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“The Shameless Pain?": A Maori Mother's Grief Processing the Effects of Suicide

This piece is about my experience of suicide and the systemic epistemology between culture and laws that are structured like a one size fit all ugly pair of shoes that a mother like me will wear for the rest of my life. I will speak about my experience in this heartbreaking real-life situation through the holistic views of Te Ao Maori and the law. My daughter's name is Chanelle Te Kura Waru, she was born on the 18th of July 1995. Chanelle died from an intentional overdose she was just 21 years old. Chanelle was an articulate independent young woman and she is our only child, her father and I loved her unconditionally, to the world she was just one person, to her father and I she was our world.

In 2016/2017, 606 people committed suicide, 457 were males and 149 were females, the highest statistic age group is 20-24yrs. The highest suicide death by methods is hanging or overdose. Maori are the highest ethnic group recording 130 deaths in 2016/2017. May 10, 2017, is the day that I was labeled a victim and my daughter a statistic.

The first hour – Te haora tuatahi

It is one of life's cruellest challenge for any parent when a child dies and an unfathomable nightmare when it is to Suicide. I remember walking up the driveway after a long car ride to Sandringham with my brother from my workplace in Mangere and I saw my husband standing there, time stopped for me the moment I was informed. I walked into Chanelle's bedroom and saw her, she looked the same, she looked fast asleep but when I touched her hand I knew she was gone, her hand was so cold, I heard the ambulance driver apologise for our loss and he

asked politely if I could not disturb her as the police and detectives needed to come in and investigate the cause of death. I wanted to pick my daughter up and breathe life back into her and tell her I love her, and that she will be okay but I was too late, these words would echo in my head throughout the night....*I was too late.*

The Police – Nga Kaupoi puuru (Pirihimana)

It wasn't long before my house started filling up quickly with Police, Ambulance and Detectives it was chaotic, people were everywhere, my husband was being interviewed by a police officer when another police officer came over to interview me, at first I thought ok this is what I have to do as part of the kaupapa (process) when dealing with the police after a death. I noticed everyone in my house had their shoes on our brand new carpet, it is common practice in my culture that you remove your shoes or ask politely if you can keep them on I thought that was disrespectful and my grief suddenly turned into a fiery rage in a matter of seconds. The police officer interviewing me only got to ask one question and this was the question: "What was your relationship with your daughter like?" Needless to say that I was overwhelmed by this question and I felt this was not an appropriate question to ask a mother who has just learned of the death of her only child, a question that in my state of mind interpreted into the following "Did you kill your daughter" although this was not asked, the sickening feeling I got from this question made me react and put me into defence mode mixed in this was anger, hurt and frustration. A more senior officer was smart enough to read the neon signals my body language and facial expressions were beaming out and ordered all his staff out of the house.

The detectives were there to determine a probable cause of death and needed to take photos as part of this investigation, I was not happy with that as it felt like an invasion of my daughter's privacy, although she was very much into taking selfies for social media this, however, was a different situation. I knew that I would deal with this situation at a later time, for now, I needed to get on with whatever it is that I need to do.

Support – Nga Rongoa

As a wahine (woman), I felt I needed to be supported by another wahine and at this stage I didn't care if she was Maori or non

Maori I needed someone who was not personally connected to me as my whanau were in shock, I needed someone neutral who can help me through this process. A female detective arrived, I felt a sigh of relief that I finally had the support of another woman who would be able to guide me through this process, unfortunately, she made an error and called my daughter by her great grandmothers name which told me that she didn't even bother to find out the name of my daughter. I later learned that my daughter's name will not only be said incorrect but spelled 2 different ways.

1. Chantel
2. Chantelle

Each time I am correcting them and telling them "her name is Chanelle!

So here I am feeling alone, trying to make sense of this whole process, no one tells you how this is going to play out, it is almost scripted when the police talk to you. A whanau member overheard the ambulance driver speaking with the police telling them that our daughter had left a letter. I was numb, all I wanted was for her to wake up, I had no strength left in me to fight the fight I needed to save that for the next three days.

The Coroner – Te Kai Taniwha Tūpāpaku

A conversation was had with the senior officer about an autopsy, I responded very quickly "No, my daughter is not to be cut" I was also advised that this could be a directive from the coroner. Scott Williams from Tipene Funerals who is a funeral director but in this capacity, he was whanau he was able to navigate us through this conversation as he gently placed the 'brown card' on the table which means under cultural grounds with reference to the treaty, we the whanau can decline the request of a Post-mortem from taking place which is what we did, this was a Lore vs Law situation.

