

Almost There

An Emerson Collective Podcast

Episode 4: What you learn when you sail around the world without a compass

Dwayne Betts:

You didn't ask me, but I'll tell you anyway. The ocean terrifies me. I mean, it haunts my dreams. I remember I was on a cruise ship going across the Atlantic and I could stare out at night and see nothing but darkness for what felt like would last forever. I thought about the middle passage. It's wild. But let me say this, if I had to be in the middle of the ocean, the only person I probably let captain me across the sea is Lehua Kamalu.

Lehua Kamalu:

The leadership really is meant to be a rock in a storm, and even if things are really going nuts, you have a plan, whatever it is. And so, I like to think I have a pretty level head there, but it doesn't mean internally... I remember a couple tears rolling down my face of, "Oh boy, am I ready for this?"

Dwayne Betts:

She's the voyaging director of the Polynesian Voyaging Society. She's a captain and she has sailed from Hawaii to San Francisco. I'm talking about 23 days on a wooden canoe using the stars and whatever understanding of wave patterns and weather that she can muster, no GPS, no compass, just her own brilliance and her crew. She might even be able to help me face the Pacific. This is Almost There from Emerson Collective and I'm Reginald Dwayne Betts.

I got to ask you this question. I'm not supposed to ask you this question, it seems rude that I'm asking you, but does that bother you that people always want to ask you if you are the real life Moana?

Lehua Kamalu:

It doesn't bother me. I don't know. I guess.

Dwayne Betts:

That's a really cool movie, I ain't even going to frank, but maybe a different question is this, now for those who haven't seen a Disney movie, Moana, it's the story of this girl who saves her people by knowing how to navigate the oceans without a compass and without a GPS system. And so to be reductive, that's what it scripts down to and people do... How do you think about the film?

Lehua Kamalu:

I think everything that tries to tell a story from a culture is always a challenge. How to balance sharing something well beyond the boundaries, I can't possibly tell the story of navigation and the history of voyaging the Pacific to the number of people that we're able to see that film. And to what you said earlier, when people come with a question, it's such a great point to start on a point of, is that how it happens, and is that what it's like out there, and how accurate is it? These all bring up really amazing ways to kick off conversations about what we do and how we do it that I'm not sure people would ask if that film hadn't been out there.

And even to what you just said about the storyline, I definitely don't think I want to be so bold as to say it's at the level of saving the people. I think that was a number of pioneers who actually led the way for me to be here today. But maybe in some ways my hope, and I imagine the hope of many who do the

similar work I do, is by saving and preserving this cultural practice, we allow these pathways for people to continue to find their own path or their own salvation for the future.

Dwayne Betts:

You are a scientist and a voyaging director for the Polynesian Voyaging Society, will you explain to the folks listening what your day-to-day work is?

Lehua Kamalu:

Oh boy. I will try my best. I'm daily trying to figure out what my day-to-day work is, but at the Voyaging Society, so I work at the Polynesian Voyaging Society, which is based in Honolulu, Hawaii. And it has been running for, next year will be 50 years since it was founded. I'd say it was founded in science and trying to demonstrate that the prevailing ideas of how Hawaiians and Polynesians populated small remote islands across the Pacific, hundreds and many thousands of miles apart, that this could be done with their own technology, with their own knowledge and wisdom and indigenous genius.

And that the prevailing theory that they simply drifted sort of aimlessly about the sea without knowledge of direction, that whole history and the way that we were learning about that migration and our origins needed to be changed. And this was one way to see is there another possibility that maybe they did have the skills, they did have the knowledge, they did have the technological prowess to build the canoes and to navigate them using their astronomy, their sciences, and their ability to be maritime people? And so this organization came together and built a canoe that is named Hōkūleʻa, it's very famous now, particularly in Hawaii. We took it all over the place. It's been to Japan, it's been to New Zealand, Rapanui, it's been to the West Coast and actually sailed all the way around the world.

Dwayne Betts:

How does it get to these places?

Lehua Kamalu:

It sails. It sails on the ocean.

Dwayne Betts:

[inaudible 00:05:46], they've been built a real life boat, but did they build it the way that it would've been built 200 years ago, 400 years ago, a thousand years ago?

Lehua Kamalu:

There was an attempt, and I think part of the process of reviving these sorts of ancient practices that have been lost in time, there weren't any canoes still sailing out of Hawaii and most of Polynesia, there weren't navigators actively practicing. And some part of this process I think was coming to realize the depth and breadth of what had been lost, including the natural materials themselves that would've been used to build these vessels. So Hōkūleʻa is not a hundred percent authentically designed using what we would've done many, many years ago. A lot of the trees had been deforested by then. It takes a lot of natural resource management to keep this up. And those have been strong themes that have survived through educational programs since then that suddenly this realization that if you wanted to protect the culture, you had to protect the environment that allowed that culture to thrive, were some big lessons, I think, over the years.

