

A FOUNDATIONAL ESSAY

I Did Not Arrive Here Alone

The voices that have helped me pay closer attention

Michael Reynolds • Aotearoa New Zealand • August 2026

The invitation to pay closer attention did not arrive fully formed.

It was not the result of a single revelation, one book or a theory that suddenly explained everything.

It emerged slowly, through years of reading, listening, working, observing and trying to understand why so many aspects of the world appear to be moving in directions that few of us would consciously choose.

Some people gave me language for things I had already begun to sense.

Others disturbed assumptions I had not realised I was carrying.

Some helped me connect questions that had previously seemed separate: food and energy, housing and wealth, ecology and economics, care and infrastructure, personal autonomy and collective power.

They have not led me towards a single answer.

They have helped me ask better questions.

I want to acknowledge some of those voices—not because association with recognised thinkers makes this work correct, but because ideas have histories and knowledge is never produced alone.

To acknowledge influence is also to make the work more open.

It allows others to follow the paths that have shaped my thinking, arrive at different interpretations, notice what I have missed and challenge the synthesis I am attempting to make.

I have not accepted any of these bodies of work as complete explanations. They do not always agree with one another, and I do not always agree with them.

What matters is what each has helped me see.

Learning to see the material world

Much of public life is discussed as though society were primarily made from money, laws, policies and opinions.

But underneath every economy is a physical world.

Food must be grown, harvested, processed and transported. Buildings require minerals, timber, energy and labour. Electricity must be generated and distributed through material infrastructure. Human bodies require nourishment, water, shelter and care.

The work of **Vaclav Smil** helped me take these physical foundations more seriously.

Smil's writing is a reminder that modern societies are extraordinarily dependent upon immense flows of energy and materials. His work on agriculture, energy, infrastructure and industrial production has repeatedly brought me back to the physical realities beneath abstract economic language. His book [*How the World Really Works*](#) is particularly direct in connecting energy, food production, materials, globalisation and the conditions of modern life.

This has influenced the way I think about food systems, local provisioning and ecological transition.

It is easy to describe a desirable future without asking what materials it requires, where its energy will come from, how its infrastructure will be maintained or whether its promises can be extended fairly across an entire population.

Smil does not provide the political or ethical direction I am looking for. Material realism cannot tell us what a just society should value.

But it can prevent us from building visions upon physical assumptions that are unlikely to hold.

The environmental historian **Jean-Baptiste Fressoz** added another important disturbance.

We often speak about energy history as a series of transitions: wood giving way to coal, coal to oil and fossil fuels now giving way to renewable energy.

Fressoz's [*history of energy*](#) challenges that comforting story. New energy sources have generally been added to those already in use, becoming entangled with and even increasing demand for them, rather than simply replacing them.

This changes the question.

Installing renewable generation is not necessarily the same as reducing fossil-fuel dependence. Greater efficiency does not guarantee lower overall consumption. New technologies can expand the total volume of energy and materials moving through the economy without displacing what came before.

Fressoz helped me see why the source of our energy cannot be the only subject of attention.

We also have to ask how much energy we expect to use, what we are using it for, which forms of production it enables, whose needs it meets and whether supposedly cleaner systems are actually replacing destructive ones or merely being added to them.

Smil and Fressoz have made it more difficult for me to accept effortless stories of transition.

They have also strengthened my conviction that ecological responsibility must involve the scale and purpose of economic activity, not only the technologies through which that activity is powered.

Questioning growth and inequality

Once the material scale of the economy becomes visible, endless economic growth becomes much harder to treat as a neutral or universally beneficial objective.

The work of ecological economist **Timothée Parrique** has helped me understand degrowth not as an uncontrolled recession or a demand that everyone should simply live with less, but as a democratic and equitable reduction of production and consumption in ecologically overshooting economies while protecting wellbeing.

His [definition of degrowth](#) brings together ecological sustainability, democracy, justice and human wellbeing. This combination matters.

A reduction in material and energy use without justice could simply force greater hardship upon those who already have the least.

Redistribution without ecological limits could improve access temporarily while leaving the underlying trajectory of extraction unchanged.

Ecological policy without democracy could become coercive, technocratic and deeply unequal.

Parrique's work helped me see that reducing throughput and building a more equal society cannot be treated as separate projects. The transition away from growth dependence must be designed around secure provisioning, democratic participation and a fair distribution of both benefits and sacrifices.

It has also brought the idea of **enough** into sharper focus.

An economy organised around enough is not an economy without aspiration, creativity or joy. It is one in which human wellbeing is no longer dependent upon continuously increasing the volume of materials, energy and commodities passing through society.

