

"Do you know where you are?" ... The rain-soaked stranger asked with a calm sense of urgency.

Two days earlier I was contemplating my options as I sat on the porch of my childhood home. My plans to to sojourn deep into the forest had fallen through due to a death in the family of my spiritual teacher, Kahumanu. Kahumanu was a Kupuna or Hawaiian elder and had promised to take me on an overnight hike to what was for me an unknown heiau. "So sorry but with all the family coming into town and the funeral arrangements... its just not a good time." Kahumanu said in a short phone message. I set the phone down and sank in disappointment.

This trip had been planned for months. Living on the mainland for the bulk of my adult life, I cherished every moment I was able to spend home. Having lost my mother a few years earlier, I had gained an even greater sense of urgency to take advantage of the time I had with old-time friends and my now single remaining parent. This particular portion of my stay had been earmarked especially for what was sure to be a profound and life-changing experience in the 'aina (life-giving realm).

Given I had returned my rental car the day before and both father and step mother were off at work, I accepted the fact that my day would likely include walking. Being about three miles up the mountain from the nearest business, reacquainting myself with the old neighborhood sounded more and more like the right way to spend the day..

I was born and raised in the mountains high above Pu'u loa (known to most as Pearl Harbor), and had explored most every ridge and valley by the time I was 15. My friends and I spent countless hours doing what kids do at Napuanani (The beautiful flowers) park and up at the heiau, Keaiwa. I knew every inch of that heiau (sacred temple) given it was a favorite meeting place for just about everyone who lived on the mountain. From the lava rock walls of the lower temple to the mist-shrouded upper stands of eucalyptus trees, the heiau had influenced my inner climate like no other place.

While I was considered by most to be the same as any other keiki running the streets, I was in fact caucasian, and for that fact labeled by strangers as "haole." This was a moniker completely appropriate as a racial heading or completely degrading as an incompetent and unwanted outsider depending on how it was used. To me it just meant "be on guard" when I heard it used angrily.

After strapping on my sneakers and grabbing a spare bottle of water, I headed out the gate and up the hill. The sky always seemed lower up the mountain, maybe due to the almost constant halo of clouds that seemed to descend into the trees. Whatever the reason, the brilliant blue sky invigorated and encouraged me to move further and faster than normal. Within 15 minutes or so I had bid farewell to the neighborhood and stepped over the chained-off barrier that stops cars from going

further. For those that grew up here the chain was a timeless gateway to the botanical sights and scents of our childhood.

As I began to hike into the forest, the trail got steeper. Within minutes I was huffing and puffing and looking for a good place to take a short rest. Just up ahead at the top of the hill I spotted a break in the strawberry guava... "perfect" I thought. The view of the Ko'olau range was inspiring. "How many men have seen this view from this exact spot?" I wondered while sipping my water. A few moments later my eyes returned to the trail and my thoughts returned to the disappointment of not going on my spiritual awakening with Kahumanu. I felt abandoned, alone and just a little angry.

"Aumakua... are you there? Can you hear my thoughts? Why have my best efforts at making this connection failed? I thought. I had been studying the ways of the Kahu (priests) for sometime now. I knew that a haumana (disciple) needed to prove himself worthy of the light by demonstrating resolve and commitment to his teacher. It seemed painfully obvious, without a master to guide me I was doomed to walk in circles. But as I began to move again down the trail, my skin began to tingle.

"Noho." (in my head)... What?

Again a voice not unlike my own whispered into my ear... "Noho." If the light is white and the spirit is good, Noho... the voice was abundantly clear yet the thinker of the thoughts and the speaker of the words seemed different. "Do it!"... Do what? I snapped in frustration. Then came a recollection of reading about a ritual whereby the presence of your guardian spirit, or Aumakua, is allowed into your body by invitation. But one had to make sure whilst making the invitation you didn't accidentally invite in a spirit who meant to do harm. The ritual was called "Noho."

So I'm supposed to do this on my own?, I thought. How can I? I don't know the procedure... what if I get it wrong? "There's nothing to get wrong" whispered the voice. A calm came over the trees. I stood motionless in the stillness, completely alone.

I outstretched my arms and tilted my head to the clouds. "Aumakua, If your light is white and you mean me no harm, I invite you to enter and be with me." I said out loud. "Aumakua, noho mai... noho mai."

In a moment the stillness gave way to a gentle breeze. The leaves began to move and the voice was silent. By all accounts, nothing had happened. Frustrated, I began to walk... then jog... then run. I ran down the trail, around the corner then up a hill. I felt a sense of freedom. For the next few moments at least, I didn't care about anything. After ten minutes of full-out sprinting, I realized something had indeed happened. This was not how my body usually felt. I had limitless energy and at age 48, no pain.

