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As evening falls in the village of Whangara, people begin to file into the auditorium of the school for the concert. I had been invited by Miss Parata, the school's teacher, to observe the Annual Culture Night Program and Prize-giving Ceremony. She in particular wanted me to hear her student Paikea Apirana who was going to receive a special recognition that evening. In our discussions about the girl, she shared with me that Paikea's grandfather Koro was the chief of the local Maori tribe. People in the community had great respect for him.

The room is full of nervous energy. Empty tables that were set up in the back of the room are quickly being filled with cakes and desserts for the refreshments after the program. Rows of white tea cups are arranged in perfect symmetry, in expectation of the celebration. I see Paikea hurrying her family as she leads them to the seats that have been specially reserved for them in the front row.

The program opens with a dance presentation. The children, dressed in blue t-shirts with an image of a traditional Maori mask on the front, file on to the stage and arrange themselves in rows. Miss Parata starts the music on a portable CD player from the corner of the stage. The line dance, a form typically associated with country and western music from America, seems a mainstream influence. There is a rich tradition of dance in Maori culture, the most notable being the Haka dance. The dance that the children are performing is of a modern type, and the audience smiles as the children try to remember the steps and sometimes a child steps left instead of right.

Later in the concert, there is another dance performance. This time, the children are wearing traditional Maori dress. Paikea is prominent in the front with the other girls. Her dress is woven in yellow and blue in the taniko style and she wears two poi at her sides which swing rhythmically to her dancing. Below her chin she and the other girls wear a moko, a traditional facial tattoo. The boys dance in back and wear dark pants and are bare-chested with simply a pendant around their necks. They chant to the music and step in time. Whereas the line dance performance was a familiar part of mainstream culture, this traditional dance transports us back in time. I don't feel as though I am sitting in a school performance any longer, but as though I am watching a timeless part of Maori culture that has been preserved.

As the music ends, Miss Parata comes back on stage and motions the children to sit. She announces that a student has won not only the school's speech contest, but also the contest for all of the East Coast area schools as well. As Paikea Apirana's name is called, I look over at her family and see excitement and surprise. There is also sadness in their faces since her grandfather has still not arrived.

Paikea comes forward and begins speaking in Maori. She translates, "This speech is a token of my deep love and respect for Koro Apirana, my grandfather." His empty seat in the front row is a visible wound to the girl on the stage. Even I, a visitor to the community, can see how much she meant her words to be spoken to the man, her "Paka," who is not here to hear them. She stares ahead and bravely begins her speech.

Paikea's speech is an oral history of the Maori people and of her place in the community. She says, "I come from a long line of chiefs, stretching all the way back to Hawaiki, where our ancient ones are. The ones that first heard the land crying and sent a man. His name was also Paikea. And I am his most recent descendant."

What makes this history so compelling is Paikea's interpretation of what her place in the community is. Her birth, instead of a cause for celebration, was a cause of sadness. I knew that she had lost her mother and a twin brother at her birth from my talks with Miss Parata. As I have observed in the community and listened to the others talk about the Sacred School that Koro has started, I think about what Paikea is saying, "I was not the leader my grandfather was expecting, and by being born, I broke the line back to the ancient ones." By being born a girl in a society that values male heirs, she is considered powerless and unable to provide the leadership the village so desperately wants and needs. Interestingly, Paikea does not see her position as one of powerlessness, but as one that can create an opportunity for change. Her power is her voice and her ability to question the ancient ways while still holding them in deep respect.

Tears flow freely down her face and at times she struggles to make the words come, but her message is unhindered. She continues to speak, "But we can learn. And if the knowledge is given to everyone, then we can have lots of leaders. And soon, everyone will be strong, not just the ones that've been chosen. Because sometimes, even if you're the leader and you need to be strong – you can get tired."

In this last line, it is clear that Paikea not only understands what true leadership is, but how it has affected her grandfather. Her questioning of the traditions of the community is not meant to hurt her grandfather, who may see the idea as sacrilegious, but is meant to help. He is the one who is tired. In many ways, she is a just a little girl who sees someone she loves in pain and is only suggesting a way to help.

Because Koro was not present to hear these words, I can only wonder what he might have thought. I am like those in the room though who see in the innocence of a young girl wisdom and strength. I feel as though I have witnessed something very unique in this ceremony, but at the same time something that has deep roots in the ethos of the community. The qualities Paikea Apirana has displayed in her speech and the deep love she holds for her family may be the best hope for the survival of the Maori community.