

OPINION

Challenges for Indigenous leaders ‘are many,’ but so are the people working to change things

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Chellie Spiller says she was like many kids – she wanted adventures and to see the world. CHIEF LADY BIRD / THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Chellie Spiller is of Ngati Kahungunu ki Wairoa descent, a Maori tribe indigenous to New Zealand. Professor of leadership and management at New Zealand’s University of Waikato Management School, She is an author and keynote speaker on wayfinding, wisdom and authentic leadership. A passionate advocate for Maori business growth, she is a leader-in-residence with the Atlantic Institute, a collaboration with the Rhodes Trust, Oxford University. She is also a fellow with the International Leadership

Association, a former Fulbright senior scholar to Harvard University and the University of Arizona, and the recipient of a Dame Mira Szaszy Maori Alumni Award and National Maori Academic Excellence Award.

Can you tell us what led you to become a professor at a major university?

I was like many kids – I wanted adventures and to see the world. I left home at 17 and went on a one-year American field scholarship in Thailand, which set me on the path of learning about culture. I then joined university, dropped out and ended up running off with a chef to Australia. My mother was very concerned. I lived there for 15 years working in the tourism industry. During my travels, I noticed the way Indigenous people were treated, pushed to the bottom of the supply chain, selling souvenirs and sweeping hotel floors. It got to the point that whilst I was having a great life, I couldn't continue participating in a deeply troubling industry.

I came back to NZ and completed a master of politics, thinking this was a political issue. I then did a doctorate focusing on sustainable Maori business. I wove what I learned from tourism with my grandmother and mother's teachings about my Maori identity. Six months into my doctorate, I was diagnosed with breast cancer and had surgery, chemotherapy and radiation treatment. During my healing process, I sought strength and protection from spiritual powers, including guidance of my ancestors who by now included my grandmother. Whilst challenging, cancer provided the opportunity to fully embrace spirituality. It was then that the kaumatua [elders] came forward guiding my healing and research. I was fortunate to receive a Fulbright scholarship to Harvard University under the sponsorship of Professor Joseph Kalt where I learned about Native American economic development. I then started working on Indigenous leadership and economies, and co-wrote the book Wayfinding Leadership. It gained a lot of attention, and demand for leadership development grew. Eventually, the University of Waikato offered me a professorship. It's been a very zigzagged path.

What does being Indigenous mean to you?

The term whakapapa refers to our genealogies. It's about taking the learning journey about ancestral lines and participate in wananga – a gathering about culture in a Maori communal meeting house. This allows us to tap into communities of belonging where I'll recite my whakapapa, acknowledging the relationships that make me who I am – the sacred mountains, rivers and oceans. It's like peeling back layers of discovery to connect with all creations. That's the enriching field of what it means to be Indigenous.

How is your sense of identity and Indigeneity connected to your personal well-being?

Being in nature is an important part of my recalibration. I spend so much time at my desk that creating spaces to get out into the world, whether it's walking on the banks of the Waikato River or barefoot along the beach, are simple ways that help me get grounded. Nature is a great healer.

I also love going into wananga with my community, listening to elders and experts talk about the inspiring people that populate our history. I'm surrounded by the carvings of ancestors, the woven panels, and feel like a child. It taps into a joy in me to be a part of it.

What is leadership and is it different from 10 years ago?

From an Indigenous perspective, it's about paying attention to interconnectedness. Indigenous leadership can be described as collective, distributive and relational. It's like an inverted triangle instead of the leader being on top like it typically is in Western notions. We have the word mana, where a leader with mana is of service to the community. Mana exists in the collective and is cultivated through a process of reciprocity and mutual recognition. I co-wrote an article called Paradigm Warriors in which we discuss how Indigenous leaders work toward a better reality, which oftentimes involves struggle. One of my guiding proverbs was written by the Maori economic activist Tuiono, which describes the best form of protest as capturing space to transform it. This guides my academic and organizational work.

