

Editor’s Note: for the interested reader, an outline of the structure of the case study of “Keo” is shown in Appendix 1.

Existential Psychotherapy in a Deep Cultural Context: The Case of “Keo”

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ABSTRACT

This is a narrative case study of the psychotherapy of “Keo,” a 23-year-old native Hawaiian man who came from a deprived and abusive background. After a period of seeming to turn his life around, Keo became depressed and withdrawn upon learning of a native Hawaiian culture curse that had been perpetrated on him and his sister. In the 24 sessions I saw Keo, I drew on my existential therapy principles to focus on his subjective reality and to work in conjunction with the Hawaiian subculture associated with the curse, including referral to a Kahuna, a healer in the native Hawaiian culture. A major existential dialectic that emerged in the case was Keo’s pull towards freedom from the curse versus his pull towards the status quo to avoid the anxiety associated with change.

Key words: depression; native Hawaiian culture; religious curses and healers of them; existential therapy; case study; clinical case study.

1. CASE CONTEXT AND METHOD

At the time of this case, I was a professor of counseling psychology at the University of Hawaii at Manoa and I also conducted a part-time private practice. The client, “Keo,” was referred to me in my private practice.

Up to that point, my personal and professional life had involved a great variety of different cultural experiences. For example, I was born and raised in a blue collar “Jewish Ghetto” in Boston, had been educated at an ivy-league-level small college in the Northeast, and had gone to graduate school at Northwestern in the Midwest and at the University Waterloo in Ontario, Canada and interned at Hawaii State Hospital in Kaneohe and at McMaster Medical School Hospital in Hamilton, Ontario. I then moved to my job at the University of Hawaii. During the time in Hawaii, I spent 4 months teaching and providing mental health counseling on

a "Semester at Sea" ship that traveled around the world visiting and experiencing such places as Kobe, Japan; Hong Kong; Jakarta and Bali, Indonesia; Bombay, India; Columbo, Mombasa, Kenya; Capetown, South Africa; and Dakar, Senegal. I relished all these different culturally rich and distinctive experiences, and my openness to and passion for delving deep into different cultures, such as the native Hawaiian culture, is reflected in my therapeutic role with Keo.

This special focus on the role of culture is also reflected in the existential theoretical orientation that I developed and employed with Keo, with its focus on individual subjective experience and an individual's responses to universal existential challenges, such as grappling with the conflicting pulls towards freedom versus security, and confronting the universal fact of mortality. As will be described below, my personal and professional background was a very important component of the type of therapy I conducted with Keo. Specifically, these helped me to be therapeutically sensitive to and responsive to Keo's culturally-relevant concerns that could only be imagined to an outsider.

2. THE CLIENT

When he arrived for the appointment Keo was a 23-year-old student at a community college in Hawaii. He was referred to me by his psychology professor. He was described as a man who had a very troubling and abusive childhood, who had managed to turn his life around by his early twenties, completed his G.E.D. and began at a local community college. The referring professor described him as a "dedicated and very smart student who was being encouraged to transfer to the University of Hawaii after his second year [at the community college]."

From the referral notes, Keo was described as quite suddenly becoming depressed and unresponsive in class. His live-in girlfriend, "Lani," had also approached his professor and the counseling center at the community college was reportedly quite worried about his sudden change in mood and behavior. A counselor at the community college counseling center was a former masters-level student of mine and she also recommended me to both Keo and his psychology professor.

3. GUIDING CONCEPTION

The Role of the Therapist's Personhood

According to Nissen-Lie, Rønnestad, Høglend, Havik, Solbakken, Stiles, and Monsen (2015):

It may be difficult to compare the work of psychotherapy with other professions

because of its specific requirement that, to be of help to clients, the therapists must succeed in integrating their *professional* capacities and expertise with their *personal* attributes in a way that almost blurs the distinction between them (p. 49).

Nowhere is this complex interface and interaction as salient as in multi-cultural situations in which accidental micro-aggressions may alter greatly the meaning and impact of any therapeutic intervention. The current case is of a Hawaiian man who was dealing directly with culturally-relevant concerns that could only be imagined to an outsider. That makes the relationship both more tenuous and more important.

Some Central Tenets of Existential Psychotherapy

Shapiro (2015) has described the history and various forms and types of existential therapy (also see Schneider & Krug, 2017). As Shapiro (2015) has indicated, there are many components that make existential therapy unique, along with elements that are common with other approaches. Some of the most central basic tenets of existential therapy are the following.

- A. A primary focus is on a client's subjective experience, with therapeutic attention paid far more to the client's personal experience than to objective or consensual reality. To emphasize the distinctiveness of each client's subjective experience and the interaction of this with the therapist's subjective experience, DuPlock (1997) has famously avowed that each therapist and client create a unique form of therapy.
- B. The initial goal, particularly in a multi-cultural setting, is to develop some common grounds for understanding. Trust is attempted out of the development of a team effort between therapist and client.
- C. The therapist and client are actively engaged in the client's personal attribution of meaning.
- D. The focal point is as much as possible on the here-and-now relationship between the therapist and client. Often this requires the therapist to make explicit previously implicit aspects of the relationship and the client's awareness of their experience.
- E. The therapeutic relationship is the vehicle for healing and dealing with clients' adaptations to basic human realities and dilemmas, such as normal feelings of alienation, meaninglessness, and fears of mortality.
- F. A distinction is made between existential anxiety and neurotic anxiety. The former involves dealing with the human condition, such as those issues described above, with acceptance and endurance. By contrast, the latter, neurotic anxiety involves fears that arise when avoiding

those existential matters. These are commonly challenged and attempts made to work them through.

- G. Existential anxiety is viewed as the engine for change
- H. One powerful technique is the use of parallel process, experiencing and utilizing the client therapist relationship as it reflects in process the dynamics the client experiences in outside life.
- I. The therapy equally values the affective, cognitive and action realms, and the therapy works within each.
- J. Particular attention is paid to awareness of a constant tension between needs for freedom and needs for security. This is often expressed as a conflict between facing the fear of the unknown (too much freedom) and the guilt and stagnation of holding on too tightly to the status quo. This is viewed from both macro (enduring, long-term) and micro (moment-by-moment) perspectives.
- K. Enhanced personal awareness is both goal and method for clients to live more deliberately, authentically, and purposefully.

Existential therapy following these tenets is potentially particularly adaptable to multi-cultural cases. Despite the fact that the theory arose from 19th and early 20th century European philosophies, the intense focus on the client's subjective reality, the lived context, life-universals, and the therapeutic relationship makes it particularly powerful in a multi-cultural setting (Shapiro, 2015).

Stages in the Therapeutic Process

I view therapy through the lens of four interlocking Phases:

- 1) Introduction: getting the client to the consulting room;
- 2) Transition: adjusting to the client's content and process, including cultural manifestations and modes of resistance;
- 3) Treatment: working through changes and facing the fears of the unknown; and
- 4) Termination: saying goodbye and transfer of training.

These are never completely linear. There can be jumps ahead, followed by emotional backfilling and many regressions to earlier processes in the trajectory when clients need to

reassure themselves of security (status quo) needs. The stage shifts in Keo's case are described below.

In working with Keo, the Transition Phase was lengthy both because of client resistance and because of cross-cultural trust issues.

