

# TO SET RIGHT— HO'OPONOPONO

## A NATIVE HAWAIIAN WAY OF PEACEMAKING

BY MANU MEYER

**T**he United States government recognizes about 500 tribes as “Native American,” including tribes of American Indians, Alaskan Natives, and Native Hawaiians. Together, they speak more than 250 languages and have found at least that many ways to resolve conflicts peacefully.

Although each tribe has held from antiquity its own unique tools for peacemaking, at the core of all Native American peacemaking is a sense of spirituality, a respect for ancestors, a focus on balance and harmony, and, above all, an honoring of land. Unlike the mediation practices most lawyers know, Native ways of healing conflicts center on relationship rather than agreement.

The goal of peacemaking is the maintenance of a strong community, a goal that usually is accomplished by adhering to a philosophy best described as “sacred justice.” Under

sacred justice, peacemakers work to restore harmony between individuals and groups, to return to peace via restitution, apologies, and forgiveness.

### *A Different Vocabulary*

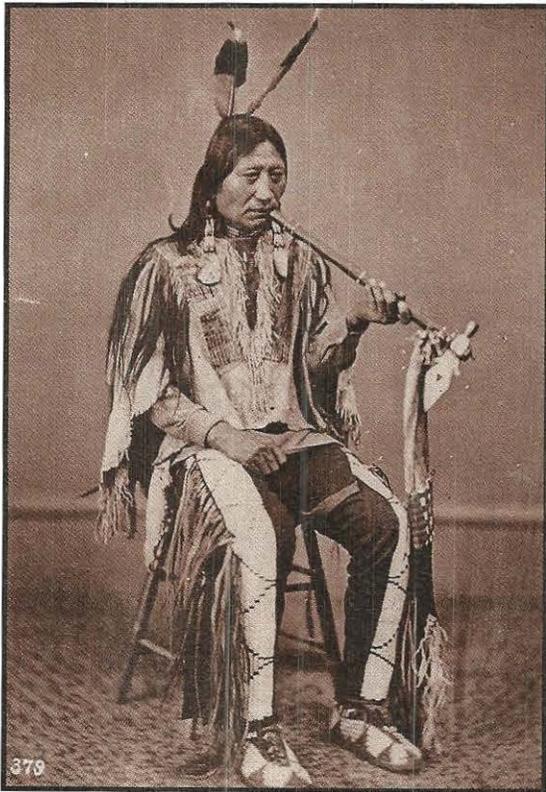
Peacemaking and mediation have two distinct vocabularies. Mediation terms such as *dispute* and *conflict* become, in a peacemaking context, *stubborn disagreement*, *having differences*, and for Hawaiians, *entanglement*. Words such as *punishment*, *revenge*, and *right* become in peacemaking, *restitution*, *forgiveness*, and *truth*. Although both mediation and peacemaking seek to end conflict, peacemaking is not concerned with distributing justice, finding who is right, or dispensing punishment. It strives instead for the maintenance of harmony between individuals and the exhibition of spiritual efficacy.

One such indigenous peacemaking process is the Native Hawaiian practice of *ho'oponopono*, which literally means “setting to right” or “to make right.”

Ho'oponopono is an ancient Hawaiian communication practice based on the physical and spiritual need for members of a family to work together and aid in one another's well-being. Historically, ho'oponopono was practiced only between immediate family members. Because each member played an important role in the survival of the family, main-

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taining harmony was vital to keeping the family alive and well. Ho'oponopono was the means with which that harmony was maintained.

In 1994, the Native Hawaiian Bar Association established Na'au Pono, a ho'oponopono demonstration project that received its first referrals from family court about a year ago. Although members of most families no longer depend on one another for physical survival, the need for a process that peacefully resolves conflicts among family members is as pressing as ever.

#### Key Conditions

The first step in the ho'oponopono process is the choice of a *haku* (facilitator). In ancient Hawaii, the haku was usually a male member of the healing, professional class, known as the kahuna. Today, haku are most often respected elders—male or female—who are not involved in the issues that have given rise to the ho'oponopono. The haku plays a vital role in setting a tone of *aloha* (love, affection), the spirit that ties the family together.

Once the haku has been chosen, the participants must understand and agree to the following before the ho'oponopono can begin:

1. Each individual in the *'ohana* (family) is committed to being part of the problem-solving process.
2. All words and deeds that are part of the ho'oponopono will be shared in an atmosphere of *'oia i'o* (the essence of truth).
3. A spirit of aloha is shared by the participants, or they are committed to reinstating that spirit.
4. Everything said in the ho'oponopono will be kept in confidence; nothing will be repeated outside the ho'oponopono.
5. The chosen haku is a fair and impartial channel through which the ho'oponopono can be done. (All participants must agree.)

