

Letters to a Young Poet: Hawaiian-Infused Mentoring Wisdom Instilled by John F. McDermott

Stacy S. Drury, MD, PhD

Your life will still find its own paths from there, and that they may be good, rich, and wide is what I wish for you, more than I can say.

—Rainer Maria Rilke

The year that John F. McDermott was born, Franz Xavier Kappus published *Letters to a Young Poet*, a collection of letters he received from Rainer Maria Rilke, a Bohemian-Austrian poet acclaimed for his use of lyrical verse and imagery. Similar to Rilke's timeless advice encapsulated in his letters to Kappus, the value of Jack's words extend far beyond the specific circumstances for which they were written. I recognize now the enduring nature of Jack's notes to me sent, not via mail as in Rilke's era, but electronically, perhaps symbolic of Jack's investment in merging the past wisdom of child psychiatry with the new era of neuroscience, Research Domain Criteria (RDoC), and, at least for me, telomeres.

Located in the vast Pacific Ocean lies a volcanic archipelago, the hundreds of islands spread over 1,500 km that comprise Hawaii. In 1969 John F. McDermott traveled from Ann Arbor, Michigan to these remote islands to join a pristine Department of Psychiatry at the University of Hawaii. Over the next 25 years, he built training programs in general, geriatric, and child and adolescent psychiatry. When he concluded his tenure as Chair, Jack had created the largest organized group of psychiatrists in Hawaii. Yet his daughter Elizabeth commented, "He never really retired. They gave him the Koa chair, but I don't think he ever used it."

This accomplishment is decidedly unsurprising to those fortunate enough to have been mentored and "grown" by Jack. He transformed mental health care for Hawaiians, training record numbers of natives while revering Hawaii's unique culture and history. Naleen Andrade,

MD, Jack's successor as Chair of Psychiatry, and the first native Hawaiian Chair of Psychiatry ever, noted that Jack proudly described himself as:

... a naturalized *haole*, in homage to the Hawaiian monarchs who fostered a society of inclusivity and accommodation. [Jack] practiced *māma po'e Hawai'i* (honor and care for Hawai'i's people) with the depth and integrity of a *kanaka maoli* (indigenous Hawaiian), while never trying to present himself as a native Hawaiian.

I attempt now to pass along what Jack discovered in Hawaii, and brought to us, his mentees: the wisdom from words he discovered there, to challenge us to change and expand how we think and mentor, ideally sharing Jack's unique influences with those we hope to guide and grow. Like the hibiscus, plumeria, and morning glories adorning the islands, I offer these words that Jack left us to make our human landscape ever more rich and meaningful:

'AKA'AKA: Laugh. I cannot remember a conversation with Jack that didn't end in laughter. No matter the circumstances, positive or negative, at some point during our interactions he would tell a story or remind me of some previous event, and then he would laugh. His was the kind of warm, sonorous laugh that makes one think of their childhood and a grandfather. I think his loudest laughs centered around his own errors, the stories he often told as I struggled with my own failures. For everyone who knew Jack, I suspect the image that most quickly comes to mind is one of him laughing and the ever-present accompanying deep blue sparkle in his eyes. McDermott mentoring, apparently, requires laughter. Laughter at our own foibles, joy in the serendipity of sometimes finding a rose, and sometimes a thorn—all are vital.

HA'AHA'A: Humility, laughing. Ha'aha'a has many meanings: laughing at our own missteps, acceptance of who we are, and becoming very silly-looking and, at the same time, very wise. This Hawaiian value teaches individuals to have humility and respect for others, helping us to understand that the truest greatness is found in being superior to your previous self. Jack asked probing questions, leading us to find our better selves. Ha'aha'a was a central facet in his mentoring style.

He honored the dignity of others, both individuals and cultures

ALAKA'I: Leadership. Jack embodied leadership, uniquely and according to this Hawaiian value; his leadership style was inextricably linked to initiative, independence, and optimism. Jack patiently sought and found the possibilities and strengths in

everyone around him, attended to his own skills and lead by example; when inspiration occurred, he would eagerly call the National Institutes of Health (NIH) from a pay phone with his own quarters to discuss grant possibilities. Forward-thinking mentors, beyond the constraints of our existing paradigms, naturally embrace alaka'i and the greatest of responsibilities, that of truly leading others.

