

I AM THIS LAND, AND THIS LAND IS ME

Pualani Kanahale

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CORRESPONDENCE MAY BE SENT TO:

Pualani Kanahale, Humanities Department, Hilo Community College
200 West Kāwili Street, Hilo, Hawai'i 96720
Email: puahele@hawaii.edu

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First of all, I'd like to thank you for the opportunity to be here.* It's a privilege and an honor to be able to stand in front of you. I don't like to do it too often, because it's nerve-racking, and the older I get the more nerve-racking it is for me. However, it is a privilege and honor to be here and to say a few things.

What I came to say is something about me, because I know me the best, and in saying these things, hopefully you'll find some of you. I'd like to read to you a certain piece of prose that I really love by J. Ruth Gendler. It sets me on a path or a journey that I like to go on as I think about what I'm going to say.

Wisdom wears an indigo jacket. She takes long walks in the purple hills at twilight, pausing to meditate at an old temple near the crossroads. She was sick as a young child so she learned to be alone with herself at an early age.

Wisdom has a quiet mind. She likes to think about the edges where things spill into each other and become their opposites. She knows how to look at things inside and out. Sometimes her eyes go out to the things she is looking at, and sometimes the things she is looking at enters through her eyes. Questions of time, depth, and balance interest her. But she's not looking for an answer.

J. Ruth Gendler, *The Book of Qualities*, 16

I would like to leave that for you to think about, because it takes a little while to sink in. But I love that because sometimes answers are not "now." Sometimes we hear things and about five years down the road it pops in your mind—"wow!"—and that's the becoming, that's the realization, that's the amount of growth you have gotten, whether it's five years, or whether it's ten years or two days. Everything worthwhile always takes a little time to digest.

* From a talk given at the 2004 Research Conference on Hawaiian Well-Being at the Kamehameha Schools Hawai'i Campus.

Every day I am reminded that I am who I am because of my participation with others around me, whether seen or unseen. I have two convictions in life. One of these convictions is that I am Hawaiian. The other conviction is that I am this land, and this land is me. There's a correlation there somewhere, and that's why I still live here, that's why I raise my children on this land. I'm convinced of that.

I've always been in awe of teachers. My mother was a teacher. She didn't have a degree, but before she died, she was teaching at the university level and she taught about who she was.

My sisters are teachers. When I say teachers, I mean they are teachers, teaching in the regular college system or in the Department of Education. They are also teachers of cultural aspects, and they live the culture, too. My two daughters are teachers. They both have a master's degree, and one is a candidate for a doctoral degree. My brother was a teacher, and a wonderful teacher. And he taught from his soul.

My husband was a teacher. Although he taught in college, he taught my daughters, and us, that as a family you always stay together. We live on ten acres of land. Each of us has our own house on this ten acres of land, two and a half acres each. (Thank you to Hawaiian Homes!) We all live around each other, we see each other every day, we talk to each other every day. Sometimes late at night, when something is blooming in my head, and there's enlightenment, I call them up and say, "You know what I just realized?" And then we start talking about it. They say, "Wow, where do you get that from?" It's some talk. It's wonderful. My husband arranged that for us. He said, "Don't ever move away from each other because someone says that life is better somewhere else. It's not better, life is good just where you are—with your family." He was a teacher.

My son-in-law is a teacher. He lives next door and he just got his PhD. My daughter-in-law is a teacher. She has her master's degree. So you see, there's a whole bunch of teachers around me. I like being involved with teachers, whether they're in my family or outside my family.

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We started a little charter school (thank goodness to Pauahi, whose land we are on down here in Keaukaha). When I look around to see who's on the staff, who's teaching in the charter school, it's family. It's my first cousin's son, my first cousin's daughter, my first cousin's other daughter, and they're all family. It's not something that we planned. It's just something that happened that way, because we all lived in Keaukaha and we wanted to serve the Keaukaha children. We all have that same kind of thinking. I guess it started from our *mākua* (parents') generation, we were sort of half raised in Ka'ū. We were all raised together with my first cousins, my uncles, my aunties. We all knew each other well. Some things start at that time of your life, very early. So you cannot dismiss younger times or younger years of anybody's life, because the stuff sticks then at that time.

Sometimes when you look at this delineation between students and teachers, there is not really any boundary. Sometimes it spills over and you don't know when a student becomes a teacher, or a teacher becomes a student. That is what it's all about. It's about always knowing that you have something to learn. In my mind, for us humans there is no real master teacher because there is always somebody who knows more than you do. What it's all about is this evolution, this continuing.

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You know when break dancing first started? I loved it! Break dancing wasn't like regular dancing, regular dancing was on your feet—everybody dances on their feet. You know that, I know that, everybody knows that. Break dancing was not like that. It broke the pattern. They danced on their backs, they spun around. I was watching it on television and I turned off the music and just looked at the images. There they were, spinning around on their backs and dancing on their hands.

To me that was great, because it breaks the pattern we're used to seeing. But what it also does is maintain a sense of rhythm. It retains a cadence. And I thought, "Wow, you know these children"—and I say children because compared with me they are children (well, actually, some of them may have been old too)—"these children are so focused on what they're doing, that it's not a form of entertainment." When you look at them, they are not standing in front of the camera and saying, "See what I'm doing? See, I'm good." Break dancing isn't for the camera. Break dancing is something from within.

