I’m so glad to be back in Samoa. Although my career has taken numerous turns away from the islands, I can never stay away from Samoa for long. That’s the way it is with us anthropologists. Our deepest feelings for our discipline are forged in the places we do our fieldwork. Though anthropology has gone global, we never really transcend our local roots. Anthropology has profoundly shaped my understanding of Samoa. But today, as a kind of thank you, I want to tell you how Samoa has shaped my understanding of anthropology. I want to trace four lessons about anthropology gleaned from my years in Samoa. Each lesson is about the study of culture in general. But they all speak in a Samoan accent.

LESSON 1: Cultural models packaged for outsiders are different from insiders' models

Shortly after the publication of Sala’ilua: A Samoan Mystery, I returned to Sala’ilua to present several copies of the book to village matai (chiefs). I don’t know what the chiefs or anyone else in Sala’ilua thought of my book, or even whether anyone read it. But I’ll never forget one reaction I had from a chief who was fascinated by the village map I had drawn and the various diagrams I had used to make sense of Samoan culture. “How did you put this all together?” he wanted to know. “Is it right?” I asked him, slightly nervously. “It may be right”, the chief replied.
“but it’s not the way we think about these things. From what position are you reporting all of this?” As an anthropologist writing largely for outsiders, I was attempting to elicit generalized models of knowledge – land-tenure rules, succession norms, village laws and the like. And what I was getting back were stories that contained these general principles, but from an actor’s point of view. They were accounts in real time, saturated with particulars and events. What had puzzled the chief was that I had reframed all my experiences in his village as general principles, as if I were an alien hovering over the village from a great distance. Having converted all events and people into abstract models, I had purged the account of the point of view of anyone in particular. But abstract outsider knowledge is too simple, too bloodless for most Samoans, who delight in the messy give-and-take of everyday politics. The chief was politely asking me to give Samoa life.

I knew that Samoans have structural models of their social world, and can simplify their culture as an elaborate array of opposed categories. Samoan culture defines two kinds of chiefs: ali'i and tulafale; two types of speaking: good and bad (t and k); chiefly and ordinary vocabularies; two styles of dancing (siva and aiuli); the front of the village and the back of the village; seaward and landward; brothers and sisters; tamatane and tamafafine; etc. For outsiders, relations defined by such categorical models can stand in for Samoan culture.

These simplified models are like the overhead maps that we use to orient travellers to physical space. But when we take a journey through familiar terrain, we use a more dynamic ego-centric model of our bodies moving through space. We give moving directions that imply a point of view. In the same way, static representations of culture are very different from the dynamic actors’ models that translate these cultural models into action. For instance, what is represented
structurally as two language (pronunciation) styles – t and k – is translated in action into a
gradient of styles that slides subtly between extreme, almost prissy formal pronunciation and
extremely crude intimate pronunciation, with all kinds of subtle gradations in between. From
such a sliding scale, Samoans can intuitively take a very subtle reading of just where a
conversation is located in social space. Similar translations reshape all Samoan structural
models when put into practice as insider’s models. When representing their political culture to
outsiders, Samoans will use the structural model of two kinds of chiefs, ali‘i and tulafale. But in
practice there is a vast gradient of different chiefly statuses and ranks, negotiated through
interpretations of genealogies, through the order of speaking at a meeting, or the particular
wording of a fa‘alupega. As Peseta Gatoloai Sio advised me many years ago “Bradd, there are
ali‘i and ali‘i, and you should never confuse the two”. Outsider’s models were never intended to
convey the complex subtleties and ironies of culture as lived.

LESSON 2: Contradictions in ethnographic reports are not necessarily errors of reporting
Despite all the studies of Samoa, Samoa has been a puzzle to ethnographers. The
ethnographic record is full of conflicting versions of Samoan life. A graceful model of social
order in Samoan social life was also fully of rough-and-tumble political conflict. A high
seriousness about rank and status seemed to vie with a basic egalitarian ethos and an
unmistakable irreverence about social status and a disdain for social climbing. When I
interviewed young people in polite Samoan, they told me that respect for the chiefs was the
most important Samoan value. When the same questions were repeated in so-called “bad
speaking”, the same kids would laugh and suggest that doing what you wanted to do was more
important than honouring chiefly authority. Tradition framed social organization as rigid and
relatively static. But these structures were subject to constant renegotiation and reinterpretation.
Sometimes life in Samoa seemed to be a hall of smoking mirrors.

