I’m so honored to be joining you all for a few minutes this morning. I’ve just arrived here in Los Angeles, from the place where I live, the Garden Island of Kauai, in Hawaii, and in the Hawaiian tradition, I share with you warm greetings of *Aloha.*

I applaud Larisa Mikhaylova and all of you who are participating in this American studies conference on the theme of, “Overcoming: Cultivating Ideals through Overcoming Barriers in American Culture.” This brings me great hope and inspiration because what you are doing is so important, perhaps now more important now than ever. Studying and learning about American culture gives you an opportunity to step into the shoes of Americans for a moment and catch a glimpse of the world through our eyes. This brings understanding, empathy, compassion, connection. Better understanding leads to better relations and lays the foundation for peace.

I grew up during the Cold War hearing that the Soviet Union would always be our enemy, the Berlin Wall would never come down in our lifetime, and that we were all most likely going to die in a nuclear war.

Something didn’t feel right to me about this. I didn’t buy that enemy story, I wanted to meet the Russian people and see for myself, who this enemy was and as a young girl, I told my parents that someday I was going to go to Russia.

It was through Russian Studies that I fell in love with the Russian language, culture, literature, music, art, and learning about Russian history, and just as you all are doing with American Studies, I got a chance to step into the shoes of the Russian people and catch a glimpse of the world through your eyes.

And it was through coming to Russia for the first time as an undergraduate and studying for a semester as an exchange student at Leningrad State University in 1978, that I fell in love with the Russian people.

My life would never be the same.

I made dear Russian friends who I came to know and love like family. There was a huge disconnect between the tens of thousands of nuclear missiles our countries had pointed at each other and my experience with my Russian friends.

That’s when I knew I had to try to do something to improve relations and work to prevent nuclear war, which has become my life’s work.

Here we are now, 43 years later, in a dangerous new Cold War, with enemy stereotypes prevalent in the media of both countries and top nuclear experts in both the US and Russia telling us that today we are at a greater risk of a nuclear catastrophe than even during the Cold War.

At this time of the global pandemic, it’s more clear than ever how we are all connected. This virus knows no borders. It shows us that we are all connected, that we truly are all one people, and share one small planet, our beloved Earth.

Although our climate and our world are changing, our shared interest in uniting to cooperate to meet the great challenges of our time remains constant – which is why your conference is so critically important as you cultivate peace and understanding.

My indigenous Hawaiian elder teacher, Kumu Hula Puna Dawson, says, *“There is no separation in Aloha.”*

May we come together in the spirit of *Aloha,* with one heart and one mind, to meet the greatest existential threats of our time, the pandemic, climate change, and to end the threat of nuclear war.

It’s up to you, it’s up to me, it’s up to all of us. We can do this and we must!

This is my hope, my prayer, my blessing. May it be so!

Again, my warmest *Aloha* to you all there in Moscow at the American Studies conference. Thank you all for the urgently important work you are doing. I’m so deeply grateful. *Aloha*