

## ***Reflections on a 16-week Sabbatical***

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In early 2024, I received the incredible news that I had been awarded a sabbatical from the O2 Sabbatical Program which grants long-term Executive Directors of Bay Area nonprofits a three-month sabbatical and funding to support them during their time off. After being in social justice and community work (and more specifically criminal justice and violence prevention work) in my hometown of Oakland for over 25 years, I was in need of a break and some fresh air. My job is not just a job. It's my life's work. I've been an activist and a front-line community organizer for decades. It is a blessing to do work that I care about and to stand on the side of justice - to do work that is consistent with my values and my deepest commitments. But, I would be lying if I were to pretend that this work isn't taxing. It's almost constant crisis management. It requires emotional fortitude and deep empathy. It requires the ability to think big-picture and to simultaneously pay attention to fine details. It requires the know-how to run an organization, to fundraise, manage staff and workloads, to ensure the financial health of an organization, to navigate the political dynamics of the field, and at the same time to stand present in the face of the suffering of our communities. And after over 25-years on the front-lines, I was in need of respite.

I decided to take my sabbatical at the end of the year to give myself and our organization time to prepare. This meant that my break actually lasted almost 4 months when combined with the holidays. This was the longest I had ever been away from work. I was nervous that my attachment to this work would make it difficult for me to be gone for so long. The program actually prohibits sabbatical recipients from having any communication with their own organizations during the time that they are off. I was worried that this would be almost impossible for me.

In preparation, I was lucky to have received the coaching and support of Regina Jackson who is affectionately known in Oakland as "Ms. Regina." Ms. Regina, who is one of Oakland's most important and respected community leaders, led the East

Oakland Youth Development Center as their CEO for decades. She was one of the first people to ever receive the O2 Sabbatical Award, so I took her counsel and guidance to heart. I was so deeply grateful to have her support. She famously climbed Mount Killimanjaro on her sabbatical so I had big shoes to fill! After having the privilege of spending time with Regina, the message was clear. Many leaders deserve a break such as this. But not everyone will get one. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and it is not to be squandered. And it was with this advice that I went full speed ahead into planning for my sabbatical.

The O2 Sabbatical Program provided our organization with support and guidance in the planning process making the journey a great deal easier to manage. I had 6 months to work with our executive team to make plans for my departure. A wonderful coach named Maria was assigned to our organization to help us prepare and to support our staff while I was gone. We made timelines and a calendar of deliverables. We made a fundraising and development plan. We talked about contingency plans in case of an emergency. We created a modified division of labor and a plan to manage my email messages while I was out. I communicated with partners, Board Members, and funders ahead of time and we talked internally amongst our staff about how to manage organizational relationships in my absence.

The months passed more quickly than I imagined, and before I knew it, it was time for me to go. I flew to Hawaii on the very first day of my sabbatical. I am a 4th generation Oakland resident (on my father's side) who has lived in the same city my entire life. My work is in Oakland, my immediate family is in Oakland, my social life is in Oakland and most of what I care about is in Oakland. I knew that if I stayed it would be almost impossible for me to disconnect. So off I went!

Hawaii holds a special place in my heart. I spent time with my cousins traveling from where they live in Oahu to the Island of Kauai, where our grandfathers (who were brothers) were born. Together, my cousins and I visited Hanalei where the Chinese settled in the 1800's. We were awe-struck by stunning views of a valley speckled with

taro patches, surrounded by majestic mountains, and a blue-green bay. I thought about what it must have been like for our ancestors to have lived there over 100 years ago somewhere around that Chinese settlement - so far away from their original homeland of Canton Province. I once saw a photo of our great-grandparents. Our great-grandfather had a queue (a long ponytail). Sadly, I don't even know his name. It is funny to think that I, his great granddaughter, would grow up in Oakland in the 1990's, only knowing how to speak English, and listening to hip hop incessantly. I'm sure he never could have imagined that. I thought about how different our lives were just four generations apart. Life was quite difficult for Chinese immigrants back in those days, and at the same time they lived on that beautiful sacred land. My cousins and I walked through Hanalei Town and saw Titus Kinimaka's Hawaiian School of Surfing. We ate kalua pig and taro mac salad at the Hanalei Taro food truck. We drove to the Waimea Lookout where you can see Waimea Canyon on one side and the Napali Coast on the other. The soil there is red and there were waterfalls running into clear streams on the side of the road. The topography is other-worldly and utterly breathtaking. Back on Oahu, I made my cousins take me to eat Zippy's, we had afternoon tea at the Halekulani Hotel, and I tried a Korean corn dog at Ala Moana. I met the newest member of our family for the very first time - a chunky, expressive, baby boy, born in the year of the dragon, who is Native Hawaiian, Kanaka Maoli, and who also carries the bloodline of those early Chinese ancestors from Hanalei.

