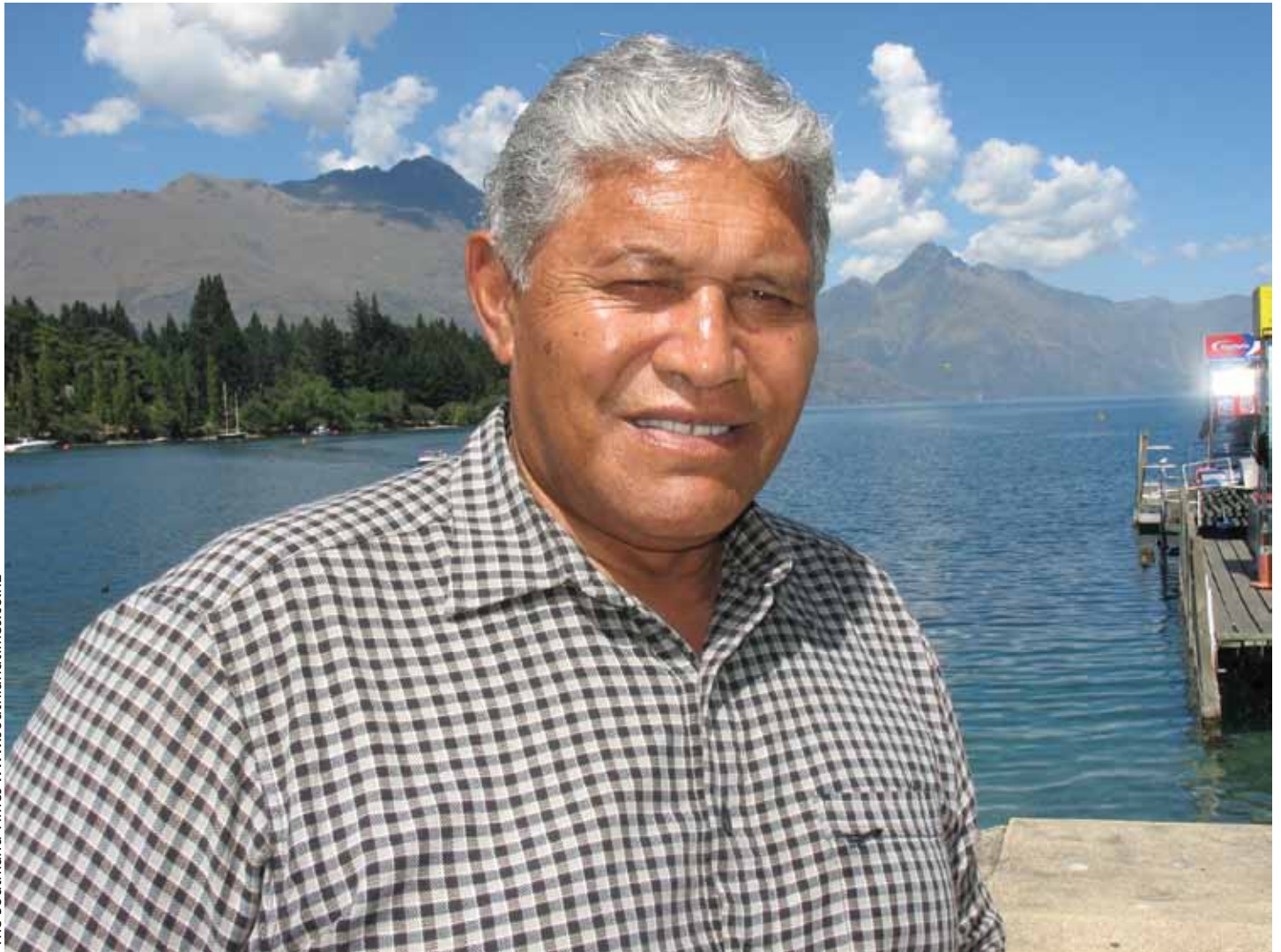




by Elizabeth Denton

Traditional wisdom at the heart of healing



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I came across Tangi Hepi at the end of last year, sitting at a desk in the kitchen of an old house that was his office in Queenstown. It was shared with two women, the kitchen facilities at his left elbow, the route to the bathroom across the front of his desk. The work was mainly women's business. Tangi had appeared at the same

time as the agency was looking to expand its activities to provide a better service for the men who crossed its path. And there he sat, quietly working on a piece of butcher paper so large it fell down both sides of the desk; a man too big for the space, a man in a woman's world.

