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Master's Project: Tending to Joy

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Tending to Joy

A Master's Project Presented

by

Karen Leu

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Science
Specializing in Natural Resources with a concentration in Leadership for Sustainability

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ABSTRACT

If we dare to hope for the thriving of humans and all of life, then joy must hold a solid place in our imagination. The purpose of this project was to breathe joy into my own life and into the world around me. Following a literature review, I carried out three mini-projects – creating crowd-sourced collages out of what brings people joy, sending daily text messages with quotes about joy, and providing cookies to groups working on social change efforts. The projects succeeded in spreading delight, raising spirits, and inspiring reflection. The journey towards cultivating joy in my own life was substantially messier and remains completely unresolved. I conclude this project not yet able but still aspiring to fully say “yes” to life.

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I. Capstone Project Description

1. Introduction

If we dare to hope for the thriving of humans and all of life, then joy must hold a solid place in our imagination. In good times, joy springs forth from the “yes” and showers us with the energy and openness that drives our lives forward and outward. In difficult times, joy provides sustenance when we courageously insist on making the best out of what we have. Always, joy is the gift of feeling alive and feeling pleased about it. Joy marks a human story transformed from one of survival and struggle into one of resilience, beauty, and sweetness.

Some object to seeking joy based on the belief that doing so is self-serving, uncompassionate, and disconnected from a world marked with so much suffering (Lama, Tutu, and Abrams, 2016; Baraz and Alexander, 2010). Yet, I maintain that seeking joy is neither turning away from nor minimizing the widespread violence and oppression that touches our world and each of our lives to varying degrees. It is a conscious intention to insist that the harshness and bleakness of our reality do not get to have the last word. So long as we are alive, we can eat and sing and dance and we can do so with gratitude, wonder, pleasure, and fun. In a culture that breeds sickness and death (personal conversation, Gibran Rivera, May 9, 2018), saying yes to life often does not come easily. Yet aspiring towards joy amidst the pain is one of the most powerful decisions we can make to change the way we show up in the world.

The purpose of this project was to breathe joy into my own life and into the world around me. Following a devastating experience in the spring of 2017 that brought me

close to the experience of wanting to die, the most important thing for me to do was focus on healing and restoring my spirit. I wanted to create something that was uplifting and that connected me to my deepest strength and resilience. I wanted to remember the goodness of being alive.

This project also continued a thread started in January 2017 by faculty affiliate, Mistinguette Smith, when she asked me during a coaching session, “What makes you come most fully alive?” (personal conversation, January, 14, 2017). Mistinguette’s invitation and permission to center my own joy and aliveness sparked exploration of a different way of orienting myself to the world – one that was not defined by the world’s injustices but rather one that sought to counter dominant culture by nurturing life-energy within myself.

To the extent that I was able, I also wanted to inject some goodness into my network. As political turmoil in the U.S. and in the world has worsened, I wanted to invite people to that which expands and uplifts rather than that which contracts and shuts down. I wanted to inspire a way of being that could still laugh and dream amidst daily realities of oppression and fears of apocalypse.

2. Methods

This project was primarily guided by one principle – to listen for the yes in my body. Listening for the yes was a strategy to cultivate joy in my life and a practice in honoring my body’s limitations. Paying close attention to and trusting my body were also the means to following my life energy, a practice that organizational consultant Peggy Holman (2011) states is essential for engaging with emergence. Holman writes:

Follow life energy: Trust deeper sources of direction.

What guides us when we don't know?

Life energy is that elusive quality that attracts and enlivens us...Following the energy of an aspiration, bringing it to life, feeds us. Just as food fuels our bodies, life energy nourishes our soul. We know it is present because excitement, laughter, and joy break out. People are awake, alive, aware of their feelings. (n.p.)

As I confronted disruption in my own life and the dizzying chaos and complexity in the world, I wanted to explore this new idea that when we tend to and act from our own life energy, we show up authentically and naturally ready to care for life around us.

Starting in November 2017, I started my literature review, reading everything I could find on joy (See References and Appendix A). I read numerous nonfiction books on joy and happiness, which offered valuable practices in the “how-to” of joy. My reading was also strongly influenced by feedback from a teacher, a Black woman, who shared her perspective that while Black women are the most genius in extracting joy out of terror, there may not be many books written by them explicitly about joy (personal conversation, A. Ali, December 7, 2017). I was motivated by her comments to seek out the works of Black writers and women of color to explore joy from a different lived experience.

To track my many musings on and experiments with joy throughout the project in a public way, I began a blog titled “joy or whatever” (<https://joyorwhatever.wordpress.com/>) and committed myself to weekly posts. Writing these posts helped me articulate struggles, reflections, and celebrations over the course of five months.

Starting in March, I felt ready to begin making tiny splashes in my world and I carried out three mini-projects to invite people to joy. My first idea was to ask three discrete communities that I'm a part of – Earth Leadership Cohort, Young Climate Leaders Network, and my fellow classmates in Batch 2 of our Leadership for Sustainability program – what brings them joy and then create collages out of their offerings.

My second mini-project was inspired by the incredible writing from women of color activists, poets, and spiritual teachers that I had read in the earlier months. These writings expressed so much generosity of heart, resilience of spirit, and true delight in life that I wanted to share them with others. The form of the project was copied from Gibran Rivera, a mentor who earlier in the year had sent daily text messages on fulfillment for a month. I invited my network to receive a quote on joy each day via text message throughout April, then curated a list of my favorite quotes (see Appendix B).

The third project was the most spontaneous and playful. I thought that a project about joy should involve cookies and came up with the idea to offer cookies to friends and acquaintances involved in social change efforts. After publicizing my offer, I made arrangements to provide cookies for half a dozen meetings and workshops.

In addition to these outward-facing invitations to joy, I experimented with several practices to increase my own capacity for joy. These included meditating on death, regularly expressing an intention towards joy, deepening my gratitude practice, and setting regular reminders on my computer to “allow your heart to smile”, a prompt from Gibran Rivera during his month of fulfillment (personal communication, January 21, 2018).

