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The first way I have to engage with you is to say, “Good morning.”

The next item I want to get out of the way before I begin sharing my thoughts with you is when I read that the title for this talk was named “health equity”, I was a bit worried because those are not words that I use to describe the work with which I am most involved. Instead, I want to honestly convey is that what I want to talk about is the underlying premise to the phrase “health equity”, both personally and as a representative of Community Campus Partnerships for Health.

The word health, it means everything. As a community activist, I can spin it to mean anything I want it to mean. I do really mean that. Health is all the things that affect us in our lives, the lives of our family and the lives of our community. It’s the lighting quality in this room, how it makes us feel and whether or not it’s right for our eyes. It’s the water quality of the water with which we brushed our teeth this morning. It’s how we got here including all the different methods of transportation but also how we got here in our own personal journeys. That is what I and CCPH means by the word “health”. Equity is just that-equity. How do we really start to build systems that allow us to be together, to not just passively coexist and not just collaborate by travelling back and forth between sectors but how to stay together and build models of shared power. We haven’t yet achieved that in our evolution as human beings. Equity is about exploring our path together to build those shared power models. But first, we must not think about how to achieve health equity or the best practices of working together towards health equity. Instead, we have to pursue the “why”, and not rush to the how.

Sometimes, even in the last few days, we have veered towards what community engagement is. We’re struggling to know the “what” and that propels us to the “how”. Meanwhile, we left the “why” in the dust and never took the time to reflect on it together and figure it out. I’m asking you for this time we have together and maybe for the rest of the day, to consider the “why”. I’m hoping I can provoke you into doing this maybe for the rest of your lives, to stay in touch with the “why”.

I gave a talk recently---- this is a new thing that’s happening to me where I’m being asked to give talks. I think to myself, “Whoa, what is this all about?” Anyway, I was in my home state of Minnesota at a conference about community-based participatory research sponsored by Mayo Clinic, a world-renowned medical and research institution. At Mayo, faculty and staff are struggling in this big, giant, institutional way to have authentic relationships with the geographic community around this dominant institution. This conference was the first time they were setting out to take stalk in these growing partnerships that seemed to have been operating somewhat under the radar for the last several years. I gave a talk with my university research partner. Afterwards, a conference

participant approached me and said. “You have to read this book because you sound just like the author.” I thought to myself, “This is scary if I’m starting to sound like an author of a book.” That has not been part of my career path.

But, as I discovered, there’s this wonderful way that words can help all of us, including me, a community activist. I’m just going to read a couple of passages of this book by Peter Block, The Answer to How is Yes:

“There is something in the persistent question How? that expresses each person’s struggle between having confidence in their capacity to live a life of purpose and yielding to the daily demands of being practical. It is entirely possible to spend our days engaged in activities that work well for us and achieve our objectives and still wonder whether we are really making a difference in the world. My premise is that this culture, and we as members of it, have yielded too easily to what is doable and practical and popular. In the process we have sacrificed the pursuit of what is in our hearts.”

That is my greatest fear as I take my community activism, my community partner role and community partner research role and engage with all of you and with all of my academic partners---we will start doing what is doable, practical and popular and forget where we started. We will get separated from the “why” and from the purpose.

Another quick passage from Peter Block’s book: *“If we could agree that for six months we would not ask How, something in our lives, our institutions and our culture might shift for the better. It would force us to engage in conversations about why we do what we do as individuals and as institutions. It would create the space for longer discussions about the purpose, about what is worth doing.”*

So that’s what I want to provoke you to think about today. Pretend there’s a tack on your chairs because that’s what community activists do, we agitate. As I have grown older and gotten these grey hairs and had children and grandchildren,- as I realise I’m coming to those later years and I’m not ramping up any longer but starting to slide down, -as I consider that the time is running out and it doesn’t feel as good to do this. [I put my fists together to symbolize opposing forces, conflict.] I have to figure out for our sake, for the sake of your children, our children, how to do this. [I put the palms of my hands together to symbolize compassion, peace.] That’s what I think our purpose is together and it’s very, very powerful.

And why do this or talk about this “why” with academics, or people in academic institutions? It’s because I think it is because you promised to serve the public good. Academic institutions promised to build democracies and help us all build democracies. They promised academic freedom- [and I quipped] which I still don’t understand what that is entirely because you all sometimes talk about each other behind each other’s back. And they think community people are difficult to get along with!

