

## **“The Soul of Kalaupapa”**

Remarks to be made on May 27, 2013 for a lecture at the Damiaan  
Centre in Leuven  
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### Genesis of the Kalaupapa experience

In December 2003, I went to Kalaupapa with my wife JoAnna to celebrate our wedding anniversary. Our trip included a precarious mule ride down the steep two-thousand-foot cliffs of the Molokai Range, which eventually spilled us out onto a four-mile peninsula of sacred space, a transforming terra firma known as Kalaupapa.

The literal translation of Kalaupapa may be rendered “flat plain” or “flat leaf.”<sup>1</sup> In either case, it is surely a leveling experience for all who cross the boundaries of their own professed beliefs and ethnicity into a larger realm of brotherhood and compassion. For it is here that religious denominations and cultural divides dissolve—where the love of God and mankind manifest themselves in a magnificent way. This smooth, beautiful peninsula seems most appropriate to symbolize the universal love of God who embraces all four corners of the earth. Structures erected in this region for more than a century include places of worship for Catholics, Protestants, and Latter-day Saints, as well as a small Buddhist temple. It is a place that not only includes a variety of Christian strains but also extends beyond this realm, embracing an array of other views. In a world made up of thousands of religious

varieties, the unconditional love and spirit of acceptance that exist on Kalaupapa truly stand as an example to us all.

JoAnna and I went away from our first encounter with this small settlement feeling much the way Elder Matthew Cowley felt when he encountered Kalaupapa in the mid-twentieth century: “I went there apprehending that I would be depressed. I left knowing that I had been exalted. I had expected that my heart, which is not too strong, would be torn with sympathy, but I went away feeling that it had been healed.” He added, “I went . . . appreciating my friends, loving my enemies, worshiping God, and with a heart purged of all pettiness. This is a transformation for me.”<sup>2</sup>

### Damien and Napela

In 1873, two ecclesiastical leaders from different faiths first made their appearance on the Kalaupapa peninsula. One was a Latter-day Saint named Jonathan Hawaii Napela, the other a Belgian priest, Father Damien J. De Veuster, (now also known as Saint Damien since his canonization in 2009). Napela was born on the island of Maui in 1813, became a district judge in 1848, and converted to Mormonism in 1852. When Napela’s wife Kitty contracted the disease, Jonathan chose to remain with her in the settlement and act as her *kokua*, a Hawaiian word meaning “helper.”

While here, Napela encountered yet another way to serve those around him; not long after his arrival, he was called to act as the leader

of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on the Kalaupapa peninsula, a calling he held from 1873 until his death in 1879, from the effects of leprosy, which is now called by the medical world, Hansen's disease.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps not coincidentally, Father Damien arrived at Kalaupapa in the same year the Napelas did. This Belgian priest would eventually gain international fame because of his demonstration of faith and attitude of selfless service on the island best, captured by his own words: "Suppose the disease does get my body, God will give me another one on Resurrection Day."<sup>4</sup> From the day of his arrival in 1873 until his death at age forty-nine, his concern was for all the patients, regardless of race or religion. However, the core of his heart seemed to belong to the orphaned children whom he often led in singing. His Christian service on the Kalaupapa peninsula serves as an important reminder of Mormon Elder Orson F. Whitney's words, "God has been using . . . other peoples of the world as well, to carry out a work that is too demanding for the limited numbers of Latter-day Saints to accomplish by themselves. . . . Other good and great men and women . . . have been inspired of God under many circumstances to deliver dimensions of light and truth."<sup>5</sup>

Soon after their arrival at the settlement, Jonathan Napela and Father Damien became acquainted. Both had come to Kalaupapa to serve, and both contracted Hansen's disease as a result of their charity. Damien was twenty-seven years younger than Napela, and the cultural

background of each was very different, yet both were firmly committed to their religious orientations. Though ecclesiastical leaders of different faiths, they became dear friends. In fact, one of their contemporaries who lived at Kalaupapa wrote, “After Father Damien arrived in the Leper Settlement, . . . Mr. J. Napela . . . and Father Damien were the best of friends.”<sup>6</sup> What makes this relationship particularly unusual is the fact that at this time, heated rivalries existed between faiths as they vied for island converts.<sup>7</sup> Yet at Kalaupapa, there seems to have developed a different kind of spiritual terrain, nourished by the relationship between these two great men and their commitment to improve the grim conditions they encountered when they arrived at the settlement.

#### Suffering Influences Spirituality at Kalaupapa

Through the influence of Damien, Napela, and a number of other avid Christians, reformation soon made headway. Over the years, Kalaupapa softened under the strain of the suffering that transpired there. One former patient named Bernard noted that Kalaupapa used to be viewed as “a devil’s island, a gateway to hell, worse than a prison.” Yet he added, “Today it is a gateway to heaven. There is a spirituality to the place. All the suffering of those whose blood has touched the land—the effect is so powerful even the rain cannot wash it away.”<sup>8</sup> Another patient named Makia Malo noted, “They thought it was hell and we thought it was heaven.”

