



**SCIENCE**  
SCHOOL OF ENVIRONMENT

## SCHOOL OF ENVIRONMENT CUMBERLAND LECTURE 2019

### Place as person, landscape as identity: ancestral connection and modern legislation

A talk delivered by Kennedy Warne, University of Auckland, August 22, 2019

*"Thanks, and aroha to Dan Hikuroa (senior lecturer in Māori studies, University of Auckland). There are two reasons I asked Dan to introduce this talk. First, the landscapes I will be talking about are persons, in law and in life. I have learned from spending time with indigenous people that it is appropriate to greet the land, and it is appropriate to greet land in the tongue it is most familiar with. So, I asked Dan if he would greet these ancestors for me.*

*"It is also appropriate to acknowledge the land as the first order of business. I recently learned that the Onondaga Native American nation uses a special address to greet and thank the living world, the title of which translates as "Words That Come Before All Else." This ancient order of protocol sets gratitude to the living world as the highest priority.*

*"The second reason I asked Dan to address these ancestral landscapes is because I want to dismiss at the outset any notion that I speak for these places. I do not. The places speak for themselves, if we know how to hear them. And they also have their own human communities who also have the role of speaking for them. At most, I am carrying a message.*

*"I want also to greet and thank the School of Environment for the invitation to give this talk that honours a great geographer and a great communicator of landscape. I acknowledge Kenneth Cumberland's spirit and his approach to geography. I was reading his memoir recently, and took note of a quote from Donald Meinig, who, at 94, remains Professor Emeritus of Geography at Syracuse University: "To explore the soil of one's own roots; to find reflective satisfaction in one's understanding of and feeling for the personality of a place; to seek to touch the lives of others by enhancing their sense of time and place, is to put geography to a human purpose." Let that be our purpose here today.*

*"Finally, I give my own greeting to the whenua where we find ourselves today, somewhere down there beneath the concrete of this building, using what the Australians call the Acknowledgement of Country: I greet and acknowledge the land and pay my respects to its traditional custodians past, present and emerging."*

In 2014, the New Zealand parliament enactment legislation that declared Te Urewera to be a legal entity with all the rights, powers, duties, and liabilities of a legal person. As a result of that legislation Te Urewera ceased to be a national park and was recognised in law as a person, unowned and unownable.

Three years later, in 2017, parliament enacted a second piece of legislation that declared the Whanganui River and its tributaries, collectively known as Te Awa Tupua, the river of sacred power, to possess, like Te Urewera, all the rights, powers, duties, and liabilities of a legal person.

Parliament is currently working on a third act in this three-part drama: the declaration of Taranaki maunga as a legal person.

I have come to think of the passing of these statutes as among the most significant geographical events of our time. They have been watched intently from around the world, and similar initiatives are being tried elsewhere. Earlier this year voters in Toledo, Ohio, passed a bill of rights declaring Lake Erie—plagued, as are many New Zealand freshwater bodies, with nutrient runoff, invasive species and toxic algal blooms—to be a legal person with the right to exist,

flourish and naturally evolve. Unlike in this country, however, hours after the Lake Erie Bill of Rights was voted in, a crop farmer filed a lawsuit contending that the bill was unconstitutional and unlawful.

It is important to note that the Urewera and Whanganui acts are not primarily bills of rights. Overseas media have often described them as “rights for nature” legislation, but that is not their main purpose. What is the purpose, then?

I posed this question to Gerrard Albert, who led Whanganui’s treaty negotiations and now chairs the tribal collective responsible for giving effect to the river’s new status.

“Recognition,” he said. Recognition that the river is the “indivisible and living whole” of Māori understanding, incorporating, as the act states, “all its physical and metaphysical elements.” Recognition also of the inalienable connection between the tribes and the river, as stated in the legislation and enunciated in the great utterance of the Whanganui people: “The great River flows from the mountains to the sea. I am the River; the River is me.”

Legal personhood, Gerrard stressed, is “a new vehicle for an old concept.” It is not something that has been projected onto the river, rather it a pre-existing condition that has re-emerged into the contemporary light. A silenced voice is able to speak again.

Gerrard put it this way: “The Resource Management Act talks about a river defined by statutes, a river someone else has created, not the river that completes me. Te Awa Tupua is the river I recognise, the river I know. Our approach has been to claw back that river, and the new legislation allows for a paradigm shift to do that.”

