

## Beyond Chaos – By Cassie Dakan

### An Essay

What a relief. A limited word count that hopefully brings clarity. OK, I exceeded the word count! BUT, no slipping into the way back when. My thoughts are about the future. No ruminating – which humans excel at – but is like a small seed stuck between teeth, annoying, painful, given too much attention. This essay skims my experiences during the last 10 months, and looks mostly ahead, and could be subtitled: *The Multiple Disruptions of Joining the Peace Corps Then Being Evacuated During a Global Pandemic Accompanied by U.S. Economic, Social Justice, and Political Chaos Which May or May Not be Transformative*. If chaos is the wrong word for you, substitute another. And my gut tells me that awakening that transforms is possible, if we seize the chaos to create an abundantly better future for Everyone.

### Why?

What was I thinking, joining Peace Corps Fiji? A journal excerpt from LA, during orientation, reads: “LAX could make any sane person want an island life. I feel more relaxed now that I am on my way, finally. I will not miss the US in general. The whole country is confused and fraught with anxiety. I do not want to live in its bubble, in relative comfort, which veils the true nature of the problems and perils the country and the world face. I am privileged and want to move through other parts of the world among different people to understand life more the way they do – and to have my privilege questioned. Gaining new eyes, ears, voice to make myself and the world more whole and united. Possibly naïve? This journey is my current expression of being more humane and the impulse to do a big thing that’s right and just and kind and sane.”

It takes significant effort to change the course of an adult life. Inertia easily overrides good intention. Damn that! The Peace Corps, long thought about, became the next big thing for me. They make it *clear* that task #1 is to “Prepare your personal and professional life to make a commitment to serve abroad for a full term of 27 months.” For 20 -somethings I imagine this preparation is easier; at age 60 it was a gradual journey leading to an even more complex journey. By August 2019 I had made every preparation possible and boarded a plane. The first, short stop was in LA to meet my group – Fiji96 – for meet/greet/rules/regulations/paperwork, and the surprisingly sweet reality that these were now my people, and we would need each other. Then away we flew. It was a good moment. Why? A card came in a care package from my daughter summing it up ... *Go! Oh, go! Go out and see the world! And wherever you go be brave, to whomever you meet be kind, with whatever you have do good.*

### Fiji

My group lived in Fiji for only 7 months, two in a training village, then five at sites. Mine was a jungle-farm. I thought about “home” and missed it; day to day life in Fiji was not easy, but as one ex-pat reminded me, I didn’t join the Peace Corps for *easy*. Just one month into service, as I returned from a weekend away, I realized how glad I was to walk down the dirt road into Kubuna village, past the livestock, avoiding dung and puddles and mud, greeted by neighbors, arriving at my house, built by the youth of my village, going in the front door – and being home.

It's true that PC service is 24/7. Everywhere, I was always a PC volunteer, meeting people who could potentially help my village or school in some way. For an abbreviated account of my service ... I taught three days a week at a nearby secondary school, serving 240 students from 30 villages, grades 9 through 13. My key contribution was expanding Family Life Education (FLE) – a national curriculum that teaches

healthy life choices, responsible sexuality, gender bias awareness, and respectful communication. Yes - OWL was my working model and I had materials to share, hoping to get past taboos, teach concepts straightforwardly, explore topics of importance to students, and encourage other teachers to be bolder in their approach to FLE. In non-class time I helped in the library, wrote a proposal for an offline, solar powered digital library, introduced faculty to a student resilience program, the list is long ... Other directions to head included helping staff and students with the yearbook to teaching yoga and starting a chess club. It was very satisfying just sitting around answering student's questions about the USA.

Kubuna village was another full time world of service. Picture seventeen households, about 85 people, all immediate and extended family members, most the children and grandchildren of three amazing women, my immediate "sisters", aged 58, 65 and 75. In Fiji and in Kubuna family and community are all. Help is always at hand, no one goes wanting. Livelihood was subsistence farming – men and women gathering both wild and cultivated food every day. My main assignment was to guide the youth group, young people ages 15 to 35, in a community development/improvement project of their choosing. They had trained and were on track to plan, raise funds for, and build a chicken operation to sell meat birds, and feed their families. The youth played a lot of rugby, drank a lot of kava, and sang beautifully. The women's group started a communal garden and planned another, to diversify their plant food options, and to sell surplus. They also had their sights set on reviving a tilapia fishpond. With village support I held Holiday School during break for all kids, then started pre-K lessons once a week for the youngest children, and two kids ages 10 and 11 began a pen pal project with a 5<sup>th</sup> grade class in Florida. Sundays we went to church (Methodist), and in my spare time ... okay, there wasn't much, except if it rained. I loved the rain pounding on my tin roof while I read.