Five days after returning from Hawaii I met up with two friends at SFO and three of us, all women who were born and raised in Oakland, headed off to Paris. We stayed in a stunning Parisian flat in the 8th Arrondissement. It was the Paris of my dreams. I marveled at the architecture, the fashion, the cuisine, and the sound of the French language - the "Ah La La"s heard everywhere on the street. We walked along the banks of the Seine to the Eiffel Tower. We ate flakey croissants and drank coffee in a light filled room on Champs Elysees. We visited the Louvre and the Musee d'Orsay. We shopped in Le Marais. I bought a scarf at a famous boutique on Rue du Faubourg Saint Honore. After three days my friends traveled on to Portugal and I boarded a river cruise alone to travel up the Seine into Normandy. Being by myself in another country was one

of the most amazing experiences of my life. I met new friends and saw places I never knew existed. I walked through Monet's gardens at Giverny and the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles. We went to the village of Les Andelys where there are medieval half-timbered buildings and a castle on the hillside. I ate Camembert and went into too many patisserie. We walked through the Luxembourg Gardens and went to Montmartre to see the Sacre Cœur. I saw the stunning cathedral at Rouen and, at the end of my trip, visited Reims where the angels smile and the grapes are plentiful. It was truly the trip of a lifetime.

Two weeks after returning from Paris I was back at SFO, this time boarding a flight to Tokyo with one of my best friends. We began at the historic Hotel Okura, a mid century modern architectural and design marvel of a hotel, the original lobby of which was painstakingly recreated when the hotel was rebuilt and renovated a few years ago. Temples, nature, technology, luxury, simplicity, the ancient and the future all collide in Japan in the most incredible and unexpected ways. We had omakase at Ginza Kyubey, Kobe beef at Mouriya in Kyoto, udon at Osaka Station, the most mouthwatering fruit, and breakfast with fish and rice porridge. We ate fluffy pancakes, takoyaki, and conveyor belt sushi. We walked through countless Torii gates, Shinto shrines, and Buddhist Temples. We saw the elusive Mount Fuji and watched the Kyomai dance of the even more elusive Maiko in Gion. We rode the Yamanote line around Tokyo and took the Shinkansen to Kyoto. We browsed the luxury consignment stores in Shinjuku and bought loads of stuff for cheap at Uniqlo. We fed, bowed before, and sometimes ran from the sacred deer in Nara. We even experienced an earthquake in Osaka. I was struck by the meticulous attention to detail that was apparent all around me in the food, the culture, the art, and architecture.

Two weeks after returning from Japan I was off to Tucson, Arizona for a 5-night stay at Miraval Wellness Center and Spa. I spent my time there attending sound baths, yoga and meditation classes, exploring art and photography, and basking in the beauty of the high desert.

After the holidays, I had only a few short weeks of my sabbatical left and I was off to Costa Rica for one final trip before having to prepare to return to work. It's a stunning country. We saw waterfalls and sloths in the wild. We walked through the forest canopy on hanging bridges. We soaked in hot springs at the base of an ancient volcano. We witnessed a lizard that can walk on water and a river that runs turquoise naturally. People there were kind. While I was there I reconnected with an old friend who I got to know 20 years ago in the early days of the Ella Baker Center. It was the perfect way to close out my time off.

One of the insights that I had while on sabbatical came to me as the result of a workshop that I attended while at Miraval in Arizona. One of the most interesting offerings at Miraval is equine therapy. It's a transformational approach that incorporates horses who assist in the facilitation of workshops aimed at therapeutic breakthroughs. The workshop I attended had 5 other participants, a human facilitator, and a horse named Beau. Each of us participants were given an opportunity to approach the horse on our own, brush the horse, and then attempt to prompt Beau to pick up its hoof. The third part proved the most difficult. Almost none of us were able to successfully prompt Beau to raise his hoof. At one point, we were all standing in a circle with frustrated and puzzled looks on our faces and the facilitator asked, "Well what would you do if someone or something in your real life wasn't moving when you asked it to? How would you approach a situation like this?" I thought about it and remembered all of the times when I would struggle to get my strong-willed dog Sophie (who passed on a few years ago) to do what I asked. I raised my hand and volunteered to try with the horse again. I confidently made my approach. But, the closer I got to the horse, the more I thought, "I don't know how to do this!! I don't even know this horse!" I found myself standing at the front of the room filled with nervousness and self-doubt. Not knowing what to do, I began petting Beau. I thought that if I was nice maybe the horse would do as I asked. But alas, I could not get the horse to pick up its hoof. Then the facilitator said, "Tell me something that you know you are good at." I replied, "I'm a pretty strong writer." I centered myself and realized that I am competent and, with that thought in mind, walked back up to Beau. I didn't say anything. I simply tapped the horse on his leg as I was

directed and he instantly picked up his hoof - like magic!! I learned a huge lesson that day from that horse. When I was nervous and seeking reassurance from Beau, he did not respond. He only responded to me when I was being my authentic self. He mirrored to me that my true self is someone who is relaxed, confident, and self assured. When I am people-pleasing or acting unsure of myself, it's actually inauthentic. It's not who I really am. Beau revealed this to me. He mirrored my true authentic self back to me. It's a lesson I won't soon forget.