The Te Awa Tupua concept is the new waka, he said. And its sharp prow around which the water bends—te ihu o te waka—is the indivisibility of the river. Previous statutes reflected the European approach to the natural world, one of compartmentalisation and division. Under that philosophy, rivers are purely physical entities consisting of beds, banks, water and imaginary median lines so that landowners on each side could say they owned their half of the river. The new statute asserts a new conceptual reality. It shifts the mindset from a transactional view of the world to a relational view. It gives the river a voice.

So far, that voice has yet to be heard in terms of freshwater legislation and environmental law, tantalising as it is to wonder what the river might say. As recently as last week I was approached by an American journalist asking if any cases had emerged to test the legal theory of the river’s personhood, wondering if anything had changed in terms of human assault on the environment since the personhood law was passed, and if enforcement of the river’s rights was even possible.

Gerrard said that’s a line of questioning he often gets from people: if the river’s a person, can it be sued if it floods a property or if someone drowns in a rapid. Likewise, can the river sue a farmer or manufacturer who discharges pollutants into its water.

“It’s natural for people to think like that,” he told me, “because when they hear ‘legal person’ they think about corporations and trusts and that kind of thing. Yes, rights are inherent in personhood, and they have to be addressed, but so are obligations. The important thing is removing the anthropocentrism that characterises decision making around natural resources.”

He gave me an example. In 2039, the resource consents which authorise Genesis Energy to divert the headwaters of the Whanganui River via the Tongariro hydro scheme into Lake Taupō expire. “I say to Genesis, you have to get serious about this because you’re taking blood from an ancestor. The reality now is that in 20 years’ time, when you come to put that needle in, that ancestor can speak for itself. That’s going to be a hugely different scenario.”

For now, though, the focus is on the paradigm shift of personhood, and ensuring that both Māori and Pākehā communities orient themselves to that new reality. As Gerrard put it: “It’s the same dance hall, with the same dancers, but the music has changed.”

The music has also changed a few hundred kilometres away in the forests of Te Urewera. Although the legislative device of personhood was developed by Whanganui treaty claimants, due to delays in their process it was Tūhoe who got the concept across the statutory line first. And again, the emphasis in the Te Urewera legislation is not on narrowly prescribed rights but an expansive recognition of identity.

The Act begins with what are surely some of the most inspirational words of any legislation

anywhere:

(1) Te Urewera is ancient and enduring, a fortress of nature, alive with history; its scenery is abundant with mystery, adventure, and remote beauty.

(2) Te Urewera is a place of spiritual value, with its own mana and mauri.

(3) Te Urewera has an identity in and of itself, inspiring people to commit to its care.

(Note that with both the Whanganui and Te Urewera legislation the subject is not the physical river or the physical forested landscape but the combined physical and metaphysical entities, including all the lives that are intertwined with those places.)

Tūhoe describe their connection to Te Urewera in terms almost identical to the Whanganui declaration of identity: "I am the river; the river is me."

When Tāmāti Kruger, Tūhoe's lead negotiator, gave evidence to the Waitangi Tribunal of his people's sense of belonging to Te Urewera, he said: "We are this land and we are the face of the land. Wherever those mountains come from, that's where we come from. Wherever the mist emerges from and disappears to, that's where we come from."

Everything about Tūhoe is "entangled in this place called Te Urewera," Tāmāti told me. "Our cuisine, music, poetry, proverbs, sayings, even the lilt of our language, is almost befitting the rugged isolation and wildness of Te Urewera. Our self-image, as well as our values, are part and parcel of this place. And this is something that Tūhoe people have decided they must not give up."

Over more than a century of colonial brutality they came very close to being forced to give it up. Then they came within a whisker of having the state's illicitly acquired Te Urewera National Park returned to them. In 2010, in Waimana, where the signing of the settlement agreement was to take place, food for more than 1000 guests had been arranged. Marae cooks were standing by to light the hāngi. Flights and motels had been booked. Commemorative pens had been engraved. Speeches written. All on the basis that the land was coming back to the iwi.

But Tūhoe's hopes were dashed, when, on the eve of settlement, Prime Minister John Key revoked the offer his government's negotiating team had assembled. Te Urewera National Park, the centrepiece of the deal, would not be returned to Tūhoe after all. Politically, it was a bridge too far.

