



RONGOA MAORI

Rongoa Maori is the holistic healing practice of this land that not only includes the diagnosis, preparation and dispensing of herbal remedies, but also the healing energy of all things and the restoration and management of our natural resources.

- Do I have to be Maori to learn and practice Rongoa Maori?
- How do mirimiri techniques, etiquette and processes differ from other forms of massage?
- How do I learn about the plants unique to Maori herbal medicine and how to prepare them using traditional practices?
- What special karakia or incantations do I need to learn?
- How do I offer these things in a culturally sensitive way so as not to offend anyone?
- Can I charge for my services?

These are questions often asked of rongoa Maori practitioners.

When I started out, there seemed to be so many rules to follow, some of which made very little sense to me. Not only was I afraid of forgetting them and then offending someone, things seemed impossible to co-ordinate.

INTRODUCTION TO RONGOA MAORI BY DONNA KERRIDGE
NZAMH 2012 CONFERENCE & AGM

“THE MAORI WORLD VIEW IS ESSENTIALLY HOLISTIC; TAHA WAIRUA IS ABOUT THE WORLD OF CONNECTIONS THAT FLOWS FROM THAT WHOLENESS, THAT BASIC UNITY, that brings all of creation together...

...This web of connections is what makes a person who he or she is, in relation to the world of which they are a part. It is much more than one’s human whakapapa... as the whakapapa of man connects him to the whole family of Tane and back to Rangī and Papa... all things on the face of the earth are connected” (Robert McGowan)

Like all good herbalists I learned:

- which native plants were good for what ailments,
- which plants would best suit a specific person, combined with the relevant ailment,
- which times of the year each of the plants were available,
- where were the best places to find them and what grows alongside them, so I could identify them quickly,
- which days of the lunar cycle were best for harvesting
- what time of day was best for harvesting specific plants.
- which side (north, east, south or west) of the plant was best to harvest from and why?
- which direction was actually north anyway?
- what was the optimal weather for harvesting and why? Things don't generally work for me unless I know the why.
- how to manage these practices alongside my own cycle & associated needs,
- how to calm myself despite all the busy-ness in my life so that I could focus on the task at hand,
- and finally how to best co-ordinate all of this with the random and often immediate needs of those who ask for my help.

My rational mind figured that by the time I had:

- eliminated all the hours between lunch and first light next morning, when harvesting wasn't so good, I had automatically lost 75% of the hours available in the year for harvesting Rongoa,
- halved those remaining hours to reflect the lower vitality in a waning moon, a less favourable time to harvest,
- subtracted a further allowance from the remainder to account for the 130 days of rain projected in Auckland per year,
- and lastly subtracted a further annual provision for menstruation, half of which were probably when it was raining or the moon was waning anyway.

After all these considerations, I was left with a total of 6.5 quarter days each month that were perfectly aligned as optimal for harvesting most plants. This of course assumes that I would have nothing else planned on those exact days, can travel and that I would be in a suitably relaxed and focussed frame of mind for harvesting respectfully.

This is maybe where the term 'Maori time' has its origins. Even the best-laid plans are subject to Maori time. A time when all the stars are perfectly aligned for certain activities and nothing else seems

to matter. Io (the creator) himself could have been waiting, but if you didn't tend to certain activities at specific times, you might risk starvation, substandard shelter for the upcoming wet season or no new clothes for another year.

What actually seemed like a very haphazard way of going about things on the surface may in fact have been time management at its finest! The tide, seasons, weather and female menstrual cycle bow to no man or woman.

Clearly rongoa practitioners must be the queens (or kings) of perfect time management, extremely opportunistic, tuned into Maori time and the master of improvisation, I thought.

Not a hard ask at all, if rongoa Maori was all you did. Fortunately in days of old rongoa practitioners didn't hunt and gather, prepare food, build houses, go to war or raise a family. The rest of the whanau took care of those things so that you in turn could take care of them when the need arose. But alas today we do it all, or at least we try to. In doing so we risk burning ourselves out and have little time left to stay in touch with nature.

How many of us know where North is, which phase of the moon we are currently entering and what time the next low tide is? This may well be the root cause of our dis-ease with living, our lack of connectivity and appreciation for the lore of Mother Nature.

After a few years of thinking I was on the cusp of getting rongoa Maori sorted, I was pulled up short when someone

RIGHT: DONNA
TEACHES RONGOA
MAORI FOR A
VARIETY OF
ORGANISATIONS
AROUND THE
COUNTRY.



explained to me that everything I had learned to date was merely the tip of the rongoa Maori iceberg.

“You have to ‘feel’ the inter-relationship that exists between all things, animate and inanimate.

By observing and developing a kinship with nature you will learn the true essence of rongoa Maori. By incorporating rongoa Maori into your daily life, not just calling upon it when needed a greater understanding will develop”.

