

# Reflections of a Native Hawaiian physician: Hawaiian cultural values in Western medical practice

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## Abstract

Native Hawaiians face challenges between their cultural upbringing and Western systems of learning. This paper describes my experiences of being a Native Hawaiian born and raised in Hawai'i and my path toward becoming a physician. This paper will reveal challenges of working within a western educational system while remaining true to self and cultural values, and identifying ways to prosper in the medical profession while incorporating Native Hawaiian cultural values. In order to succeed in these areas, it is important to know oneself, to believe in oneself, to find a purpose and mission in life, and to appreciate and share one's gifts and talents. Awareness and acknowledgement of the differences between Western and Hawaiian beliefs is necessary to practice medicine in Hawai'i.

## Introduction

Native Hawaiian physicians are often challenged with the internal conflict of their culture, which defines them, and Western medicine, which they learn and practice. This internal struggle occurred throughout my journey of becoming a *kauka* (doctor) and continues in my career. I have learned many lessons along my medical career path and still maintain my identity as a Native Hawaiian *kauka*. I have found that it is challenging, but possible, to function as a healer of Western medicine and stay true to the Hawaiian values ingrained within me.

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The purpose of this article is three-fold—to identify and explore challenges within the system, challenges within myself, and challenges of integrating Hawaiian cultural values with Western medicine. First, using examples from my own personal experiences, values will be discussed, such as believing in oneself, improving one's self-confidence, knowing one's strengths and weaknesses, being aware of one's learning style, learning from one's mentors, identifying what motivates an individual, and developing a mission in life. Second, the differing aspects of Hawaiian culture and Western medicine will be investigated. Third, bridging Hawaiian culture and Western medicine, with the example of *kūkākūkā*, a cultural approach used with Hawaiian patients, will be explained. Interviews and personal experiences with *kūpuna* (wise and respected Hawaiian community elders) and Hawaiian physicians along with visions for the future of Hawaiians will be explored.

## Challenges within the system

### Believing in oneself

"Maybe I could be a doctor," I thought to myself during college after having decided to major in Biology. "Why not?" I enjoyed acquiring knowledge and I wanted to learn for the rest of my life. I also wanted to help and heal people. So my journey began toward becoming a doctor. I did well in college until my advisor, the Dean of the Science Department, told me, "I'm not sure you should be a doctor, because I don't think you can handle it." If I believed what she had told me, I would not be a doctor today. Therefore, my first lesson was to believe in myself regardless of what others believed. My insecurities left me to doubt whether I had the qualities necessary to become a physician. My advisor was partly correct in that I did not feel prepared for medical school after graduating from college. Fortunately, the University of Hawai'i John A. Burns School of Medicine (JABSOM) saw potential, so I attended 'Imi Ho'ola, a JABSOM program for Pacific Islanders from disadvantaged backgrounds dedicated to improving skills needed to succeed in medical school. The program was extremely beneficial in improving my knowledge base, study skills, and confidence.

## Self-confidence

Self-confidence had always been a challenge to me, and evaluations throughout my medical training recommended upon this. During my medical training, I either I was worthy enough to be a doctor and the Hawaiian principle of *ha'aha'a* (humility) was misinterpreted for lacking self-confidence.

vividly the transformation of my inner self. I undergraduate university on the continental crossed *aloha* ("sharing the breath of life") to me. I felt the culture shock of a different place, being exploited by others, I put a wall up in order to protect my values, to shelter my self-identity, and to adapt to the new cultural environment. This protective wall remained up until my second year of family practice training when I was on a rotation in the Republic of the Marshall Islands. The Marshallese people were very friendly, accepting, and appreciative of my help. At that point, I finally accepted myself for who I was and realized my special qualities.

I felt in this environment, I realized me of 10 years ago where life was very simple. In days of old, life is now in the islands, the main priority was survival.

Now, the priorities in the United States, and also in modern day Hawai'i, are time efficiency and productivity. I felt comfortable being myself in this environment and a feeling of renewal blossomed within me. I realized and accepted that I did not need to be perfect, I had character, and my greatest asset was—myself. I was content in relating with people. The combination of growing up in a large family with my mother as a social worker, traveling the world with travel benefits from my father, contributed significantly to my social skills.

I realized who I was and my purpose in life as I progressed through family practice residency training. I felt comfortable expressing my true self and my improved level of confidence. Surprisingly, my mentor recently asked me, "How do you stay so confident in yourself?" This statement confirmed for me that my lack of self-confidence had been resolved. I realized that gaining self-confidence is a process. I accepted this, accepted it, and gained confidence in my own unique and special qualities.