However, out of that debacle grew something new, something remarkable, something that sidestepped the issue of ownership and went to a deeper place of identity. Tāmāti put it this way: "I realised John Key was misunderstanding what we were on about. Ownership was his obsession, not ours. So, we stopped using that word. My feeling is that the land was here first, so nobody owns it. If anything, it owns you. The water owns the water, the land owns the land. So, our proposition to the government has been, 'Let us agree that Te Urewera owns itself.'"

And this is what has happened. The Te Urewera Act disestablished Te Urewera National Park and the land became an independent legal entity, owned neither by Tūhoe nor by the Crown, but with Tūhoe recognised as its legitimate guardian and governor.

It's worth noting that with both Te Urewera and Whanganui, ownership in the European sense of title to property did not return to the iwi involved, although initially this was what both sought. A sceptic might say that the personhood settlements represent a shifting of the goalposts when the penalty kick failed. "If we can't get ownership then we'll say we never wanted it in the first place." Though in reality the view of indigenous people everywhere is that the Earth is incapable of being owned.

Tāmāti Kruger spoke candidly about the ownership problem to me. It's an issue Māori have wrestled with, and it causes distress. How do you accommodate an ontology you may not want to embrace, because it's the paradigm of the holders of power, without becoming philosophically colonised by it. There is colonisation of the land, and there is colonisation of the mind. In one conversation he said to me: "Māori people have unfortunately seen this principle of ownership as trumping tikanga, trumping mana whenua [customary authority], trumping te ahi kaa [the long-burning fires that establish occupancy rights]. Today many cannot tell the difference between ownership and mana whenua, but they are completely different concepts. They come from different mindsets. This thing called ownership was used to marginalise and dispossess Māori, but by adopting it for themselves Māori have played into the Pākehā mindset."

This is one reason these leaders speak more about the responsibilities inherent in the new legislative paradigm than the rights it extends. When I interviewed Tāmāti again last year, he reminded me that the term “mana whenua” is not about saying, “I was here first.” It has to do with kinship relationship with the land. “It’s you saying, ‘I am an expression of the land, and without it I will become blank. The further away I am from the land in my kinship, in my caring and my connection, the smaller I will become, until I am nothing. So, I must keep that connection.’”

One of the questions I asked both leaders was if there was a path for Pākehā to follow towards indigeneity. It interests me that Māori, as a people, did not exist prior to their encounter with this Aotearoa landscape. They became people of the land through engagement with the land. I recall Hōri Parata, a Ngatiwai kaumatua, saying, “We came here as Polynesian, the land made us Māori.”

Is this a process Pākehā can undertake, and an outcome to which they can aspire? To be inscribed into the fabric of the land, even as the land is inscribed in them?

When I put this question to Gerrard Albert in Whanganui, he said that Pākehā could indeed say: “I am the river, the river is me.” “That’s what we want them to be able to say,” he told me. “The river isn’t just iwi, it’s community—and that includes Pākehā communities. Let everyone acknowledge the kawa of the river. Kawa doesn’t distinguish between Māori and Pākehā. Let everyone come into that way of thinking.”

Tāmāti Kruger told me: “I see a time when all of us, regardless of heritage, come to understand that in Aotearoa we are all tangata whenua. And that means that we are of this land, that this land has made us who we are. We have let this land create us in its image, and together we are proud of who we are and where we come from. In such a world we don’t need a treaty or policy or laws to tell us what we must do. Kinship is our motivation, our kinship connection with the land. The Tūhoe view is that other people can love Te Urewera as much as Tūhoe people do. That as human beings, if we come to believe and adopt as our tradition that we come from nature, that nature creates us in its image, then that can become our identity.”

Kinship with land, a communicative Earth, a conversation with landscape—these were concepts largely unknown to me 30 years ago, when a friend and I launched *New Zealand Geographic*. We somewhat ambitiously called it “the journal of New Zealand.” Although not an academic journal like the *New Zealand Geographer*, nonetheless it was positioned at the scientific end of the magazine publishing spectrum. My own masters degree in marine zoology from this university predisposed me to that approach. When I reflect on my relationship to landscapes, I would have to say my sense of place was minuscule. I did not feel *misplaced* or *displaced* so much as *unplaced*. Locale, milieu, landscape, environment, whatever you want to call it, I thought of it as an interchangeable and largely anonymous backdrop to the drama of life.