It requires a secure floor beneath everyone.

It may also require limits upon the ability of some people to accumulate without end.

A more recent influence has been **Gary Stevenson**.

Stevenson's journey from financial trading to public economic education, described in [The Trading Game](#), gives inequality an immediacy that conventional economic language often removes.

His work has reinforced for me that inequality is not only about differences in income. It is about the accumulation of assets and the power that follows ownership.

When some people must spend nearly everything they earn on housing, food, energy and debt, while others possess sufficient wealth to continually acquire more property, shares and infrastructure, inequality begins to reproduce itself.

Those who own assets gain from their increasing value. Those who do not own them face higher barriers to security. Wealth flows upwards, and the distance between people becomes increasingly difficult to reverse.

Stevenson has also demonstrated the value of explaining structural economics through ordinary experience.

That has influenced not only what I want *Paying Closer Attention* to examine, but how I want to approach the media side of the work.

Public understanding does not always require simplifying the reality of a problem. It often requires finding language that reconnects abstract systems with what people are already experiencing in their homes, workplaces and communities.

Recovering human scale

Questions of scale have been central to my thinking about food, infrastructure and collective provisioning.

In *A Small Farm Future*, farmer and social scientist **Chris Smaje** asks what forms of agriculture and social organisation might remain viable in a future shaped by ecological disruption, energy constraints and the weakening of global systems upon which industrial societies have become dependent.

His work has helped me see food as more than a commodity or an economic sector.

Food is a relationship between people, land, energy, knowledge, labour, culture and ecology. The way food is produced shapes settlement, livelihoods, community capacity and our relationship with the living world.

Smaje's arguments for smaller-scale farming, agricultural diversity, local economies and greater self-provisioning do not provide a simple plan that can be transferred unchanged to Aotearoa.

Nor do I believe that everything necessary for a dignified life can or should be organised at the smallest possible scale.

But his work has helped me question systems that have traded local knowledge, distributed capacity and ecological responsiveness for apparent efficiency and global dependency.

It has encouraged me to ask not simply how much food a system produces, but what kinds of people, places and relationships that system produces alongside it.

The work of **Ivan Illich** goes deeper into this question of human scale.

In *Tools for Conviviality*, Illich uses the idea of a tool broadly. A tool can be a physical object, but it can also be an institution or system through which education, health, transport, energy or knowledge is organised.

Illich helped me recognise that tools can initially extend human capacity and later grow to a point where they begin to diminish it.

Systems designed to serve people can make people increasingly dependent upon professional control. Technologies intended to increase freedom can remove the knowledge and capacity needed to live without them. Institutions created to meet human needs can redefine those needs around the services the institution is capable of providing.

Convivial tools work differently.

They remain understandable and adaptable. They strengthen the capacity of people to act, learn, create and cooperate. They support interdependence without turning people into passive clients of systems they cannot influence.

Illich's suspicion of large and professionalised institutions creates productive tension within my own thinking.

I do not take his work as an argument for abandoning universal public services or leaving essential needs to informal communities. Local capacity cannot substitute for properly resourced healthcare, public transport, education, housing or social protection.

The question his work leaves me with is how we might create public and collective institutions that provide universal security while still increasing the agency, knowledge and participation of the people who depend upon them.

How do we create systems that care for people without unnecessarily disempowering them?

How do we make expertise available without allowing it to become an unchallengeable form of control?

How do we build shared infrastructure that enlarges what people and communities are capable of doing together?

Conviviality has become important to me because it offers a way of thinking about the lived experience of commoning.

A robust society should not merely survive disruption.

It should remain a society in which people possess meaningful ways to participate, contribute and exercise judgement.

Learning from living systems

The work of biologist **Olivier Hamant** has provided another important part of the framework.

Modern institutions are frequently organised around performance and efficiency. They remove duplication, reduce spare capacity, standardise processes and concentrate production in whichever places appear able to deliver it most cheaply.

These systems can perform impressively while conditions remain predictable.

They can also become extraordinarily fragile.

Hamant's work on [robustness and the limits of optimisation](#) draws attention to the very different qualities found within living systems.

Life retains diversity, redundancy, variation and apparently inefficient forms of spare capacity. These characteristics may reduce maximum performance under stable conditions, but they increase the ability of a system to remain viable when conditions fluctuate.

This distinction between performance and robustness has changed how I think about resilience.

Resilience is often used to mean the ability to recover quickly and return to a previous state. But in a world where climatic, ecological, energetic and political conditions may not return to what we have considered normal, restoring the previous system may be neither possible nor desirable.

