

# Looking for God

From the Baptist Church in Burlington, Vermont, to Mauna Kea with Native Hawaiians

By Tom Whitney

**W**hile in the Navy in Philadelphia a friend took me to the Unitarian Church there.

**The Unitarians** The minister was a former sociology professor and I liked his sermons that related to real world and social issues. They didn't tell me what I should believe, and I liked that. When a Jewish holiday came around they would have Jewish people and artists come and explain what their religion meant to them. They did the same with other religion's special days. Unitarians respect that people have a religious and spiritual part of themselves and support that notion without providing dogmas that they expect their members to express in some rote fashion.

**The Baptists** I had been brought up in the Baptist Church in Burlington, (Northern Baptist, so we were not holy rollers) probably because it was across the street from where we lived on Pine Street in Burlington. I went there all the way through high school, but I never did really take Jesus to be my savior. My earliest impression of the church was sitting upstairs and listening to white-haired Doctor Sisson roar on about Burma, where he had spent some time. Foreign missions were part of the church's self-defined role in the world. Then mom would take us downstairs for Sunday school. Mostly I liked the discussion groups through high school, talking about big issues. I was interested in grappling with big issues, learning big lessons. During junior high time I *loved* Church League basketball, so that required some church involvement. I guess it became a habit.

My mother made sure we went, and at one time ran the Sunday School there, but I didn't ever remember hearing her mention God at home. She didn't seem particularly religious or spiritual. I asked my sister Mary recently if she had ever heard mom talk about religion. Mary said the only times were when she might say "My God, are you girls ever going to clean up you rooms!" For my mother, getting her children involved in



*The beautiful, classic, Unitarian Church built in 1816 that stands at the head of Church Street, the main thoroughfare of the largest city in Vermont. As a young person I had no idea what the values of this church were about. They weren't very good in basketball - which is not relevant to anything important, but a young kid registers information like that. As an adult I came to realize that my values are most consistent with Unitarians. For some reason, young people don't get to shop around for a good church for them. They do what their parents want.*

perhaps any church was a part of her duty as a mother. The Baptist one was originally convenient.

In later life I have figured that the social interaction is a great part of the appeal, and value, of a church – more than the doctrinal details. It



*The Baptist Church on St. Paul Street where I attended for twelve years without becoming a convert.*

provides something for kids to do. At least in our time, the doctrinal differences were not so crucial and life-threatening as they had been a few hundred years earlier in England and are today in the Middle East. Not being a strong believer, I did not take my children to church regularly and later regretted that.

My young ones - maybe - might have made a better set of friends than they did, and not been led into the drug culture.

**The Catholics** My last year in high school I went to Midnight Mass at a huge Catholic Church on Christmas Eve with my girlfriend Sue. It was an experience much different than the Baptist Church. It was more mysterious and grand; more thrilling with the music and the visually darker mood was more uplifting. It left a lasting impression, on me. Later in life I married a woman who was brought up in the Catholic Church. She had left it behind completely. We have never gone to church together in thirty years.

**The Quakers** A few years after my first wife and I were married we became weekend relief at a halfway house for women parolees in Los Angeles. The house provided a low cost place to live while people become re-oriented to the world outside prison. It was run by the American Friends Service

Committee,<sup>1</sup> the AFSC, and was the first such program in the Western United States. Now there are many halfway houses. The “Friends” are Quakers. This is a group that came to the United States from England at first to Pennsylvania, which was a religious experiment by the Penn family in England who wanted to sponsor a colony that would epitomize religious toleration.

I grew to respect Quakers. During their services, often there is mostly silence until people feel moved to get up and express themselves. They are not preached at, like in so many churches. AFSC and Quaker people are quiet, but determined. During wars Quakers have often become conscientious objectors and refused to carry guns. They act

---

**Social interaction is a great part of the appeal, and value, of a church today – more than the doctrinal details.**

---

<sup>1</sup> The AFSC serves all over the world. See their web site: <http://www.afsc.org/>

on their beliefs, firmly but without violence, no matter what the difficulties. The AFSC is often at the forefront of creating programs to deal with emerging social issues. They don't seek headlines, but they do seek solutions, and find them. My friend Ray Tretheway in Sacramento is a Quaker. Talk about solution-oriented. He and his wife Judy built a house with walls and ceilings of very thick foam insulation that has dramatically cut their electric energy costs in the hot Sacramento summers that almost require air conditioners. Anyone could do it. Ray and Judy did, and are reaping the benefits.

