

# The Kohola Healing Sculptures

## ... Towards the Light



The Kohola Healing Sculptures is a tale strewn with miracles, an example of how civilization today can recover a healthy relationship with Mother Earth and nature that affirms life and the value of all living creatures. Hawaiian spiritual practice often includes an *aumakua*, a deified ancestor who offers guidance, protection, and good fortune, frequently taking the form of a land-animal or bird or sea-creature.

The most prominent Hawaiian *aumakua* is *Kohola*, which means humpback whale. The final syllable, *la*, is used throughout Oceania and literally means sun or sunlight, which begets the metaphor “towards the light,” noted by early Hawaiians observing the mother Kohola gently pushing their keiki (newborn calves) to the surface for their first breath. *La* is also typically combined with other syllables, achieving more nuanced meanings.

The humpback whale makes an annual round trip between Hawaii and Alaska to feed in Alaska summers and to rest and give birth in the warm winter waters of Hawaii. It is a particularly loved creature whose songs can be heard through the water and whose joy is so clear when the leviathan slaps the surface of the ocean on a dive upward... towards the light.

Three notions provide the ethical, cultural groundwork of Hawaiian spirituality and undergird The Kohola Project. The best known is ***aloha***. Used across the English-speaking world as an informal greeting, *aloha* has become a casual substitute for “hello.” In fact, the word connotes something much deeper. Aloha is an essence of being: love, peace, compassion, and a shared mutual understanding of respect. Aloha means living in harmony with the people and land around you, with mercy, sympathy, grace, and kindness. Greeting another person with *aloha* suggests a mutual regard and affection. And it can mean a simple goodbye, see you soon, to a goodbye forever.

A second ethical pillar of Hawaiian spirituality is the practice of ***ho’oponopono***. Put most simply, it consists of four phrases: “*I love you. I’m sorry. Please forgive me. Thank you.*” As taught by Dennis Kauahi, the notion of healing is implicit in *aloha* and becomes a serious practice through *ho’oponopono*. It emphasizes healing – making whole; rather than curing – which focuses on the symptoms of sickness. The practice is typically used to achieve family harmony.

Finally, throughout Oceanian culture the word ***mana*** describes a spiritual life force permeating the universe, an energy that animates the world. *Mana* has been variously defined by Western and Hawaiian scholars as supernatural power, divine power, miraculous power, and spiritual power.

*Mana...*

*Mana* is the energy we seek for good in The Kohola Sculptures– using old wood, recycled rather than harvested, and the ancient art of carving, all in healing support of the globe and humankind. Leaders who embody *mana*’s sacred energy do not become sacred themselves. Rather, they are the agents through which the energy is manifested. Tonu Shane, the Polynesian carver at the heart of The Kohola Sculptures, is totally clear: “*This is not about me. This is about the mana and about what emerges, about the carving and what it reveals.*”

### The Historic Background

San Francisco’s Interfaith Center at the Presidio’s inaugural program was held in June 1992 at the University of California at Berkeley, focused on the importance of vibrant interfaith and indigenous mutual respect. Jon Larson, a businessman and philanthropist, and Paul Chaffee, founding executive director of The Interfaith Center at the Presidio (ICP) met while helping to organize the conference. Later that year they met master carver Tonu Shane at ICP, San Francisco’s spiritually inclusive organization – Methodists to Mormons,

Pagans to Buddhists, indigenous to institutional, and so many more – all are welcome.

Through most of the nineties, the Cultural Conservancy, another Presidio nonprofit, worked extensively with Tonu as a guest artist, naming him their first artist-in-residence. From 2001 to 2007 he taught carving at Windward Community College of the University of Hawai'i,

Jon has written about those early years leading up to The Kohola Healing Sculptures, also known as the Healing Poles project.

*"The stories of the great whale, the great California redwood and Pacific Coast cedar trees, and the spiritual traditions and cultures of the indigenous peoples of California, Hawaii and the Pacific region, are retold through the Kohola healing sculptures. They offer a respectful and reverent manner seeking to heal ancient wounds and restore new life, respect, and hope to the living and future descendants of the indigenous people, plants, and animals of the world."*

In 1995 the United Nations chose to celebrate its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, the city where the UN Charter had been signed in 1945. Jon enabled the attendance of a dozen Hawaiian kahunas, kupunas (respected elders), priests and healers. They saw a whale Tonu was carving from an ancient redwood and named it "Kohola," and The Kohola Healing Sculptures "Towards the Light" projects emerged.

Jon and his UN50 Grace Cathedral interfaith team also gathered sacred waters from 30 sites around the world, including many of the world's great healing sites including Lourdes France, England's Glastonbury Well, the Mendenhall Glacier in Alaska, the Nile, the Volga, the Ganges, the Amazon, New Mexico's Chimayo Church, and from as far away as Nepal's Sunkoshi River, Australia's Phagen Bay, Delphi Greece, the Jordan River, and Kawaiahao Church, Hawaii.

The waters were blended in the UN Interfaith Service by 75 children from international children's choirs and then put back into 30 bottles, 27 of which were distributed at the 1995 service.