Take, for instance, that notorious subject beloved of the Western press: Samoan love and marriage. On the face of it, the rules of dating in Samoa are clear. Romance is prohibited for any boy and girl who are kin in any degree. Those who are "brothers" and "sisters" cannot also be "husbands" and "wives." Violations of this principle are what Samoans call mata 'i fale (incest). Yet Samoan kin ties are traced through any male or female link. In a small population, this means that the difference between kin and non-kin depended on one's genealogical knowledge, not on any clear-cut boundaries. You never knew who could turn out to be your relative. As Samoans were fond of saying: "e le iloa ni tamaiti ni 'aiga" (kids don't always know their families). But behavioural norms define a categorical difference between classificatory siblings and lovers. For a boy, the expected behaviour towards any "sister" is non-erotic and respectful. Girls who were not considered "sisters" are, conversely, fair game. The norms were defined categorically, but in practice the difference between kin and non-kin was a matter of degree or of one’s genealogical knowledge. Lovers might turn out to be relatives, a disturbing possibility that all Samoans know about. This contradiction at the heart of Samoan love and marriage is one of the several reasons that love Samoan style could never be characterized as a casual or simple matter.

What is an anthropologist to do with such pervasive contradictions? They make Samoa look incoherent. Yet I came to realize that such contradictions are actually the engines that bring culture to life and make life interesting. Often they are the sources of the fa'alavelave – the endless entanglements and social complications – that Samoans both love and hate, and which are celebrated in song and dance and in fale aitu. Sometimes they provoke tears and tragedy,
sometimes laughter. But in the face of their own contradictions never do Samoans seem to feel that they have to come to any final resolution. Life goes on.

LESSON 3: In explaining human behaviour, “culture” can't explain everything.
Samoa first taught me the importance of what I call “cultural models.” Conceiving of culture as models made sense and gave anthropologists a useful unit of culture to work with. But eventually I came to appreciate the obvious fact that not everything people experience is culturally modelled. In my graduate student days, culture was supposed to account for everything. We were drawn to dramatically contrastive analyses starring “The West and the Rest”. Whatever we did, Samoans or the Japanese or the Nuer could be counted on to do it otherwise.

Polynesians, for instance, could be counted on to do kinship differently than we did it. And in some ways they did. In the 1970s anthropologists fanned out throughout Polynesia to prove that kinship wasn't necessarily about biological ties, as we in the West conceived it. The issue was whether notions of kinship had to include a “natural” tie or it was nothing more than a cultural imaginary. The test case was the meaning of adoption, a Polynesian specialty. Adoption might be problematical for us, because our cultural system just happened to define kinship as necessarily involving blood ties. Polynesians would support the idea that kinship systems varied endlessly and were cultural inventions free of natural constraints. By adopting kids like mad and having no notion that such *tama fai* (made children) were any less real than blood kin Polynesia was the test case. Reports came back from all over Polynesia. The case for culture seemed clear. Polynesians appeared to have a vision of kinship that saw relationships as shaped more by human action than by any facts of nature. Polynesians are virtuoso adopters. Upwards of 40
percent of Samoan kids in my survey were adopted or fostered. Some had no ties or only
distant biological ties to their adopting families. “Made children” were said to be treated no
differently than their non-adoptive siblings. Even the so-called “natural” claims of attachment of
mothers to their infants were negotiable. Birth mothers were said to readily give up their babies
to relatives or others who for one reason or another couldn’t have children. Here was a world in
which the so-called “natural” claims of kinship were culturally remade. And that’s what I wrote in
my master’s thesis. If the play of life starred a cast of “natural” kin ties, culture could rewrite the
script.

But as my Samoan got better, things got more complicated. Adopted kids, it turned out, were
often anxious about their status in their families. While “officially” they could be offered political
titles in their adoptive families, the status of tama fai could be ambiguous and uncomfortable.

*Tama fai* were not normally *suli moni* (true heirs), they were not “the true blood of the family”.
The so-called cultural models of kinship expressed by Samoans were just one layer of
experience, one dimension of a more complex truth.

A psychiatrist working at Moto’otua told me that many of his patients were women who came to
the hospital complaining of physical pain for which local doctors could find no physical basis.
Eventually some of these women revealed a repressed mourning for the loss of their infants that
Samoan tradition had forced them to give up in adoption. Adoption requests were culturally
expected to be greeted by *alofa* (love and generosity), blocking the legitimate expression of the
anger and loss these women experienced. In some cases their feelings resurfaced as bodily
pain.
I had been taught to think of culture as “constructing experience”. But I came to see that “the work of culture” was more limited in scope. Cultural models rendered experience publically accessible, setting out easily communicated default readings of experience. But cultural models never exhausted an individual’s experience. Experiences not modelled by explicit conventions might be difficult to represent and communicate publicly, remaining private and poorly understood by individuals. But such inarticulate experiences were still a significant part of their lives. Cultural knowledge may be central to human life, but culture is only a part of human understanding.

LESSON 4: Life’s surfaces can be deep.