Would you encourage New Zealand as a nation to adopt Maori leadership?

We do in many ways. We have our Treasury and the Reserve Bank advancing a well-being economy that aligns with a Maori view, albeit with important distinctions. It isn't about wealth and profit but creating a future of well-being across many dimensions. Each generation has dealt with uncertainty – for some cultures, a wayfinding philosophy has been their way of life.

How do you compare Indigenous peoples' approach in the U.S. to New Zealand?

There is a lot in common between Indigenous peoples. We share the sense of sacred kinship with all creation and an indelible sense of stewardship. Being custodians of the Earth is important, no matter where we are. In NZ, we have Maori TV stations, radio stations and political power. We've got collective leverage through broadly shared language and philosophy, what we call Maturanga Maori knowledge systems. Whereas in North America, there are distinct languages and tribal groups. There is also a significant difference in that Native American reservations have constitutional sovereignty. We don't but are moving toward that. Many tribes are developing their version of co-management.

What would you say are the main opportunities, and challenges, as an Indigenous leader?

Maori leaders, like many Indigenous leaders worldwide, are forged in the fires of resistance, insistence and taking assertive action. Some of our business leaders at the helm of billion-dollar organizations navigate tensions between law and lore of culture and commerce, making compromises about corporate and Maori values. Some are exercising their warriorship against systemic racism, trauma, poor housing, economic

hardship and loss of cultural transmission. We've got political leaders in the halls of power railing against the economic ideals rupturing the heart of what it means to be Indigenous. The challenges are many, but so are the people working to change things.

What is your vision of the future for the world through the lens of Indigenous empowerment?

A key principle of wayfinding leadership is calling the island to you. It's about paying attention to the signs in the surrounding environment such as the ocean, clouds and flight path, and notice their interconnection. Many of us are acculturated to a deeply exhausting and limiting conquering striving mode. Wayfinding teaches to expect variables from all angles so that we can respond well when something unexpected occurs. It's about being in the present and making conscious choices. Every time we make a choice toward a healthier planet, we're creating that future. It's revealing of what is present so we can create a future for our youth that they can touch, feel, see and hear, and not one they're going to get to someday. One of my co-authors and mentors, Hoturoa Barclay-Kerr, said that success is succession.

How can non-Indigenous people be better allies and supporters for Indigenous issues?

It starts with listening and being comfortable being uncomfortable because journeys of learning take us into uncomfortable places. I call that meeting ground the interspace where we get off our cultural ideologies. We dive into this messy, ambiguous place in between. For that, we need to listen, to observe and be a wise custodian of the Earth and our future generations. Be willing to go on that journey of discovery, know that it could be challenging but illuminating in transformative ways.

What would you suggest for those seeking to learn more about Indigenous peoples' cultures and history?

For organizations, a first step is to become ambicultural. In NZ, we have a foundational treaty, a covenant between Indigenous peoples and settlers. Today, it's expressed in how organizations are working. I tend to use the word ambicultural to harness the strength of different cultures, whereas bicultural can create a bit of a bifurcation where world views don't meet. Ambiculturalism must percolate through the decision process by working with the local Indigenous community. It can't be effective or meaningful from a distance.

Individuals should ask themselves where they are situated in their learning journey, how they can participate, not just "perform," and genuinely learn about the culture. There are plenty of outlets for that. We have Maori language and culture classes all over NZ. Indigenous theatre, performing arts, books and events are also ways people can start learning and support Indigenous peoples.

What advice would you have for Indigenous youth reading this?

Keep deepening your learning about identity. Realize that there's a rich inheritance, this spiritual birthright, connect to it and share it. I received a lovely text from one of my nieces when she was learning about Maori graphic design, and her lecturer shared with her class one of our leader's interviews on mana. She was so excited to learn about it, which made me happy. Notice those pockets of goodwill and reasons for hope, and team up with people who believe in you. We need our youth to know that we believe in them and to experience our commitment to "success is succession."

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