Robustness asks whether a system can continue caring for life while conditions change.

It values distributed capacity, multiple ways of meeting needs, local knowledge, adaptability and the ability to function without every component operating perfectly.

Hamant's work helped provide language for something I had been circling for some time: the need for **robust commoning in a fluctuating world**.

But robustness alone is not an ethical direction.

An unequal or oppressive system can also be made robust. A system can become better at surviving while continuing to concentrate wealth, exclude people and degrade the living world.

Robustness describes qualities that can support endurance. It does not determine what should endure or for whose benefit.

That is why I have found it necessary to hold robustness alongside commoning, equality, care and ecological responsibility.

The work of **Daniel Christian Wahl** has helped develop this ecological and regenerative dimension.

Wahl's *[Designing Regenerative Cultures](#)* asks how people might collaborate in creating diverse cultures adapted to the particular ecological and cultural conditions of place—and how our actions might create conditions conducive to life.

Regeneration asks more than whether we can reduce harm.

It asks whether human participation can restore relationships, renew ecological capacity and contribute to the health of the larger systems within which we live.

This has influenced my movement from thinking primarily about sustainability towards thinking about whole ecosystems, bioregions and the role of human systems within a living world.

At the same time, regenerative language can become vague if it is separated from material limits, ownership, power and measurable consequences.

Smil and Fressoz remind me to ask what a regenerative proposal requires physically.

Parrique reminds me to ask whether it remains dependent upon economic growth.

Hamant reminds me that living systems are not controlled machines and that regeneration cannot be reduced to an optimised technical plan.

The usefulness lies in holding these voices together.

Staying with uncertainty

Dougald Hine has influenced the way I think about the emotional and cultural dimensions of this work.

In *[At Work in the Ruins](#)*, Hine argues that climate change confronts us with questions that scientific knowledge alone cannot answer.

Science can help us understand what is happening within the atmosphere, oceans and living systems.

It cannot, by itself, tell us how to live with what we know, what kinds of lives remain worth building, what we owe one another or how to respond when familiar stories of progress no longer feel credible.

Hine has helped me remain with the possibility that some losses cannot be prevented and that the future may not be a repaired version of the present.

This is not an argument for surrender.

It is an argument against allowing hope to depend upon promises that someone, somewhere, will eventually produce a solution large enough to preserve our existing way of life.

There is a particular kind of helplessness that comes from sensing the seriousness of our predicament while feeling unable to speak honestly about it.

There is another kind that comes from believing we must possess a complete solution before we are entitled to act.

Hine's work has helped me recognise that meaningful work can begin without certainty.

We can remain present. We can care for what is still here. We can strengthen relationships, protect possibilities and learn how to inhabit changing conditions without pretending that we control them.

This has shaped the tone I want *Paying Closer Attention* to carry.

I do not want to create another stream of catastrophic information that leaves people frightened and immobilised.

Nor do I want to offer reassurance that is disproportionate to what we know.

I want to help create a space where uncertainty can be taken seriously without becoming an excuse for passivity—and where people can examine difficult realities together without being hurried towards false hope or easy despair.

Governing what we share

The work of political economist **Elinor Ostrom** provided an important empirical foundation for thinking about the commons.

Ostrom studied communities that had developed durable ways of governing shared resources. Her work challenged the belief that common resources must inevitably be depleted unless they are either privatised or controlled by a central authority.

She showed that people can create rules, responsibilities, boundaries, monitoring and processes for resolving conflict through which shared resources can be cared for over time. Her research also pointed towards forms of [polycentric governance beyond a simple choice between markets and states](#).

Ostrom helped me understand that a commons is not merely a resource available to everyone.

It is a governed relationship.

Commoning involves the practical and often unglamorous work of deciding who can use something, under what conditions, how responsibilities will be shared, how breaches will be addressed and how rules can change as circumstances change.

Her work gives reason to believe that people are capable of self-organisation.

But it does not mean that every community begins with equal power or that local governance is automatically just.

A commons can still exclude. It can reproduce existing hierarchies. It can place unreasonable burdens upon those who perform the work of care. It can be overwhelmed by external markets, state power or people with greater access to wealth and legal resources.

Ostrom helped establish that common governance is possible.

The questions of colonial history, structural inequality and the distribution of power determine whether it can also be just.

Beginning from Aotearoa

In Aotearoa, thinking about collective governance cannot begin and end with European theories of the commons.

The work of **Matike Mai Aotearoa**, convened by **Moana Jackson** and chaired by **Margaret Mutu**, has profoundly challenged the assumption that our existing constitutional arrangements provide the neutral foundation from which collective futures should be designed.