3. Results

I created three collages out of the pictures, quotes, poems, and videos I received (see Appendices C, D, and E) and shared them with their respective communities. The Young Climate Leaders Network gave the most positive feedback of the three communities. When I posted on the group's WhatsApp thread prompting people to tell me what brought them joy, the somewhat dormant thread came to life with everyone posting pictures and delighting in each other's offerings. More than a third of the group responded to the collage with gratitude or excitement. One person told me that she found my joy project "so powerful" because she felt a one-on-one connection with people that she hadn't experienced in a while (personal communication, May 9, 2018). One of the most heart-moving replies read: "Greetings from Alabama, where I am here...celebrating the opening of the National Lynching Memorial. On such a heavy day, even for a necessary monument to remember that white supremacy was and is still swarming like locusts in this 'nation,' this was a nice shoulder rub for the soul...." (personal communication, April 27, 2018).

The cookie project, I quickly realized, could not have failed. I made over 350 chocolate chip cookies for seven different events including a workshop on rethinking anti-racism, a carbon tax coalition meeting, an equity advisory group for DC's climate plan, a tenant organizing meeting, and meetings for people working on restorative justice in schools. The cookies were accompanied by a sign to provide context (See Appendix F). People predictably loved the cookies. An acquaintance whom I reconnected with at one of the events said, "I have talked this up because I just appreciate it so much!" (personal communication, April 3, 2018).

Sharing quotes about joy via text message was the most substantive of the three projects as it involved daily engagement for a month. By the end, 102 people were receiving the text messages, approximately 15 of whom had heard about it from a friend after the project started. More than half of the people provided feedback, which was overwhelmingly positive. Below are personal highlights with a more comprehensive review of people's responses to be found in Appendix G.

Several people told me that a particular day's quote felt perfectly timed for what they were going through at the moment. One person who was a stranger to me once responded to a quote, "What I needed, when I needed it most."

For some, the project spurred shifts in understanding.

- "I see sorrow differently, as something that is necessary to embrace joy."
- "The idea that someone is/was focused on spreading joy was a great paradigm shift...."

For more than a couple people, the messages provided support during a difficult time:

- "This could not have come at a better moment as I worked/work through heartbreak and grief. To be reminded of the sacred through these texts amidst the all-too-real and all-too-human feelings of sadness and longing have been incredible talismans."
- "Getting these texts felt like a north star appearing each day, just in a time when life was/is deep and complicated. Glimpses of truth, lightness, beauty helping steer through a difficult time...."

One quote in particular from Archbishop Desmond Tutu deserves special mention due to the strong feedback it received from over fifteen people: “Remember you are not alone, and you do not need to finish the work. It takes time, but we are learning, we are growing, we are becoming the people we want to be. It helps no one if you sacrifice your joy because others are suffering... Give the world your love, your service, your healing, but you can also give it your joy. This, too, is a great gift.” (Tutu & Lama, 2017).

His words were a clear contradiction to the tendencies of many activists:

- “I so often tell myself that my suffering is somehow adding balance to an unbalanced world and my anger as the fuel for the work that I do but these words challenged me to see my joy as much a tool for impact.”
- “The idea that suffering in the world doesn't preclude our right and responsibility to find joy is so important!”

Separate from my experiments to invite others to joy were my efforts to incline my own mind towards joy. The journey was and continues to be difficult and still, there were forward steps and moments to celebrate. Many times, I was able to connect with my own resilient spirit and feel unhindered by the past. I was occasionally able to shift mood-states through listening to upbeat music, dancing, or spending time outdoors in solitude. The reminders on my computer to “allow your heart to smile” grounded and uplifted me many times. As a result of a journaling exercise in the book, *Happier*, by Tal Ben-Shahar, I committed to meditating longer and more frequently. I also felt great joy in implementing this project and knowing that my work was uplifting to others. On one particular day after dropping cookies off, I went home feeling so happy and full in being

able to do something good, however small. This was a precious moment during a generally difficult time.

4. Evaluation

I loved this project and it was hard.

The outward-facing components of the project to breathe joy into the world – the collages, the cookies, and the text messages – were a source of positivity for myself and were well-received. These mini-projects, whether in the form of chocolate chip cookies, uplifting text messages, or prompts to recall one’s pleasures, shifted moments in ways big and small. They inspired delight, smiles, a sense of being nourished, and sometimes deep reflection. In addition, I felt pleased that these mini-projects were internally driven by my own life-energy in a way that did not exceed my capacity. I neither stretched myself thin nor did I completely hide from outward engagement, tempting as though it felt at times. I embodied well the quote: “Do what you can, with what you’ve got, where you are” (Widener as cited in Roosevelt, 1913, p. 337).

The inward-facing component – breathing joy into my own life – eludes any form of evaluation that I am familiar with. I do not know how to capture the magnitude or frequency of oscillations between moments of tasting joy and periods of true struggle laced with different flavors of panic, hurt, anger, purposelessness, shame, and numbness. The idea that I could steadily make progress towards joy through hard work and intention has been completely abandoned. The metrics that I developed to assess my daily mood, hoping they would increase over the course of six months, were tossed out. As I write this at the end of July, the last few months have possibly the most joyless in the course of the

whole project. I am still struggling with heartbreak, fear, deep ambivalence about life, and the inclination to close my heart and protect myself.

Still, I got out of bed every morning and did the best I could. I made progress towards healing emotional wounds and walking my path more steadily than when I started. I no longer question whether it is OK for me to be happy when I encounter suffering in the world or worse, believe myself to be undeserving of joy. I am more deeply committed to a vision of aliveness that I want to realize in my work and my life. Joy holds a more solid place in my own imagination. For all those things, I am pleased, proud, and deeply grateful.

A couple reflections on my project can be found in the blog post I wrote after the month of joy texts (See Appendix H) and in the following excerpt I wrote for the NR395 Sustainability Seminar class related to the module I created on saying “yes” to life:

I aspire to be able to say yes to life. With all its promised pain, I aspire to say yes...After six months of a Capstone project on joy, I’m still not there. In fact, I might be less there than I was when I started the project. But I guess this is me still keeping at it.

