

## Tonga's Beautiful Beach

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When Tonga's Baron cleans the beach, who can litter!

*"Eternal gratitude towards the past.  
Unlimited service in the present  
Unbounded responsibility for the future."*

*r. Huston Smith-Scholar, served as an RYS Senior Advisor*

### A Touch of Tonga Spirit



The Kingdom of Tonga, once known as the Friendly Islands, contains 176 lush tropical islands that cross the international dateline. The culturally rich Polynesian kingdom was never colonized by Europeans but they welcomed Christianity. Today 98 % of its citizen's belong to a church. In the capital city Tongatapu an expression of that faith Tonga church goers can be observed each Sunday morning as groups of white clad ladies stroll almost parade-like down the street to attend a church.

Tongans love to sing and coming together provides a good reason for song. A person at a gathering will feel moved by the spirit and pick a song to sing, often it is a religious song. Those gathered may be from different villages and churches but when they sing together it is as if they were raised on the same songbook. Their voices naturally fill the air with beautiful layered harmony.

Dancing, or Mafana as it is known in the islands, may follow the singing for it also is a rich aspect of the Tongan culture. To many, Mafana is an expression of pure spiritual exhilaration and has a sacred element to it. The values and traditions of the islands are enriched by song and dance and provide a continuity linking the past to the present.

### A Royal Standard

To the disappointment of those in the glamour industry who consider thin to be vogue, the life-loving Tongans have their own standard of beauty. Tongan's can be huge, not necessarily towering tall huge but really round huge. Huge is good. Being a big Papa and especially a big Mamma is an honor, a thing to strive for. When girls reach their middle teens they are often encouraged to put on extra weight. Adding weight is like adding some extra beauty. I think the Tongans are on to something.



The Kingdom of Tonga is governed by the longest succession of hereditary rulers from the same family. The King and many members of the royal family are regarded with respect and near veneration, and carry with their titles important responsibilities in guiding and governing the country. The example royalty provides is of great importance to the nation.

When royalty behaves with petty self-interest it can bring disorder, yet when they behave in the interest of the people, blessings flow. From my perspective, true royalty is more than a circumstance of birth as it needs to be coupled with a nobleness of character as the following story points out.

### **Responding to a Call for Help:**



I met and shared with several prominent Tongan Ambassadors for Peace at international conferences after making presentations about the international work the Religious Youth Service (RYS) was doing around the world. In informal conversations these leaders enjoyed promoting the unique qualities of Tonga and its people but when the talks became serious they would inevitably move to an issue that weighed heavily on them. As concerned citizens, they were alarmed at the confusion in values that young people were facing on the islands.

The Tongan “Elders” shared their apprehension that the traditional values of the islands, richly influenced by Christianity were being confronted by secular, materialistic and hedonistic influences. They saw the onslaught of outside media as an ‘invading’ force with a power to move young people in a dangerous direction. Anxious about the future, they sincerely asked for help in protecting the youth and the culture that they loved.

Moved by this honest appeal we formulated a plan that garnered support from RYS, the Tongan Family Federation and local Ambassadors for Peace. While researching how to effectively implement a program in Tonga we discovered that the island’s churches tended to focus almost exclusively on their own congregations. Any plan we made would have to have the ability to pull people from each church together for the purpose of tackling a mutually agreed on objective.

We recruited Mr. Paul Savor an Australian educator who worked throughout the South Pacific with character building programs for young adults. Together we created an interactive program aimed at appealing to a diverse audience. The ecumenical, multigenerational two-day program offered character education training, and a service project. We also provided time for community members to brainstorm, discuss and come to consensus on ways to improve their community. Fortunately, a good amount of time was set aside for singing.

### **Joining together in Service**

Paul and I flew to Tonga and met with the local organizing team and were happy to be in such a beautiful environment. Only after arriving did we grasp the sense of isolation that could be felt living so far from any large landmass. Young people in Tonga were very aware of the larger world and many suffered from a feeling of being ‘confined’. It was clear that the island could appear to be a prison or a paradise in the minds of its citizens. We needed to help the resident’s rediscover the potential that existed on the islands.

The Tonga RYS program attracted 60 representatives of social and civic organizations, churches and various schools. Within the limited time we had together it was important that we substantially work together on a fixable problem. To do this we had to solicit each person’s ideas, form a consensus on which problem to tackle, make a step by step plan and then work cooperatively to accomplish the task in the time we had set aside. The problem of litter on the beaches was the choice we agreed on. We had to reclaim a part of the beach area of this tropical paradise.