The Treatment Phase is the period in therapy in which active interventions are designed to help the client risk facing the unknown—their personal demons. As to be described below, given the problematic attachment and other early trauma in Keo's case, the anxiety to anything that could bring on repetitions of abandonment and rejection were quite poignant.

In addition to the usual demands of the Termination Phase, termination of therapy in a rural or small community like Keo's is always potentially tricky. There are innumerable likelihoods of running into former clients or therapists in normal day-to-day living. Both therapists and clients are faced with compartmentalizing (see Shapiro, 2010). In Hawaii, this is particularly symbolic with the word "aloha" used to say hello and goodbye.

4, 5, & 6. ASSESSMENT, CASE FORMULATION, AND COURSE OF THERAPY IN AN INTEGRATED MODEL

In the existential therapy model, the therapist approaches the client with a very open mind, not wanting to allow preconceptions to interfere with the process of relationship-building and the client telling their story in their own way. For this reason, the usual next sections of a pragmatic case study—4. Assessment, 5. Case Formulation, and 6. Course of Therapy—are presented below in one section, as they emerged in the process of therapy from my initial contact with Keo.

In the description below, I have indicated in italics explanations of (a) culture-specific references and of (b) my thought processes in the moment.

Session 1: Phase 1. Introduction with Assessment

Keo arrived a few minutes late for his first appointment, accompanied by his girlfriend who drove and helped with the paperwork. He is a physically large man of mixed-Hawaiian descent. He was dressed in long, baggy basketball shorts, an Aloha shirt and rubber zoris (flip flops); normal garb for an islander. He reported minimal weekend drinking and marijuana use and no other medications or recreational drug use, except an over-the-counter non-steroidal anti-inflammatory for a recent shoulder strain.

His history indicated no prior therapy despite a long history of abuse as a child and multiple contacts with the correctional system as a teenager. He was abandoned by his father before he was born and by his birth mother before he was one year old. His paternal grandmother cared for him until she passed away when he was seven. He then was passed to several relatives and finally was in the foster care system until he was sixteen. He dropped out of high school, worked odd jobs and for a few years "did a lot of partying and getting into hassles with the law." During that time many of his associates were arrested, sent into juvenile detention or died young. Although he had been arrested on possession of marijuana charges several times, he managed to escape incarceration by being placed on probation. When he was 19, he met Lani, his current partner and "she made me clean up for her."

The clearest message during that first session was that he did not want to be there. He said that he didn't think therapy worked for him and that he was there only to appease others, particularly his girlfriend, who stayed in the waiting room through the session. [*I characteristically view that kind of position as reflective of anxiety about upsetting even a relatively painful status quo and significant fear of the unknown. Thus, I endeavored to support his anxiety early, rather than confront it and to try to make the session as Keo-friendly as I could.*]

A significant portion of the dialogue between us was conducted in Pidgin English. Note that Pidgin English is a polyglot language of common discourse in the islands. It contains words derived from several languages and is reportedly an outgrowth of diverse workers' native languages on the sugar plantations. In the Southwestern U.S. the term "Spanglish" is somewhat similar. In most examples of dialogue, I have translated into standard English for clarity. In a few circumstances, the correct meaning is obvious, more meaningful as spoken, or could not be easily translated and is left in original.

J: So basically you don't want to be here, but it is important to you that others get what they want.

K: You got it Doc. What are you going to do for me anyhow?

J: (pause) Well (pause) if I could do something for or with you, what would you like?

K: I dunno. You from here?

J: [*This felt loaded and it seemed a way to dismiss the therapy quickly. People who are not native to Hawaii are sometimes viewed by local inhabitants as interlopers. Rather than respond from a standard therapeutic stance, I decided to answer a few of his questions to create a more realistic bond.*].

I wasn't born here. You can tell me if I am a Kama'aina or just another "dumb Haole."

(smiling) [A "Kama'aina" is a true resident of Hawaii. It sometimes refers more to white residents, but not exclusively. A "haole" is referred to as a visitor an non-native of the islands—it is a term often applied to white and black individuals and can be derogatory.]

K: laughing. Okay, maybe one dumb Haole wouldn't ask that question.

J: Where are you from?

K: Waianae, Kalihi, North Shore. I went Hilo for two years. Mostly, Kalihi.

J: You went Farrington or Kam school?

[Characteristically, one part of local identity is high school allegiance. Often people are pigeon-holed by such teenaged experiences. "Kam" (Kamehameha) Schools is a private (K-12) school for those of Hawaiian heritage].

K: I went Kam schools until my uncle moved to Waianae, and I went Waianae High School for one term, then I dropped out.

J: You've come a long way then to be in college and looking at UH [*University of Hawaii*].

K: Yeah. (heavy sigh and looking down)

A long silence followed.

J: I wonder what's happening now. You seem to be shutting down.

K: (looking at floor, not at me) Yeah.

J: So would you be willing to tell me what you are thinking.

K: Just tired.

J: You seemed to get tired when we talked about high school and I said you had come a long way.

K: (long silence) Not so far and no energy for go more.

J: Is this what happens in school and home, or just with me asking all these questions?

K: No, not just you.

J: So this is why the Community College folks and Lani are worried about you?

K: I guess.

J [*Because he indicated that he was here for others and had no personal reason to do so, we talked in a more distant third person manner to find a connection*]
What do *they* think is happening?

K: Lani says I am depressed and the CC [*Community College*] counselor said so too. My psych prof likes me and wants me to go UH, so he thinks I am just too worried.

J: So if you had to choose between feeling depressed or too anxious, what would you choose?

K: I don't know! Can I go now?

J: You can go any time you'd like. We do have more time, and if you can tolerate it, I'd like to see if there is anything we can do to help you feel better.

K: Like what?

J: What have you tried so far on your own? We don't want to repeat anything that isn't working.

What followed was his lengthy description of either trying to tough it out, playing basketball with friends, or using marijuana. He acknowledged that none worked so well long-term, but that he was at a loss as to what else could work. We also explored what events could have occurred to precipitate his sudden mood change and loss of interest. [*Although he reported no history of depression, I wondered if his early alcohol and drug use may have been attempts at self-medication.*]

When I asked, "By the way, has anything in your life changed recently," he responded by looking away and I felt a palpable increase in anxiety in the room. I decided that would be something for future sessions, if he came back.

As we came towards the end of the session, I made two comments

J: I am glad that you decided to stick it out and I hope we can meet again to try to find some way to relieve your funk. Would you like to try one more time next week?

K: I don't know. I'll call if I want to come back.

J: [*I prefer that the default position is to call to cancel rather than call to make an appointment. This is especially useful with clients who are depressed or have low motivation.*]

Okay, but I'll tell you what. I know I will be free next Tuesday at this time. So if you want to come in, just come, no sweat. If you don't, it's okay too. Just let me know

On Tuesday morning the following week, Lani called and said that Keo would not come in today, because her car broke down. She asked if he could come in next week. Normally I'd want my client to make the call, but in the interest of cultural sensitivity and his low commitment to therapy, I agreed.

I noted that the fact that he arranged for a call before the scheduled time was a very positive sign and I was willing to put my normal therapeutic frame aside.