5. Future Questions

Joy is hard and elusive to me. As I conclude this project, I continue to hold the same question I did when I began it – what does it take to cultivate a reliable sense of joy? Other questions about joy have also emerged. Is a reliable sense of joy even possible? How do I say “yes” to a life that carries so much risk for pain and suffering? How do I free up room in my body that is tied up in trauma or fear in order to experience joy?

My deep exploration of my relationship to life and joy have brought up other deeply personal and important questions. What about meaning? What about love? When do I create and take action and when do I surrender?

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7. Appendices

Appendix A: Recommended Resources

Articles

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Books

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Appendix B: Joy Quotes in April

Every day for the month of April, I texted out a quote having something to do with joy from someone awesome.

May this be a House of Joy.
May we be open here to dreams,
and to each other.
May all who enter in these magic walls
feel love and feel respect
for learning and each other.
May we be always friends to life.
May we walk in that friendship.

1 Lucille Clifton

In each day there is a heartbreak of story, a constant heartache for our relatives, whether they have wings, fins, roots, paws, or hands...but there is much beauty and joy in the midst of heartache. Hold your sorrow and grief, remember, but be grateful for this life.

Winona LaDuke
“How to Be Better Ancestors”

2 <https://www.humansandnature.org/how-to-be-better-ancestors>

I want to live longer.
I want to love you longer, say it again,
I want to love you longer
& sing that song
again. & get pummeled by the sea
& come up breathing & hot sun
& those walks & those kids
& hard laugh, clap your hands.
I am not ready to die yet.
aracelis girmay

3 “I Am Not Ready to Die Yet”

I was a tiny bug. Now a mountain. I was left behind. Now honored at the head. You healed my wounded hunger and anger, and made me a poet who sings about joy.

4 Rumi

To truly be free, we must choose beyond simply surviving adversity, we must dare to create lives of sustained optimal well-being and joy. In that world, the making and drinking of lemonade will be a fresh and zestful delight, a real life mixture of the bitter and the sweet, and not a measure of our capacity to endure pain, but rather a celebration of our moving beyond pain.

bell hooks

“Moving Beyond Pain”

5 <http://www.bellhooksinstitute.com/blog/2016/5/9/moving-beyond-pain>

The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.

Howard Zinn

“The Optimism of Uncertainty”

6 <https://www.thenation.com/article/optimism-uncertainty/>

Hard times require furious dancing.

7 Alice Walker

I want to know how your heart is doing, at this very moment. Tell me. Tell me your heart is joyous, tell me your heart is aching, tell me your heart is sad, tell me your heart craves a human touch. Examine your own heart, explore your soul, and then tell me something about your heart and your soul.

Omid Safi

8 “How Is Your Heart Doing?”

We are meant to live in joy. This does not mean that life will be easy or painless. It means that we can turn our faces to the wind and accept that this is the storm we must pass through...The acceptance of reality is the only place from which change can begin.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu

9 The Book of Joy

That deep and irreplaceable knowledge of my capacity for joy comes to demand from all of my life that it be lived within the knowledge that such satisfaction is possible, and does not have to be called marriage, nor god, nor an afterlife... For once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of.

Audre Lorde

10 "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power"

For as we begin to recognize our deepest feelings, we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering and self-negation, and with the numbness which so often seems like their only alternative in our society...

In touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial.

Audre Lorde

11 "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power"

Recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama.

Audre Lorde

12 "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power"

My beloved child, break your heart no longer. Each time you judge yourself, you break your own heart. You stop feeding on the love which is the wellspring of your vitality. The time has come. Your time. To celebrate. And to see the goodness that you are.

13 Swami Kripalvanandji

The Nature of this Flower is to Bloom

Alice Walker

14 "Revolutionary Petunia"

The imagining needs praise as does any living thing. We are evidence of this praise. And when we laugh, we're indestructible.

Joy Harjo

"A Postcolonial Tale"

15 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gE4mGc_aUx8

The greatest form of sanity that anyone can exercise is to resist that force that is trying to repress, oppress, and fight down the human spirit.

16 Mumia Abu-Jamal

Joy in the midst of suffering is, for me, one of those gnarly Zen things. We do the work to create the opportunity for joy—to be silly, to have a good drink, to make love, and figure out the craziness of life. If we don't live in that joy, then what are we doing this for?

Rev. angel Kyodo williams

“Working Through Racism”

17 <https://tricycle.org/trikedaily/angel-kyodo-williams-racism/>

We give in and we abdicate our right to joy, our right to live and thrive in the face of [suffering]. But if we choose joy over and over again, the suffering is transmuted into something that is generative, that we can use to live in a bigger way.

Rev. angel Kyodo williams

“Working Through Racism”

18 <https://tricycle.org/trikedaily/angel-kyodo-williams-racism/>

Take responsibility for what you love as an act of service. This practice is a game-changing skill... The more this practice becomes our operating norm, the more innovation, joy, solidarity, generosity, and other qualities of well-being appear.

Peggy Holman

Engaging Emergence

[http://peggyholman.com/papers/engaging-emergence/engaging-emergence-table-of-](http://peggyholman.com/papers/engaging-emergence/engaging-emergence-table-of-contents/part-ii-practices-for-engaging-emergence/)

19 [contents/part-ii-practices-for-engaging-emergence/](http://peggyholman.com/papers/engaging-emergence/engaging-emergence-table-of-contents/part-ii-practices-for-engaging-emergence/)

Love and respect your Self and everything will become an echo of the same vibes. Thank this body, this breath and life. Give thanks for every little joy which life brings to you and smile. And smile like you have never smiled before and delve deep within.

20 Anandmurti Gurumaa

My mission in life is not merely to survive, but to thrive; and to do so with some passion, some compassion, some humor, and some style.

21 Maya Angelou

I would not exchange the sorrows of my heart for the joys of the multitude...I would that my life remain a tear and a smile...A tear to unite me with those of broken heart; a smile to be a sign of my joy in existence.