My first year in Samoa, I spent a lot of time grumbling about the Samoan focus on the surfaces of life. If I looked depressed, someone would always try to make me smile. The expression of happiness seemed to be as good as happiness itself. Form always seemed to trump content. Polite manners, smooth relations and an attention to proper gesture seemed to matter more than feelings, thoughts or intentions. If I, a clumsy palagi, ever expressed open annoyance at someone, my outburst would be greeted by a skilled volley of polite words aimed at blocking my open expression of feelings. Eventually I learned to express inner feelings less directly.

This attention to surfaces was apparent in the way that Sala’ilua handled the murder of a village chief, a man in whose family I was living at the time. It was no secret who the murderer was; he was a primary school teacher and son of the other senior chief of the village, and he was immediately taken into custody. In the village fonos following the event there was little attention to motive. The chiefs avoided discussion of causes of the conflict, and focused instead on its social effects on village political life.
This Samoan emphasis on outward consequences or surfaces turned out to be a basic Polynesian orientation, very different from what I was used to. Since the Greeks, Western epistemology has stressed understanding as literally standing under the surfaces of life. Aristotle taught us to distinguish the internal qualities of things – substance – from mere appearance – or accidents. For Plato, the visible world was an illusion – a shadow world. The eternal forms could only be discovered by looking inward, beneath the surface. Polynesians, on the other hand, seem to view the world outside-in. In his 1968 article, “Kite: Polynesian Insights into Knowledge”, Aarne Koskinen suggests that Polynesian epistemology emphasized the visible world, the external perceptual field. Interior knowledge was unreliable and even suspect. 

*Mana* for Polynesians was traditionally known through its visible signs – bright colour, large size, ample quantity, fertility. Social status is only effective if it is publicly visible. In evaluating power and status, Polynesians draw attention to what we call “eye candy” – perceptual salience. Explaining *alofa* to me, a Samoan friend claimed that "*alofa* is nothing without the gift". The *mea alofa* (gift) is literally the externalization of love. For Samoans, it seems, it’s often not the thought that counts so much as the visible action.

Funny how time can transform our understanding. When I returned home from Samoa I remember how I came to miss this attention to the surfaces of things. I recalled those irritating little speeches that people would call out from their houses as I walked through the village on my way to the bathing pool, soap in hand and towel draped over my shoulder. “Where are you going, honoured sir? Are you going to bathe?” and I would dutifully finish the script, saying “Yes, thank you, I am going to bathe indeed!” Now, back in the States, as I walked the anonymous street on which I was living, speaking to no one I passed, I suddenly missed those
little surface rituals. No one raised their eyebrows in acknowledgment as they passed. So I realized that these small ritual moments accomplished a big job. They threw out lifelines of connection, reminding us that we lived among people who cared that we were there. They were acknowledging the simple fact of my existence.

I came to miss those broad Samoan smiles. Compulsive social smiling was contagious. It often left me feeling cheerful, and smiling back. Eventually I stopped wondering whether the smiles were genuine or not, and was simply thankful for their warming presence. All those surfaces, it turned out, had deep roots. Their effects gradually sank in and shaped, in some unspeakable but life-affirming way, how I felt and thought about things.

A few years ago I started noticing how hard it was for many Americans to carry on genuine conversations. Too many monologues masqueraded as dialogues. Self-promotion seemed to have replaced genuine dialogue. What seemed to be missing was the smooth give-and-take of mutual interest, the back-and-forthness of curiosity and disclosure that is the foundation of relationships. Then I realized that I had no memory of similarly difficult conversations in the Pacific. There, the problem was often finding the right level of formality, or timing the transition from formal speech-making to casual chit-chat. But of topic control, turn-taking, mutuality of reference – these things seemed to flow easily in Samoan conversation.

Could it be that the Samoan orientation to an outside-in view of being was something we could learn from? From infancy on, Samoans experience social relations through a well-oiled set of formal conversational scripts. Upon entering a house, calling out to a passer-by, meeting someone on the street, beginning a formal meeting, there is always a framing script, and it
always begins with a back-and-forth series of mutual acknowledgments. This verbal reciprocity is established ritually and its rhythms scaffold the shape and pacing of the more spontaneous talk that follows. Eventually the reciprocal forms, with their inherent mutuality, come to serve as the natural shape of social life. All in all, it strikes me as a pretty profound consequence of paying attention to the surfaces of life.

Having moved from unspeakable dimensions of life to life’s articulate surfaces, I come to the end of my lessons. As anthropologists, we know that ethnography is good to think with. Our most compelling theories have always been both local and general at the same time. Their rootedness in place doesn’t make our concepts merely local. But it does suggest that our general ideas are always rooted in some concrete particulars, always grounded in a body that has been somewhere in particular. For anthropologists, that “somewhere” is called “the field”. My four lessons, if they have any legs at all, will inevitably straddle the Samoan world from which they emerged, and the world at large towards which they are directed. This is why to understand what it means to be human we anthropologists know that we have to locate ourselves in some small corner of the world; only to spend the rest of our lives struggling to think our way out.