Once the police and detectives were finished we had the support of the Tipene Funeral staff they were able to care for Chanelle so that we could say our goodbyes before she was taken away to be processed by the coroner's office.

I remember watching her leave and thinking to myself there are so many things I need to get sorted because that's what mothers do, then this hollow thought hit me, I'm not a mother in the physical sense anymore' my only child was gone, I have

nothing. I was not in a good state but I needed to push through and make some sense of what just happened. I wasn't prepared for explaining what happened, why, when and what if. I wasn't prepared for the comments associated with suicide, I can recall hearing "why didn't she call me?" and "I can't imagine how you feel" or "I'm so sorry" as if that person had caused my daughter to take her life. I know everyone meant well and I suppose this is the only way we as humans think is best to comfort someone. The term 'no words' is really a good term to remember in a situation like this, a hug really speaks volumes.

Notifying the family – Nga panui aitua

The next task was to inform everyone, by phone, social media and face to face. I couldn't do this so I asked Scott to do it for me on social media. We didn't realise the impact that social media would have after the announcement of Chanelle's passing, there were whanau and friends all around the world streaming in with messages of support and condolences. The Tipene funeral facebook page blew up overnight and all staff was managing the huge influx of phone calls within the first 24 hours. Tipene Funeral did what I couldn't bring myself to do and that was to keep everyone updated and I appreciated this so much. We tried to get our daughter home earlier once she was released from the coroner but it was not to be, as we believe in our culture the tupaapaku (deceased) still has a wairua (spirit) and they will determine when they are ready to take the journey home, we usually associate this to tupaapaku waiting for someone to arrive so that we all take the journey home together, in this case, my whanau believe that Chanelle was waiting for her whanau to arrive from Australia and once they were here she was ready to go home.

The Funeral - Tangihanga

I had to think about where was home going to be for Chanelle, her father is Nga Puhī (North) and I am Ngāti Rereahu (South), which way do we take her. Chanelle's father made the decision to take her home to where I was raised, down in Mangapehi south of Te Kuiti, the beginning of my existence and immersion in Mātauranga Māori and the final resting place for our daughter.

Before we took her home we wanted to give Chanelle's friends and university whanau the opportunity to say their

goodbyes to her so we laid her body at Mataatua Marae for one night before taking her home to Mangapeehi Marae. I remember driving towards Mataatua Marae and all I saw was people in black everywhere, they had been waiting for Chanelle to arrive so they could pay their respects. I could hear the karanga and then the wailing began, I didn't realise it then but the wailing I could hear was from me, a mothers cry and the whanau behind me could feel my pain and heartache. It was here that I witnessed an outpour of grief from young people right up to our kaumatua and kuia. This is why I am so proud to be Maori it is times like this that we can come to support one another and grieve together. Understanding the tikanga (protocols) and practices that I have been taught growing up. A kaumatua took my husband and me aside and he said to us that our lives as we know it will never be the same again and that we should never blame each other for what has happened. These words were to remain with my husband I as we prepared to take our daughter home.

Chanelle at the time of her passing was a full-time student at AUT, she was studying for her Bachelors of International Hospitality Management, we had so many students and staff and I can recall meeting the deans from the Faculty of Culture and Society as my sister informed me that Chanelle bought the 'big wigs' from AUT. It was during this time that I heard the heartbreaking stories from her friends about their dark moments and the messages my daughter sent to them telling them to "hang on in there" and to make an appointment with their GP to get other supports. I couldn't believe what I was hearing, many of the whanau that attended the funeral went home that evening and had whanau hui to reassure their tamariki that they are there for them, I even had one young boy who confided in a friend of mine that he was contemplating ending his life, the discussions that were had were all because of my daughter, it was too late for me, but just in time for many others. But why does it have to take a loss of life to save a life?

