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GROWING HAUORA: A PERSONAL JOURNEY OF SUSTAINABLE PRACTICE AND NATURE-BASED LEARNING

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INTRODUCTION

In an age where industrial progress and digital saturation increasingly disconnect us from the land beneath our feet, the need to re-centre human well-being within the rhythms of nature has never been more urgent. As a chef, solo mother of three young children, and future educator, this has become increasingly apparent to me in recent years. Last year, I completed a Bachelor of Culinary Arts through an Assessment of Prior Learning (APL) process, which offered me the opportunity to reflect on what is truly important to me—and how these values are expressed in my practice as a chef and future food educator. This reflective journey culminated in a Framework of Practice (FoP): a conceptual model that articulates the underlying beliefs, values, and practices that inform my professional actions.

My reflections on the importance of nature in both my life and my practice—alongside a growing concern for the well-being of today's children—led me to explore the notion that engagement with nature, particularly through food, education, and culturally grounded practice, can serve as a powerful pathway to individual and collective well-being. This article traces that exploration, drawing on indigenous and contemporary understandings of health, ecopsychology, mātauranga Māori, and my own lived culinary experience

As a result of this reflection and research, I propose that a reciprocal, empathetic relationship with Papatūānuku is both urgent and transformative. This relationship forms the foundation of my Framework of Practice. By creating opportunities for people—especially children—to reconnect with the natural world, I believe we can foster deep, enduring well-being. Set within the context of hospitality, this perspective invites educators and practitioners to reimagine sustainability and our relationship with nature not as a trend, but as a deeply relational, values-driven approach to living and learning.

FOUNDATIONS OF MY FRAMEWORK: UNDERSTANDING HAUORA AND ITS ECOLOGICAL CONNECTIONS

According to the 1946 constitution of the World Health Organization, health is "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (World Health Organization, 2025). The constitution further states that all aspects of health are essential for the well-being and functioning of individuals and communities: "Healthy development of the child is of basic importance; the ability to live harmoniously in a changing total environment is essential to such development" (World Health Organization, 2025).

Considered alongside the Treaty of Waitangi, the understanding of health in Aotearoa New Zealand shares some important features with the World Health Organization's definition. Health is seen as a holistic concept where a balance of factors can affect well-being. It comprises a number of dimensions: te taha wairua (the spiritual part); te taha hinengaro (the mental); te taha tinana (the physical); te taha whānau (the family); te taha tūroa (the environment) and te reo (language). This framework has been modelled by Mason Durie as Te Whare Tapa Whā, with the four walls of a wharenui representing the four pillars of health: te taha wairua, te taha hinengaro, te taha tinana, me/and te taha whānau (Te Whatu Ora, 2024). It is paramount that all factors are considered when assessing personal and communal well-being (Te Whatu Ora, 2024).

Despite these positive definitions of health and the targets they set, as a society we have lost sight of what true health and happiness look like. I believe this has to do with factors such as larger human populations, consumption, urbanisation, resource depletion, waste generation, pollution, and chemical contamination. We have become a society that believes that the successes of the modern world depend on controlling and converting nature to our own uses (focusing on wealth and material gain); as opposed to understanding that physical, mental, and spiritual well-being all rely on our ability to experience diverse natural systems.

In ancient indigenous cultures around the world, health, well-being, and connection to nature are understood in this holistic way. Historically, indigenous societies were dependent on, or interdependent with, their natural environment (Salmón, 2000). As a result, they also formed a deep connection with it, viewing humankind as part of a wider ecosystem where living in balance with the natural environment was necessary for sustaining human life (Warbrick et al., 2023). This reciprocal relationship is responsible for the sustainability ethos of indigenous societies.

Given this country's ancestral ties to Māori culture, I have come to view human wellness in the context of the indigenous concept of hauora (health). Although New Zealanders have a strong affiliation with the 'outdoors' and nature, as our urban areas and populations grow this connection is becoming weaker, resulting in poorer overall health.

