

GUEST: RAMSAY TAUM
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Papa Lyman, he actually challenged me one day. He goes, You're not Hawaiian yet. At twenty - one, twenty - two years old, I said, Of course, I'm Hawaiian. But he really challenged me, saying that, You were really trained and educated in the Western context, and the content you understand is from that as well, so you haven't really become Hawaiian yet.

After receiving this challenge, Ramsay Taum moved from Oahu to Hawaii Island. He spent the next six years there working at nights, while spending time with Hawaiian elders during the day. By the time he moved back to Oahu, he felt that he had finally become Hawaiian. Ramsay Taum, next on Long Story Short.

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***Aloha mai kakou.* I'm Leslie Wilcox. Ramsay Taum of Honolulu is the founder and president of the Life Enhancement Institute of the Pacific. His mission is to include Native Hawaiian cultural values and principles in community planning, whether it's in designing space, or consulting with business and nonprofit leaders. Although Ramsay Taum attended Kamehameha Schools, that's not where he learned his culture.**

I graduated Kamehameha in 1978 after thirteen years there, and then went to the United States Air Force Academy. Transferred to the University of Southern California in 1981, and I graduated in '81 with a Bachelor of Science in public administration, and some urban planning.

Well, with all the ROTC and Air Force, it sounds pretty Western.

It was. And even coming out of Kamehameha Schools, I think we can recall that there really wasn't much of an emphasis on the cultural pieces. In fact, while I was at the Academy, I started taking Chinese, Mandarin, because they required a second language. And at the time, Hawaiian wasn't considered a second language. So, even when I was at Kamehameha, I didn't pursue Hawaiian language, unfortunately, like our students can now.

It was such a different campus then.

It was a very different campus. There was a very different emphasis. The whole cultural thing was a very different part of the world.

It was more, your Hawaiian culture is here for you to enjoy, but here, partake of this Western stuff.

Yeah. I kinda joke about it now. I tell people, I don't leave my life to go do my culture thing and come back to it. But at one point, it was kind of like that. I'm gonna go do my culture thing, and then I'll come back to life tomorrow. Culture really isn't like that; culture is alive. And so, I'm glad and happy to see that our students are now being able to experience the culture in a more realistic way. I mean, living the culture and not just having it be a part of something you do as an extracurricular activity.

Was it important to your parents for you to go to Kamehameha? Tell me about your parents.

My parents; I mean, I couldn't have better friends, let alone mentors and guides. My father was a Kamehameha graduate, and he actually [CHUCKLE] got himself into the school when he was much younger. And so, when I got to Kamehameha, many of his teachers that he had were still there. And so, that was a legacy I got to experience when I was at Kamehameha.

Was it hard to get into Kamehameha then?

They wanted to see how we played. Then they had us painting and doing creative things, and they talked to us about different stories. And I remember doing a painting and playing with other things. From what I understood later on, that was a big part of the experience, was the whole notion of social interaction.

That's what I've heard.

Yeah. How to really engage people. Because if you can do that, they can provide you with the content if you engage with them.

You could do that as a kindergartener. Isn't that how you make your living now?

That's so true. At one time, I thought I'd be a professional friend.

[CHUCKLE]

You know; gonna be a professional friend.

Facebook probably will have that position soon.

Eventually. Yeah.

You played a lot of sports.

I did. I was very fortunate. I'd actually have to say there probably wasn't a day that I wasn't involved in some physical activity since the time I started schooling.

Were you really competitive in sports?

I think I was.

You wanted to win?

Yeah.

At all costs?

I think so. Deep down inside, I think there was part of me that just really wanted to succeed in that way, one, to to make my parents proud, but also just this

drive, this competitive edge, because it was good, it was great to feel that you could achieve that accomplishment. I'm not sure I'm that competitive these days, though. I think it shifted some; some spiritual thing happened. I'm probably not as competitive as I was then.

Or maybe you want two sides to win.

Yeah; I guess that's it. It's more about the win - win, rather than the win - lose type of thing. I guess that came with time.