I managed to have some downtime during the tangi to speak to a very dear friend of mine who lost his wife to suicide 12 months earlier, our circumstances were different but the pain was definitely the same. He spoke to me about when he took his wife home to her marae and the kaupapa there regarding suicide was not acceptable and that the rejection of a tupaapaku from suicide laying on this Marae could mean that the whanau would have to take her elsewhere, if it were not for the strong korero of whanau during this time the outcome could

have been different, for the sake of her children and husband she laid on her marae for the remainder of her tangi. There was talk about this kaupapa during my daughters tangi, we were informed that the whanau urupa was full which would mean that our daughter may have buried on top of her koro who passed away 12 months earlier, which to our whanau was not an issue, however this was not to be, news was delivered to the Marae that because my daughter had taken her life she was not to be buried on top of her koro because of his ancestral name and the mana that he carried. This saddened me as I am grieving for my daughter's spirit and now what to do with her body? If her Koro was alive he would have had a word or ten to say about that and unfortunately, this is a reality of suicide in an indigenous world and if we thought that pakeha law was insensitive and culturally unacceptable we really have some hard-hitting questions that need to be raised now and not wait for a situation to arise regarding suicide. A hui was held and it was decided that my girl will be buried on her koro, with the support of his wife and daughter. No one will really understand what I felt inside, I just wanted to lay down beside my daughter and die with her so that I can be with her instead of this stupid relentless world that I call home. I would be feeling like this for many more days to come following her tangi. To feel like this is not a mental health issue, it is a mothers love, pain, and a feeling of despair that we are allowed to have.

On the way home after the tangi I got a phone call from Victim Support asking me if there is anything I need, I asked them politely "can you bring my daughter back" the answer was a quiet 'no', then I said "well there's nothing you can do for me, thanks for ringing". I never heard from Victim support again after this phone call. I needed Victim support the night my daughter died, I needed all these networks to guide me through that process, to be called a victim was difficult for me to hear and still is to this day, we teach our children not to call people names but yet here we are as adults branding people victims after a traumatic incident.

It was also evident after the tangi that Chanelle's phone and her Ipad was missing, I had to raise these questions with the officers involved as I was not informed of this nor did I get an inventory of what was taken by the police the night Chanelle died. This was later rectified when I pushed for answers and lodged a formal complaint. This was one of many incidents during this process that I had to deal with over the next 12 months. I sent an email to the coroner's office dated August 3rd,

2017, 3 months after Chanelle's death and requested that my daughter's photos taken by detectives the night she passed be destroyed as we believe that the wairua of our daughter is not completely laid to rest because her pain still lingers in this world. To some, this may be an unusual request as we were advised by the coroner's office the photos will be sealed as per the Coroners Act 2006, the photographs are prohibited from being made public. I was informed that the photos are put into a grey envelope and sealed indefinitely, this doesn't support my values around tikanga and the protocols for Maori, in particular, my whanau. We don't see the difference between sealing the photographs or destroying them permanently.

The Letter – Nga kupu o te ringa pouri

As discussed earlier I was advised my daughter left a letter, this was the beginning of a long and very painful process. We only got a photocopy of Chanelle's letter as the original was still sitting with the coroner, however, the police officer that was supporting us managed to get this for my husband and I. Her letter talked about her loneliness she wrote "even in a house full of people I was still lonely" her bright candle was slowly fading. The night before she died she sent me a message on messenger "Nite nite mum I love you" it was 1 am in the morning I was still awake studying and responded back to her "Nite nite babe I love you too" this was to be the last message I would ever send my daughter. These messages were never unusual, however, I did have a bad feeling something just wasn't right and a mother's instinct is usually correct, this time I was just too exhausted from studying and working that I did not act on this feeling, something that will haunt me forever. Chanelle also left messages in her letter to specific people and a heartfelt apology to all the whanau, she named all those that were close and dear to her. According to police usually, when letters or notes are left behind by the deceased, the final word is usually exposing family skeletons or secrets. I always knew that my daughter was never one to expose anyone's secrets so for many, she has taken these with her to the next world.

Where I found my Solace– Te Korowai a Hine Te Iwaiwa

As a Maori whanau we continue to provide wrap-around support for each other, not just the grieving whanau but to everyone affected. My husband is not as outspoken as I am,

mainly because he was raised a lot different from me, I was immersed in tikanga growing up and continue to have very strong wahine toa influences in my life. His worldview is very much pakeha even though he is Maori he was raised very pakeha and to know his life story he was raised with love and support. We attended some counseling sessions so that we could be supported externally more so to lessen the burden that my whanau were already carrying. My husband found them useful but I didn't connect well, again this didn't fit my cultural support needs either.