### **Caring for the Environment**

Many of the white sand beaches of the main island were unfortunately ‘decorated’ with ugly plastic bottles and various forms of litter. When a beach has litter on it, it becomes easy for others to add their litter. In time, the litter becomes the norm and it becomes an accepted fact of life. Cleaning a beach is a good service but when that work stimulates a change in one’s attitude towards littering it makes a more lasting impact.

In shaping our program we were hoping to create a new attitude and stimulate creative approaches to caring for the environment. Perhaps in the future one of the volunteers would investigate creating a biodegradable container made from local palm or banana leaves. Such a product could save money, help the environment and end the overuse of plastic. Solutions to this problem can be solved when a community works together.



Early in the morning, before we began our clean-up we gathered together and had an education session on issues concerning the environment. We took time to solicit feedback about which beaches we would target and how best to keep those areas clean after the cleanup. Before the tropical sun burned too bright we closed our meeting and began moving to 'our' beaches. Traveling by foot, car and pick-up truck with gloves and garbage bags in hand we headed for the white sand beaches.

Lord Baron Vaea the special advisor to the King heard of our plans, he loaned us his pick-up truck to help us collect and move the piles of garbage. The Baron, a member of the Royal Family was an Ambassador for Peace, a man of heart and character. His support was a reflection of the appreciation he felt for the volunteers and their efforts to create a cleaner environment.

### **Leading By Example**

In ancient China, the Emperor would make an annual trip to the countryside during spring planting time. On a piece of farm land he would take a hoe and make a few cuts into the soil. This was a symbolic ritual done as an act of solidarity between the emperor and the millions of farmers of his kingdom.

On the morning of our project, the Lord Baron Vaea came to the beach with the truck and a National TV crew. Our dear Baron did more than symbolically pick up a can or two. This huge man bent down and worked as hard as the young volunteers picking up bag after bag full of garbage.

As a group, we started our physical work with a fresh bright spirit. We felt invincible, we were new age warriors and the enemy to be conquered was the garbage. Yet, in time the heat of the morning increased with the direction of the sun. We were beginning to ache and our spirit started to gradually sag as we pushed ourselves on. Then, like a rallying cry from a Sargent in the army, a young lady shouted, "Shame on us, how can we slow-down, look at how hard Baron Vaea is working.

On hearing the admonition, we all started to refocus our efforts and clear the clumps of litter. We began singing more and encouraged each other. As the day progressed our bags piled high in the pick-up truck. We now could clearly see what this beach area was meant to look like.

### **Our Purpose Revealed**

It was at a point in the late afternoon when we were again awoken to the purpose of our work. This time the outspoken young lady in our group shouted out ruefully, "How could anyone be so thoughtless and inconsiderate to litter." Look, see how Lord Vaea is working so hard, it is such a shame, a real shame, if anyone throws litter on this beach again! Let's finish cleaning this and make sure it never gets messed up again!"

The voice of the young lady inspired us on beyond the challenge of that day. The voice sunk into our collective conscience and showed a new found respect for the beach and the natural environment that the young adults were living in. They, the youth, the leaders of the future, were re-discovering what the Baron knew and loved. They were following in his footsteps and would be better able to move ahead, into a cleaner, purer future.

### **Being a Model of the Spirit of Service**

We learn best when we have a good example. Every nation needs good models of leadership if they are to rise above mediocrity. True leaders are those that recognize problems and work on solutions. A true leader will serve, train, motivate and educate others on how to solve problems. Creatively preparing a new generation for leadership allows our society to show gratitude to the past, serve the present and take responsibility for the future.

The Baron loved the natural beauty of the island and he wanted the upcoming generation to have that sensitivity and concern. He realized that in simply having a group of people clean the beach up wouldn't prevent it from getting dirty again. What was needed was education and that education had to begin with an example.

The best anti-littering education statement in the Kingdom was the example of this huge, elder, honored member of the Royal family. The volunteers that saw him in person or those that watched him on national television, sweating, bending and picking up the litter left by thoughtless acts of disregard, were emotionally moved.

Echoing in my ears are the words of the young lady on the beach, "How could anyone be so thoughtless and inconsiderate, you see, Lord Veana is working so hard, it is such a shame, a real shame, if anyone throws litter on the beach again! Let's clean this mess and make sure it never gets messed up again."