After Ramsay Taum returned home from college, he went to work at Kamehameha Schools. There were two people in particular whom he credits for starting him on the path to becoming Hawaiian: Papa Richard Lyman, who was then a trustee of Kamehameha Schools, and Auntie Pilahi Pahi, a spiritual leader whose life was the embodiment of aloha.

When Papa Lyman talked with you, he called you Boy. That doesn't give you a sense of identity, does it?

It was funny, because I'd get a phone call from him every now and then. He'd go, Boy, pick me up.

[CHUCKLE]

I said, Oh, here we go. So, I'd go down and pick him up, and take him on errands, and we'd go to lunch. Spending time with him was probably the highlight, simply because we would go to places that a young man of my age probably would never go to.

For example?

Well, at the time, going to the Pacific Club. I mean, he'd say, Pick me up. We'd go around, drive this thing, and we'd go have lunch at the Pacific Club. And I remember he had this special table that he would always sit at. And it was strategic. I chuckle now when I think back that it was this strategic location for him. Because as we sat there, everyone passing by would greet him; Mr. Senator, Mr. Trustee. I'm this wet behind the ear kid going, Wow, this is pretty impressive. Like this place, this man. But in that short period during that time, he would then start with the mentoring. He'd ask questions, talk, see that person there, this condition. We'd talk about these issues. Because as these people came up, so would these issues. And so, it was kind of like his classroom, and I was the student being, taught at the time. So, it was quite interesting. He would call me in the middle of the day, and he'd ask me a question. What is this thing, the tamarind? Find out. And he'd hang up.

And he knew the answer.

He knew the answer.

[CHUCKLE]

It was the funniest thing, because I'd come to his office with all of my research, ready to report to him, and he'd be sitting behind this newspaper and he'd be looking at me over the top of the newspaper. And I'd be explaining it to him,

then he'd put the paper down and he had this twinkle in his eye, and he says, Yeah, that's what I found out too.

[CHUCKLE]

The tamarind was a good example, because I learned so much about Pauahi, I learned so much about the history of her childhood and all those things. And this was in the development of Tamarind Park. And so, they were just looking at that development on Bishop Street, and that's what that assignment was about. But it was more than Tamarind Park; it was about this other stuff. Understanding that it was the place that Pauahi's *piko* was planted, and that the tree became part of this, and it was on campus, and it was down at Bishop Museum. So, you had all of these different paths to follow. I look back on those experiences fondly.

You mentioned Auntie Pilahi Paki, who gave us a new appreciation of the term *aloha*.

Yeah. Well, one day, he actually told me; he goes, Eh, Boy, go call this lady. And I said, Who is she? And he says, You just call her. So, I ended up calling her, and she hung up on me. [CHUCKLE] I don't want to talk to you; she hung up. Which was also another practice. So, it took several efforts.

What do you mean, another practice? That's what *kupuna* would do?

Yeah. You'd call them, and they would ... I don't have time for this. I'm not interested; and they hang up. Again looking back, I acknowledge that now. That is part of that test that you can't study for. Because clearly, if you're not interested, you won't call back.

So, you did call back after you got hung up on?

Oh, yeah. I called back. Nobody wants rejection, and especially when you're full of yourself, right, at that age. There was a tempering going on. And Pilahi was good at it. I had heard different stories, and I checked with different people and they said, Oh, yeah, that lady, she's a *kahuna*, you know, this, this and that. And there was more than just respect in the community. In fact, I was with her on several occasions, and she'd walk into a room, and I think everyone sat a little taller or stood a little straighter when she walked into the room.

Was that because of who she was at that time, or what they knew about her from before? What would cause that?

I think so; I think the stature and the fact that she had already established herself as this woman of spiritual, cultural means. She was acknowledged already in the circle. But also, she was Paki; she's considered one of the last of the Paki line. So, she was of royal ancestry. So, I think that definitely had something to do with it. But more so, there were those who still didn't understand the notion of *kahuna*. What is a *kahuna*? And I asked her; I said, Auntie, you *kahuna*? She goes, They think so. And she'd give me the wink like, Let's just let 'em think that. But she was very, I guess, regal in many ways. You'd walk into a room, and like I said, people would stand a little taller. And she held us accountable; she held those around her accountable, but yet with *aloha*. That's the one thing that I

admired and learned a lot from her, in her physical and her interactions with other people, was that deep sense of *aloha*. Which has really kind of launched me onto doing the things that I'm doing today.

