

Moemoea mo oku mokopuna...

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E oku rangatira, tena tatou katoa. I tenei wa o te ao hurihuri, anei etahi o nga whakaaro aroha mo ngai taua te iwi o nga moutere o te Moana Nui a Kiwa. E tika ana nga korero o nga tipuna, no mai ra ano na te Atua e noho marika kei waenganui i a matou.

I have always believed it to be so that since time on earth began, God has been with the peoples of the Pacific. We have therefore been forever blessed with an environment and a way of life so perfectly attuned to the needs and ongoing stewardship of all in God's very good creation. Over time however, we have not been careful. We have not been faithful stewards of God's gifts so freely given. Knowing as we do that through God's grace we are blessed time and time again by the extant offer of God's selfless redemptive love, what are we now to do especially in the current circumstance?

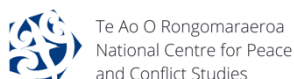
As I write these words, I have my mokopuna firmly in my mind. I have my maternal yearnings for their futures deeply etched in my heart. In late March 2020, our beautiful whanau matriarch took wings and journeyed onward to be with the ancestors, to be at rest eternal with God. The mantle of whanau leadership now falls to me and so it is that I wonder with deep urgency just how best I ought to continue her work. Her labours of love were only ever singularly focussed on how to ensure the best possible future for those most precious in all our Pacific families—our mokopuna. What follows then are glimpses into the conversations we regularly had about our concerns and our delights about the future of the Pacific and in particular the rightful place and the rightful prospects for our peoples. Our korero was always feisty, funny, and unavoidably political.

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed so much about the 'essential' character of each one of our Pacific Island communities. Respective governments, at first, tentatively reacted and then subsequently responded more seriously and comprehensively to the completely unanticipated and largely little understood 'enemy' that first appeared on the South Pacific horizon in early 2020.

Ours is a region which over the past few decades has so uncritically allowed itself to be utterly seduced by the spurious economic lure of international tourists who come in droves to satiate their perversely ill-informed tropical island fantasies. They come and are feted by our ever-generous Pacific hospitality. Most leave behind little of enduring economic value and almost nothing of spiritual, environmental, cultural, or political value. It is as though a creeping politics of individualised greed has subsumed our time bound cultural tradition of tatou tatou.

Our troubling preoccupation and thus dangerous dependency upon international tourism is in part what rendered us all so ill prepared, so potentially vulnerable to Covid 19. Thanks be to God that in this instance our pristine island communities have managed to keep the Coronavirus at bay.

It might have been so different but for the vigilance and selflessness of those within local island communities, those who have seared into their memories the stories of the elders who spoke of the horrors inflicted in earlier times by ships carrying sailors and passengers infected with death-dealing diseases against which the peoples of the Pacific had no immunity, no ability to withstand – leprosy, influenza, typhoid, measles. It has therefore been largely the pre-emptive protective action taken in many instances not by



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political leaders but by traditional and other community leaders which has spared the Pacific unimaginable horror. It is timely, indeed obligatory, to reflect now on just how blessed we have been to avoid the impending waves of death which were almost within the reefs surrounding our islands; the unconscionable loss of life which the coronavirus would have wrought with such ease had it been allowed to enter onto the shores of our unsuspecting and utterly vulnerable island communities. It is timely therefore more than ever to reflect on the political leadership crisis this experience has also drawn into even sharper relief. For it is here in the political realm that the essential work of rebuilding and futureproofing the future for the children of the Pacific must now begin. It is here within the primary building block portfolios upon which the future well-being and prosperity of the entire community depends. It is within each of these portfolios where radical change is indicated if our mokopuna are to stand any chance of flourishing.

