

Taha Auaha: The Healing Power of Creative Expression

Why Creativity Is Not Optional — The Passage of Freedom

Ruku l'Anson (April 2026)

When there is historical pain or deep emotion, creativity is not decoration — it is the primary language through which what has been held can finally move.

Abstract

This article introduces Taha Auaha — the dimension of Creative Wellness within Te Poutama o te Ora (TPO), a nine-dimension Māori wellness framework developed to address the complex, layered nature of human healing. Drawing on Māori epistemological traditions, trauma-informed practice, epigenetics research, and expressive arts theory, this article argues that creative expression is not an optional supplementary activity but a fundamental human need — particularly for those carrying intergenerational trauma, cultural disconnection, or deep emotional histories that have never found adequate form. The article explores the mechanisms through which creativity facilitates healing, positions Taha Auaha within the broader TPO framework, and offers a practice rationale for integrating creative expression into wellness programmes. Written in accessible language for practitioners, whānau, students, and community members, this article draws on current research while honouring te ao Māori perspectives on expression, whakapapa, and the passage of story.

Keywords: *Taha Auaha, creativity, creative wellness, Te Poutama o te Ora, trauma-informed practice, expressive arts, whakapapa, intergenerational healing, Māori wellness, narrative release.*

He Kupu Whakataki — Introduction

Somewhere in the history of how we talk about wellness, creativity got separated from healing. It became the domain of artists. Of school art rooms. Of people who had time and talent. Something people did for enjoyment, not something they did to survive.

This article asks us to reconsider that separation — not as a philosophical preference, but as a clinical and cultural matter.

Within Te Poutama o te Ora (TPO), creativity is recognised as a distinct and essential dimension of human wellness. Called Taha Auaha — from the te reo Māori word auaha, meaning creative, inventive, and generative — this ninth dimension of the framework holds a specific and irreplaceable function: it is the dimension through which what has been held is finally released.

This is not a new idea. Across the world's healing traditions, including those of Māori and Pasifika peoples, creativity has long been understood as a medicine. Song, karakia, whaikōrero, tā moko, whakairo, kōrero pūrākau, haka — these were never simply cultural performances. They were technologies of transmission, release, and restoration. The stories of the people were carried in creative form across generations precisely because creative form can hold what ordinary language often cannot.

Contemporary research in trauma science, neurobiology, and expressive arts therapy has arrived, through different pathways, at the same understanding. This article brings those pathways together — weaving te Ao Māori frameworks with current evidence — to make a clear case for why Taha Auaha belongs at the heart of any serious wellness practice.

He Aha te Taha Auaha? — What Is Taha Auaha?

Taha Auaha is the ninth pou (pillar) of Te Poutama o te Ora. The nine dimensions of TPO are: Taha Matihiko (digital), Taha Pūtea (financial), Taha Kai (gut wellness), Taha Whakapapa (relational), Taha Tinana (body), Taha Tuakiri (identity), Taha Wairua (spiritual), Taha Hinengaro (mental/emotional), and Taha Auaha (creative). Together

they form an integrated architecture of wellbeing in which each dimension both stands alone and is in relationship with all others.

Taha Auaha is positioned as the ninth dimension not because it is least important, but because it functions as the integrating dimension — the place where the work of all other dimensions finds expression. It is the dimension that asks: what has moved through you in this healing process? What can you now give form to? What story can be told, painted, sung, woven, or spoken that could not be before?

The word auaha is instructive. It does not simply mean artistic. It carries the sense of bringing something new into being — of innovation, originality, generativity. In the context of healing, this is exactly what creativity does: it takes what has been formless, held, and wordless — grief, shame, longing, ancestral weight, relational rupture — and brings it into a form that can be witnessed, processed, and released.

Auaha is not talent. It is the human capacity to bring into form what was previously formless — including our pain, our joy, and our inherited stories.

