so I know where I stand and it makes life easier. She is really good at making dinner at a certain time and she takes me out to do stuff like rock climbing. And she looks after my dog. I wouldn't be coming here either if it wasn't for mum.

It was Anita's turn to listen and she did so intently, her face softened as she responded. As Connor gave this glowing testimony of his mother, his cheeks brightened.

For some time I had had a question on the tip of my tongue waiting for the right time to offer it to them and now the time seemed right: "Anita and Connor, strange as this may sound, do you think that Andy's death has given you an opportunity to have a relationship as mother and son that might otherwise have passed you by?"

I had known that this question might touch a nerve and sure enough they both seem to flinch.

Anita glanced at Connor as if checking that he was bearing up under the weight of my questions before replying:

I realized that I was running out of time to be a mum and that it was really special. I am so glad that I didn't miss out. We have been through the hard stuff and I feel like we are entering a new phase and we are closer together, more like good friends.

Having tested the waters of their readiness for such enquiries, I embarked on the questions that I had anticipated asking: "Connor, do you think that your dad would be approving of the mother that your mother is becoming?"

Connor nodded.

I feared that he would shy away from a reply but instead he rose to meet my question: “He would be proud and he would be surprised at how well she has done . . .”

Anita with good spirits chimed in: “He would be bloody surprised!”

I joined Anita in her laughter and Connor’s smile warmed the room. “Connor,” I added, “do you think that your dad would think that your mother’s mothering of you provides something for you that he might not have been able to provide as well as your mother is able to?”

“Yeah!” he enthused, “mum gets me out there. It was her that got me out to guitar lessons and it gives me more confidence.”

Finally, I asked both mother and son: “If you could see Andy’s face looking down at you, would he be thinking of you kindly and smiling?”

“Yes,” said Anita softly, “that feels right!”

Although the world behind her dark glasses remained private, I saw a tear form in Connor’s eye and saw his mother watch it slowly descend down his cheek. I let Connor’s tear mark the close of our conversation that day.

One evening the following week I found a message on my answering machine from Anita. Even although it was a little garbled, I was still able to make out her words and the muted tone of distress it carried: “Really sorry we won’t be able to come this week because Grant, Connor’s paternal uncle, has had a heart attack and he’s in hospital.”

A week later there was another message to inform me that Grant was recovering.

Session Four: Reclaiming Memories From Pain

When we met again I sensed that some sort of change had come over mother and son. They seemed as if something had been shed while at the same time appearing renewed in some way that I could not put words to. Anita’s opening comments confirmed that it was not my imagination.

“We have been replacing the old memories with something better!” Anita proclaimed.

As I looked at her quizzically, she elaborated:

When we heard about Grant, we could hardly bear it. We both began to howl. Then we forced ourselves to get into the car while we were still bloody howling. We knew Grant was in the same hospital that Andy had been in. It was so hard to even think of going back there but we just knew we had to do it for Grant’s sake. We wanted him to know that he is very special to us and he had better come home. Connor was brave going in. We had to walk through the same car park and through the same entrance that we had to walk through when Andy was there.

In reverence of their courage, I invited the silence that had come upon us to linger. Some moments later I found a question that I hoped might honor what they had told me:

Anita, as you told me of how you and Connor found the courage to walk through the same car park and through the same entrance that you walked through to visit Andy, I asked myself if your bravery is born of your love for others and if that love has proved greater than either fear or sorrow?

The question seemed to hang suspended in the air for some moments before Anita answered.

When she did so, she replied with exquisite care:

Connor loves Grant. Grant is a bit like Andy and he and Connor really get each other. I think walking into the hospital was very brave. I went because I wanted to give his wife a small gift of what I knew. I think for both of us it was like reclaiming territory.

“Anita, do you have any idea what Andy might have said if he had witnessed Connor walking into the hospital again?”

Connor looked away, turning his face towards the window.

Anita’s answer found its mark: “He would have been super-proud. He would have said: ‘Good on you mate!’”