Sessions 2-6: Phase 2. Transition

Session 2. Introduction of the Curse

When Keo came for Session 2 the following week (again, about ten minutes late), he seemed far more anxious than depressed. This was conveyed primarily non-verbally. His legs were jiggling and his hands seemed to be in frequent motion. He also looked frightened.

After a few minutes, I brought the conversation to the here and now.

J: You seem worried today. Different from last time. Is it because of something that happened or about telling me something now? [*Here I'm focusing on the here-and-now.*]

Keo took a deep breath, made intense eye contact and then looked down at the floor for what seemed like a minute or more, before he began talking.

K: Lani told me that I should tell you something. I met my sister "Maile" for the first time.
[*Note that Maile has the same father but not the same mother as Keo.*]

Maile told me we were cursed because our father disturbed the stones at the "Heiau" near Waimanalo.

[*In Hawaiian folklore and history a Heiau is a temple or sacred place for the "Alii," that is, the chieftain class. In ancient times, commoners who violated the place or removed stones designating a burial site were punished, often by death. In modern days, the punishment sometimes involves a curse on the trespasser and his/her family. For believers in the ancient ways, it is no small matter!*]

J: Tell me about that.

K: You cannot tell anyone about this! I don't know much. I didn't even know I had one sister. My father left before I was born. She was about one year old then. She has a different mother.

J: That's several shocks: you discovered you have a half-sister, your father violated a Kapu [*Taboo*], and that you were cursed because of it.

K: You believe in the Kapu system?

[I wanted to focus on the here and now, rather than any cultural differences here.]

J: What I am aware of is a lot of anxiety in here. I can feel it all over.

K: I appreciate that, you know. Lani doesn't think it's that important. She's Hapa *[part-Hawaiian]* but she's very modern.

J: What about Keo?

K: I think I am modern too, but when Maile said we was cursed, I don't know. It seems real bad.

J: Tell me as much as you can about the curse.

K: She just said it and said it was this old Kahuna *[shaman/healer]* lady who said that moving the stones near the old temple would bring great grief and harm to our household.

J: You don't know who it was or what the curse is specifically, just that it is very dangerous to you and your loved ones.

K: Lani thinks now it will keep me from marrying her.

J: To protect her and any children the two of you might have. *[I thought, so one consequence supporting the status quo is to keep him from marriage, commitment and risk of rejection.]*

K: Yeah. But she don't think it's protection. She says I am "commitment phobic" – you know a flight risk (laughing).

J: I'm more concerned about what you think.

K: I am worried about my future family being cursed and even about myself and now I think I should worry for Maile also.

J: That's *plenty pilikia [trouble]*. It even includes someone you met for the first time this week.

K: Now that you know, maybe I should include you as well.

J: That is a lot of responsibility for something your absent father did.

[Although, he had used the far more derogatory term "sperm donor" earlier to describe his father, as soon as I added that last phrase, I regretted losing the emotional connection to be logical. I could see his face change and he became more protective. I was aware that I'd have to

regain his trust and that a moment was lost by what could be viewed as my insensitivity to his feelings about his absent father.]

Keo just responded by saying, "It's blood!" and then went off talking about other things. He talked about his depressed mood, his anxiety, trouble with classes he was taking, and even the UH football team

Although the core of the session and material lost its edge, there was a connection with Keo. I wrote in my session notes that I felt confident that he'd return to work on the issue.

That note was overly optimistic. He didn't return for three weeks. His reasons were end-of-term exams, some job responsibilities, and a tryout for the UH athletic programs. Something was happening at a sub-conscious level. Although the distance seemed greater and the depth of expression far less, he seemed to be connecting more with me, albeit at a distance. Although I couldn't fully explain what was occurring at the time, I was feeling good about our continuing relationship. The answer to that puzzle would not occur to me for several sessions. Nonetheless, it seemed like a break in the therapeutic interaction or what psychodynamic therapists might call "regression."

I was beginning to lose my confidence, when Keo called himself (for the first time) and asked for an appointment.

Because of some atypical fortuitous scheduling, I was able to see him the next day.

He began by describing a lengthy meeting with an assistant coach about his age and eligibility to play football at the University of Hawaii. I responded by asking his high school graduation year, even though he dropped out and got a G.E.D. From what he understood, he could only have one year of eligibility and the coach could maybe get him a one-year extension because he began community college three years ago. Because he dropped out and was officially held back, he gained some extra eligibility time, according to the current NCAA rules. He was relieved, but daunted by the assistant coach initially saying that he might not have any eligibility.

Keo then spent much of the session reporting that he had obtained good grades on his recent exams and that he and Lani had a good time visiting her "calabash uncle and auntie" on Kauai [*"calabash" is a word for extended family, often including close friends*]. He said they seemed to like him and he got along with all the *keikis* [*children*] who were visiting and lived close by. When I commented that he liked the sense of *ohana* [*family*] in their clan, he brightened considerably, smiled broadly and said "yeah, not like how I came up."

It would have been an excellent segue for a bridge to this recently discovered sister, but by then there were only about ten minutes left in the session, so I held that intervention in abeyance. He seemed to prefer the "report-oriented session" anyhow and went on to say that her family place was nice, but "two days we got Kona winds and we were downwind from the pig farm, "whew, it smelled stink." [*Kona winds typically blow from the south and bring equator-like conditions. Normal winds in Hawaii, called "trade winds," are from the north and east and make the island temperatures so comfortable.*]

We both laughed at his colloquial manner of describing the "aroma" from a pig farm and he passed a few additional pleasantries before making another appointment in a week. My notes from that session included, "Keo was still at a fairly surface level of communication, and he seemed to enjoy being with what seemed like another mentor. It might be important to explore what it means to him to collect parental figures."

Session 3. Raising the Topic of the Prison Murder of Keo's Former Friend

For Session 3, Keo arrived characteristically ten minutes late, but this time commented that he and Lani were on "Hawaiian time." I considered this acknowledgment a significant attempt on his part to show respect.

The session began again with a few stories and reports of the week and then he related a story about an old friend who was killed in prison during the week. He knew the fellow when he was a teenager and considered him to be "scary" and "dangerous." He was a convicted murderer, serving a long prison term. Apparently, he attacked the wrong inmate in the prison yard and was stabbed to death. The story had dominated the local newspapers, and I had read about it, but of course, had no prior idea about Keo's association with the fellow. As is common in small communities, I also had a personal connection.

As it turned out, the accused killer was someone I had met when I played city-league softball. One of the teams in the league was the prison. For obvious reasons, they played only home games. So I had played several games in the prison yard against the prisoners. The man accused of the stabbing was a Samoan man who stood at least 6' 7" and weighed 300 pounds or more. I remembered him because of his prodigious strength, hitting a softball (that I pitched) well out of the prison. He jokingly offered to retrieve it. Like Keo's former friend, this man was also serving a life sentence for homicide.

I also knew the prison because I had worked there and in the juvenile corrections sites several years previously.