Dwayne Betts:

I'm afraid of the water. I hate to say this, and you're talking about getting in water where there is no Starbucks, so I'm just trying to understand just what is the vessel that I'm now contemplating riding on from Hawaii to Japan?

Lehua Kamalu:

We say it's a performance replica. While we didn't have the traditional trees to carve it out of, in the past, these things would've been dugout canoes, and I think sort of an English, I suppose canoe is the closest thing we can call it. In Hawaiian, we call it a wa'a. Wa'a is a term you'll hear in Hawaii, you'll hear it across Polynesia in the Pacific to describe canoes, many different kinds, some are smaller for paddling just on the coast, some are a little bit bigger just to go between channels in nearby islands. And then the one we're talking about, Hōkūle'a, is a wa'a kaulua, so it's a double-hulled canoe. It's 62 feet long and about 21 feet wide. And she's got masts that come up about 32 feet off the deck that hold up these sails, and we call them crab claw sails, they kind of look like crab claws pinching one another. It's a lot of work to launch a canoe, I'll say that, it takes a village to keep one, to build one, to sail one.

Dwayne Betts:

Can you explain what it means to be the captain of a ship? Can you explain what it means to navigate from Hawaii 3000 miles?

Lehua Kamalu:

For sure. Sailing this canoe it's interesting, I think you find out as you become the captain that for me it was, "I just realized how much more I didn't know I didn't know."

Dwayne Betts:

It's really hard to find out how much you didn't know when you are in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, I got to say.

Lehua Kamalu:

There's not a lot of room for error, you could say that for sure. I was able to learn from some pretty incredible experienced captains and navigators that came before me, that were part of this renaissance period of when Hōkūle'a was constructed, when she took her very first historic voyages. And they're really heroes here in Hawaii and in many places that have heard their story and seen what they accomplish. And so there's automatically a pretty high bar, I'd say, to enter that space. One that I wouldn't say I willingly or maybe half voluntarily, half fallen totally, accepted, recognizing just how much weight is put on that role. It's not just about sailing the ship, so to speak. It's really everything involved with preparing for departure, getting your crew ready, figuring out who's going to sail this vessel. Once you arrive, there's pretty high expectations that have been built over the last few decades of what your role is. When you land in a community, you aren't just docking at a little marina and doing a couple things here and there, there are massive cultural engagements that take place.

And really being a captain and navigator on Hōkūle'a or Hikianalia, these are the two vessels we actually operate out of the Voyaging Society. There's really a lot of leadership expectation that you are not just coming as a leader of this canoe, but that you are representative of these islands that you came from in a really big way. And so we just came back from Tahiti, it's been about six weeks, six weeks now. I did a voyage down and back again. And when we were there, we had some pretty important discussions

about what it means to traverse that pathway between these two places. So for those who might not be familiar with the history, Hawaii is populated by migrations that came out of French Polynesia hundreds of years ago. And so we consider them our elders, our older brothers and sisters, our ancestors.

And so this is an ancestral pathway, and the idea that we are responsible for these pathways, we are the ones who bring life to these places, the few people probably who see these remote ocean spaces and actually speak for them and get to share what happens along these roadways that we're not the first ones to travel, but have been traveled by many generations before us. So besides just sailing the ship and managing the crew, there are expectations of understanding the larger implications of the space that you occupy, the land you came from, the history, the relationships that tie these communities together, and also what you're going to do together moving forward. A voyage while seemingly long while you're out there for a few weeks on end is just a small part that leads you to an introduction to a community where we want to talk about the issues that are going on.

And even though I might not have thought I was going to be in that position, early in my years thought this would be a wonderful way for me to reconnect with my culture and spend my time after school learning the ocean, now it becomes a greater responsibility of what does this ocean mean for here in Hawaii, for myself, for these islands that live in this ocean? And do we need to take a role in its protection, in its stewardship in much larger ways than just what the dominant forces in the Pacific may want to do with it?

I think it really gives you a good framework for understanding the natural world around you. It gives clear purpose to why it's important to understand that natural space, and the vessels, we sometimes call them the classrooms, that we get to go out and learn about this ocean world, this ocean school that we live in. And so Hōkūle'a is really the oldest and the first one that has been rebuilt in modern times. And the word is actually the Hawaiian name for a star in the sky that's known probably more popularly as Arcturus. It is a star that is a zenith star, so it ends up directly over your head when you're standing where I am here in Hawaii. And so we have a lot of association of zenith stars to specific islands. So here in Hawaii, Hōkūle'a or Arcturus is that star.

