

## BUILDING THE BELOVED COMMUNITY: A LIFE PRACTICE

*Puanani Burgess*

Puanani Burgess is a process designer and facilitator for Building the Beloved Community, a community-building and conflict transformation process based on bringing people face to face for ceremony, storytelling, and healing circles of trust and respect. Participants tell the story of their names, the story of their community, and the story of their gifts, and are able to see the beauty and humanity in themselves and each other. Poha and Popo, Mauna 'Ala and Gandhi, Castor Oil, Pearl City High School, and the Gift are some of the 10 core principles and values of the process of Building the Beloved Community. These principles and values together with exercises like Guts on the Table help people to come together to dream, heal, and build their beloved community.

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I am a storyteller, cultural translator, facilitator of Building the Beloved Community, poet, and aunty. I am writing down this mana'o (thought, idea, belief, theory) as Aunty Pua to you my 'ohana (family). As you read these elements of my work, my life, know that this is not about me, but WE.

In the past 25 years I have developed processes which are part of a community-building and conflict transformation process I call "Building the Beloved Community." I first heard these hopeful words from the Reverend Martin Luther King as he described his spiritual and political work.

One of the anchor exercises of Building the Beloved Community is called "Guts on the Table"<sup>1</sup> in which I ask people to tell three stories. The name of the exercise, "Guts on the Table," comes from the Hawaiian understanding that your na'au, your gut, is the deepest place from which you think. It's the place where your

mind, heart, intuition and experience come together. It is the place where mana, your spiritual core lives. The Hawaiian word for thought is mana'o.

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The poem by the writer Leslie Marmon Silko, "Ceremony," from her book *Ceremony* (1977) powerfully describes the importance of ceremony and stories and storytelling in the life of the people and its role in keeping culture alive and relevant.

#### *Ceremony*

I will tell you something about stories,  
[he said]  
They aren't just for entertainment.  
Don't be fooled  
They are all we have, you see,  
all we have to fight off illness and death.  
You don't have anything  
if you don't have the stories.  
Their evil is mighty

but it can't stand up to our stories.  
 So they try to destroy the stories  
 let the stories be confused or forgotten  
 They would like that  
 They would be happy  
 Because we would be defenseless then.

This poem and her book greatly influenced and shaped my work and in particular the design of Guts on the Table.

The methodology is simple: create a safe space and help people find their stories and tell them. This exercise was designed to help people get deeper, faster. People sit in a circle, on chairs or on the floor, and each person will tell their stories, one-by-one. In this exercise, I usually begin speaking (one of the core principles of doing this work is that you should never ask someone to do something that you haven't done or aren't willing to do first). So, I as the facilitator will tell my stories first, and then the circle moves to my left and continues until it circles back to me.<sup>2</sup> In the past 25 years I have been part of over 1,208 circles. Here are the stories I ask people to tell:

**TELL THE STORY OF YOUR NAMES, ALL OF YOUR NAMES.** In modern times, we usually introduce ourselves with just our first names and leave out all of our other names which contain much of our personal histories. People tell the story of how they were named or who named them; the meaning of their names or how they feel about their names. When you tell the story of your names you tell the story of your people, your family, and what you feel about your names.

**TELL THE STORY OF YOUR COMMUNITY, HOWEVER EACH PARTICIPANT DEFINES "COMMUNITY".** When people tell the story of community, they tell the story of how they live as part of a group.

**TELL THE STORY OF YOUR GIFTS.** This is usually the most difficult story for people to tell. The belief is that if you talk about your gifts, then you will be "bragging on yourself," which in many cultures is not appropriate behavior. The emphasis is for people to tell what their gifts are, rather than their skills, degrees, or titles. The importance of this story is to enable them to wonder what their family, organization, or community would be like if it were gift-based and not just skill-based.

Most of us, when applying for a job, are only asked to detail our skills and experiences, not our gifts. My theory is that gift-based organizations do work that is more spiritual and satisfying and long-term.

In one of the circles I did with twelve 11th and 12th graders at my local high school, I was taught an important lesson, which has shaped my work and perspectives. I call the story of this lesson, “The Gift.”

