

“How was Fiji?”

“Was it good?” “Was it fun?”

People have been asking me these question often since I’ve returned to Toronto.

The fullness, vastness, and depth of my experience in Fiji fails to be conveyed within the confines of these monosyllabic adjectives. While ‘fun’ and ‘good’ hold their value to truthfully speak of my time in Fiji, for me, simply answering ‘yes’ to these questions traps me in the shallow ends of my ongoing reflections.

In this video, I try my best to articulate my personal and professional growth as a leader during my six weeks in Fiji.

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For my second summer in the Laidlaw Scholars Programme, I choose to complete my leadership-in-action project through the centrally-offered opportunity with Think Pacific.

Think Pacific acts as both a UK-based social enterprise and a registered Fijian charity. Through their institutional model of collaborating with the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs and local partners, Think Pacific delivers projects in rural Indigenous Fijian communities to advance the country’s National Development Plan.

Our team of Laidlaw Scholars, from different cohorts and seven universities worldwide, participated in Think Pacific’s debut project titled “Health, Community, and Youth.” During four weeks, we lived the Waisava and Vunimaqo settlements in the northern Fijian province of Ra in the largest Fijian island of Viti Levu.

Our project strived to achieve some core deliverables. First, building a community health center. This nursing dispensary would immensely benefit the community’s health worker, giving her a workspace to perform health check-ins with the settlements’ residents.

Our project also aimed to offer space for local partners, such as Diabetes Fiji and Youth Champs 4 Mental Health, to deliver their workshops to the Fijians in the community. While Diabetes Fiji sought to raise awareness about the current Fijian diet leading to high rates of non-communicable diseases, Youth Champs 4 Mental Health sought to raise awareness about the importance of mental health within the Fijian context and destigmatizing the present prejudices framed in the wider cultural space.

While Scholars helped with the funding and execution of these activities, we also participated in additional culture course sessions. These created a space for iTaukei Fijians to celebrate different aspects of their Indigenous culture with us. Culture course sessions sought to further immerse Scholars in the Fijian way of life and preserve iTaukei tradition to counter its dwindling practice against the rise of Western influence in rural Indigenous Fijian communities.

Different Fijian families within the community hosted us Scholars. During four weeks, our Laidlaw group was privileged to be the first ever to be welcomed into the iTaukei community of Waisava and Vunimaqo. Their hospitality constantly guaranteed the warmest welcome and unconditional care.

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Prior to leaving for this experience, a dear writing professor and mentor emailed me the following message: “You’re a seasoned traveller who has been living abroad and I’ve no doubt you’ll have a fantastic and existentially expanding time.”

Grasping my experience in Fiji as an ‘existentially expanding time’ is the closest I can get to capture the entirety of its impact in my life. Throughout these four weeks of living in Waisava and Vunimaqo, I stretched my heart and mind into new levels of love and introspection. The absence of my habitual routine created a conducive environment for me to reflect on who I am, who and what I value, my understanding of leadership, and how I navigate my own leadership style.

Limited technological devices and Internet access nudged me to venture into people’s life stories and thinking processes. Stepping into someone’s mind through conversation was such a vulnerable yet rewarding daily activity. I absorbed each day

through my evening journaling session before sleep. As I recounted my dialogues with Scholars and Fijians in my writing, I slowly realized how each interaction taught me how we learn *with* each other rather than *from* each other.

Learning is often an exchange, but it doesn't need to be transactional. Transaction suggests hierarchical extraction without return or appreciation. Learning *with* implies how while one person shares their thoughts or feelings, the other person receives them openly and lovingly. Both people stand at the same level in that interaction.

Storytelling, for me, has become a way of learning. Because stories walk me through someone's lived experience and their way of interpreting it, I feel accompanied while journeying through someone's life. I'm learning *with* them. I'm learning *together* with them and all that they carry inside them.

Venturing into people's life stories, thinking processes, and often souls also led me to desire to become even more well-travelled. One of my cousins, who works in the tourism industry, always noted the difference between tourism and travel. I hope to become more well-travelled by visiting new places around the world and immersing myself in their local life, always being mindful of how different communities shape our connection to different places, especially the privilege of being welcomed into Indigenous communities worldwide. But also, I hope to become more well-travelled through consuming more media. Whether reading books, watching movies, or listening to music, I desire to taste all the richness this vast world offers.

