

I have been invited by Miss Parata, the teacher at the school in the village of Whangara, to watch and observe the Culture Night. As I walk into the auditorium I can immediately feel the energy of what is about to take place. Tables were being set up with white tea cups in perfect rows, as well as cakes and goodies. I immediately notice Paikea who is with her family, eagerly escorting them to their reserved seats.

I have been informed that in addition to this concert, it is also a night that a special prize will be given to this little girl Paikea. Miss Parata explained to me that this little girl's grandfather (Koro) was the chief of the Maori tribe, and that the entire community had tremendous respect for him. She further explained that Koro was Paikea's guest of honor, and she was surprising him with the speech she would give after the announcement of the award for winning the speech contest at her school. As I sit and wait for the concert to begin, I can't help but take note that a grandfather doesn't seem to be present in the front row where this little girl's family is seated.

The program begins and the children are dressed in blue t-shirts with a Maori mask on the front. Once Miss Parata starts the music the line dance seems to begin. The children seem a little awkward with this dance, almost as if it's a new dance they are trying out. Dance is an important tradition in the Maori culture, but this dance seems more modern and the children seem to be stepping in the wrong directions, at wrong times, but nevertheless always with smiles on their faces.

The next performance moves me into the traditional Maori dance, and dress. Paikea, along with the girls, is in a woven blue and yellow taniko style dress, with two poi at her sides swinging to the rhythm of the dance she is performing. Paikea, who is front and center, also wears a moko below her chin, a traditional facial tattoo of the Maori. The boys are behind the girls, bare-chested with dark pants and a pendant hanging around their necks. Their movements, rhythm and chants take me back in time, as if I am no longer in the auditorium but instead watching an ancient aspect of the Maori culture that has been preserved through these children.

The applause and excitement after the dance is done brings me back to the auditorium, where Paikea Apriana's name is announced as the winner of the speech contest. More applause erupts in the auditorium, notably from her family and friends that are there supporting her. Along with their excitement and cheer, I can't help but notice a sadness that I attribute to the fact that Paikea's grandfather is still not there.

Even with the absence of her grandfather, this little girl begins her speech in her Maori language with "This speech is a token of my deep love and respect for Koro Apriana, my grandfather." I am moved by her statement, her love, her respect, and admiration you can feel through her for this man Koro. His absence in the crowd has clearly hurt her, but she bravely continues the speech honoring her grandfather.

With tears in her eyes Paikea explains the history of the Maori people through her words, and that she comes from a long line of chiefs, ancient ones, and that the one sent was also named Paikea and that she is “his most recent descendant.” She continues to explain her place in her culture, and that instead of being celebrated at birth, she caused sadness. “I was not the leader my grandfather was expecting, and by being born, I broke the line to the ancient ones,” she is able to state through more tears. I think about my talks with Miss Parata about the belief this girls has that she born to lead her people, but because she was born a girl, this belief of hers was not to be entertained, especially by her grandfather, the chief of the Maori. While her culture didn’t see her as able to be the leader they were desperately looking for, Paikea never loses sight of her belief. She sees the position she is in as one that can create an opportunity for change. You can hear the power in her voice during her speech, a voice that is able to question the ways of the old, while deeply respecting them at the same time.

I can feel the strength and wisdom of this young girl, this young leader as she seems to truly grasp the concept of leadership when she explains “we can learn. And if knowledge is given to everyone, than we can have lots of leaders. And soon, everyone will be strong, not just the ones that’ve been chosen. Because sometimes, even if you’re the leader and you need to be strong, you can get tired.” As my eyes have filled with the same tears that are running down this girls face, I again feel the love and respect she has for her grandfather and the Maori. She explains how the original whale rider Paikea, was probably tired from leading, but I can’t help but think this statement relates more to her grandfather.

She sees his pain, and feels his pain about the search for the new leader of the Maori. She feels as if she is the descendant that was born to lead, and doesn’t say this to upset or hurt her grandfather or challenge traditions, but instead wants to help him because she sees how tired he is. In addition to him, she wants her people to all grow and learn, and be stronger as Maori people. Although her grandfather wasn’t present to hear this heartfelt message from his granddaughter, I can’t help but feel that this little girl’s love and strength is what will continue to make the Maori culture strong.