We were in one of the classrooms, seated in a circle of chairs. I explained the process to them and in keeping with one of the fundamental principles of how I do my work, I went first. When the circle got to a young man, an 11th grader, he told the story of his names and community well, but when he started to tell the story of his gift, he put his head down and said, “What, Miss? What kind gift you think I get, eh? I stay in this special ed. class and I get a hard time read and I cannot do that math stuff. And why you make me shame for, ask me that kind question? ‘What’s your gift?’ If I had gift, you think I be here?” Then he just shut down and shut up, and I felt really shame, because I made him shame. So I shut down and shut up. When the circle was done, I just packed my things up and left quickly, no apologies, no nothing.

Two weeks later, I am in our local grocery store, Tamura Store, it’s a place where you can see everybody you like see and everybody you no like see. And I see him down one of the aisles and his back is toward me and I stop. I thought, “RUN! I’m not going down this aisle and get yelled at again if he sees me.” So I backed up as fast as I could and tried to run away from him. Then he turns around and he sees me, and he throws his arms open, and he says, “Aunty! I have been thinking about you, you know. Two weeks I been thinking: ‘What my gift? What my gift? That aunty tole me I have gift, so I bettah fine ’um. So, I been tinkin, tinkin, tinkin.”

I say to him, “OK bruddah, so what’s your gift?” He says, “You know, I cannot do that math stuff and I cannot read so good, but Aunty, when I stay in the ocean, I can call the fish, and the fish he come, every time. Every time I can put food on my family table. Every time! And sometimes when I stay in the ocean and the Shark he come, and he look at me and I look at him and I tell him, ‘Uncle I not going take plenty fish. I just going take one, two fish, just for my family. All the rest I leave for you.’ And so the Shark he say, ‘Oh, you cool, brother.’ And I tell the Shark, ‘Uncle, you cool.’ And the Shark, he go his way and I go my way. I think that’s my gift.”

And I look at this boy and I know what a genius he is. But in our society, the way schools are run, he is rubbish. So when I talk to teachers and principals of schools, I tell them his story and ask them, “What would this kid’s life have been like if this curriculum was gift based?” What if we could identify the gift of each child and teach to that gift? From this story I began to ask, “What would happen if the schools were gift based, that we would find and teach to the gift of each child and each teacher would teach from their gifts.”

This story has created a conversation in my community about developing a gift-based school, one in which everyone, students, teachers, groundskeepers, principals, office staff, cafeteria workers, counselors, and so forth would work from their gift. I think the implication of answering the questions “What is your gift?” “What is the gift of your community or organization?” would lead us down an interesting development path. So this for me is a very native approach—being able to see the giftedness in every aspect of life, in every person.<sup>3</sup> What is your gift? How do you live your gift?

I was invited into working with women in prison by Toni Bissen of the Pū‘ā Foundation and Mark Patterson, the warden of the Women’s Community Correctional Center (WCCC), to help design and implement a pilot program in WCCC around “trauma-informed care.”<sup>4</sup> Simply, the theory was to help the women deal with early life traumas which may have affected them and influenced the choices they had or perceived they had, which put them on the path to prison. For Warden Patterson, he wondered what could happen to the lives of the women in WCCC if the prison became a pu‘uhonua (place of refuge) and that the time they spent in prison would not be poho (wasted).

For me, I knew that many of the women who are incarcerated are Native Hawaiians, and I wondered why. I also knew that the road to prison is complex and curvy and that I, but for small interventions by people and serendipity, which were not predictable or dramatic, I could have ended up in prison.

One of those interventions was my knowledge that I had a gift and with that gift came a responsibility. What is that gift? My gift is peacefulness—I can go into very dramatic and conflict-laden situations and remain calm and peaceful. I can keep

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my head in highly charged situations. And my peace has a ripple effect on others. My gift has become the core of my work of Building the Beloved Community.

In the design phase of the WCCC trauma-informed care pilot project, I suggested that we “Build a Beloved Community” first with the women selected to participate in the project rather than go directly and immediately to uncovering and dealing

“What is your gift?”  
How will you weave  
this gift into how  
you approach your  
vision, and how will  
you weave it into  
your work and life?

with a person’s traumas. By beginning with “Building the Beloved Community” we would first help the women to build relationships of trust and respect while they were in prison—a community that would offer safety, understanding, and support, thereby ending what Kurt Vonnegut called the “terrible disease of loneliness.”