Whereas the *Collins English Dictionary* defines "nature" as "all the animals, plants, and other things in the world that are not made by people, and all the events and processes that are not caused by people" (Collins, 2024), in te ao Māori this definition extends further: "Taiao (nature) is the natural world that contains and surrounds us—the land, water, climate and living beings. It refers to the interconnection of people and nature" (Taiao Ora, n.d.). Taiao Ora (n.d.) describes it further with a whakataukī (proverb): "Ko au Te Taiao, ko Te Taiao ko au" (I am nature, and nature is me). This proverb assumes a permanent relationship of respect, reciprocity, and interdependence. Like us, nature is alive—Taiao (nature); ora (alive). This concept can be unwrapped further:

Tai:	The horizon where heaven and earth meet
Ao:	The world around, above and below us
Tai Ao:	The natural world that contains and surrounds us
Ora:	To be alive and well
Taiao Ora:	Taiao Ora: The well-being of our natural world. (Taiao Ora, 2004)

I believe we have an intrinsic desire and need for nature—even if it only takes the form of an indoor plant. As Stephan Kellert explains in his book *Building for Life*, "because we evolved in a biological rather than an artificial or machine-dominated world, we have always relied on—and continue to rely on—repeated experience of nature to achieve our physical and mental health and productivity" (Kellert, 2005).

Ecopsychology is a recent field that studies the relationship between human beings and the natural environment, utilising both ecological and psychological principles (Society for Environmental Population and Conservation Psychology, 2011). This concept proposes that healthy people create a healthier environment, and interacting with

a healthier environment fosters improved health in people (Summers & Vivian, 2018). Social and environmental movements such as the deep ecology movement formed by Arne Næss (1995) and the Deep Green Resistance, based on the book of the same name by Derrick Jensen, Lierre Keith, and Aric McBay (2011), stress two main things: that every living being, human and nonhuman, has its own inherent value and thus has the right to live and flourish; and that the 'industrial revolution' poses the greatest threat to the natural environment.

The way our society is living today is highly destructive and damaging to both our mental and physical health. According to deep ecologists, humans should be returning to an eco-centred relationship with nature, living within the means of the local ecosystem and local seasons (Næss, 1995). An ecological self-concept is one in which a person understands their direct interdependence with the planet. They are driven to live sustainably not just for their own sake, or even for the sake of the planet, but because of the web of intrinsic and extrinsic values and connections among all living things (Weaver, 2015). Thus, it is paramount that environmental awareness and sustainability are taught and demonstrated to tamariki (children) at home and especially in school.

INDIGENOUS SUSTAINABLE VALUES: LEARNING FROM TE AO MĀORI

This 'new' way of thinking has many links with indigenous cultures around the world, including that of Aotearoa New Zealand. Māori have an affiliation to the earth which is reflected in their cultural practices, spiritual beliefs, and social structures (Lockhart et al., 2019). Whakapapa (genealogy) is central to Māori identity and understanding of the world. It links individuals and communities to their ancestors, the land, and the natural elements. Māori believe that their genealogy connects them to the earth and all living things, a relationship that underscores the importance of land in their worldview.

Tikanga (custom and tradition) emphasises the importance of living in harmony with the land and sea—for example, kaitiakitanga involves acting as guardians of natural resources, fishing and farming in ways that sustain resources and respect the environment. This is also reflected in spiritual beliefs about Papatūānuku (Earth Mother) and Ranginui (Sky Father) in whom all things were created. The mythological accounts of their separation highlight the sacredness of the earth and the role of humans as caretakers. Traditional agriculture and land use (environmental stewardship), such as kūmara cultivation, was adapted to the local environment in ways that reflected Māori understanding of and respect for the land (Adds, 2008). For example, soils were modified to enhance the growing conditions for kūmara in New Zealand, a practice that was not previously used in Polynesia (The University of Waikato Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato, 2015). The gathering and cultivation of kai and medicines from the natural environment was done in a sustainable way, ensuring availability for future generations and sustaining the mauri (life force) of the ngahere (forest) and moana (seas) (Te Ahukaramū Charles Royal, 2007). Seasonal harvesting techniques, regulated fishing, and the use of all parts of a plant reflected their interdependence on the natural world. The tī kōuka tree, to give just one example, was used for fibre, the leaves for weaving, the young tips eaten as a sweet vegetable, and the older branches boiled and then scraped for the porridge-like paste (Department of Conservation, 2024). Pūrākau (cultural narratives) and symbols often feature elements of the natural world and highlight the interconnectedness of all living things (Lockhart et al., 2019).