That is what you promised. You promised to help us level the playing field and for us to figure out how to do that together. I think that every single one of you individually

entered an academic career because you wanted to leave the world a little bit better place than you found it through your teaching, research or service to the institution. You're not just working in a store or for a corporation. Instead, you said you wanted to do this work of making the world a bit of a better place. That's the piece with which I want to engage with each of you. And then I want us to consider the institution itself. I want to take us back, I want to go back and talk about the "why".

To understand a bit about my personal relationship with higher education I will share a bit of my own story. It is somewhat awkward and clumsy and sometimes painful but a great story nonetheless. I grew up in a small, steel mill town named Ambridge in the state of Pennsylvania. It's an industrial town named after the American Bridge Steel Company, now defunct and completely closed up. This closing happened about two years after I graduated from high school. My parents were both firstborn Americans. My maternal and paternal grandparents were from Transylvania, a country that no longer exists. My father was educated in Transylvania as a metal worker. My mother grew up working really hard, cleaning for wealthier people in a suburb of Pittsburgh. She saved money under a mattress in order to run away from home and go to college. She got her second to the last beating from her father once he found out that she had done this but she left anyhow. She ran away from home, graduated with a two-year teaching degree and was teaching in Indiana, several states away. But, as the eldest girl of six children, she was called home to raise her younger siblings when her mother became ill.

I grew up knowing that I had to go to college because that's part of the immigrant continuum and my mother was the living example of just what I would be expected to do. I grew up with that notion but I also grew up in the 1960's. There were a lot of other things going on in America. My parents were happy to be called part of the silent majority in the United States at that time. I wasn't happy being part of their silent majority so I decided, yes, I would go to college but for all the wrong reasons. It was to get as far away from home as possible and from where I had grown up. I wanted to be as far away from that steel mill town as possible. When I got to college, it was a profound experience, but again, in the context of the 1960's in America. I attended Boston University for a very short time. It was during the Vietnam War and towards the end of the civil rights marches on Washington DC. I spent as much time outside of the college classroom as I did inside. When I was inside of the college walls though, there were incredible people teaching, often in non-traditional ways. For example, some of my professors were leading anti-war demonstrations within the university system, talking about building and rebuilding our democracy. In some ways, that particular university experience was a big part of why I'm standing in front of you today.

But, I realised I was wasting my parent's hard-earned money and my own that I had saved while working in a public library since I was 14-years-old. It was a waste of money all around. Plus, in my experience at the time, the world was going-to-heck-in-a-hand-basket, so why attend college?

After I quit school, I drifted around a bit and ended up in Minnesota to visit a high school friend. I lived in a commune, did some feminist theatre, waitressing, became a nursing

assistant for a short time, and eventually started a construction company. That was 34 years ago and I still own the construction company. Things have gotten difficult financially so I also work part time in a retail hardware store. During all of this, I was living in an inner city community where things are always happening. There's always work to be done, in our urban, inner city and ethnic communities, to claim our space, to claim our voice.

The work to claim our space led me to help my neighbourhood prevent a garbage transfer garbage station from being built in its midst. This particular neighbourhood is one of the poorest in the state of Minnesota and is also the most ethnically diverse. The neighbourhood population of about 20,000 people is comprised of the second largest, urban, Native American population in the United States and now, one the largest Ethiopian and Somalian populations. For 150 years or since Minneapolis became a city, it's always been a neighbourhood of immigrants, but the faces of those immigrants have changed.

We prevented this garbage transfer station from being built and we felt "pretty hot to trot". This was the wealthiest county in Minnesota. The county system is in charge of waste management. What should we do next? We looked for the next institutional enemy. I had no children then and less grey hairs so I was into this "power-over dynamic thing". It feels good to win, be able to get your way with people. It feels really good. We were looking for the next way to do that and eventually we picked on the University of Minnesota because we were tired of them "doing research on us" and "being canaries in their coalmine." We perceived them to receive millions of dollars in federal grants based upon our "needs" as identified by the researchers. It felt like university folks were like any other outsiders to our community who assumed that if we were poor, we must be stupid. So we thought we'd take on the University of Minnesota.