Suddenly, in the span of a day and a half – a blur of food, drink, song, prayer, and heartfelt goodbyes – I left.

After three weeks of growing local media coverage and Peace Corps reports about the Corona virus (in China then Italy), on March 18 we were evacuated from our towns and villages. The virus was a global danger, and airlines were discontinuing flights. On Monday evening we got word: Do 3 things – inform your village and school, pack your things to return to the US, and secure or give away everything else. Wednesday at 3 pm the seven volunteers in my vicinity flew off our island. There was some confusion, and a lot of disappointment. But, the PC and Fiji staff did the only responsible thing, kindly and professionally, and I am grateful.

## Return

My return to Flagstaff was in a late night snowstorm. Days later random morning thoughts were like this:

1. Trying to sync technology without success is a frustrating waste of energy. &%%\$. What is life really for? I asked myself this question a lot in Fiji, but the answer seemed clearer there.
2. Idealists, wanderers, "grassroots diplomats", we went. Now all are evacuated, service closed indefinitely. Oh woe. But our story is hardly special. The lessons will arrive.
3. Free yourself from expectations. Disappointment happens. Make a hard right when necessary.
4. Quarantined, mind adrift, I dream about the people in my village - disjointed impressions – my brain sifts and organizes them in weird ways. Clearly, my Fiji life, with its daily hits and misses, miscalculations, adjustments, and impressions, is still very sensory and subconscious.
5. Seek a world of meaning. In deep uncertainty, there is no uncertainty about this.
6. You can go out and seek the world, but regardless, the world will come knocking. Its arrival is inevitable. Open the door.

I was reading *Travels with Herodotus* when I left for Fiji, a book by Ryszard Kapuscinski, a respected Polish foreign correspondent who began his own work in journalism in the 1950's. I have now read it three times, again in April. Herodotus was a unique Greek, not an elite, living 2500+ years ago, curious about the roots of conflict, wandering the "known world" by foot and beast, along with interpreters. He aimed to discover and record oral histories before they "disappeared," which resulted in *The Histories*. RK traveled widely with this book, as he became a border crosser, and was inspired by this wanderer, and he writes that Herodotus:

"traveled to where people were, asked and observed, and collected his information from what he himself saw and others told him. His first act therefore was the journey ... What set him in motion? (To subject) himself to the hazards of one expedition after another? I think it was simply curiosity about the world ... It is actually a seldom encountered passion ... to traverse the world for years on end of one's own free will in order to get to know it, to plumb it, to understand it ... Such people have always been uncommon. Humans are by nature sedentary creatures ... What propelled him, fearless and tireless? I think it was an optimistic faith, one that was lost long ago: faith in the possibility and value of truly describing the world ... Herodotus travels in order to satisfy a child's question: Where do the ships on the horizon come from? And is what we see with our own eyes not the edge of the world? No. So there are still other worlds? What kind? ... His most important discovery? That there are many worlds. And that each is different. And that each is important ... We cannot really know what draws a human being out into the world. Is it curiosity? A hunger for experience? An addiction to wonderment? The person who ceases to be astonished is hollow... Herodotus is the antithesis of this spirit. A vivacious, fascinated, unflagging nomad full of ideas, plans, theories ... delving into the struggle to learn – about life, the world, perhaps ultimately oneself."

### Urgently Awake

Human strength comes from honestly examining and knowing oneself (plenty of time for that) and extending outward. This knowing is impossible unless we are tested in unfamiliar ways. The best we can reach for is personal and societal growth. If that's true, then 2020 has been a chaotic test of our frailty and strength as we write the current chapter of human history. Herodotus details many stories of chaos, yet assures readers that people make it through – make friends, change, make human life worth living.

One definition of chaos is *a state of thorough disorder and confusion*. My recent observations of the world, and my felt experience, during a ten month journey into the chaos of unexpected events, is leading me into new understanding of the perils and promise of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. If we do not want "return to normal", daily life will be a practice to see, confront, quell, and shape chaos into better selves, systems, and societies. I believe that this is the long path of awakening that transforms, becoming through life experience, rejecting nothing. Because of this promise, the small voice in my ear urges ... Go! Oh go (and grow) ... with courage, kindness, doing good. Because we can.