In my whanau when we lose a loved one we take a vow of silence, this means that we are released from our Marae or Tikanga duties we all uphold in our whanau. In my case, I did not karanga on a Marae or function in a formal capacity so that I could grieve for the first 12 months of my daughter's death.

TK Groot

TK Groot is the beginning of my healing journey.

Ko te Whaea te takere o te waka

Mothers are like the hull of a canoe, they are the heart of the family. (anonymous)



Being with whanau certainly helped with my healing and through this support, the creation of TK Groot began. TK Groot is a soft bear who is based on the character Groot from the movie Guardians of the Galaxy, this bear represents my daughter as this movie for a 21-year-old was her Lion King of the 21st century. I didn't know it then but the healing this bear will bring to my whanau and people all over the world through TK Groot's travels would be a story in itself. TK stands for Te Kura who is a Travelling Kaitiaki. TK Groot has a heartbeat in her chest, and in her right hand the voice of my daughter, I got her cell phone message recording. So whenever I feel a wave of emotions coming I would press her hand to listen to her phone message and then get through my wave. When whanau travel away they pick up TK Groot and take her on their travels around the world. To travel was my daughter's dream, we the whanau honor this dream through our Travelling Kaitiaki. I get to watch the traveling journeys unfold on facebook as TK Groot has her own page and to further this journey, TK Groot has other bears that also travel and connect online. From this phenomenon, we have placed gifted bears with people that need that something special and if a small gift as a bear brings a little bit of sparkle into someone's world then that's a sparkle we all share.

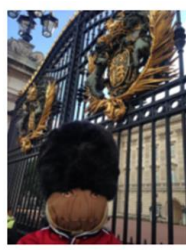
Here are some of TK Groot's travels that have helped me through my grieving journey.



Europe 2017



Paris 2017



London 2017



Scotland 2017



Bali 2017



Netball Samoa 2017



Costa Rica 2018



Los Angeles 2018



Las Vegas 2018



*Waka Ama Nationals
2018*



The most heartbreaking of all was Chanelle's Graduation December 14th 2017 Aotea Square, Auckland.

It was here that I learned of Posthumous and the beautiful tributes for those who have passed on. It was absolutely amazing to be a part of this tribute but heartbreaking that we were there for our daughter.



*Chanelle's Graduation 2017
Bachelor of International Tourism Management
Auckland University of Technology*

Support Groups for Maori parents affected by suicide – Manaaki Tangata

One morning I got on the internet to try and find a 'Maori' support group for mothers like me, I was reaching out and to add to my sadness I was unable to find a support group here in Auckland. I found more websites about suicide prevention, suicide support for rangatahi and mental health. None of these supports fit my need. I read a letter from Mike King to Dr. John Cranshaw, and Mike made reference to how the government continues to fund failed experiments and further isolate vulnerable people, We need Maori support groups out there to help mothers like me and from the statistics, there are roughly 100 Maori parents in New Zealand just like me. A concern for me is if Mike King who is passionate about raising the awareness of suicide resigned from the NZ Suicide Prevention External Advisory Panel, Mikes letter explains .why.

I often felt undervalued as a mother throughout this experience and felt my cultural values were ignored. There are days where I just can't be around people, I excuse myself so I can have a moment to cry on my own. I can't sleep because every time I close my eyes I see my daughter lifeless body lying on her bed. In some cases, I chose to ignore people just so they wouldn't take pity on me and my life. I still haven't seen my daughters death certificate I guess that's because I hold on to her life with everything I have. All her paperwork was done by my sister, she would have the job of closing Chanelle's accounts and paying for her funeral costs, I can recall hearing my daughter whispering in my ear, "don't worry mum all the finances will be taken care of", and this is what she was like in life, she never had any bills, and was very stingy with her money, I guess she got that from her dad.

The first 12 months were so hard for me to get through. I had family members that could not go to work because of the grief they were experiencing. I also had to support my nephews and nieces through their journey because their big cousin was no longer around as she was their pillar of strength. My whanau would be concerned about their children knowing that suicide was never too far from their thoughts. However, through my journey, our tamariki could see the pain and heartache their parents would suffer should they chose to take their lives. We rally together to ensure that each and every one of them feels loved and never lonely. I had to get through the first, Birthday, Christmas, New Years and all the other family celebrations so that I can heal. I did not drink alcohol or take

drugs because I didn't trust myself to stop. I refused medication because I didn't have a problem with my mind, it was my heart hurting, and having access to medication after your daughter dies from an overdose would be adding fuel to my already burning fire.