This man has taught many people many

things. He has taught young mothers the dangers of blowing marijuana into the noses of their infants to put them to sleep; he has taught sexually active adolescent boys to think carefully about their actions; he has taught drug addicts and alcoholics the way out of their nightmare existences, and he has taught young girls the power of a karakia beside the

lake. Tangi is known amongst his peers as a drug and alcohol counsellor, but he is very much more than that.

Tangi traces his ancestry back to the Tainui Waka. His iwi is Ngati Maniapoto and he belongs to Rakaunui Marae. He was born in 1944 in Kawhia and his first language is Maori. The korero around his naming was given by Te Rauangaanga Mahuta, a friend of Tangi's koro, Tuturi Hepi. Noticing that Tangi's mother was pregnant, he asked if they had a name for the child. When they said that they did not, he told them: "This is the name—Tangi. Whenever Tuturi and I meet, we cry, whenever we leave each other we cry."

Tangi grew up with a mother who was a strict disciplinarian and a father who believed in the value of working hard. At the age of 10 he was sent to live with a Pakeha dairy farmer. His father saw it as an apprenticeship for the day when he would take over his grandfather's farm. "Feed him, put clothes on his back, and work him hard" his father told the farmer when he left his son at the gate. Tangi's day started at 3.30 in the morning. He milked the cows, cleaned down the shed and milking equipment, fed the other animals and had to be washed and ready for school by 8.30 am.

At 17 Tangi went to work at the Patea Freezing Works moving to the Mataura Freezing Works, near Gore, two years later to work as a meat inspector. At 21 he married his school sweetheart, Nyre. Plans to work his grandfather's farm were no longer viable owing to a dispute over its ownership. When Tangi took up the call to take part in the negotiations many years later he found it as much an education in human behaviour as it was an insight into the soul-sapping machinations of government bureaucracy. Justice eventually prevailed but it took determination and decades of persistence.

Tangi's work in the freezing industry took him to Hawke's Bay where he worked in a supervisory role. When a downturn in the industry indicated a need to move on he took a job driving a van for the Psychiatric Unit of Hastings Hospital. Tangi noticed that Maori clients often failed to allow the hospital staff to

provide full assessment and treatment. But they listened when he suggested to them that they should engage more fully with the services, so much so that it came to the notice of the Unit Manager. Before long it was suggested that Tangi might undertake some training in Drug and Alcohol Counselling.

From these early beginnings he has gone

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on to gain the respect of his peers. Lew Findlay, Co-ordinator of Ferguson House in Palmerston North, says, "he is the most effective drug and alcohol counsellor I have ever come across". Tangi has not drawn back from difficult challenges. "I have seen him work with people that everyone else has given up on. The kids really relate to him. He has the ability to reach the people."

As his experience grew Tangi realised that his success came not so much from what he had learned during formal training, but rather from the teaching of his kuia.

In 2007 Tangi was visiting his son, the youngest of his three children, in Ireland when he was hospitalised with pancreatitis induced by the accumulation of gallstones. He was not expected to live. It was to Kawhia that his mind wandered during those many months when he bridged the divide between life and death. There, amongst memories of home and the old people, he was supported by his

tupuna and repeated karakia. He made a promise to his tupuna that if they helped him carry the burden of his illness, he would pass on his learning. He withdrew to an inner world, unwilling, and perhaps unable, to share his thoughts with those who cared for him. He wept silently as an Irish woman sprinkled holy water over him, comforted by the familiar ritual that his father had practised when he was sick as a child. He remained defiant to the ravages of the disease, in the words of his Irish physician, "a big Maori man, too stubborn to die".

