

## **PRINCIPLES OF BUILDING THE BELOVED COMMUNITY**

### **DRAFT Revised 3/27/09**

These principles and stories emerged and evolved over the past twenty-five years; there are others, but these are my core principles for community building. Each of the principles are told through the lens of stories which have taught me so much. I hope they will help you as you build your beloved community.

1. **Poha and Popo Principle:** Be willing and able to see the world from the other's point of view.

In the Poha and Popo story, my son, Poha's Chinese grandmother, his Popo, would take him, when he was two years old, on a walk in a stroller around the block. We live in a very rural part of our community, Wai'anae, and our blocks are two miles around.

During the walk, Popo would stop at a pasture to show Poha the horses and cows in the pasture, knowing that children loved to see large animals. She'd goo and ga at Poha, waiting for his laughter or some kind of response. But, he would have no response, instead he just sat in his stroller and stared blankly. Popo did this four days in a row and each time, Poha wouldn't respond. On the fourth walk Popo thought, "I'm not going to do this one more time, if that's all that boy does is sit and stare." She decided to see what Poha was looking at from his point of view, she bent down to see what Poha was looking at from his point of view and from that point of view she saw that all he saw was tall grass. When she realized what he was looking at, she bent down and picked him up and lifted him to her eye level. And from that point of view, Poha saw the horses and cows and began to laugh.

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. If you assume you are talking to a Gandhi, or to your child, you'll always give your best.

In the Mauna 'Ala and Gandhi story, I was asked to give a keynote talk to a conference of about 400 people. On the day of the convening, I walked into the large conference room which could seat 400 and there were only 30 people there and that's all the people who would be attending. The organizer of the conference who invited me, apologized, but basically inferred that I wasn't a big enough draw and that's why the audience was so small. I did my best, but my best was very disappointing, especially to me.

When I got back home after that fiasco, my eight year old son, Mauna 'Ala, saw my sadness and asked, "What's wrong, Ma?" I told him what a disappointment I was and how badly I felt.

Mauna asked me, "So, Ma, what if I was the only one in the audience? Wouldn't that have been enough for you?" I said, "Yes Mauna, if it was only you in the audience, that would have been enough." Mauna then responded, "What if there were only three people in the audience, Ma? And what if one of them was Gandhi, wouldn't that have been enough?" "Yes, Mauna, that would have been enough; that would have been plenty." "Well, how you know Gandhi wasn't in the audience, Ma?" Mauna responded. "I don't know," I said. "See, Ma, you gotta assume he was there."

3. **Izzy Abbott Principle:** The most powerful process is one that can weave tradition and modernity into a supportive, whole fabric.

We asked Dr. Izabella 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, Haloa.

Dr. Abbott told the story of Haloa 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 Haloa, 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.

4. How Do You Join Two Dots? Principle: Straight line, circle, or zigzag: We need to create processes that supports not just different ideas, but different ways of making decisions or handling information.

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 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 zig zag. 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.

5. **Castor Oil Principle:** When you say “no” to something, you have to say “yes” to something else.

A facilitator friend, when faced with people who focus on the negatives, would ask people the following question, “I wanna know how many of you, in small kid time, your mother, would give you castor oil to clean your system?”

People would raise their hands, then he asked, “And when your mother gave you the castor oil, did she tell you to take the whole bottle one time?” People would say quickly, “No, only one tablespoon at a time; if we took the whole bottle it would kill us or make us really sick.”

Then he would ask, “And when she gave you the castor oil, is that all she gave you?” “No. My mom gave me a slice of orange,” said one person. “Mine gave me a lemon drop,” said another.

“Yeah. See, that’s just like this situation here. When you tell what you no like, you gotta tell what you like. You cannot just complain, ‘cuz soon, what started out as you wanting to voice your concerns, turns into poison, and people don’t want to listen. Worse, they won’t come back to the meeting. You gotta give the “yes” with the “no.”

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, were helped, healed, gave joy.