22 Kahlil Gibran

This morning I carry the desire to live, inside my thigh
It pulses there: a banyan, a mynah bird or young impatient wind
Until I am ready to fly again, over the pungent flowers
Joy Harjo

23 "I Am Not Ready to Die Yet"

You carry / All the ingredients / To turn your life into a nightmare- / Don't mix
them! / ... / You carry all the ingredients / To turn your existence into joy, / Mix
them, mix / Them!
Hafiz

24 "To Build a Swing"

Remember you are not alone, and you do not need to finish the work. It takes time,
but we are learning, we are growing, we are becoming the people we want to be. It
helps no one if you sacrifice your joy because others are suffering...
Give the world your love, your service, your healing, but you can also give it your
joy. This, too, is a great gift.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu

"Giving The World Your Joy"

[https://www.huffingtonpost.com/his-holiness-the-dalai-lama/giving-the-world-your-](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/his-holiness-the-dalai-lama/giving-the-world-your-joy_b_12051310.html)

25 [joy_b_12051310.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/his-holiness-the-dalai-lama/giving-the-world-your-joy_b_12051310.html)

The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious...
It is enough for me to contemplate the mystery of conscious life perpetuating itself
through all eternity, to reflect upon the marvelous structure of the universe which we
can dimly perceive, & to try humbly to comprehend even an infinitesimal part of the
intelligence manifested in nature.

Albert Einstein

26 Living Philosophies

We are preparing for what is coming and praying for humanity so that we may wake
up and correct our course before it is too late. We are dancing and singing strongly
and sending a voice to the universe saying that we want to continue living.

Arkan Lushwala

27 The Time of the Black Jaguar, free excerpt: <http://www.pachamama.org/wp->

Banish the word 'struggle' from your attitude and your vocabulary. All that we do now must be done in a sacred manner and in celebration.

Elders of Hopi Nation

28 <http://boggscenter.org/statement-from-the-elders-oraibi-arizona-hopi-nation/>

Like the joy of the sea coming home to shore, / May the relief of laughter rinse through your soul. // As the wind loves to call things to dance, / May your gravity be lightened by grace...// May your prayer of listening deepen enough / to hear in the depths the laughter of god.

John O'Donohue

29 "A Blessing for Equilibrium"

Make peace with the universe. Take joy in it. / It will turn to gold. Resurrection / will be now. Every moment, / a new beauty.

Rumi

You are made for perfection, but you are not yet perfect. You are a masterpiece in the making.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu

30 The Book of Joy

Appendix C: MSLS Batch 2 Joy Collage

That feeling of being home, whether it's in your heart or in a physical place. My heart place is with the people that I love when there's no expectation and it's cozy and I know that I'm with the people who love me for exactly who I am. There's this baseless joy of being with those people who have this outpouring of love and knowing that there's safety there.

Nicole

Chelsea

large groups of native northwestern tribes * my garden just be-
ginning to bloom * my little bush budding * Spending time with my cat

Perri

The waters that embraced me and reminded me where I came from.

Bao

Declaring our own 'snow day' and playing all day when we are the only school open in the state of Vermont! Azzia

POWDER DAYS AT MAD RIVER GLEN

-VIC-

KAREN

The beauty of the mountain is talked about most from a distance. Not while one is scaling the summit with life at risk. That is the time for silence, one-pointedness, reflection, and drawing upon all your skills. So you might return from the cloud's domain and inspire others to breathe closer to God. While still human, the way you did.

- Hafiz

Abi

Genuine and spontaneous love from little dog to big dog. Melts me and makes me giggle.

Rachel

Alayna

Listening to music that I just have to move to. Making, smelling, eating pie. Sunny days at my heart place at Lake Sunapee, NH.

Jamie

When I feel hollow and disconnected from hope, I can always find my way back in a few quiet days sleeping out on wild, expansive land. A recent river trip on the Rio Grande in Texas helped me remember a lot of powerful feelings of joy and beliefs about the universe.

Colin

I love the moments when I am outside, closing my eyes to take in the moment and the breeze on my skin is neither too hot or too cold. It is a feeling of effortlessness, when the struggles of the day dissolve.