We ended up successfully completing, and I'll fast forward through this description for the sake of time, two federally funded projects on reducing childhood lead poisoning. The relationships between community and the University folks started out like this [I put my fists together to symbolize opposing forces, conflict.] and eventually ended up like this. [I put the palms of my hands together to symbolize compassion, peace.] Our collaboration lasted ten years. Why the collaboration sustained itself is not just about the research we were conducting, not just because the community cared about curing childhood lead poisoning, though we certainly did. Instead, we found one thing we could put at the centre of our circle, our collaboration. This was the love of our children and love of each other's children. Whether we were moms or dads or aunties or uncles, whether we were the "good parents" or "not so good parents", we wanted our kids to grow up and thrive because we knew that without that happening, our world would come to a quicker end.

Something that Scott Bowman quipped in his remarks a couple of days ago that really struck me, yet I believe he also really meant it was, "Engage or die". I think the context that he stated this phrase, "engage or die" was made from an economic perspective. In other words, if we don't have a workforce, an educated workforce, universities won't be

able to continue to bring in students. They will not survive. But, because he also had pictures of his family, his blue collar, working class family portrayed on the screen during his power-point presentation, I also know that he also understands the importance of this engagement in a very visceral, personal sense. I'm picking on you Scott,- I know you're out there so you can tell me afterwards if I got this right. There's another place from which he spoke the words "engage or die" because he knows the potential impact on his family and his loved ones if universities are unable to truly engage with communities.

I believe we've got to find a way of engaging with each other's knowledge systems or we will die. It's about sharing those knowledge systems that was our real work my community's collaborative efforts to learn how to prevent childhood lead poisoning. The community's knowledge system was understood to be equally valuable, equally necessary, equally respected as the University of Minnesota's knowledge system. It's a different way of learning, a different way of knowing. Universities don't create knowledge. Universities think they hold knowledge and they might but they only hold knowledge of a certain kind.

On a simplistic basis, all of you knew how to wake up this morning. Nobody taught you that. You knew how to wake up and you have learned how to get through the day. People who are struggling, people in America that I know, who I live down the block from me are struggling amidst incredible strife: addiction, unstable housing situations, physical abuse, joblessness, health issues, and incredible poverty and all the stress poverty brings, etc. How do they wake up each morning and get through the day? That is a way of knowing, knowing how to get through any day is profound, especially compared to how much easier it is for us to get through our days.

Think about your tough days, the tough days that maybe you had to travel over the years to get to this place, to find your place in this theatre today. But somewhere inside of you, you know the "why". And you know the how and that's where you need to engage with the community and with those shared knowledge systems. The goal is not to blend those knowledge systems. We have to value and know and trust those ways of knowing and bring them together for the common good.

So how did this collaboration that I talked about a minute ago bring together those knowledge systems? One way was by learning to respect and trust each other's knowledge systems and value them equally. But, the essential element was building a governance model that allowed those knowledge systems to be shared. That's the key with this community engagement work: it is as much about the sharing of the knowledge and, perhaps, more importantly, it is about the governance structures that will hold those shared knowledge systems. As we create structures where knowledge systems can be shared and figure out how to do that, we are building models of shared power.

That shared power, in my opinion, is what's going to save this planet and save the lives of many around us, allowing there to be many children and grandchildren for ages to come. I think that this is the work that belongs to us [meaning community and university

partners] to do. One idea, I think, that's important for us to continue to think about is the idea of "sharing" rather than "blending". I heard in the last couple of days about the kinds of projects that are happening between universities and communities in Australia. But, it still seems to me that we're talking about an academic knowledge system setting out to accomplish something with a community group, get something done. What if, again, like I was saying before, that at least some of the work was just getting to the "why"? The work is not just about "the doing" or getting it done, it's also about the process and being totally conscious every step along the way of what it feels like to do the work. What's hard, what hurts- and there better be some pain or else it's not effective. What feels glorious, what does success feel like? On one level, it needs to be personal. It needs to be all of us taking this in and at the same time not just an assembly of individuals doing so.

One of the things about the analysis of health status, at least in the US and often throughout western society, is that it considers only the health of an individual or an accumulation of individuals. Not very often do we look at health of the community, which is really a key thing. We are only beginning to examine what the social and environmental determinants are that impact the health of a community. However, many indigenous cultures and indigenous people primarily view health as a collective condition that considers the people collectively or the health of the community. It's a very powerful understanding. Thinking about health this way gets us to the "why" a whole lot faster than through considering only the health of the individual.