So I liked the Unitarians and the Quakers but never went to their churches much during the past thirty years.

**Tree of Life** Here in Hawai'i in 2002 I was asked to design a "tree of life" mural for a local museum. The job was soon cancelled due to lack of funding, but my research led me to what for me were some profound realizations. First, before I tell you what they are, I want you to know my bias here is that I basically accept what reputable science proposes as the latest evidence-based explanation of physical phenomena. I trust the scientific method. There are theories that cover what we know up to this time. When we have more information, those theories will likely change. I am not a religious person, and don't accept attempts by religion to describe physical phenomena. For those who are religious, I respect that. Some religious ideas may be true. What most struck me were the two following phenomena.

**Primordial Soup** My big realization here is that every living thing on the planet arose out of a primordial soup<sup>2</sup> of single-celled organisms that floated on the planet for a billion years. Lightning strikes, lava eruptions, meteors hitting the earth and a bombardment of star dust caused single cells to unite with others in a more complex soup - and so on up to the present day. We share cell structure and chemicals with every living thing including animals, plants, birds, you name it: they are all our cousins. We have evolved from that soup.

**Mitochondrial Eve** And then there is Mitochondrial Eve<sup>3</sup>. She is the woman who is the most recent common ancestor of all humans alive today. This is shown by analysis of mitochondria that are passed down from mothers, and change very little through the centuries. Those tiny changes provide just enough information to allow for analysis to track where people have come from and where they have gone. This common, stupendously prolific great grandmother is believed by many scientists to have lived in Kenya, Ethiopia or Tanzania about 150,000 years ago. And yes, there is a Mitochondrial Adam.

---

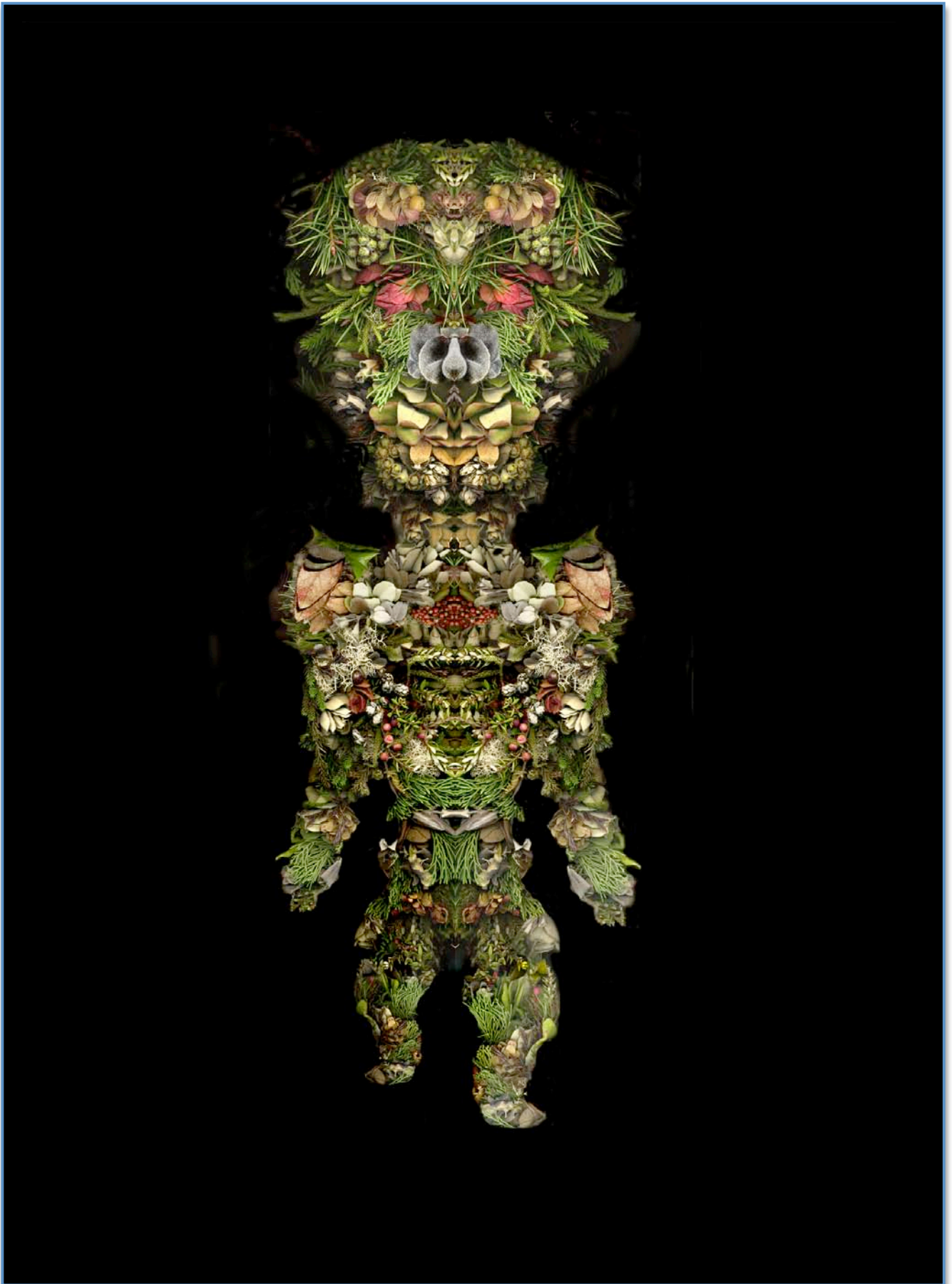
**We share cell structure  
and chemicals with  
every living thing  
including animals,  
plants, birds, you  
name it: they are all  
our cousins.**