It was my thinking that although it is important to be aware of the trauma in your life and to heal that wound, trauma awareness and healing are not enough. It is my belief that it’s impossible to rebuild a life on just trauma awareness and healing; there has to be an awareness of one’s strengths and gifts which can be the firm foundation for rebuilding their lives. Through the search for their gifts, they arrive at a place where they can say with belief, “I’m valuable and I have something valuable to live for and contribute.”

To prepare the women for the process of finding their gift, I first tell them the story of the young man mentioned above whose gift was the ability to call the fish. That young man knew the ocean and all the animals and life forms that lived there. He respected them, took care of them, and taught others to respect them and the ocean. From finding his gift, he built his work; Hawaiians believe that “work is medicine.” Today he is a fisherman with a mission: he’ll bring fish, ‘opihi, octopus, lobster to you *only* if they are ready. If they are not in season, he will not bring any to you, no matter how much you’re willing to pay him for it. From my experience with this young man, I began to understand how important it was to help people find their gift and make their gift part of their work, their life’s work, their vision.

This simple intervention, asking “What is your gift?” has opened up the door of hope and possibility for these sisters in prison. So, to all of you reading this, I wonder “What is your gift?” How will you weave this gift into how you approach your vision, and how will you weave it into your work and life?

In 1959 I was 12 years old. It was also the year that Hawai'i "became" a state of the United States. It was also the year that I decided that I was going to be a lawyer. This made no sense, and yet this decision became my North Star—guiding me forward in a turbulent sea. Initially, inspired by Perry Mason, the TV lawyer, I wanted to fight for justice, right wrongs, solve problems. Funny.

In 1979 I was 32 years old and entered the seventh class of the William S. Richardson School of Law. In my second year of law school, I clerked for Cynthia Thielen, who was then an attorney at the Legal Aid Society of Hawai'i and the attorney for the Protect Kaho'olawe 'Ohana (PKO). Cynthia opened up a whole new world of possibilities to me. I was assigned to work on PKO issues, did research, went to rallies, watched and learned Hawaiian activism. As part of my work, I was invited to Moloka'i to observe and listen to members of the PKO to discuss and decide on the proposed Consent Decree between PKO and the U.S. Navy to survey and protect historic and cultural sites on the island, clear surface ordnance from 10,000 acres, continue soil conservation and re-vegetation programs, eradicate the goats from the island, limit ordnance impact training to the central third of the island, and allow monthly PKO access to the island.

I thank Dr. Emmett Noa Aluli for the invitation and Professor Jon Van Dyke for allowing me to turn in my Constitutional Law midterm exam on Monday rather than on the Friday it was due—the day I was scheduled to be on Moloka'i. Jon understood that this would be a historic moment for the Hawaiian Movement and for Hawaiian Activism.

I watched the stars align, people argue, cry, leave the circle, return, try again, sit quietly, grieve, pray, practice diplomacy, pray, always back to prayer—the essential elements of Hawaiian decision-making. This experience changed my life and shaped my work. I began to work directly with PKO and discovered that I could organize ideas, messages, and people. Over the next year, my energy and thinking was moving more toward activism and away from my formal law studies. In my na'au was brewing the unthinkable question: Do you really want to be a lawyer? In the night, during sleep, the 'uhane (spirit) came to talk with me and when I awoke I knew that I was done. So, I called my husband, Poka Laenui (Hayden F. Burgess), to come and pick me up; I was living close to the university for school. To his credit, he never asked me "What are you doing?" or "Are you sure?" He just came to pick me up and we drove home to Wai'anae, my beloved community.

There, I became the apprentice of Eric Enos, Billie Hauge, Gigi Cocquio, Sister Anna McAnany, Auntie Marie Olsen, Uncle Walter Keli'iokekai Paulo, Uncle Eddie Ka'anana from Miloli'i, and so many others. With my law school training, I began to help the leaders in my community incorporate organizations and policies as part of community-based development: the 'Ōpelu Project, Ka'ala Farm, Inc., Hoa 'Āina o Makaha, Time Out Nurseries, Hale Na'au Pono (the community mental health center), and the Wai'anae Coast Community Alternative Development Corporation, as well as other organizations on Hawai'i Island and Kaua'i. Going to law school was a blessing. Through that experience I could understand and interface with the many systems that impact our lives and communities.

I bring values and principles, stories, and laughter and tears; I receive stories of pain, trauma, joy, justice, and hope.

