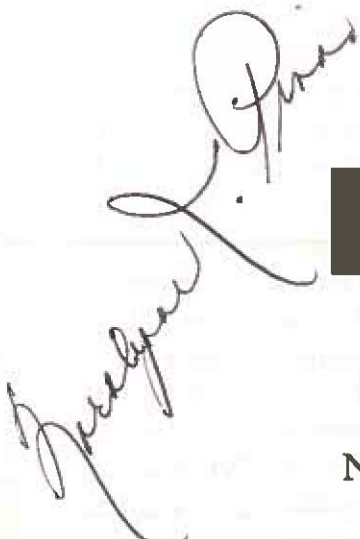




CHAPTER 1

ALOHA SPIRIT

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“Are we losing our aloha spirit?”

There is a certain abiding spirit of community that we tend to associate with insular places. It has to do with the gift of giving, with reciprocity, and with interdependence. While little gestures and conventions speak to this, each community's “habits of the heart” are unique.

In many small towns, some folks always seem to know the names and genealogies of the families that live there and all the other ties that bind people together and to that place. They will share their stories with you if you ask them nicely and, often as not, will tell you all about that ineffable “something” that happens when people in their community interact.

In other locales—places where people farm and ranch, for example—it is still customary for people to gather to raise a barn or rebuild a house that has burned. Everyone comes from far away. Everyone pitches in, even people who don't like each other very much.

Even in a few hard-core city neighborhoods, this same attitude surfaces when neighbors bring each other welcoming gifts or stop to inquire about each other's health in barbershops and supermarkets. Wherever it occurs, it seems to have something to do with intimacy, caring, and the imparting of friendship to others.

Aloha spirit. In Hawai'i, we call all these things "aloha spirit," and it is part of what makes us special. It's part of who we are and why Hawai'i is different from Los Angeles, Wichita, Lexington, Philadelphia, and every other place. Here, the word "aloha" is used to convey love, to express compassion, to show mercy or sympathy, to describe charity and kindness, and to say hello, goodbye, farewell, and alas.

Despite its many uses, or maybe because of them, there is little agreement about what aloha means. George Kanahele, scholar, businessman, and civic leader, says, "It is hard to think of another word that over so many decades has aroused more public attention, even controversy among Hawaiians and non-Hawaiians, than aloha." What we can say, though, is that all its meanings—from compassion to charity, to simple greetings of kindred human beings—are essential to a caring and humane society.

Tourists and malihini. Are we losing our aloha spirit? The question is asked repeatedly, but the answer seems to depend on your perspective and who you define as "we." If you are a tourist or *malihini*, a comparative newcomer, Hawai'i probably looks considerably better than the place you've come from. The climate is temperate, the landscape is magnificent, beauty surrounds you on a daily basis, and Hawai'i's thriving local cultures offer endless diversity in food, art, dance, literature, music, and perspective. Along with these things are simple, everyday acts of friendliness that somehow didn't happen in that place you just left, or that happened with much less frequency: the touch of a smile from a stranger, a flower lei given, a helping hand, a kind word offered when none was needed or foreseen.

People from elsewhere—the occasional visitor, the repeat tourist, the recent transplant—notice these things right away. Aloha spirit, says King Intermediate School seventh-grader Joel H. K. Nakila, Jr., winner of an essay contest sponsored by Thomas Cook Currency Services, "is what people come to Hawai'i for. It's caring for people without expecting something in return." Perhaps because this caring is rare in the places they come from, or because it takes a more hospitable and amiable form here, *malihini* accumulate these experiences. They treasure them, remember them, and come back (or stay) because of them.

Depending on your tolerance for generalization, however, there are

at least two other groups of people who might disagree strongly.

Kama'aina. If you are a certain kind of longtime resident of Hawai'i but not originally from here, some of this aloha spirit may look frayed and worn around the edges. Some might list it as an endangered species. A few say it's completely dead. What many *kama'aina* see these days is the crowding, congestion, and upraised middle-finger protestations that seem to come with urbanization. Looking around, you note the loss of little Mom and Pop stores in neighborhoods, the influx of chains with fancy French names at Ala Moana shopping center, the advent of warehouse discounters, crowds of tourists on formerly remote beaches, traffic jams, and a general decline in civility compared to life here ten, twenty, or thirty years ago.