This was a humbling moment on my learning journey but also a beacon that lit the way forward.

I knew which trees were good for this or that, how to apply many of the tikanga practiced by my tupuna and now I was learning I had only just begun to open the door on this practice called rongoa Maori. All this wonderful knowledge that had been so generously shared with me was the beginning not the destination. With that knowledge came a responsibility to continue to care for nature and share the learning that had been entrusted to me for the benefit of others.

I was both at the beginning and past the point of no return simultaneously.

I give you advance warning, be careful what you wish for should you choose embark on the learning that is rongoa Maori.

There are no short cuts. Rongoa Maori is all encompassing and it will take at least a lifetime to master. So why do we do it? We do it for the benefit of our grandchildren and their future generations the way our tupuna did for us, keeping this sacred knowledge alive, however difficult the challenges.

What I had been focussed on was native herbal medicine, an important but very small component of what constitutes rongoa Maori. I was confronted with the realisation that the life long journey I was embarking on was a continuum of the lifelong journeys of all those that had gone before me - another humbling moment.

Traditional Maori knowledge (matauranga Maori), which also governs the practice of rongoa Maori, was preserved by past generations through language, myths & legends, genealogy (whakapapa), the calls of the birds, carvings and other arts. All of these things had now been added to my ‘to learn’ list. The sheer volume of knowledge I would need to acquire to really understand rongoa Maori was just starting to sink in.

Nonetheless this is where I started my journey and the realisation that if I am to die happy clearly I am going to have to temper my need to rationalise everything. I either accept the knowledge handed down by my ancestors as a given, or find a way to live a very very long time.

Before I continue, I would like to acknowledge that what I am sharing with you is not new, nor can I claim it to be mine. Much of what I share is knowledge that has been shared many times over many generations. I cannot claim copyright of that knowledge. My thoughts are based on the teachings I have received from a variety of sources, historical books, wonderful wise old people, practitioners from other fields, college & university tutors, scientists, patients, my peers, my students and especially my adversaries. I am grateful to them all for leading me to this place.

However my greatest and most treasured teacher is Rob McGowan who has nurtured my learning and that of many others in the practice of rongoa Maori. I am eternally grateful for the gift of his teachings. Our subsequent friendship and

knowledge I have gained from him, has had a profound effect on my appreciation for life and experience of taha wairua. Much of what I share here is the result of our many discussions and the challenges he encourages me to embark on in order to progress my learning. Writing this piece is one of those challenges, as I present to you the gifts I hold in my heart and my head, which house the essence of who I am and who I hope to become.

What is Rongoa Maori?

Rongoa Maori is about having an intimate relationship with Nature.

Rongoa Maori is a set of practices (tikanga) unique to individual iwi (extended family groups), whanau (family) and practitioners.

It is a mix of tangible and intangible things - recipes, techniques, rituals, massage, herbal medicine, karakia and incantations.

There are a number of rules around harvesting plants for medicine like:

- harvesting from the eastern side of plants where ever possible to support on-going healthy growth and viability of the plant,
- taking no more than is immediately required or than the plant can bear in order for it to continue growing without a struggle,
- ensuring the plant's continued health by inoculating it with soil from its base after harvesting bark,
- taking the time to acknowledge the sacrifice the plant is making for our benefit.

There are pre requisites to learn before touching the body of another like:

- ensuring that we are still in ourselves, focussed on the task at hand and no other and therefore clear to work with the wairua (spirit) of another,
- acknowledging the existence of both our and the other persons ancestors who contribute to the healing process.

There are rules to learn around the preparation of linen for mirimiri such as ensuring that towels are not laundered with items associated with food preparation or items that may have been in contact with the bodily fluids of others.

The consumption of food in and around a place of healing is usually frowned upon as healing is a tapu practice (sacred), food is noa (common) and they are equal opposites that do not mix.

Understanding the role of patients as active rather than passive participants in healing is important too, such as:

- the patient's desire to bring about change,
- the notion that patients bring to the table not only themselves but their ancestors who also warrant acknowledgement,
- patients may be required to participate in certain activities such synchronicity of breathing and promoting dreaming.

Humility and respect for the patient and self is also important to learn about, for example:

- the healing process is mutually beneficial for patient and practitioner alike

- it is a privilege to have a skill to share with others who so readily give of their skills for the benefit of the community and others also.

However, there is more to rongoa Maori. Some say you are born to these things, or not. Others say it is something only experience can teach us depending on our choices in life.

The ability to offer wise counsel and to recognise loneliness or estrangement from ones sources of individual power such as whanau or turangawaewae (having a place to stand) as the cause of a person's imbalance requires maturity, which should not to be confused with age.

