

Imaging a New Day in Wai'anae



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Stand on the side of Farrington Highway opposite Tamura store and watch people walking on the sidewalk, across the parking lot, or in and out of the doorways. See how people walk? Some look at the pavement, careful of each step. Others look straight ahead, negotiating around cars, people, and shopping carts. Still others look far into the distance, searching for mountain tops or rainbows. While each has a different perspective, all share this same place and instant.

Imaging a new day in this place we share called Wai'anae calls upon each one of us to seek the distance where we are able to stand on mountain tops or under rainbows and live our utopia. Imaging a new day challenges us to dream, it dignifies our dreaming, and our dreams become a bit closer because of the communal and public nature of them. It does not, however, overcome our need to take one step at a time, or to avoid the middle distance negotiating around obstacles. But these differences in styles of moving ahead can more easily become aligned when we can share the dreaming and perhaps the dream itself.

Because we share a common concern over the mental health of the Wai'anae community, we have a natural starting point, a place of reference for this dreaming, but we are not bound by this reference, we can dream from any starting point. We will naturally experience an exploration into the facets of life in Wai'anae, and even life outside of Wai'anae. We will need to adopt the metaphor of a spider web for our imaging a new day in Wai'anae, a matrix which interconnects a variety of areas of life, pulling and tugging one or another part of our daily lives.

Permit me to image the Wai'anae I see from the focus of our community's mental health. Begin with a child non-conforming in behavior to community standards by molesting physically and mentally children younger and of the opposite sex. That child's place in the spider web has a negative impact upon each of the family members who share the same household. It has an impact on each of that child's victims and each victim's household. It may have an impact upon the child's classroom environment, upon the teacher(s), upon the school, and may spread to neighbors, social services, courts, hospitals and jails.

Isolating and treating the child to conform to the societal standards of conduct under the present system of treatment is problematic. Why? Most likely, the child will not get treatment because the child will not be identified until it is too late. If identified in time, the child may not get treatment because there is a lack of funding for the "professional" services mandated by the present mental health regime in the State of Hawaii. Even if the child is able to obtain the "professional" services to the extent subscribed by the present mental health model, the child will be tossed back onto that spider-web which has been so tugged and disturbed that the healing of other affected points on the web have not yet been accomplished.

Thus, the mental health model which tries to address the "best interest of the child" fails to see the child in the social, economic, spiritual, and cultural setting from which he comes. The more recent theory of "beyond the best interest of the child," which realizes the child's family must be part of the treatment, is also inadequate because it sees the family as an isolated entity, not as part of a larger community of families, employers,

employees, neighbors, aunts, uncles, as well as a mixture of cultures, etc. Medical/psychological models fail before they begin because they are premised upon, and operated by, those who do not come from the Wai'anae culture, but from a foreign place. That failure becomes ingrained by the lawyers and judges of the judicial system, who are also strangers by background and training.

How do we take control of the treatment, care, and love of our children? How do we develop a Wai'anae response to the wellness of this community injured by this child's acting out? And if we can somehow "heal" the child, have we taken care of the cause which brought about this behavior? If not, have we really healed the community so another child will not be similarly affected? How do we move beyond individual healing and understand that we can never have healthy individuals living in an unhealthy community?

The child's actions, we would most likely find, were consistent with norms from the child's "community." His victimization perpetuated a cycle of victimizing, and so the child passed along the violence, giving life to the victim/victimizing cycle. Throughout society, victimization, getting even, and pay backs are applauded. Can we mend the child and ignore the "entertainment" which makes this child its' target, and its' market? Can we develop new rules for entertainment without fundamentally challenging and changing the system of laissez faire economics? Can we change the economy and not look at the legal/constitutional structure which glorifies individual initiative? Where does it stop? How deep do the roots of this "poisonous tree" go? What is the soil that feeds it? It is fed by the deep culture upon which the social structure is built, from which the economic structure attaches, and the legal structure is created to protect. If we are going to make fundamental changes, we need to begin with a reexamination of the deep culture of Wai'anae. Not the old culture, not the mixture of cultures, but the underlying system of belief and action upon which our society operates. If we are going to make fundamental changes, we must be ready to take on the challenge to dream of another deep culture and move to it.

Analyzing the fundamental culture, dreaming a new culture, and talking about the dream are all part of the initial stages of the community empowerment we need to undergo. But there is nothing more empowering than actualization. Only then will we begin the coordination between planning and execution, execution and planning, planning and.... So we need to plan the actualizing, from the step by step approach, to the long distance foresight approach.

There is no starting or ending point, no entry or exit, just a spider web of life which makes the Wai'anae community. We could begin with an economic plan, an educational one, or a program to take over the media. Because our commonality is a concern for mental health, I propose we begin with a plan to develop a new approach to mental health in Wai'anae.