But throughout those same four weeks, the absence of my habitual routine also created an often-burdensome environment. Limited technological devices and Internet access removed usual stimulators that allowed me to distract myself from thoughts and feelings festering inside. Back in Toronto, connecting to the World Wide Web helped me temporarily brush everything inside, aside. But when in Fiji, I had to sit with my thoughts and feelings for days at a time. I had to carry that inside myself with often little privacy to debrief with my private journal or my other Scholar friends.

I had to learn how to navigate that discomfort within myself, allowing myself to feel whatever it was. From joy to sadness, harmony to distress, I had to immediately embrace it. I quickly noticed that if I ignored it, it would harm my mental health

further. Embracing it, however, would most times make me feel extremely overwhelmed. But slowly, throughout the weeks, I learned how to frame these challenges as positive discomfort within myself.

When framing these through a leadership lens, this discomfort birthed situations for me to sift through my thoughts and feelings, unscramble them, and make sense of them when I was ready for it. It meant often wanting to unpack my emotional state, but pausing the action to wait for a more diligent time to do so with myself.

Immersion in such a different physical environment, removed from everything and everyone I've ever known, brought some difficult realizations and lessons. Combined with an overall lack of privacy — through both open communal areas and a shared language — it was often challenging to even find space within the day and settlement to have a check-in chat with any of my Scholar friends. I was fortunate to meet another Spanish-speaking Scholar in my team, and communicating in the language only he and I shared created a spontaneous haven of privacy and solace. But given how, within the Fijian context, male-female relationships, even only one-on-one conversations, are often perceived as something suggestive beyond friendship, that crafted haven quickly became another thought of worry on how I was being perceived, how to best navigate the cultural setting with sensitivity, and how to be mindful of my impact as a leader.

I'm grateful to have found trusted support in a few other Scholars I grew in closer friendship to. But even with them, I had to often be honest with myself, meet myself where I was at, and communicate that to the people around me. My thoughts and feelings often clashed inside me, and I often also had to just pour them out in my journal. It was my main way to stay grounded in who I am, what I was experiencing internally and externally, and even a more private and reserved way to do so.

Through my interactions with other Scholars, we spent a lot of time together. "It's like you speed run a friendship," said one of the Scholars from my university. Especially throughout the four weeks in the settlement, we got to know each other in a very particular context — away from everything and everyone that's familiar.

Spending time together 24/7 meant that we started noticing when someone was off. While I appreciated the care and support, sometimes I wasn't ready to talk about my current emotional headspace. Recognizing that to then state it to my peers was crucial in navigating my inner tumultuous world during that period.

From spending time together 24/7 also surfaced instances where something that another Scholar said or did bothered me at times. I learned how to, first, process what specifically made me feel upset, triggered, or put off. Next, through building mutual trust and comfort with some of the Scholars, I debriefed my feelings with them, clarifying the situations, and mutually apologizing as it was fit. I became more confident in being sure of myself because I was valued in the appropriate spaces.

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More externally, however, I navigated different leadership styles and how these result in different forms of presence within social dynamics. Through exposure and interaction to different forms of leadership, I often found myself becoming hyperaware of my surroundings, both how I perceived others and how I found myself being perceived.

From my early interactions with the Laidlaw Scholars in my team, especially in the first few weeks upon our arrival in Fiji, I recurringly found myself feeling intimidated. Intimidation bubbled inside me because I identified qualities I admired yet thought I lacked. I became more aware of how my leadership style differed, but I spiraled into feeling out of place because of its differences. Throughout my life, especially within professional and academic contexts, I repeatedly struggled with Imposter-related thoughts and feelings. Experiencing them within my LiA in Fiji was unexpected but not unsurprising.

But what stemmed from it, again, was an opportunity to learn *with* my peers, and even with myself. Through our interactions, I began to better discern leadership qualities I appreciated and disliked, according to my own leadership style and overall personality. My ongoing reflection about leadership styles derived from how these, perceived through my perspective, translated into how people established their presence and carried themselves in group settings. While I admired some people's

ability to articulate their opinions so confidently to make me feel uplifted and encouraged, other times I received that same trait in a different tone that felt drained or belittled. I noticed how leadership styles, while sharing common traits, can present themselves differently and thus have different impact.