Trust is another important factor in the delivery of rongoa Maori. A sense of familiarity through reputation or whanaungatanga (belonging) can evoke an element of trust that favourably connects patient and practitioner in the healing process.

For me rongoa Maori is essentially a way of living, a way of communing with nature in order to restore the natural balance or wellness in ourselves as human beings and as inhabitants and caretakers of this land.

It assumes man's place as junior to and therefore dependant on all other elements in nature. It differs with the notion of humankind as separate from or superior to nature. This kaupapa (key principle) is what governs the practice of rongoa Maori and in fact is the basis for all traditional Maori knowledge.

Tikanga are rules, customs, practices or behaviour, considered ethical in relation to a particular kaupapa. Tikanga are the right way of doing things when measured against the basis for the practice in the first place, in this case, to live or exist as one with nature.

Dr Charles Royal says,

“it is by sharing a common kaupapa that the individual and their community find the answers to life's great questions and also by which they are able to find inspiration and validation for the actions one takes in one's life”ⁱ.

In order for Maori to maintain balance with their natural community, practices were devised that provided direction on how best to go about their daily living. As a result, rongoa Maori practices evolved that included five categories of healing which were carried out in combinationⁱⁱ.

There are physical treatments such as herbal remedies, massage and the use of uncontaminated water from natural springs set aside specifically for healing. There are metaphysical treatments such as karakia (prayer) and incantations that enhance our connection to the healing powers of our greater community, our ancestors, each other, the plants and all other things of heaven and earth, a thing we call, taha wairua. No one aspect of rongoa Maori is considered effective on its own but taha wairua the invisible or spiritual connection between all things is considered the most important.

For every action there is a reaction. If we can accept that all things, which are clusters of energy, are connected and can

exchange energy, then we understand the kaupapa (principles) upon which rongoa Maori is practiced.

THE ESSENCE OF RONGOA MAORI IS TAHA WAIRUA.

WITHOUT TAHA WAIRUA MIRIMIRI BECOMES MASSAGE,

WITHOUT TAHA WAIRUA RONGOA RAKAU OR WAI RAKAU ARE NEW ZEALAND PLANT MEDICINES, WITHOUT TAHA WAIRUA KARAKIA & INCANTATIONS ARE PERFORMANCES.

Rob McGowan says,

“The Maori world view is essentially holistic; taha wairua is about the world of connections that flows from that wholeness, that basic unity, that brings all of creation together. This web of connections is what makes a person who he or she is, in relation to the world of which they are a part. It is much more than one's human whakapapa... as the whakapapa of man connects him to the whole family of Tane and back to Rangi and Papa... all things on the face of the earth are connected”ⁱⁱⁱ.

This was never more obvious to me than when I visited a small village in Africa. The people wore virtually no clothes, lived in skin and stick huts with mud floors and owned little in the way of possessions. Their entire purpose for being was about managing the resources in their environment and preparing for the migration of the animals through their lands.

Ensuring the wellbeing of the animals and providing for their needs was everything in terms of their own well-being. In doing this they were assured of sufficient food and shelter for the upcoming year. Their symbiotic relationship with nature provided their medicine for maintaining and ensuring the well-being of the tribe.

There was a stark contrast between what I observed as their markers of health and our own. Their well-being was reflected in the incessant laughter and gaiety of the children, their oneness with nature, their sense of community and the many celebrations they shared together, their gratitude for even the smallest things, their hospitality & humility and their genuine love and respect for the animals, which provided their most basic needs.

The existence of ‘mauri’ is another key concept in the practice of rongoa Maori. All things have a mauri – it is what gives form to energy. People have a mauri. It begins at the time of our conception and remains in us until death. It is what connects the physical body and our soul. When that connection dissolves or disappears, we die. Some cultures refer to that bond between the physical and the spiritual as Qi, life force, prana and liken it to a light that shines within us.

Helping to strengthen the mauri or physical/spiritual bond is a key step in initiating the body's innate healing potential. When we curse, criticise or belittle others, feel guilt for our actions or the thoughts we have, fail to nourish or treat our body respectfully or for one reason or another have no sense of belonging, our light or mauri begins to dim.

i Royal Charles, Kaupapa and Tikanga, presented draft (Te Wananga O Raukawa, 2000), p1

ii Mason Durie, Whaiora: Maori Health Development, 2nd ed (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1998), p7

iii McGowan Rob, Rongoa Maori, a practical guide to traditional Maori medicine (Tauranga: Author, 2009) p24

Often this dimming is reflected as a physical, emotional or mental imbalance which if allowed to continue will eventually smother our light, extinguishing our mauri. Helping to rejuvenate the light in others by using herbal medicines, physical therapies, offering kindness & respect and channelling healing powers of taha wairua is what is at the heart of rongoa Maori.