Keo was obviously troubled by the death of this man. I tried to get him to focus on his own life, what could have happened if he hadn't pulled out of the path he was on as a teenager and fears about his own mortality. It was slow going. He wanted to focus primarily on how the former friend had wasted his life and was now unable to redeem himself. I made a brief intervention about how making mistakes was one thing, but redemption was very important. *[My intent was to try to bridge to a possibility that he could be redeemed for his father's trespass. It may have been a precursor to future connections, but he did not seem to respond directly at the time, except to look at me in a questioning manner. My attempted creativity and subtlety clearly failed to have the desired major impact!]*

Sessions 4-6 , Processing the Murder

We spent the next three sessions processing the event of his friend in prison being murdered and how it could have happened. At the end of the second session, focused on the murder, he began to address how it could have been him getting stabbed. He also related that he knew the accused murderer and said,

That is one scary dude. I'm a big guy, but he is one of those beeg, beeg guys and very mean. He came up in Kalihi *[a lower income rough neighborhood on Oahu]* when I was a kid.

I began addressing directly with him whether it was at all possible for him to redeem himself. He replied that he had done some very bad things as a youngster and felt a lot of guilt.

I asked if he wanted to tell me about any of them. He replied that he didn't like to think about the past, because "it was not so good." He did describe some of his experiences in the "system" of foster care and being bounced from house to house with no real home once his grandmother had passed.

Sessions 7-18: Phase 3. Treatment

Session 7. Returning to Talk About the Curse

At the beginning of our seventh session, I commented,

J: You know, I've been thinking about what we talked about last week. About your past: how difficult it was and the regrets that you don't like to discuss and I thought, those things may be minor compared to the death threat Keo is now under and the potential disruption of life caused by his new knowledge of the curse.

K: Yeah. I think the future is as daunting as my teen years.

J: So. Is that worth our discussing today.

K: Don't know what to say. It is just the reality.

On the one hand, Keo was subjectively facing a very real existential dilemma. On the other, he was from a Western mind responding to superstition. *[The option of trying to talk him out of his fear of the portents of doom—caused by sins of the father being passed to the son by a man who had been little more than a sperm donor—seemed both tempting and foolhardy. I believed that the best path to his future was through his cultural myths and ethic. Note that the word “myth” here is used in its original meaning, such as the Greek myths—allegories for ways of living. It is not used in the more contemporary American meaning of a falsehood.]*

At the time, I had only a rudimentary understanding of Hawaiian legends and restrictions, and almost no understanding about curses. I spent the next few weeks reading, consulting with experts at the University of Hawaii, the Hawaiian East-West Center (<https://www.eastwestcenter.org/>), and the Bishop Museum of Hawaiian Culture (https://www.bishopmuseum.org/?gclid=Cj0KCQiAurjgBRCqARIsAD09sg_pjPtWC1b0oFedOJTUh8-N4M8uy--L0EXok7LGqmhZks7osWEVfXsaAjEEEALw_wcB). I also consulted with a Kahuna, whom I had fortuitously met two years prior around the origins and practice of *Ho'oponopono*, a traditional Hawaiian practice of reconciliation and forgiveness as precursors to aspects of modern family and group therapy.

As I was getting my cram course in Hawaiiana, and before speaking to the Kahuna, a well-known medicine man, I asked Keo's permission to discuss his dilemma without any names attributed.

J: I wanted to learn more about the curse so I've been studying at Bishop Museum and UH about heiau curses.

K: For real?

J: Yeah. I wanted to know as much as possible to guide us. So there's a big favor I have to ask you. I met "Ioki", the Kahuna from Kahana Bay. I met him two years ago. I wanted to ask him about how to undo the curse. I wouldn't mention your name, of course.

Keo looked at me long and hard. *[I didn't know what he was thinking and wondered if my attempt at respect had actually overstepped his boundaries.]* Then slowly he smiled and with slightly moist eyes he said, "Thanks eh. You are not some dumb Haole."

After that session, I got a call from Lani. She asked,

L: What did you say to Keo? He was crying on the way home in the car. I don't want him upset like that.

J: Did he seem upset?

She paused and replied,

L: No, he was just tearing up, but he was very loving when we got back.

Session 8. Feedback from Ioki, the Kahuna

In the next session, the eighth, Keo was both subdued and anxious.

J: You seem a little more troubled than usual.

K: No, I am okay. *[He was looking at me expectantly.]*

J: So I spoke with Ioki about the curse.

K: Yeah?

J: He had some ideas that might work and he offered to help, if you want to discuss it with him.

[Keos non-verbal signs of anxiety increased noticeably.]

K: What he thought?

J: He said if he could find out more, there would be ways to find reconciliation and for the curse to be lifted, but that you would probably have to go through a ritual to reverse your father's deeds.

Keo took a long time to respond. He clearly seemed more anxious than before. *[I didn't know if the anxiety was about meeting this Kahuna, a man of major repute or about something more psychological. It was clear to me that either way, whether the curse was lifted or if it wasn't, Keo had significant real anxiety ahead of him.]*

To try to bring that to a workable level, I decided to provide some comfort. I was beginning to develop the notion that his anxiety rose when a path through his dilemma was lifted. I thought about how when we are close to our ideal, the risk of losing seems much more intense. Rather than confront him with this notion of the fear of "grabbing defeat from the jaws of victory" (a phrase he used commonly), I decided to back off and provide support for where he was, rather than where he might be in the future.] I started:

J: Here's the thing. There is no rush. You could do it sooner or later. The ritual would be the same. We could talk more, get more information from your sister Maile or others and plan before deciding to have such a big meeting.

K: You could come too?

[Now it was my time to be taken aback. I hadn't considered the prospect, but the Kahuna I talked with told me clearly that I could not participate in or observe any such ritual. Despite my personal interest, I knew that such a big a break in the therapeutic frame would be very unwarranted.]

J: I am so honored that you would want me there. I could come with you and Lani too, but the ritual itself, you have to do alone, or if she wants, with Maile. I could be available before and after."

K: That sounds right. I want to think about it.

J: No rush. What are you experiencing now?

K: I don't know. I'm cold.

J: This is a very anxious prospect. Lots to discuss no matter how it works out and no matter what you decide and when. We have some time to talk about it.

Keo didn't say much else during the session. He referred several times to the air conditioning in the office and feeling cold. I kept focusing him on the amount of his internal heat that was being spent on keeping down the anxiety.

It seemed a realistic intervention until after the session, one of my colleagues emerged from her session and asked if the A/C was overactive. She said the office was freezing. When we turned the corner to the reception desk, our receptionist was wearing a sweater. I was left with the question whether it was anxiety or A/C that was impacting Keo. That night, I wondered if I should mention next time that his experience of being cold could have been the office temperature. After about an hour, and a call to my consultant, I decided to let him bring it up. *[The A/C issue was a good example of potential over-analyzing a situation psychologically.]*

I had another dilemma to deal with regarding Keo that involved withholding information about my meeting with the Ioki, the Kahuna. He had related to me his irritation at the curser saying that the original Kahuna was wrong and that she shouldn't have leveled the curse at Keo's family. I knew that it wouldn't help Keo, given his belief system and given that to have warring Kahunas would only make the one who offered to help less credible.

Session 9. Feedback from his Sister Maile on the Curse for Breaking the "Kapu" (Taboo)

We had agreed that it would be helpful for him to get more information about what actually occurred.