Moving forward – Taku titiro ki tua o Pae

I have been told many times that I'm a strong person but in reality, my weakness stems within me. We become conditioned in the way we think, the way we talk and the way we feel. We look forward and glimpse behind us every so often. One key focus that I had to face was the **acceptance** that my daughter was no longer here and she was never coming back to this world. It didn't become easier, I just got used to the fact that this is now my life. I'm not afraid to die anymore, when and if it is my time I will accept that my world will change again because I will leave my loved ones behind in this world. Generations will continue to grow, my own legacy has ended as I cannot have any more children, I always said that "God only blessed me once". I often tell people "Don't feel sad for me, I am a professional at being sad I don't need any more tips"

I wrote this because I wanted to assure mother's out there to know that what they are feeling is ok, we can cry, scream and throw things around so that we don't suffer in silence. We can be frustrated at the system and the way we feel we are treated because we can raise these issues with our own voice. It is ok to cry for nothing because nothing to us is everything. The word blame should never have been invented, it provides us with guilt and frustration, we blame ourselves, we blame the system, we blame our loved ones or we blame their loved ones, each day the world will continue to move, and each morning we wake up it is another 24hrs we have conquered.

A love that never ends - Te Aroha kore mutunga

I was given a link on Facebook about a Maori mother who lost two sons, one passed away from an accident and 2 years later her 2nd son through suicide. I watched this video about her story and I could hear myself and see myself through her experience. Heeni Morehu and her whanau spoke of her journey through the grief, and the support she got from whanau to help her through this. She spoke of her tough moments when giving up would have been an easier solution to get over the pain she was feeling.

Heeni also shared the poem about ugly shoes, here are the words that would ring true to what I was feeling.

"An Ugly Pair of Shoes"

I am wearing a pair of shoes.
They are ugly shoes.
Uncomfortable Shoes.
I hate my shoes.
Each day I wear them, and each day I wish I had
another pair.
Some days my shoes hurt so bad that I do not
think I can take another step.
Yet, I continue to wear them.
I get funny looks wearing these shoes.
They are looks of sympathy.
I can tell in others eyes that they are glad they are
my shoes and not theirs.
They never talk about my shoes.
To learn how awful my shoes are might make them
uncomfortable.
To truly understand these shoes you must walk in
them.
But, once you put them on, you can never take
them off.
I now realize that I am not the other one who wears
these shoes.
There are many pairs in the world.
Some women are like me and ache daily as they try
and walk in them.
Some have learned how to walk in them so they
don't hurt quite as much.
Some have worn the shoes so long that days will
go by
before they think of how much they hurt.
No woman deserves to wear these shoes.
Yet, because of the shoes, I am a stronger woman.
These shoes have given me the strength to face
anything.
They have made me who I am.
I will forever walk in the shoes of a woman who has
lost a child.

Author Unknown

I recently met another Maori mother just like me, I could see me in this mothers eyes, as she spoke about her pain of her only son, he was her lifeline, and now he was gone. For the first time in 13 months, I felt that my purpose around this horrible nightmare is to help someone else navigate themselves through this despair and they will help me too. As I sat and listened to her story, it resonated with mine, my ears haven't been privileged to hearing first hand another mother like me pining for her child and having a piece of ourselves die with our children. This was all new to me, it was what I needed. This meeting lifted my spirit to where I could talk about my daughter and the effects of suicide, but it also highlighted that there are other mothers out there that feel the same. It doesn't matter what the time difference is when losing a child, what does matter is that we are not alone.

There is a need to raise the level of support groups and resources appropriate to Maori after a suicide. Whanau support in the home could be navigated by Maori for Maori. We as whanau should be given a choice to have support through Maori initiatives to ensure that our well being is supported especially within the first 12 months after a suicide.

Throughout this journey, I have learned that I have a voice, that my feelings matter and that specialists and practitioners are not always right. I learned that even the police make mistakes and there are still some gaps that need addressing. I make reference to this because we still do not have our daughter's original letter in our possession. I learned that the process does not always align with cultural support needs and that we as whanau advocate for our loved ones in their honor no matter the circumstances.

I dedicate this to Channele Te Kura Waru, Grayson James Cannons and to all the whanau out there that walk the long walk in our journey of life.