So I'm analyzing this break dancing thing and I'm getting very excited about it, because they are so focused on what they're doing that as soon as they start dancing, they leave their audience behind. They become themselves, and they become part of that earth that they are on (and it's not even earth, it's concrete). But it's their world, it's the soul that is coming out from within them, their connection to their world, and the cadence going on in their body. What they're doing is so old and so primal. It's between them and the earth. It doesn't have to do with an audience, it doesn't have to do with who's watching them. That, to me, was a sense of measurement. Break dancing is a metric that shows you how much of the primal mind exists in people that have lived in "civilization" for generations. These people live in the middle of city blocks, they are aware of their environment and hardship, they developed a whole culture around their city blocks and are street smart. Some natives have primal instincts so embedded that despite generations of exposure to the thinking mind and "civilization," ancestral behavior surfaces.

I recall dancing at the mall in Washington, DC. After we finished we went back to the hotel, and in the evening a lady from Jamaica came to look for us. She introduced herself and asked us if she could come into our room. "Yeah, okay, okay, come on in." (We had this aloha thing with her.) She was a doctoral candidate in ethnomusicology. She said, "What were you doing today? What is it with your hands? What is it with your feet, and your body? And why the musical instruments that are played?—I've never seen anything like that."

So we talked about it a little, and I realized that few people use their hands as much as we do. So I looked at modern dance, and then I looked at Irish dance, and I looked at all these different forms of Western dance and folk dance, and I said "Wow, you know she's right. We do use our hands a lot." In hula, we use our hands to provide visualization of something we are expressing, and we use our feet to keep rhythm. We use the hands to actually shape the elements of what we are dancing about that the *mele* (poetry) tells us about. We use our eyes to focus in different directions and we listen to the rhythm of the *ipu* (gourd) and *pahu* (drum). We're using many, many different parts of our body when we're dancing. Very few people in the world do that. And that to me is a big deal.

So I was listening to Joseph Campbell, and he was relating a meeting between a Zen priest and a minister from Kansas. The minister from Kansas asked the Zen priest, "What is your ideology, and what is your theology?" And the Zen priest said,

“You know, we don’t have an ideology, and we don’t have a theology. We dance.” I said, “Wow, what a smart guy!” What a smart guy because everyone in the world has a dance. Everybody dances.

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Dance is something that is very soulful. Dance comes from within and goes out. It’s an art. I don’t know how many of you actually draw or paint, but that comes from within, too. I just thought of this before I came, and I thought, “Art is the venue which invites your soul to participate in life.”

A dance is soulful. In some places in the world, dance is a form of meditation, like with the Sufis. Dancing is also celebration, so many of us dance because we are celebrating life. Sometimes we are celebrating death, and that is a way of celebrating life. And still for others, dancing is ritual. So dancing is used in many, many different forms.

I am very fortunate because I was raised in a family who valued their tradition of dance. That is who they are. If you look at my mother, that’s who she was—she was a dancer. If you look at my grandmother, that’s who she was—she was a dancer. They valued this, and I’m very fortunate to be in their family, to recognize that value. For many of us today, dancing is a form of entertainment. For us it wasn’t only a form of entertainment, but we used it for many purposes.

Dancing is a tool to educate ourselves, telling us who we are. The hula was also a vehicle, very capable of pitching you into another world, into that event for which the mele was composed.

That is what dancing hula is capable of doing. When that happens, and you look at the dancer, the dancer becomes the dance. The dancer then can pitch you out with her to wherever she’s going, or whatever the mele is talking about. Hula is capable of that. (I don’t know about any other dance because, you know, I never did ballet, although I wanted to. I have a picture of me when I was sixteen years old, acting like I know how to do ballet. But I didn’t go on my toes or anything. [Laughter])

Hula can also connect you back to your outlet or clan. For instance, Kauilanuis, all of you who have Kauila in your family, Keahialapalapa, Kekailoa, Kanakaokai. All of this is in the hula. The hula connects you back to those elemental forms. Or it can connect you back to the Kuhaimoana, Kaholoakāne, or other shark forms. It

connects back not only to the shark forms but also to the migration that they came with, the ali'i. The sharks were connected to Pele; that's what hula is all about. Hula can also connect you to Ka'ōnohiokalā, the eyeball of the sun. It makes you aware of the fact that we know a lot about our moon, and we know a lot about our stars, and we know almost zilch about our sun. And yet the sun is the most obvious. And since this school is in Puna, which begins the day of this archipelago, we should go down to Kumukahi and look at the different pillars at Kumukahi and learn their names and how they're related to the equinox, and how they are related to the solstice. How they measure the sun from the south to the north, from the east to the west. That's what hula does. Hula provides all of that information and tells you how to get a clue.