Thinking and being *aloha*.

Yeah. When I first approached her, I actually asked her if she would teach me Hawaiian, because I was really keen on wanting to learn *olelo* Hawaii.

[CHUCKLE] And we're sitting there, and she looks at me and she goes, Mahealani -- my Hawaiian name. She goes, Mahealani, if I teach you Hawaiian, can you do your job? And at the time, I was working for Neil Hannahs at Kamehameha, at the Department of Communications and Community Relations. And in my role as public information officer, I was liaison with community, so clearly, the answer was no. I said, If I speak Hawaiian, most of the people won't understand me. So, she said, Well, then I'll be doing you a disservice by teaching you Hawaiian. Which was really confusing for me, because I knew her then at that point to be this woman who was an advocate of Hawaiian language. So, she then turned and asked me; she goes, If you ask someone to pass the water in English, will they pass it to you? I said, More than likely. She goes, Yeah. If you ask them to pass it to you in Hawaiian, would they pass it to you? I said, Probably not. She goes, Would you like to learn how to get the water to come to you?

[CHUCKLE]

I said, Well, that'd be a trick. She goes, Well, that's what you use Hawaiian for. So, what she was saying was, if you want to move the elements, you want to move the spirit, if you want to connect with people in a different way, that's what you learn Hawaiian for. And so, she said, If anything, I would rather teach you how to think in Hawaiian. And what I came to learn later was that in that process of thinking and shifting the way we process the information, it won't matter what language you're using; you'll always be speaking in Hawaiian. She was saying, at some point in time when you go back far enough, we're all connected, we're all indigenous to some place, that being Island Earth, if you would. But she was adamant that at some point in time in history, someone had to pick up the paddle, someone pick up the sword, someone picks up the lei. You know. And she says, her relative, who of course, is Kamehameha, had to pick up the spear. It was necessary and important at the time to go to war. But she said, We've gone beyond that, we have to get back to *aloha*. So, she talked about her father and the Paki line, saying that at some point, we have to pick up *aloha* to balance it out. And that, of course, is the expression that we use today, *hooponopono*, we have to make things right. And you do that not with the sword in mind, but with *aloha* in mind. And so, she said, By using your words, that's gonna be the key, is to know how to use your words, and use your thoughts.

When Ramsay Taum started thinking about leaving his job at Kamehameha Schools, he received an unexpected offer. What happened next took is cultural training in a new direction that involved learning the ancient Hawaiian art of *lua*, a martial art used for self defense.

So, I know you've said that you were raised in Kailua, Maunawili, Oahu.

Yes.

But you grew up on the Big Island. Explain that.

Well, actually, I got a call one day. It was one of my last days at Kamehameha Schools. I was walking out of the door and got this phone call from a friend of mine, Hiona Granberg. He says, What are you doing? I said, Well, I'm actually walking out of my office. He says, Well, there's this position, we're looking for someone that emcees, sings, and dances, and I know you do one or two of those things. And I said, That's true. So, I thought about it, got on the plane that evening, and several days later was actually retained by the Sheraton Royal Waikoloa, and was mentored by Josephine Flanders in a show at what was then the Royal Waikoloan, the flagship for Sheraton. And there I was for six years, actually doing entertainment, entertainment consultant for the hotel. But it was during that time that I owed someone an hour at night for the shows, I got to spend time doing all these other things. Learning the *laaaulapaau* from the *kupuna* that were there, reconnecting to the *aina*, and new ways of being, new ways of thinking. And that one experience allowed me to do that. And mind you, I was avoiding entertainment like the plague. The joke was, we Kamehameha graduates are either in uniform, police department or the fire department, or entertainers. And that clearly wasn't on my list of things to do. But I found that it gave me the opportunity to experience Hawaii in a different way.

You were leaving Kamehameha, but had no plans. It sounds like you were completely open.