This work of building the beloved community has taken me to many places in the United States, the Pacific, South Africa, Japan, Romania, the Philippines, Thailand, and soon, China. It's also taken me to work with architects, planners, mental health professionals, teachers, students, youth, women in prison, and people and countries at war. I bring values and principles, stories, and laughter and tears; I receive stories of pain, trauma, joy, justice, and hope.

This deep work often begins, as it did for me, in a dark place, the place I hide from, don't invite people into and is smelly and itchy and filled with disappointment. The door to the outside, to light, to understanding, came through writing this poem almost 20 years ago.

*Choosing My Name*

When I was born my mother gave me three names:

Christabelle, Yoshie, and Puanani

Christabelle was my "English" name,

My social security card name,

My school name,

The name I gave when teachers asked me for my "real" name;

It was a safe name.

Yoshie was my home name,



My everyday name,  
 The name that reminded my father's family  
 That I was Japanese, even though  
 My nose, hips, and feet were wide,  
 The name that made me acceptable to them  
 Who called my Hawaiian mother kuroi mame (black bean);  
 It was a saving name.  
 Puanani is my chosen name  
 My piko (navel) name connecting me to the 'āina (Land)  
 And to the kai (Ocean) and to the po'e kahiko (ancestors);  
 It is my blessing, my burden;  
 My amulet, my spear.

This was a tough poem to write and a hard poem for some to read. It was first published in the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* and was read by my family—and several of my father's family members were upset that I revealed these details of my life. My father, a quiet and hardworking Japanese man, simply said to those who called him, "That's her life and her story. Leave her alone." In that moment, I understood that every story has foreseeable and unforeseeable impacts and consequences. I also understood that courage, like my father's, is often quiet.

Throughout these last 20 years, I have gathered and told stories which revealed the principles and values I have grown up in and with and which I use to establish the foundation for building a beloved community. I would like to share a few of these stories and principles with you.

**THE POHA AND POPO PRINCIPLE.** Be willing to see the world from another person's perspective *and* be willing to show them your perspective. This creates processes that allow me to see you as human and you to see me as human before we start talking about issues. Because once the issues come up, the brain takes over and you set out on the mission to resolve the conflict. If you let the brain take over before you see each other, then you cannot really resolve the issues, because you don't get to pierce your own values and understand other people's values too.

In this story, my son's Chinese grandmother, Popo, would take him for a walk around our block, which is two miles around. Popo knew that little kids loved big animals, so when Poha was 2 years old, she would push him in his stroller and stop beside a pasture to show him the horses and cows. She'd goo and ga at

him, waiting for some kind of joyful response. Instead, Poha just sat there in his stroller, bored. Four days in a row she did this, and on the fourth day, she decided that she wasn't going to do this anymore if that's all Poha would do. So, on the fourth day, she knelt down to see what Poha was looking at from his eye level and from that perspective she began to understand that all that Poha saw from his eye level was tall grass! He never saw one horse or one cow. When Popo understood what Poha was looking at, she picked him up and held him at her eye level and he began to laugh.

**MAUNA 'ALA AND GANDHI PRINCIPLE.** Assume that each person you meet or talk to is sacred and worthy, and that will help you interact and treat people with respect and dignity. Your children can be your best teachers if you let them.

Seventeen years ago, I was asked to give the keynote at a large national conference of about 400 people. On the day of the convening, I walked into the huge auditorium and there were about 30 people there, and that's all the people who would be coming. I tried to persuade them to come to sit in the first row, but they weren't moving; they wanted to stay as far away from me as possible. I stood on that big stage, with the podium and microphone and my image being projected on a large screen, the kind you use when you expect a big crowd. I did my best, but it was hard not to feel the disappointment and shame for not "being a big enough star," in the words of the person who invited me to speak. What a fiasco.

When I got home, my 8-year-old son, Mauna 'Ala, watched me drag my sad 'ōkole (bottom) into the house and he asked me, "What's wrong Ma?" I told him what happened and how disappointed I felt in myself.

Mauna asked, "So, Ma, what if I was the only one in the audience and you was only talking to me? Wouldn't that have been enough?" I said, "Yeah Mauna, if I was only talking to you, that would have been enough."

Mauna continued, "But what if only had three people in the audience, Ma? And what if one of them was Gandhi, wouldn't that have been enough?" (He had just watched the movie Gandhi the night before.) "Yeah, Mauna, if only had three people and one of them was Gandhi, that would have been plenty."