Hula has a primal cadence that reminds you that you belong to the cycle of this island, these islands. It eventually takes you from these islands to the world, to the universe. If you do hula, you belong to the universe. We have to pay attention to our Hawaiian native intelligence and experiences. We should be able to look for them, define them—because nothing is lost. In fact, we still have a lot of knowledge that was left to us by our ancestors. It's still there; we just have to go and look for it. That's what we are all about—research.

The Native Hawaiians to me are like the *Upanishads*, in their philosophy of life. The *Kumulipo*, as Kekuni Blaisdell mentioned, is an ancestral chant that has over two thousand lines. It talks about procreation, evolution, hierarchy, even death. It talks about the whole span of time from the beginning to its existence—and the end is not the end—it begins again.

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you belong to
the universe.

How many of us have email? How many of us have cell phones? All of us. How many of us have headaches during the day? Sometimes there's all this stress because the cell phone is ringing and you have to answer the two hundred emails you got overnight. This has a deadline, that has a deadline, everything has a deadline, and pretty soon you have a big headache.

I have some things here that I would like to share with you, that sort of divorces me from all of that, so I don't have headaches, unless of course someone is standing right on the side of me saying, "Did you do this, did you do that?" I'd like to leave with you some of these hints that divorce me from all of that, and these are hints that have been left before.

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Grandparents are wonderful people because they always take you in and they don't spank you. They might be a little loud with their voice when they get a little edgy, but nothing else. They give you food, all kinds of food. If you want money, they give you money. Grandparents are wonderful. Even those grandparents who have died are still wonderful to us, because they have left us many clues as to how our life should be lived today. We still live in the same space they did, and a lot of things have not changed. So for all of us who are committed to life in these islands, committed to our "Hawaiianness," to island lifestyles, there are many, many helpful hints that we still have.

NUMBER ONE—Know the cycles and the rhythms of our universe, whether the sun, the moon, the winds, the ocean currents, the clouds, or the rains. These things are still the same, they have not changed, and they are not going to change. The sun still rises over here. The last time my great, great, great, great, great grandfather was out at Kumukahi, the sun was still rising in the same place. It is still the same. To know these things should encourage you to go out there and sit, to go out there and feel the sun, to go out there and feel where the wind is coming from, and to go out there and feel the rain.

NUMBER TWO—Everything around us has a function. When we go swimming and look under the ocean, when we go up into the forest, and we look through the forest, everything we see has a function. If it is not something you eat, know that the thing you eat lives off of it. So everything belongs to the *honua* (land, earth, world). Around us, whether it's in the ocean or in the forest, it's part of our *honua*. This concept is ageless. It's the way we have to think about our environment.

NUMBER THREE—Know your place as a human in this environment. We, you, me—as a human can use anything in reach. But we are responsible for not letting it become unreachable through pollution, overdevelopment, and abuse and over-use. For example; 'opihi, lauhala trees, hau bush, hā'uke'uke, and so on.

NUMBER FOUR—Survival is knowing that there is a hierarchy; There is something more powerful than you. Experience is knowing that you and I belong to this hierarchy. Our kūpuna taught this.

NUMBER FIVE—Hawaiian practitioners live comfortably in both worlds because they know who they are. They know *why* they are and they know *what* they are. And they know what they must continue to *be*. I consider myself a practitioner of a sort. This is my life. This is the life that a practitioner knows, loves, and is involved in every day.

I want to share something with you. It's a dream my brother had. He said, "I went back to the place where we were for the last few days. I went back there by myself and I was looking around, and I walked up the lava, and then I saw an old man. He only had a *malo* (loincloth) on, a red malo, and he had long hair, and a beard, the whole thing. We looked at each other and then he motioned for me to come. He didn't say anything, so I followed him. He turned around and walked back up *mauka* (inland), still walking on lava. Then he turned and motioned me to wait. Then he disappeared behind some rocks. So I stood there for a long time thinking, where did this guy go? I followed him. I went to the place where I last saw him and I looked down. I saw this old, white-haired man with his malo on. There was a whole rock wall full of computers, and he was working at his computer. So he turned around and looked at me and smiled, and told me to wait. Still he continued on his computer, and then he told me to come down." I asked my brother, "What did you see, what did he say?" and he said, "I don't know, I woke up." [laughter]

The computer reaches around the world. But this lava gives us our home.

The image of that old man and his wall of computers was a beautiful image. That is telling you that we Hawaiians still can do what we do on plain lava rock and appreciate it, but still go back to our computers, because the computer reaches around the world. But this lava gives us our home.

These are my five steps to maintaining my sanity. And these are your five steps to maintaining your sanity. Go out and feel your rain. Don't run away from it—unless of course there's lightning, then get out of it. [Laughter]

I'd like to leave you with this message. Again, this is from a brother. He wrote this for one of his daughters.

How fortunate are we
When in life's looking glass
Our soul we see
Reflection of the past
Previewing eternity

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pualani Kanahale is assistant professor of Hawaiian studies and chair of the Humanities department at Hilo Community College. A master chanter, Pualani comes from a long line of kumu hula including her mother, Edith Kanakaole. Pualani and her sister, Nalani, are kumu of Hālau O Kekuhi, a hula hālau their mother founded in 1953. The sisters both work to perpetuate Hawaiian cultural traditions such as mele oli and mele hula.