No; I had actually started my master's degree in systems management. I was actually pursuing and thinking about going back to law school back in Washington, DC. Papa Lyman and Auntie Pilahi Paki got a hold of me, one on this side and the other on this side, and they started challenging me, knowing that I had a keen interest in serving Hawaii and the people of Hawaii, and our culture. And they both kinda said, Well, how do you do that if you don't know what that is yet? Again, reinforcing the fact that up to that point in time, my training had really been more in the Western context.

Living on Hawaii Island and working where you did gave you a new sense of being, of how to be. What does that mean?

I like to use the phrase, the difference between being self - centered and being centered in self. Hawaii Island, Moku O Keawe, is a place where the *mana* is still really strong. And it's a place where if you believe in the concept of *karma*, I

would see someone say something about someone else, and within short order, it would be said about them. It's one of those things; be careful what you wish.

This is North Kohala; I have to be careful. [CHUCKLE]

Yeah; exactly. But also dealing with *kupuna* and elders who were prepared and willing to share. And so, in that sharing, you not only find out about them and it, you find out a lot about yourself. Because as Papa Lyman said, you know, Hey, Boy, if you jump into the ocean, you're jumping into the food chain. Do you know what end of the food chain you're on? And frankly, up to that point in time, I got my fish at Tamura's. So, it wasn't part of my daily practice as a child to go fishing. And so, in that time I was there, I got reengage that part of who I was, or who I had wanted to become.

As a practitioner, you do body alignment and you do mediation or *hooponopono*.

That's correct. And again, a lot of this happened on Hawaii Island, like I told you. If there was a shift, it happened during that period that I was there, and ironically, it was in the search for *lua*. Because what I didn't say was that when I went to Auntie Pilahi, I was also looking to connect to *lua*, the language and history and the stories. She basically said, Ah, that's *pilau*, you don't know that kind stuff.

Because it's fighting.

Yeah; it's fighting. But more so because historically, it was a dirty concept. You're breaking bones, you're dislocating, it's about fighting. And so, that wasn't an area she wanted to delve into. So, she proceeded on this other path. Well, it was shortly thereafter that I moved to Hawaii Island, and while I stayed in communication with her, it was on Hawaii Island that I got to meet Uncle Tommy Solomon, Uncle John Pea, and Uncle Al Grace from Milolii. And I did not express to them my interest, but because of Auntie Pilahi, Papa Lyman, and another *kupuna* who I fondly refer to as Tutu Kale, but Charles Kenn, he had started sharing the *lua* with me as well.

Perhaps more so then than now, it was secret. I mean, the practices of *lua* were secret.

It was.

So, why did you want to learn how to break people's bones, anyway?

[CHUCKLE]

[CHUCKLE] I don't know that I wanted to learn to break people's bones, but it was part of the Hawaiian cultural renaissance we were all going through. Mind you, this is 1977, 1978. I'd experienced things on the intellectual, academic, social side of social injustice and how to reclaim who we are as Hawaiians. There was this, for me, an internal desire to learn and reconnect to that. *lua* as a cultural practice was of interest to me. I'd already been involved in martial arts from family and just a general interest; *judo*, *kung fu*, different things. But like the language, I said, What's our Hawaiian art? Charles Kenn, Tutu Kale, told me, Boy, if you want to do this, you gotta go do this first. So, he gave me a list of

tasks. And one of those tasks was to identify five other young Hawaiians, eighteen years or older, who would meet a certain criteria. Meeting the criteria was difficult enough, but finding five other Hawaiians my age who knew anything about or interested in *lua* was extremely difficult. Everybody was still into Bruce Lee and all that other kinda stuff. So, I failed in that task. So, I went back to him, rather disappointed, but that's when he said, Okay, well, I guess we have to do it a different way. So, he proceeded to teach me other things to prepare for the day when perhaps five young men would make themselves available. And that really introduced me to the healing arts. So, it was everything from sports medicine to anatomy.

I believe you've said that *lua* was the key. A martial art, a bone - breaking art, was the key to peace.