I ran the trail like I was on fire. My feet darted in and out of the tree roots and sailed over the occasional felled eucalyptus trunk that blocked the path. I felt an odd presence. Not a strange one, just a strong one. Kind of like a renewed sense of self... an energy. I felt like a child returning to a playground. Remembering all at once the joy and freedom of being alive and unbound.

I ran and ran. The trail was warm and humid but the trade winds kept me cool. After passing several groups of hikers going the other way, I found myself back on pavement. In total, I had run some 8 miles up and down the steep ridges. I checked my cell phone for the time. It had been less than two hours since I closed the gate behind me. "How was this possible?" I pondered.

I made my way back down the hill to my home contemplating the extraordinary energy I had felt. I also contemplated the extraordinary pain and stiffness I was sure to experience by later that day. "This isn't going to go well later" I worried. But as the evening wore on the stiffness never came. This was one of the greatest days I had ever had. I had felt a profound connection to the land, to the place. I wanted more.

The next day.

The next morning, I awoke slowly to the soft sound of cooing doves. While excited about going up into the mountains again, my mood was dampened by the darkness of the morning. The clouds were grey and the air was misty. "Not the best weather for trail running" I calculated... "Oh well, maybe tomorrow."

Breakfast came and went yet the weather stayed the same. Misty and drizzly but not truly raining. I did the math again. "I could go and if it starts to rain just head back?" I thought. "What if it starts to rain when I'm deep inside? it will be too late to turn back?" the questions swirled. Finally, a decision was made. I left a note for my father just in case... "Went up the mountain on a hike. 8:15am." The backdoor shut.

With my 12oz bottle of spring water in hand, and nothing more than camo pants and T-shirt for weather protection, I headed back to the chained-off dirt road. The drizzle soon turned to light rain and the first of two profound questions began to be bantered in my mind:

"You really should turn back, its only going to get worse."... "that may be true. But this is why I'm here." I kept walking towards the trail.

By the time I stepped over the chain barrier, the raindrops had fully matured. By the time I summited the first hill, I was soaked thru to my underwear. This was not going to be a repeat of the day before. This was a "no-shit storm" and I was headed into its eye.

As the trail become increasingly slippery and footing become increasingly important, I began focusing on every step. As my attention become more and more internal, my thoughts become more and more external. By the time I entered the heavy grove of strawberry guava that I had ran through just the day before, I was listening intently to "the voice" as it stated the answers to my questions that followed each answer. Like Marlon Brando schooling young "Corell" in Superman 1, I was being given the answers to all of life's great questions by a familiar, parental "voice."

"What if I come around the next corner and find a wild boar crossing the trail?"... "you won't." What if I slip and break my ankle on a root, I won't be able to get out of here?... "you won't," the voice said. I kept my head down and continued to hike through the now torrential rain. I felt increasingly wet and cold as the trail grew darker and more narrow. The mountain was completely enveloped in a heavy rain cloud and the quickest way out was to keep heading in.

At the top of a steep incline was a crossroads I remembered quite well. It was another trail that looped some five miles around. To the right was a trail that would lead back to a main road in about a mile. To the left was the bulk of the loop that would take me completely around the rim of the mountains. I stood in the rain and listened to the host of voices now shouting in my head. To the left the foliage thickened behind the large trees on both sides of the trail. The canopy was low causing an eerie cave-like opening. To the right, open ground.

I stood in the rain and stared at the "cave" opening. It was death... this I felt. There was no good reason to go in. The rain was coming down harder than ever, the footing would be completely unsafe and given the weather there wasn't going to be another soul on the trail all day. I concluded this was completely unsafe and unnecessary. I stripped off my drenched Tshirt and walked down the trail. A minute later I disappeared into the darkness of the "cave."

If it was possible for it to actually rain harder, it did. The rain sheeted off the brow of my deep-set eyes like a tin roof. A decision had been made and a new level of intensity was now in play. Nature had thrown down a challenge and I called its bluff. This was indeed going to happen. I didn't know why, but I felt sure. My fate waited for me somewhere deep in the mountains and I was willing to die to find it.

The never-ending switchbacks of the Ko'olau range had been my garden since I was too young to remember. Having not been associated with a specific religion or church as a child, I had a particular "spiritual" reverence for this environment. "If I'm going to die, this is where I choose to do it. If its going to happen, let it happen now." I yelled into the dense cloud. The cloud responded... rain.

With each new corner came a new section of trail. With each new section of trail came a new corner. But one of these corners would prove to be very different. As I headed down a slight grade I felt the distinct presence of someone else on the trail. I

looked back... nothing, nobody. I took a few more steps and felt a "surge of something" enter in and lift me slightly. With this came an overwhelming sense of déjà vu. A sense that I had been here not just before, but that this was in fact my eternal place. I at once knew that the "real" me has walked this trail outside of time. The life I knew as my own was but one of several lives that I had "dreamed." This place is simply where I wake up when each life is concluded. I knew this to be true in the same way that one knows the difference between "real life" and the dream one had the night before. My whole life, everything, my childhood, my family, my kids, my wife... a dream. All I felt was "of course."

