

My hopes and fears  
in the collision and collaboration  
of voices and worlds  
that is  
Food Dignity

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I'm sorry I cannot be with you there today. I have had to record my presentation at home in Laramie, Wyoming.

## Introducing myself



St. Johns,  
Newfoundland,  
1975



I'll start by spending a minute on a few key moments in my 41 years of life so far. My mom is a Newfie, and my first memory is of a ferry journey to Newfoundland to visit my great grandmother Taylor. From the boat, the water beckoned as the biggest swimming pool I'd ever seen. I must have shared this with my father, because he warned me that the water was full of jellyfish (his story) or sharks (my story). Either way, for me the moral of this story was that the water went from being beautiful to terrifying, and I've been afraid of natural bodies of water ever since.

## Introducing myself



But that didn't stop me from jumping into this one, in Fiji, when I was teaching there as a Peace Corps Volunteer. Following the leadership of the local kids, I found out that something that appeared scary and dangerous turned out to be fun and exciting.

## Introducing myself



That said, my next leap came only in 2006, when I decided to give up the control and predictability of doing an armchair dissertation at Cornell University and, instead, throw myself into a new community-based health project. I didn't know what the research would be, but hoped that if I kept showing up and helping out, the research questions – and answers – would eventually emerge. It felt like jumping off a cliff. But it landed me with the most amazing set of mentors and friends, and the framework for the Food Dignity project. This is me with Jemila Sequeira, my first organizing and anti-racism mentor, and organizer of the Whole Community Project for food justice that was born out of that community-based health effort. Whole Community Project is now one of the 5 community partners in Food Dignity. This photo was taken on my last day in Ithaca. I had just turned in my dissertation to Cornell and our Food Dignity proposal to the USDA, and was on my way to Wyoming. I had decided that as an activist academic, rather than an academically-minded activist, I could bring more money to social justice work and help to amplify the wise voices of people doing that work to a wider and a powerful audience.

## Introducing myself

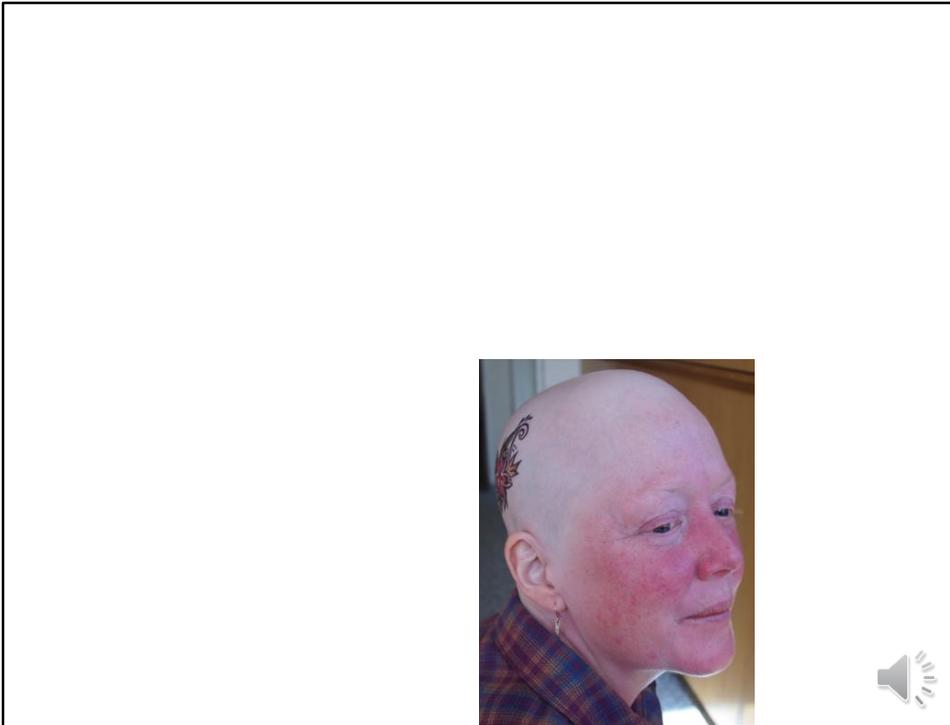


Ithaca, NY 2011



However, I never once thought I would have the luxury, and the burden, of having five million dollars over five years to further that mission.

Here I am, terrified and excited, at our first team meeting of Food Dignity partners two years ago. My learning curve has been almost vertical and I spent a lot of time being afraid.



This is me now. I am bald and, by necessity, a new kind of brave, because I am battling stage 3 breast cancer.

What have I been so afraid of?

## Reactive Fear



One lesson I've learned is that the worst possible place for leadership and good decision-making is one of reactive fear. I had lots of reactive fears. I was afraid of USDA discontinuing our funding. I was afraid of academic partners – especially at Cornell – of thinking this project was too ambiguous, too slow, too hard, and not enough like research. I had a nightmare that David Brooks – the NYTimes columnist – told the president of a foundation I was working with that what I do is *not* research, it is storytelling. (Funnily enough, this year Brooks wrote a column about the importance of storytelling in creating and understanding knowledge.)