These realizations brought me outside of my contextual experience of leadership in very tangible ways. Leadership possesses both labor-related and identity-related contexts that often feed into each other. Collaboration within our team sometimes clashed but never hindered the overall goals our project aimed for and eventually successfully achieved.

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What did I learn from these eventual challenges?

I've learned to further embrace introspection and solidify self-confidence. Being confident in who I am, however, was the way to inwardly navigate these thoughts and feelings. Being more observant of how I perceive others and how, in turn, others may be perceiving me meant holding on to who I knew to be my most authentic and effortless self. While not getting too dependent on other people's perceptions of me, at the same time, I began being more mindful of how I take up space and choosing to withdraw myself.

I confirmed, through conversation with a few Scholars, that even if I felt a sense of losing my self-perception in my own thoughts and feelings, I was still striving to be being genuine. I was matching the energy of others in different situations. Either asking questions or listening more. And that one-on-one connections differ vastly from group dynamics.

The main leadership skill I applied and strengthened included meeting people where they are at, through communication and cultural humility. Recognizing lack of knowledge triggered feelings of intimidation, but reframing that into opportunity to desire to learn more and become even more interculturally aware prevailed.

A specific instance involves conversations with my Fijian mom about food. On July 24, after our culture course session where we weaved our own baskets using coconut tree branch, I showed my isu (basket) to my Na. She shared how, together with my Fijian father, they sell the baskets for 5 Fijian dollars. They sell the baskets to carry the cassava that they farm. When I asked how they say 'cassava' in Fijian, Na shared it's 'tavioka,' which instantly reminded of how in Brazil, we have this food called 'tapioca,' and it's made of cassava flour. I remember sharing that with her, and being joyful in imagining that something from my culture may have stemmed from Indigenous Fijian culture and their language.

This food-related moment pushed me to bring Brazilian cuisine to my Fijian family. I attempted to bring 'tapioca' to them, and when that failed, I brought the *brigadeiro* dessert. They loved it! And it brought me so much joy to be able to cook this in the other side of the world, unexpectedly, from the conversations I had through the cultural immersion I experienced.

Regarding language, conversations in Spanish with the Spanish-speaking Scholar sparked curiosity in the Fijians within the settlement. They would ask what language we were speaking, where it was spoken, and eventually even started picking up some words in Spanish as they contrasted them to Fijian.

This led us to teach a Spanish class together, and share the nuances of the language given the parts of the Hispanic world we are from. We also shared broader cultural nuances that stemmed from language, including how our family lineage differed. Because in the Fijian context only the father's name is passed down to their children, one of the iTuakei women in the settlement was so pleasantly surprised to learn how, in our Hispanic culture, our mother's family name is also passed down to her children.

This was a heartfelt moment for her, but for me too. It reminded me of how, before I moved to Canada for university, my mom told me, "You only learn about your culture once you leave your country."

This ongoing cultural exchange then eventually led me to share my experience in Fiji through publishing a two-part feature article in the *Sunday Fiji Times*. Journal entries

throughout my stay in Fiji led to a publication thanks to one of the Think Pacific leaders in our team knowing *The Fiji Times*' editor-in-chief. Before Fiji, writing was a core part of who I am, both personally and professionally. When in Fiji, writing profusely became every fiber of my being, and it grounded me immensely.

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Fiji, as my professor predicted, was existentially expanding for me. I learned a lot *with* people — from confronting myself in new depths because of a new positively uncomfortable environment to encountering different leadership styles and navigating how to find my space given how others take up space.

I cannot grasp the entirety of my reflections in this already lengthier video. A part of me feels I never will fully capture it. All I can do is be patient. Over time, my tangled thoughts and feelings will find their place within me.

Returning from the simplicity of Fiji to the business Toronto life was and often continues to feel jarring. I'm still figuring out how I've changed and how I've stayed the same. But I notice a renewing sense of self in nuanced capacities. More concretely, I notice myself still nurturing these new levels of introspection that became second-nature during my stay in Waisava and Vunimaqo. Through even more careful reflection, I hope to become a more interculturally aware leader with an inner drive to continue to be curious, absorb the surrounding world, and learn *with* the communities within my reach.

Fiji will always hold a dear place in my heart.

All I can do is be grateful.

Vinaka vakalevu.