Disrespectfully treating the land and all that contributes to her beauty, dims the mauri or beating heart of Papatuanuku (mother earth) diminishing her ability to provide what we need in order to heal. So we must not only care for each other but contribute what we can toward healing our land, which so many of us have taken for granted.

When we are at peace and quiet within ourselves, are of good intention without envy or judgement (good or bad), the flow of wairua through us strengthens, perhaps enough to help restore the mauri of our land and our fellow citizens.

As our wairua is imparted in the actions we take, the kindness we share, the medicines we make or the laying on of our hands and we simply give of ourselves it becomes effortless and we cannot but help brighten the light or mauri of all things. We too benefit from this energising flow of wairua through ourselves.

Rongoa Maori cannot be patented or become the object of intellectual property rights for how will the law makers isolate wairua, the essence of all things in this world.

Holding onto the knowledge and keeping it secret was our old people's way of protecting the integrity of our healing practices from those who would inevitably bring its practice into disrepute through lack of care, greed, exploitation or simply as a means to elevate themselves within their community.

The old people would also ensure the safety of those who they chose to nurture the knowledge, by enriching their spiritual preparedness for the temptations of power and pride, fame and fortune, instilling humility a quality that served as one of their greatest protectors.

Although today we are fortunate that we get more of a say in whether we want to learn rongoa Maori, that choice comes at a price. We must be sure then, that we make strong our circle of protection and nurturing previously bestowed upon students of rongoa Maori by the old people. We must draw close, value our support structures and whanau as they will be the ones we hold fast to when we become weary or times are difficult. We must invest in developing qualities such as humility and respect for all things.

The only way we can truly learn these things is to begin at the beginning. So this brings me back to the questions others wanting to learn rongoa Maori often ask me.

Do I have to be Maori to learn and practice rongoa Maori?

No you don't, but it certainly helps some Maori ease a little more effortlessly into the learning because there is a sense of familiarity about it and some of the language used to explain rongoa concepts maybe a little more familiar to us, but don't let this deter you from learning.

How do mirimiri techniques, etiquette and processes differ from other forms of massage?

Learning mirimiri is similar to learning other new styles of massage. Like other styles it can differ from practitioner to practitioner or iwi to iwi. No one style fits all however some more general Maori tikanga may apply such as not putting feet on pillows used for the head which is sacred to Maori.

How do I learn about the plants unique to Maori herbal medicine and how do I prepare them using traditional practices?

Many of the principles associated with using plants in Maori herbal medicine are common with those applied by many other herbalists such as harvesting times for medicines. However Maori protocols require that additional sustainability practices are followed when harvesting barks or plants from certain areas. As a rule of thumb it is not acceptable to harvest or make medicines while menstruating.

Having said that it is also important to remember that herbal medicines work best in conjunction with other rongoa Maori practices and that from a rongoa Maori perspective the most effective remedies often involve good company, quiet moments of solitude and enlightenment, having a place to stand and knowing where and how you belong. Making our connections with the natural world a priority can sometimes negate the need for physical remedies. How well do we each connect with the natural world today?

What special karakia or incantations do I need to learn? How do I offer these things in a culturally sensitive way so as not to offend anyone?

In rongoa Maori karakia is a personal practice that does not always require words. It is about clearing ourselves and those we are working with in preparation for the work ahead. It is about uniting everyone involved to bring about a greater good; it is about setting intention and providing protection. This is done in the most appropriate way according to those present. Reciting ancient karakia verbatim without a true appreciation for their origins or context is not helpful and to some extent, disrespectful.

Can I charge for my services?

Traditionally healing services were paid for by koha (donation in kind). This could be in the form of food or clothing or anything else that a healer may require in order to sustain them while they worked. Remember their contribution to the community was healing, those with other skills balanced the scales according to the skills or resources they had available to them.

Some practitioners today will not accept any payment for their work, others are happy to accept koha and others charge a set fee reflective of the fact that the power company probably won't accept food (kai) in exchange for the electricity they use.

A fellow rongoa practitioner, Tania Waikato, answers the question of charging this way,

"Money is simply a medium of exchange and as a medium of exchange it is not the problem that tikanga seeks to guard against. The problem is its potential to incite greed and exploitation in those who are spiritually unprepared for the temptations money provides at the expense of authenticity of practice".

If the thought of rongoa Maori speaks to you and you want to learn more I encourage you to seek out good teachers, learn from as many different sources and perspectives as you can so you can establish your unique way of incorporating rongoa Maori and Maori herbal medicine into your life and practice. Like learning to read and write we first must learn our ABCs. The ABCs of rongoa Maori is getting to know the plants, their likes and dislikes, their relations, their peculiarities and who their friends are.

