

Learning to crawl in the Māori world

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Ko Waimārama te moana.

Ko Tukituki te awa.

Ko Kahurānaki te maunga.

Nō Heretaunga ahau.

Ko Trevor Sweeney tōku matua. Nō Te Aroha ia.

Ko Margaret McCann tōku whaea. Nō Otira ia.

Ahako ko Ngāti Pākehā tōku iwi, he kaha tōku hononga ki te whenua o Ngāti Kahungunu.

Ko Rebecca Sweeney ahau.

This is my pepeha. I extended it last year and can now say it without prompts, and in any situation. It's time to extend it again, or perhaps prepare a wider range of pepeha and mihi to use in different situations. I'm learning to crawl in the Māori world.

I started my journey when I was about 7 years old when my teacher at Hastings Central School, Mrs Wilkie, taught our class to pronounce kupu Māori correctly and taught us to sing a range of waiata. She shared a passion and it certainly rubbed off on me! Thanks to Mrs Wilkie, I have always had pretty good pronunciation and I have always loved tikanga, te reo, and waiata Māori.



Many years passed. I've stayed on lots of marae around Aotearoa — during my years at teachers' college; while working for government; and now, through being part of the CORE whānau. I went on a noho marae for the first time at the age of 12, to Mihiroa Marae, and loved every moment. I still remember learning some of the tikanga, kawa, on that marae through elders talking to us, or through us kids making dumb mistakes and getting told off. I still make dumb mistakes now. I still get told off. I don't mind. I also get gentle guidance. I'm learning to crawl in the Māori world.

I am scared to share my thoughts in this post but am doing it anyway, in case it helps you to start your journey into the Māori world. It's scary but it's worth it. Here are some of my learnings.

NEVER ASSUMING I HAVE IT ALL FIGURED OUT...

I learned a long time ago that relationships and kōrero are hugely important to Māori. These can be cut off or broken down at any moment if I assume I know what's best. I have learned that the same is true for all people — but Māori people taught me this. I still make mistakes, but I also see myself growing. It's easy to forget tikanga Māori if I move too fast and make assumptions. I am Pākehā, so I always think like a Pākehā first. I need to be aware of this bias and I try to learn from the mistakes I make rather than defend myself. I accept any feedback, no matter how it is given. Relationships still matter here, and it's sometimes hard to take feedback from people you have no connection with, but I believe it's important to take it when you are learning to crawl in the Māori world.

TAKING INVITATIONS AND PARTICIPATION SERIOUSLY...

Aotearoa is still mostly a place operating as two worlds: a Māori world and a Pākehā world. Sometimes they overlap, but not that often in my experience. Others might have different views depending on how they live their lives.

Occasionally, I get to take part in the Māori world through regular noho marae arranged by my amazing CORE whānau Māori colleagues, or through a range of tikanga that we strive to make the norm in our mahi, both internally at CORE and externally with our clients. I have learned to take the opportunities that I get very seriously. I want to genuinely contribute in ways that add value, but often I can't. I don't want to be the person who just takes what I need or want. I want to give as well.

Before any noho marae I get quite stressed and anxious. I spend a lot of time practising waiata and karakia, and sometimes even things like games I know we will play (no one would guess this as I am still pretty average at these things!!). Don't get me wrong — every noho feeds my wairua and gives me renewed energy that I can't explain. Is that mauri? I feel at home and warm around a group of people who support each other, and it is a good place to be. But I am also still learning to crawl in this Māori world and where I crawl, I feel like I am in a learning pit and I don't want to mess up or disappoint my whānau.

Feel the fear and do it anyway!

LISTEN AND LEARN...

If there is one thing I have learned that is super important, it is the need to listen and learn.

I don't talk much in the Māori world. I think I have spoken up in a group situation on a noho marae only once, maybe twice, and that wasn't until I'd been part of the group for a long time. If I do speak, it is often to ask a question or to try to understand something. When people around me kōrero Māori I try to keep up. I sometimes get my phone out and open the Māori Dictionary online to check some of the tricky vocab that I hear. I can never keep up but sometimes I can follow along — mostly I can't. That's my problem and no one else's. I keep trying to listen to everything and to learn. There are multiple perspectives on issues and ways of working in the Māori world and every situation is unique — just as it is in the Pākehā world.

I have taken lots of te reo and other kaupapa Māori courses over the years. I started in high school when I took School C Māori in 7th form. In English, we were given a set text — a biography called Amiria by Anne Salmond. I loved the stories of the Stirling whānau and read Eruera, and then started reading all the Anne Salmond history books I could find. I remember when I was about 19, crying, as I read Two Worlds, and realised what our history really was (and had caused). I took a Māori Education paper with Wally Penetito during my Master of Education. I took the Mauri Ora course through the Open Wānanga. I took a range of online and face-to-face beginner and intermediate reo courses through places like CultureFlow, Wānanga, and more recently CORE.

It wasn't until last year that I really learned how huge it is to learn the language. I'm not sure I will ever get very far but I will keep trying different ways to learn. It's actually terrifying at times, but I just keep trying. Some people would say I don't try hard enough, and that is probably true. I am grateful to the amazing Māori around me who persevere, help, laugh at and with me, give advice and lend books, demand my engagement, teach me their ways, or just offer kind words of support.

HAVE DEBATES WITH THE INTENT TO SEEK COMMON GROUND...

I used to avoid debates when I was younger. Many Māori have taught me not to do this — simply through their insisting that I have a debate with them! My experiences tell me that, if I don't engage in debate with Māori when they invite it, that I won't earn any respect. The intent is always to seek common ground or to at least ensure everyone is heard before decisions are made. I was taught this first by Māori, and later by people like Joan Dalton. Now I love debate and I step into it when it matters. I mentor others to do this, too.

NEXT STEPS FOR ME...

Everything is harder for me in the Māori world. It makes me think about how it might be for Māori learners moving from Māori to English-medium schooling! I am learning to crawl in the Māori world. I'm not sure what my next steps are. I have goals for growing my reo. I am

committed to the partnership goals that CORE has. I'm not always sure I know what it looks like to honour Te Tiriti o Waitangi as a Pākehā. This changes as I learn more. I think I need to make more of the opportunities that I get to be in the Māori world. Another recent learning for me is to make the goals far smaller and more achievable. Much smaller than the goals I might set for myself in the Pākehā world.

Maybe one day I will be able to walk in the Māori world!



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- Online Programme: [Te Reo Puāwai Māori](#)
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- Workshop: [Jumpstart my reo](#)
- Podcast: [100% success in language learning/embrace your dickness](#)
- Podcast: [What is my role as a Pākehā in upholding the mana of Te Tiriti o Waitangi](#)
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