We begin by examining the underlying culture which gives rise to the present mental health system, in order to determine what is good and what is not for this community. The privatized and individualized mentality of society is out of hand. While we need a healthy degree of respect for the privacy of individuals and families, we can not continue under the assumptions that good individuals automatically make a good society. Society suffers as a whole when the benefit of the individual is paramount. It is like a crowd watching a parade. The one who brings a step-ladder benefits himself. However, this disadvantages others without step-ladders. The guy who brought the step ladder never considers the people around him and how they will be disadvantaged by Mr. Ladder stepping up above them!

But there is the societal voice which says, "Hey clown, get down! You're screwing up the view for the rest of us." You won't find this voice in the crowd, especially one in which signs are posted encouraging step-ladders and sidewalk shops make money selling them.

How did we arrive at a point in Wai'anae where the deep culture of individualism so dramatically affects us that we allow privatization of huge chunks of land which then go to waste or non-use while many of our people desperately need land to maintain their health? How is it that those people most in need of treatment are often the last to get it, if at all? How is it that the sources of healing are so far removed from the people in greatest need? And how can we undo these things?

Let's distance ourselves from the current system and underlying culture and shift paradigms for a moment. Imagine a Wai'anae where we have taken back those huge acres of land now unused or abused.

Makua valley, previously leased to the U.S. military, has reverted to the State and been placed in the hands of the Wai'anae Wellness Society. This society has brought a new vision to Wai'anae in which we redefine the meaning of community resources to mean our children, youths, parents, and grand parents. The wellness society has been managing the Makua valley for the last five years using the cultural concept of the land as the first and foremost natural healer of the community and her individuals. Over these five years, people initially trickled into the valley part-time, to grow a garden, attend a class, and spend a relaxing weekend getting back to the land. But over the years, the valley transformed from a place of cultural rejuvenation and has become a source of pride and cultural identity. This attitude has spread to the surrounding schools and businesses.

One activity of the Wellness Society is to engage in traditional healing for those who have been acting out in school. While the methods are called traditional, the Wellness Society did not hesitate to make use of Eastern and Western technology, nor to adjust traditional methods when it was deemed appropriate. One healing method is the system of ho'oponopono: family healing which integrates a spiritual, psychological, and cultural dimension to the process.

In some instances, it was discovered that "family" did not exist in the traditional way. Many families lacked "dads," or had them only part-time or only recently. Family members at times did not sufficiently identify as family, did not have a common sense of identity, or regard for the leader who would act as the ho'oponopono guide. Many families had to be built or rebuilt. Makua offered the place for rebuilding. The Wellness Society gathered the human resources from Wai'anae who could join in the family patch-up activity.

Patch-up comes in different forms, depending on individual family needs. The land offers opportunities for working together on common family plots, growing vegetables and fruits such as taro, squash, beans, papaya, and watermelons. An equally important harvest is the pride that develops in these families! The valley also includes a community plot where families who have not "worked" together, and have inter-family problems, first work and learn common skills in being together and respecting the land.

The common plots usually have elders and other highly respected people who gladly take time to "talk story" with individuals. Usually, they do more listening than talking. Someone suggested putting up a listening pole where people could sit and just talk! It seems people doing the talking always feel better, even if they are scolded by the kupuna.

If they want to, families can sleep overnight, on the ground or in whatever makeshift shelter they can arrange.

Participation is always voluntary. No court-ordered referrals are accepted. Some basic rules are strictly enforced: No non-prescribed drugs, no weapons, no fighting, no plotting crimes, no cops. Enforcement is accomplished at the valley get-together which takes place once a week and which must be attended by everyone who anticipates coming to the valley that week. The talking circle is sacred. The tone is set by the kupunas who lead the circle, talking about the good and bad.

One aspect of the talking circle is dealing with enforcement of the rules. A kupuna will raise the subject of so and so who came to the valley drunk, to meet his jail-mate and talk about pulling a job. The kupuna will describe how this conduct diseases the valley community, giving everyone associated with Makua bad vibes. Others talk openly about the problem, criticizing, explaining, excusing, and reaching consensus, or if no consensus, a decision by the kupuna of the appropriate remedy. The worst punishment is banishment from the valley.

Families are not the only ones who come. Many people come as individuals. Some want to be with family or just to be family with others. Some are, over a period of time, "hanai-d" into families. A special place was recently built by the community to provide a place for individuals.

Sometimes a Western oriented psychiatrist will meet with an Eastern psychology master and a Kupuna to discuss approaches to wellness for individuals, families or groups, reasons for particular types of conduct, recommendations for further treatments, etc. Generally, the person or family under discussion will accept the conclusions of this group, or fashion their own remedy using the insight from these various models of wellness. Much of the healing comes through prayer intermingled with hands-on treatment including massage, preparation of your own medication from local herbs, etc.

The most difficult aspect of operating the Wellness Society of Makua is getting people to leave. Generally, the "staff" feels people will leave when their spirits are healed. When they do leave, none return on a "need to" basis. Every time an individual or family leaves to join the wider Wai'anae community, it was the start of new day in Wai'anae.

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