

Te tangihanga o tōku Pāpā

**Whakapapa Research
Project series: Whānau event**



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Whakapapa Research Project series

This is part of a series of writings from eight whānau researchers on nine kaupapa. This kaupapa is about a whānau event.

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Research kaupapa

Aspirational letter to future generations

Deoxyribonucleic Acid (DNA) and whakapapa

Kai

Matriarch

Research methodology and methods

Whānau event

Whāngai

Whenua

Taonga



He kupu whakaūpoko: Introduction

The death of our Lord Jesus Christ who was crucified and died on the cross at Calvary is commemorated by Christians every year on Good Friday. For my mother, Debra Anne Rangikura Leatherby (Ngāti Tama, Ngāti Mutunga, Taranaki Iwi, Te Āti Haunui-a-Pāpārangī, Ngāti Toa), Good Friday is also a day of remembrance for her husband and my father, Gordon Raymond Tuuta (Ngāti Mutunga, Taranaki Iwi, Ngāti Maru, Te Āti Haunui-a-Pāpārangī, Ngāi Tai ki Tāmaki, Ngāti Raukawa). On Good Friday in 1987 (17 April), my father at the age of 28 lost his battle with cancer. My memories of my father and his tangihanga are vague, as at the time of his passing I was seven-years-old. For me to understand the context of my father's passing and his tangihanga, I asked my mother to share with me her memories of this heart-breaking and sad time in our lives. This is her story.



Debra Leatherby and Gordon Tuuta, Ngā Motu, Taranaki, 1983. Photo courtesy of Debra Leatherby-Tuuta.

Mum's story

To be able to get the true essence of my journey through the tangihanga, I need to start from the beginning. My husband, after a period of time, would feel very ill occasionally, which gradually became worse, so he went to see his GP who could not give a diagnosis, so I took him to my doctor. My GP sent him for x-rays, and they found an ulcer at the base of his stomach. They operated, and he came home, but he continued to feel unwell and was losing weight. I remember clearly the day he was fixing a puncture on our son's bike and he said to me "go and ring Mr Fancourt (surgeon) and ask him what he can do for me." I phoned the surgeon and over the phone he stated to me, "I cannot do any more for your husband, except to tell you that it is highly unlikely that he will live to Christmas, let alone Easter." From this moment, I felt my life and that of my son's was completely and utterly shattered.

Life for the next couple of months changed him completely, with him turning to Atua for guidance. Most upsetting for him was that he would not be around for our son as he was growing. We had karakia with whānau, church

members and our priest every night, and my husband never gave up until the day he passed from cancer, which finally took his life on 17 April 1987. It was Easter; he passed on Good Friday, so this time of the year is very special (it always has been), and for me, his passing at this time of year held much significance and meaning.

The evening before his passing, my aunty (who was a nurse) washed him and the soles of his feet, while others were preparing supper for everyone, so this to me made me think of the Last Supper, as did others. I would just like to say one other thing. I have always been eternally grateful for the presence of Atua in our lives and how he carried me and my son through the months, prior to my husband and my son's father passing.



Karakia at our home, Airdale Place, Waitara. Photos courtesy of Debra Leatherby-Tuuta.

Gordon passed away on Good Friday at around 10pm, my son was with my Mum and Dad, and they arrived. All I heard from inside the house was my son let out a whaling sound, and my first instinct as a mother was to hold him so tight and not let him go, which I did.

I took our son into the room to see his dad and waited for my kuia (Heneriata (Maggie) Leatherby née White) to arrive. Kui then instructed those that were going to move Gordon from the bedroom to the lounge what to do. My kuia laid a mattress in the lounge and Gordon's whānau and friends lifted him, and while this was happening, I heard our son say, "be careful with my Dad". We spent the night at home and the next morning the undertaker arrived to take Gordon to be prepared, with his sisters going in to dress him.