He then asked, "Well, how you know that Gandhi wasn't in the audience Ma?" I responded, "Hmm. I don't know that Gandhi wasn't in the audience, Mauna." Mauna responded, "Well Ma, you gotta assume he was there."

Eight years old. In that moment, I experienced the truth of what I was taught, that wisdom is not just the province of the old or of elders. This changed my understanding of who could be my teachers.

**CASTOR OIL PRINCIPLE.** When you say “no” to something, you have to say “yes” to something else. It’s easy to grumble and be cynical; it’s hard to say what you want to do and what you’ll commit to doing.

A facilitator friend, when faced with people who focus on the negatives and remain in the “awfulizing” (Dennis Kauahi’s term) and the “No-can!” would ask the people, “How many of you, when you were a kid, your mother gave you castor oil to clean out your system?” A few people raise their hands. He then asks, “And when she gave you the castor oil, did she give you the whole bottle and tell you to drink it all one time?”

The response is usually swift and loud, “NO! Ho, if we took the whole bottle we would die! She gave us one teaspoon only.” My friend pressed on, “And when she gave you the castor oil, is that all she would give you?” Several voices would chime in, “No, she gave me a slice of orange,” or, “She gave me a lemon drop.”

My friend, would explain, “Yeah, see that’s just like this situation here. When you tell what you no like, you also gotta tell what you like. You cannot just complain about stuff, ’cuz pretty soon, what starts out as you wanting to voice your concerns, if that’s all you do, turns into poison, just like taking the whole bottle of castor oil can turn medicine into poison. You gotta give the yes and not only the no.”

**PEARL CITY HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPLE.** For change to happen, we have to pierce our most closely held beliefs, especially those beliefs which keep us tied to trauma, victimhood, hopelessness, and sadness.

A friend was a teacher of Hawaiian Studies at Pearl City High School. Her students were engaged when she talked about the culture, language, and values of the Hawaiian people, but when it came to the part of Hawai‘i’s history which dealt with the Great Mahele, the great cutting up of the Land and the distribution and concept of “ownership” of the Land, she watched her kids zone out, lose interest, and grow silent. Over 7 years, her students began to reveal why they didn’t want to hear that part of their history.

“My people were stupid,” they would say. “If only they did what the law told them to do—register to own your land. That’s all they had to do!” My friend tried to invite speakers who would explain to them what happened during that period and why people didn’t register to own the land. But nothing she did would change her students’ belief that their ancestors were stupid. Many of them lived in “projects” and nobody in their family owned land, and they believed they were never going to amount to much.

One year, at the very beginning of the year, my friend wrote up on the blackboard, way up on the top of the right side of the board, in that place sacred to teachers: “REGISTER TO OWN YOUR CHAIR IN TWO WEEKS, OR LOSE IT.” She then signed her name and drew a box around the warning.

Two weeks later, the kids walked into the room and THERE WERE NO CHAIRS! “WHAT, TEACH, LIKE WHEA DA CHAIRS?” She responded, “You read English, right? You read that sign I put up on the board? “Yeah,” they said. “So, why didn’t you do what I told you to do—register to *own* your chairs. I signed my name.” Puzzled, they said, “You neva did that before and nobody evah did that before, so we just blew it off.”

“So, do you see what happened to your ancestors? In a time of great colonization and imperialism throughout the world, things were changing rapidly and without warning to the maka‘āinana (the common people). People were being asked to do something strange: register to *own* your land, in a language that wasn’t theirs at a time of great colonization. So they just ‘blew it off’—just like you.”

The students began to pick up their history like a spear and began to poke holes into the stories that kept them imprisoned in hopelessness, a world without pono (goodness).

This Japanese woman, who cares so much for her homeland and her kids, did the impossible with such simplicity and power. Another wisdom keeper.

There are a total of eleven principles and fifteen poems I use in my core curriculum. The principles are summarized below.

