

Sara Whitestone

Searching for Mahalo

The water is warm. I swim out past the breakers and let the swells take me in their rise and fall. Every time they pick me up and put me down, I laugh just for the joy of it. I laugh because all is well and beauty wins and love is everything. And I am very in the present.

But why is getting to that place—that moment of joyfully being—so hard? Over and over I have asked myself: Is restlessness a form of seeking, or is it the inability to be content?

I had found a straight-through flight from New York City to Honolulu and charged my credit card. My financial head should have nixed this impulse instantly, but human need is stronger than practicality, and seeking and finding is rarely about money. So, I obeyed this urge to search for something I didn't yet understand. To search for mahalo.

As if in reward for that obedience, my frantic need eased as I touched the water. Those warm waves were my blessing. I was in the present. In the presence.

Is it love—our need to love and to be loved—that drives our restlessness and fuels our discontent? But this type of restlessness is not seeking. It is a yearning thirst that cannot be slaked.

For seven years, I had yearned—desperately thirsted—to live life with a man who was not available to me. And for all that time, we stayed true to our commitments while loving each other from a distance.

But in the space between one single wave lifting me up and gently setting me down, I knew I needed to emotionally let this man go. To live in the present—to feel the divine—I had to stop looking elsewhere.

I also had to believe that love is not limited to romance. On this trip, I wanted to experience other forms of love—those immediate and eclectic connections where total strangers become friends because we are living in the present and, in that moment, we are completely engaged with each other.

He's sitting cross-legged on the beach, a small guitar in his lap and a tiny dog by his side. I ask if I may join him, and he

welcomes me to the sand next to him. His name is Neil, and in answer to my inquiries, he tells me that although he was born and raised in Kailua, he is not an ancestral Hawaiian. But he says he has lived the mahalo I am looking for and has returned to this island from a stint in New York City to be able to live it again.

“Mahalo is round and warm, like a hug,” Neil says. “And when you speak it, the syllables must be round and warm. Everyone in Hawaii uses aloha—both locals and tourists. But those who speak mahalo really mean the blessing of warmth and love.”

Neil’s dog, Kiba, licks my face and begs to be petted, and Neil plays and sings to me—Bob Dylan’s “I Shall Be Released.” We talk of release, of change, of how hard it is sometimes to let go. Then we joke about changing places with each other—just for a few weeks. I would stay at Neil’s place, take care of the dog, play the guitar, and he would go to New York City and teach college writing for me. But then—

“You wouldn’t want that,” Neil says. “You wouldn’t want to have to take care of a sick father. My dad has Parkinson’s.”

“That’s sad,” I say.

“That’s life,” he replies.

“To deeply understand mahalo,” Neil continues, “you must also feel its opposite. The Portuguese word *saudade* doesn’t have a direct translation in English, but it’s an indefinable feeling of nostalgia, of longing, of sadness—a distant hope that something or someone will return.”

“But that keeps us from living in the present,” I say.

“Yes,” Neil agrees. “And that is not mahalo.” Then he smiles, shrugs off his *saudade*, and begins another tune, which is warm, like a hug.

I still cannot reconcile that death—or that any sadness—has to be part of life. Maybe that’s why I’m searching for mahalo—searching for a way to always be in the presence of the divine—so that death is not a separation, but just another breath to be inhaled.

Yet, I sometimes still cling to those things that bring me feelings of pain—of *saudade*. Why do my hands clench so tightly around what I am trying to keep, when my rational mind tells me that living in romantic desperateness is not going to make me happy?

If I open my hands, one finger at a time, the *saudade* of

that seven-year love—the ache that has made me so miserable—disappears like a vapor. But the mahalo of that love stays, hovering gently in my palms.

I walk on the beach slowly, hesitantly. It is already my last night in Hawaii. And I want—

I want so much to understand that all is well and all will be well. But what if I get on the plane and leave what I have learned here, written in sand, to be washed away by the waves?

And then I meet Stu.

He is walking down the beach, and it is the look of serenity on his face that emboldens me, without any chitchat or introductions, to ask, “Can you tell me the true meaning of mahalo?”

“Let’s sit down here together for a moment,” Stu says. His eyes, exactly the color of the sky, look kindly into mine as we settle into the comfort of the sand.

“And now I’ll tell you what I know,” Stu continues. “Hawaiian people use mahalo to say thank you, but it is deeper—wider than just that. When you say mahalo, you are giving the recipient a blessing because you’re so thankful to that person; you want to wish him or her happiness. Mahalo literally means may you be in the presence of the divine.”

“I’ve been feeling that presence,” I whisper.

“But there is more you should feel,” Stu says. “In the Hawaiian language, ha means breath. Both aloha and mahalo are about breath, breathing. It is the deep Hawaiian tradition of effortlessness.”

“I’ve been putting effort into a lot lately,” I say slowly, “in my professional life, and in trying to get my personal life and its relationships sorted out...”

“Yes, most people are stressed because they’re working so hard to figure life out,” Stu says. “But you won’t fully understand—or live—the grace of mahalo until you learn to let the breath lift you, until you learn how to fly on the wind effortlessly.”

“But how do I do that?” I ask, bouncing up and down a little from where I sit, like an excited child.

“Let me tell you about the ‘Iwa,” Stu says, pronouncing it ee-vah. “The ‘Iwa is a seabird that is built to fly into the wind without having to flap her wings. In fact, she rarely ever lands. She lives almost her whole life in the air—even taking a few seconds of sleep as she soars.”

“You mean the bird can actually move forward into the wind without having to work her wings?”

“Yes,” Stu says. “It’s all about how the ‘Iwa uses the updraft that is coming into the island to her advantage. If she wants to fly upward with the draft, she’ll stay horizontal, and the wind will buoy her. But if she wants to move into whatever direction the wind is blowing, then she’ll simply angle herself slightly downward and let the aerodynamics take her forward.”

“Like hang gliding?”

“Yes, exactly like that.”

I am silent for a moment, taking this in. Stu repositions himself in the sand, and I notice his long tattoo—all the way down one forearm. “Is that the ‘Iwa?” I ask.

“It is.” He shows me a mirror image of the same tattoo on his other forearm. “I’m a paddler,” he says, as if that’s all the explanation I need for this symmetry. “I got these tattoos because I wanted to be reminded every day to live effortlessly—to know who I am and to know where I am going, but then to let the breath of the divine lift me and carry me because I am willing to lean into the wind.”

And then I knew. I knew I had to learn to stop flapping my wings—to stop trying to fight the wind—and to instead, with just a shift of my soul, move forward into the breath of the divine.

It is morning, and with only a few hours left on this healing island, I once more walk the beach. Aren’t the oceans and mountains and skies and God in them all big enough to embrace me?

My soul shifts into the wind, and I know who I am. I know what I want. And in this, I feel the evenness of happiness that is my true nature.

I look up, and there is an ‘Iwa—the first I have ever seen. She soars high on an updraft. Then as she faces the wind, she angles herself slightly downward and shoots forward.

She owns nothing and yet joyfully experiences all that is important. And that is her freedom.

A love of seven years. Beautiful in so many ways. But now I am learning to fly through each day on my own—to feel the strength of the mahalo breath—and to let all my raw emotions, my rational thoughts, my angsts, and my joys be buoyed in its warm hug.

And I am myself. Inhaled from the sky. Sucked in from the sea. And free.

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