-Celia-

celebrations left clockwise: Ben, Isaac, and Posey; Lowell

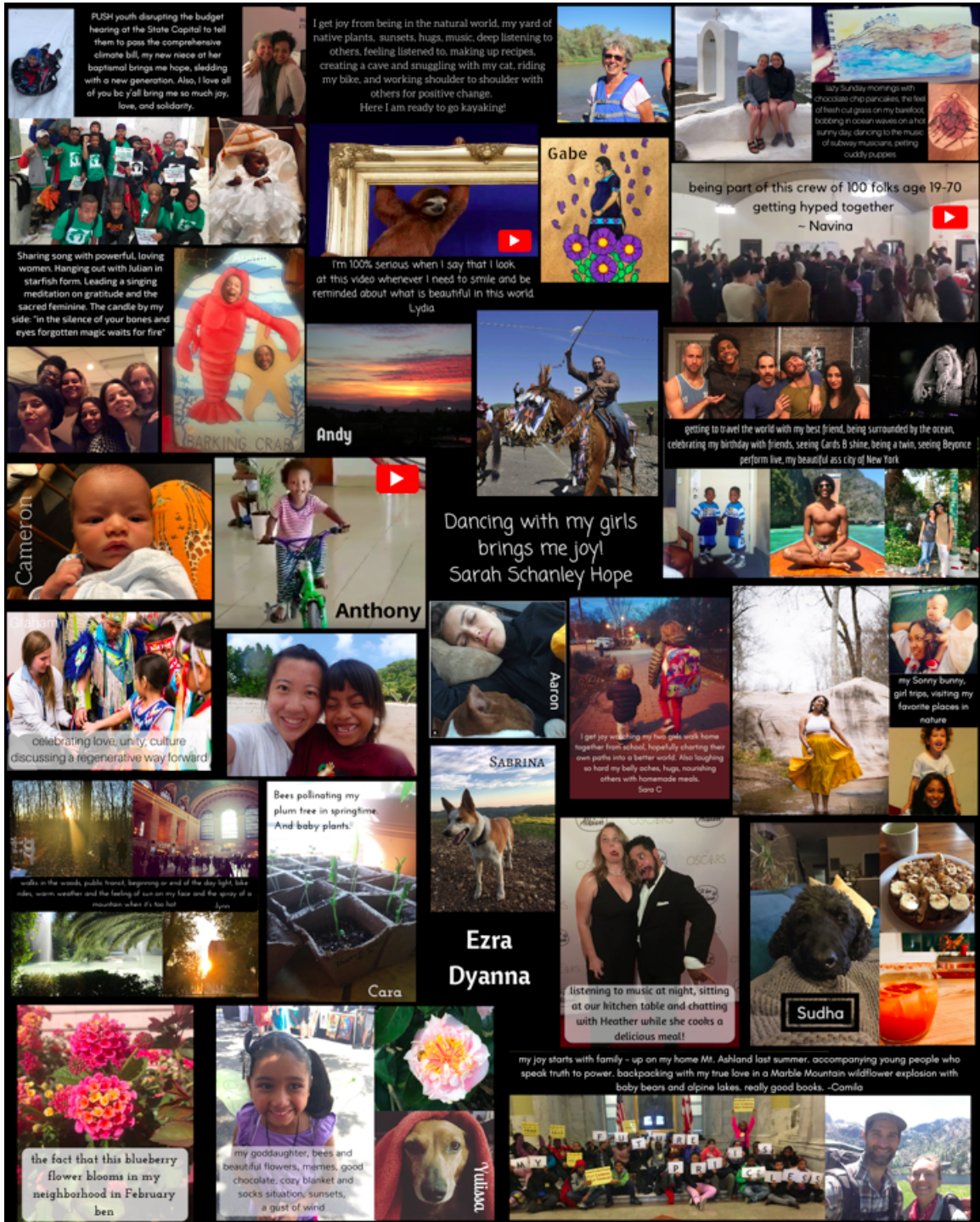
Lowell was a foundation of my childhood. He was the one who often took the lead of many of my adventures, including participating in action projects, and teaching me about relationships. He was the one who taught me to love.

Posey & Isaac

sunshine on water! Ben

I bought this rose gold ring as a symbol of my own love for myself. It brings me joy daily when I wear it. Erin

Appendix D: Young Climate Leaders Network Joy Collage



Appendix E: Earth Leadership Cohort Joy Collage

Earth Leadership Cohort 2

Joseph

I think of this Rilke poem often and especially these days with things feeling so hard and feeling as though I am being battered from all sides. I am not sure it is the most joyful poem, but it brings a smile to my face when I think about it.

The other thing that brings my joy is my relationship with Aravinda. And so, I have a collection of selfies that we have taken together. I am including one here as my picture of joy. We have had the opportunity to travel together to so many places and experience so many things together. So much joy in my life has been in her company.

Quiet friend who has come so far,
feel how your breathing makes more space around you.
Let this darkness be a bell tower
and you the bell. As you ring,
what hatters you becomes your strength.
Move back and forth into the change.
What is it like, such intensity of pain?
If the drink is bitter, turn yourself to wine.
In this uncontainable night,
be the mystery at the crossroads of your senses,
the meaning discovered there.
And if the world has ceased to hear you,
say to the silent earth: I flow.
To the rushing water, speak: I am.



(Handwritten signature)

Daniel Kieval



(Click on the picture to watch the video.)

(Handwritten signature)

Karen



(Handwritten signature)

Aravinda



I have not ceased to marvel at the miracle of an egg.

(Handwritten signature)

Kirstin

one big source of joy for me is watching my daughters grow up into curious, original, delightful people. Sarah and Jasmine are three now



(Handwritten signature)

Ian

I'm finding delight and joy in strengthening friendships and making a home for myself in my new apartment.

(Handwritten signature)

Jennifer

I live near a large conservation park now and it's wonderful to be able to take short hikes and be in the woods in the middle of a city.
My cat brings me a lot of joy. Look what a very good snuggle fluff he is.



(Handwritten signature)

Janna

truth and holding hands and singing and praying and play, and simplicity, and breath.
(Click on the pictures to watch the videos.)



Appendix F: Joy Cookies Sign



Appendix G: Review of Impacts from Joy Texts

Some of the small ripples created by the text messages:

- One friend used the quotes as a daily journal prompt. At the end of the project, she expressed interest in finding a book with daily joy quotes and in learning more about Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the author of two of the quotes I sent out.
- One friend who works as a counselor at a high-needs middle school said he shared several of the quotes with his students.
- Someone said one of the quotes “sparked a beautiful check in with my partner where we opened up to each other and deepened our connection.”
- One friend used a few quotes to “introduce group discussions about resilience, bless the food with my family on Easter, or share with a loved one.”
- One friend was inspired by the quotes to shift her mindset: “in anticipation of a long work day ahead, I was easily drawn into anxiety. Then I distinctly recalled thinking back to all of the text messages I've been receiving from you, and I made a conscious effort to change my thinking. The ‘long day’ was ultimately energizing and helped me connect back to what brings me joy: being in community.”
- One person nicely captured a sentiment that many people shared: “Not a huge life altering change but like a brief meditation or breathing practice, reading the quotes brought me a moment of pause and reflection amidst what is often a hectic and fast paced day.”
- One friend used the quotes as opportunities to have the conversations she wanted to have:
“In March, I had a great conversation with one of my coworkers about how to love and live when you know everything you love is going to die. It was a conversation I wanted to continue, with him and with other people in my life, but I don't always know how to bring it up. I shared these texts with that co-worker and with other people in my life, and they served as a jumping off point for conversations about cultivating joy in the face of struggle that I wanted and needed to have, but hadn't had a comfortable way to broach previously.”
- On the Saturday evening when I texted the Alice Walker quote, “Hard times require furious dancing,” four people went dancing. One person was directly inspired by the quote: “in the middle of a terrible day. I decided to take the quote literally, and came home and danced around my room for a while. I felt better.”