That thinking began to change as a result of meeting the Far North kuia Saana Murray. Saana was a formidable political and environmental advocate on behalf of her Ngāti Kurī people and also a writer and poet. In 1989, *New Zealand Geographic*’s first year of publication, one of our photographers produced a set of evocative images of the Spirits Bay–Cape Reinga area. I had pictures, but no text. Who could write words that would catch the essence of that spiritually charged landscape—the leaping place of the departed?

I was given a name: Saana Murray. After some phoning around I found that she was in Otara, staying with the family of one of her 13 children. I drove to the house and showed her the prints and asked if she would be willing to write something. What she wrote was up to her, I said. I wanted to capture the spirit of the place.

Saana agreed. Then, nervously and apologetically—because deadlines were looming—I asked how soon she could write the text. What she told me I have never forgotten. “I cannot write anything here,” she said. “I will have to go to the land.”

She said it as if it she were stating the obvious. Yet it was the first time I had heard such a thing: that to have any meaning, any real truth, words about the land required the presence of the land. That knowledge was inseparable from its context, that it was part of a living matrix of encounters and relationships, past and present, physical and spiritual.

For someone steeped in scientific thinking—a mindset in which knowledge is a transferable commodity—it was a challenging thought and an awakening moment.

Living with Tūhoe for several weeks in 2012 deepened my understanding of Māori engagement with land. One night, in Waimana, some whānau were explaining to me a word I had heard several Tūhoe using: *matemateaone*. One woman said that it was a feeling of being wrapped and cocooned by the earth. Like being privy to the yearning that Ranginui, the sky father, feels for Papatūānuku, the earth mother from whom he is eternally separated.

“It’s like being in a spell,” she said. “Sometimes when I’m walking in the forest, I get the taste of Papatūānuku on my palate. There’s a sudden sense of sweetness. ‘Hmmm,’ you think. ‘What’s that?’ It’s no particular flower or plant. It’s just the taste of health. Other times, at night, the sky can feel like an ocean of stars and you seem to have stepped off the edge of the earth. You’re dizzy, but you don’t want the experience to stop. It’s too special.”

I had felt those very things in the Urewera forests. Once, at midnight, I stepped outside a hut on a high forest ridge and almost stumbled with vertigo. The stars were thicker than I’d ever seen—great clusters of light spangling the sky—while immense trees thrust upwards to greet them. It felt as if I was witnessing visceral contact between Rangī and Papa.

At dawn I walked to a bluff with a view of mist-wreathed valleys and listened to *kōkako*, a bird that Tūhoe say mediates between *wairua* time, or spirit time, and human time. *Kōkako* seem not to simply sing their notes, they send them into the world as gifts, painting the forest with song, drawing the listener into the music.

In such times the curtain between natural and supernatural feels thin, like a membrane allowing passage from one side to the other. The more I get to know the Māori world, the thinner that membrane seems to get.

I started reading about other indigenous worldviews, especially that of Aboriginal Australians. It often strikes me as immensely and sadly ironic that with all the affliction the planet is now facing: the sixth extinction, a destabilising climate, simultaneous crossing of multiple biophysical tipping points, that no one seeks survival advice from the world’s longest continuously existing culture—people who have occupied that continent for more than 50,000 years, and whose understanding of the interpenetration of culture and nature is at a level that blows the Western mind.

I came to know the Australian ecophilosopher Freya Mathews, whose book *Reinhabiting Reality* had been an epiphanous introduction to the meaning of being native to place on a voyage I took to Antarctica. In that book she wrote: “To be native is to have one’s identity shaped by the place to which one belongs: one is a creature of its topography, its colours and textures, saps and juices, its moods, its ghosts and stories. To be native is to experience the world as fundamentally continuous with one’s own nature, rather than as an alien and lower realm of sheer mindless externality.”

To become native is to undergo one’s own nativity, one’s own incarnation into place. “To belong to the land is to uncover its layers, discover its story, and weave one’s own identity into that story,” Freya wrote. “Through a particular place, [the world] agrees to become our world, attentive to us, attuned to us. We become its people.”