A breeze of fragility had entered in the room, upon which I hardly dared to intrude. I risked continuing though, concerned that the territory we were now traversing might take us to places that perhaps we would not be able to reach again once this precious moment had passed: “Anita, if Andy were able to look down and witness the love that Connor now has for Grant and Grant now has for Connor, would it give him some comfort?”

Anita’s chest heaved before she slowly responded:

Grant has a special place in his heart for Connor. We didn’t used to see much of Grant but, in a way, Andy dying has allowed Connor to develop a relationship with him. When we saw Grant again the next day, he had forgotten that I had been there the day before, but did not forget that Connor had been to see him.

I watched Connor out of the corner of my eye as Anita spoke, knowing that the questions I was offering could take him into territory that could either open up his wounds or salve them and perhaps both. Unsure of the direction the questions might be taking him, I thought it wise to ask: “Connor, would it be alright with you if I asked you a few more questions about your uncle and your relationship with him? Or do you feel that you have had enough and that we should end for today?”

Eyes wide, Connor gave me his permission to carry on: “No, it’s okay,” he quietly signaled.

I proceeded with care:

Connor, I realize that your visit to the hospital may have conjured up your pain. I also know that you chose to walk on: that your love and concern for your uncle proved to be greater than the past. Your mum says there is a special tie between you and your uncle. Could you help me to understand what it is that gives you this special tie?

Hesitant at first, Connor informed me that Grant was able to share stories of his father's family with him. Despite being a private person, he had shared with Connor a book that he compiled of his and his father's family history, full of photos of England, stories of his grandfather who had been a butcher and a picture of the family crest, which had originated on the Isle of Lewis in Scotland. Anita joined in, adding:

They have a cool connection. Grant has even taken time off work for Connor and that's saying something because he is a workaholic. Grant has really stepped up for Connor since Andy died. When Andy died we lost a dad and gained a family. We have both been very much embraced and blessed by that side of the family/whanau.⁶ In the days between Andy's death and his funeral, the house was filled with people, family, friends, children, and of course Andy lay in state in the lounge (on the pool table that he loved).

Anita continued:

Mere, Grant's wife, is Maori. Connor was given a Korowai⁷ (cloak), by his aunt Mere that he wore to his father's funeral. Mere who is a traditional Maori weaver had made this Korowai some time before. She brought the korowai over and gave it to Connor. That parting with the cloak was a gift of great significance as it was her first korowai. She said that it felt right that he should have it. Mere was very specific about the qualities of the cloak. She said it needed to be honored and cared for. To be worn with pride on occasions that brought honor to Connor.

More explanation is needed to do justice to the significance of the korowai to Connor and to his story. I have decided not to footnote korowai because of my concern that it will be impossible for a non-New Zealand reader to fully appreciate the significance of a korowai being bestowed on such a young man. In Te Ao Maori (the Maori world), korowai are considered as a taonga (a treasure from the past), which is handed down through the whanau (family) lineage. For Connor to have been gifted the korowai not just for the occasion of his father's death but to keep, was enormously significant.

Korowai are most usually displayed on the occasion of death (Malcolm-Buchanan, Te Awekotuku, & Nikora, 2012), to cloak the deceased, acting "as an anchor," connecting the deceased to both the "now" and the "before" (as cited in Malcolm-Buchanan et al., 2012, p.55). They also have other uses including as adornment for graduations and other very important occasions, as bereavement gifts, and as gifts to strengthen connections between families and tribes:

⁶Often defined as the Maori word for "family," "whanau" also describes emotional physical and spiritual lineage and connections between extended family members both living and ancestral.

⁷A Korowai is the modern term for a Maori cloak in the Awawa tribal domain (Malcolm-Buchanan, Te Awekotoku, & Nikora, 2012), made with flax and bird feathers through the art of whatu (finger weft-twining). They are given as esteemed gifts to honor relationships and to provide physical and spiritual protection.

“Certainly korowai privilege the occasion at which they are used, and to my mind they are silent woven repositories that discreetly speak a thousand silent words” (as cited in Malcolm-Buchanan et al., 2012, p. 59).