---

---

<sup>2</sup> "Primordial Soup," start on Wikipedia,

<sup>3</sup> "Mitochondrial Eve," a topic on the Wikipedia website: <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mitochondrial\\_Eve](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mitochondrial_Eve)>



The art on the previous page is my graphic response to the idea that we share cell structure with all living beings.

There is no question that all this is a hotly debated topic. Ask Google to search for “origin of life” and it turns up a 5,620,000 entries. I am not here trying to convince you I am correct, just *reporting* where I am with the concept. I have boiled it down to my two paragraphs above, *but* I keep an open mind. The paragraphs above reflect my current thinking, subject to change with more convincing evidence.

As we examine our family trees, how far back do we look? I asked one of my classmates, Steve Berry, who has researched about a thousand ancestors and he said because “The numbers get so mind-boggling, because the number of ancestors doubles each generation as you move back in time, that unless it is only close, like maybe as far out as a third or fourth cousin, I don't pay much attention to it.”

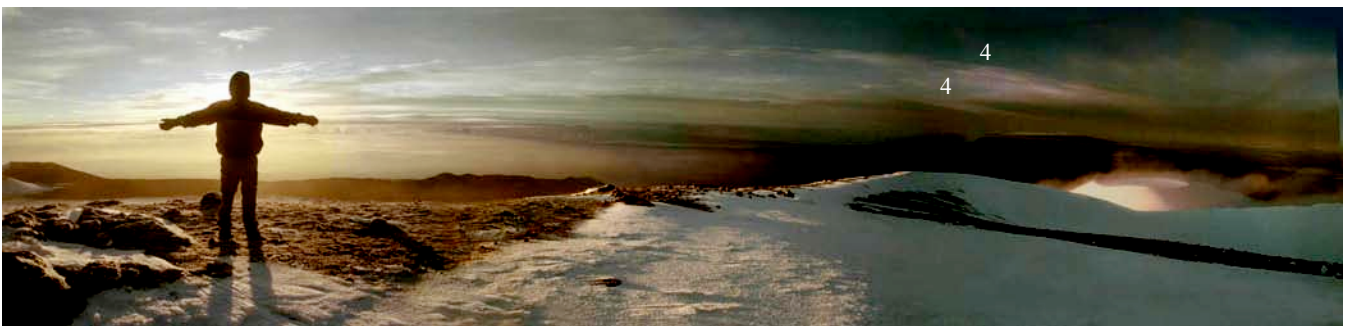
I think most of us go back a couple of hundred years. Going much further back than the invention of moveable type in the 1200's and Gutenberg's press in the 1400s is pretty difficult because there were few records, unless you have royalty in your lineage and your ancestors had scribes or stone cutters to record their exploits. Even five hundred years is pretty short in the world's time scale.