My kui, who was old school and tūturu Māori, told me I had to wear black at all times. She told me I could not eat through the tangi, except a cup of tea, and that I had to get up before the sun came up to shower. I was to stay with my husband at all times. Kui never elaborated too much on why I had to do this, but I did as she said. If it wasn't for her, I would not have known this, as I had never at this time had anyone so dear to me pass (apart from my Koko).

Once the funeral home had finished preparing Gordon, the hearse arrived back at the house and we all followed it to Urenui Marae, where our Kui did the karanga as Gordon was carried into the whare. There Gordon was placed at the backwall of the whare, and the lid taken off and placed behind the head of the casket. The marae had been set up by the haukāinga of Ngāti Mutunga. My son and I slept by the tūpāpaku for the duration of the tangi. I do remember sitting at the foot of the casket with my back to Gordon and my Kui giving me a tap on my arm and saying to me, "I hope he kicks you." My Kui then told me never to sit with my back to the tūpāpaku. Our son was seven-years-old when his Dad passed, and he knew what was happening, but had his cousins to play with and love him through this journey. In saying this, he was loved and still is, by all his whānau, especially by me, his Mum.



Urenui Marae. Left whare: Mahi Tamariki. Right whare: Te Aroha (where Gordon laid during his tangihanga).
Photo courtesy of Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Mutunga.

The next few days had its trials and tribulations, but we got through. Many people came and Gordon's wish was for everyone to celebrate his life, however short it was. He also wanted Bob Marley to be played throughout his tangi. This happened, although some kaumātua did not agree. One kaumātua sticks out in my mind, and that was Uncle Ara Lake, who sat and explained to the rest that it was Gordon's wish, so let's just go with it and respect his wishes. Thank you, Uncle Ara.

The days leading up to the burial were a haze. How I know this is that my whānau would say "so and so was there", and I could not remember seeing these people. All I could focus on was my son and making sure he was okay, but I knew my Mum, Dad and brothers, and the rest of our whānau made sure he was.

The burial day came, and Gordon was taken outside onto the marae ātea, where me and our son sat at the head, with whānau around us. Gordon was walked over to the urupā and laid to rest next to his mother, who had passed a week before. I remember thinking to myself at the time that mine and my son's pain and grief was enormous. I looked at Gordon's father (William (Bill) Gordon Tuuta) who had just laid his wife to rest a week before, and now had to do the same with his only son. I could see the hurt and pain in his eyes.

Gordon was laid to rest and we then went back to the whare to complete the formalities then went to the wharekai for the hākari. That whole time I remember feeling numb, devastated, lost, full of grief and not knowing where to from here for me and my son. The days that followed were hard, not just for me, but for my son too. My son went to stay with my dad's sister for a little while, and as a Mum and now reflecting again, much pain and guilt runs through me because while I was grieving, so was my son. It felt like it was just me going through this at the time, and every day I wish I could turn the clock back and do things differently. As I write this I need to say to my son "I am so sorry because you lost your Dad, and it wasn't just me who had lost, you did too." However, my Dad and I went and picked my son up from Whanganui and brought him home. We lived with my parents for many years, in fact, my parents were not just my son's Nan and Koko, but his Mum and Dad too.

Our lives changed so much after Gordon passed, and often, I reflect on things and wonder what if he had never passed, and what would our lives had looked like, something myself and my son will never know. Finally I would just like to say to my son from his Dad, you were and are loved and you have become a caring, loving and beautiful man, and I know you have always been proud of who you are and where you come from, but above all loyal and true to yourself.