I continued to walk through the stormy rain forest in a state of wonderment. This was the most profound and real experience I had ever had. While I knew where I was, and felt myself on the trail, a second incredible "knowingness" rose up... "my dream-body and perpetual-body have somehow "overlapped" in this place," I felt. As if the two realities had merged into one single awareness.

All at once, an incredible shift occurred. My awareness was suddenly high in the trees across the valley looking back at where I stood on the trail. Then in the blink of an eye I was seeing the valley from yet another vantage point some distance away. In this experience, I became aware of "myself" as the forest "itself."

In this incredible moment came incredible peace. There was no fear, no thought--only observation. Just as quickly, I was back in my body. I continued walking towards the next corner of the switchbacks. I reached out to make contact with a young sapling on the trail and experienced my arm effortlessly pass through it. With that my first cognitive thought arose: "am I dead?" The thought continued, "Did I slip and fall to my death just before all this happened? That would explain this entire thing... Oh my God, I'm dead." I stuck out my arm again to pass it through another tree but this time it hit with force. The pain of the blow brought me solidly back into my body. "If I were dead, that wouldn't have hurt," I calculated. "So if I'm not dead... what the hell just happened?"

The sensation, the awareness, the experience seemed to abruptly draw to a close. I stopped on the trail and stood in complete confusion. My thoughts scampered to reconcile the experience. But there would be no such reconciliation. As if having passed through a time portal, I was back... and still very wet.

While my mind was becoming increasingly "clear" as to where I was, something was about to happen that would call it into question yet again. Peering through the heavy rain, I saw movement on the trail about 100 yards up ahead. It was a person. As he moved closer I could make out his dark hair and backpack. The man represented the first human I had seen since leaving the house. And in the heavy rain he seemed very out of place.

As I moved towards him on the trail I became self-conscious of my own appearance... camo pants and drenched, shirtless torso. "Oh well. Hope I don't scare

him," I thought. As we got closer I could see he was Asian and dressed for sightseeing. I gestured with a friendly wave and "howzit" (a common greeting among islanders, wet or otherwise). The man waved back cautiously as he approached.

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My thoughts began to race. "Who is this? What is he doing way up here in this storm? Why is he wearing black socks and deck shoes? Why is he asking me this? Is this a trick question? Shit... maybe I am dead."

"Yeah... I think so. Why? I replied uncertainly.

The Asian man looked back towards where he had just came then turned back towards me.

"Have you heard of the (looking down at a piece of paper) Ai-a-ee-ya loop trail?" He asked.

I thought for a moment then shouted through the rain... "do you mean the Aiea loop trail?"

"Yes!" The man said. "do you know where it is?"

Now even more confused I replied... "you're on it."

The man now excited said "I am? really? that's great... hey, do you know which way it would be to get back to the parking lot?"

"Well, sure... head down that way for about another mile and the trail will put you out into a campground. Follow it up to the top of the hill then walk up the road a couple hundred yards... and there you are," I said.

"Oh... okay, okay... great. Thank you." Said the Asian, and with that turned away and began digging in his pocket. Not sure as to what just happened, I passed the man and began walking down the trail again. After a few steps I heard him speaking and turned back to see him on his cell phone.

He shouted "I just saw a man and he said we're on the trail right now. He said to keep going..." I turned away and continued down the trail. I wondered who the man would be calling, and since when is there even cell phone signal up here?" As I came around the next corner it all started to make sense. There, huddled under a large tree stump that had jutted out over the trail were two little Asian girls and an elderly Asian man. All three were soaked and one of the girls crying.

As I got closer one of the girls started to cheer "we're saved, we're saved" but was quickly hushed by the older man. A woman's voice from down trail then said: "I found it... I found the road." She was an Asian woman in her 30's and as with the others, was not dressed for a hike much less a tropical typhoon. They were all soaked and muddy. The girls were wearing little beach sandals (rubber slippahs) and T-shirts. The adults, at least, wore sneakers.

The Asian man with the backpack, now just a few feet behind me, shouted to his wife... "he said its just down the trail about a mile." I smiled at the woman who appeared a bit put off. The woman looked passed me and said "I found the road and its off another trail about 50 yards down." The woman looked now at me and asked rhetorically, "Right?"

I looked at her, looked back at the group, then turned and said..."I'm not sure what you found, but if you're looking for the way back to your car- its down this trail about another mile."

The woman, now even more insistent replied, " No, I found the road and its over in that direction (pointing 90 degrees to the west) and that's where we are going."