The purpose of the five conditions is to ensure an ethos of commitment, honesty, privacy, and fairness, and to provide a foundation and structure for the discussions that will follow. It is these five conditions that set the stage for a successful, relationship-centered resolution process.

A part of the haku's role is to "ritualize" a tone of sincerity and commitment for the ho'oponopono by asking each participant whether he or she understands and agrees to the five conditions. The haku has the right to pause and assess a particular participant's sincerity, and to end, postpone, or continue the process based on what he or she feels is appropriate. A ho'oponopono will not begin if the haku

determines that the participants are unwilling to agree to the five conditions.

The extent to which a haku will need to establish the necessary tone of sincerity will vary greatly from family to family. Families that have long experience with ho'oponopono will come to the process fully aware of the five conditions and fully prepared to accept them. (They know already that the ho'oponopono will not proceed without such acceptance.) For modern Hawaiian families, however, for whom the specifics of ho'oponopono are vague, a clear presentation of the five conditions will be necessary.

**T**he ho'oponopono will begin with a *pule wehe* (opening prayer), said by the haku and addressed to family *'aumakua* (god or gods) to ask for guidance, strength, clarity and healing. After or during the *pule wehe*, the haku will "say" the *kukulu kumuhana*, the meaning of which can be understood in two ways.

*Kukulu kumuhana* means both a clear, objective statement of why the ho'oponopono was called—a useful starting point for discussion—and a form of

ALOHA MAI NO,  
ALOHA AKU; O KA  
HUHU KA MEA E  
OLA 'OLE AI

WHEN LOVE IS  
GIVEN, LOVE  
SHOULD BE  
RETURNED; ANGER  
IS THE THING THAT  
GIVES NO LIFE

—HAWAIIAN  
PROVERB

## GLOSSARY TO HO'OPONOPONO

**'Ohana:** Family blood ties or, more recently, a very close grouping

**Haku:** An unbiased mediator, one that is respected by all

**'Aumakua:** Family god, often represented by a living creature or plant

**Pule Wehe:** Opening prayer, usually said to the family *aumakua*

**Kukulu Kumuhana:** A pooling of mana (energy or strength) directed toward a positive goal; a unified force. This also is the clear, objective statement of the problem

**Hibia:** A tangling of emotions that hinders forgiveness

**Mabiki:** The discussion of the problem, a time to unravel, to peel away the layers of acts and feelings that have created the *hibia*

**Hala:** Fault or transgression

**Ho'omaubala:** Period of unrest, the continued holding of a grudge, feelings of hostility

**Ho'omalu:** A silent period, a "timeout"

**'Oia I'o:** The flesh of truth, absolute truth, the essence of truth

**Mibi:** Forgiveness, repentance, apology, confession

**Kala:** To release, untie, free, unbind

**Mo Ka Piko:** To sever the umbilical cord; symbolically, to cut off an *'ohana* member

**Pule Ho'opau:** Closing prayer

—M. M.

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spiritual solidarity in which people focus on one person or one problem and, in doing so, unify their spiritual strength for positive ends. Kukulu kumuhana can be understood as the pooling of the emotional, physical, and spiritual strength of family members for a shared purpose. Whether conscious or unconscious, it *always* is present in a successful ho'oponopono.

The haku may facilitate the spirit of kukulu kumuhana during a ho'oponopano if one of the participants becomes "stuck in hostility." In doing so, the haku will ask all of the family members to spiritually and mindfully help break the barriers that are keeping the one member stuck.

It is interesting to think about why kukulu

# HO'OPONOPANO AND MEDIATION: EXAMINING

## HO'OPONOPONO

## MEDIATION

### *How conflict is understood*

- ▷ Conflict is disruptive to harmonious relationships.
- ▷ Boundaries of conflict extend beyond the family to the spiritual and natural world; as do repercussions.
- ▷ View of self as relational; in conflict, the focus is the affects of individual behavior on the group; "Security" and self worth are achieved through relationships
- ▷ Conflicts bind people tightly through hihia.

- ▷ Conflict is normal, potentially positive, and can lead to personal growth.
- ▷ Boundaries of conflict are narrow, defined by those directly involved
- ▷ Self is seen as autonomous, individuated; can speak of "self-interests" in conflict; "security" of self comes with individual achievements, e.g., economic success.
- ▷ Conflict is divisive and separates people.