I acknowledge that we cannot live a life of times past. We must continue to evolve and adapt to find new ways to exist as one with the world and each other that incorporates the ever changing set of priorities in our lives. But nor should we ignore the learning of the past generations which serves as our unwavering foundation for the future.

The birth of my mokopuna (grandchildren) motivated me to learn the ways and philosophies of our ancestors so that they would be able to benefit from this knowledge. No longer can I take it for granted that someone else will be around to teach them, should they ask. With knowledge comes responsibility and it is my job now to protect that knowledge, its integrity and to share it respectfully for the benefit of these future generations.

Rongoa Maori is less about the do's and don'ts of Maori herbal medicine or mirimiri or providing ancient karakia for practitioners. It is more about recognising ways of helping to restore the mauri of another using care & compassion, the natural resources surrendered by Papatuanuku in order to lessen suffering, insightfulness and the energy that is taha wairua, the beating heart of all in the heavens and here on earth.

These things will not come to us quickly. They reveal themselves a little bit at a time as we become more confident and begin to trust our hearts. They are skills that evolve with time.

We all have the capability even if we don't realise it. Our rational thinking leads to learning, learning to knowledge, knowledge to trust, trust to intuition and intuition to wisdom. It is a long process - little by little is not only a good thing but safe practice.

It is helpful to know that our healing work (*mahi*) and our persona (*ahua*) is beautiful and that we each have much to share with one and other.

Restoring our pride and appreciation for our respective communities is a good place to start. It begins by caring for our families first and foremost, then moves to the care of our wider relations and then onto our immediate communities and then the world. Many of us are focussed on healing the world when our families are those most in need of our support. Trees that grow in isolation are exposed to the mercy of the elements, however as part of a bush family they thrive bracing and nurturing one and other finding their natural order. Perhaps that is why many of us prefer to live in towns or small communities rather than as hermits. Our individual strength is best realised when we know we belong and because we have a purpose beyond that of our own immediate needs.

You may have noted that many of the things I have described are not too different from those in western herbal medicine. Rongoa Maori philosophies and practices have similarities with many other traditional healing practices and parallels can be drawn on almost every level with practices and concepts applied in other lands.

For example, let us look at what I call the "wheel of universal truth" for holistic traditional healing practices. Here we can see that when we are new to another way of thinking, be that religion, traditional healing modalities or even a different culture, we all start at the circumference of the wheel. As we move closer to the centre of the wheel we learn what is at the heart of these doctrines or kaupapa. The bulk of the population dabble on the circumference of the wheel venturing just deep enough to secure inclusion in the group or flit between teachings until we find one that really speaks to us.

On the circumference we notice all of the things that make our choice special and what differentiates it from other choices in the wheel. We extol with passion our choice, are enthusiastic about this unique way of doing things, encourage others to join us in our pursuit and espouse theories about why this way is different or perhaps better!

But for some who choose to delve deeper into their section of the wheel they become more focussed on learning about the kaupapa or principles that are the foundation of their particular choice. As they move deeper and deeper toward the centre they see less and less of the differences between other sections of the wheel and more and more commonality between them as they move forward. Eventually as they progress their learning they arrive at the centre of the wheel, the heart of their kaupapa, to find that others from other sections have arrived at the same place. No matter which language, doctrine or path that has survived the tests of time that you chose to follow, the centre will always be a universal truth, a common kaupapa.

Tikanga, the right ways of doing things, are less obvious in the centre of the wheel, are necessary to keep us from rolling around like a loose stone – eventually directing from us the circumference toward the centre. Tikanga are what define us, kaupapa is what unites us. If we focus less on our different modalities and more on our shared purpose we are in a much better position to learn from each other and move with more ease towards the centre of the wheel no matter which section we chose to enter at.

Different tikanga, ignite passion in the hearts of people differently, but the hearts themselves are the same not better or worse. So when I am asked "What is the point of difference for rongoa Maori?", I refer to tikanga Maori because I suspect the kaupapa of rongoa Maori differs little from other holistic traditional healing practices such as Ayurveda, Traditional Chinese Medicine and some religions.

There also are some key qualities that are useful when practicing rongoa Maori:

HUMILITY, knowing our place in nature and sharing in the intimate details of our patients' lives can be a very humbling experience. Once we elevate ourselves to the status of an expert then we deny ourselves the opportunity for growth by remaining virtually closed to the possibility of learning anything else worthwhile from others or from our own mistakes.

OPENNESS, is the willingness to share. It is only through sharing with others that we are rewarded with the learning associated with their experiences and knowledge as well as our own.

Holistic Healing Practices



NON-JUDGEMENT, recognises us all as equals, each with our own qualities and contribution to make to our community and shared kaupapa.

CUNNING, there are times when practitioner cunning will help a patient recognise their situation for what it is and therefore buy-in more willingly to problem solving it.