[Matike Mai](#) begins from He Whakaputanga, Te Tiriti o Waitangi, tikanga and the continuing authority of hapū and iwi.

It calls for constitutional transformation rather than minor reform of arrangements built through colonisation and the continuing concentration of power within the Crown.

For my work, this is not simply another institutional model to be placed alongside cooperatives, public ownership or commons governance.

It is a challenge to the ground upon which those ideas stand.

The language of the commons can become another form of dispossession if it declares land, water or knowledge to belong to everyone while ignoring the authority, relationships and obligations that already exist.

Recommoning cannot mean taking what was first removed from Māori control and placing it into a new structure defined by others.

Nor can ideas such as kaitiakitanga, whakapapa or collective authority be detached from the relationships that give them meaning and absorbed into a generic ecological vocabulary.

Matike Mai has made me more conscious that collective governance in Aotearoa must honour tino rangatiratanga and engage seriously with the relationship between rangatiratanga and kāwanatanga.

It has also made me more cautious about claiming alignment.

I cannot speak for mana whenua, hapū or iwi. I cannot declare that a framework produced outside those relationships is consistent with tikanga simply because I believe its intentions are good.

What I can do is recognise that any credible discussion of shared authority, land, infrastructure and the future of Aotearoa must take these constitutional relationships seriously.

Te Tiriti is not an additional value to be fitted into an otherwise completed commons framework.

It changes the framework itself.

The voices without books

Not all the people who have shaped this work are writers, academics or public figures.

Some of the most important learning has come through working beside people who grow and distribute food, care for shared spaces, support whānau, navigate public systems and continue turning up for their communities despite being tired and under-resourced.

Community work has shown me that care does not happen simply because it is valued in principle.

Someone has to perform it.

Someone notices what needs repairing, welcomes the new person, maintains the relationships, remembers the history, cleans the space, resolves the conflict and carries the work when others step away.

It has also shown me that participation requires more than an invitation.

People need time, confidence, security, information and a genuine reason to believe that their contribution can influence what happens.

Parenting has brought another kind of attention.

Questions about climate, housing, work, care and the future are not abstract when I consider the world younger generations are being asked to inherit.

The distance between political time and generational time becomes much harder to ignore.

These experiences keep the intellectual work grounded.

They remind me that a theory of commoning that cannot account for exhaustion, conflict, unequal capacity and the practical labour of maintenance is incomplete.

They also remind me that knowledge is produced in gardens, kitchens, workplaces, neighbourhoods and relationships—not only in books.

Becoming good ancestors

The work of public philosopher **Roman Krznaric** has helped me think more deeply about the time horizon of responsibility.

In [*The Good Ancestor*](#), Krznaric examines the forces that keep contemporary societies trapped within the immediate present: electoral cycles, quarterly financial reporting, constant news, digital distraction and an economic system organised around rapid returns.

Future generations are absent from these arrangements.

They cannot vote, purchase shares, submit feedback or defend themselves against decisions whose consequences they will inherit.

Krznaric asks a deceptively simple question:

| What would it mean for us to become good ancestors?

This is not primarily a question about how we will be personally remembered. Most of the people who live with the consequences of our choices will never know our names.

It is a question about what we leave behind.

Will future generations inherit secure foundations for life, healthy soils and waterways, functioning public institutions and the capacity to make meaningful choices of their own?

Or will they inherit ecological damage, concentrated ownership, unpayable obligations and brittle systems designed to benefit the present by transferring their costs into the future?

Krznaric's work helped me understand long-term thinking as more than forecasting.

Forecasting attempts to predict what will happen.

Being a good ancestor asks what responsibilities we possess because our choices help determine what becomes possible.

This connects directly with my concern for younger generations. The future is not an abstract destination populated by hypothetical people. It is where our children, their children and innumerable forms of life will continue the story we are already shaping.

In [*his writing about long-term thinking*](#), Krznaric draws upon the Māori concept of whakapapa to challenge the Western tendency to divide the past, present and future into separate territories.

His engagement with whakapapa describes a continuity through which the living are connected with those who came before and those who are still to come.

This has resonated deeply with me.

It challenges the image of the individual as a self-contained person occupying a brief moment of time and owing little to either the past or the future.

We are recipients of knowledge, relationships, institutions and living systems that we did not create.

We are also ancestors in the making.

But Krznaric's discussion should be understood as an introduction rather than an authority on whakapapa.

