

Earth Whisperers/Papatuanuku
A film review by Rev Dr Steve Taylor

Confession time. Watching Earth Whisperers/Papatuanuku increased my global footprint. Firstly, the coffee for the theatre only came in styrofoam cups. Secondly, on exiting, the rubbish tins remained devoid of an environmental option.

Such is the impact of Earth Whisperers/Papatuanuku. Directed by Kathleen Gallagher, the star taking centre stage is none other than the land of the long white cloud. The movie became a vehicle by which the many blessings given by Papatuanuku, the land, could be named by some of her children. Specifically this involved ten interviews, spread over 73 minutes, with ten Kiwis; including a Tuhoë healer (Rita Tupe), a herbalist (Isla Burgess), a tree farmer (Hugh Wilson), a chef (Charles Royal), a bird caller (Gerry Findlay), an environmental campaigner (Alan Mark), a seed saver (Kay Baxter), an organic farmer (Jim O’Gorman), a photographer (Craig Potten) and a Maori kuia (Makere Ruka). The interviews are absorbing, ordinary Kiwis sharing their passion to cleanse this land before it becomes one long, polluted, cloud.

The narratives are compelling, ranging from soil’s ability to heal, to the dietary potential of stinging nettle. Equally, the facts are disturbing, including our dependence on Northern Hemisphere seeds and the power of a persistent few to lever environment change.

A coup was the involvement of cameraman Alun Bollinger. One of New Zealand's most high profile cinematographers, Alun has removed the lens cap on works including Goodbye Pork Pie, Lord of the Rings, The Piano, What Becomes of The Broken Hearted and River Queen. Much of the cinematography revolved around an earthbound camera, stylistically keeping clean, green, New Zealand centre stage.

Earth Whisperers/Papatuanuku falls somewhat uneasily between documentary and green whimsy. While a documentary is defined as a film or TV program presenting the facts about a person or event, choosing ten “green” voices left little room for opposition viewpoints. The green whimsy was compounded by the cliché shots of dew laden spider webs (brunch at Aranea’s place anyone?) and the sound of tui and bellbird emanating from the lips of bird caller, Gerry Findlay. The soundtrack during the interview with Charles Royal was a standout, a funky set of electronic beats and clicks.

Which returns me to my coffee cup. As I sadly tossed the styrofoam I considered the practical reality of urban living. I would love to be one of the ten interviewed, absorbed by dreams of a self-sufficient lifestyle block. But for this season of my life, I remain an urban dweller. So does most of New Zealand. For a no. 8 wire generation, change is more likely when it is framed, not as a rural idyll, but in suburban community gardens or urban recycling schemes. Finding a few such urban earth whispers might just make Papatuanuku less mythic.

Earth Whisperers/Papatuanuku is available on DVD from www.wickcandle.co.nz and would work well as a Kiwi church discussion group. All that is needed would be a free night, a set of couches, some candle lit tables, a stack of recycled paper on which to print invitations and some well-chosen discussion starter questions.

Side bar: Film church discussion starters.

1. Of the ten people interviewed, who did you feel most drawn to?
2. One way to describe these ten people is as contemporary Kiwi “environmental” saints. Are there any Bible characters, or people in Christian history, that you consider could also be “environmental” saints?
3. How do you respond to the Maori concept of land as “Papatuanuku”, as earth mother?
4. Francis of Assisi famously wrote in The Canticle of Creation: “Praise be to You, my Lord, for our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and keeps us.” How practically, on a regular basis, might we as humans pay attention to the whispers of the earth in ways that might sustain and keep us?
5. Craig Potton talked about the power of a persistent few to bring about environmental change. What examples of this have you seen?
6. In what ways has the green movement changed your attitudes and behaviours, whether positively or negatively?
7. What might change in your attitudes and behaviours as a result of seeing this film?

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