In interviews, some patients have related how their spirituality has been affected by their Kalaupapa experience, especially as it pertains to prayer. For example, one patient named Nancy Toleno said:

We were nurtured. . . . Not just by a Protestant or a Mormon or even Catholic nuns. Everyone worked together. . . . Everyone needed prayers, there were prayers. And I was thankful that I was very close, very close to God. . . . Someone asked, “Do you ask God why?” I said, “No, I don’t.” I just say, “maybe it’s a wake-up call.” I thank Him. . . . I want people to know, really know the love in the hearts of the people of Kalaupapa. . . . We’ve got hearts. We’ve got hearts.<sup>9</sup>

Another patient who came to Kalaupapa at age fourteen in 1936 also shared her experience of expressing gratitude to God, even in times of adversity:

God knows best for us. . . . You must keep your faith no matter what comes into your life, you must still be able to thank the Lord for the many other blessings that we receive, and keep this faith all the time, no matter what comes into our life. Yeah. ‘Cause I feel religion is not thanking God when everything is good; religion is thanking God when everything isn’t going right.<sup>10</sup>

This vertical relationship with the heavens seems to have also affected the horizontal relationships among the patients themselves. Furthermore, several people who have had contact with the Kalaupapa patients have spoken of the unifying effects which appear to be inherent in the suffering of this disease. For example, in his book *Travels to Hawaii*, Robert Louis Stevenson wrote of his visit to Kalaupapa, explaining, “They were strangers to each other, collected by common calamity.” Protestant writer Ethel H. Damon noted, “Surely the isolation of suffering has tended toward obliterating the barriers in religious

observance.”<sup>11</sup> Reverend James Drew further observed, “They are brothers and sisters here. . . . Leprosy has made sure of that.”<sup>12</sup>

One Asian patient named Paul Harada echoed this same theme: “The more we suffer, the more strength we have. The more suffering, the closer we are together. Life is that way. If you haven’t suffered, then you don’t know what joy is. The others may know something about joy, but those who have gone through hell and high water, I think they feel the joy deeper.”<sup>13</sup> In referring to the Kalaupapa community this same patient told me, “We are all friends.” There is an “ecumenical philosophy” here.<sup>14</sup>

#### Ecumenical Philosophy at Kalaupapa

In a number of interviews I have certainly seen and heard indications of the ecumenical attitude at Kalaupapa. For example, Latter-day Saint patient Kuulei Bell related that at times she was recruited to sing in the Catholic choir. Not only has Kuulei sung with a Catholic choir, but she and her dear friend and fellow patient, Lucy Kaona, have made many trips to Father Damien’s Church in Kalawao (St. Philomena), three miles from Kalaupapa, to enjoy the chapel’s acoustics and especially to sing to Father Damien as a tribute to his charitable service.<sup>15</sup>

Another example of ecumenism was related in a humorous way by Richard Marks, a former patient, a Catholic, and the sheriff of Kalaupapa for nearly two decades (with a record of no arrests). In describing the Catholic mass in Kalaupapa at Christmas-time, Marks explained, “The

Protestants and the Mormons came early and they took the back seats so we had to sit up front.”<sup>16</sup> Another Catholic patient, noted, “We know all about the things we [the patients] went through. . . . I think that’s one [reason we feel like a family]. . . . When we had a function going on, the whole community just comes together.”<sup>17</sup>

Apparently this kind of attitude prevailed throughout the twentieth century. Latter-day Saint convert Mary Sing, who also remembered the kind service rendered by Mother Marianne Cope recalled, “When I came [to Kalaupapa in 1917] everybody was living just like a family. Nobody says anything bad about the other religion. Everybody was together. See, they respected, you know, each church.” Mary added, “If the Catholic had a party . . . they wait for the Mormon people to get through with their service. . . . And so [it] is with the Protestant, everybody was happy.”<sup>18</sup>

One patient, Edwin Lelepali, known affectionately as “Pali” and a very active member of the Protestant community, recalled, “Us and the Catholic Church and the Mormon Church, we’re always getting together. When it was something big, we always join together and enjoy it.”<sup>19</sup> One memorable ecumenical service occurred soon after the Lion’s Club erected a cross at the Kauhako Crater, shortly before the Easter celebration of 1948. One author wrote of the assemblage of different Christian faiths: “The two Mormon Elders assisted Pastor Alice in the service; many Roman Catholics were present. . . . The people sang as

never before, their joyous message carrying on the wind even to the sufferers in the hospital at Kalaupapa.”<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps the most impressive piece of Kalaupapa’s interfaith collaborative work is the construction of various places of worship. For example, “Pali” expressed his joy and gratitude when members of the settlement joined in 1966 to help restore the Siloama Chapel: “We had the Protestants, we had the Catholics, we had the Mormons all chip in to build this Church. . . . They wanted to help this Church. . . . When you came here you could feel the spirit of love. It was special working with them. . . . It was just beautiful. I can never thank them enough. It was wonderful.”<sup>21</sup> When asked if the same was true when a twentieth century Catholic church was erected, he added that everyone joined in “to help raise some funds for the Church. . . . That’s what’s so different about Kalaupapa, when somebody needs help, everybody’s there.” Finally, this patient explained, “This is our family. . . . I don’t care what religion. . . . That’s how we felt. When they need help, we [are] there, see? . . . We always go. You don’t have to ask us, we just come out and help. That’s how we were brought up here in Kalaupapa. Somehow that great love for everybody brought us together.”<sup>22</sup>