Nostalgia plays a part no doubt, and, interestingly, many *kama'aina* date the decline in aloha from about the time they themselves arrived. Perhaps there is a cause-and-effect relationship. Nonetheless, there are other indicators that also may tell part of the story. Remember when front doors didn't have locks? Today, Hawai'i suffers from the "break-in blues": \$10.3 million in cash and goods stolen during 5,718 burglaries in 1992. Or take traffic. There was a time—not so very long ago, in fact—when people still waved at each other from their cars. Nobody honked. Nobody cut in. Auto theft was completely unknown. Or even a little thing like fruit trees. Many *kama'aina* can still remember bags of mangos left on front porches. Today it's more likely your fruit tree will be stripped clean if nobody is looking.

Does this mean that aloha spirit has really deteriorated significantly? Andrew Lind, a renowned sociologist from the University of Hawai'i, thought so back in 1972. He believed that beneficence, consideration for others, and hospitality inherently decline when communities lose their intimacy.

Loss of familiarity, in turn, is in great measure a function of population increase and technology. It's harder to maintain that unique feeling of interconnectedness when the medium of exchange is a computer, a modem, a conference call, or a fax machine instead of a face-to-face smile. The reality today is that people on O'ahu, where the majority of Hawai'i's population reside, no longer can know and interact with everyone else as if Honolulu were a small community. Increasingly, our day-to-day associations take place with strangers.

Hawaiians. There is a third view that comes from people indigent to this place, most of whom are resurgent with cultural pride, many of them politically astute and assertive. Some call themselves *kanaka maoli*, “true people.” The aloha spirit, say some of these folks, isn’t an elusive concept and it isn’t dead. It’s just gone underground for awhile. Why? Because it’s been exploited.

Aloha spirit is a special blessing, intimately tied to Hawaiian culture. Because of this, it is vulnerable. It is easily captured by others and transformed by image-makers and marketeers into something designed to sell vacations to people from Japan, Germany, and Canada. Like the aloha shirt—which was “invented,” patented, and then turned into an industry that primarily benefited people from elsewhere—there is a risk that the phrase “aloha spirit” could become a cynical commercial contrivance.

For this reason, many Hawaiians want to reclaim the phrase from non-Hawaiians entirely. “Aloha spirit,” says Mahealani Kamau’u, executive director of the Native Hawaiian Legal Corporation, “is based on unconditional giving and sharing. Ironically, the very people who have the least to give materially—Hawaiians—are now being called on to share their aloha spirit in the greatest proportions. We see that the phrase has been expropriated by the tourism industry and turned into a call to self-interest. We should be nice because it’s good for business. We reject that view.” In fact, for Hawaiians, retaining the phrase “aloha spirit” as a unique cultural property may prove critical to coalescing the many diverse views Hawaiians have regarding sovereignty.

Shared sentiments. Many non-Hawaiians, including *kama’aina* and *malihini*, share those sentiments. Holly Henderson, a friend who cares deeply about such issues, puts it this way: “The dilemma of aloha is that it is possible to take it for granted, accept it as your due, love it, revel in it, luxuriate in it, take from it—and never reciprocate, never give anything back, and maybe never even know that if you don’t, you destroy the balance that enables it to uplift community.” Said differently, aloha spirit is not an abstract intellectual idea. It is a life form which must be nurtured and practiced if it is to survive.

Given the pace of demographic, economic, and political change in Hawai’i, this may become progressively more difficult. It is easier to reduce the notion of aloha spirit to a bundle of interpersonal codes than

it is to infuse the “spirit” half of the equation into everyday affairs. But for some people, aloha spirit ultimately means just that. It is the divine breath that gives all of us a sense of humility, balance, and grace.

An individual thing. Perhaps it all comes down to individuals and their sometimes complicated relationships with each other and with the land that grounds and surrounds them. There are Hawaiians who don't have much aloha spirit for other people or for Hawai'i itself. Conversely, there are some non-Hawaiians who seem to have been born with aloha spirit. They give to others and to the place with no thought of receiving anything back. There are non-Hawaiians who have lived here for generations and have lost that spirit (or never had it in the first place), and people just arriving on United Airlines Flight 107 from Los Angeles who have more than their share of aloha but have never before heard the word spoken.

Love, affection, compassion, mercy, pity, and kindness—the things Mary Pukui and Samuel Elbert in their Hawaiian dictionary tell us make up aloha—transcend and cut across cultures. No cultural or ethnic group owns these things exclusively. If they are in decline, let's not forget that they seem to be in decline everywhere as we skate to the close of this difficult, extraordinary century.

In Hawai'i, however, these essential qualities of life—community caring, community giving, and community feeling—have a better-than-even chance of enduring because they spring so brightly from the land and its first people.

So long as these two things persist, so too will aloha spirit.