The Science of Creativity and Healing

Why the Body Holds What Words Cannot

One of the most significant contributions of contemporary trauma research is the understanding that traumatic experience is not primarily stored as narrative memory — as a story we can tell in sequence — but as somatic, sensory, and emotional material held in the body's nervous system (van der Kolk, 2014). Bessel van der Kolk's landmark work demonstrated that trauma survivors often cannot access their experiences through verbal recall alone, precisely because the language centres of the brain are among those most disrupted by traumatic events.

This finding has profound implications for wellness practice. If the held material of trauma — and of less acute but equally significant experiences such as grief, cultural disconnection, and inherited family pain — is stored below the level of verbal language,

then wellness approaches that rely exclusively on verbal processing will always have a ceiling. Something else is needed to reach what words cannot.

Creativity reaches it. Not because creativity bypasses the intellect, but because it engages the whole nervous system. Visual art, music, movement, writing, craft, and song each activate neural pathways that verbal processing does not (Malchiodi, 2011). They provide access to emotional and somatic material that is otherwise unreachable in ordinary therapeutic conversation. As Levine (1997) observed in his foundational work on somatic experiencing, healing does not only happen through understanding — it happens through the body completing what was previously interrupted.

Expressive Writing and Emotional Release

The research on expressive writing provides some of the most accessible and well-replicated evidence for the healing power of creative expression. Pennebaker and Beall (1986) demonstrated in early controlled trials that participants who wrote about traumatic experiences for as few as four consecutive days showed significantly better immune function, fewer health centre visits, and improved psychological wellbeing compared to those who wrote about neutral topics.

Subsequent decades of research have confirmed and extended these findings across diverse populations and creative modalities. Pennebaker and Smyth (2016) synthesised this body of evidence in their comprehensive review, concluding that expressive writing consistently produces measurable benefits for physical and psychological health — particularly when the writing engages both the emotional content of experience and the participant's attempt to make meaning from it.

It is this combination — emotion and meaning-making — that distinguishes therapeutic creative expression from simple diary-keeping or emotional venting. Creativity that heals is creativity that gives form not only to what happened, but to what it meant, what was lost, what was passed forward, and what might now be different.

Epigenetics and the Inherited Story

One of the most striking developments in recent trauma research is the growing evidence for epigenetic transmission — the biological mechanism through which the effects of traumatic experience can be passed from one generation to the next without direct exposure (Yehuda et al., 2016). This research demonstrates that the children and grandchildren of trauma survivors carry measurable biological markers of their ancestors' experiences, including altered stress hormone regulation and changes in gene expression.

For Māori and other indigenous peoples whose whakapapa carries the weight of colonisation, land confiscation, language suppression, and systematic cultural destruction, this research is not abstract. It provides a biological account of what many have known experientially: that the pain in the body is not only personal. It is inherited.

Taha Auaha engages directly with this understanding. When a person creates from a place of deep emotional truth — when they write the poem their grandmother could not write, paint the grief their father carried in silence, or sing the song their people were forbidden to sing — they are not only expressing their own experience. They are giving passage to a story that has been held in the body across generations. The creative act becomes an act of intergenerational healing.

When we reveal our creativity, we give passage to all the narratives we have held — brought through from epigenetics, upbringing, and environmental conditioning.

Polyvagal Theory and Creative Safety

Porges' (2011) polyvagal theory offers a neurobiological framework for understanding why safety is a prerequisite for creative expression, and why creative expression in turn creates safety. The theory describes the human nervous system's hierarchical response to threat, and crucially, identifies social engagement — including the prosodic qualities of voice, facial expression, and movement — as the primary mechanism through which the nervous system shifts from defensive states into states of connection and openness.

Creative expression, particularly when witnessed in a safe relational context, activates exactly these social engagement systems. Singing engages the vagus nerve directly through resonance in the chest and throat. Shared creative acts — making together, witnessing together — create the co-regulation that the nervous system needs to process what it could not process alone. This is why creative practice in community is not merely pleasant but neurobiologically significant.

For those whose nervous systems have been shaped by trauma — including the complex developmental trauma of growing up in environments of instability, cultural disruption, or relational rupture — the regulated co-creative space may be the first context in which held material can safely begin to move.