It comforts me to feel that I am related to everything that lives. We are all made of the same chemicals, and have similar structures to a greater or lesser degree.

There should be no conflict between science and religion. Science and rational analysis explores the realm of God. My logic says that if God is all powerful, it is God's will that his or her domain be analyzed with the mental tools God has provided. It has to be God's will that we use the powerful brains he or she has given us.

If there is a heaven, we are experiencing it now; there may be nothing else after we die. This may be it.

**Coming alive spiritually in Hawai'i** I feel that my science-based attitude about the world has given me a good background to appreciate the Hawaiian attitude toward nature. Hundreds of years ago, when Hawaiians were going to enter a forest, they would pray to ask the favor of the forest god; if they needed to cut a tree they would ask permission of the tree. Many Hawaiians today have those feelings. To me it expresses a reverence for



*Here a man on the top of Mauna Kea, Hawai'i's most sacred mountain, celebrates the dawning of a new day during a Hawaiian vernal equinox sunrise ceremony in 2005.*



all. In my view, thinking rationally that we are somehow related to every living thing reinforces this idea of being respectful, and thankful.

Hawaiian spiritual practitioner Harold Kāula is shown here during the Winter Solstice ceremony at dawn on December 21, 2000, the last spiritual gathering of Hawaiians on Mauna Kea during the second millennium.

Kāula is wearing a long ti leaf cape similar to ones that may have been used by ancient Hawaiians to protect against the freezing weather on the 13, 796-foot peak. The brown ti leaves come from plants in his family cemetery, the yellow ones from the Hawaiian church in Waimea. Kāula asked permission of each plant to pick it for the purpose of making this cape. It was completed in an up-all-night session with another spiritual warrior and many helpers in the dark before the dawn of the Solstice.

Kāula crafted the spear from ironwood.

Kāula traces his family

lineage back to ancient Hawai‘i when it was once part of an ahupua‘a on the Kohala side

---

<sup>4</sup> “Change We Must - My Spiritual Journey,” by Nana Veary, copyright © 1989 by the Institute of Zen Studies, Honolulu, HI.

of Mauna Kea. Kāula Gultch is named after a family ancestor. Ahupua‘a are the triangular shaped land divisions that stretched from the seashore at the base up to a point at the mountaintops, that encompassed the cycle of life and needs of ancient Hawaiian communities. Here is a man who feels a strong connection to the land of his ancestors.

The most spiritual experience in my life happened on the top of Mauna Kea. A few times the leader of the group, Paul Nevis, suggested that after the sunrise ceremony we take a few moments by ourselves to call out the names of our ‘ohana, our family, and send them a prayer. I did that. The first time I called out the names of my mother and father and sons. Three months later, faced the rising sun and called out the name of all family *and* friends I could think of and thought about all our connections. Both times, I was overwhelmed with a feeling of gratitude and appreciation and certainty and peace standing there on the highest point on half the planet.

A Hawaiian woman named Nana Veary<sup>5</sup> gave some good suggestions about how to act when you are on sacred land. Many Hawaiians and Navajo people believe all the land is sacred. How should you act? You ask permission and give thanks - and it can become a way of life. Her book, “Change We Must – My Spiritual Journey,” traces her journey through various religious faiths is like my Bible. She finally settled on Buddhism.

