

It is no surprise that *Whale Rider* became an international gem after its release. The movie brings average watchers into a world that is unfamiliar and presents said watchers with a conflict that is entirely inside this small community. As I watched, I envisioned myself as Mary Catherine Bateson. Her experiences in *Peripheral Visions* weighed heavily on my mind as I watched, and I began thinking about myself as the anthropologist; someone who came to the Maori village to study their culture and values. I also found myself trying to imagine what I would do if I were there, as if I were actually trying to live amongst them. When I watched “Speech of Love and Respect”, I noticed many things that made the scene significant.

For Pai, this is a very important moment. While she does have a special bond with her grandfather, Koro also believes that she has broken the line of chiefs that directly descends from their ancestor, Paikea, the Whale Rider. He does not even consider for a moment that she could be the next chief, and instead focuses on training other boys. When Koro fails, he falls into a depression, and is unable to get out of bed. Pai invites him to be the guest of honor at her school’s performance, because she has secretly won a speech contest for her speech that is dedicated to her grandfather.

Her grandfather does not show up, and Pai does her speech anyway, with a little encouragement from her grandmother. Pai is extremely emotional, and it is hard to watch such a young girl struggle in front of so many people. For me in particular, the teacher, it was awkward. I felt for her as she struggled to deliver the words, catching herself as she cried, and seldom wiping the tears away. I found myself waiting for someone to stop her, or for Pai to rush off the stage, eager for the emotion-filled moment to stop, or for Pai to receive some comfort. This did not happen. Pai continues her speech until it is done, and her tears never stop. It occurred to me that this moment is awkward for me because I was raised in a setting where emotions are generally hidden or toned down in the public eye. I could not imagine getting up in front of a classroom full of my peers with tears streaming down my face delivering a speech to someone who didn’t show up to hear it. I would be embarrassed and probably unable to continue. In contrast, Pai is not unaffected by her emotions, but rather, it is important for her to continue her speech, so she does it even with the tears streaming down her face. This moment made me think of Bateson, when attending her first wake in the Philippines. She felt very awkward when she participated in the customary steps to the wake, and she recognized that her awkwardness stemmed from her upbringing and experiences with death. The challenge would be for me to emotionally bare myself in this Maori village, despite what internal tension it would bring. Of course, this also assumes that I am correct in my assumption that emotions are a welcome and accustomed sight in this village.

This moment is also important for Pai because it is the first time she vocally stands up for herself. She has been trying to learn what she needs to become chief, but until this point, when her grandfather says no, she backs away. It is during this speech that she expresses her ideas about how everyone should be given the chance to learn, not just the boys. She acknowledges that leaders even get tired sometimes, so everyone should also be strong. Her namesake used a chant to call out to the ancient ones when she was too tired on the ocean and could not find land, and it is this chant that she recites, after tearfully saying that it is dedicated to her grandfather. For Pai, this was a huge moment. She is trying to show what she has learned, and even though her grandfather is not there to hear it, she delivers her speech anyway. This was also a celebration of herself and her culture, and something that obviously made Pai proud. Her disappointment in herself, for not being a boy who her grandfather is proud of, and her disappointment in her grandfather, for his inability to change his mind about the old ways, is so apparent in this scene.

The juxtaposition of the breached whales to Pai's speech further exemplifies the importance of both events. For Koro, the beached whales are yet another sign that he has failed to find another chief and to continue the old ways of his people's culture. He had been trying to mend the rift he believes exists between the ancient ones and the world because of Pai's birth. He is so distraught when the boys fail to complete the challenges to become chief, that his sadness comes before his family. He was going to be late or miss the event anyway; he was leaving well after everyone else when he was walking and saw the breached whales. Koro believes in his culture and way of life more than anything else.

The whales being breached represent something that I, as an outsider, can only understand on a surface level. I have not lived in this village, or grown up with its values. So while, yes, I can see that whales are an omen or sign that Koro deals with, it is important to remember that I'm merely an observer. My own reactions, if I were there, would help to make my experience more participatory. I already notice my own reactions to events that happened in the movie and much like Bateson, was able to recognize that the reason I was able to notice my own feelings has much to do with how different I am from Pai, and how much different my world is than Pai's world.