

Brooke Fiafia reflects on her experiences attending the social movements conference with a group of fierce and loving women. While critiquing conference spaces, she talks about the aroha that drew her to this particular conference. Aroha, as she writes, is necessary for our shared humanity. It is what was activated in the creation of the conference and what was explored in conference conversations and sharings about transformation, connection, relationship, and showing-up as our authentic selves.

Activating Aroha

BROOKE PAO STANLEY

I'm not super into conferences to be honest. I think they're clout spaces for academics and I'm pretty staunch about only using clout for the cause (of changing the world). I grew up in privilege and so I've been privy to spaces like this my whole life—so called 'clout' spaces—and found all of them to be pretentious, disingenuous, and boring AF. I am very much into aroha, though, and it was the only thing that drew me to the social movements conference in 2020. It's the belief and practice that has saved and held Indigenous people and communities together since colonisation began. And I believe it's the only belief and practice that will continue to hold us as we move into the next era in our shared humanity and community, one that requires deep change on all levels, from all of us for all of us, especially for the whenua.

I work with an organisation called Auckland Action Against Poverty (AAAP). We're a voluntary political organisation (I'm the only one who is paid, as the coordinator) that fights for freedom from poverty in Aotearoa, a belief and practice introduced through colonisation that sits at the intersection of society and how each of us gets to participate in it. It's such a wild concept and there's so much to unpack with it, but we'll leave that sharing for another time.

I wanted some of our volunteers—many of whom are people receiving benefits—to experience a conference and so

I had the gratitude of attending with some of the most iconic people I know: Agnes Magele, Kafa Mamaia, and Sally Faleupolu. They are fierce, loving women with incredibly powerful and moving stories; women who have had to live their lives ‘without’ this so-called clout and who have had it too rough for too long, and still do; women who have been forced to be resilient in their survival, women I am honoured to call my sisters in love and solidarity.

What stood out for me about the conference was the feels. For me it’s all about the feels. And instead of a conference it felt more like an offering, one created with the intention of being a space of exploring the depth of aroha in its all-encompassing range and heart. I was inspired and empowered listening to Margaret Mutu give the keynote address on the first day about constitutional transformation and Matike Mai. I felt a deep thanks that Margaret could speak to it in a way that we could all understand and therefore dream and hope for our future. Trust me when I say that my sisters and those we work with at AAAP, those who serve in our community, are the most authentic, most genuine, and most ‘Tell you you’re all shit to your face’ people I know. So, to have my sisters there feel the words in their cores is the kind of clout (I’m here for) that is forever. I was emotional listening to Pania Newton and Pua Case’s sharing of the significance of relationship building to movements of change and their militant protection and loving of the whenua and maunga. I was strongly reminded of how sacred it is to be in relationship to the whenua, ourselves, and each other. I felt an overwhelming sense of being spoiled after the talanoa between Dr Elizabeth Kerekere, Makanaka Tuwe, and Mahmah Timoteo and their stories of how challenging it can be to show up as our most authentic selves in the world but to do it unapologetically anyway.

My sisters were a bit bummed out about the fact there were so many sessions held at the same time; we had to make some hard choices about which ones to be part of, but at the end of it all I felt it was an offering of radical hope. It gave us hope to dream, to safely unpack the systems that have been so violently established for us, and to understand what each of our journeys are in making ways back to our whole selves again, together:

to remember and reclaim stories and beliefs and power we've forgotten; to remember that our existence as Indigenous women of Oceania means a solidarity bound in the salt of the moana and the blood of our ancestors and children; and to remember that there is still so much work to do but that those of us who believe in this work are growing. Aroha was what drew me to the conference and it's what was activated in its creation. I hold deep appreciation and care for those who weaved it into a space that calls us to keep calling on the fires of change and look forward to what will rise from it.