After several conversations with Maile, Keo got a fuller story. He also talked with her aunt, who knew a lot more about the incident and also about Keo's birth mother and father. He described "Auntie Nona" as very smart and sweet and related that he visited her at her home in Waimanalo and she made him a feast. She was Maile's mother's sister so no real blood relation to Keo, but she treated him as family without question. Keo said that when Auntie Nona was around, Maile "didn't have to act so *big tita* (tough girl)," and that Maile was more friendly towards him. He said he was invited back and would do that with Lani sometime soon.

Auntie Nona's story was that around the time that Keo and Maile were two and three years old, living in separate households, their father began drinking very heavily. When he was drunk, he became bellicose and occasionally violent. Apparently after drinking way too many "Primos"¹ at a beach party near Makapuu point, he had a major altercation with two other men and after a fight, stormed off towards the mountains.

He saw that his ancestors' *Heiau* (Temple) was exposed and in attempting to balance himself, fell down and disturbed some rocks at the front of the *Alii* (nobles) burial area. He was seen by others, who subsequently reported the incident to elders in the Hawaiian community. A Kahuna became involved and when Keo's father became belligerent with her, she leveled the curse on him and his progeny.

Case Formulation after Session 9

[As Keo related the story Aunti Noni told, in my formulation of Keo's case, I began to wonder about the tension between the fear of the unknown, and the fear of stagnation, even the misery of the status quo. Questions began to form in my mind about what Keo would have to face if the curse was carried out? And what would he have to face if it was lifted?

The fear of freedom. It may seem contradictory and paradoxical, but if he remained under the curse, he would not in good conscience marry Lani and have children. He could not take the chance of flying on an airplane, because of danger to other passengers—indeed, if he

¹ Primo Beer was the most favored beer in the islands for many years. Although it was "the Hawaiian Beer" and primarily sold and marketed in Hawaii, it was actually owned by a major beer company (Pabst) and brewed on the U.S. Mainland.

were to make the University of Hawaii football team, he couldn't play in away games. That could be a very effective explanation of and impediment to his facing his failing to make the team.

There were also some potential issues around his cultural identity in either case. For all these reasons, I had to deal with my own impatience and desire for a quick solution and to be attuned to the "dangers" of unexplored or unexamined solutions, even if they might provide temporary relief.

My great temptation was to utilize the Kahuna or whatever other means to get the curse lifted and then to have the client go off into his future in a free manner. This "solution" and imagined "happy ending" could have a paradoxical effect.

From the perspective of existential psychological theory, Keo (and most of us) are not comfortable with unfettered freedom and certainly not unfettered sudden freedom. Throughout this session and afterwards, the refrain of Kris Kristofferson's song, Me and Bobby Magee, echoed in my mind: "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose."

Fromm (1941) wrote extensively about the potential dangers of what he called "negative freedom." Without some creative direction, such freedom can be a destructive force. This is contrasted to the freedom inherent in true intimacy, what Buber ((1970) referred to as the "I-thou" moment. The negative freedom of being separated from an (arguably) painful status quo can lead to a feeling of hopelessness. This is what I had to avoid with Keo. Instead, it was essential to rearrange the focal point of tension between his current state and a new freedom that was balanced with security.

How to intervene. A premature intervention may have the potential to disrupt his status quo sufficiently to send him into a tailspin of depression and anxiety. A ritual, based in his cultural beliefs, engaged when he was ready could allow him a more balanced resetting of the internal tension between freedom and the psychological security he clung to.

One essential component was to replace his current sense of stagnation and discomfort with a physical/psychological ordeal that could become a new set point for his feelings of alienation and fear. The ordeal or sacrifice is well acknowledged as a way of altering self-destructive beliefs and behaviors. Passing through some initiation rite affirms that the person has accomplished something that makes him acceptable to a desired group. For someone who experienced so much rejection as a child, this was salient for Keo.

Such an initiation rite has sometimes been used as a therapeutic tool. For example, the legendary hypnotherapist, Milton Erickson, frequently recommended to clients that they climb Camelback Mountain near his Phoenix home as an ordeal/ritual that could be cleansing. It also made it possible for his clients to be more open to his more indirect therapeutic suggestions.

I was very much in favor of Keo facing his demons and going through the ritual. However, based on speculation raised in earlier sessions, I concluded that it may be that upsetting the status quo here by lifting the curse could cause a drop in Keo's felt sense of security. In that instance, the freedom would be a large threat and Keo might operate to sabotage the change to maintain security.

In this counter-intuitive way, living under his family curse was protective. He didn't have to let down his guard with Lani, with me, and with others. It had significant value in creating safety. Although it seems counter-intuitive that a life threat would be secure, in Keo's world, it provided him with cultural connection, no chance to risk rejection or future additional abandonment. Given the repeated important losses of significant others as a child through desertion, the surfeit of his mortality feelings that arose over the death of the prison inmate, and the discovery of a sister he never knew he had all were shaking his sense of a secure world. I felt he was pondering how quickly all could be lost.]

Session 10. Starting to Consider Whether to Engage in the Ritual

We began discussing the dangers of having the curse lifted. At first, Keo was disbelieving that something so good could have negative consequences. I repeatedly reframed it in terms that his strategies for success would potentially have to be altered. Essentially I encouraged him to hope for positive change, but to retain a focus that after he had come so far, it was important to recognize and savor how well things were, despite the obvious problems. We also discussed in some depth the decisions he'd have to make in case he was freed of the curse. Primarily, he'd have to recalibrate his relational-commitment reticence, his refusal to fly, and his potential athletic aspirations and then face new fears of the unknown. After some time, I introduced the notion that the ritual itself might be daunting.

K: Yeah. I thought of that.

J: What thoughts?

K: I don't know. What thoughts would you have?

J: Well, I'm not you, but when I think of it, it can be a little terrifying.

He took a long time looking at me and slowly said,

K: You know you're the only one who understands that. Lani wants me to do it, my friends want me to, and Maile wants to do it together.

J: That's a lot of pressure.

K: Yeah, for real.

J: For what it's worth, it seems scary either way and you get to choose—rock and a hard place.

Sessions 11-14. Keo Decides He Wants To Do the Ritual

After discussing the concern about the ritual per se in sessions 11 and 12—and resisting any implication that a positive outcome could present new problems—in session 13 Keo reported that he wanted to talk with the Kahuna and do the ritual. I gave him the contact information and inquired, “What brought to this decision now?”

K: Lani is all for it (noticing the look on my face he continued), I know what you are going to say, what about me. Yeah I think I gotta try to restart my life and get on with it.

I did take care to remind him that talking to Ioki didn't mean he had to do it—only that he would know more about options.

We discussed the specifics in some depth and Keo went to talk with the Kahuna. When Keo returned the next week for Session 14, he reported that he liked the Kahuna, Ioki, a great deal and that they decided to do the ritual after school let out for summer break.

Keo asked me what I knew about the ritual. I responded that I only knew that it was truly Hawaiian, and that as a non-Hawaiian, I was not allowed to know any details. He smiled when I said that and said that he was sorry, but he liked that. I responded empathically, it is kind of cool that there were so many secret parts and that made it even more special. I also told him that there were probably parts of the ritual that he would not be allowed to share with me afterwards, trying to make it acceptable for him to have personal information that was sacred.