Māori Perspectives on Creativity and Healing

Auaha in te Ao Māori

Long before the language of trauma science existed, Māori understood that stories needed somewhere to go. The oral and creative traditions of Māori culture were not simply aesthetic practices — they were technologies of collective memory, emotional transmission, and intergenerational connection. Waiata carried grief and longing that could not be spoken directly. Haka expressed resistance and identity when other forms of assertion were suppressed. Whakairo encoded whakapapa in permanent form. Kōrero pūrākau transmitted the moral and relational wisdom of the tūpuna in ways that resonated far deeper than instruction.

Royal (2009), in his foundational work on indigenous creativity, articulates the concept of papatūānuku as the creative ground from which all expression emerges — the primal generative force from which te ao Māori understands all making to arise. Within this framework, human creativity is not individual achievement but participation in a creative order that is both natural and ancestral. To create is to be in relationship with one's whakapapa, one's environment, and the living and the dead.

This understanding shapes how Taha Auaha is positioned within TPO. Creativity is not a skill set. It is a relational practice. When a person creates, they do not do so in isolation — they draw on everything and everyone who has shaped them, and they offer something forward to those who come after.

The Double Exile and the Creative Wound

For many Māori and indigenous people, the capacity for creative expression has itself been wounded. Colonisation did not only suppress language and land — it suppressed the creative practices through which those realities were held and transmitted. The suppression of te reo Māori was also the suppression of waiata, of kōrero, of the specific sonic and poetic textures through which Māori identity was expressed and passed forward.

For those who experienced what has been described in the TPO framework as the double exile — being neither Pākehā enough nor Māori enough, belonging fully to neither world — the creative wound is compounded. The language and forms of the ancestral creative tradition may feel inaccessible, belonging to a culture one was not fully permitted to inhabit. The creative forms of the dominant culture may feel alienating, belonging to a world that did not fully receive one either.

In this context, Taha Auaha serves a particular function. It invites the practitioner to begin wherever they are — in whatever creative form feels closest to their body and their truth — without requiring cultural performance or artistic credential. The goal is not to produce Māori art. The goal is to give passage to the story that is held, in whatever form makes that passage possible.

Smith (1999), in her seminal work on decolonising methodologies, argues that reclaiming the right to tell one's own story — in one's own form, and perspective — is itself an act of decolonisation. Taha Auaha positions creative expression in exactly this way: not as therapy in the clinical sense, but as the reclamation of one's own narrative authority.

Taha Auaha Within the TPO Framework

The Ninth Pou

Within TPO's 5+3+1=9 architecture, Taha Auaha occupies the position of the single integrating dimension — the one that draws from and gives expression to all others. This placement reflects its functional role in the healing process. A practitioner working through the dimensions of TPO will, by the time they reach Taha Auaha, have done significant work: they will have attended to their physical body, the digital environment, financial wellbeing, spiritual life, relationships, their connection to te Taiao, identity, and mental and emotional patterns.

Taha Auaha is the dimension that asks: what do you do with all of that? The answer the framework offers is: you express it. You give it form. You let the accumulated work of healing find a language that is more than analytical — one that is felt, witnessed, and released.

This is why Taha Auaha is sometimes described as the dimension of dimensional autophagy — the process by which the healing system consumes and transforms the residue of what has been processed, clearing the way for new growth and new integration. Just as biological autophagy is the cellular mechanism by which the body breaks down and recycles damaged components, creative expression is the mechanism by which held emotional and narrative material is broken down, given form, and transformed into something that can serve the individual's forward movement.

Taha Auaha and the Whakapapa of a Wound

TPO's companion theoretical framework — the Whakapapa of a Wound — traces the genealogy of human suffering, locating it not only in the individual's present experience but in the inherited patterns of epigenetics, developmental shaping, relational templates, and cultural wounding that have been passed forward across generations. The framework argues that effective healing must attend to this full genealogy — not only symptom management but the tracing of narrative lineage.