Yeah. I subscribe to the notion that violence is probably one of the lowest forms of communication. It suggests that we haven't learned to use our words well, and when we reach a level of frustration or fear or anger that we then turn to that lowest form of communicating. We have to pound it out of you, beat it out of you. So, when you can manage that, and you realize that you can protect yourself as well as others, you then aspire to communicate at a higher level. And that's what I have found *lua* has been for me. It's about creating safe people, safe places. And when a person, a man or a woman, is safe, I think they attract others to them. And when you create a safe person, you create a safe office, a safe home, hopefully you create a safe community. And so, ultimately at some point in time, it is about creating safety. But *lua* is also, I believe, the opposite side of the coin of *hooponopono*, which is about making right. The tradition of war and warriors protecting rather than fighting is this notion that we go to war to bring something back into balance. So, I see *lua* and *hooponopono* being the same thing, and so, I've been able to define it for myself as one of those tools to peace, making things correct. Not fixing bad things, but making things correct.

Ramsay Taum learned from many *kupuna* while he was on Hawaii Island. After six years, he was ready to return to Honolulu, and start putting his knowledge to use; speaking on Hawaiian values, consulting, and even working with architects to design spaces that create a Hawaiian sense of place.

You've crafted an expertise for yourself, a job for yourself that is hard to explain. It is.

Because you're calling upon all kinds of different parts of your being. Do you have a name for your profession?

[CHUCKLE] Well, I think most people would say consultant. Because, people do consult with me. But it is *hooponopono*; I really have to say that's what it is; it's about making things right, whether it's through design or whether it's through its language, strategic planning. Peacemaking; those kinds of things. I like to say

life enhancement facilitator. I had a client ask me that multiple years ago, knowing all the different things I did. He goes, What is it that you do? How do you describe that? And as weird as it is, I find myself engaging individuals, communities, businesses, and enhancing whatever it is they're doing, taking it to the next level; an evolution, if you would.

One of the things I've seen you do very well, and I think you may be best known for this, is integrating Native Hawaiian values into Western business practices.

Again, I think that goes back to Pilahi and Auntie Mornah. Again, all of the *kupuna*. We can use the term place - based, the place - based approaches. And it's acknowledging that values are universal. I think we all have values. But the cultural values are those values that take priority in the places they are in; the culture and the place that we happen to be in at the time. And so, I've been fortunate to work with companies and people interested in making sure that they're in alignment with that. And that alignment starts with values, that then leads and guides our behaviors. It all comes back to our beliefs. So, in the conversation of values, we then have a conversation about these other things, which then reveals all kinds of wonderful stuff. And sometimes, that means creating a place, the physical surroundings, the holding environment if you would, that sense of place that then lends itself to the way we behave inside that place.

And that's your architectural work.

That's the architectural work. I think that comes back to, again, Pilahi's message on *aloha*. It's that we're all at the table, and we don't see the center of the table from one perspective. So if you sit at different parts of the table, you're still looking at it, but you're seeing this thing here. And the best way I can explain my experience has been just that. Rather than sitting on one side of the table looking at the world from that perspective, from one *kupuna*, I got to sit in the middle of the table as they each shared their information. And somewhere in the middle, there's this commonality which I would then call the culture, and each discipline, each aspect of culture may be slightly different because it requires to be. And yet, there's something in the middle that ties it all together. And so, having had the fortune of being at the knee or at the ear, or the elbow of these different *kupuna* gave me a different perspective on who we are as Hawaiians and who we are as people.

Ramsay Taum's journey continues, not only as a cultural practitioner and consultant, but also as a teacher who is keeping alive the knowledge of the elders that was handed down to him. Mahalo to Ramsay Taum of Honolulu for sharing these stories with us. And mahalo to you for joining us. For PBS Hawaii and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou.

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What about the Chinese part of you?

Well, it's interesting, because like I said, when I was at the Air Force Academy, I started learning Mandarin and thus, my name and all that kinda stuff in Chinese. And I just hope that there's enough time for me to learn all that too. But there's only so much my head could hold. If I could do something else, I probably would like to learn more of that, to just have an inkling of what our Chinese side of the room can offer.