I strongly believe that we need to reflect on the past and look to mātauranga Māori (the Māori world view and knowledge system) in order to gain insights into how to establish reciprocal respect between humans and nature. I have tried to do this in my own practice, seeking to work in places that shared similar values of sustainability and seasonality. This meant buying from local suppliers, buying produce in season, using compostable coffee cups; supporting suppliers that shared these practices; buying in bulk to save on packaging, and offering food scraps to farmers or for use in garden compost. In England, I worked at River Cottage, a restaurant I sought out for these reasons. They would buy only organic produce and meat, buying direct and supporting local farmers who were actively caring for the soil and their animals, and who were working to create nutritionally dense produce which was better for our health.

I tried to carry on these efforts when I created and opened Sylvia's, a small family-style café in Port Waikato. I planted a small kitchen garden providing basic greens and flowers for the café. I used produce sourced from local people. I only purchased food that was in season and grown as locally as possible. I purchased meat and eggs from animals that were ethically raised. All food scraps were taken to a local farm and fed to animals or composted. I used recyclable or compostable packaging, cups, and utensils. I supported smaller companies making sustainable choices, such as producing juice with natural ingredients, bottled in recyclable glass, and produced by a family-owned and run business. All rubbish was sorted into landfill, recycling, and composting and discarded correctly. I put real thought into the impact the café as a commercial operation had on the environment.

This way of thinking and acting is still very important in my everyday life and in the role-modelling and teaching of these values to my children. We talk about the earth, personifying her as Papatūānuku. In this way I can talk about the impact of rubbish, waste, over-commercialisation, industrialism, and materialism, in the context of respect and concern for Papatūānuku. My children are at the stage where they understand the need for recycling and not littering. They will pick up other people's rubbish and put it in the bin. However, they do not yet understand the bigger picture behind over-commercialisation or why we may not buy that bright yellow plastic toy. This is something that I am learning to be more mindful of, demonstrating small decisions such as buying things in bulk to reduce packaging or making our own bread instead of buying it, so we don't create more plastic waste. Life becomes richer when making the connection with the reality that we are part of something bigger.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONNECTION: MY FRAMEWORK OF PRACTICE

From the age of seven, I was lucky enough to grow up on a large bush block, with the ngahere at my doorstep. Being surrounded by nature felt normal, and I was completely at ease within it. Nature became something I unconsciously relied on to recentre and recharge. Whether we were helping Mum in the garden or swimming in the river, we had no choice but to benefit from nature's presence and our interaction with it. The important role that this early exposure played in grounding me has only become clear through recent reflection.

When I left home and moved to the heart of Auckland city, I found myself living in a flat with no backyard and neighbours just a metre from the front door. I knew I didn't like living there, but it was a means to an end—I was studying, then working, and later continuing my studies before becoming a chef. My career path required me to remain in the city. Still, every chance I got, I would seek out nature—heading out for bush walks, finding waterfalls, discovering lakes, or going to the beach. I also began running. These times in nature allowed me to reconnect and reflect, and to recharge for another day. In some jobs I could only run once a week due to my hours, making it vital to walk to and from work to still get that time outside and reset. At the time, I didn't stop to ask *why* I needed these things. I just knew I did. Looking back, I can now see that these moments grounded me. They reminded me of home, connection, and belonging. In a world that was fast-paced, busy, and often lonely, nature gave me stillness and clarity. I believe it was my early interactions with the natural world that instilled in me the need to seek it out and use it as a source of well-being in adult life.

As a mother, I encourage my children to be involved and connected with nature. This behaviour may look like merely running outside barefoot, splashing in puddles, mudsliding down a hill at a park, but it also includes practices such as walking with my children around the garden when they are experiencing big feelings, to ground them and recentre them. We have a weekly 'outdoor day,' rain or shine: for one hour or all day, it is a priority to be outside in nature as a family.

Based on these personal experiences, alongside my new understanding of the deep connection between hauora and the natural world—and in light of the increasingly urban and digital environment today's young people are growing up in—I have come to understand the critical importance of reconnecting youth with nature. Learning about the natural world and our interdependence with it is essential to developing a balanced sense of hauora, one

that can sustain a child throughout life. When these connections are made, belonging, community, meaning, and purpose begin to take root. Children develop deep values that will guide them as they navigate life.

This is the essence of my Framework of Practice: to provide opportunities—through food and education—for people, especially children, to reconnect with nature in ways that foster and enhance holistic well-being.