HO'OHANOHANO: To conduct oneself with distinction, honor, and integrity. Jack was, to quote John Schowalter, a gentleman. He honored the dignity of others, both individuals and cultures, particularly the Hawaiian culture, voraciously learning all that he could but never adulterating intrinsic meaning. His daughter Beth described Jack as

... a man who pushed us to always resist the easy answers, who listened deeply, often when you thought he wasn't really paying attention. He wanted always to get to the heart of the matter, ask the unasked question, eager to unravel the most daunting complexities.

His leadership and transformation of the *Journal*, first as its editor and then through his mentoring of the editors that followed, including those of us blessed enough to



Dr. John F. and Sally McDermott with Dr. Naleen Andrade in 2004 at the 75th Anniversary Gala of the ABPN. McDermott (1983-1991) and Andrade (2002-2010) served as ABPN Directors.

have a position with his name, embodied ho'ohanohano. Striving for this value represents yet another cornerstone of McDermott mentoring.

MAHALO: Thanks, gratitude. Literally *mahalo* translates into "may you be in divine breath." However, Mahalo also reflects a manner of living—that of living always in thankfulness and gratitude, seeing the richness in the world around you that makes life at every moment a precious experience. I hold this image of Jack in his shepherding days in Hawaii and think of the vast number of associations between herding and his experiences with the field of child psychiatry. He traveled, watched sunsets, and, while never really stopping, managed somehow to still see and smell the hibiscus and orchids surrounding him. I imagine Jack would tell us all Mahalo, thank you, and remind us to both "get moving" and yet still notice the world's gifts all around us.

As I reflect on all of Jack's accomplishments, I wonder, What next, where do we go from here? Yet even for

this, Jack gave me the advice, years ago, clairvoyantly predicting that someday I would need it, as he described to me how Hawaiians deal with death and loss:

The essential point is that [the Hawaiians] extended out the grief [of losing a loved one], took much longer to adapt to the loss, with imagining the lost one and the transition of the person and his/her spirit, prolonging that transition instead of polarizing life and death like we do. A healthy side effect is that they traditionally made up from quarrels during this time—and it, of course, was followed by a magnificent celebration, a luau or dinner party, when the grief work was done.

As we begin this next journey without Jack at our side, I take solace in Jack's teachings on the Hawaiian grief process. I have no wish to polarize Jack's life and death, as that would mean he was no longer here; instead I continue to adapt to this loss, as I suspect many others do as well. I prefer to think of this time as a period when Jack's spirit will transition within each of us, guiding us to take his wisdom, laughter, and warmth and shape it

with our own strengths. I see his sparkling eyes in the sunsets, hear his laughter in the waves on the shore, and feel his warmth each time I see anyone in a Hawaiian shirt, especially blue. Jack reminded me of an old adage that has perhaps great relevance as one considers the transition from mentee to mentor: "To know who you are, you must know who you were, and there you will find the seeds of who you will become."

Because of Jack I have a much better understanding of who I am, and now see the seeds of who I hope to become as I strive for ha'aha'a, alaka'i, and ho'ohano-hano. To Jack, I say a fond mahalo. When this transition is done and the grief work complete, I promise to ensure a magnificent celebration to honor Capt'n Jack.

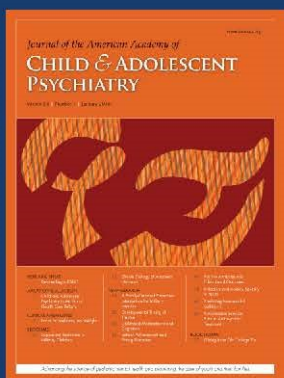
And finally I want to add just one more bit of advice: to keep growing, silently and earnestly, through your whole development; you couldn't disturb it any more violently than by looking outside and waiting for outside answers to questions that only your innermost feeling, in your quietest hour, can perhaps answer.

—Rainer Maria Rilke

About the Author

Stacy Drury, MD, PhD, is vice chair of Research in Pediatrics and the Remigio Gonzalez Professor of Child Psychiatry at Tulane. Her clinical and research interest is in the impact of early life adversity on child development and how that parent-child relationship, genetic, and epigenetic factors influence the lasting negative traces of those experiences.

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