### *Summary of Community Building Principles*

1. Poha and Popo Principle: Be able to see the world from the other's point of view.
2. Mauna 'Ala and Gandhi Principle: Assume the sacred in each person, and don't let the number of people following or listening to you determine what you will give.
3. Izzy Abbott Principle: Weave tradition and modernity into a supportive, whole fabric.<sup>5</sup>
4. How Do You Join Two Dots? Principle—straight line, circle, zigzag: Create a process that supports not just different ideas but different ways of making decisions or handling information.<sup>6</sup>
5. Castor Oil Principle: When you say “no” to something, you have to say “yes” to something else.
6. Dalai Lama Principle: Tell the whole story, not just the uwe wale no story (the story of tragedy, oppression, victimization), but also tell the story of when you helped, healed, gave joy.<sup>7</sup>
7. Sylvester Stallone Movie Principle 1: Not everyone who craps on you is your enemy; not everyone who digs you out of that crap is your friend. Have patience before deciding.<sup>8</sup>
8. Sylvester Stallone Movie Principle 2: If you can learn something from a Sylvester Stallone movie, you can learn something from anybody.<sup>9</sup>
9. The Gift Principle: Help people find and acknowledge their gift; this also applies to organizations, communities, schools...

10. Pearl City High School Principle: For change to happen, we have to pierce our most closely held beliefs, especially those beliefs which keep us tied to trauma, victimhood, hopelessness, and sadness.
11. Listen Deeply to yourself and others. See poem below.

*When Someone Deeply Listens to You*

By John Fox

When someone deeply listens to you  
It is like holding out a dented cup  
You've had since childhood  
And watching it fill up with  
Cold, fresh water.  
When it balances on top of the brim,  
You are understood.  
When it overflows and touches your skin,  
You are loved.

When someone deeply listens to you.  
The room where you stay  
Starts a new life  
And the place where you wrote  
Your first poem  
Begins to glow in your mind's eye.  
It is as if gold has been discovered!

When someone deeply listens to you,  
Your bare feet are on the earth  
And a beloved land that seemed distant  
Is now at home within you.

And a final, extra principle, leave a breathing space so that the passion will continue to burn. See Judy Brown's poem.

*Fire*

By Judy Brown

What makes a fire burn  
is space between the logs,  
a breathing space.  
Too much of a good thing,  
too many logs  
packed in too tight  
can douse the flames  
almost as surely  
as a pail of water.

So building fires  
requires attention  
to the spaces in between,  
as much as to the wood.

When we are able to build  
open spaces  
in the same way  
we have learned  
to pile on the logs,  
then we can come to see how  
it is fuel, and absence of the fuel  
together, that make fire possible.

We only need to lay a log  
lightly from time to time.  
A fire  
grows  
simply because the space is there,  
with openings  
in which the flame  
that knows just how it wants to burn  
can find its way.

I use poems as teachers; they are compact, tell stories and life lessons in ways that stick. I will list some of the most powerful poem/teachers I know and hope you will find them for yourselves and sit with them. Of the 15 in the list, I will first share three of the most important of my teachers with you.

*Losing a Language*

By W. S. Merwin, from *The Rain in the Trees* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1988)

A breath leaves the sentences and does not come back  
yet the old still remember something that they could say

but they know now that such things are no longer believed  
and the young have fewer words

many of the things the words were about  
no longer exist

the noun for standing in mist by a haunted tree  
the verb for I

the children will not repeat  
the phrases their parents speak

somebody has persuaded them  
that it is better to say everything differently

so that they can be admired somewhere  
farther and farther away

where nothing that is here is known  
we have little to say to each other

we are wrong and dark  
in the eyes of the new owners

the radio is incomprehensible  
the day is glass

when there is a voice at the door it is foreign  
everywhere instead of a name there is a lie



nobody has seen it happening  
nobody remembers

this is what the words were made  
to prophesy

here are the extinct feathers  
here is the rain we saw

*Calling the Circle*

By Christina Baldwin

It has always been scary  
To step into the circle of firelight,  
To ask for entrance or to offer it. Our hearts race...  
Will we have the courage to see each other?  
Will we have the courage to see the world?  
The risks we take in the twenty-first century  
Are based on risks human beings took  
Thousands of years ago.  
We are not different from our ancestors,  
They are still here, coded inside us.  
They are, I believe,  
Cheering us on.

I use this poem to call the circle, to bring people below the piko and into their na'au.

*A Prayer Approach*

By Susan Wright (submitted as part of the One World Dialogue within  
the Dalai Lama Center in Vancouver, BC, 2008)

I honour your gods  
I drink at your well  
I bring an undefended heart to our meeting place.