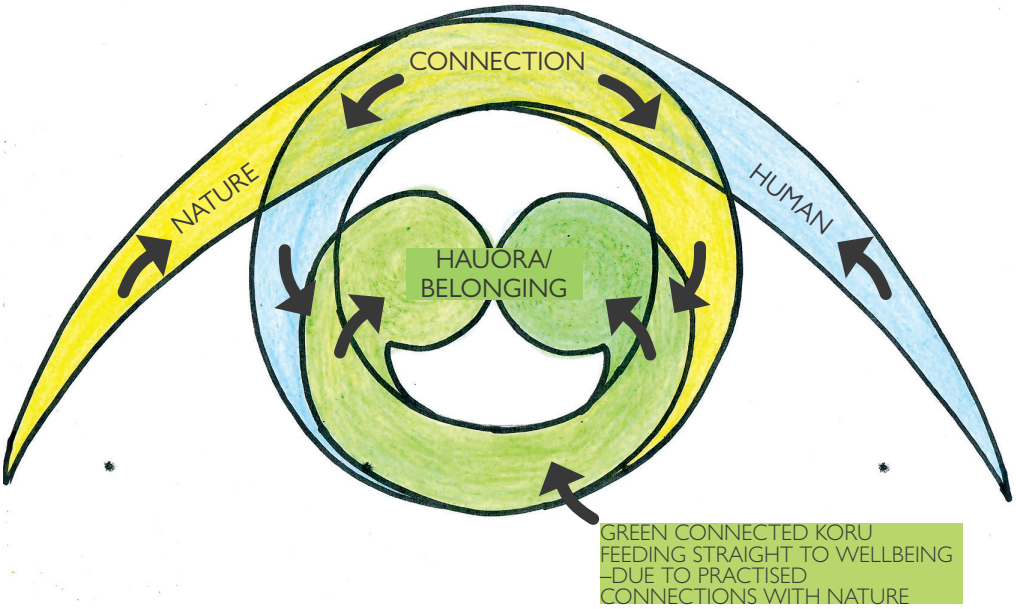

Figure 1. My Framework of Practice.

The koru on the left in Figure 1 represents nature; the koru on the right represents the human as an entity. As the two koru come together, they overlap and form two embracing circles. The outer circle represents all the interactions offered and experienced between the human and natural worlds—specifically, in my context, food and education. The inner circle encapsulates two further circles or nodes, the innermost growth of the koru. This circle represents personal hauora or well-being. It is continually fed by the outer interactions between humans and nature. The bottom of the outer circle (coloured green) houses another connection between human-nature interactions and well-being. I believe the earlier a person is living a life experiencing connections with nature, the more deep-seated and grounded this pathway becomes, and the easier it is to re establish well-being, as the connections have been practised and are familiar.

This diagram provides an overview of the concepts behind my Framework of Practice. What is most important in this context is the outer circle of interactions, incorporating values, beliefs, experiences, opportunities, and learnings that feed into a person's overall wellness. I believe that my aim of providing opportunities through food education for children to reconnect with nature will be best achieved through the public school system, rather than offering such opportunities to a select few. Through establishing gardens and creating meals, children will grow connections with Papatūānuku, with themselves, and with each other. This is what will bring hauora.

These kind of initiatives can be seen in New Zealand and around the world. Those based on food often embody the concept of "farm to table" or "garden to table," reflecting sustainable techniques of food cultivation and transport. Many chefs have realised the importance of children connecting with food and nature, and have instigated programmes to be implemented in schools. In America, Alice Waters was a trailblazer, starting up one of the first garden-to-table restaurants, and subsequently running the Edible Schoolyard Project (Edible Schoolyard Project, 2024). English chef Jamie Oliver started a kitchen garden project (Ministry of Food: Jamie Oliver, 2024). Stephanie Alexander, a chef in Australia, started her own kitchen garden programme (Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation, 2024) which has greatly influenced the current Garden to Table programme in New Zealand.

The Garden to Table Trust was established in New Zealand in 2008 and has implemented their programme in over 300 schools. Their website describes their intention clearly:

> We support schools and kura throughout the motu to take the learning out of the classroom and into the māra kai (garden) and the kīhini (kitchen). Our schools teach thousands of Kiwi kids the knowledge and skills that have a transformative and lifelong impact on their hauora (well-being)—and on the world around them.
> (Garden to Table, 2023)

It is through involvement in these kinds of initiatives that I believe I can apply my Framework of Practice and begin to make a difference to the hauora of our young people.

