

World Indigenous People's Conference on Education 2005 (Hamilton, Aotearoa)

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I can't say whether or not any of us could truly articulate what it was that brought us to New Zealand ~ this foreign land thousands of miles away from our home. We arrived as lawyers, politicians, nurses, educators, small business owners, students, farmers and community economic developers in our woolen socks, thick jeans, sweaters and beanies bound by a passion ~ a passion for our people and our land. What exactly would we learn? Who would we meet? What would we find? We did not know and yet we had had faith and worked hard to get there. Every dollar, every weekend, every e-mail, every dream was spent for the past year in effort to get here. And we had arrived. What were we hoping to find that we could not find at home? We didn't know. We couldn't tell you. But we knew we had to come.

Our token Kiwi told us, "They call this place 'the Land of the Gods.'" We could see why. With blue, sunny skies that stretched high above us, crisp air, lush green pastures, farms, and mountains as far as the eye could see, more cows and sheep than one could ever imagine, valleys and rivers that burst in colors and spaces beyond the senses, and people with rosy cheeks from good food and cheer who spoke with a witty, British lilt. . . we were definitely in God's territory.

When we arrived at the *marae* they told us to take our shoes off and to file quietly into the meeting room. Their people – grandfathers, sisters, mothers, cousins, husbands and sons -- greeted us with chants, song and dance that reverberated with the wisdom and heritage of their ancestors and their land. They embraced us with such overpowering love for we were their cousins from Hawaiki Loa; we were their *family*. The walls, floors and our ears shook with their people's words: ALIVE, BEATING and BREATHING within and through them with JOY and PRIDE. Their *mana* filled that entire room and shook our very beings. Our skin prickled with goose bumps and shivered in the presence of such a force. They greeted us as caretakers, as guardians, as stewards of their people's language, their people's culture, their people's identity and pride. Many women from our home cried. Cried in joy, in awe and in vain for what our people had lost and what was possible. **Their spirits lit us like winds on ember.**

I try to think of words to describe the transformations we went through while attending the World Indigenous People's Conference on Education 2005 (Hamilton, New Zealand). We were greeted by forty Maori men – fathers, sons, uncles, and brothers - dressed in their people's dress who chanted and moved with such power, force and masculinity that the earth seemed to reverberate in awe and fear. They seemed to draw from within them the power possessed by their ancestors which had accumulated since the dawn of time. We were greeted by Native Americans who came from Canada and America in their native costumes – bright plumes of feathers and fabrics designed in patterns of rich hues of blues

and reds and yellows – who danced, and sang and spoke about their homes and their struggles. We were greeted by Australians who played their instruments that made deep throbbing noises. We were greeted by professors in Taiwan that were trying to help the children from the various indigenous populations learn mandarin through native songs. We were greeted by a Native American astronaut, a man who worked for education in Cuba, an African doctor who battled against AIDS in his country every day, Hawaiian teachers who tried to understand how pop culture influenced indigenous students' writing. . . we were greeted by so many different indigenous peoples from all parts of the world who wanted to hear our stories and who wanted to share theirs. **Their spirits lit us like winds on ember.**

We came not knowing what we would find. We came with our own stories, our own struggles, our own journeys looking for . . . something. And we found a gold mine. As I sit here trying to think of how to describe what was found, I can hear the voices of my friends who had the amazing opportunity to have their lives touched by this place. Most poignant, were the testimonies shared by the youth:

It makes me sad to see how much these people know their culture and their language. They're so proud of who they are and they. . . they look up to us! To us!?! But really, we should be looking up to them. I mean, there were like. . . four people at Wai'anae High School who wanted to learn Hawaiian. It's sad that our people have lost their language and their culture. And I, I know what I have to do. When I go home, I'm going to do everything I can to learn my language and to teach my family the language. (Native Hawaiian female, age 16)

I went to this workshop where I learned about the Hawaiian form of martial arts. It was freakin' cool. . . You see, when I was young, I was brought up on the Mainland and taught all the western stuff. When I came back home to Hawai'i, I realized that I missed a lot of stuff – a lot of lessons and knowledge about being Hawaiian. And I feel like I have lost, like I've been robbed, of that. . . I want to find a connection to my culture again and I can see me doing this martial arts stuff. I mean hula. . . I feel like a freakin' fairy. But martial arts, I could do that. (Native Hawaiian male, age 19)

I feel really depressed. Like, when I see how much the Maori people know their culture I feel embarrassed. We've lost that in Hawai'i. And I also think that. . . it's important to be proud of who you are and yet to be modest. I don't know. . . I guess I realize that for me, right now, as a half Hawaiian and half Native American person I need to concentrate on understanding who I am first and then work on what I need to start learning about my heritage. (Native Hawaiian/Native American female, age 15)

What I wonder is . . . it's cool to hear about all these people's stories and their different ideas but. . . what works for one people may not work for us. Like maybe that upside down triangle thing works for the Native Americans but not for Native Hawaiians. Like I think we need to start thinking about our challenges at home and to just keep our minds open to possibilities. (Caucasian male, age 19)

Our questions grew deeper, our eyes wider, our understanding clearer and our drives stronger. On the final day, as if speaking our minds, one man shared, "I came to *Aotearoa*, a land so far away, only to find what *kuleana* I have waiting for me at home." When we left,

we placed our foreheads and nose ridges along our hosts' in hongis and exchanged "ha" – the breath. Their farewells swept us over the air and sent us home.

Thank you to all who have made this journey possible. We at MA'O thank you with deep love and gratitude and can promise you, our lives have changed because of this trip. We are firmer in our commitment to the health of our communities, our people, our heritage and our land. May the New Year bring us a step closer to actualizing our goals.

-MA'O