

# **Weaving the Pieces Together**

**By Annette Unten**

*Life is a woven tapestry. All the people and the events that enter my life become a part of the threads in my tapestry. Bright colors are woven with pastels. Nubby threads are intertwined with silk and ribbons. All of them add to the richness of this piece. The tapestry will not be complete until I die. What a beautiful tribute to my passage here on earth.*

I was born and raised in Hawaii. My mom was of Japanese descent and my dad was Portuguese, Hawaiian, and English. I always say that I was brought up with the strictness of the Japanese culture and the gentleness of the Hawaiian culture-a unique mixture.

I grew up on a sugar plantation in the little town of Waialua on the island of Oahu. It was a really neat place with people from a lot of cultures and a lot of different races. Plantation work didn't pay much, so my dad didn't make a lot of money. My mom worked as a practical nurse and didn't make very much either.

My mom had been married before, outside her race, to a Chinese man. They had two children, my brothers, who she raised alone for two years before she met my dad. Then she married my daddy and had two girls. Perhaps it was the divorce that made her feel so strongly that a woman could be as successful as a man and that a woman could make it on her own. She gave us the message that you shouldn't have to depend on your husband, especially financially, because you can do anything. That message became a part of me and even though I wasn't a super student, I knew I'd go to college. I just knew. Because my mom said I would.

Growing up, I went to a Catholic school where everything was taught from the white culture's perspective. I remember wanting to be white so much, wanting to be blonde and putting a light-colored mop on my head to play white girl. Being white was held up to me as being so special. When it was time to go on to high school, my mom wanted me to continue with a Catholic education, but we couldn't afford it. So I went to the Kamehameha School, where students have to be of Hawaiian ancestry. This school was left by the long line of the Kamehamehas, the last royal family of Hawaii, for the children of Hawaii. At that time, it didn't do much with the Hawaiian culture. All the books and everything else were geared for white students.

When I finished high school, I knew that if I didn't leave Hawaii I would never finish college. A lot of my girlfriends went to the University of Hawaii where the beach is just so lovely that your car automatically drives you there! They all had nice tans-but no degrees. It was still very, very hard to leave. Everything I was used to was there. But I did it. I went to California.

My mom really wanted me to be a nurse. She thought that would mean that I would always have a job. But all I could think was "Ooh, I hate sick people!" And I think the Lord said, "If we make her a nurse, she'll hurt people more than she will help them!" Thank goodness I didn't go to nursing school and went into teaching instead. And I have just loved it! That's one thing I'm very clear about. I've taught all ages, from toddlers through college, and I've loved every bit of it.

In California everything was new. Right away, I noticed that my way of dressing was different. It was amazing to me that in California everyone dressed as if there was a change of seasons. All of my clothes were for one season-very loose fitting and casual. That made me stand out.

At first I went to a community college where the teacher in my chemistry class told us that if we had any problems we could come talk to

him. So I did. He asked me where I was from, and when I told him Hawaii, he said, "You know, they don't have good schools there. There's no way you're going to pass this class." He was right. I didn't pass. More important, I think that was my first real hit of discrimination. I was being judged by where I grew up.

About that same time, I wanted to join a sorority. There were two on campus. One was the sorority with all the cheerleaders, and that's the one I wanted to be in. The girls there told me, "We think you want the other one, don't you?" At first I didn't get what they meant. At first it didn't hurt. I was again being judged on my appearance, which wasn't their version of a cheerleader.

After I got my associate of arts degree from El Camino College, I went to Cal State Long Beach and received my bachelor's degree. In my fifth year, I earned my elementary teaching credential and, along with that, a specialist credential in early childhood. I went into teaching in 1970 and taught for seven years in the Long Beach School District. Then I had my son, Kimo, and decided to stay home. While Kimo was in preschool, the director asked me to help out. One of the teachers had several children with behavior problems and she thought another person in the room would be great. So I worked part-time. Then she asked me if I'd do a "Mommy and Me" program for the school. I said yes, I would love to. From there, the local junior college asked me to teach in their parent-toddler program. I loved the little ones. There was so much excitement and they were such fun.

I found great joy in this work, but I had also loved college teaching and working with the adults, so I decided to go back and get my master's degree. I started slowly. I had been hearing about Pacific Oaks from different people and decided to visit their campus. When I did, all I could think was: "Oh, boy. This is it. This is where I want to be."

I didn't really think a lot about my culture and didn't realize how much I had tried to fit into the white culture until I went to Pacific Oaks. That's when it hit me right between the eyes. In one of my first classes there, taught by Betty Jones, she asked if anyone spoke a language other than English. She knew I was from Hawaii, and when I didn't say anything, she looked at me and said, "Annette, don't you speak Pidgin English?"

I remember looking back at her and thinking, "To hell with that. I'm not going to admit this." Everyone I had ever talked with on the mainland thought that Pidgin English was such an awful language. The subjects don't match the verbs - it was just not considered correct. Then Betty said, "You know Pidgin's a beautiful language, especially if you think of how it came about. It has a little bit of Portuguese, a little bit of Hawaiian, a little bit of Japanese; little bits of this and that so that all people could communicate with each other. It's really great." I could only think, "Oh, my goodness. Nobody's ever said that to me." It felt wonderful.

The Social and Political Contexts class hit me real hard on how racism is a part of society. It answered so many questions that I hadn't been sure about. Puzzle pieces that I thought were missing in my life were in fact there and now began to fit. For instance, there were many things about my Japanese culture that I understood because my mom was the strong personality in our family and brought the Japanese culture into our daily lives. But we didn't do very much with the Hawaiian culture. I think when the government was taken away from the Hawaiian people, the message the people got was that they were not capable of governing themselves. There was also this image on the mainland of Hawaiians spending all their time dancing, singing, and lazing on the beach. I didn't want that image; I didn't want to be part of it. So I used what I could of my own background. If people wanted me to be smart and to the point, then I became Japanese. Since I felt my Hawaiian was not valued, I became "less Hawaiian."

When I went to Pacific Oaks, I began to see the beauty and gentleness of the Hawaiian culture. I began to see that there's so much to it. And I also began to see that so many incidents in my past-the sorority that wouldn't let me in and the professor who said I'd never learn because I was Hawaiian-played a big part in how I saw myself.

At Pacific Oaks I started asking myself why I was surprised when people pointed me out as being Hawaiian or assumed that I was Asian. I realized that I had been seeing myself as white, as fitting in with everybody else. I began to understand that people just see what they see. And, as I began to be comfortable with who I was, I found myself embracing my Hawaiian side. That brought me back to my hula, to joining a Hawaiian club in California, and wanting our kids to be part of it. At the same time, I was learning that, as a person of color, I needed to be real strong and sure about who I was. If I could do that - if I could be centered - everything else would fall together. But if I couldn't, that's when all the questions and hurts would come up.

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