COLLECTIVE ACTION: FINDING 'MY TRIBE'

Reflecting on my time at Sylvia's café, it is very apparent to me that I held strong values and adhered to them to the best of my ability. It is also very clear that in order to adhere to those values I had to be a trailblazer within the community. I feel that I was able to create space for community to grow (I still hear today about relationships that were formed from meeting at the café), and able to introduce customers to a different way of eating and trying new ingredients. However, this came at a cost to my personal well-being. As much as I facilitated community for others, I never really felt supported by people who shared my values.

I now find myself reflecting that I no longer want to be the leader standing at the front of a resistant crowd. Being a sole voice takes a lot of strength—strength that I would now rather direct towards my children or future generations. I now see the value in finding 'my tribe,' reaching out to like-minded people, and becoming part of a movement to use the momentum that already exists. I want to find my 'family' in order to create sustained change, because many voices are stronger than one.

At present, I am trying to facilitate a maramataka gardening workshop in our extended community, based on the Māori lunar calendar. In this way I am able to use my skills of leadership and action, but in a way that will attract only those of a like mind who are genuinely interested. At the same time, the children and I have been continuing our weekly bush walks. Doing what I value for my family, and sharing the experience, has attracted like-minded people. By pursuing these activities, I feel I am slowly building my community or whānau.

Similarly, in an education context, I believe that connections with Papatūānuku can be readily accessed through projects such as hands-on gardening directed by the lunar calendar, growing healthy food, learning to prepare and cook it, sharing that cooked kai with the community, and passing on the knowledge that has been acquired to others. It is through providing a space for these activities within education, with the underlying intention of achieving hauora through connection with the natural world, that our children will be able to flourish, having acquired some deep-seated values and trust in themselves and their place in the world.

On a small scale, I had been trying to implement similar projects in Sylvia's café, but quickly discovered that there was not enough of me to do everything. I had dreams of running gardening workshops, starting a community garden, having regular cooking classes, holding community preserving evenings, giving nutritional talks, and other

such activities. Within my limitations, I was able to offer simple cooking classes for children and adults. The classes emphasised the cooking of seasonal food from scratch, providing a space where people could feel welcomed and accepted and know they were going to eat real, wholesome food.

I have come to see that the real benefits of my explorations will unfold in my immediate future through teaching and in finding educational spaces that align with my values in order to explore how to embed a garden-to-table concept within a school curriculum. I want to be part of a movement of like-minded educators who will inspire and create together, creating a space for real long-lasting change. I look forward to helping children to connect with nature via food and education in order to promote and foster positive well-being.

CONCLUSION

This exploration of nature-based practice grounded in mātauranga Māori, personal reflection, and culinary experience has led me to a central conviction: reconnection with Papatūānuku is both a necessity and a gift. Through this process, I have come to see this relationship not as an abstract idea, but as a lived truth, one that holds the power to transform our individual and collective hauora. The reflective journey underpinning my Framework of Practice has been deeply personal and, at times, profoundly emotional. It has prompted me to re-evaluate the direction of my life, the influence of societal norms, and the way I raise my children. In doing so, I have arrived at a pivotal moment: the opportunity to realign my life with my core values, and to model a way of being that invites others to connect more deeply with the natural world.

My Framework of Practice is grounded in the values of sustainability, reciprocity, and connection. It recognises the vital relationship between people and the planet, and seeks to foster well-being through food, education, and everyday acts of connection. Whether through school garden projects, shared meals, or immersion in nature, I believe the seeds of reconnection can be sown in simple yet powerful ways. By embedding nature-based practices into our homes, classrooms, and communities, we can cultivate a generation who not only value the earth, but understand their role in caring for it.

AI statement
ChatGPT was used to assist with grammar and sentence structure and for final proofreading.

Sylvia Dwen is a Bachelor of Culinary Arts graduate and solo parent to three young children, based in Port Waikato. This revised piece, originally completed as part of her studies, became a transformative assignment that sparked a personal quest to engage and deepen people's connections with and in nature. Currently, Sylvia is exploring ways to incorporate sustainable, nature-based practices into her culinary work, aiming to create experiences that foster deeper connections with the environment.

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