For some, the month-long project spurred shifts that lasted beyond a moment or a day.

- “Over the weeks of the text (and maybe a few weeks before that also), I started having the feeling that I need more joy in my life. Even though I have a fulfilling career as a teacher, I feel that I lack joy in my day to day work. All this has got me thinking about how to change my mindset so I can experience more joy in regular moments throughout the day.”
- “The texts have been amazing - they prompt an energy change and mood change in me on a daily basis and then in the longer term I've noticed how much more I talk and ask people what is bringing them joy.”
- “I'm in my late twenties, and I certainly feel the pressure to figure things out...I'll continue to explore what it looks like to give the world [my gifts]. It may mean going back to school, taking up a new hobby, or a change in vocation...we'll see.”
- “I also think I see sorrow differently, as something that is necessary to embrace joy.”
- “The idea that someone is/was focused on spreading joy was a great paradigm shift....”

For more than a couple people, the messages provided support during a difficult time:

- “This could not have come at a better moment as I worked/work through heartbreak and grief. To be reminded of the sacred through these texts amidst the all-too-real and all-too-human feelings of sadness and longing have been incredible talismans.”
- “Getting these texts felt like a north star appearing each day, just in a time when life was/is deep and complicated. Glimpses of truth, lightness, beauty helping steer through a difficult time. I don't know how to measure that, or exactly which to attribute, but these really were a beautiful gift.”

For others, the messages were valuable affirmations.

- “One of the things I'm working on personally is not feeling guilty for having and needing pleasure in my life and so many of the texts affirmed to stay with joy. It's not easy, to say the least and as one who wants justice, restoration/healing/rest for the world and its inhabitants.”

Some of the responses to the Archbishop Desmond Tutu quote cited in the paper:

- “I got [the quote] on a day when i [sic] was feeling really grinded down by all the activist work I do and all the BS in the news, and it was a great reminder that the world needs my joy just as much as it needs my labor and struggle.”

- “This was probably the most powerful quote I have read. I think it's because it recognizes similarities that we are all going through and that we are not alone, and that we are hopeful and moving forward towards a better place. It's a gentle admonition to each and everyone of us about how important Joy is, And that we must continue to move towards this ideal....”
- “Ever since I saw the quote...I've started reminding myself to not worry so much about things that I'm doing and to not give up. Which is something I wouldn't have been doing before I saw it and wouldn't be doing if I hadn't saw it”
- “I was having a very busy and draining week at work. It was a surprise to see the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu...That one couldn't have arrived at a more timely moment and I actually remember letting out a sigh of relief. I so often tell myself that my suffering is somehow adding balance to an unbalanced world and my anger as the fuel for the work that I do but these words challenged me to see my joy as much a tool for impact.”
- “I've shared [this] quote...a number of times in a number of spaces. It seems like a message that can't be shared too much right now as people feel desperate to contribute to the greater good and often feel like we're losing all hope. The idea that suffering in the world doesn't preclude our right and responsibility to find joy is so important!”

Appendix H: Personal reflection after the month of joy texts

Posted on April 30, 2018 to <https://joyorwhatever.wordpress.com/2018/04/30/reflections-on-a-month-of-joy-texts/>

Reflections on a month of joy (texts)

To all of you who've received texts from this mysterious 33222 number for the past month ("Who is this?"):

Thanks for taking part in my little experiment to send out some little joy shoots out into the world. I've read every single reply and have been grateful to have even those little points of connection with you.

The worst thing about telling a whole bunch of people that I'm working on joy for my Master's project is worrying about people's expectations of me. My mind sounds like this, "Please, God, do not expect me to smile the next time you see me, or even be happy, or even be calm." Six months ago when I decided I wanted to make my project about joy, I was anxious, broken-hearted, and struggling with coming to terms with some of the things life had thrown at me. Six months later, those things mostly remain true!

It's even worse to be sending out daily text messages about joy. Sometimes I send or schedule them in moments when I'm less than joyful. Sometimes I receive them when I'm cranky, tired, angry, sad, hopeless, even bitter about humans, or distracted by a task, and I just ignore them. Am I a hypocrite? An imposter? How can I tell people these things when I don't even feel them inside myself?

Oh the suffering that comes from having a human mind.

I'm not a saint or a guru. My housemates could easily attest to that. I haven't perfected the art of being joyful nor I would I even say I'm decent at it. I've cried possibly every day this week, I have unprocessed anger and shame in my body, and sometimes, I really don't care about humans and whether or not they make it. Woah, did I just say that? Mm, yup.

And still, and still, and still. I'm curious about life. I'm curious about what it means to be a living being alive in this world at this time. I'm dumbfounded by the fact that even while experiencing a trauma that left me collapsed in tears and barely able to move, there was still something in my being that made me drink a kale smoothie for dinner and floss my teeth before going to bed. A kale smoothie for God's sake. What screams life more than a kale smoothie?

I marvel at the universe and what it means for us to be a tiny blue dot swimming in it. I'm grateful for all the beings and the sun and water and minerals that give me sustenance. I

think it's so cool when musicians mesh songs together like [this](#) or loop their voices like [this](#) or even better when they do both at once like [this](#). I love being silly. I fantasize about Taiwanese food and long for the day not-too-far-off-into-the-future (less than 4 months!) when I get to walk down the streets of a Taipei night market and indulge in the best food this world has to offer. And it feels really good to do things with my life that make others feel happy or loved.

The quotes I sent out, I do not embody in my day-to-day life. I sent them because I liked them and wanted to share them. Some of them are aspirations or at least nice ideas of how I could be living in the future. Some of them were gifts to me and hopefully were gifts to you as well. Some of them offer what I think are different ways of conceiving of our lives or of social change that feel interesting and meaningful for me to explore.

...