I'm a participant or member of an organization in Minnesota called the Cultural Wellness Centre whose purpose is to explore and improve health through first studying and learning about cultural identity. It's an African-American centric organisation where one really has to work on understanding one's own culture in order to be in a relationship with other people from the Cultural Wellness Centre. Under the leadership of Elder Atum Azzahir, Executive Director of the Cultural Wellness Center and board member of Community Campus Partnerships for Health, there is a group of people developing a Cultural Community Review Board. We're evaluating specific research projects that are brought before us and are deciding about whether or not the research is culturally appropriate to the community. We are also studying and learning together about what the very idea of research is or isn't. Research to us is a way of knowing, a way of understanding ourselves within a community.

I was at a meeting of the Cultural Community Review Board recently before coming to Australia. We were discussing how the cultural way of understanding is different from western culture's knowledge system or science. Evidence based research and that way of knowing dominates our understanding of what science is, what research is, and certainly what knowledge is considered to be. We're looking at other ways of knowing and learning especially from those in indigenous communities. Cultural wisdom or ways of knowing include topics like: living in harmony, living with mythology and stories, having an understanding of the cosmos. I'm not a religious person but I want to be living a life which integrates my emotional, mental, physical and spiritual health. That is the work of the Cultural Wellness Centre.

As we were talking about the evolution over the last several years of this Cultural Review Board, one of the elders posed a question to us out of the blue. This apparently random query sometimes happens when you work in cultural communities whose scholars come from traditions that highly value storytelling. Anyway, he said, "I wonder if we had been truly living with these shared knowledge systems and not just where these different bodies of knowledge coexist in parallel places, but where we had a deep and integrated understanding of each other's ways of knowing, if perhaps the Gulf oil spill would never have occurred. I was like, huh? I had to think about this. As an activist, it's easier to just hate BP Oil. It's just easier to be mad and angry at oil corporations. It's easier to be angry at all corporations. It's just easier to not have to think about it at all. This is hard to do with the Gulf oil spill because every time you turn on your computer, there is the latest news flash about it.

It really made me think, whatever did he mean? I went home to my family and my Friday afternoon but the question really stuck with me and I kept turning it over and over in my mind. I think I'm beginning to understand what the meaning might be. The BP Oil guys had never had conversations with the fishermen in that area who know the wind, the waves, the intricacies and mysteries of the sea. There was no opportunity for the fisherman to offer, "You guys are crazy for trying to drill this deep because it won't work." It's not just sharing knowledge systems but living an integrated life as a society. It is living by these ways of knowing, not just the scientific way of knowing but this way of knowing what is right for us as a people and integrating that with where we need to get to together and why. We have lights and electricity and all those kinds of things but let's take those knowledge systems and really get inside of us as a people and work from what we know and the why. The Cultural Wellness Center's elder really inspired me to think about how important it is to keep learning about this concept of "other ways of knowing" and to consider these ideas along side of more traditional systems of knowledge to solve real-world issues.

I can be a community activist and I have a good deal of power because you [this audience] want to know what people like me are really like, what makes us tick. It helps me to even feel exotic sometimes, especially to be invited to another country! How do I take that thrill, that charge to my ego, that "power thing" I talked about before and not go on a "power-trip"? How do I not become this egotistical individual that starts to assimilate all these experiences and grow bigger and stronger and more ferocious? How do I take these experiences, thoughts and feelings into myself, balance it all with humility and have it reflect back out to her, my daughter, [who was sitting in the audience] and all of you?

That's our job, to figure that out. Again, why am I choosing to do this work with you or wanting, hoping to, is because you promised that universities and colleges, higher education institutions, are about serving the common good. It is the place from which we can get back to levelling the playing field by participating equally, fully,---not to become grey matter, but to stay who we are and engage with each other. Not to become each other but to engage with each other around the "why", to leave the world a better place than what we found it.

Thank you.

I want to introduce Sarena Seifer, Executive Director of Community Campus Partnerships for Health. I'm a board member of Community Partnerships for Health. As an activist, one often begins working in one's own community and then, okay, one wants to work in even a bigger way, so I considered, "How about doing something on the national level"? That is more or less why I came to be on the board of CCPH. Now it's becoming an international organization. Being a board member of this vital organization is so exciting. I want to say again, the "why" of doing this work must be considered. Community Campus Partnerships for Health has and continues to strongly consider and pursue the "why". The work of CCPH is not to just improve health in the traditional meaning. Its mission is to seek social change. Community Campus Partnerships for Health lives by the why.