Reflection

Reflecting on my mother's story, I can recall certain memories during my father's illness. Many of my whānau from both sides gathered daily at our whānau home on Airdale Place, Waitara, when Dad was at his weakest. All of my cousins were there, and because of this, I have fond memories of this time. I remember my father's mother, Nanny Elisha, who was also sick with cancer. Both Dad and Nanny were cared for in the same room, located to the left when you entered our home. Nanny was taken back to our Tuuta homestead in Urenui, before her passing on 10 April 1987, a week before Dad. Photographs given to me from my mother have provided me with glimpses into that time, including Mum and Dad's wedding, which took place at our home on 1 April 1987. Taking Dad to Urenui Marae for his tangihanga, I remember stopping on the side of the road at Wahapakapaka to pay our respects to my dad's maternal grandparents and other whānau members who lie in our whānau urupā. However, the most unforgettable memory of my Dad's tangihanga was sitting by his coffin with my mother as the many whānau and friends were entering Te Aroha (wharenuī) to pay their last respects to my Dad. The sound of crying throughout the wharenuī and looking up and seeing tears flowing from the faces of people hugging me and embracing me are vivid.





Father Conaghan assisting me as a child lighting the candle at the wedding ceremony for my mother and father at our home on Airdale Place, Waitara, on 1 April 1987. Photo courtesy of Debra Leatherby-Tuuta.



Hākari after my parents wedding ceremony. Photos courtesy of Debra Leatherby-Tuuta.



Cousins at our home, Airdale Place, Waitara. Back left to right: Rebecca, Moses, Raymond (son of Gordon & Debra). Front left to right: Shem, Wade, Tara, Kane, Jason. Photo courtesy of Debra Leatherby-Tuuta.

He kupu whakakapi: Conclusion

Mum's story has given me an understanding of what she was faced with and the pain associated with losing someone close to you. The loving support from whānau since Dad's passing, including my mother's parents, Nana Maisie and Koro Scotty, has been instrumental, for they have provided a loving and stable home environment for my mother and I. Thank you, Nana and Koko, for your unconditional love. To my mother, you are a strong woman and have overcome so much. Thank you for sharing your story, despite the pain and heartache you endured at the time. To my Dad, although your time on earth was short, your memory remains and my love for you will never fade: "All I ever had was Redemption Song". He aroha mutunga kore.



Me (4 years) and Dad. Photograph taken in 1983, Ngā Motu, Taranaki. Photo courtesy of Debra Leatherby-Tuuta.

Kuputaka: Glossary

Use of tuhutō (macrons): the introduction of macrons over some Māori vowels, have (1) clarified definitions and (2) made it easier to pronounce Māori words (i.e., knowing where to place the emphasis as you are saying the words). When we quote sources from earlier periods where macrons have not been used, we have not included the macron to remain true to the original text. In the glossary, we have included both versions of the word (with and without macrons).

Atua	God
hākari	large feast of food
hapū	cluster of extended families, descended from an eponymous ancestor
haukāinga	home people; local people of a marae
iwi	tribe
karakia	prayers; incantations
karanga	ceremonial call performed by females
kaumatua	elder
kaumātua	elders
Koko (Koro)	grandfather
kui	grandmother
kuia	elderly woman or women; grandmother/s
Mahi Tamariki	wharenuī at Urenuī Marae
marae	traditional place of gathering
marae ātea	open area in front of wharenuī
Ngāi Tai ki Tāmaki	iwi of Tāmaki Makaurau
Ngāti Maru	iwi of central Taranaki
Ngāti Mutunga	iwi of north Taranaki, also of the Chatham Islands
Ngāti Tama	iwi of north Taranaki, also of Wellington and the northern South Island
Ngāti Toa	iwi of the Kāpiti-Ōtaki area and northern South Island
tangi	shortened form of tangihanga
tangihanga	funeral
Taranaki Iwi	iwi of coastal Taranaki

Te Aroha	whareniui at Urenui Marae
Te Āti Haunui-a-Pāpārangī	iwi of Whanganui
tūpāpaku	deceased body
tūturu Māori	to be entrenched in Māori customs and traditions
Urenui	small settlement in north Taranaki
Urenui Marae	marae at Urenui
urupā	cemetery
Wahapakapaka	area south of Onaero, north Taranaki
Waitara	suburb of north Taranaki
whānau	extended family
Whanganui	town on the lower west coast of the North Island
whare	house
wharekai	dining room at a marae
whareniui	meeting house at a marae