

Reconnecting Spiritual Roots in Our Faith Communities

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In the Day Reading Room of Sterling Library at Yale Divinity School, a beautiful desk is surrounded by countless books and manuscripts chronicling the early nineteenth-century missionaries to Hawai'i. Five thousand miles from the shores of my Hawai'i home, as a first year seminarian, I was overjoyed to find this desk and the works surrounding it. In the bleakness that defines much of New Haven fall and winter, it was a space almost sacred—a place apart from this often dismal corner of New England that had become my temporary home in the early 1980s.

That is, until it wasn't.

While researching a paper on religious support on the continent for the Overthrow of Queen Lili'uokalani, I consulted *The Friend*, the journal of the Hawai'i Evangelical Association, the church body that emerged from the American Board of Foreign Missions, and eventually became the Hawai'i Conference of the United Church of Christ (HCUCC). I expected to find support for the Overthrow there, but to my horror, it wasn't tacit, but loud and unanimous support, reflecting the most vile and racist thoughts rampant in Congress and across the continent. There, in bold print, were my own blood ancestors, self-righteously celebrating a grievous wrong. I was utterly destroyed by this revelation. The sacredness of that space was forever lost.

That memory resonates profoundly with me as now, after more than three decades of ordained ministry in Hawai'i as part of the HCUCC, I find myself sitting at the HCUCC office with colleagues as we consider the implications of 2020—the 200th anniversary of the missionaries' arrival. We are also aware that this year is more than twenty-five years after the UCC and the HCUCC apologized for their role in overthrowing the monarchy, and promised to work toward restitution, reparation, and renewal. And in that office, we find ourselves asking “Has anything changed?”

Western understandings of 'āina still carry the day—value determined by short-term profit maximized. The 'āina still suffers under the bulldozer and the concrete weight of structures of finance, commerce, and visitors. The reefs wallow in silt, the fish run thin, and the sacred wai is clogged with rubbish and Roundup. For the people who welcomed my ancestors with aloha, though already horribly

thinned by introduced disease, and who are now squeezed to the margins of health and wealth—the question lingers in the air.

“Has anything changed?”

And further—

“Does this faith of those intrepid missionaries have anything new to say?”

Then, in the midst of this gathering, my colleague Kahu Wayne Higa of Ka’āhuanu Church on Maui began to speak of Holy Communion. But the symbols he used were not the bread and wine, but the *kalo* (taro) and the *wai* (fresh water). He held in front of us an imaginary ‘ohā (taro corm), imu-steamed and ready for transformation, and he began to grind and to pound.

“The *kalo*, broken for you, that you might have life. The *wai*, running fresh and clear, that you might be renewed.”

In that moment, the wisdom of two powerful spiritual traditions merged seamlessly, speaking as one about self-sacrificial love. That moment wrapped these traditions of spiritual wisdom that for 200+ years have too often been pitted against one another—a win/lose proposition that has produced very few winners—into a unity, calling forth a life-affirming network of mutuality that could span the entirety of the Creation.

We must relocate ourselves in the beauty of such commonality, for there we will find the wisdom that will guide our future. I suggest that we begin with ‘āina. For too long the prevailing Western paradigm vis-à-vis the land has been that of control and exploitation. This understanding emerges from a poor translation of Genesis 1 that gives humankind “dominion” over all of God’s Creation. In a recent episode of the “On Being” podcast with Krista Tippett, Professor Ellen Davis of Duke Divinity School shares that the Hebrew word from which “dominion” comes is more appropriately translated as an “artistic exercise of skilled mastery.”

Oh, how different might things have been, if such had been the understanding of those first foreigners who set eyes on these island shores, decades before the first missionaries arrived. One would be hard pressed to find a finer example of the “artistic exercise of skilled mastery” than the *ahupua’a* system that defined and focused all activities, borne out of a brilliant awareness of every waterdrop that falls upon the *mauka* peaks, working its way through the *wao akua* (realm of the gods) in rivulet, fall, and stream to the *wao kanaka* (realm of human activity), diverted by ‘auwai (irrigation channels) into *lo’i kalo* (taro patches), where it provides nutrients while also being filtered before its return to stream, and its flow to *kahakai* (shoreline) and eventually to *moana* (the sea).

If those first foreign visitors and enchanted residents had paid attention to the *mo’olelo* (story) of Hāloa, the firstborn sibling who comes to second life in the *kalo*, they might have understood their own Biblical story better, in which humankind in Genesis 1 is created not “apart from” but as “a part of” the rest of the Creation—“kin” not just to other humans, but to the finned of the sea, the limbed and leafed of the forest, the winged of the sky, the footed, pawed, and hoofed, and all that breezes, flows, and rises in peaks of grandeur.

Rather than in the kingdom of brute force, unconscious manipulation, and soulless extraction visited upon these islands, we truly live in a “kin-dom.” “He ali’i ka ‘āina; he kauā ke kanaka” (The land is the chief, humans its steward), the na’au (wisdom) of Hawai’i proclaims, a sentiment echoed repeatedly throughout the Biblical story, for as Professor Davis explains, “the best index in the Bible of the health of the relationship between God and humankind is the health of the earth as a whole.” Mālama ‘āina (to care for the land), in the same way that it cares for us, is our kuleana (responsibility). So say our Hawaiian brothers and sisters, but so too says the Good Book—a truth that needs to emerge again.

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Sadly, such a reading of the Bible did not accompany those who first journeyed from the West, whether as world explorer, sailor, whaler, merchant, or missionary. Nor did it occur to their children who came to call Hawai’i their home. If the ‘āina is a resource only valued for its economic return—dominated always, easily exploited and plundered, with its sacredness having no value in the equation—then it is no leap at all to take the same view of those who work the land, whether on plantations of mono-crops, or for hotels filled with tourist props. Just as the land shudders with thoughtless and heartless assault, so do its people. For too many here in Hawai’i, the yearning to thrive gave way long ago to a struggle just to survive—and all of this happening in a land that yearns to provide for all.

But that can be then, and there can be a new now. Two hundred years and more have passed, Biblical scholarship advances, and the mo’olelo and mele (song) that were too long suppressed burst forth again. Seeds of vitality and beauty, wisdom and wonder, which have lain dormant are present to guide us, and a brighter future awaits. That future need not reflect the conquest reality of the last 200+ years: one spiritual tradition, one economic system, one form of land management needing to win, and forcing the other to lose. This reality has produced trauma and tragedy. The time has come for today’s church communities—the descendants of those intrepid purveyors of faith of centuries ago—to uncouple our faith traditions from those systems that value profit, power, and possessions, and to reattach ourselves to the wisdom imbedded in these sacred islands—a wisdom of reciprocity (aloha aku, aloha mai—the aloha you share is the aloha you receive) and of kinship/‘ohana, an understanding of *family* that makes the entirety of creation the true neighborhood of the Golden Rule. It is wisdom utterly integral to our own Good Book as well.

Shall we do the hard, reflective, and reckoning work required to truly share both sorrows and joy? Shall we open ourselves to wisdom that adds color and depth to our own? Shall we allow the deepest yearnings towards an utterly transformative aloha to lodge firmly in our na’au (seat of wisdom) and burst forth from our hearts? Such is the kāhea (call) echoing across the islands, calling forth not just the footprints that mark our days, but the soul-prints that shall mark our lives.

Work Cited

Tippett, Krista, host. "Wendell Berry and Ellen Davis: The Art of Being Creatures." *On Being*, 10 June 2020, <https://onbeing.org/programs/wendell-berry-ellen-davis-the-art-of-being-creatures/>.

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