

And suddenly
We stood still
Held breaths and wide eyes
Waiting and waiting and waiting

I scribbled a one-month plan for a possible quarantine. One year later and we are still here. That Spring semester of 2020, I mentored college students and conducted research with a team of community organizers, youth, and scholars. In both instances, the sobering reality of the pandemic's reach into our collective and individual lives offered opportunities to reflect deeply on how we, as people, show up for each other when systems and structures fail us. Moments of crisis always reveal where the deepest wounds are and who is most vulnerable. They are also opportunities to see beyond the existing frameworks that govern our lives. These moments expose both our fragilities and deepest desires. Hanging in the balance, are the possibilities for new ways of being.

As a mentor, coaching students through the doctoral program application is a highly involved process requiring as much in-person collaboration as possible, but during a quarantine with no end in sight, our program needed to adjust. In order to respond quickly and with care, we knew that the unique circumstances posed an opportunity to truly show up for students in important and meaningful ways that placed their most pressing needs at the forefront. Before starting graduate school, I spent twenty years as a community organizer working alongside activist, artists, students, families, and people outside of the academy who taught me about the power of collective healing. I knew that *this* moment required more from me than what an academically rigorous education could ever teach. I needed to show up for the *heart-work*. Heart-work is work with people that centers the psychological, emotional and spiritual needs of people. It is an essential part of community organizing that honors the complexity of our lived experiences, especially in times of tension and crisis. Moving from a space of embodied knowledge and my experience and training as a community worker, I invited my students to a community gathering for a virtual check-in. Everyone showed up expecting updates about new deadlines and processes for getting their work done for the program but instead I asked them a set of questions I've used for decades in my practice as a community worker, "how is your heart?" "where in your body are you storing your feelings?" "what do you need from the group to feel held/supported?" One person spoke up, and another, and then every person, one by one, shared their worries, concerns, fears, anxieties, hopes, and desires. We made space for tears and silence. Despite the distance, there was a closeness that reminded us of our collective experiences. "How can institutions better support students through this crisis?" I asked this question because I'd been wondering how other students were dealing with academic demands. From social media to conversations with colleagues, it was clear that for many students, academic expectations remained unchanged. The question hung in the air. "We need time to breathe," "this is a worldwide crisis and we need professors to realize many of us are in shock," "keeping up with deadlines is hard, but this just feels wrong." I took notes of some of the things people expressed. What seemed most significant in that conversation was the feeling of overwhelm from having to continue moving forward with business as usual as though friends and family weren't struggling to simply breathe. "It would be nice to just be able to check-in like

this in our classrooms," "I didn't know I needed to vent about this," "I wish more professors would care about our mental health," "I feel like I've been holding my breath for so long," were some of the last notes I took from our meeting, leaving me with both a deep sadness and a burning desire to create more spaces for heart-work and deep breaths.

Se siente como que se me va el aire
It feels like the air is leaving me

At the start of the pandemic before closures began, I started working with a group of community organizers, students, and scholars to plan a participatory research project to investigate the experiences of family separation within immigrant communities. As our world shifted into quarantine, our research team faced an important decision about how best to proceed. Together, we gathered online to unpack our fears and desires about the new circumstances. After some deliberation we collectively decided to continue our project by shifting our plan. Through the summer months, at the height of the impact of Covid-19 in New York City, we gathered weekly to collect surveys and hold healing circles with small cohorts of those most impacted in immigrant communities. Our turn toward healing circles was an intentional move to respond to the immediate circumstances and center humanizing methods to find how best to support people who experienced being left behind by support networks and institutions meant to provide aid. Participatory methods invite those most impacted by an issue to name the problems, solutions, and desires related to that issue. While the survey data revealed the extent to which immigrant communities experienced the negative impacts of Covid-19, healing circles offered insight into the ways people made meaning of the circumstances and imagined possible steps toward justice. Our healing circles included parents and students who reflected on the impact of the pandemic on educational access. Parents wondered who was privileged in receiving free virtual learning resources and if there might be more local governments could do to ensure monolingual parents of small children could assist their children in English reading and writing tasks. Concerns were raised around increased surveillance through the virtual model and the logistics of being able to meet the technology requirements to comply with "screen on" policies. Feelings of being distrusted were expressed along with the frustration and anxiety it raised, compounding the emotional toll already felt from living through uncertainties of a global pandemic. Some high school students suggested that a hybrid schooling model post-pandemic would permit them to manage other responsibilities like work or childcare that are often part of the daily lives of students in some immigrant communities. We ended each of our healing circles with a guided meditation to help participants experience a technique that might assist them in self-soothing or in helping others through difficult and stressful moments. We also understood the importance and significance of honoring our time together. "Take a deep breath in, hold it for two seconds, and release."

Mentoring students and conducting research through Covid-19 brought me back to some of the most important lessons I received through working with community organizers on the ground. Being present, holding space, and sharing our vulnerabilities are at the root of solidarity. In moments of crisis it's critically important to remember our shared responsibilities to one another. Being seen and seeing each other in the midst of our grief is a powerful force. When

systems and structures fail to hold us up, who shows up and *how* they show up is what we will remember.

Eyes locked

Screens from near and far

Together

We

Exhaled