

I AM – by Anahera Herbert-Graves (Chief Executive Officer Te Runanga-a-Iwi o Ngāti Kahu)

I was asked recently how I can work year in and year out on the fault line between Māori and the Crown without getting bitter and twisted. Some years ago, during the worse series of tragedies I have ever experienced, I received a great yet simple insight – the knowledge that whatever happens to me, I am always OK. At the time I thought I was desperately unhappy, exhausted, frightened, and furious. But today I know that, while all those feelings have been felt by me at different times, none of them actually defines who I am. Neither do their opposites for that matter.

The late Anthony de Mello describes this knowledge in his book “Awareness.” Using the sky as a metaphor for who “I am” and the clouds as a metaphor for the things that happen to “me,” he explains how when a cloud appears and then disappears it may affect the look of the sky, but the sky itself remains essentially unchanged by the cloud’s coming or going, or by what type of cloud it is. In the same way, he continues, I am essentially unchanged by whatever happens to me or whoever comes and goes in my life. They may appear to make me look or feel sad, but in reality I am neither.

However, knowing who I am (or am not) does not automatically exempt me from suffering. De Mello defines suffering as what happens when my will comes up against immutable reality. Although reality does not cause suffering in itself, any more than it causes joy, it’s clear that if I try to bend it to my will, then that will cause me to suffer alright.

But if I am not visibly suffering will those who did me wrong ever be held accountable? Am I supposed to just forgive and do nothing to them? Surprisingly the answers are yes and yes. Other people and their actions are not mine to control. If I have an expectancy that they will be honest but they turn out to be lying thieves, I either accept that fact and work to resolve any hurt caused, or I try to force them to be honest and suffer when that inevitably doesn’t happen. There is nothing wrong with having expectancy, but I don’t need to get bitter and twisted when or if it doesn’t match with reality. As for wrongdoers being held accountable, there is a God to take care of that. And guess what? It’s not me. Thank God!

In the past I would crack a fit over the fact that the Crown has yet to right any of the wrongs it has done to me and my people. Now, I simply observe and accept the reality that the Crown currently remains without honour or integrity. Then I cheerfully carry on seeking after a day when that changes.

And the key to doing that year in and year out is to simply know I am.