Nativity takes place one step at a time as we engage with the places of our lives. Land beckons, we respond. *Titiro atu, titiro mai*—one glance directed at another, the other glancing back. I see, and I am seen. It comes about through knowing a place and letting the place know you.

I took some early steps in knowing and being known over a period of months when I visited my local urban creek Te Auaunga, or Oakley Creek, almost daily, to see what it had to say to me, and I to it. (Notice, by the way, how difficult it is to speak of the personhood of place when the only available pronouns in English are he, she and it—two of them gendered and the third inert. Many native languages do not have this limitation.) My engagement with Te Auaunga was like beginning a conversation in a foreign tongue—or rather a language once sensed, perhaps partially known, but forgotten through lack of use.

In the Apache language “land” and “mind” are the same word. As minds wish to communicate, the land invites conversation. The word “conversation” itself comes from Latin roots that mean “an act of living with or keeping company with.” How perfect. For this is a conversation made with all

the senses and faculties, with the soul's articulation of respect, reverence and care, and with physical responses to the world's promptings. At Te Auaunga, which flows beside the site of Auckland's first mental hospital, I often cup my hands and drink from a spring that the ancestor Wairaka drank from centuries ago. Body and soul, I connect myself to this place and its history, becoming woven into its story.

I came to the term "conversation with landscape" through Robin Kearns, here at the School of Environment. He told me about a collection of papers edited by two Icelandic geographers, one of them a friend of Robin's. The book was published in a series overseen by British anthropologist Tim Ingold, whose work on perception of the environment, and much else, has been formative in my thinking about human relationships with the nonhuman world.

It is also thanks also to Robin that my connection with Oakley Creek changed from a dalliance to a commitment. On a whim, I attended the AGM of the Friends of Oakley Creek, a volunteer group of riverkeepers, and it so happened that Robin was the guest speaker. He spoke about Maslow's Hierarchy of human needs as it pertained to urban green space.

Lately I have been thinking about Maslow's hierarchy as a framework for thinking about how a conversation with landscape might develop.

The lowest tiers on Maslow's pyramid are physical, which I would equate to thinking of land as resource, as "sheer mindless substrate," in Freya Mathews' phrase, for the sustenance of human life. Here the focus is on land's exploitable attributes: its utility for food production, its suitability for habitation. As a substrate, it is devoid of subjectivity and agency, and certainly lacking personhood or sentience. It is metaphysically inert.

The next tiers in Maslow's pyramid open the door a chink to the metaphysical realm, bringing ideas of belonging, affection and esteem. A growing awareness of being flavoured by one's *terroir*, like a wine. This is the idea behind the statement: "We came here are Polynesians, the land made us Māori."

The top level of the pyramid is usually identified with self-fulfilment and self-actualisation, and here I'm thinking that the relationship with place moves beyond human physical and psychological needs and becomes one of reciprocity, based on an ethic of stewardship and aroha. The subject-object binary begins to dissolve: "I am the river, and the river is me."

This process of movement from the purely physical to an interpermeating combination of material and immaterial, physical and metaphysical, is consistent with a rejection of the doctrine of dualism between human and nonhuman, between mind and matter.

I mentioned Tim Ingold, who, like many anthropologists who have lived and worked among traditional cultures and learned their lifeways, has abandoned the narrow rigidity of a materialist view of the world that denies its agency and sentience. In discussing the phenomenon of sentience in his book *Being Alive*, Ingold writes, "It is not possible to be sentient in an *insentient* world—in a world, that is, which has turned its back on its inhabitants, exposing only its rigid, external surfaces to perceptual scrutiny. To be sentient . . . is to open up to a world, to yield to its embrace, and to resonate in one's inner being to its illuminations and reverberations. Bathed in light, submerged in sound and rapt in feeling, the sentient body, at once both perceiver and producer, traces the paths of the world's becoming in the very course of contributing to its ongoing renewal. Here, surely, lies the essence of what it means to dwell."

The rise of the ecological restoration movement in this country is an example of a movement towards dwelling. It is a movement driven not just by biodiversity goals but by love of one's home place—"endemophilia," to use the word coined by Australian sociologist Glenn Albrecht, whose new book *Earth Emotions* will appeal to the emotional geographers in the room. Groups of volunteer riverkeepers, ocean guardians and land carers that number in their thousands are rejecting the old anthropocentric view of nature as resource, declaring an allegiance to place as part of whakapapa and taking on a kaitiaki responsibility to the living world.