I have no cherished outcomes  
I will not negotiate by withholding  
I am not subject to disappointment.

This poem is an excellent way of bringing people to agreement about how we will gather, our terms of engagement.

Self Care is a key element of my workshops. Too often we don't leave enough room or space to keep the fire/passion growing. This poem reminds us to make a breathing space.

Finally, I'd like to share a poem I wrote which defines my approach—"He Alo Ahe Alo" (Face to Face)—to issues and problem solving and transformation.

*He Alo Ahe Alo*

By Puanani Burgess

He Alo Ahe Alo

(Face to Face)

That's how you learn about what makes us weep.

He Alo Ahe Alo

(Face to Face)

That's how you learn about what makes us bleed.

He Alo Ahe Alo

(Face to Face)

That's how you learn about what makes us feel.

What makes us work

What makes us sing

What makes us bitter

What makes us fight

What makes us laugh

What makes us stand against the wind

What makes us sit in the flow of power

What makes us, us.

Not from a distance  
Not from miles away  
Not from a book  
Not from articles you read  
Not from a newspaper  
Not from what somebody told you  
Not from a “reliable source”  
Not from what you think  
Not from a cliff  
Not from a cave  
Not from your reality  
Not from your darkness  
But,

He Alo Ahe Alo  
(Face to Face)

Or,

Else,

Pa‘a kou waha (Shut tight your mouth)

‘A‘ohe o kahi nana o luna o ka pali;  
Iho mai a lolo nei;  
‘Ike i ke au nui ke au iki;  
He Alo Ahe Alo

(The top of the cliff isn’t the place to look at us;  
Come down here and learn of the big and little current,  
Face to face)

And come and help us dig, the lo‘i<sup>10</sup> deep.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Finally, to the kupuna, whose name I never knew, who taught me:

If you plan for a year—plant kalo.

If you plan for 10 years—plant koa.

But, if you plan for a 100 years—teach the children Aloha 'Āina  
(to Love the Land)

Aunty Pua.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## NOTES

1 I moved away from the ordinary way of having people introduce themselves—you know, go around and tell everybody why you're there, what your role is, your educational background, and so forth—because I saw that this kind of introduction set the stage for the discussion. Even though people introduced themselves to each other, they really didn't know or trust each other. That made whatever we were going to do really hard. There was more potential that if I said blue, you would say green. Saying your name and telling all the things that make you an

expert at something, or interested in something, or good at something, wasn't cutting it. When it came time to really dig deep, nobody would go there, because basically there was no trust in the group. So how do you build trust? Guts on the Table became one way to do that. I don't call it Guts on the Table when we start the process, because I don't want to make people nervous. I tell them later.

2 In the interest of time, I specify parameters, otherwise people take advantage. I explain how much time each person has. I typically use between 3 to 5 minutes for them to tell all three stories. I tell the people that in Hawaiian tradition, the left side is the women's side, so I always pass the watch to the left. I ask the person to my left to hold the watch for me, and when I have 1 more minute remaining, to hand me my watch. When they hand the watch to me, I know I have 1 minute left to summarize whatever I have left to say. So in that way, everybody has the same amount of time. You may not tell all three stories. That's okay. But, you had the same amount as everyone else to tell what was important to you.

3 See the article, "A Life Lived Whole" by Parker Palmer (<http://www.yesmagazine.org/issues/healing-resistance/a-life-lived-whole>).

4 See the article "Can Prison Be a Place of Healing? The Trauma-Informed Care Initiative at the Women's Community Correctional Center" in this volume by Mark K. Patterson, Patrick Uchigakiuchi, and Toni Bissen.

5 Izzy Abbott Principle: We asked Dr. Isabella Abbott, a world-famous Hawaiian ethnobotanist to be a speaker at the Kalo (Taro) Festival in Wai'anae. For her workshop she brought four microscopes and placed them on a long table. She took thin slices of kalo and put them on glass slides and put them under the microscopes. She then called the children up to the microscopes to see the body of their ancestor, Hāloa.

Dr. Abbott told the story of Hāloa being the elder brother of the Hawaiian people, being on the earth to take care of and to nourish the people; she then told the story of kalo from her Western academic perspective which sees kalo as the most nutritious food for the Hawaiian people.