Dwayne Betts:

So if I was in the ocean and I was trying to find Hawaii, all I got to do is find that star and then I could make it to land?

Lehua Kamalu:

You could. It's a little tricky because the stars are only going to be right over your head for one moment out of the nighttime, so for the other-

Dwayne Betts:

You know what's funny? You just gave me disclaimer, you was like, "Just in case you plan on trying this, let me just tell you..."

Lehua Kamalu:

Pro-tips. Just keep a little cheat sheet at someplace. And I think you're touching on some of the strategy here is that Hōkūle'a is one star and has special meaning for us. It also is interpreted to mean star of gladness. So there's some beautiful songs that have been written for the last 50 years about this star and its meaning to Hawaii. There are other zenith stars, so Tahiti for instance is... The Zenith star of Tahiti is Sirius or Aa, which is one of the brightest stars out there.

Dwayne Betts:

What about the North Star?

Lehua Kamalu:

The North Star, zenith star of the North Pole is the North star. And since we are in the Northern Hemisphere, the North Star is such an important part of our daily navigation. With the North Star visible, you get a mark on true north, which is what we navigate by because we don't have any instrumentation, particularly no magnetic instrumentation. We are dealing with true things that can be observed by the naked eye. And so the North Star is incredibly important to that.

Dwayne Betts:

I'm thinking about the Antebellum period and people who were enslaved and they would search for freedom and the south is literally the Atlantic Ocean in 1830. And so you're trying to navigate the south and you don't have GPS, you don't have Google Maps and you just reading the sky and you searching for the North Star. That makes me think that part of what you're doing is also a freedom mission and it's saying, you keep talking about community and you keep talking about connecting spaces, how does community become... And it's both community and history though, it's not just community and family, and you and your parents and your sisters, but it's also this intentional decision to move back from New York to Hawaii. And so I wonder, what does that mean for you in retrospect? Do you feel like your work is in service of you being Hawaiian and that your larger work is about a freedom project that, in reclaiming these traditions of the past, the legitimacy of those traditions and the relevance and significance of those traditions?

Lehua Kamalu:

All those questions are a hundred percent relevant to what we do. I think when I was much younger, because my dad was in the military when I was born, he was just, "I'm getting stationed." We lived in Puget Town, we lived in Connecticut, we lived in New York. And when we finally left the military and came to Hawaii, there was a focus on getting back into culture and language specifically, Hawaiian language itself, I think, in Hawaii has a very complicated history. It was obviously banned many years ago in the school system. And so what you had was a sudden drop-off of the students speaking it, the children speaking it. And so you skipped a couple of generations in that process.

That was really the early years of Wine Immersion Programs. And so entering my kindergarten year, went into a fully Hawaiian immersion school, meaning you walked in and it wasn't like, "Let's teach you a few words in Hawaiian," it's, "We're already all speaking Hawaiian." I'm not going to say it was traumatic, but it was an abrupt departure from my English-speaking life. Part of that process, of learning language is understanding the words, the grammar, the imagery, the meaning behind the words of the language that you're speaking. And a lot of that is understanding the culture of Hawaii, Hawaiians, pasts, present, all sorts of issues. You really have to credit a lot of the visionaries who saw the value of bringing back that language and figured out how to do it.

Dwayne Betts:

You leaning into the language, you leaning into the culture, and in fact you're not even leaning into it as you finish school, this is you, you about to be an apprentice. What is that? And I'm talking about what is it to be an apprentice navigator the first time you get on a ship? Because if you go on a cruise ship or something, and I've only been in the Atlantic Ocean, I only think about the middle passage. Not all of the time, not all of the time, but my cultural antecedent for being at night in the Atlantic is... You looking

around and it is so frightening. And so what I'm wondering from you, because you're somebody whose connection to the Pacific isn't rooted in horror from what I've heard you tell me so far.

So what I wonder is what is it like to, you pushing the ship out or you bought to launch the ship, I don't know how many people are there, but it's this one moment where you're looking out on the Atlantic by yourself, first as a navigator that's taking on this huge responsibility as an apprentice navigator, and then as a captain, what is it like? Just take me there, that moment where you're just far away from land where you just see the memory of land.