I don't know what we're doing here. I certainly don't know what I'm doing here at this moment in my life. One day I'm going to die and all of you are going to die. And I hope so much that we don't have to suffer too much before that day happens. Even better, I hope we can all find ways to be a part of and contribute to a life-supporting, life-nourishing web of beings that also supports and nourishes you.

In the words of June Jordan written weeks after 9/11 and inspired by the words of Auschwitz and Fallersleben survivor Elly Gross:

Some of Us Did Not Die
We're Still Here
I Guess It Was Our Destiny To Live
So Let's get on with it!

II. Program Synthesis

1. On the influence of the wisdom of nature

Nearly two years later, I continue to share and be shaped by the story that Tom Wessels shared during our retreat at Shelburne in August 2016. Tom told of an invasive vine species so aggressive that it had taken down an entire forest and I still remember him describing how struck he was to see only fallen trees where they had once stood tall. He shared his opinion that the vine's relentlessness now worked against its own interests as there was nothing left for it to grow on except itself – an undesirable inefficiency from the perspective of the vine. Tom concluded with some confidence, “With time, this vine will learn to get along with others.”

This story has served as a powerful metaphor for how I understand the forces that currently dominate U.S. culture, economy, and society. These invasive forces are ravenous as their influence spreads to all corners of the globe, consuming living beings and ways of being and producing sickness and sameness. It is conceivable to me that this culture based in the mindset of greed, domination, and separation will not be able to take a hard turn until there is no alternative because so much is gone.

And yet the essential word in Tom's teaching is time. For me, to be sustained and grounded requires attuning to a deeper, longer sense of time. It requires not caving in to the endless pressures of a society demanding constant productivity and it requires not succumbing to the constant stress of urgent crises produced by failing systems. When I zoom out in time, I am able to see an alternative to the frame that only shows suffering and devastation. I can move into a mindset that allows me to appreciate my role and that of humans in the grand unfolding of the universe. I remember the value of slowing down,

being still, and witnessing. I am able to notice how evolution moves us towards dynamic balance between preservation of self and preservation of the species, between preservation of the species and preservation of the whole. I am able to find comfort in knowing that dominant culture will either “learn to get along with others” or evolve out and thus make space for new life and new ways of being to come forth.

This trust in Mother Earth and her deep resilience has been liberatory. Without denying the incredible emotional weight of death and genocide whether ethnic, cultural, or ecological, I can also rest in the knowledge that life will find creative and mysterious ways of manifesting itself, with time.

This shift in understanding of the world forces a shift in understanding myself. When I allow myself to trust that the Earth has her own way of taking care of herself, that we are not engaged in an epic battle between good and evil, then there is no need for me to be a savior or victim. I can drop the ego-based drama of believing myself to be responsible for life on Earth. I can adopt a practical view of myself as one being among countless others who carries neither the power and responsibility to save the world nor the ability to do nothing. Rather, I have goals, I have agency, and I can use my agency towards reaching my goals.

I can appreciate the art of being and becoming, just as if I am a tree in a forest. When I stop being concerned with being the tallest, prettiest, or the one that is able to sequester the most carbon, I can appreciate that just by existing, I provide shade and a home to others, I clean the air for others to breathe, and I give back to the Earth from which I take. We each shape and change the world in ways big and small, knowable and forever unknowable.

I have also come to realize so simple a fact that every living being in the world is interested in its own survival and that ought to include myself. That means dropping my narrative of martyrdom and sacrifice and my deeply embedded survival strategy of living only for others. That also means dropping all my guilt over having resources and privileges that others don't have. It is right and reasonable to take deep interest in myself and my well-being.

Attuning to nature and evolution has additionally shaped the way I understand and hold my politics and ideas. There cannot be an idea, a politic, or a vision that remains static and always remains true or right or good. Utopia is both impossible and undesirable because without problems, there is no tension and without tension, there is no change. I stand behind nature and the Buddha and Octavia Butler (1993) when they attest that “The only lasting truth is Change” (p. 3). When I completely sink into that truth, then I must sink in to the reality that everything is and will remain incomplete. I must give myself over to the cycles of life and death and try to tap into or surrender to the evolutionary thrust that creates life.

Finally, the wisdom of nature leads me to reciprocity. Before I take each meal, I express gratitude for all the beings who made my meal possible — the wheat, the lettuce, the humans, and sometimes the chickens and cows. I give thanks to the sun and rain. And I ask that the food nourish my body so that I may nourish the Earth. On most days, I'm not sure if I will ever be able to give back a fraction of what I've been given. I'm not sure what matters or how to return the gift. I can only hope to do my small part in contributing to the flourishing of life.

2. On challenging forces of domination and oppression

A mentor, Gibran Rivera, believes that change follows the sequence of state, story, strategy. The strategy we devise to create change stems from the story we have about a situation, and the story we hold about a situation is highly dependent on our state of being. If we are in a contracted state, we will create a limited, narrow-minded story, resulting in an ineffective strategy (personal conversation, January 23, 2018). Going along with this framework, the last two years have marked a deep process of reconfiguring my state and story, resulting in new and as-yet-unknown conceptions about strategy.

State.

How do I work with grief, collapse, rage, fear, and shut-down? The past two years have contained two huge and tragic events that sent shock waves to my emotional and physical body – the election of Donald Trump and a horrendous interpersonal conflict that took place in my home. Finding ways to work with extreme states of distress is an ongoing exploration and I have experimented with so many ways of shifting my state so as to not succumb to the wishes of my lizard brain and contribute to the ongoing cycles of human drama and trauma. Spending time alone in nature, conscious breathing, creating space for rage to move through my body, burning symbols of that which I have lost, dancing – these actions helped metabolize my emotional experience so that I could be as grounded and choiceful as possible in moving through life.

Story.

In “Uses of the Erotic”, Audre Lorde says, “Recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather

than settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama” (2007, p. 59). I am tired and uninterested in continuing “the same weary drama” no matter who the characters are.