During my time off, I did not communicate with any of the staff from my organization. Occasionally they crossed my mind and I would feel the pull to want to reach out to check on them or to ask how things were going. I wondered if they got the grant. I wondered how the youth members were doing. I wondered how the events were going. But I did not reach out because, not only was I prohibited from reaching out to them by the sabbatical program, I did not want to give them the impression that I didn't trust them. I realized that if I had reached out to them I might be signaling a lack of confidence and that was the last thing I wanted to do. It was my obligation not to reach out to them because the truth is that they had my confidence. I knew that it wouldn't be perfect but I knew that they would hold things down. It was actually much easier for me to be away than I thought it would be and I hope that I can continue to convey the same level of trust in them as I transition back into the work.

Taking time off and allowing myself to step away gave me a new perspective and some space for reflection. I realized how fast life can pass by when you are working. A decade has gone by without me even noticing and it took me having time off to realize that I need to be more intentional about what I want for my own life before it passes me by. My sabbatical gave me the opportunity to emerge from a fog that I had been in for years. It's as if I was working so hard and managing so much that I had worked myself into a daze and perhaps I had become a bit numb from the experience.

Having time away from work allowed me to begin to see this, to awaken a bit from this fog. In particular, it gave me the space to reflect on the impact of the sudden loss of our former Deputy Director, Dr. Prince White. When Prince passed away in 2018 it was

deeply heartbreaking and traumatic for our organization, for our youth, for our colleagues, for our movement, and especially for his family. I stepped in to hold things together for everyone else and I never gave myself the space to truly grieve. Shortly after that, the pandemic hit and further uncertainty for our whole world ensued. I can see now that I just tightened up and took it all on as if it was all on me and as if it was all mine to manage, and maybe I've been working like that ever since. Taking a sabbatical allowed me to see that it might be time for me to let go of the "it's all on me" approach.

I want more joy, exploration, and wonderment in my life and it shouldn't take a 3-month sabbatical for me to have those things. I want to build the time and resources into my normal everyday life so that I can continue to travel. I want time to go to museums and spend time out in nature. I want and deserve to have more balance in my life, especially at this stage of my life. I also learned that I have the capacity to let go sometimes. I learned about the importance of trusting others to hold up their parts of the work. Taking it all on as if it's all mine to do is not the right approach. It's not healthy for me, nor does it help to develop others. I'm excited to try a different approach moving forward.

During my sabbatical, I really tried my best to live in the moment. Other than keeping a very loose travel journal, I allowed myself to enjoy all that I was experiencing. I did not want to take my time for granted, so I really went for it. Maybe for the first time in my life, I gave myself permission to be truly happy, to let joy all the way in, to enjoy all of the incredible experiences that were before me in this expansive wondrous planet and to do this even in the midst of some really difficult times for our world.

I was reminded that the world is an amazing, marvelous, breathtakingly beautiful, joyful, colorful, creative place. I was amazed to see everyday people in Paris taking leisurely lunch breaks with their friends during the workday. I was impressed by the way that public transportation in Japan moves millions of people every day yet somehow manages to run precisely on time. Even though sometimes we feel as if the world has become homogeneous and "cookie-cutter," there are still places in the world where people approach things and think about things differently than we do. It was liberating to

experience that difference. Traveling reminds me to keep a broader perspective about what is possible. There is so much that I still have yet to learn or be exposed to. I feel so honored and privileged to have been able to experience all that I did.

And yet, as someone who has dedicated my life to social justice, I understand that at the same time that all of this goodness and beauty exists, the world also contains deep turmoil, war, suffering, heartbreak, oppression, inequality, and genocide. Both are true and somehow we have to come to terms with both. It is a sacred thing to put others before oneself. I'm so lucky to have been able to spend my career with people who care enough to place the needs of others before their own self-interest.

As I am concluding my sabbatical, instead of having answers, I am emerging with a new set of questions. I am left with questions about how we hold the duality of it all. How do we reconcile both realities? Can our own joy and desires co-exist with our values, our integrity, our compassion for others, and our deeply held political beliefs? Can we let joy all the way in without abandoning the suffering of others and the planet? I'm not sure that my questions have easy or simple answers. But I want to experiment with living in the gap between these two seemingly contradictory perspectives.

I entered into this work 30 years ago wanting more for the people in my community - in Oakland - who didn't get their fair share. I continue to do this work because I believe that people in my community deserve so much more than this world has given them. But now I am beginning to realize that maybe I also can allow myself to have some of what I've been fighting for for others. I want justice, joy, prosperity, diversity, wellness, peace of mind, creativity, and beauty for all of us - myself included.

I feel so immensely grateful to have experienced what might have been the most amazing past few months of my life. I am still processing it all and will likely be doing so for months to come. Thank you so much for making this possible for me and I hope that everyone who deserves a break is as lucky as I have been.