Lehua Kamalu:

It's interesting because all your questions are coming at such a great lineup that I'm thinking back to how the last one really plays into this one. We were touching on the concept of freedom in the practice of what we do. And I'm sure many people have described the ocean as this frontier of freedom. It's out there, you're on your own and by yourself, and before you ever leave the dock, you have done years of work. You have worked on how you work as a team, how you work as a crew, how you treat your team here on the dock. All of the work that goes into these canoes, lashing them with miles of line, keeping them cared for, doing sea trials, doing training runs just a few hours at a time, then slowly making them longer, one night, two nights, six nights, and then really going out 300, 400, 800, 2000 miles offshore. I think all of this-

Dwayne Betts:

How long does that take? Are we talking about, because you said two nights, then you said three, then you said four. How long is a 3000-mile trip? Is that two weeks? Is it a month?

Lehua Kamalu:

The longest trip I did was actually up to San Francisco and that took 23 days. So it takes a little bit of time and I think that particular trip was the first time I was asked to be Captain Navigator. I'm pretty good at managing, I'd say, my emotions on deck and keeping pretty clear. I had great examples to follow in that. The leadership really is meant to be a rock in a storm and even if things are really going nuts, you have a plan, whatever it is. And so, I like to think I have a pretty level head there, but it doesn't mean internally... I remember a couple tears rolling down my face of, "Oh boy, am I ready for this?" We're not going back, my teacher's on board with me, this is it. And my 10, at that time it was 13 crew members. This is up to me to figure this out. And for the next 3000 miles, you just go mile by mile, day by day and make the best decision you can for each one of those legs.

Dwayne Betts:

We say almost there. And I think it's having the strength to confront the challenges. The most interesting part of rocks ends up being the lines that time and sand and gravel knit into the rock. And I think that's where our character comes from. And so being a rock in a storm does not mean that you haven't been tried and tested.

Lehua Kamalu:

I don't think I was born necessarily a rock. My parents might disagree with my general stubbornness, but I do think that had to be developed as well over time and over years of training. I've been doing this for 13 years now, and the first time I was allowed to captain, I had been doing it I think eight years. And there was a lot of, I'd say, self-discovery and really asking yourself the hard questions about how you're handling situations. What are the things that are concerning you, that are frightening you that I don't

know that a lot of other folks can answer for you. You've really got to sit with those things. Before any voyage, I'm doing crazy amounts of planning, looking at the routes, looking at the weather, looking at the ocean patterns. Part of the navigation is not just the stars, it's clouds, wind, wave patterns, prevailing winds, all of this comes into play.

Is this hurricane season? Are we potentially going to be in some pretty serious situations? What's the thing that I'm probably most afraid of, or that I feel the least prepared for? You have got to go in on those things because to confront... Not just the situation for the first time because you can't possibly plan for all the situations, I think to confront the emotion sooner than later in recognizing it lets you work through that. Because like we were saying earlier, there's not a lot of room for errors in some of these moments. And so the decisions, they just have to be fast, and I think I'm normally not. I never was a quick decision maker I felt like, you were saying you're not particularly fond of the ocean necessarily. And so I think that was my discomfort, was the decision making and learning to be quicker, learning to be more confident in that and decisive.

And that of course comes partly with experience and needing to make sure that this wasn't decisions that just I'm coming up with because I'm in charge, these are decisions that really are the best for the entire team to go through and really are going to allow us to get this trip done and be effective. And a successful journey, at least for me, is that we got there, we're all in one piece. But I'll often say, you're almost bittersweet because you'd be totally fine if we didn't quite hit the dock and we just turned around and went back again for another 23 days. And I feel like that's a bit of my measure of, did we create the right environment, the right team, the right sense of family on board, where everyone else is also not just looking to the captain for constant direction, but feeling confident in that we can all handle this together and that we'll get through it?

And so there's a lot of individual development, a lot of team building that goes on through the years. And I don't know, maybe I also might be just a little bit crazy. We get pretty good training grounds here in Hawaii. We have some of the roughest channels in the world. A lot of times people don't quite associate that with Hawaii, I did like beaches, but the reality is because of our geology, we have these high volcanoes, we have these deep channels that run between us. We get some pretty dangerous conditions. You actually don't see as many sailboats here as people might expect.

And so I'd say maybe the navigation is being more so observant and attentive than it is about being precise. Because if you're able to recognize where you are, it might not be that you're actually on course or on track to where you thought you were going to be, but if you recognize the signs that you're such miles east or west, or I see this bird that I know lives a certain distance from land, you don't actually need to be so precise in the route, you can find your way back to where you intend to go simply by understanding the environment you're dealing with.

Dwayne Betts:

Well, what bird though?

