“Waidentity”

by Shelly Davies

There was a rule at Nana and Tupe’s house: Never flush after a mimi. Flush your tiko, sure, fair enough, but never just a mimi. For a townie like me, as urbanised-a-Māori as they come, returning to our wā kainga every holidays, that was quite a concept to swallow. Whadya mean don’t flush! How embarrassing, to see my foamy yellow urine flagrantly swirling there and not be able to hide it—to cover up my usually covert act—but to just have to put the lid down and walk away. And how much more disconcerting to rush into the wharepaku, doing my little mimi dance, to lift the lid and find someone else had been there before me, or five someone elses, all strictly adhering to the tikanga: don’t flush your mimi.

This was my introduction to water as a taonga to be conserved, but I know that by then my relationship with wai was already formed though still in its infancy… I was already being moulded and shaped by my relationship with wai, like rocks being worn by the sea. How could I not be? Through my father and grandfather I am Ngātiwai: “people of the sea.” You could say wai literally flows through my veins. In our little Kawa bay and on the beach Moanauriuri, I learned who I was. I learned what it meant to be a Davies and how we got that name. I learned what it meant to have the veil between me and my ancestors be something transient. I learned to play and to respect, to love and to cry, to rage and to find peace, and intermingled with all those knowings was wai.

Our waterhole is a place that is central to many of my significant childhood memories. Us kids were sent to the waterhole for our daily wash—showers and baths were for adults and babies only. What a chore. What a hardship. We were so put out by this we felt the need to go up to five times a day… Playing is very dirty work you know, and we were all extremely concerned with our personal hygiene, NOT. That waterhole was a magical place, and it was *ours*. Grabbing the soap and a pair of clean undies was just an excuse to go to our magical little pool, shaded by manuka and accompanied by a soundtrack of cicadas and tui.

It was a learning place for me. Learning to dog paddle, learning to swing on the rope and jump in, but not too close to the bank 'cos of the tuna that my uncles said would bite our toes. Learning to overcome my fear of the dark swirling water where I couldn't see the bottom, and learning to trust that I was safe; that the wai would protect me.

The wai in our waterhole cleansed the sleep out of my eyes every morning and crusty salt out of my ears every afternoon. It soothed my constantly sunburnt skin and camouflaged my tears when my cousin made fun of me. It spoke to me, in a voice I would listen to acutely while floating on my back, eyes closed, enveloped in that roaring loud silence. There was reo in that popping, clicking, trickling world which muted all the sounds I was used to hearing so they became otherworldly echoes. The reo was for me alone, but it was the same reo spoken to my tupuna in that same place, words I could not yet understand but that I listened to just the same.

Some of my most special memories are of going fishing with Nana. We would sneak out of the house before the sun rose, drag the dinghy down the beach and my Nana, my substantially large and cuddly nana who had already had one of what would become three hip replacements would row us out to the point with red-faced, breathy powerful sculls, rarely stopping to rest. She was a serious fisherwoman with her own tikanga. We weren't allowed to talk about who would catch the first fish or how many we would bring home, or we might as well just turn around and go home. We didn't use fishing rods; just hand lines that you could hang over your pinkie and feel every tiny little nibble from our breakfast down below. It was such a rush, feeling those tentative nibbles come, go, come back again until wham! They took the bait completely and the chase was on. The more cut up your fingers got from the nylon line the prouder you were with your catch—always snapper, by the way—which would be cooked in butter and on your plate for breakfast before everyone else was even properly awake.

But even more than that, for me, it was the face and the voice of the moana that left its strongest impression. Fishing was a mostly silent affair and usually the only sound in those early morning hours was the slapping of the water against the side of the dinghy. I loved the irregular and yet steady rhythm of it, a song which would lull me to sleep when the fish weren't biting or send me to snuggle up against Nana when the wind started to pick up.

I learned how being out on the water felt like being in another world, for we could be only metres from the shore but I still knew that we were at its mercy, safe in our little dinghy only because the moana allowed it to be so. I thought

of tukaiaia and of Te Mauri the one-eyed shark, our kaitiaki who travelled with our people when we were out on the water. I would stare into the dark turquoise depths and wonder what it would be like to be down there, looking up.