The 30th and final bottle was utilized to bring some of the blended waters of the world back home to Hawaii's Kawaiaha'o and Ka Punahou springs and were shared in ceremony in 2024 at Ko'olauloa.



The 9/11 One Voice Healing Pole given to the City of New York and erected at the Bronx Zoo in 2002

## Port Chicago

Ironically, The Kohola Healing Sculptures were precipitated by one of the ugliest, most destructive events in United States history, the explosion of military ordnance at the Port Chicago Naval Magazine on July 17, 1944. The naval post, 17 miles northeast of San Francisco, was where American ships loaded bombs and ammunition during World War II for the Pacific theater. A broken winch led to fire and the world's largest ever man-made explosion except for the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki a year later. Four-hundred and ten thousand pounds of explosives and more than 5,000 barrels of fuel oil exploded and burned at Port Chicago. Three hundred and twenty men died and 390 were injured.

Almost all of the enlisted sailors were African-American. They were not trained in moving explosives. White officers surviving the explosion were granted special family visits; black sailors were not, though they suffered most of the deaths and injuries. The enlisted survivors were ordered to clean up the results, which they did. But 50 of the enlisted sailors refused to go back to moving ordnance without being trained. They were court-martialed, found guilty, and sentenced to 15 years in prison, though appeals over the next few years significantly reduced the length of incarceration for most. It's been suggested that the Port Chicago tragedy helped push the country a little closer to integrating the US military and achieving civil rights for people of color.

Back at Port Chicago, ten giant yellow cedars, originally brought down from Alaska in the early 1930s, survived the tragedy. The logs had been floating caissons helping support the extended Port Chicago pier. They were 30-36 feet long, each weighed between two and three tons, and they ranged from 300 to 1,000 years of age based on ring counts. After the Port Chicago explosion cleanup, the logs were left in nearby mudflats which helped preserve them until they were extracted half a century later on Earth Day in 1997.

Master wood carver Tonu Shane heard about the Navy's decision to sell the logs for scrap lumber and firewood. He contacted Jon Larson and Paul Chaffee. Jon offered to buy the Port Chicago logs for \$1,000 each, and the offer was accepted. The logs were off-loaded at the Presidio of San Francisco, the nation's newest national park.

**The Kohola Healing Poles:**

Since then, the ten yellow cedars, once remnants of warfare, have largely been carved into sacred healing poles. The Interfaith Center at the Presidio, a consortium of Bay Area interfaith organizations, was a recipient. One healing pole went to the Bronx Zoo in New York, memorializing those who died in the 9/11 Twin Towers tragedy. Another was raised as a totem in Indian Canyon Village, a central California community devoted to indigenous ritual and ceremony. The 10th of the ten yellow cedar logs was returned in 2023 to a new and final home back in Alaska near its original home, the Chumash National Forest on Prince William Sound.

**2024:** In June 2024, a Kava ceremony and Kohola celebration brought together tribal royalty, elders, teachers, and leaders from across Oceania to Ko'olauloa in Hau'ula on the windward north shore of Oahu. Wood sculptures were gifted in ceremony to special individuals and organizations supporting the indigenous interests of Hawaii, Polynesia, and throughout Oceania. The 30th crystal vessel with the last of the sacred waters first blessed 29 years earlier at the UN50th interfaith service, was brought to Hawaii where they were shared and blended further with fresh waters for future ceremonies throughout Oceania including the Mt. Shasta home of the Winnemem Wintu, a native tribe in the Mount Shasta region of northern California.

**Futures:** One healing pole will be raised in the new Roundhouse being built by the Wintu. And the tenth and last yellow cedar will be carved and raised in Cordova, Alaska, in the land where it and the nine others grew starting from seedlings in the same centuries when the first Polynesians discovered and inhabited the Hawaiian Islands.

**The Whale Tour:** A five-ton life-size carving of a humpback whale and her *Keiki* (baby calf) was carved by Tonu from a 2,000+ year-old redwood giant log found abandoned in a defunct lumber mill in northern California. Plans are being formulated to send it on a Good Will voyage around the world starting across Pacific/Oceania.

@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@

@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@



**Tonu – master carver**

**Tonu Shane**, a master wood carver and eco-visionary, is the driving energy behind the Kohola Project. His spiritual mentor, Failautusi Avegalio, has offered wisdom and access to *mana* in Tonu's work. Over the years, painting, woodcutting, and carving, particularly carving massive healing poles Tonu calls acupuncture needles for the Earth, have inspired millions.

A gifted teacher, Tonu has a history of teaching carving to children, the blind, and the disadvantaged. At most of these sites, Tonu has involved local young people and community members to assist in the carving. Rather than seeing himself in grandiose terms, he is guided by *mana* in pursuing the well-being and good health of Mother Earth, nature, and all that lives.



The original Kohola carving team welcoming two of the ten Kohola logs to the Presidio.



Mother Kohola with Keiki calf welcoming the Hokule'a voyaging canoe from Hawaii to San Francisco in 1995.



The "Interfaith" Healing Pole shown above was present at the first [United Religions Initiative](#) conference at Stanford University in June of 1999, the initial convocation of a large group of representatives of faith traditions from throughout the world who gathered to organize a United Religions organization inspired by and modeled after the success of the United Nations.