And beckoning from the top of Maslow's pyramid, as it were, are the persons of Te Urewera and Whanganui, showing what's possible as we develop a truly bicultural mind.

It interests me that some of the seeds that resulted in the personhood legislation were planted more than 40 years ago by American legal philosopher Christopher Stone. In a 1972 paper entitled

“Should trees have standing? Towards legal rights for natural objects” Stone called for a radical new theory of the human relationship to nature. He noted that the problems human beings now confront are “the worldwide crises of a global organism: not pollution of a stream, but pollution of the atmosphere and of the ocean. Increasingly, the death that occupies each human’s imagination is not his own, but that of the entire life cycle of the planet earth, to which each of us is as but a cell to a body.”

Stone was under no illusions as to the likely success of that project. To be able to move away from the view that Nature is “a collection of useful senseless objects,” he wrote, “we humans have to give up some psychic investment in our sense of separateness and specialness in the universe. And this is hard giving indeed, because it involves us in a flight backwards, into earlier stages of civilization and childhood in which we had to trust (and perhaps fear) our environment, for we had not then the power to master it. Yet, in doing so, we—as persons—gradually free ourselves of needs for supportive illusions.”

If the reality of ecological unravelling was starting to dawn on people in the 1970s, it is inescapably obvious now. And Stone was prescient to see that it is at the level of human relationship to the natural world that the work of repair begins.

To me, it is precisely by challenging the philosophical boundary between sentient human and insentient Earth that ecological repair becomes possible. I believe the personhood legislation of Te Urewera and Whanganui invites us to reconsider that boundary and see it as not as a fixed barrier but a movable horizon. The question these new legal entities pose to us is: “What if the perspective you imagine for yourself, the foundation for your ethics and your politics, is not the condescending certainty of a materialist world view, but a growing awareness of a mindful world?”

In his newly published memoir *Horizon*, environmental author Barry Lopez writes, “When a boundary becomes a horizon, the leading edge of a farther destination, then a world one has never known becomes an integral part of one’s new universe. Memory and imagination come into play. The unknown future calls out to the present and to the remembered past, and in that moment of expansion, the imagined future seems attainable.”

Christopher Stone saw a boundary—an established legal order that restricted rights to humans—and reframed it as a horizon—an opportunity to conserve nature for its own sake, based on its own intrinsic being. Iwi saw a regulatory framework that rendered land and water as inert resources and imagined how that might change if places were recognised as persons. They saw a horizon that, if reached, would cause travellers not to fall into a cosmological abyss but to discover a new world.

### **Thoughts in answer to a question from Dan Hikuroa: “How does the land speak to you?”**

Let me distinguish between speech and vocalisation. Even in English we say a book, or a movie, or even an act of kindness “really spoke to me”—but obviously not in vocalised words.

That’s not to say the Earth is incapable of vocalising. The atmosphere has been doing plenty of (thunderous) vocalising today. Tim Ingold recounts an anecdote in his book *The Perception of the Environment* in which an old Ojibwe couple are sitting in their tent, and a storm is raging outside. Thunder comes in a series of claps. The old man listens intently. Then he turns to his wife and asks, quite casually, in a matter-of-fact tone of voice, “Did you hear what was said?” “No,” she replies, “I didn’t catch it.”

Ingold makes the point that Ojibwe don’t regard the world’s speech-making as a transfer of mental content but a manifestation of being alive. Or to employ the distinction I made earlier, not a transactional view but a relational view. And a relationship where the subject–object dualism diminishes to the point of disappearance. According to the anthropologist who wrote about Ojibwe, “Any inner-outer dichotomy, with the human skin as boundary, is psychologically irrelevant.”

I think of my communicative capability with landscapes as being rudimentary and tentative. I’m

going through an unlearning phase. Unlearning an anthropocentric orientation in which my agency dominates, while the land is merely the substrate on which I act.