PRACTICAL, the ability to think quickly and modify treatment protocols to accommodate patient limitations or exploit opportunities available to them in order to progress healing is not uncommon.

MATURITY, Maturity brings with it fortitude in times of difficulty and the wisdom to avoid responding in haste, fear or anger. Maturity reflects the range of experiences we have had, the quality of guidance we have received, a willingness to learn from our mistakes and those of others and the courage to act when required trusting our intentions even when we are unsure of the path ahead. If we are afraid of these things, or lack courage in tough situations how will we know the true potential of healing?

“When intuition replaces intellect, knowledge turns to wisdom”

Assets useful in the practice of rongoa Maori are:

COMMUNITY AND WHANAU SUPPORT, without this it is very difficult to devote ourselves to our practice or gain the trust of our patients,

A GOOD TEACHER, will not only share their knowledge in a way that works for you, they will guide you towards other opportunities to learn and do what they can to protect you from harm such as professional jealousy and help you stick to the kaupapa until you are spiritually mature enough to manage these things for yourself,

AN AFFINITY WITH NATURE and the ability to recognise the plants in their natural environment which will give us the confidence to do the work we aspire to and frees us to learn about tikanga,

THE ABILITY TO SET ASIDE OUR ‘STUFF’ and the busyness of today’s living before working with patients. Failure to do so invites mistakes, introduces static into the healing process and is disrespectful to the patient. Karakia is used to help patients, practitioners and others present to let go of their busy-ness and unite everyone in the common purpose of the task at hand. The ability to do this authentically requires practice. In today’s fast paced living the ability to multitask is considered a quality however rongoa Maori requires a paradigm shift to value complete focus on the task at hand and nothing else. For the benefit of patient and practitioner, it is important to ensure that all other taps are turned off completely before opening the healing tap.

And clearly the ability to speak Maori would help, but it is not a necessity when starting out, it will come with time.

The key points of difference for rongoa Maori, as I see them are that:

- the practice utilises the nature of this land to heal the illnesses that frequent this landscape and its people. It does not depend on the importation or exploitation of the natural resources of other lands.

- Rongoa Maori was traditionally taught in wananga. Believe it or not it was Maori not the military that invented boot camps. Students were removed from society for long periods, sometimes years, and resided in specific training camps with their tutors, the very best in their field. They were released from many every day duties in order to focus their learning. Learning was a mix of spiritual and physical exercises and the only way out was through graduation or expulsion. In these camps they were taught rongoa Maori without many of life’s distractions. A modern version of wananga or residential schools would be a real asset in progressing the sharing of this knowledge in a respectful and efficient way today. Rongoa Maori is not something we turn off or on in a classroom or our practices at predefined times, it is a way of living!
- Rongoa Maori recognises the ancestors of everyone involved in the healing process. All of those in the room contribute to the healing process in some way through their presence. Those in attendance as the representatives or the living embodiment of their ancestors also bring with them the spirits of their ancestors to participate in the process. Although not always obvious, a room can be quite full of healing potential. You could say that rongoa Maori enlists the power of many generations and it can quite literally be a case of when ‘your people (as supporters of the patient) and my people (as facilitators of the healing process) combine forces’ what an awesome healing energy we create.

This is why so many of us gather around our dying in hospitals. We bring with us our tupuna and our combined love to help the patient transition smoothly along their journey. Even though someone may be dying, healing is still required to provide comfort and support to the patient and their immediate family during this process. I can see that this might be a cause of angst for some, at what many might consider a very private and personal moment. But not for many Maori who muster courage to be able to grieve openly knowing that they are surrounded by others who love and will catch them should they fall.

It is also the reason why no one person can take the credit for any healing that occurs. Without humility and acknowledgement for other forces at play - healing is compromised,

“...the kumara does not sing of its own sweetness.”

While some may think we are a people with a lot of nonsensical rules and traditions, we can in fact be quite a practical bunch. Generally if you poke a little deeper to get to the bottom of why we have certain tikanga there is often a logical explanation for them.

For example the requirement for women to rest during menstruation was an important tikanga to be adhered to. The gathering of plant medicines or digging of gardens was prohibited at this time. In part this was recognition of low energy levels experienced during menstruation and the need for women to take this time to restore themselves. Also the distraction of cramping and other associated symptoms meant that it could be difficult to give focus to certain tasks and lead to mistakes or the spoiling of precious medicines or food.

Other tikanga are no longer so widely practiced today due to the breaks in maintaining traditional practices over the last 150 years or changes in the way we live today.

An example of this would be the practice of placing harakeke (flax) remnants at the base of the bushes they came from. This was a good way of giving back to the land and helping to restore the plant. This was fine when most of our flax grew in areas that flooded and washed away bugs that harmed the flax. Today we plant flaxes in areas that don't flood so when we put our discarded flax back under those bushes we provide a great home for the harmful bugs that destroy our plants. As a result you will see many practitioners placing their flax remnants near to rather than under flax bushes.