Health: Ironically one of the freely admitted political responses to the pandemic threat has been the fear of our respective island health systems being unable to cope, under-resourced, ill-equipped, unsophisticated. It is true that in many Pacific Island nations health systems are rudimentary, parlous, overly dependent upon the tightly controlled largesse of the colonialist benefactor nations Australia and New Zealand, international donors, WHO and increasingly upon the little understood insidious benevolence of the sleeping dragon. But it must not be that way going into the future. It is going to take compassionate, visionary, morally trustworthy, experienced men, women, young people as well as similarly gifted medical and scientific leaders to reimagine and to reconstruct future wellbeing pathways. There are any number of skilled, qualified, generous-hearted Pacific Island experts capable of undertaking this work but what is needed is an end to the corrupt politics which so often preclude the finest and the best being entrusted the privilege of leading the way.

Education: similarly, across the Pacific, education is also accorded very uneven political attention. It is thus, generally under-developed, under-resourced, under-equipped and clearly undervalued. In spite of many heroic individual efforts among teachers, Principals and community leaders, there is little evidence of effective national level cohesion, collaboration, contextualisation among and between education providers. In higher education the default continues to be toward either New Zealand or Australia. But it doesn't need to be that way and certainly it ought not continue to be that way going into the future, especially when much of the curriculum necessary for inculcating the moral values, cultural traditions and theoretical expertise needed for the nurturing of good citizens and good leaders already resides to the largest extent within Pacific communities themselves. But it is going to take compassionate, visionary, morally trustworthy, experienced men, women, young people as well as similarly gifted leading educators to reimagine and to reconstruct future educational pathways. There are any number of skilled, qualified, generous-hearted Pacific Island experts capable of undertaking this work of transforming education but what is needed is an end to the corrupt politics which so often preclude the finest and the best being entrusted the privilege of leading the way.

Trade: Trade throughout and beyond from the Pacific is arguably one of the most incoherent, uneconomical, unimaginative, exploitative, and utterly under-realised aspects of Pacific life. We live in a region blessed with incalculably valuable natural marine resources and yet to the largest extent we are failing to protect the very environments which gift those resources as tradeable products into our care. Further, we are failing to maximise the true value of Pacific products. We have for too long prioritised the coveted lure of global trading partners in preference to those closest to us in the Oceanic neighbourhood. We have failed to see beyond the distant and, now disappearing horizons of economic greed. Trade throughout the Pacific does not and ought no longer need to be the way it has been. What is needed though are compassionate, visionary, morally trustworthy, experienced men, women, young people as well as similarly gifted ethically grounded business leaders and economists to reimagine and to reconstruct future mutually beneficial and environmentally sustainable trading pathways. There are any number of skilled, qualified, generous-hearted Pacific Island experts capable of undertaking this work but what is needed is an end to the corrupt politics which so often preclude the finest and the best being entrusted the privilege of leading the way.

Tourism: Apprehending the devastating economic impact arising from the loss of international tourism ought not lead to any reconsideration of how to simply return to the way things were rather it ought to be seen as providing the greatest opportunity for reimagining how best to repurpose existing infrastructure in new ways, ways which give priority to uplifting and upholding the mana me te wairua o nga mouere, me nga moana e hora nei, me nga tangata Pasefika katoa! All it will take are compassionate, visionary, morally trustworthy, experienced men, women, and young women working alongside similarly gifted experienced tourism leaders all of whom are capable of reimagining and realigning new forms of sustainable and eco-friendly tourism – tourism which repositions local communities and not foreign interests as kaitiaki, tourism which protects the local and thus honours the spirit of the national. It will require political will, moral courage and determinedly Pacific-oriented hearts and minds to reorient tourism as the precious taonga it surely is.

Church leadership: Church leaders across the Pacific have been largely silent in the public square during the pandemic period, apart from offering unhelpful and uninspiring theologically bereft platitudes either to do with God's judgement or punishment in the current circumstance or with the equally unintelligent promise of God's divine protection no matter what. Instead of seizing upon the Gospel imperative to cry out about the inequities and structural injustices which lie at the heart of our insufficiencies in health care, education, trade, and economic affairs, too many Pacific church leaders prefer to remain as unassailable elites, claiming first and foremost the humanly constructed privileges rather than the God-given responsibilities of church leadership. Pacific Churches must not remain as they are – God requires of all and not just some church leaders that they be compassionate, visionary, morally trustworthy, experienced men, women and young people working selflessly and tirelessly for those who are the least, the lost and the lonely, that they consistently inspire confidence, courage and hope, that they enable and empower all in our communities to succeed and to flourish, that they stand for justice, for inclusivity, for equality and human rights, indeed for kindness to characterise relationships among and between all God's people. These are currently so few among the church leaders we have. And yet there are any number of wonderful faith-filled young Pacific Island men, women and young people who ought to be encouraged and prepared for the sacred work of church leadership. But what is needed is an end to the conservative patriarchal dominance which so firmly precludes the finest and the best being entrusted the privilege of leading the way.