Taha Auaha is the dimension in which this genealogical work finds its most complete expression. When a practitioner creates — whether they write, draw, sing, weave, or move — they are enacting the Whakapapa of a Wound in form. The creative work does not only describe the wound's genealogy; it participates in its transformation. It is the practitioner saying, in the language of creative form: I have traced where this came from. I now give it somewhere to go. I give it passage, give it freedom.

This is the phrase that best captures the function of Taha Auaha: it gives passage. To the stories that have been held in the body. Grief that was never witnessed. Rage that had no form, and the beauty that was suppressed. The love that could not speak. Creative expression gives all of this — passage.

Implications for Practice

For Practitioners Working with Taha Auaha

Practitioners integrating Taha Auaha into their wellness work — whether in counselling, social work, community health, or education — are encouraged to consider several key principles drawn from the research and from TPO's framework:

- 1. Safety before expression.** Creative expression of held material requires a regulated nervous system. Porges (2011) and van der Kolk (2014) both emphasise that the capacity for creative exploration depends on a felt sense of safety. The relational context — the practitioner's presence, the environment, the group — must establish safety before the creative work begins.
- 2. Form follows the body.** The practitioner should not prescribe a creative form. They should invite the client to identify what feels closest to their body — what medium, what sensory texture, what mode of making feels most accessible. The right form is the one that can be entered without requiring performance.

3. Process over product. Taha Auaha is not an arts programme. The creative work is not evaluated aesthetically. What matters is what moved — what was held before the session that is now in motion, in form, in the world.

4. Witnessing is part of the healing. Pennebaker and Smyth (2016) note that creative expression that is witnessed — even by a single trusted other — produces stronger healing outcomes than expression that remains entirely private. The social engagement dimensions of creative witnessing (Porges, 2011) are clinically significant.

5. Honour the whakapapa of the creative act. For Māori practitioners and clients, acknowledge that creative expression carries whakapapa. The work is not only the individual's — it draws from and offers back to the collective. This understanding can itself be therapeutic for those whose sense of creative belonging has been fractured.

Taha Auaha and the Non-Creative Client

The most common resistance practitioners will encounter is the belief that creativity is for creative people — and that the client is not one of them. This belief is almost universal among those whose creative expression was discouraged, suppressed, or shamed in childhood or through cultural conditioning. It is, in itself, a wound worth attending to.

McNiff (2004), in his foundational text on art as medicine, notes that the therapeutic power of art does not depend on artistic skill. It depends on honesty of expression. A drawing that is clumsy but true carries more healing potential than a technically accomplished piece that conceals rather than reveals. The practitioner's role is to establish this — clearly, repeatedly, and without judgment.

For Māori clients, it can also be valuable to reframe creativity away from Western individual artistic achievement and toward whakapapa participation. You are not being asked to be an artist. You are being asked to participate in the creative lineage of your people — to add your voice to the waiata, the kōrero, the making, that has always been part of who you are.

Ngā Whakaaro Whakamutunga — Conclusion

Taha Auaha offers wellness practice something that purely analytical frameworks cannot: a pathway into the held, the wordless, and the inherited. It does not compete with evidence-based clinical approaches — it extends them, opening a doorway into material that verbal processing cannot always reach.

The research reviewed in this article — from epigenetics and trauma neurobiology to expressive arts therapy and Māori creative tradition — converges on a single understanding: the capacity to give form to one's experience is not an aesthetic luxury. It is a healing necessity.

For those carrying the accumulated weight of historical trauma, cultural suppression, intergenerational burden, and relational rupture, creative expression is not self-indulgence. It is the work. It is the passage through which what has been held can finally move, be witnessed, and be released.

Te Poutama o te Ora positions Taha Auaha as a dimension of wellness precisely because of this understanding. Wellness that does not include creative expression is incomplete. It attends to the symptoms but not the voice. To the behaviour but not the story. To the wound but not the passage.

Taha Auaha opens the passage.

Ko te auaha te ara e tukuna ai ngā kōrero o te whatumanawa. Creativity is the pathway through which the stories of the heart find release.

Ngā Tohutoro — References

This article is written in plain academic language and draws on these sources in ways intended to be accessible to practitioners, students, and community members without specialist academic backgrounds.

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