## Reactive Fear



Most of all, I was afraid that I'd disappoint community partners and mentors, especially by being too racist, too blindly arrogant, and not radical enough to do this work. I was afraid that I, and this project, would repeat the usual crimes in community-campus research – including co-opting wisdom, knowledge, credit and funding. I have also been afraid that we will get the stories of the community food work wrong.

I owe Hank a lot of credit for holding me back from making important project decisions from this dangerous hole of reactive fear until I finally (mostly) found a better way.

## Easy(ier) Courage



With help of time, study, and friends (including those on the Food Dignity team), I have been climbing out of that hole – embracing these fears along the way. I have discovered that acting with courage is so much easier than acting out of fear and, with some irony, makes my fears much less likely to be realized. I now know that when I most want to turn my back, I need to pry open my heart. When I most wish to squeeze my eyes shut, I must force myself to witness. Instead of defending, I should listen and learn. And never, ever, suppress my red flags.

## E.g., 2 red flags I have suppressed

🚩 “Explaining” how indirect cost inequities in FD aren’t as bad as they could be.

		Development, Coordination
Academic conference travel	\$ 131,650	To disseminate results (the community subawards also include some travel)
University indirect costs	\$ 576,944	12% might sound high to community people, but it is well below the circa 50% that is a standard university rate, and the 28% allowed by USDA.
Community indirect costs	\$ 151,155	This is 10% added to each of the 5 subawards. A little for website development, and things I must have



Just as examples, here are two flags I should *not* have ignored.

In my very first memo to the FD team I defended the indirect costs the universities take: quote, “12% might sound high to community people, but it is well below the circa 50% that is a standard university rate, and the 28% allowed by USDA.” unquote. Share and discuss – yes – but why defend? I was so deep in my reactive fear hole that I was being proactively defensive, and about something I had no wish to defend.

## E.g., 2 red flags I have suppressed

- 🚩 “Explaining” how indirect cost inequities in FD aren’t as bad as they could be.
- 🚩 Accepting a conference’s rules that only two coauthors for a FD workshop could be listed in the program.



About a year later, in our first collaborative FD conference presentation, I submitted all the names of the FD people participating. The conference organizers came back and said we could list only two. After one weak attempt at getting an exception, I ignored a red flag that I felt and listed myself and Hank, as the leads in the project. As the conference drew near, the flag became more like a fire alarm and I wanted to run – even though I couldn’t articulate why. At the conference, Jemila and Gayle went from being warm with me to giving me a cold shoulder, after having seen the program, which did not list all the coauthors. They each tried to help me understand; and now I can glimpse how my behavior represented one of the big risks in Food Dignity – that academic partners will appropriate and colonize and take credit for the work and wisdom of community partners.

## Easy(ier) Courage: “Built-in inequity”

Examples in Food Dignity: “Am I supposed to do this work out of the trunk of my car?” – an FD community partner

- For UW and CU, Porter budgeted for USDA’s max indirect costs of 22%; and only 10% for community partners. USDA disallowed even that.
- Academic partner salary fringe is 40-56%; community partner fringe is built into (lower) salary lines.
- Project poses community partners as the leaders and experts, but UW is the grantee and Porter the director.
- All the academic partners are white.

From “Food Dignity” poster, by Gayle Woodsum, Jim Sutter, Hank Herrera, and me, for the CCPH Community Partners forum, December 2012



Here is a piece of a poster that some of us, including Hank and Gayle, did for a Community Campus Partnerships for Health conference in December. Finally naming ways that Food Dignity perpetuates inequity was so much easier than defending them.

## Love, hope, courage and rigor



I still have a long way to go, as any of these folks actually there with you today can tell you. But I am not alone among the Food Dignity academics, I think, in learning to do this work with courage, working from an open-hearted place of love and hope instead of acting in fear and feigned detachment. I am also learning that coming to the research from this more “true” place means that community partners are more interested in working with us to identify and share “true” answers in our research collaborations. In other words, working from the heart, with love and courage, leads to research that is not only more ethically “right” (and way more fun), but also is more rigorous.

# Gratitude



Love, hope and courage have been my talismans on this journey of learning how to do social justice work, and in particular doing that work via community-academic collaborations. Humility is another key feeling, though I have also learned that *all* of these feelings flourish when I work from a place of gratitude.

# Gratitude

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For example, while funding acknowledgements like this are required, I also feel deeply thankful for the opportunities these funders have created for this work. I am grateful to all of you there, in the room in Cornerbrook, for your time, interest and insights in these themes today. I am grateful to Hank for teaching me to work from the heart before the head; to Gayle for her mentorship in leadership and in working with gratitude; and to Daryl whose wisdom, tenacity and courage teaches me hope. Most of all, I am grateful to every one of the over three dozen people working together in this project who are struggling through the collision and collaboration of voices and worlds for food dignity.