Not sure why she seemed so determined to get them even more lost, I offered again, "Okay, do what you want but I've been hiking this trail for 40 years and the last time was just yesterday. Since I'm headed that way, why don't we go together and check out this road you found. If it doesn't turn out, I can help you get back?"

From the rear the younger man yelled "sounds good honey, lets do that." And with that the family fell in behind me and the Asian woman. We walked down the trail about 50 or so yards then she pointed to a small feeder trail off to the left. "There, thats it right there" she said. I knew this was not the way home but offered to go with them none the less. After another 30 yards or so, the group came across an old, overgrown asphalt road.

"I don't know what road this is" I said, " but I guarantee its not the one you're looking for. It's likely been here since World War Two." (The area had some key communications towers at one point and the military had built some access roads.) "You can see how overgrown it is... We should head back" I suggested.

"Yes!" Said the younger Asian man from the back of the pack. "Let's follow him, Okay honey?" he asked of whom I now assumed to be his wife. The kids cheered in agreement and the group turned around and headed back to the main trail. As they walked the younger man made his way up to me and struck up a conversation.

"So you said you've been hiking this trail since you were a kid?" The Asian man asked.

"Yeah, I grew up just down the road from here. You passed it on the way up. One road in, one road out." I joked. "Where are you folks from? How did you get up here?" I asked.

The man said, "We're visiting from San Francisco and staying in Waikiki. We found this trail in a guide to the island. It said it was a "easy hike" okay for beginners."

"Bet you didn't count on getting caught in this kind of rain?" I asked. "Not really an easy hike now, huh?" The man nodded in agreement. "Do you folks know what this place is?" I asked.

The man looked around and answered, "its like a state park right?"

"Yes, but its also a Heiau. A healing heiau to be specific. Did you see the lava rocks piled up into a large circle with several ti leave plants inside?" The man shook his head no. I continued, "the trail we are on was actually a medicinal herb picking trail used by the Kahuna la'au lapa'au (herbal medicine healer) back in the old days. Each of the plants here had special uses for various types of healing purposes." I pointed to a nearby tree... "That tree there is called a Kukui. The leaves were used as bandages, the bark was boiled into a tea to help settle the stomach and the nuts were used as candles." I said.

The family became increasingly interested in the now friendly surroundings. They began to ask questions. "What are those berries?" One of the girls asked.

"Strawberry guava" I said. I reached out and picked a perfectly ripe specimen nearly the size of a golfball. "Here you go, try this its really sweet." As I held out my hand with the fruit to the girl her mother kindly pushed the girl's hand away. "No thank you." She said. The group kept walking.

"Why do you know so much about this place." asked the Asian man.

"I didn't always," I replied. "I took an interest in learning later in life. Now I feel like a finally understand my connection here. It's my home." The group crossed a small stream and headed up the next hill. As we neared the top one of the girls said "I see a roof!" And a moment later, the forest opened up into a large meadow with camp sites. The girls began to shout loudly... "we're saved, we're saved... he's our angel mommy. The man is our guardian angel."

I walked the family up to the road and pointed the way back to their car. "Its just around the corner up there. No more than 100 yards." I said. "There's no way you can miss it. One road in and one road out." With that, each of the visitors took their turn shaking my hand and thanking me for my kindness. I waved goodbye as they headed up the road. I knew that I would beat them down to the main entrance of the park and would have another chance to see them safely drive away.



As I walked down the paved road towards home, I felt the rain lighten up. What were the chances of running into that family? I thought. Why did that guy ask "Do you know where you are?"... Why did he phrase it like that? What would've happened if I had missed them by just ten minutes... would the mother have led them up that old road even deeper into the forest? What a day it had been.

As I passed through the main temple of the heiau I stopped to thank my Aumakua, spirit guardians, for showing me what I saw, teaching me what I had learned and for putting me into the service of the lost family. I smiled and looked up the road for what was likely the only car in the park... but there was nothing.

I headed down the narrow road for another 20 minutes or so expecting to catch a glimpse of the kids as they stuck their heads out the window. Just as I rounded the final corner for home I heard the sound of a car coming down the hill. As it got closer I stepped off the road and got ready to wave. I peered through the raindrops and was passed by a small construction truck with a single driver. A moment later I slipped back into the yard of my childhood home wondering "where the heck have I just been?"

I often wonder about that day and what may have really happened. Was there a connection between my "awakening" experience and the family I helped? Why didn't I see them leave the park? Were they even really there? For that matter was I really there?

Perhaps the experience I had sought via the guidance of my kupuna could only have happened without him. Perhaps my fear of death and resolve to push through opened the door to my higher self. Fact is, I just don't know.

Now however, it seems wherever I am, I cant help but to gaze at the softly blowing tree tops and wonder, what dreams may yet be still to come.

Mahalo na mea Ike.