### *How conflicts are resolved*

- ▷ Problems are dealt with holistically; there are no limits on the scope of resolution that is possible.
- ▷ Traditionally, island societies allowed "no-exit"; entangled, conflicted relationships needed to be straightened out.
- ▷ Purpose of ho'oponopono is to "clear the way," restore harmonious relationships; "straighten" things out
- ▷ Family process is to restore harmony, maintain integrity

- ▷ Problems/conflicts can be compartmentalized in such a way that some issues are "mediatable" and some are better taken care of by other specialists.
- ▷ Urban societies are mobile; "exits" are easier if conflicts are unresolved; it is possible to settle the issues in conflict without creating or destroying good relationships.
- ▷ Purpose of mediation is to make agreements
- ▷ "Family mediation" is almost synonymous with "divorce mediation"; it helps the family restructure in as rational a way as is possible.

kumuhana refers both to the pooling of strength and the stating of the problem, and whether that dual meaning has something to do with the success of ho'oponopono. Stating the problem in the hopeful context of spiritual solidarity is much like planting a seed in fertile soil—the very nature of kukulu kumuhana provides the context for resolution.

*Mahiki*

Mahiki is the process of examining one layer at a time, of inching toward the source of trouble to untangle emotions, actions, and motivations, which will, in turn, uncover yet another, deeper layer of the same. In the process of mahiki, the haku deals

with only one problem at a time, tracing it from start to finish until it can be fully understood. Imagine mahiki as peeling back the layers of an onion. It is the heart of a ho'oponopono, the process that enables the family to come closer to *mibi* (forgiveness) through the identification of *hala* (fault or transgression) and *bibia* (entangled emotions).

During mahiki, the participants may speak only when given permission and only to the haku. This gives the haku an opportunity to deflect the anger and clarify the emotions or thoughts of participants who may be too *bibia* (entangled) to speak clearly. Generally, hakus agree that anger and emotions are important and valuable in ho'oponopono, but should not run unchecked or misdirected.

## THE DIFFERENCES

### HO'OPONOPONO

### MEDIATION

*The setting*

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▷ Family home or other intimate setting that is familiar to family and haku</li> <li>▷ The process is private; limited to family members and the haku.</li> </ul>           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▷ Office or other site that is unfamiliar to disputants</li> <li>▷ The process is public; it includes many outsiders in central roles, e.g., mediators, and in peripheral roles, e.g., accountants, lawyers, counselors, etc.</li> </ul> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▷ Time is extended, marathon-like; the process can last hours or even days; multiple sessions are possible; sessions are scheduled close to time of the problem.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▷ Sessions may last between two and four hours; multiple sessions are possible; a time lapse is likely between the grievance process and settlement.</li> </ul>  |

*The role of the participants*

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▷ Participants share cultural assumptions; traditionally everyone is familiar with the process and the ritual.</li> <li>▷ All parties have a connection to one another; the family system is the focus.</li> <li>▷ Family members deal with all aspects of the problem; there is no need for outside assistance.</li> <li>▷ Hierarchical structure—the haku has special status in relation to the family (although within the family, the relationships between the parents and children are more egalitarian than usual).</li> <li>▷ Haku is known to family, is a respected elder, who has intimate knowledge of the parties</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▷ Participants don't necessarily share an ethnocultural background.</li> <li>▷ Parties are segmented; individuals are the focus, e.g., "Disputant Party #1" and "Disputant Party #2."</li> <li>▷ Disputants make their own decisions, but may need expert advice regarding the details of the agreement (and approval by lawyers and the court in family cases).</li> <li>▷ The structure is egalitarian (nonstatus oriented); mediator has no ascribed status.</li> <li>▷ Mediator has no prior knowledge of or acquaintance with parties.</li> </ul> |
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### Time Out

Another phase of a ho'oponopono is Ho'omalū, a time for the participants to gather strength and think. It is a silent time and usually is called by the haku to quell mounting tension or provide a rest and time for silence and reflection. Ho'omalū is a valuable and useful tool in ho'oponopono as it serves to ritualize the time when family members eat, gain individual strength, or pool their energies for the benefit of the group. It can last a few minutes, a few hours, or days.

Although every ho'oponopono must end in resolution, the path to that ending is not always amicable. There is an option in ho'oponopono called *mo ka piko*, which means "to sever the umbilical cord." An example of when *mo ka piko* might be used is a situation in which one member of the family refuses to participate in the problem-solving process or to embrace the family with any sense of aloha. As a

result, he or she may be cut off from the ho'oponopono and, if restitution is not made, asked to leave the family for good. *Mo ka piko* is used only when all other options have failed.

One of the last phases of ho'oponopono is *mibi*, a phase of forgiveness, apology, and confession. It usually is charged with sincerity and strong emotions. During *mibi*, the haku no longer acts as the mediator of words and emotions but allows members to talk directly to one another. The character of that talk is 'oia i'o, one of the five conditions of the ho'oponopono to which the participants agreed.