In order to discontinue the drama, I must first be aware of how the drama plays a part in my own identity formation. Steven Karpman defined a drama triangle as an unhealthy social dynamic that comprises three roles – persecutor, victim, and rescuer (Gasal, 2013). This dynamic can happen in groups or within oneself. As I reflect back on my involvement in various groups working for justice, I can see clearly how each of those roles have played out in my thinking. If I wasn’t busy trying to rescue those deemed more marginalized or threatened than me, then I was complaining as a victim of inescapable oppressive dynamics or persecuting those I believed to be responsible, if not in speech than certainly in thought. The rescuer role was most core to my identity. It gave me purpose and meaning and the certainty that I was on the right side of history. Trying to step outside of the drama triangle has meant feeling groundless in the absence of those things.

Finding a path that lies outside the drama has also meant complexifying the story. Few things can be put into neat categories, and few realities in the world can be boiled down into neat storyboards. Doing so erases the true complexity of the world, resulting in ineffective strategies to change it. I am interested in ways of understanding systems of domination and oppression beyond a simple “problem” lens, which locates causes and identifies solutions. I remember my former self wanting to understand the roots of oppression and colonization. I came across so many theories offered up as explanations for how oppression all began – patriarchy, the Roman Empire, adultism. Each theory

holds the seduction of knowing and the danger of leaving out alternative and contradictory information.

Complexifying the story specifically involves avoiding labeling individuals, groups, or systems as “good guys” or “bad guys”. I want to rigorously challenge my own and others’ tendency to point fingers at the “oppressor”, whether that be a particular person, institution, or even system that we might call white supremacy or capitalism. I see human history as being riddled with stories of groups of people thinking themselves superior to another and taking resources, land, or lives. I want to hold all of this information with understanding. To be human requires contending with the impulses of the human mind – fighting, blaming, comparing, desiring, judging, fearing, hating.

The MLS program has helped tremendously to create a new and evolving story. The focus on well-being, relationship, and thriving has reshaped my ideas of what I desire for the world. The concept of justice no longer compels me in the same way with its connotations of rigidity and standards. Fairness is a basic and essential condition but it is not the most we can hope for. Desiring for all life to thrive allows for differentiated, self-determined paths towards wellness and wholeness.

My particular focus on joy has also thrown a wrench into my understandings of justice and privilege. I now believe that the dominant discourse in social justice communities around power and privilege can prevent deeper questioning about what is a good and worthwhile life and how to facilitate the creation of healthy, life-supporting societies. The focus is on what wealthy, white men have. It is perhaps then assumed that their privilege buys them a good life and that those without it are stuck with something less than. Without naively dismissing the value of money, formal power, or all the other

variables that afford greater agency to pursue the life that one desires, I completely reject the notion that those privileged by systems actually have desirable lives. If we aspire to a society that is healthy and well, then I believe we must critically examine what conditions are important to support individual and collective thriving. For me, this society is one in which more people are being able to access joy and to experience loving and being loved. I deeply believe these are among the greatest experiences one can have in this life, even though they do not correlate well to traditional markers of privilege such as race, class, and gender, if they correlate at all.

All of these thoughts and questions are being integrated into the new story that continues to unfold.

Strategy.

If we seek something beyond the same weary drama, we must fundamentally transform, not reverse, the logic that drives systems of oppression. I believe this work is very hard, possibly unknowable as to what it must look like, quite possibly always incomplete.

I value treating people with kindness. I want to continue holding seriously the question that Mistinguette posed to me and discover what helps me come most fully alive. I want to connect to the life force within myself that can withstand the forces of domination and I want to explore what it might mean to be free. I want to keep asking questions and stay with the unsettling feeling of uncertainty. I want to trust myself more deeply and try to shed the “shoulds” of who to become. I want to keep slowing down. I want to make small ripples. I want to have some fun.

3. On leadership practices

I don't remember exactly how I reacted when Matt started listing off the MLS leadership practices at Shelburne and named sovereignty and self-determination as the first one. But I know I had some kind of reaction. Up until this program, my understanding of my life and purpose was always framed in terms of the other. As a child growing up in an East Asian family, the unconscious rule that I excelled at was obedience to the other. As a Christian, to live was to love and serve others. As someone who cared about social justice, the only meaningful purpose in life was to fight for the rights or struggle for the liberation of others. And doing so meant trying to give up as much privilege as possible. It meant constantly questioning whether to pursue things for myself. This self only existed for others to such an extent that even my efforts towards personal and spiritual growth were always framed in my mind as means towards becoming a better activist.

The practice of self-determination also went against all of my social change sensibilities. *How do you distinguish between self-determination and individualism? How do you create large-scale change if you allow people to make their own decisions? I thought what we needed was more practice with interdependence and cooperation.*

It took a personal crisis that activated my deepest survival instincts to enter into a new level of awareness of the self. Above everything else, my mandate first and foremost was to take care of myself. If I could not do that, I could not do anything else. This was a worldview-shattering realization for me.

Deborah Rose (2005) articulates the idea of "life both for itself and for others." After a lifetime of existing for others, this past year has been a time of leaning heavily in

the direction of life for itself. I am allowing myself to seek out what feels good and restful and nourishing. I am indulging myself with hot showers, Youtube binges, and a long-awaited trip back to Taiwan. I am divesting my attention (brown, 2017) from the suffering that is not mine to bear.

How much time does it take to strengthen an unused muscle? I imagine there will come a time when I have strengthened my self muscle enough to be able to walk the paradoxical line between life for itself and life for others, between acting as an autonomous being with needs and desires and acting as one part of an interdependent whole. For now, as I place almost exclusive focus on myself, I am challenged enough in trying to understand who this self is underneath all the layers of conditioning. Who do I want to be when I free myself of all expectations and the need to be seen as a “good person”? To explore this question, I must trust myself so deeply and trust that the true nature of my self is to care and that my deepest desire is for all to be well. I hope with time, I will be able to hear “the sound of the genuine” that Howard Thurman (2017) so emphatically says lives in each of us.

As this program comes to a close, I find myself sinking deeper and deeper into the complete unknown with not even a glimmer of where this journey is headed. I am grateful for the invitation to explore the uniqueness of my differentiated self and exercise self-determination.

4. References

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