The same spirit of love and collaboration that existed during the construction of the Catholic and Protestant churches was also evident in 1965 when a new Latter-day Saint chapel was built to replace the older 1904 chapel, which had deteriorated. When the building was dedicated

at the close of the year and the work hours tallied, it was discovered that those of other faiths had actually donated *more* hours in its construction than the Latter-day Saints had. “All worked hard, and some of those with disabilities had their hands wired to the wheelbarrows that they might do their share.” The entire settlement joined in celebration over the knowledge that their LDS friends had a new chapel to worship in.<sup>23</sup>

### My Conclusion is the Message of Inclusion

The charity and uncommon service rendered at Kalaupapa serves as a reminder of the importance of erecting bridges instead of barriers, finding common ground instead of battleground, and in valuing one another regardless of ethnicity and religiosity. To me, it provides a vivid illustration for the need for us to not only join hands, but to look outside the circle of our faith’s community to love and serve one another. Such an ecumenical philosophy of inclusiveness seems to be desperately needed in a world that suffers from societal diseases such as selfishness, pride, bigotry, and prejudice. In addition, it is hoped that this short treatise on the Kalaupapa settlement will serve as a reminder of the acute need for each of us to generate light instead of heat and to apply the Latin maxim: “In the essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; and in all things, charity.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Emmett Cahill, *Yesterday at Kalaupapa . . .*, (Honolulu, Editions Limited, 1990), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Elder Matthew Cowley, cited in Lee G. Cantwell, “The Separating Sickness,” *This People* 16, no. 2 (Summer 1995), 63.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan and his wife Kitty both died from the effects of Hansen’s disease in August 1879. See the Kalawao Death Register, 1879—1880, Hawaii State Archives.

<sup>4</sup> Father Damien, originally named Joseph de Veuster, was born January 3, 1840, in

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Tremeloo, Belgium. A priest in the Society of the Sacred Hearts of Joseph and Mary, Damien was ordained at Honolulu in 1864. He then spent several years working among the native Hawaiians on the big island of Hawaii. Members of his parish contracted the disease and were sent to Kalawao on the Kalaupapa peninsula. His heart was instilled with a desire to labor among the leprosy settlement, and when the opportunity presented itself, he quickly volunteered. See Gavan Daws, *Holy Man: Father Damien of Molokai* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1973), 6, 19, 30–34.

<sup>5</sup> Elder Orson F. Whitney, Ninety First Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1921, 32–33.

<sup>6</sup> Ambrose Hutchison, (resident of settlement 1879–1932), “In Memory of Reverend Father Damien J. De Veuster and Other Priests Who have Labored in the Leper Settlement of Kalawao, Moloka‘i,” 19.

<sup>7</sup> Writing in the same year that Damien and Napela met (1873), Charles de Varigny wrote that the native Hawaiian “believes the Catholic priest when he describes the Protestant missionary as a wolf in sheep’s clothing; but he also believes the Protestant minister who speaks of the Catholic priest as an idolator, and of his ritual tainted with paganism.” Cited in John Tayman, *The Colony* (New York: Scribner, 2006), 91.

<sup>8</sup> Tayman, *The Colony* (New York: Scribner, 2006), 315.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Nancy Toleno by Fred E. Woods, August 7, 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Nancy Brede, August 2, 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Ethel M. Damon, *Siloama: The Church of the Healing Spring*, 84.

<sup>12</sup> Rev. James Drew cited in Tayman, *The Colony*, 297.

<sup>13</sup> Tayman, *The Colony*, 314.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Paul Harada by Fred E. Woods, summer, 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Interviews with Kuulei Bell by Fred E. Woods in Kalaupapa, summers of 2004–2006.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Richard Marks by Fred E. Woods, July 28, 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Clarence W. K. Kahilihiwa “Boogie” by Fred E. Woods, July 29, 2006.

<sup>18</sup> Interview of Jack & Mary Sing by Ishmael Stagner & Ken Baldrige, Oral History dated Feb. 24, 1979, BYU-Hawaii Archives, 4.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Edwin Lelepali, “Pali,” by Fred E. Woods, July 29, 2006.

<sup>20</sup> Damon, *Siloama: The Church of the Healing Spring*, 90–91.

<sup>21</sup> Interview of Edwin Lelepali, “Pali,” by Fred E. Woods Feb. 9, 2007.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Edwin Lelepali “Pali” by Fred E. Woods, July 29, 2006.

<sup>23</sup> Orlene, J. Poulsen, “Kalaupapa – Place of Refuge,” *Relief Society Magazine* (March 1968): 210–11.

<sup>24</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed. (New York: Scribners, 1915), 6:650, explains, “this famous motto . . . is often falsely attributed to St. Augustine . . . but is of much later origin. . . The authorship has recently been traced to RUPERTUS MELDENIUS, an otherwise unknown divine.”