Keo reported continuing anticipatory anxiety, but also determination to face it head on. *[In my case notes after the session, I wrote, “This is a good model to use going forward to help him explore his fears of the unknown in the rest of his life.” I also noted that I expected a combination of relief and increased anxiety after the experience. If it was successful, and I had great faith that it would be, I theorized that he would have to encounter all the anxiety that the curse protected him from addressing directly. This included the likely relational pressure, and movements into new experiences like the football team and flying.]*

I focused on the here-and now relationship.

J: Well, what do you know about the ritual? I am interested in what feelings you are experiencing now.

K: Just wondering.

J: What are you experiencing with me in here?

L: I am glad at what you said. I feel respected and you don't want to intrude, but you are okay with the whole thing.

J: So you feel more connected.

K: (Color rising) Yeah. I do.

J: What's that like for you.

K: Well it makes me worry more, but it's good also.

J: So being close here feels good, but it brings up anxiety at the risk of ...

K: I don't know why I thought this, but what came into my head was when do you leave?

[I wanted to reinforce his experience and also delve into it. Had we not been in therapy phase this would have been inappropriate:]

J: It's great that you can be aware of that and also to risk saying it aloud to me. Especially when so many have left you before.

We talked about his past, about his friend who was killed in prison, about his fear of losing Lani, and his tenuous grasp on the relationship with Maile, his erstwhile sister. He also wondered aloud if the ritual would change him and make him unlovable.

J: So it's a risk both ways. It could make you less lovable and more prone to rejection, or it could have the opposite effect and make you more lovable and that comes with a greater risk of loss and responsibility for those who love you. It's a scary proposition.

He fell silent and began to weep. He asked, "When you know someone so well, how do you ever leave them?"

J: The *Kahuna* can help you exorcise the curse from your family and also find the real Keo, because parts of him may be somewhat unknown to us now.

K: Yeah what if we don't like him?

J: I suppose that is possible, and I am also aware that we may like him more. Either way, it's another confrontation.

K: When I told Lani I was going to do it, she said she was proud of me.

J: So she's confident it will be for the best. How about Keo?

Between Sessions 14 and 15, When the Ritual to Reverse the Curse Took Place

Keo called and left a voice mail that the ritual had taken place and that he was okay. He cancelled the tentative next scheduled appointment and said he'd call when he was ready to talk.

Three weeks of "radio silence" then ensued. This made me anxious and I had to resist my desire to contact him.

Session 15. Positive Reaction to the Ritual

One month after the ritual weekend, we had our next appointment..

When Keo came in he reported still being high from the experience. Not only was he sure the curse was lifted, but he felt a much deeper connection to his culture and community. He said that he made some new friends and that they were also going to UH in the fall.

Keo also discovered a distant relative, an older man whom he saw as a new mentor. When he told me the man's name (and Hawaii being a very small place), I recognized this elder as an excellent mentor and guide and a very accomplished slack-key guitarist. *[This could be very useful later in helping Keo relate to his culture of origin. Slack-key guitar is notable because each family has a unique way of tuning the guitar strings. These are honored family secrets and a point of pride for musicians.]*

By the time he was done with his report, the session time had essentially elapsed. Keo asked:

K; So do I need to come in again.

J: I don't know if need is the right word. Things seem to be in a good place right now. I guess the question you need to ask is whether we could accomplish anything else together.

K: I'll think about it and call.

Keo called that very evening and said he did want to continue therapy. We made an appointment for the next week.

Sessions 16 and 17. Processing the Impact of the Ritual

[The challenge in this late treatment/early termination phase was to find ways for Keo to face his life now that he was not tethered to his self-determined limits on intimacy and responsibility for others. I was struck with the challenge of helping him face the issues that I theorized would be essential, but that were not fully conscious for Keo.]

Sessions 16 and 17 consisted of my asking Keo to speculate about what he might have to face, now that he was free of the curse and had found a new community. There was little there, except he reported that Maile, who had gone through the ritual with him, was originally as happy as he was about the ritual, but was now seeming to come back to earth and looking at a lot of problems in her life. He wondered if he would have to do so also.

When I asked about what kinds of things he'd have to encounter, he had no answer.

Session 18. Focusing on Life Decisions

In the third session post-ritual, I began to probe more regarding Keo's decisions about Lani, the University, football, and other central aspects of his life. As I did, he began to report anxiety that he had so many decisions to make now. I reinforced the importance of facing the decisions and also commented on how his connections with his new family and friends and his culture seemed to be a real plus. As the therapy progressed, he reported that there was no reason to hold back with Lani, and he was getting some light pressure from friends to make the commitment, but the thought of a lifelong commitment made him "udgy." *[I wondered if Keo's individualized slack key tuning of his guitar and his family's special tuning of the guitar could be a metaphor to highlight uniqueness in his life.]* I broached the subject by talking with Keo about how playing slack key guitar was both doing something unique and still fitting within his culture. For both reasons, his tuning and his approach to traditional Hawaiian music was special. *[The unspoken inference of the metaphor was that he could commit to Lani in his own way without reducing all the degrees of freedom in life.]*

Sessions 19-20: Phase 4. Termination

Keo went to alternate week scheduling to stretch out his insurance coverage and also to delay termination. I gently talked with him about how he has a natural pull for security and the status quo, including now the status quo of seeing me each Wednesday afternoon.

This led to queries about what would happen on a Wednesday or other times if I were not on his schedule. Would that increase anxiety? I interpreted it to him that as his past was so chaotic that any schedule and predictability would be of value, and I wondered aloud how he might create that stability in his life outside of therapy.

Sessions 21-22: Return to Phase 3. Therapy

During sessions 21-22 there was a pregnancy scare when Lani “was late” for two weeks.

Keo was committed emotionally to Lani, and reported that the relationship was very good and that he saw a future. Although the pregnancy scare was gone, he seemed to have many questions about the experience. When I inquired about his experience when he thought she was pregnant, he replied,

I was glad, relieved when she got her (period), but you know, I was also a little sad that I wasn't becoming a father.

When I normalized those ambivalent feelings, he asked somewhat hesitantly for a lot of reassurance whether I thought that his children might have the same problems he had.

J: Well, you know, there's no predicting how any keiki (child) is gonna grow up. We can give them love and understanding and teach them what we believe is right and wrong, but ...

K: I just wonder if I have, da kine [*an expression in Hawaiian Pidgin somewhat like "whatchamacallit"*—bad genes or something?

J: So, you have turned yourself around. You will graduate from college (first one), you have a girlfriend who loves you. You have discovered two families (your sister Lani's and your Aunt Noni's) in which you are welcome. It's all good signs. Eh?

K: I just don't know if I have what it takes to be a good dad. What do you think?

J: I think you have the potential to be a very good dad, because you love family and you care so much. It might take refocusing on the new pieces in your life and to think of the present and future and not to be so caught up in the past or in fate or destiny.

K: Yeah. I am thinking more about future.

J: So tell me about the reassurance you want from me. Now.

K: Just want to be sure you'll be around if I like come back someday.

J: Yeah.

K: Okay.

Sessions 23-24. Return to Termination Phase

During these last sessions we talked about Keo's feelings concerning termination. At one point he invited me to a family event. Normally I would politely decline, but here, culturally,

having a meal with someone and their family was an expression of gratitude and respect. I asked him how he'd introduce me at such an event and he replied, "Oh, I tell everyone you are my head shrink," and then laughed. "I tell them about you all the time."