Connor’s korowai spoke “a thousand silent words”: Anita told me that the gift of the korowai “felt to her “like an acceptance into the wider family.” Connor told Anita that when he wore the korowai he “I felt that I was wrapped in aroha”⁸ and wore it constantly for three or four days.

When Anita asked him if he was going to take it off he said, “I feel protected. I need to have it on.”

My musings on the gift of the korowai brought to my mind the gift ‘of what Anita knew’ to Grant’s wife, Mere, and Grant’s gift to Connor of his father’s family history: More questions were stirred into being: “Connor, do you think that by telling you stories of your father’s side of the family—of where you and he and your father come from—that Grant was bequeathing to you another part of your father’s legacy?”

Connor seemed lost in thought for several moments before finally replying: “Yes, I guess so. Is this where your red hair comes from? Has it been passed down to you from your Scottish ancestors through your father?”

Anita chipped in: “Grant looks like Andy. He reminds Connor of him.”

Remembering how Anita had earlier mentioned that she, alongside Connor, had walked thorough memories of the past to visit Grant in hospital, I thought to ask her: “Anita, I have just been thinking of what you told me earlier of how you walked past fear to give Grant’s wife a gift of what you knew. Would you be willing to tell me more about this gift that you brought for her?”

After some time for the consideration of my query, Anita replied:

I had been through the same situation. She had told us not to come but I just knew we needed to be there for them both. It was not so much about knowledge and knowing stuff as having had the experience of getting “that phone call.” The initial mode of racing to the hospital not knowing what to expect is terrifying. Understanding that what she said—“don’t come in”—was not what she needed. Mere needed support, touch, and care. She was not to be left alone outside the room where her husband was critically ill and probably dying. She needed to be reminded to have food and drink put in her hand and told to go home and sleep. This is what she did for me.

“Connor and Anita,” I asked, “have you returned the gifts of love and protection that your family bestowed upon you at your times of need to other members of your family at their times of need?” Connor and Anita looked at me fleetingly. The poignancy of the moment was almost unbearable. “Do you think it is time that we closed our conversation for today?” I asked as gently as I was able. Mother and son nodded in unison.

⁸Most usually seen as the Maori word for love, although aroha means more than this.

Session Five: This Mother Is Here to Stay

A couple of weeks passed before we met again. I had a premonition immediately upon greeting them that something had happened.

Sure enough it quickly transpired that they had brought something quite different to discuss with me this time: Anita began:

I want to talk about my bipolar. I am worried about how it affects Connor. We had a talk about it the other day and I've realized he is more affected by it than I had thought. It's worse when I am racy than when I am down. I ask Connor to do one thing and then another or I get really particular about things being done in a particular way and it's just not feasible for him to do it in the way I want it done. It's not fair on him.

"Anita," I asked, "could you tell me if 'bipolar' is the way you have always described these experiences?"

Anita told me that in the past she had always described it as "the raves and down times." She also told me that the diagnosis had been a "huge relief."

I further enquired: "Even though the diagnosis was a huge relief, what way of describing it would be most helpful in this conversation: 'the bipolar,' 'the raves,' and 'the down times' or something entirely different?"

Anita turned to Connor:

Well, we still do call it "the raves" mostly, don't we, Connor? When it's "the rave," I whirl around with the broom and it really annoys me to stop. It's a great feeling: it doesn't feel like my feet are touching the ground but then it gets to the point where everyone else is wrong and it gets too much. When I am down we call it a "down period." There haven't been any for a while but then I tend to go and stay in bed. Connor gets worried about me then because he knows I am really upset and I also have problems getting him to school.

I turned my attention to Connor in order to ask him to help me to understand "the raves" and the "down periods" through his eyes: "Connor, would you mind telling me if how you're Mum described 'the raves' and 'down periods' fits your experience? Is it a little different for you from how your mum understands it to be?"

Connor swallowed hard and looked at his mother as if to seek her permission before he spoke: "She gets bad tempered and yells easily sometimes and when she is more demanding, it tires me out."

