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Sillerman 2021 Fellowship Reflection
Strategy + Governance, The Beker Foundation

I find myself in a tricky situation. On the one hand, I could write this reflection as a retelling of what I did. More than once, I felt I did herculean things this summer. (And I didn't do them alone!) If I were to tell you the scale and scope that I felt like I had authority over, it would feel akin to bragging. The reason for that is the other hand of the tricky situation. I could write this reflection purely singing the praises of the staff and trustees of the Beker Foundation. I felt empowered to be as creative and big-thinking as I could be, and was armed with all the support to be so. I was welcomed into discussions that were at the heart of social justice philanthropy at a large scale. Enough so that I feel I can write to you and say "I did herculean things this summer." So, I hope as you read this reflection, you are able to forgive if I brag about some awesome spreadsheets I made or if I extol too greatly the eminent trust-based philanthropic leadership I worked alongside, for I am eternally grateful to have had the opportunity.

Phrases as Vignettes

Is the juice worth the squeeze?

I love learning a new turn of phrase. In nonprofits, we love to overuse an *impact* or *outcome*. During COVID, everything was *unprecedented* as we *pivoted*. Midway through my fellowship, during an evaluation process meeting, a team member taught me the phrase "is the juice worth the squeeze." I'm in love. I'll never be at a loss for what to say when I know I can say that. (I realize it's not a new phrase, but I hadn't heard it!)

I believe in words and actions. I think a lot about what we say, what we do, and what we say about what we do. I came into the Beker Foundation during a pilot grant program. They said to me, on day 2 or 3, "we want to know what you think about these organizations and this process." A fairly tame and traditional statement. I could envision being at a typical internship, offering my thoughts in neat script in the margins, which summarily would be removed when a real decision maker entered the process. Instead, Sheri and Felice made abundantly clear that I had a role to play, not as a contributor of superfluous information, but as a collaborative architect of the most complex grantmaking structure the foundation has undertaken to date. Through weeks of iteration, processing, research, framework creation and refinement, we built and implemented a proposal evaluation system that I am so fortunate to have all of my fingerprints on. They said that's what they wanted. They proved it with their leadership and guidance.

Our process required a lot of work. A lot of good work. And I hope the staff feel the juice was worth the squeeze, because to me it absolutely was. To be able to walk away and say "I can make the amorphous have structure in grantmaking" is sublime.

Brian Kibler

Are you learning anything?

I struggle with praise. As evidenced in this reflection, I have no issue overestimating my own work. Inarguably, I could take on more humility in that realm. But I'm very particular about accepting praise, particularly if I'm not sure to what extent it's earned or what it's praising. Sometimes I'm told I have good instincts or that I'm intuitive. I don't know why, but these don't resonate with me. I don't particularly like when someone says I did a good job, because part of me wants to respond "of course I did. That's why I'm here."

Praise at the Beker Foundation is earned and offered. And it's wonderful. Sheri has a knack for framing it in ways that avoid circean outcomes.

"Are you learning anything?" is one of the most profound compliments I've received. I was told many this summer, I hope I earned them, but that one I carry with me. Sheri said it to me after I had spent a non-insignificant time in Excel, cleaning and coding giving history data. Parts of the project required a lot of institutional knowledge that I did not hold. Other parts just required finicky data scrubbing. I didn't have institutional knowledge and I refuse to be the lesser of two finicky things, so I had to level up my Excel skills rapidfire this summer to find ways to overcome those challenges. I'm not sure I'm a wizard yet, but there were times when I felt like I was making magic as I scrubbed and coded. To spend so much time and effort learning a task, executing on that task, and to hear that I did it so well it was unclear that I was learning it. I mean, come on. I don't know what you did in summer 2021, but I hope you felt at least half as good as I felt that day.

What do we mean by tikkun olam?

Part of my fellowship included contributing to the strategic plan for the Foundation. As a part of that process, the Foundation mapped its core values. I entered midway through, seeing a sea of identified values like *compassion*, *sustainability*, *mutual responsibility*, but presented in Hebrew, as is common in Jewish affiliated organizations. I helped devise some systems for gauging trustee response to certain values, doing some analysis and data visualization, living in the nuts and bolts of treating these words as fixed concepts.

But one afternoon, Sheri and I dug deeply into what we mean when we say these words. A really common phrase we kept coming back to was *tikkun olam*, repairing the world. Fairly ubiquitous in Jewish philanthropy and social impact. But it's not one I use every day.

One of my favorite tensions is between words as shortcuts and words as gates. Or, another way, when can we use a word to just get where we want to go, and when do we need a word to be very

specific in its meaning and our usage. It's not uncommon in strategic planning to spend an inordinate amount of time wordsmithing. When navigating a bilingual word bank and sifting through values that have been debated and explored in literature and tradition over centuries (e.g., *tikkun olam*, *areivut*, *gemilut hasadim*, *tzedakah*), this can be particularly challenging. There are times in this process when one can look at the phrase and go - "*Tikkun olam* will take us where we want to go, do we need to boil it further?" At the Beker Foundation, there is a true commitment to upholding intention, particularly when it comes to living one's values. And so, we had to ask ourselves, and of the Foundation's practice, *what do we mean when we say tikkun olam?* Words matter. And how we frame and understand our work matters, too.

Is this where we hug?

In a world of physical distance, remote fellowships, and using soap each and every time we wash our hands, it was truly special to end my experience with an in-person board meeting. I was able to facilitate a portion of the meeting around strategic vision, we moved forward the pilot grant process, and I finally got to meet part of the team in person.

I think about my work in two facets - service and love. That which we do as an obligation to our fellow person and that which we do out of love for humanity, also known as philanthropy. At the end of my fellowship, after process flow maps, pivot tables, drag queen Slack messages, discussions of decolonizing funding practices, deep dives into rabbinical texts, having difficult conversations, rubrics, reports, Zooms, Salesforce general accounting units, and STUNTs, Sheri and I put a close on the summer with a hug. I couldn't think of a better way to underline how I spent my summer, if not with an expression of gratitude and love.