Lehua Kamalu:

The most popular bird that we discussed here is, it has a Hawaiian name called Manu-o-Kū, and it's a white turn or fairy turn, it's sometimes called. It's a beautiful, it's white bird and it has these deep black eyes. If you ever visit Hawaii, you'll see them all over the place.

Dwayne Betts:

And so when you're looking for land, if you see one of those that you are-

Lehua Kamalu:

You are in range, yes.

Dwayne Betts:

It's interesting that you are the Hōkūle'a's first female captain and navigator. And having a conversation, I'm having a conversation with you as if you are just naturally in this role, I didn't expect necessarily to be amazed by the fact that it's a woman that I'm talking to that's so composed, so knowledgeable, and so able to connect all of the different things that your work touches upon. But I might just be naive in that expectation, and so I guess I want to know, what do the accolades mean to you and for you, and particularly in context of the legacy that you're creating for what will be the next generation of people who understand that to sail is to care, is to connect, is to advance the culture, what is the work that you do speak to the tomorrows that you see?

Lehua Kamalu:

The accolades are tricky. Like you said, I think that's what my experience has been. It's that I think I've gotten here and it just happens to be that I'm a girl. I didn't really think a whole lot about that until it became, I think, a bigger conversation and girls would be like, "Oh my gosh, that's a girl." And I think I almost lost touch because I had immersed so heavily into the practice. If you'd probably talk to people close to me, for 10 years, it has been pretty heavily this day in and day out because of the intensity of the work and the study. So my actual job as the voyaging director is more so the administrative sides and the fundraising and the programmatic things, whereas I feel like it's my personal commitment for these things like the captain training and the navigation, and being able to support both of those efforts I think comes together really nicely.

I think the titles and the accolades are more, I won't say I'm scared of them, but I think they're a daily reminder that all of this comes with some pretty heavy responsibilities. This practice has to be lived, it has to be done. You have to be out sailing to do it. And so I think it sets a pretty high bar and expectation for the work that must continue for this to keep going. And so with these roles, with these titles, with these accomplishments, there's a natural progression that this next generation is going to be looking for guidance, for training, for help, and not just, like we said, understanding how to sail the canoe, but how this work pervades everything that goes on. Some of our students, and we have wonderful students these days, they're so culturally grounded, so sensitive, so globally informed, I'm always so impressed by their abilities. And I think we approach it with the idea that I expect that their world will be harder than mine and that some part of my job is to help out from this generation moving forward.

Dwayne Betts:

Well, I got to say I'm glad that I got to play a small role in making a story told and making it live and adding to the living archive, your work is extremely impressive. A lot of times I talk to people... All the time, actually, I talk to people and I'm thinking, "Oh man, I could do that." I'm telling you I cannot captain a sailboat across the Mississippi River, let alone across the Pacific. I am awed and really impressed, but more so as you said, I'm impressed by the way in which the work as a captain and as a navigator and as a sailor, actually so much connects to the work of what it means to be alive in this world and to be in community with folks. So thank you for your time and I look forward to following your career more. And actually, I'm going to get in the Pacific, next time I'm close, I'm going to get in the Pacific and then I'm going to get out of the Pacific, but I'm going to get in it though.

Lehua Kamalu:

Got to do it. You got to do it.

Dwayne Betts:

Do you see sharks in the water?

Lehua Kamalu:

If I tell you would you still get in the Pacific?

Dwayne Betts:

Probably not.

Lehua Kamalu:

I will say, there is value in having, I don't call it fear, although that might be a more appropriate term, healthy respect for the ocean. I think there's always an important role that plays. When you live in Hawaii and you grow up around the ocean and the beaches, you have this daily dialogue of, "Oh gosh, who's gone and done something really silly today?" Here, you don't go swimming in murky water, you don't go swimming after hurricanes, because predators take advantage of that cover. So you can be fairly sure that if you're in murky water, there is someone taking advantage of that element of surprise. And so don't go in the murky water. You don't really swim after heavy rainfalls because, A, there's flash flood warnings in the streams and also it's washing out a lot of debris into the ocean that tends to attract curiosity from things that live in the ocean. There's just a couple pro-tips and 99.999999% of people totally fine.

Dwayne Betts:

Almost There is produced by Jesse Baker and Eric Newsom, a magnificent noise for Emerson Collective. Our production staff includes Eleanor Kagan, Brianna Garrett, and Paul Schneider, along with Patrick Darcy, Alex Simon and Amy Loeb from Emerson Collective. Special thanks to Nia Elliot. I'm Reginald Dwayne Betts. Thank you for listening.