## Self

Strengths, weaknesses, learning style, and relationships with people are my strengths. It is important in medicine as learning medical

science. People relate better to someone who listens and cares.

Test-taking had always been a challenge for me, so I sought out mentors who were proficient at taking tests and I learned from them. I realized that mentors—people I could trust who strengthened my areas of weakness and who wanted me to succeed—surrounded me throughout my career path. Vital to success is actively seeking out mentors with the expertise to help strengthen weaknesses and be supportive.

Medical school was challenging and I found that I learned better in a group setting. My learning style was more "hands-on" and I was an auditory and visual learner; therefore, I excelled in clinical skills and patient care and I learned from constructing pictures and flowcharts, studying aloud, and listening to audiotapes.

Throughout my training, many people advised me to never lose touch with who I was and to know myself and from where I came. "You are a product of your ancestors and you are a child of God," friends and family would say to me. The most important lesson I learned in medical school was that I could succeed if I persevered and believed in myself. More importantly, I realized the greatest motivational factor for me was a power greater than myself and integral to my success and to the path that lay ahead of me.

## A mission

It is important for everyone to know their life mission and to have clear goals to accomplish that mission. My mission is to be a person of integrity, to serve others, to learn, to be a role model, to empower communities, and to educate those with whom I come in contact in order to positively impact and improve health for Hawaiians and the people of Hawai'i, the Pacific Basin, and abroad. Hawaiians believe that "you must share your God-given talents with others." This is why I enjoy "giving back" to communities and to the people of Hawai'i by (a) being a role model, (b) encouraging youths to believe in themselves and to achieve their goals, (c) educating others about medicine and health, (d) caring for and healing the afflicted, (e) improving health care through research, and (f) learning from each and every encounter in my life so I can share these experiences with others.

## Challenges within myself

My approach to life, molded by cultural values, was nearly opposite of Western culture and medicine. Reconciling these two approaches has been a major challenge for me

Test-taking had always been a challenge for me, so I that I improve myself. I questioned why I was there and also felt that there were things that may have been

I remember when I attended an university in the U.S. and expressed my concerns to those around me and after feeling that I needed to protect my self, I realized that I could survive in this environment. The wall remained up until my second year of residency training in the Republic of the Marshall Islands. The Marshallese people were very friendly, accepting, and appreciative of my help. At that point, I finally accepted myself for who I was and realized my special qualities. I felt in this environment, I realized me of 10 years ago where life was very simple. In days of old, life is now in the islands, the main priority was survival. Now, the priorities in the United States, and also in modern day Hawai'i, are time efficiency and productivity. I felt comfortable being myself in this environment and a feeling of renewal blossomed within me. I realized and accepted that I did not need to be perfect, I had character, and my greatest asset was—myself. I was content in relating with people. The combination of growing up in a large family with my mother as a social worker, traveling the world with travel benefits from my father, contributed significantly to my social skills.

I began to realize who I was and my purpose in life as I progressed through family practice residency training. I felt comfortable expressing my true self and my improved level of confidence. Surprisingly, my mentor recently asked me, "How do you stay so confident in yourself?" This statement confirmed for me that my lack of self-confidence had been resolved. I realized that gaining self-confidence is a process. I accepted this, accepted it, and gained confidence in my own unique and special qualities.

## Know thy self

Identifying strengths, weaknesses, learning style, and relationships with people are my strengths. It is important in medicine as learning medical

along my medical career path. On the one hand, Western culture tends to place the individual first. The medical field tends to favor assertiveness and competition.

In contrast, Hawaiian cultural values are spiritual and revolve around divine gifts from a higher power which include:

□ *Aloha* (“alo” = sharing, “ha” = the breath of life). *Aloha* is one of the most cherished principles in Hawaiian culture. It is the basis of being Hawaiian and encompasses all Hawaiian values. *Aloha* means love, compassion, kindness, affection, and grace. *Ha*, the breath of life, is a divine gift from the creator and is necessary for all life. I appreciate this divine gift and express *aloha* for everything created by God, including living in harmony with nature as well as showing consideration, respect, and thoughtfulness to others, especially *kūpuna* (elders), *mākuā* (parents) and *‘ohana* (family).

□ *Ha‘aha‘a* (humility): Hawaiians are traditionally known to be humble and to appreciate all that is given to them. It is not customary to “get ahead at any cost,” to exploit others, or to take credit for work done. This may be misinterpreted as being soft-spoken, shy, quiet, or lacking knowledge. I feel that *ha‘aha‘a* means to give all credit to God for all the blessings He has given to us.

□ *Ho‘omanawanui* (patience): This means, to me, to make time and make God’s divine gifts eternal. Hawaiians are traditionally patient, optimistic, and steadfast; with fortitude I believe that God will provide what is necessary in His time.