I have settled on a belief that all land is sacred and that we must walk gently on it. If there is a heaven, we are experiencing it now, grounded on this earth, so we should make the best of it while we can, before the long sleep. ☯



*Hawaiians don't have a "church." The land is sacred. They don't pave paradise to put in a parking lot for Sunday visitors. Here people have gathered on Mauna Kea near a wooden altar called a lele where plant offerings are placed with prayers. Plants represent Hawaiians gods. When*

*they walk through a forest or garden they are surrounded by gods.*

*At a recent solstice ceremony on Mauna Kea, Kaliko Kanaele, the leader of the Hawaiian group, greeted me as I was out of breath from exertion when I had just come down from the arduous trek up the last big hill to the top and he hesitated, then in greeting he called me Gandalf, referring to the Celtic wise man in the Lord of the Rings saga. He said it as a tribute of respect in a friendly and fun way. There is something profound and mythical about those sunrise ceremonies on Mauna Kea.*



<sup>5</sup> “Change We Must - My Spiritual Journey,” by Nana Veary, 1996, p. 110

*And I could be Celtic with my Irish and English genealogy. – Tom Whitney*



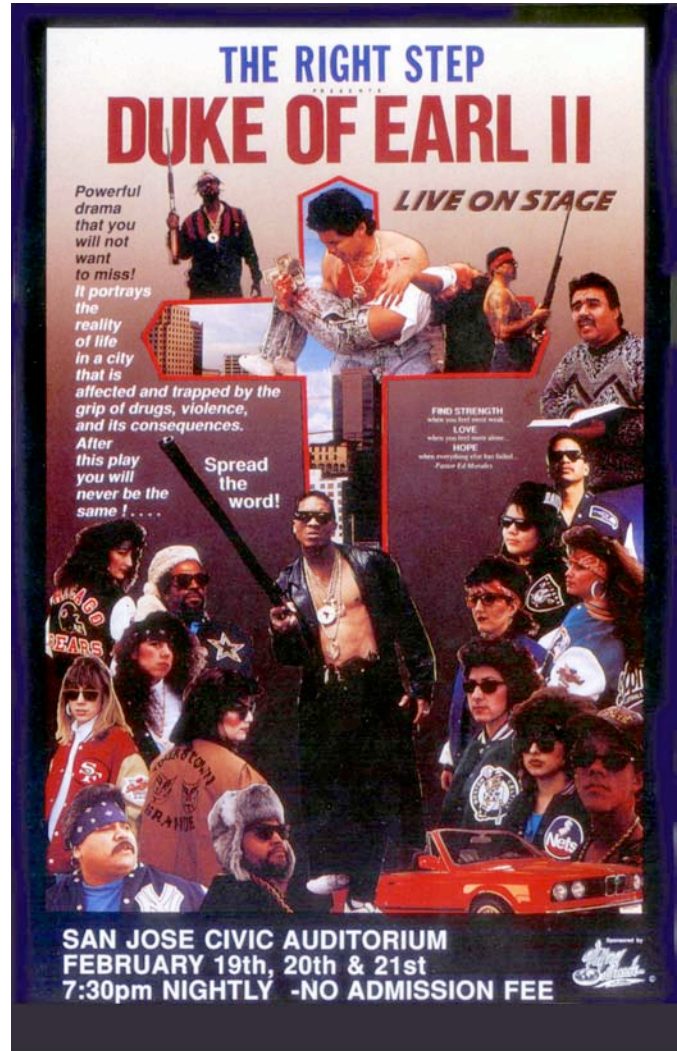
*My son Garth Augustus Whitney has changed his name to Talib Sankofa and has adopted Islam as his faith. He made the connection when he spent time in jail.*

*My attitude about his name change was that it was up to him; it was ok with me.*

*Garth has completed two years of college and is progressing toward a B.A. degree. He works as a security person in Berkeley, California. – Tom Whitney*



*Julien, Tom and Talib Whitney, May, 2006*



*Julien Carmichael Whitney is presently working for Victory Outreach in Seattle. He became involved as a resident in their drug recovery program many years ago in San Jose, and recently has become involved again. Victory Outreach is a Christian international fellowship of over 600 churches and rehabilitation centers located throughout the world. Most of its churches have associated residential facilities called "Homes" that are in essence halfway houses so people can get back on their feet after periods of drug use.*

*The poster above was inviting people to a dramatic production to learn about Victory Outreach. The actors are members of the church. Julien has become a graphic designer, stained glass designer and web designer. He was involved in managing and creating publicity for the production in the poster. I took the photographs for and designed the poster. The "shoot" took place in an empty parking lot in Oakland.*