I learned the changeability of wai by watching the sea. My grandfather, Tupe, sat in his chair for hours on end, watching the sea. I used to sit by his feet, alternately watching him and the water, trying to figure out what it was he saw, what he thought, what silent conversation was occurring between him and the water. I watched our moana change from that turquoise, a flawless mirror in the pre-dawn to an azure blue in the full sunlight, twinkling like diamonds, so you'd have to squint to look at it, to the heavy grey-green of a storm with white tipped waves ever rolling towards the beach. My Tupe knew what weather was coming because of his conversations with our moana. Knew whether it was time to bring the cows in to the home paddock or give his garden some extra water, whether the generator should be cranked up early to keep the freezer iced up or if the tractor would be needed tomorrow to get over the hill because the jeep wouldn't make it in the mud.

I guess I could class my childhood as the romance stage of my relationship with wai. The marriage wouldn't be so smooth.

I first crossed Te Moananui a Kiwa to America as a teenager to spend a year with my family living in Chicago. There's nothing like being removed from your culture to really solidify your understanding of it. And then crossing it again, to study in Hawaii after I married my husband, Chris. The moana there

wasn't one I knew and we had an uneasy foreplay until we found comfort, the moana with moonlight glimmering on the ocean floor while I spearfished. I came to love those first few minutes, adjusting to breathing underwater, willing my lungs to do what doesn't come naturally and then relinquishing control of my motility to the ebb and flow of the water.

Once Chris went spearfishing without me and came home bleeding, the rocks having raked their claws across his chest. He said he was lucky to have made it home. I wasn't to know this was merely a prelude to the main performance, a foreshadowing of things to come. Maybe the moana spoke to him that night and he didn't listen. I don't know.

But it wasn't until after our son was born that my relationship with wai was traumatically transformed. Until the day Chris went to the San Clemente beach in California during the storms of el nina, having been away from Aotearoa for five years and seeing the ocean he shouted, it looks just like home! And dove in. No one in the group saw the no swimming signs. No one recognised the anger, the fierce warning in the churning green-grey water, no one thought to stop this kiwi boy from reconnecting with his moana. And when he called for help they laughed, he loved an audience, my Chris, always the joker, until they realised he wasn't joking. Wai, taking my love away. Wai, pulling him under. Wai, like a solid wall between his would-be rescuers and him, telling us all they were not supposed to get to him, he belonged to the water now. Wai, filling his lungs and casting his spirit out of his body. Wai, claiming that body and keeping it in some hidden place for three days, spitting him out onto the sand after having had its way with him.

And wai, the screaming, choking tears I cried to find out he had been taken from me, to think that my son would not know his father, to even try to conceive of a world without him in it. The moana broke my heart. It was a betrayal of the highest order.

So again I crossed the ocean to America, this time to collect his body. To dress him, to say the things that needed to be said. And to face the moana who took him. I didn't stay at the beach long, felt repulsed looking at the waves, now calmer, their anger having been quenched, couldn't breathe my chest felt so tight I felt I might drown just looking at it. So I left that beach, turned my back on it and ran to the car. I drove, drove away as fast as I could, and I didn't look back.

But I did have to face the water before I left America, before I brought Chris home. And down came the rain again. At my hotel that night, drawn outside into the rain, needing to feel the chill of the rain pierce my skin, making me feel, reminding me it is better to feel than to be numb, and going to the hotel pool, a poor substitute to the pull of the moana but wai just the same, and wai I had to face before the gulf between us became too large to be traversed. I was terrified to go in that water but I had to. So I stepped in. First step, second step, down and down and down again, my chest tightening with each descent. I forced my legs to move and my lungs to take in air, forced my heart to continue beating as I felt the wai falling on me from the sky and encircling me from the waist down. I willed myself to be stronger than the wai, tried desperately to remember my earlier connections with it, our romance, that

loving familiarity, that trust, to remember the seductive voice with which it had so often spoken to me in the waterhole.