I also asked him what it'd be like to cross paths on campus, where I taught, or at a slack-key guitar event. He said, "It'd be cool!"

It may seem atypical for a therapist to attend a family social event either during, or for some time after the completion of psychotherapy. However, the culture of psychotherapy practice must always be contained within a larger cultural framework that is the client's life.

Three factors were involved in the decision to alter the normative frame of therapy with Keo.

The first has to do with what the family social event means in the client's framework. To the extent that it's a breach of professional distance, of course, it can be somewhat problematic. To the extent to which it shows respect for the client in his personal lifestyle and culture, it can be beneficial. This is often described as the *emic* approach to understanding a unique culture and showing appropriate cultural humility.

The second involves the theoretical frame. As described here, the therapy and the relationship was being conducted from an existential therapeutic perspective. The primary focus of change in this approach is the increasingly intimate therapeutic relationship per se. The approach focuses on human universals and is defined not in terms of a transference relationship, but in a more direct approach to human connection. This represents the *etic* approach to understanding cultural phenomena.

The third factor is more global and descriptive of the nature of doing therapy in a rural or small community. Quite different from large population centers, therapists and clients may interact through common activities on a regular, every day basis. Thus, I may be the therapist on Monday with a client who is my physician, hair stylist, bank teller, or waiter later during the same week. Characteristically, therapists in rural communities (and an island like Oahu certainly qualifies) may have children in the same school, serve on the same committees, work with one another, etc. The essential key here is the development of well-honed compartmentalization. When we are opposing coaches for 12-year-olds playing soccer, the relationship is simply soccer. Any connection to what goes on in the therapy office during those times is placed on hold, to be discussed only in sessions.

Given those three factors, I decided to go as a guest to the family event, a pretty typical Hawaiian beach park party. There were several generations of about 40-45 family and friends all

there to celebrate a child's birthday party, but like most such gatherings, it was primarily a good reason to get together at a beach park, share a large picnic, swim, surf, and "talk story." After sundown, the guitars and ukuleles emerged and a few young hula dancers performed. After talking with Keo for a few sessions about potential conflicts of interest and discomfort, I told him, I'd come by in the late afternoon, and did.

Characteristically, anyone who knew enough to be there was just accepted and offered food and conversation. When asked whom I was with, I simply responded that I knew Keo for a while and he invited me. He quickly added, "Dat's the doc I went tell you about—my head shrink." In response to their curious looks, I smiled and replied, "Guilty as charged. Thank you for inviting me." They all laughed and said, "You one good guy to help our brother." Immediately the conversation turned to a local guitar player who was picking out some beautiful, intricate Hawaiian melodies, and I was offered a beer.

Although it seemed like the right thing to do, and remaining cautious about a risk to the therapeutic frame, I was unsure about any particular therapeutic value until Aunt Nona sidled up to me and said, "You know, Keo is really glad you are here. He feels very respected and honored you came to his world." That was later confirmed by him directly during a session.

Information From Follow-Up

Keo decided not to play football, but to throw his energies into his studies and his newfound family. He also reported that he was learning guitar from his "uncle," adding quickly that his playing was "junk."

Keo did contact me a few times at the University. Two years later, he was particularly interested in whether I would come to his graduation and the family party afterwards. I did both. I already knew his family and they were typical celebratory events. Keo kept being amazed that he had been given over 20 leis for the graduation.

He and Lani announced their engagement the afternoon of his graduation.

7. THERAPY MONITORING AND USE OF FEEDBACK

This was a quite unusual case. In addition to several cultural factors, the client had a very traumatic history, including being in the foster care system and troubles with law enforcement. Although his life course had been on a very positive trend for the past couple of years, he was a long way from achieving the goals he set when he entered therapy. His adaptations were also quite limiting

Within an existential therapy frame, formal assessments or instruments are rare and none were used in this case. However, a close monitoring of the tone, connection, and verbal and non-verbal interactions within the therapeutic relationship were monitored closely and frequently checked with the client. For example, it almost became a joke to Keo when I asked in each session about what was going on for him in the here-and-now interaction in the room. Whatever the answer, we would pursue the meaning and our here-and-now relationship.

Because of the nature of this therapy, I also consulted with other experts on areas where I could be inadvertently insensitive, either either culturally or therapeutically. For example, it was a serious question about how much I might actually reify the impact of a multi-generational family curse within the client's phenomenal world. I was very fortunate to have at my disposal experts at both the Bishop Museum and East-West Center. Three psychologists at the latter organization explained in detail how significant the belief in the "Kapu" curse could be within the Hawaiian community. It was stressed (and also fit with my normal approach) to avoid any questioning of the reality of such a curse and instead to take it as a fact of the client's life. From that phenomenological framework, I could work with Keo within his belief system, without activating resistance to an outsider delving into very sensitive and literally deadly-serious matters.

This position was reinforced by the Kahuna, Ioki. Although I had met him previously and had a comfortably casual relationship with him, I could not presume to understand at an emotional level the intensity and full meaning of such a curse. Ioki insisted that I take the curse with all the seriousness inherent in the Hawaiian culture and for Keo in particular. I did not question his judgment. I did however work with Keo to make direct contact with Ioki, rather than be an intermediary-interpreter as much as possible. I believe that direct contact and my respect for both men was an important component in the treatment.

At the time of treatment, I was a member of an integrated private practice group. We did case presentations and frequently consulted each other. When I was invited to break from the normal therapy frame in this case (for example, attending the family beach party), I consulted extensively with a colleague who worked from a more classic psychoanalytic perspective. She went over with me in detail what she perceived as risks to the therapeutic (transference) relationship. She also was able to view this particular treatment as already having multiple transference relationships and likened the treatment more akin to group or family therapy, where the strict analytic process would hold less sway. The most salient advice she provided was the extent to which I had to monitor closely any shifts in the relationship and my counter-transference.

In my 50 year career in psychotherapy, I have always sought out consultants, particularly from pluralistic orientations. Those sources were particularly useful in working with Keo. For example, by understanding the intense reality of the curse to Keo and his community, I was able to work within that framework to reach him and work through some of the more difficult dilemmas he was facing. I never tried to convince him otherwise.

8. CONCLUDING EVALUATION OF THE THERAPY'S PROCESS AND OUTCOME

Outcome

Keo, a 23-year-old native Hawaiian man who came from a traumatic and abusive background, was referred to me for the treatment of anxiety and depression. The referral came after several well-deserved, hard-earned advances in his life had resulted in a newly stable homeostasis in which he was progressing in school, had a viable relationship, and was far from his earlier troubles with authorities. The break in the now-diminishing successful balance in his life was precipitated by his discovery of aspects of his family history and in particular a multi-generational curse placed upon his family due to a transgression by his biological father. The revelation led directly to a withdrawal and reduction in a pattern of psychological and behavioral growth.

The motivation for therapy at this point in time came primarily from a professor and Keo's live-in girlfriend. The 23 sessions spread over a period of approximately eight months. At the beginning of therapy, Keo himself was somewhat reticent, but not opposed to begin treatment.