'Oia i'o is absolute truth, sincerity and the spirit and essence of truth. Among its many aspects is "total truth"—truth without innuendo, intentional omission, or slanting of facts and presentation. It also is truth that can be sensed emotionally; a person will know by what he or she is feeling whether his or her statement is 'oia i'o. This kind of truth, no mat-

## HO'OPONOPONO

## MEDIATION

### *The role of the participants (continued)*

- ▷ Haku's authority is based on substantive knowledge (wisdom), skill, and status as an elder.
- ▷ Haku's power is direct; he or she can influence, counsel, and advise; spiritual power also is available.

- ▷ The authority of the mediator has been gained through the obtaining of credentials and skills (via training); he or she has procedural knowledge.
- ▷ Mediator's power is indirect and procedural; he or she can plan communication strategies and invoke leverage of "state" to boost influence, e.g., "What happens if you don't agree?"

### *Rules*

- ▷ Based on an oral tradition (The parties are receptive to the power of the word; general intentions can cover broad range of matters; there is no need to spell out details.)
- ▷ A discussion about emotions and the quality of relationships is essential to understanding problems and resolving them.
- ▷ Direct emotional expression, particularly anger, is discouraged.
- ▷ Communication among family members is indirect and controlled by the leader.

- ▷ The process is based on a written tradition (written files and notes; agreements must be written down with full details).
- ▷ Talk about emotions is necessary at first, but is peripheral to the main focus: negotiating concrete agreements. (Further exploration of emotional issues is referred to counseling.)
- ▷ Emotional expression is allowed; in "forum" stage, participants are expected to "ventilate" their feelings.
- ▷ Direct communication is encouraged; indirect communication, i.e., mediator-controlled communication, is used only if necessary.

ter how painful it may be to others, is what is expected in ho'oponopono because the essential element of ho'oponopono is the total revealing of what really happened. Until everyone involved knows clearly who did what to whom and why, it will not be possible to remedy the situation.

**T**he phase of *kala*—to release, untie, free each other completely—follows the phase of forgiveness. *Kala* represents an ideal that is not easy to attain. In ho'oponopono, it is expressed in the phrase: *Ke kala aku nei 'au ia 'oe a pela nobo'i 'au e kala ia mai ai* (I unbind you from the fault, and thus may I also be unbound by it.)

The *kala* process of forgiving and releasing is not the same as the more familiar “forgive and forget,” in which an incident that is forgotten has actually been repressed. *Kala* seeks instead to strip the inci-

dent of its pain-causing attributes. It may be remembered, but if *mihi* and *hala* have been sincere, it will be remembered as “no big thing anymore.”

Although the specific experience of *kala* will vary with each ho'oponopono, some of its aspects will be common to all: a sense of releasing, a deep and profound emptying, a feeling that something has been lifted from the group, a lightness, and an upwelling of *aloha*. All of this is healing.

*Another Prayer*

A successful ho'oponopono ends with a drained yet united and uplifted family. The process closes with a *pule ho'opau*, a prayer that gives thanks for guidance and asks for continued support. Prayers are essential to the Hawaiian peacemaking process. Denying the need for guidance from a spiritual source is denying the truth of what makes ho'oponopono work. CL

HO'OPONOPONO

MEDIATION

*Rules (continued)*

- ▷ No secrets; discussions occur with all members present
- ▷ Self scrutiny is key. (How have I transgressed? Will you forgive me?)

- ▷ Secrets allowed in caucus.
- ▷ Naming, blaming, and claiming of grievances by individuals (“This is what you did, this is what I want you to do for me.”)

*Stages*

- ▷ Opening prayer and statement of problem by haku
- ▷ Discussions (*mahiki*)—the examination of all layers of the problem takes place with the whole family present.
- ▷ Discussion is focused on the past to uncover the thoughts, feelings, and actions that have led to the conflict.
- ▷ Through discussion there is understanding of *hiihia* (tangled emotions), which makes possible the moving toward resolution.
- ▷ Resolution comes from mutual apology and forgiveness; admission of guilt, or contribution to *hiihia* and *hala* are important.
- ▷ Session ends with prayer and socializing (a meal).

- ▷ Opening statement by mediator, then the parties' first joint statements
- ▷ Discussions “get at the issues” by encouraging the parties to move from positions to interests; discussion occurs in joint *and* private sessions.
- ▷ Forum gives some focus to past actions, but only in the service of negotiating future actions.
- ▷ Discussion furthers negotiation by “reducing bargaining range” and “expanding the agreement zone” between parties.
- ▷ Resolution comes through negotiations that lead to a written agreement; agreements avoid admitting guilt or attributing blame.
- ▷ The process ends with the parties receiving a copy of the agreement; then they disperse.

—M. M.