

Refereed Articles: Connecting With People

Sharing. by Bonita Bigham 14/11/00

Life can be a funny thing. Just when you think you have things all sorted out, along comes a new situation, a new experience, or a new person who shakes you up to the core, and gives you a whole new perspective on something you thought you had pretty sussed. I have met one of those people. And damn it, I actually really like her.

Building a friendship with a "skinhead chick" has never featured on my list of life ambitions. It is one of those things I could have gone through my whole life without experiencing, and not have been bothered one iota. I mean, what on earth could I have in common with someone who associates mostly with her own kind, is unashamedly vocal about her beliefs? Someone who has spent her life feeling discriminated against, someone who is proud of her culture and heritage?

Why on earth would I want to get to know someone like that? But hold on! That sounds just like me! I'd always considered myself to be quite open-minded. In fact, I thought I was a pretty good example of someone who could move between Te Ao Maori and the Tauwiwi world with relative ease. A matter of having to, really, considering my whakapapa. I thought I had a good grasp on the fundamental dynamics of both cultures.

In my arrogance, I also thought I had a lot to offer in terms of facilitating more understanding about race relations in this country. I thought there was nothing I could tell Maori about Pakeha culture, but a hell of a lot Pakeha needed to know about what it's like for Maori. I had my own "Closing the Gaps" policy, and looking back now, it was all one-way traffic.

Ms M has changed that. She has peeled away the layers of self-assured smugness, the self-righteous spiel, the self-adorned I'm-Maori-and-therefore-right korowai so many of us assume. When I first met Ms M and heard her opinions I was angry. Angry at this outspoken young Pakeha woman for having what I considered to be borderline racist views. Angry at a school system that didn't teach the true history of this country. Angry at society for giving her the basis for her opinions and allowing her to vocalise them. But mostly I was angry with myself, because I didn't think I was ever going to get through to her.

I wrote her off, not because I thought she was unreachable, but because I thought I wasn't up to it. What a wake up call! Over time and tenuous interaction, we began to talk. Through the talking came tiny smidges of understanding. Through those smidges came more opportunity to talk, to listen, to understand. And before we knew it, we were finding some common ground about the fundamental beliefs which have shaped our lives, our outlooks and our opinions.

Scary stuff, me and the skinhead chick. Never the twain shall meet. Ms M grew up in suburban Wellington. Far from being a privileged child with a silver spoon in her mouth, she says life for her was quite the opposite. She can identify with the kind of childhood many Maori have - not enough money, sub-standard housing, hand-me-down clothing. She knows all about the have and the have-nots of society. She was a have-not kid. But she certainly had eyes, and intelligence, and a keen sense of what it was like to miss out.

Many things have contributed to her perceptions and opinions, but there is something in particular that really stands out for her. Ms M grew up with, went to school with, and had school friends who are Maori. But what she also realised was that her Maori friends, many of whom came from far more affluent backgrounds than her, had access to funding and assistance she would never benefit from, because they were Maori.

We all know the reasons behind these scholarships and grants. We all know their existence is just a drop in the ocean of what Maori really deserve. And we all know how much help they have been in addressing the needs of our rangatahi studying in the tertiary sector. But every one of us knows at

least one instance when the funding system has been abused by people who only acknowledge they are Maori just to access the putea.

I call them the quasi-Maori, the sort-of-but-not-really types. It brusses me off - always has, always will. So why shouldn't the others who see it, know it, need it, but can never access it not be brassed off too? Remind me again: who are the haves and the have-nots? Ms M has told me a lot about her way of life, how discriminated against she and her friends are sometimes made to feel.

She talks about what society assumes she is like because of the way she dresses, the way she talks, the people she associates with. She doesn't appreciate the stereotyping and the romper stomper image she is automatically labelled with. The people she hangs out with don't do drugs, they don't harass people walking past them in the street, they don't condone violence. They just don't seem to get any ticks (or should that be black marks) in the profile boxes we normally associate with skinhead culture.

Ms M has helped me open my eyes to the wide spectrum of colour that exists between black and white (no pun intended). But I'm also really pleased, and relieved to say that by her own admission, she is discovering those same shades of grey from her side of the ever-decreasing divide.

Next week (November 21-22), my classmates from the Taranaki Polytechnic Journalism School will be coming to Waiokura Marae, my turangawaewae in Ngaruahine, for their course prescription marae stay. For some of them, this will be their first time on a marae. I'm hoping it will be an experience they will never forget.

And as for my mate Ms M, I know she's nervous and I know she's worried she will say or do something that offends somebody. I think that's a good thing, I'd be really worried if she didn't care. Then again, if she didn't care, I wouldn't be calling her my mate. I've learnt there is a fine line about the demon we call racism.

Unwittingly, I've been guilty of reversing the racism many times in my ignorance and arrogance. Sometimes we need these wake up calls in our lives, to become better people from it. The more we get, the more we can share. That's not the Maori or the Taiuiwi in me talking, that's just Ms M's friend.