It contains symbols of the world's faith traditions carved on the surface. Since the initial meeting in 1999, the URI organization has expanded to a presence worldwide.



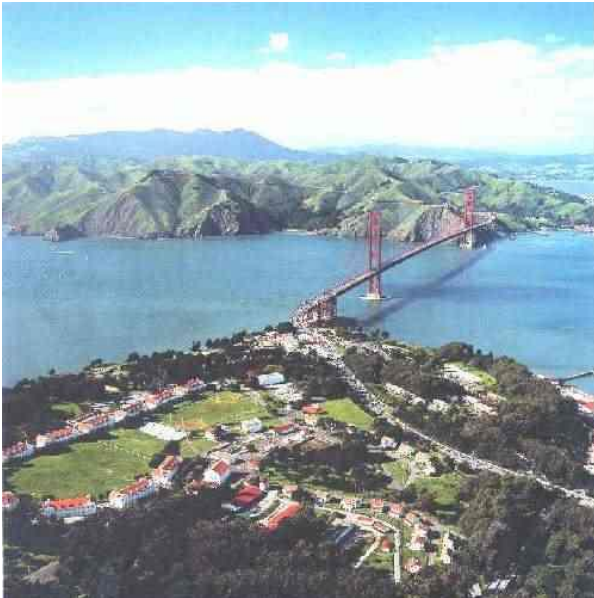
First Peoples of California Healing Bench - Intertribal Friendship House, Oakland

@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@

[The KohoLa Healing Sculptures](#)

Healing Mother Earth and Her Peoples,  
through  
-Aloha (Love),  
-Mālama (Caring), and  
-'OHana (Family)

@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@



Kohola carving site in the San Francisco Presidio



Interfaith Kohola Healing pole being carved by PICA's Sam Hart of Molokai



View of wreckage on shore as crane begins removing debris. (U.S. Navy)



View of wrecked pier. Submerged Stern of Quinalt Victory is at upper right. (U.S. Navy)

Port Chicago after the 1944 explosion. Note one of the Kohola logs amongst the debris.



The First Peoples of California Healing Totem - Indian Canyon, California



Kohola sculpture gifted to the Cultural Conservancy of San Francisco, located on the grounds of the Interfaith Center at the Presidio.



The 9/11 One Voice Healing Pole gifted to the City of New York and erected at the Bronx Zoo in 2002



Jon Larson delivering three of the ten Kohola logs from Port Chicago to the San Francisco Presidio carving site on Earth Day of 1997



The 10th and last of the ten Kohola logs being loaded for return in 2023 back to its birthplace and home in Alaska.



Ten Kohola logs at the carving site in the Presidio of San Francisco in 1997



One of the ten Kohola Healing Poles showing the twisted DNA Helix theme of all of the sculptures and showing the brilliant coloring of the Yellow Cedar interior of all of the Kohola logs that came from Port Chicago.



PICA carvers were integral to the carving of the Kohola Healing Poles.



The youth of Monterey California carving the 9-11 Heal All Life Healing Pole in 2001 that was gifted to New York City in 2002.



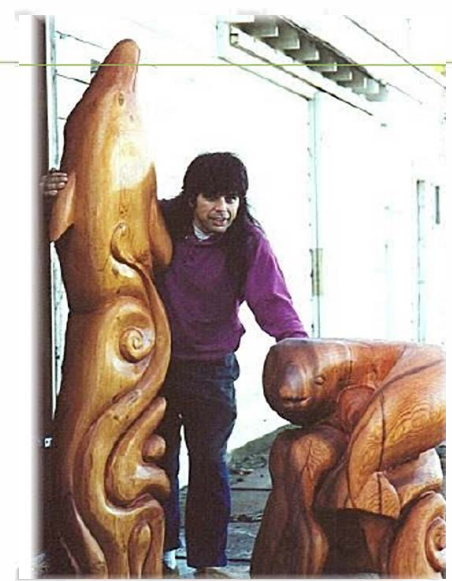
The last of the 30 crystal vessels holding sacred waters gathered from 30 sacred places around the world, and the nine colored ribbons placed by Kupuna from the Hawaii spiritual delegation to the United Nations 50th Anniversary Interfaith Service



The First Peoples of California Healing Totem - Indian Canyon in central California with Buddhist Prayer flags and traditional pairing of abalone shells in the background.



The 9-11 One Voice Healing Pole gifted to New York City and raised in the Bronx Zoo in 2002.



Pacific Islander eco-Sculptor/Teacher Tonu.





Supported by the Jon and Karen Larson Family Foundation  
[www.lff1.org](http://www.lff1.org)



@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@

The Kohola Healing Sculptures

Web site: [www.lff1.org/kohola](http://www.lff1.org/kohola)

Email: [jonlarson99.jl@gmail.com](mailto:jonlarson99.jl@gmail.com)

Phone: 415-435-3222

P● Box 751, Tiburon, CA 9492●

@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@



*Beneath Bali Hai II* by George Sumner

The Kohola  
Healing Sculptures

*"Towards the Light"*