And I dove under and pushed myself in one breath from one end of the pool to the other without breaking the surface. I am not afraid of you! I told the wai. I am still here! And I came up gasping for air and swallowing raindrops and took myself back under again. This is a conversation we need to have, you and I, and we'll have it here, on your turf. Speak to me, and tell me why you took him. Tell me. And while I listened, the wai spoke. In that popping, crackling, muting-the-sounds-of-the-world voice I knew so well, it whispered to me and I sobbed and cried and thrashed, angry, not wanting to hear, coming up for air and then down again. A conversation like and yet unlike my Tupe had with the moana each day, the wai in this swimming pool at a hotel in San Diego began to tell me why. And when there was no more fight left in me I began to breathe calmly again, in out, in out. I floated on my back, eyes closed, rain on my face and continued to listen, until my tears were gone and the whispering of the wai was a soothing, healing balm to the heart it had also broken.

I took Chris home and buried him in the little urupa overlooking Aotea harbour. He loved the sea, it took him home, and now he could sit on this little hill and hold his conversations with the moana just like my Tupe did, sitting in his chair every afternoon.

So life continued on and wai was ever present, though our relationship was irrevocably altered. My baby son and I lived on the edge of the Waikato river, trying to figure out a new life for ourselves, and we started each day in the pre-

dawn light walking beside her banks. Once again the wai spoke to me and I relied on its presence to help me find my feet in this new unknown world without Chris in it; a constant in a world which was dangerously close to falling apart. My moods aligned with those of the river, its dark swirling waters rising and falling and changing hue daily. This constant state of change reassured me. It was always there, and we began each day with this hour of whispering silence alongside the awa.

My son, Lainn, fell into the river one day while feeding the ducks but he was with my mum, I wasn't there and I didn't want to know about it. When he got older and went on his first school camp at age five I couldn't supervise him at the beach. Every pore of my skin, every cell in my body wanted to keep him out of the reach of that water. Even though the water told me he would be safe, my protective urges were overpowering. The only way I could fight that urge was to leave him in someone else's capable care and walk away. I would not rage a war against the wai. It is too much a part of me and a part of my people. We had to take our time and find an easy place to be together again.

And take our time we did. Years passed, and I tried to deny just how vital wai was in my life. But my denial was impotent against the water's omnipresence. It was always there. In the sparkling creek on my new husband's farm. Tricking from the copper plumbing of the house we built. Swirling in my womb, protecting my two beautiful baby girls as they prepared to come into the world.

When my second marriage, bad from the beginning, brought me to edge of sanity I found myself one day, running from the house on our farm in Okaihau with my small baby in my arms, out into a heavy downpour. I ran, not in fear but from a place of such frustration, hopelessness and isolation that all I could think to do was to get out. And the rain poured down as I slipped and slid down the hill through the long wet grass until I fell and could do nothing more than cry and hold my baby Grace close to keep her warm. The rain mingled with my own roimata, streaming down my face, covering our bodies as if to envelop us and shelter us from the pain like a korowai. It didn't comfort me but it was a witness to my struggle. It was always there.

It was there when I had worked my way out of the marriage, and, more than two years later, my three babies—not really babies anymore—were in a bathtub in my rented house in Te Awamutu. The four of us now on our own; life was right. All was as it should be, a fact symbolised by this situation: my three children all together in the bath, belly laughing, making waves that splashed on the floor, all of us happy, none of which could happen with him in our lives. Wai. Elemental in every moment of my life; a fact that without some consideration may have gone largely unnoticed.

I could possibly describe my relationship with wai as love-hate. I absolutely adore it, suffer withdrawals when separated from it, crave the feeling of being enshrouded by it, but at the same time I don't know how to ever forgive it for taking Chris away. I am still overcome with that mother-lion fierceness when I think of putting my children at its mercy but at the same time, I would never deprive them of the chance to fall in love with it themselves. And I think that

really what I need to do is stop fighting for control; to stop trying to prove that I am more powerful than the awa, the roto, the moana. I think I need to relinquish my desire for supremacy and acknowledge that wai is and always will be more powerful than me. Just stop fighting it. Or maybe it's about trust; allowing myself to trust the water to protect me and my children, or maybe even more importantly, to trust myself to survive if it doesn't.

But I know that this journey isn't over yet. Like the waves pounding on the rocks, like the river carving out its path, wai has not yet finished shaping me. My relationship with wai, this parent-child, husband-wife, provider-kaitiaki paradox, a knowing and being passed on to me through my tupuna, will be one of the truly enduring relationships of my life.