Whakapapa is not simply a useful metaphor that can be detached from Te Ao Māori and adopted as a technique for improving Western decision-making. It carries relationships

between people, whenua, atua, tūpuna and generations yet to come. Its meaning arises within whakapapa itself, tikanga and lived Māori relationships.

As with the commons, it would be contradictory to take an Indigenous understanding of intergenerational relationship while ignoring the authority and obligations from which it emerges.

The responsibility is not simply to borrow the concept.

It is to allow it to challenge the assumptions beneath our own institutions—including who possesses authority, how belonging is understood and which relationships our decisions are required to honour.

Placed alongside Matike Mai, the question of being a good ancestor becomes constitutional as well as personal.

What arrangements of power are we passing on?

Whose authority will those arrangements recognise?

Will future generations inherit institutions capable of collective care, democratic participation and ecological restraint?

Will they have greater freedom to shape the conditions of their lives, or will their choices already have been narrowed by decisions made for our present convenience?

Krznaric has helped me see that paying closer attention must involve expanding not only the range of relationships we notice, but also the period of time for which we accept responsibility.

We need to pay attention backwards—to what we have inherited, whose sacrifices made our lives possible and which injustices remain embedded in our present arrangements.

We need to pay attention around us—to the people and living systems carrying the consequences now.

And we need to pay attention forwards—to the lives being shaped by choices whose full effects may not appear until long after we are gone.

To act in common is therefore also to act across time.

It is to inherit with honesty, participate with responsibility and leave behind conditions through which others can continue the work.

A constellation rather than a canon

These voices do not combine neatly into a single programme.

Smaje's emphasis on smaller-scale agrarian life raises questions about which systems must still be coordinated nationally or internationally.

Illich's distrust of professionalised institutions sits in tension with the need for universal and properly resourced public services.

Ostrom demonstrates the possibility of self-governance, but her institutional principles cannot simply resolve histories of colonisation or unequal ownership.

Parrique provides a democratic and equitable account of economic downscaling, but degrowth without robust systems of provisioning could leave people exposed to insecurity.

Wahl's regenerative possibilities must be tested against the material and energetic constraints made visible by Smil and Fresco.

Hamant's robustness needs an ethical direction so that we do not merely make existing systems better able to preserve injustice.

Hine reminds me that no framework will remove uncertainty or restore complete control.

Matike Mai reminds me that collective futures in Aotearoa cannot be designed as though colonisation, Te Tiriti and tino rangatiratanga were secondary considerations.

Krznaric reminds me that the consequences of all these arrangements extend beyond those currently able to participate, while his engagement with whakapapa must remain an opening into Māori understandings rather than a substitute for them.

Gary Stevenson reminds me that none of this will matter publicly if structural conditions cannot be explained in language connected to people's everyday lives.

I do not see these tensions as problems that must be tidied away.

They are part of what keeps the work alive.

Together, these voices have helped me move towards a set of connected convictions:

That human societies must be understood as material and ecological systems, not only financial ones.

That endless economic growth is incompatible with a finite living world.

That reducing material and energy use must be accompanied by greater equality and secure access to the foundations of life.

That systems designed only for efficiency will become fragile as conditions fluctuate.

That human-scale and convivial arrangements can strengthen agency, knowledge and participation.

That commons require governance, responsibility and care—not merely shared ownership.

That robustness without justice is not enough.

That regeneration must attend to power and material reality.

That collective governance in Aotearoa must honour Te Tiriti and tino rangatiratanga.

That people not yet born, though absent from our institutions, must nevertheless be present within our decisions.

And that we need forms of public conversation capable of holding uncertainty without retreating into denial, fatalism or false solutions.

This is the constellation from which *Paying Closer Attention* has emerged.

It is not a new doctrine assembled from fragments of other people's work.

It is an attempt to place different forms of knowledge into conversation with lived experience and with the conditions unfolding around us.

I expect this constellation to change.

Other voices will reveal what is missing. Some ideas I currently hold may not survive closer examination. People with different experiences will see relationships that remain invisible to me.

That is not a threat to the work.

It is the point of the work.

I did not arrive here alone.

None of us does.

We inherit a world shaped by people we will never meet, just as people we will never meet will inherit the world being shaped through our choices today.

The invitation to pay closer attention is mine to issue, but the questions do not belong to me.

Many voices have helped me reach this moment.

More voices will be needed to challenge the work and shape what follows.

Perhaps the measure of that work will not be whether our generation is remembered, but whether those who come after us inherit greater capacity to live, care, participate and choose.

Paying closer attention is one way of beginning to accept that responsibility.

It is part of learning how to act in common.

And it may be part of learning how to become better ancestors.