□ *Kōkua* (help) and *lōkahi* (unity and harmony): Hawaiians traditionally also enjoy working together and helping each other to get things done. For example, planning a *lu‘au* (party) involves the entire family and friends to prepare the meal and setting. Hawaiians respect a higher power’s blessings and therefore, respect themselves and one another in order to *kōkua* through *lōkahi*. Harmony and balance are also important to health and wellness.

□ *‘Ohana* (family): *‘Ohana* is a core value in Hawaiian culture and provides the foundation for other cultural values as well as the mutual support necessary for success in life. I found it very difficult to say no to my family when it came to helping with and attending family functions. The advice I received while pursuing my medical training was to say, “No,” to my family and to move away from them in order to stay focused. Western culture contradicted my cultural values and as a result of

this, I found it difficult to be myself and to express myself during my medical training.

□ *‘Oia ‘i‘o* (truth): My father often tells me that living a truthful life means appreciating God’s divine gifts of *lā* (sun), *wai* (water), *‘āina* (land), and *ha* (breath of life). Without sunlight and rain, the trees and plants would not grow. Without the trees, there would be no breath of life. I have learned to appreciate these gifts that God has given by “living truth” so our spirits and our bodies can stay healthy. “Living truth” is when one is *pono* (good, upright, moral) and lives in harmony with nature and respects God’s blessings. There are no lies or deception—no stress, violence, anger, or hatred.

Upon interviewing two Hawaiian *kūpuna*, my deep sense of spirituality and belief in a higher power was reaffirmed. Western medicine focuses on the physical being and scientific rationalization of disease and illness. *Kupuna* Lilia Hale stated,

“Hawaiians are very spiritual. As a *kauka*, you need to think spiritual and physical. You need to get to the patients’ feelings, to have them tell their story and to gain their confidence in you. If the spirit is sick, the body gets sick. People need to do *ho‘oponopono* [family conferences in which relationships were set right through prayer, discussion, confession, repentance and mutual restitution, and forgiveness].

There is a God that believes in us and who loves us. I go to my *Kauka* because he knows my body. Spiritually, I take care of myself. People are responsible for their spirit and their body.”

(personal interview, 2001)

*Kupuna* Malia Craver said,

“... our ancestors were *‘ike* (knowledgeable) and wise and recognized a higher power. They could see the elements of the universe like the sun, wind, clouds, stars, and ocean. Western medicine is not connected to a higher power. Our people are very religious and pray all the time. We are a continuation of our ancestors, who are with us always. I go to western doctors and take what they prescribe, but I also use *lā‘au lapa‘au* (traditional herbal medicine) and *l pule* (pray).”

(personal interview, 2001)

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listen to patients (thus respecting the individual) and being efficient in caring for as many patients as possible to maintain a functioning clinic.

## A vision for the future of Hawaiians

I can visualize a Hawai'i where all Hawaiians are educated and the Hawaiian language is spoken by all. Overall health and life expectancy has improved. Violence, addiction, and abuse are uncommon. All are employed or self-sustaining. This is possible, but it will take much time, effort, and patience—one step at a time, one day at a time. We must know who we are and why we are here in this world. We must take responsibility for our actions and be accountable to ourselves. We must teach our children and be role models to them because they are our future.

*Kupuna* Malia Craver stated,

"... we need to have a school for *keiki* (children) to start building their identity and self-esteem. Our people need to know that they are worthy and special. Many grow up confused, angry and ashamed and are not being helped. We need all Hawaiians—*kūpuna* (elders), *mākuā* (adults), *ōpio* (youth)—to help each other and those in need. We need successful people to get a brother or sister to help them with life. We need to instill wisdom and help them to learn cultural and spiritual values."  
(personal interview, 2001)

**All too often physicians lose sight of the privilege of the profession—to care for people and to educate them about health and a healthy lifestyle. This takes time.**

Believing in myself. Understanding that I am special. Developing, utilizing, and sharing my special talents and gifts. Knowing that I can do and be anything I desire as long as I believed it in my heart. This is how I became a doctor. I surrounded myself with mentors—people who are experts at what they do, who can improve upon my weaknesses, who will give advice, and whose success is measured by my success. I will help others who need my help. I will listen and take care of myself and others. I believe that we can have more Hawaiians who are successful and happy, who can become doctors if they desire, and who believe in themselves. I believe we can all help each other to overcome the challenges of Western attitudes and to maintain our own cultural values to improve the future for Hawaiians.

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*I ho'okāhi ka umauma, ho'okāhi ke aloha*  
All abreast together, one in love  
*All united in harmony and love*