Another example of a rule that may seem nonsensical is when men carving meeting houses are made tapu (which means set aside for that task alone or made special). As such they were forbidden from having sexual relations during that time. Why you might ask? Among other things this rule freed carvers from distractions and ensured the speedy completion of many works. It proved a great motivator for young virile carvers, who were keen to return to normal living. If we scratch the surface just a little with regard to tikanga we may discover some hidden wisdoms in them.

Another point of difference in the practice of rongoa Maori is the importance of storytelling, waiata (song) and whakapapa for the transfer of knowledge between practitioners and across generations.

Today science is broken down so much, and we have created such a huge range of specialisations, that many scientists don't even speak the same language any more. As these very intelligent, caring and committed people learn more about their individual specialisations they need to create new words for their discoveries and talk almost exclusively to their peers about their developments. As a result they can become isolated from the very communities that their great work benefits.

Our current health care systems are no different. We have amazing, caring, committed specialists for every body system and then specialists within each of those body systems as well. They have their own languages and specific areas of focus. It's no wonder we as consumers or as practitioners sometimes have trouble deciphering what is best for us or our patients given the range of health silos we have created. Natural health practices are no different.

Professor Lloyd Spencer Davis, Director and Stuart Chair in Science Communication at the University of Otago explains,

“pure science is inherently narrow in focus....it's the way you do science. You can't understand the world all at once, so you focus on just one little bit at a time. The problem is science races ahead of society's ability to understand it. It's partly the sheer volume but also scientists are becoming more specialised and [their research] more difficult to understand.... Science unfolds the truth that exists in the universe”^{iv}.

A universal truth perhaps?

In 2008 the University of Otago established its Centre for Science Communication which specialises in film making, online digital media and public exhibitions in order to popularise science.

iv Davis, Lloyd, Deciphering Darwin, November Issue (North & South Magazine, 2007), p35

Maori on the other hand simplified a lot of their knowledge gained over multiple generations into stories, songs and proverbs (whakatauki) in order to communicate them effectively to ordinary people.

Coming up for air from our work occasionally, keeps ourselves grounded in everyday living and enables us to see if we are still in sync with our original kaupapa and helps us to improve patient outcomes.

In my view today we are a little too focussed on evidence based research that proves remedies for 'control groups'. Rongoa Maori on the other hand is an outcome based health practice that recognises outcomes for individuals that do not necessarily form part of any predefined or controlled group. I think a healthy balance of both approaches in an effort to enhance outcomes, would be of greatest benefit to our patients.

I have heard it said before that no Maori ever migrated to Aotearoa. They were Pacific Island people who became Maori. Maori are born of these Pacific Island peoples who arrived here in search of a better life. They found the climate, the flora and fauna, the stars and many other things different from those in their homelands. I am sure this sounds familiar to many of you.

In order to survive they were forced to evolve many of their traditional practices to accommodate their new surroundings. Many of the traditional rules associated with the uses of some medicinal plants, tools and preparation methods had to change but not so the underlying principles for the way they worked with the plants and the respect they afforded them as precious gifts from Papatuanuku.

Consequently and in order to survive, Maori culture was born of this land. Not THE land, but THIS land. It did not exist before this time nor does it exist anywhere else. Everything about Maori culture relates to this land, the people who have lived and died on it, the plants, the stars, the mountains, the rivers, the rocks and the animals. Our language, songs, carvings, prayers, stories, food and our medicines all relate to and are of this land.

Maori are of this land and the land is who we are – we are inseparable. If the land is unwell then so too are we. Without it we are nobody, we have no culture, our language is no longer relevant, our songs & stories become disconnected, our children will have shallow roots, insufficient to sustain them in times of bad weather. It is also the land that calls us home when we die.

Rongoa Maori is a way of reconnecting with the land in order to restore wellness not just to the many peoples who now reside in our land but first and foremost to the land itself so that in turn it can nurture and provide for us our most basic needs as it did for those Pacific Island peoples so many years ago.

THE NEXT TIME YOU FIND YOURSELF OUTSIDE IN A PEACEFUL PLACE CONSIDER FOR A MOMENT THE WONDER AND PURE BEAUTY OF PAPATUANUKU, MOTHER EARTH.