Political leadership: Uniquely Pacific political leadership, albeit proceeding from a secular basis, ought nonetheless be on the exact same Gospel based trajectory and be similarly diversely representative. For surely it is only when the Pacific wide kingdom of God, comprising men, women and young people are together entrusted with the awesome responsibility of political leadership that it is more likely to be infused with necessary compassion, essential accountabilities, visionary thinking, moral trustworthiness, more likely to be conducted with necessary integrity and with dignity. There are any number of skilled, qualified, passionate, generous-hearted Pacific Island people capable of being entrusted the work of political leadership but what is needed is an end to the shamelessly corrupt tribalised politics which always preclude the finest and the best even offering themselves, let alone being chosen

As Covid 19 has changed our lives now so irrevocably, we are confronted with stark choices – to scramble fruitlessly to return to the old uncritically romanticised Pacific 'normal' with all its inequalities, injustices, political corruption, economic greed, poverty, its nil regard for the rights of women or young people, or we can raise ourselves above the extant challenges now before us. We can because we must with urgency, courage, hope and an abundance of aroha, turn to consider the God-given gift opportunities now before us. We can and we must critically reflect on the lives we have been living, to be honest in confronting those aspects which are not in accord with Gospel teachings. We can and we must as God's precious Pacific people, question if indeed all in our communities are able to live lives free from abuse, violence, poverty, where all can truly belong, can succeed and flourish? We must ask if kindness and integrity characterises our relationships with our environment, with one another? We must ask if our leaders and our leadership

systems are just and therefore are truly reflective of the diversity of our communities. And if not, we must ask why not?’

It is my fervent belief that as peoples of the Pacific, we can do so much better as we turn now to face the future with extraordinarily clean hands and with far more open hearts! Even as we struggle to comprehend the rapidity of change and understandably, to somewhat resist the overwhelming prospect of so much that is yet unknown, we must also remind ourselves that as God’s Pacific peoples, we have a duty of care to the pristine environment we are blessed to call home. Equally, we must never forget that we are bound by that same duty of care for each other as sisters and brothers in Christ o Te Moana Nui o Kiwa. It is because of our faith commitment that we are being called anew individually and collectively, to reflect with even greater urgency on the brokenness and vulnerability of many within our communities and of the environment itself. We are being called in this moment to commit, with renewed vigor, to addressing all of those injustices which give rise to human suffering, and to working tirelessly towards a more just, more equitable, and more inclusive future — one that uplifts the God-given dignity of all our people, of all our men, our women and our young people and more especially, our precious mokopuna.

No reira ka nui tenei mo tenei wa. Nga manaakitanga a te Runga Rawa ki a tatou katoa!

Dr Jenny Te Paa Daniel (Te Rarawa) is Te Mareikura (Esteemed Indigenous Professor) at the National Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, Otago University, Dunedin. Previously she served for 23 years as Te Ahorangi (Principal) at St Johns Theological College in Auckland. During her lengthy leadership tenure she established herself as one of a very small group of leading Pacific women theological writers and teachers. Highly respected globally and nationally for her fearlessness in critiquing injustice and for her relentless advocacy for women’s leadership, she has been awarded four international honorary doctorates and two prestigious Distinguished Alumni Awards in recognition of her own leadership example and her prolific scholarship. Te Paa Daniel lives in both Aitutaki and Auckland enjoying a perfectly balanced lifestyle which now prioritises affinity with and affection for, whanau (especially mokopuna!), whenua and moana.