In 2006 one hundred and fifty people were invited to Vancouver, B. C. to participate in the opening of the Dalai Lama Center for Peace and Education. Seventy-five people came from corporations

large and small and seventy-five people 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."

7. 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 a 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' 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.

8. Sylvester Stallone Movie Principle 2: If you can learn something from a Sylvester Stallone movie, you can learn something from anybody. Keep an open mind about who can be your teacher(s).
9. The Gift Principle: Help people find and acknowledge their gift; this also applies to organizations, communities, schools . . .

As part of the "Building the Beloved Community" process I've developed over the past twenty years, I do an exercise called, "Guts on the Table." It's purpose is to get people "to think" from below their *piko* (belly button/navel) in their gut or *na'au*.

It asks people to tell three stories: 1. The story of all of their names. In this story resides the story of where they come from and what their people dreamed for them; it tells the story, "Who am I?" 2. Tell the story of your community, however you experience community. This tells the story, "Who am We?"

3. Tell the story of your Gift. This often is the hardest Story to tell because many of us were raised to think that talking about our gift(s) means “bragging on ourselves.”

I did this process with a group of 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders at Wai’anae High School. We went around the circle of students And when we came to this young Hawaiian boy, he told the story of his names and his community well. But, when it came to telling the story of his Gift, he said, “What, miss? What kine gif’ you tink I get? I stay in dis fricken’ special ed. class; I get hard time read and I cannot do dat math stuff so good. And why you make me shame fo’, ask me dat kine question, ‘What your gif’?’ If I had gif’, you tink I stay in dis kine class?” So he just shut up and shut down.

And I, felt shame, that I made his shame, so I shut up and I shut down. When the circle was done, I just packed up my stuff and left; didn’t apologize, didn’t talk about it. It was one of those situations that you regret, but couldn’t figure out what to do about it.

Two weeks later, in Tamura Store (it’s one of those places in a community where people you can run into anyone you want to see if you just wait long enough), I was pushing my cart down one of the aisles and I saw that young guy; his back was turned toward me. I stopped in my tracks and thought, “RUN, PUA!” I tried to pull my cart quickly and quietly, so that he wouldn’t turn around and see me.

I thought, “If he sees me, he’s going to yell at me again.” I took three steps backward and he turns around and sees me. Big smile, arms open wide, he says, “Aunty, I been tinkering about you,” he points at me. “Two weeks I been tinkering, dat aunty tole me I get one gif, so I betta fine’um, you know. So, I been tinkering, tinkering, tinkering,” he points to his head.

“So, brudda, what’s your gift?”

“You know, I get hard time read and hard time doin’ math, but Aunty, when I go in the ocean, I can call the fish, everytime, I

can call the fish and I can put food on my family table. Every time. And sometimes, when I stay in da wadda, the shark come, and he look at me, and I look at him, and tell him, “Uncle, no worry, I not goin’ take plenny fish, only one, two fish – jus’ for my family. All the res’ I leave for you. So, the shark make shaka sign and say, “You cool brudda.” And I tell him, “You cool Uncle and I make him shaka sign. So, he go his way, you know Aunty, an’ I go my way. I tink dat’s my gif”

I look at this boy, whose body language has changed from a defeated, sad, hopeless boy, to a proud, spine-straight, brilliant young man, and say, “What I hope for you brudda, is some day, you’re going to have a wife and children, and you’ll think ‘My wife, have gifts, and my children, have gifts. I better help them find them and better help support them.’”

Then when I talk with teachers, school administrators, I tell them the story of this boy and ask, “What would have happened to the life of this boy, if this curriculum was gift-based? What if we could find the gift of every child and teach to their gifts? This boy is rubbish to you, to this system. And yet, clearly, he is a genius, the things he knows about the ocean and all the beings that live there is huge. In his gift, he has so much to offer. So much to be respected.

Sometimes, asking a question, will sit like a seed in a person’s heart, soul and grow at the right moment.

10. 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 some one 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 finally, a final principle, an extra, 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 would.

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.

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