HER BEAUTY IS PUNCTUATED BY HER FLOWING LANDSCAPE OF MOUNTAINS, CREVICES AND VALLEYS,

HER CYCLES ARE SUMMER, A TIME OF PRODUCTIVITY AND AUTUMN A TIME FOR HARVESTING AND STORING NUTRIENTS FOR THE WINTER MONTHS, WINTER A TIME OF HIBERNATION, RESTORATION AND PURIFICATION AND SPRING A TIME OF REJUVENATION AND FERTILITY

*THE RAIN IS RANGINUI'S TEARS OF PURE LOVE FOR
PAPATUANUKU, THE KAKANO OR SEED GIVING LIFE TO
ALL THINGS,*

*HER WATERWAYS ARE HER ARTERIES DELIVERING
NUTRIENTS TO EVERY PART OF HER BEING,*

WATER IS HER LIFE'S BLOOD,

*HER WETLANDS ARE HER KIDNEYS FILTERING THE
WATERWAYS OF OUR LAND,*

*THE MICROBES ARE HER LIVER CLEANING AND
REMOVING TOXINS,*

HER SOIL IS HER WOMB,

*HER MOKOPUNA ARE THE CHILDREN OF TANE,
PROTECTING HER FROM THE ELEMENTS – THE TREES,
THE PLANTS, THE BIRDS, THE INSECTS AND THE
YOUNGEST OF THEM ALL, HE TANGATA, HE TANGATA, HE
TANGATA (THE PEOPLE)*

*HER MAURI IS ENERGISED BY THE LOVE OF HER WHANAU
AS SHE IN TURN LOVES AND PROTECTS THEM.*

*OUR BODIES, ARE A MICROCOSM OF, Papatuanuku who
GIVES US LIFE,*

*AND OUR MAURI IS ENERGISED BY THE LOVE AND
RESPECT WE GIVE TO AND RECEIVE FROM ALL THINGS
IN OUR WORLD.*



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Ko Karioi te maunga
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Ko Tainui te waka
Ko Waikato te Iwi
Ko Ngati Tabinga, Ngati
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- Bachelor of Health Science in Complementary Medicine
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Donna operates a small natural health clinic in Helensville where she specialises in using rongoa Maori philosophies and principles in the delivery of her services. She teaches rongoa Maori for a variety of private training organisations around the country and is a weekly presenter on the television series Maara Kai.

She is married with two children and four beautiful mokopuna who remain her motivation for her passionate journey.

The kaupapa behind rongoa Maori reflects the laws of nature and the world's natural order. The reason we even exist is because of the intricate integration or connection between all things. Again it is based on the premise that humankind are part of and not separate from nature and that we, as children of Tane, have a rightful place on this earth. Although, should we overstep that place or become out of sync with the rest of our community, for example by taking more than we reasonably need to survive from other members of our natural community, imbalances will occur that will ultimately affect our health and well-being.

As a result much of our tikanga is based on the protection and preservation of nature, which brings us back to restoring the mauri of the land and its inhabitants through the circle of life and energetic flow that is Taha Wairua.

In conclusion I would like to share with you this poem written by Heather Delamere Thomson,

*“KORO, WHAT IS WAIRUA?”
THE CHILD ASKED, EYES WIDE.
WAIRUA, MY MOKO IS WHAT GIVES US LIFE,
HANDED DOWN TO US FROM A TIME PAST.*

*AT THE MOMENT OF YOUR BEGINNING,
YOU SHARED WITH ME THE WAIRUA OF OUR TUPUNA;
FOR I AM YOUR LINK WITH THE PAST,
YOU ARE MY PLACE IN THE FUTURE.*

*THE AROHA OF THE WHANAU HAS WAIRUA.
AND THEIR WORDS, THEIR LAUGHTER, THEIR TEARS,
THE MARAE, TANGI, WAIATA AND WHAKAPAPA,
HAVE A WAIRUA THAT STRENGTHENS US, GIVES US
PRIDE.*

*SO TOO THE SUNRISE AND SUNSET,
THE SOFT SUMMER RAIN, THE RAGING STORM,
THE SONG OF THE BIRDS IN THE TREES,
THE WAVES ON THE BEACH,
THE MIST RISING FROM THE BUSH,
THE MOONLIGHT ON THE WATER,
AND THE EMBRACING DARKNESS OF THE NIGHT.*

*TO SIT QUIETLY IN THE WHARENUI OR THE URUPA,
AND FEEL THE PRESENCE OF YOUR TUPUNA IS TO
FEEL WAIRUA.
YOUR ARMS ABOUT MY NECK , YOUR BREATH ON MY
CHEEK,
FILLS ME WITH A SPECIAL WAIRUA.*

*FOR THERE IS WAIRUA IN ALL THINGS THAT GIVE
MEANING TO LIFE,
TO LOVE, TO THE FUTURE.*

*SO MOKO, OPEN YOUR MIND,
LET YOUR HEART LOVE,
YOUR EYES SEE,
YOUR EARS HEAR
YOUR HANDS FEEL.
GIVE OF YOURSELF, MY MOKO,
FOR IN GIVING YOU RECEIVE
AND THE WAIRUA GROWS.*