As we watched and listened to Dr. Abbott's presentation, we watched as she wove her traditional way of understanding the importance of this plant, as Hāloa, the elder brother, and as kalo, a nutritious food, into whole cloth. The ability to weave

these two perspectives into a whole meant that people wouldn't have to choose between one way or the other—to be traditional or modern—but they could be both. This “and” perspective allows for greater inclusion of many perspectives which is part of building beloved communities.

6 How Do You Join Two Dots? Principle: Imagine two dots on a large piece of paper, how do you join those two dots? One way is a straight line. When I think of people who join two dots with a straight line, I think of people who make lists and who ask the questions: What are we going to do? Who is going to do it? By when? How much is it going to cost? And what will be the outcomes? It's efficient.

What's another way of joining two dots? With a circle. When I think of people who join two dots with a circle, I think of people who ask the question, “Why?” Why are we doing this? Why now? Why this way? The questions of philosophy. So, the meeting that straight-line people thought would take 1.5 hours is now going to take 4 hours.

What's a third way of joining two dots? The zigzag. Start at *a* and go all over the place until you finally get to point *b*. I think that people who join two dots this way are the people who know the long story of the community, or the issue or project and want to tell that long story so people can understand deeply what they're doing or proposing.

I tell these stories at the beginning of the process to help people realize that they have, not just different ideas, but they have different ways of handling information and making decisions. What we need to do in our processes is make room for these different ways.

7 Dalai Lama Principle: In 2006 150 people were invited to Vancouver, BC, to participate in the opening of the Dalai Lama Center for Peace and Education. Half the people came from corporations large and small and half came from civil society.

One of the processes involved giving ten participants at a time an opportunity to sit with the Dalai Lama in a small circle to ask him a question or tell a story. In one of the circles a native woman, a chief of her people, told the story of sadness of her people, poverty, and ill health. As she told that story, her shoulders sagged and her head bowed and the tears flowed.

The Dalai Lama listened closely and when she was done, asked her quietly, “I’m sure you saved the life of at least one child?” She paused before answering, “Oh, yes,” she said slowly and began to tell the story of a child and his mother, then another child and her family.

The Dalai Lama said gently, “See, you didn’t tell us that story. When you tell your story you have to tell the whole story.”

8 Sylvester Stallone Movie Principle 1: Have patience before deciding who is your enemy and who is your friend.

During the workshop I ask, “How many of you have ever seen the Sylvester Stallone movie *The Assassin*? It is not a very memorable movie, or people are embarrassed about watching that movie, so people are often reluctant to admit or raise their hand to acknowledge that they’ve seen it.

In summary, Stallone is the King of the Assassins and he is being challenged by his protégé played by Antonio Banderas, who wants to ascend to the throne. The critical scene is what I call “The shoot-out at the O.K. Corral”: Stallone is in a bank, concluding a \$7 million transaction and Banderas is in an abandoned building across the way with a machine gun and a trillion rounds of ammunition pointed at the doorway of the bank (there is usually only one way in and one way out of the bank), waiting for Stallone to emerge.

Across the street, at a little café, sits Julianne Moore’s character; she and Stallone are lovers in this movie, and she is wired to Stallone. Her job is to watch Banderas and report to Stallone Banderas’s moves. She tells him that “He’s nervous. He’s pacing.”

In his nervousness, Stallone asks her to tell him a story. She tells him the story of a little bird, a sparrow, during winter, who decides to fly south to follow the sun. As she flies in the cold air, her wings freeze and she falls to the earth in a pasture.

Then along comes a big old cow, steps over her, and lands a big cow pie on her. No matter how we feel about being in a pile of crap, it was warm in there and the bird’s wings begin to defrost and she comes alive again and flaps her wings. She catches the attention of a big old tabby cat who comes over to her, digs her out of that crap, and promptly eats her.

So, the first principle of this story is: Not everyone who craps on you is your enemy, and not everyone who digs you out of shit is your friend. You have to be patient to find out who truly is your enemy and who truly is your friend. Sometimes we decide that too soon, and it turns out later that the person or situation we thought of as our enemy turns out to be our best teacher. Patience.

9 Sylvester Stallone Movie Principle 2: Keep an open mind about who can be your teachers.

10 A lo'i is an irrigated paddy in which kalo (taro) is grown. Kalo is believed to be the elder brother, Hāloa, of the Po'e Hawai'i (the Hawaiian People).