

To the Virtual Storytelling Conference;

Kia Orana. My name is Tuaratini and I am a Takitua (Storyteller) from Te Moana Nui O Kiva (Pacific Ocean). My ancestral homeland is the Cook Islands – Fifteen tiny and idyllic islands scattered across 2 million square kilometres, 21 degrees south of the equator. I currently live in the city of Auckland in New Zealand a country which has a total population of less than five million. New Zealand is the place many pacific people migrated to during the 50s, 60s and 70s and Auckland is the largest Polynesian city in the world. I am from a storytelling collective called Turou Takitua, founded by myself and my colleague Jarcinda Stowers-Ama



KEYWORDS

Kia Orana – *Greetings* - I wish you long life – this is the greeting of the people of the Cook Islands

Tuaratini – *My name*

Turou – *Hail* – a greeting to an esteemed person (Cook Islands language)

Takitua – *Storyteller* (language of the Cook Islands nation – made up of the two words TAKI – meaning to guide, lead or carry; and TUA – meaning story).

Te Moana Nui O Kiva – The *Pacific Ocean* (an ancestral name used by many Polynesians in the region)

Moana – *Ocean, sea.*

A'o – This means *breath*. (Cook Islands language) A little difficult for some to pronounce so I have used the Hawaiian word **Ha** in its place (I have some Hawaiian ancestry too so felt comfortable with adopting this term).

Ha - is the Hawaiian word for *Breath of life*. I use the term **HA** to also mean energy or spirit.



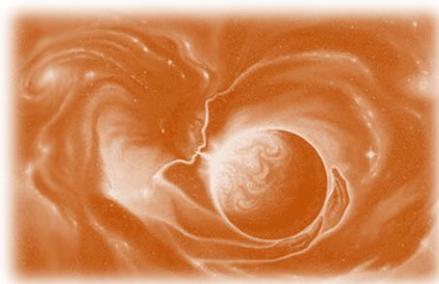
Te Moana Nui O Kiva (the Pacific Ocean) is the deepest and largest body of water on planet earth and covers one-third of the world's surface. It is the home of over 25,000 islands (including nations like Australia and New Zealand) the vast majority of which are uncharted and/or uninhabited. Over one-fifth of the world's languages are spoken in the Pacific and it is the most linguistically diverse place on the globe - yet only 1% of the world's population lives here.

"We sweat and cry salt water, so we know that the ocean is really in our blood".

- Teresia Teaiwa

As a daughter of the moana (ocean), the Pacific is the place I call home. It is rich and diverse in stories depicting life, death, comedy, tragedy and joy, and serves as the building blocks of my cultural knowledge, understanding and connection. We have thousands of years of history passed down through oral traditions and it is the storytelling traditions of my ancestors that inform the way I navigate my world today.

Traditionally my people would tell stories in their homes and their villages – with bodies and life teaming around them. This was vital because these stories were a way of preserving history, passing on knowledge, instruction, and explanations for life and the world around us – but the very act of storytelling in this way was also a way of sharing **A'O** or **HA**.



The concept of HA is a vital element of our Pacific storytelling. HA means *breath*. It is the energy or essence that brings our stories to life. The *breath* of life is at the core of my storytelling practice and has been in existence since the beginning of time. When we share stories with people around us – we share with them that *breath* of life. We *breathe* life into the stories we tell, and we *receive breath* from the people we're connecting to.

So how do we continue to share and exchange that HA in our storytelling when the world is being affected by Covid-19? How do we share HA in a virtual world?

A storyteller like myself, accustomed to the world of LIVE storytelling has a more difficult task of telling stories when you leave that comfortable space containing HA. One can breathe life into a story and feel it leave your body – but that HA does not travel through the internet to connect with the viewer/listener. It isn't returned to you as instant feedback and energy while the story is being told. In a world of modern technology, we as storytellers have become more adept at capturing our audiences through the internet – But I am often reminded that the process of exchanging HA struggles to exist in that way of storytelling.

As a modern woman, I fully embrace the world of virtual storytelling as an opportunity to reach a wider and more diverse audience across the globe. I am benefiting from learning new skills by using new technologies. I am connecting with new people from different cultures every day – and it is amazing. However, as a storyteller of the Pacific, passionate about reviving the storytelling traditions of my ancestors, my ultimate goal is to return to those LIVE storytelling opportunities – to refill my cup with the vital essence of HA... So that the energy and passion I expend and receive during those exchanges can sustain me at times when I'm isolated and delivering stories through online and social media platforms instead.

Storytelling in my world of Coronavirus;

New Zealand went into Level 4 Lockdown on 26 March 2020. We were not allowed to leave our homes. The people who lived with you became your “bubble” and were the only people you could have contact with. All businesses and government facilities were closed and only emergency services (hospitals) and essential services (grocery stores) were allowed to remain open. Police were active on our streets to make sure that you were not leaving your home and after 5 weeks our fight against Covid-19 has reaped commendable results. We are now in Level 3 and there is a lot more movement – but gatherings are still restricted to 10 people max and that is only if they are gathering for a funeral or a wedding. Our Prime Minister is leading us through this pandemic with empathy – her messages are “Be Kind, Stay Home, Save Lives” and “We're all in this together”



**WE'RE ALL IN
THIS TOGETHER**

The New Zealand government does not consider a Storytelling gathering essential – In a pandemic panicked world I fully understand and support this. This has been a good time to observe the world around me and to explore ways of sharing storytelling online. On my newsfeeds, I've seen storytelling occur in many forms. Stories of hardship. Stories of sadness and tragedy. And stories designed to bring laughter and joy into our homes. Most of those stories were NOT told by your typical Storytellers. But instead told by everyday folks who've never once attended a storytelling conference, workshop, or performance in their lives... I've been experiencing storytelling through their tweets, photos, memes, videos, tik-toks, and novel-like posts about the dramas of life in lockdown. In comparison, I haven't seen many conventional type storytelling sessions from my part of the world and have been feeling a little bereft without it.

As LIVE storytellers we are usually sharing and exchanging energy with physically present audiences. We use all our skills to engage the senses. We move, we breathe, we mimic, we sing, we dance, we laugh, and we create whole worlds while harnessing the spectrum of emotions. We can do these things because of the energy of HA – it lives within us and is passed to us by the people we are physically storytelling to.

So how do we translate that through the medium of technology? In the world of social distancing and Coronavirus? Well, it is certainly a little harder yes – but the storytelling doesn't necessarily have to change. In front of the computer screen or phone camera we should STILL move, breathe, mimic, sing, laugh and create whole worlds and emotions AS IF we were performing for a physically present audience.

But remember, we may need to speak slower and clearer for those listening through their tiny inefficient phone speakers. We may need to move slower for those watching through low-resolution phone screens. We may need to tell shorter stories for those with spotty internet connections or distracted by things happening around them. And finally, we must have faith that this way is just for a short time. Have faith that this pandemic will pass and that one day we will come out of isolation and be able to again tell stories with our people physically present around us. That when that day comes, we will remember to appreciate and enjoy the experience as a reciprocal one. Storytelling is the sharing and exchanging of stories, fueled by the breath of life. HA.

** The views expressed here are personal opinion and do not necessarily reflect the views of all Pacific storytellers, or storytellers in the Turou Takitua Collective*