Anita inhaled deeply before saying: "I know it's unreasonable, but I can't stop the words coming out."

A thoughtful expression passed over Connor's face and his brow furrowed.

Noticing the concern that seemed to have taken possession of him, I enquired: "Connor, is there something else about 'the raves and down periods' that is on your mind right now?"

Connor paused, then his words shot out and he looked as if they had taken him by surprise: “Sometimes she gets so upset and she goes away. I worry that she could hurt herself or that she might not come back.”

Connor’s words seemed to hang in the air for a moment in the way bubbles do before they gently land and then burst. Certainty entered Anita’s voice as she said reassuringly: “I know I used to go away and leave you when it all got too much for me but its ok now. Things have changed for me. The impulse to stay is bigger than the impulse to go.”

Turning to face me, she maintained:

Sometimes I was running because I felt like such a bad mum at the time. I used to see the torment my demands and the stress caused him and I would find myself thinking that he would be better off without me there. There was a time this year when I needed to go away but instead of leaving Connor I took him with me. My whole purpose for the next three or four years is to stay with Connor. You know that, Connor, don’t you? And you know that I won’t hurt myself?

Anita’s intent gaze now rested on her son.

Connor’s sat up in his chair and smiled with a tender confidence.

“Connor,” I began, “does hearing your mum telling you that she no longer feels the way that she did, that the impulse to stay is now greater than the impulse to go, that she will not go away without you and will not hurt herself reassure you even a little bit?”

As Connor nodded firmly, fighting his tears back.

I asked: “Would you say that your mother’s words reassure you a little, a medium amount, or a lot?”

“A lot,” Connor replied. As the words left his body, he sat back in his chair and the tension that had previously furrowed his brow left him. Connor’s body spoke so profoundly that there was nothing more to say. As they walked out of the door, I noticed Anita’s hand resting tenderly on her son’s shoulder.

Session Six: We Can Talk Now

I nearly walked past Anita in the waiting room because she no longer sported her dark glasses. In fact, this was the first time I had seen her eyes. Her hair was also dramatically different: newly bobbed and a stunning red reminiscent of her son’s hair coloring. As she was sinking into the easy chair in my office, Anita told me that they thought this would be their last session. Anita explained that she felt “kind of different” and that Connor also “felt it was finished.”

I was a little surprised at this news that our sessions had come to an end but once I had found my bearings, I asked Connor if he would be willing to help me understand how he had come to the realization that our work was over.

Connor responded with an assurance that I had only glimpsed before: “I can think about Dad more easily and I feel better about myself.”

Finding myself unable to keep my enthusiasm at bay, I responded: "I am delighted to hear that. Can you tell me what it is that you think has helped?"

Connor's eyes looked to the ceiling momentarily and then he delivered a poised answer: "It is has been hard to talk about my feelings. I didn't want to do it but I needed to!"

We sat in quiet appreciation of Connor's reply for a couple of moments before Anita's enthusiasm overcame her. She told me how relieved she was that Connor was "back to his usual self": "He's not withdrawn anymore and he's trying new things."

She turned to Connor, adding:

We can have a conversation now, can't we? And you tell me what's on your mind. We can talk about Dad outside of here too now, can't we, Connor, whereas before Connor kind of crumpled when I tried to talk about Andy. Now I feel that Andy is present and we can honor the inheritance he has left for us both.

Anita's words brought our conversation to a close and I knew that our time together had truly come to an end. Anita reached forward to hug me as she left the room and Connor followed his mother's lead by gazing back at me fleetingly before he began his descent down the stairs.

POSTSCRIPT

Several months later, Anita and I met to read through the story of our work and for Anita to contribute to the writing of the story as a coauthor. Anita told me that "the grief still comes in waves but the conversations that we had helped us to re-surface."

I also met with Connor and together we read the story aloud. At the end, Connor asked for a paperclip to hold the pages together. He knelt at the table in my room and carefully and ceremonially numbered each page before reverently placing the story into his bag.

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