Two elements were immediately apparent. First, despite a sense of mounting crises in his life and a diminishing return on current behaviors, he was quite reticent to relinquish recent successes for fear of backsliding. The status quo for him was becoming both less effective and emotionally costly. Second, he had shown remarkable resilience and growth over the years in what could be well-described as a significant life-turnaround.

The goals for therapy that we designed together thus involved employing his considerable strengths to address the current situation, and to begin experimenting with an alteration in the balance of his security and freedom needs. In short, the goals involved moving away from some of the stagnating aspects of the status quo and addressing some fears of the unknown.

In part, because of his traumatic background, his connection to the criminal justice system, and his history with foster care and associated significant desertion and violence, the major task early in therapy (transition phase) focused primarily on trust-building and

development of an intimate therapeutic relationship. Several tests of trust occurred early in treatment, such as issues of timely appearance for appointments; late cancellations; and discussions of cultural matters, including a family curse that would seem alien to medical professionals. In addition, a particularly big test was the acceptability of the use of Pidgin English in sessions.

The core of the therapy involved working within a unique cultural framework from both *emic* and *etic* perspectives. By stressing both the necessity to be aligned to the normative within-cultural forms of healing, and also to see human universals that transcend such factors, Keo was able to experience both the pathway to success in a familiar frame and also to explore how he fit better in relation to the larger world. In part, that world involved our evolving relationship in which he felt both respected and encouraged to experiment with some alternative forms of being that were far less limiting. In some ways, the therapeutic relationship was one of active involvement together and also witnessing.

The goals of therapy were far less centered on specific behavior change than on the ability to develop a new depth in relationship with significant others and to support his shift in the balance of security and freedom needs. The predominant method was for me and Kepo to work as a team to explore possibilities without making a precipitous shift away from the current security needs. This was accomplished primarily by my holding onto the security side of the equation as Keo explored more of the freedom side. As Keo became more certain that I would not push him into incautious new behaviors, he began to trust his own capacity to explore novel options. My ongoing focus on the positive value of the Keo's current security and acknowledging the potential risks a change could elicit allowed Keo to try both thought experiments and behavioral experiments with some greater sense of safety and lowered fears of abandonment.

The therapeutic process was in many ways fairly typical of existentially-oriented work as described above. However, there was one quite notable atypical aspect of the therapy that made this particular case unique. That involved the use of natural cultural phenomena in the treatment. Because one cause of much of the distress was the recent revelation and acknowledgment of a curse visited upon Keo and his family, the employment of a local shaman (Kahuna) and an ordeal ritual to help alleviate that curse was central to the treatment.

The ensuing cultural ritual itself had a clearly positive impact in at least two ways: a belief in the official lifting of the curse and in allowing Keo to be more deeply connected to a cultural group to which he had deep roots. My respectful support of the option for Keo to undergo the ritual came from both research and a personal connection/introduction to the Kahuna who presided over the weekend event.

While quantitative indicators of positive change were not employed, the viability of a combination of existential psychotherapy and native Hawaiian ritual resulted in many qualitative indicators which indicated that Keo's behavioral stagnation, anxiety, and depression were all substantively lowered at the termination of treatment. Probably of greatest note was Keo's sense of belonging after a lifetime of feeling like an outsider and outcast.

For example, one qualitative indicator was Keo's increasing use of self-revelatory humor during sessions and with his family and friends is characteristic of a far more open connection to significant others. This was accompanied with an increasing sense of felt belonging.

There were three behavioral measures that are of note here. The first is that Keo showed no backsliding to the life of criminal behavior or association with gangs that were part of his earlier teen years. Indeed, the sessions spent processing the murder of the prison inmate he knew allowed him to describe feelings of empathy, sadness and relief that he was no longer in "that world."

Secondly, although it wasn't a central piece of the therapy, one index of Keo's success involved being able to decide not to play football at the University. Initially, he was discouraged by an assistant coach wondering about eligibility and took it as a personal rejection. By the end of therapy he took a far more positive approach, studied the NCAA rules, worked with the Head Coach to clarify his ability to play and decided to focus more on his studies. That process of exploration and active decision-making was seen as a clear indication of his developing maturity.

Finally, as mentioned above, the afternoon of his graduation Keo announced his engagement to his longtime girlfriend Lani, who had long supported the positive directions in his life, including commitment to staying in school and going to therapy.

Implications and Conclusions

In terms of my therapy practice over 50 years, there were unique aspects to this case. It is the only case in which I included a Kahuna to deal with an ancient Hawaiian curse. I have never had another case that directly used the same resources (although I was able at times to consult personally with Ioke, the Kahuna, on both teaching and therapy matters and had him guest lecture in my psychotherapy class).

However, reflecting on the use of my existential theory and my response to the client, I would generalize my approach as follows:

- 1) Begin from the client's subjective perspective. The curse, its circumstances, and the larger subculture supporting it meant that the curse was a dramatically important part of Keo's subjective reality and had to be addressed from his point of view and lived experience.
- 2) Accept and work within the client's framework can mean, as it did in Keo's case, that the therapist has at times to accept a client's subjective reality that is widely discrepant from their own.
- 3) Where appropriate, seek out in-cultural resources.
- 4) Question and explore situations that initially look like an obvious positive—in Keo's case, lifting the curse, keeping in mind the complexities of experience emphasized within the existential model.
- 5) Look for existential dynamic in action, specifically, the dialectic between seeking security in the status quo versus seeking freedom in change.

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APPENDIX 1. OUTLINE OF THE CASE STUDY OF "KEO"

1. CASE CONTEXT AND METHOD

2. THE CLIENT

3. GUIDING CONCEPTION WITH RESEARCH AND CLINICAL SUPPORT

The Role of the Therapist's Personhood

Some Central Tenets of Existential Psychotherapy

Stages in the Therapeutic Process

4, 5, & 6. ASSESSMENT, CASE FORMULATION, AND COURSE OF THERAPY IN AN INTEGRATED MODEL

Session 1: Phase 1. Introduction with Assessment

Sessions 2-6: Phase 2. Transition

Session 2. Introduction of the Curse

Session 3. Raising the Topic of the Prison Murder of Keo's Former Friend

Sessions 4-6, Processing the Murder

Sessions 7-18: Phase 3. Treatment

Session 7. Returning to Talk About the Curse

Session 8. Feedback from Ioki, the Kahuna

Session 9. Feedback from his Sister Maile on the Curse for Breaking the "Kapu" (Taboo)

Case Formulation after Session 9

Session 10. Starting to Consider Whether to Engage in the Ritual

Sessions 11-14. Keo Decides He Wants To Do the Ritual

Between Sessions 14 and 15, When the Ritual to Reverse the Curse Took Place

Session 15. Positive Reaction to the Ritual

Sessions 16 and 17. Processing the Impact of the Ritual

Session 18. Focusing on Life Decisions

Sessions 19-20: Phase 4. Termination

Sessions 21-22: Return to Phase 3. Therapy

Sessions 23-24. Return to Termination Phase

Information From Follow-Up

7. THERAPY MONITORING AND USE OF FEEDBACK

8. CONCLUDING EVALUATION OF THE THERAPY'S PROCESS AND OUTCOME

Outcome

Implications and Conclusions