The knowledge that Tangi has promised to pass on is so far untaught and unpublished. It is the wisdom gained from a lifetime of living astride the Maori and Pakeha worlds and 17 years as a drug and alcohol counsellor. Two things make his work unique. Firstly, his approach to counselling is based on the teaching of his kuia, Mange Hepi, who imparted a traditional Maori perspective untainted by Western thought. Secondly, the refinement of his practices has come about not so much from theoretical sources, but from his own experience with clients. This holistic view of wellbeing, shaped within a traditional world view is remarkable not only as a therapeutic experience but also in its effectiveness. A consultation with Tangi Hepi may be with reference to a specific problem, but his guidance is more likely to be about a philosophy for living.

Mange Tumohe Hepi was Tangi's paternal grandmother. He speaks fondly of her, remembering that when she took her blanket into the sunshine on the hillside beside her home, her mokopuna knew not to disturb her. This was her quiet time when she said her karakia. He recalls kneeling beside her as she weeded the garden with arthritic fingers, collecting the weeds for her and listening to her stories. From her, Tangi learned about the importance of the potential that lies inside us all, "deep in here" he says, knocking his chest with his fingers. And in her words he repeats the importance of taha tinana, taha wairua, taha hinengaro and love for one's whanau. Altogether, if these things are strong the



Tangi with his mokopuna Carla.

wairua is strong. To enable his clients to see this he draws the kakano, the seed.

The kakano contains the four parts that are necessary for development. Each one represents an aspect of growth as described by his kuia. The seed is planted at birth, and it is important – “imperative” Tangi corrects me – that it is nurtured throughout development. As the seed grows, the parts grow bigger until at adolescence it bursts, spilling its contents into the life of the adult to assist and guide them throughout their lives.

In his work with clients Tangi is able to show them where in their lives they have

lacked the necessary nourishment for the growth, and how important it is to restart the process. “How do you do that?” I ask. He raises his cupped hands to his face and blows gently across them, “Blow on the ngarahū,” he explains, “we have to rekindle the flame”.

Tangi tells of a time when he first felt the deep seated cry of the ngakau. He had been taken to his auntie’s home, a place which was unfamiliar, to be looked after by his kuia amongst other young members of the whanau. His parents had to be a way for a short time. He watched them walk away from the house, over a log that crossed the stream, and away

across the paddock into the distance. In his three-year-old mind the separation anxiety he felt was fuelled, he recalls, by a fear that they might never come back. In response to his gasping cries, his kuia tried to comfort him, “Ka kite a hau e moko e tangi tangi ana to ngakau” – “I can see my grandchild that your ngakau is crying”. The ngakau, he explains, is like a tiny velvet cushion upon which the heart rests. All of the private and sometimes unknown pain that a person is holding is contained beneath this cushion. In touching this place, deep-seated emotional processes are triggered. The cushion is forced upward, the emotions spill over—the ngakau weeps.

He draws a picture of the ngakau on his whiteboard, describes it softly to the client, and discloses his own experience using his kuia’s words. The use of his native tongue floods his own mind with memories of the pain that he and others carry. The pace is slow. The space is mostly silent. Trust has been established sufficiently for the cushion to lift. The communication between client and therapist reaches into the depths of what it is to be human, what it is to be accepted, what it is to be not only heard, but felt. It’s powerful stuff.

His one-time supervisor, psychologist Andrew Raven of Central Health, Hastings, puts it another way. “I believe that good counselling requires the development of a ritual space: a place removed from the mundane and ordinary, a place where ‘magic’ can occur, a place where transcendence of ordinary thinking and reacting can occur. Obviously this is Tangi’s work.”