Freya Mathews, the ecophilosopher I introduced earlier in my talk, expresses this issue of orientation very well, when she asks (in *Reinhabiting Reality*): “What *are* the possibilities inherent in our relation to world, to place, and what would it take to realise them? They are possibilities of allegiance, faithfulness to world, to place, as sovereign, solace, beloved, its ends our own, its will our command. Such a reorientation can emanate only from a metaphysical outlook dramatically counter to the definitive temper of modernity. The modern period, ushered in by the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, has rested on, and reinforced, a thoroughly secular view of empirical reality. From the viewpoint of this secularism, empirical reality is empty of any communicative capacity, any capacity to ‘mystify’ rational observers by overriding their observations and calculations via revelatory initiatives of its own. The object of our observations is expected to unfold in a lawlike way, undisrupted by dialogue with its observers or eruptions of poetic self-disclosure or promptings of inner will. In this sense that world is conceived as without an informing principle of its own: in itself it lacks any attribute analogous to mentality, subjectivity, soul, or spirit and is devoid of the meanings, purposes, or values to which such attributes give rise. We, and other beings like us in respect of rationality or perhaps sentience, are the sole locus of mentality. All the rest of the colourful, variegated, teeming world that we see and hear, taste and touch around us is ultimately nothing but empty matter or physicality, conceptually drained of any presence or interiority, and hence of any meaning-giving principle. This is the great—dualistic—premise of modern civilisation: there is nothing akin to mind in basic matter.”

Breaking free of that philosophical cage is a long journey. During this unlearning period the primary way I seem to interact with landscape is hinted at in the concept of *matemateane* that I was talking about earlier: a sense of cocooning, of disappearing.

I comment on this in my most recent *New Zealand Geographic story*, about remote backcountry huts. I was standing on a spur in the Toaroha Range, in the foothills of the Southern Alps, feeling microscopic in the landscape, and relishing the words of US agrarian poet and writer Wendell Berry: “Here I am reduced to my irreducible self. I move in the landscape as one of its details.”

The late US poet Mary Oliver expresses a similar reaction in her poem “Sleeping in the Forest,” where she writes:

I slept as never before, a stone on the river bed,  
 nothing between me and the white fire of the stars  
 but my thoughts, and they floated light as moths  
 among the branches of the perfect trees. . .  
 All night I rose and fell, as if in water,  
 grappling with a luminous doom. By morning  
 I had vanished at least a dozen times  
 into something better.

It occurs to me that we may have something of a template for human conversation with landscape in the engagement between Papatūānuku and Ranginui. Some words written by Tāmāti Kruger set me on that way of thinking: “Each and every day all of nature hear and echo the messages of Papatūānuku to Ranginui, but only some of mankind have come to understand that our silence is our part in these Te Urewera conversations.”

I asked him what he meant by that, and he immediately flipped the question back to me: “What do you think?” I said my guess was that humans are talkative creatures with agendas and solutions, always thinking we have to have the last word. Whereas he seemed to be saying something like what the Tao says: “The wise can act by just being and teach without speaking. Things come to them, because they let them go. They create by not trying to possess.”

He agreed, adding: “In our time and space we tend to think that nature needs us, that nature is helpless, that we will save nature. And we sit down and plan how we’re going to do it. We impose

our view based on the belief that nature is ours. That nature is asking us for answers.”

It strikes me that a fair amount of diminishment is needed before we can begin to enter a dialogic relationship with place. But even that journey of diminishment is enchanting and rewarding and provides abundant evidence of a willing conversation partner.

I sometimes wonder why I have developed a totemic feeling for land, water, even weather. Why, at the portal of the Pike River mine, did I accept the invitation of the stepfather of one of the Pike 29 miners to wash the pounamu I wear around my neck in the water that flows continuously out of the mine? Why did I feel a need to play Fritz Kreisler’s melody “Love’s Sorrow” on a borrowed violin at sunset at Maungapōhatu, one of Tūhoe’s sites of great significance, where Rua Kenana’s community was brutally raided by police just over a century ago? Why, standing on the escarpment of the Denniston Plateau, watching tendrils of mist twining among the pillars and outcrops of that sandstone Stonehenge, did I feel a need to speak lines from West Coast poet Leicester Kyle: “as soon as you stand here you know it: all roads end here and somewhere else begins.”

Simply a search for deeper meaning amongst the shards of experience life scatters before us? Perhaps, but that positions me as the agent, when so often I feel that I am not the initiator but the responder. Something calls, I respond, and I become part of the world’s unfolding.

There is so much more to learn about this conversation—this “keeping company” with the earth. Imagine developing a sustained communicative intimacy with the places we inhabit. That’s the hope that inspires me.