Tangi Hepi is not a man you contact if you are looking for a sympathetic ear and a sounding board for your own justifications. That is not to say that he isn’t at times sympathetic or caring, but rather that his major focus is recovery. He knows that in order for that process to start, his clients have to come face to face with themselves. Taking responsibility is the first step in recovery. Where addictions are concerned the message is simple – it has to stop. But how do you bring someone to the point where they stop

justifying and minimising their behaviour? “You enter their world,” Tangi explains. And you may have to jolt them into seeing the truth. To his client he may say, “Look at your life, look at all this shit that you have been taking on board. Imagine you have a big tanker that you have been filling up with all this stuff.” He draws a tanker with a lid on the top. “Here you are, running about full of it, leaking the contents all around, and when your shit truck needs emptying, where do you do it? At home on your own whanau? Your wife suffers, your children suffer, your community suffers. Take off the lid, take a look. Face your own shit. What are you going to do about it?”

For those that are not so convinced they want to take a look, he draws another picture. It is the back view of a lamb standing in its own mess. “You remind me of this,” he says. “If you want to stay there, that’s up to you. There’s a hole in the wall, it’s called a door. If, on the other hand, you want to get better, I’m here to help you.”

Mange Hepi taught her mokopuna that the heart must be in contact with the mind. The heart is what keeps us true. When a person is using drugs or alcohol the connection between heart and head is severed, leaving the mind free to start a dance of its own. It is clear when speaking with Tangi, that he has little respect for a mind disconnected from the heart. His clients often describe this process as one of ruminating thoughts that go around and around until they feel they are going crazy. To recover, he teaches his clients, the heart has to become the command centre. For this to happen it has to reconnect with the mind; the substance abuse has to stop.

Isolation breeds fear. Relationships help us feel safe, they help us to grow. Tangi’s work with a client is almost always carried out within the context of the whanau. The healing power of relationships and a sense of belonging are central to his work. A troubled young man may enter his consulting room reluctantly, perhaps angry, often socially adrift. If he is Maori, usually from a few clues, name, dialect, vocabulary, facial features,

Tangi can find a link to his roots. Finding this connection can be a real turning point.

We may have a certain birthright in claiming our place within the whanau, but we also have a responsibility. Tangi points this out by drawing a diagram of the influences that have come to bear on his client’s life. Then, after a period of quiet contemplation, the tables are turned and the client is asked to consider the influences that they are exerting on others. Making a client aware of their responsibility with respect to their whakapapa can lead to a new perspective and sense of

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purpose. Tangi builds on this by tying the generational threads together. “Look at your life, the life that you have been given by your parents. You have some work to do here. You have to develop, to nourish the seeds that have lain dormant, otherwise you are unable to hand this gift on to your children. What sort of kaupapa is this, to leave your kids without the seed, with no means of developing a strong, clear wairua?”

Male role models like Tangi are not around every street corner. He is an imposing figure of a man, expansive in stature, inscrutable much of the time. Set against his somewhat austere

countenance is his ability to cut to the heart of things. Over the years he has found ways of helping his clients to understand the bewildering world in which they find themselves. Through the use of illustration and story he is able to help them reach inside, to find the secrets of the ngakau. Once they discover the capacity for growth that lies within they can find the courage to make the necessary changes. To find that the rhythm of our heart sounds not only within ourselves, but also within those with whom we interact, is a life-changing realisation. It can lift a client out of their struggling world of isolation into one that is rich with connection and possibility.

Tangi has started to focus on issues other than drug and alcohol counselling now. He chooses to work with young people when he can and would like to be able to do more. The peer group, he says, is the point of contact. We should be arranging meaningful activities for our young people that can be engaged in by their immediate peer group. They need to be taught to look after one another, to find what is true for them in their own world, and to respect the needs and beliefs of others. The adults that our young people come in contact with are often still in the process of development themselves, in schools, in the sports arena, in the town, and sadly, even in their own homes. Finding adulthood is difficult without a role model to show the way.

It isn’t difficult to understand that after so many years of seeing the effects of social inequalities, negligent parenting and risk-fuelled adolescent behaviour, that Tangi has turned his sights to prevention. Perhaps this is one of the messages his tupuna were so keen to have passed on. His success in the counselling arena raises the questions of what exactly it is that brings about healing, what exactly is necessary for a happy, satisfying life. The traditional world view in which Tangi grounds his life and practice provides not just a framework for recovery, it is also a time-tested, coherent, and successful framework for living. 