

Dear City of Seattle,

We, Ubax Gardheere and Boting (Bo) Zhang of the Office of Planning & Community Development's Equitable Development Initiative, are writing to tell you that we're done.

We're done working for a dictator posturing as a Mayor. We're done feeling increasingly out of touch with our communities and friends. And we're done being women of color bearing a disproportionate emotional labor burden in our civilization's collective reckoning with our mid-life (or is it end-of-life?) crisis.

We can tell you more about all of these things, in due time. For now, we're taking some time off to reclaim our mental health. And before we do, we want to share with you some changes that we'd suggest.

First, in this election cycle, consider this: when we select candidates for how good they are at convincing us that they are the best, we elect *exactly the wrong kinds of leaders* who can bring out the best in others.

Ask candidates to show their work. What is the process by which you've arrived at your current beliefs? Who did you include, and what lived experiences do they bring? Do those with different views feel heard by you, or left out of your process, or maybe even bullied into swallowing their own values to do it your way?

Give love to candidates who know something about trauma and vulnerability. How are you taking care of yourself? How can we support you, hold a space for you where you don't need to show up for us every day with your armor on and your quiver ready?

For years, the two of us have witnessed firsthand the toll it takes inside City Hall when a Mayor is elected more for their conviction than for their curiosity. We might call this "trickle-down politics": the mindset that if we just get a leader who believes what a majority of voters believe, the institution can do great things. Trickle-down politics was a good foundation for a society built on conditional belonging, but deep democracy—true collective decision-making—is what we need if we truly intend a society of unconditional belonging.

This brings us to community. Community, we miss you. When we each took our jobs, we were afraid that we'd get pulled away from the values and people we hold most dear. To an extent, we have. Our bodies have been weaponized in an institution that historically and presently has actively fought against you, and you have sensed this.

We couldn't have made it this long without your love and support, and we can't wait to be back alongside you.

But one thing that has broken our hearts during our time here has been sensing that, as you are building up more power, there has been an increasing sense of gatekeeping among you. You are being divided by the same disease of charismatic leadership that has infected our civic politics.

Those who have done incredible work fighting for change excel at the fight. Sometimes, it's a different kind of leadership that's needed to build collaboration.

We want you to know that you are who keep us going inside a heartbreaking institution. We know how hard it is to stay together in a system that keeps rushing us, insisting that we prove ourselves with concrete actions and deadlines that, by design, come at a cost to relationship. We are trapped in a system that has internalized the belief that it is what we do and produce, not how we live our lives, that matters. And so, the responsibility to heal isn't just yours to bear. The institutional media, funders, landowners, and governments who insist that you keep proving yourselves need to turn their gaze inward.

But we also want you to know that when you start to be overcome by your hurts from each other, when you stop making space to heal them, when you go your separate ways, or when you forget that we are part of you, we falter too. It becomes harder to discern what we're [longing for anymore](#), in the fight against so many things.

Which brings us to emotional labor.

There is an ongoing joke about the Seattle Process, this notion that when you bring too many people together, we don't get anything done.

Fuck that. It's not bringing together too many *people* that makes us slow. It's bringing together so much trauma that gets us trapped in gridlock. And time and again, we have seen women and people of color step up inside the institution to massage at the knots.

The [2020 Workforce Equity Technical Report](#), published by the Seattle Department of Human Resources and Seattle Office for Civil Rights, says that "women leave regular employment at rates 30-60% higher than men." Here are the statistics:

Among employees leaving regular positions, people of color and women were somewhat less likely to be retiring or leaving for personal or family reasons, and more likely to be leaving for reasons involving professional advancement or due to workplace conflict or culture. Employees of color were more likely to report reasons for leaving of conflict or culture (42%) than were white employees (37%). This difference was wider for women (44%) versus men (35%), and was especially so for women of color (47%) versus white men (34%).

"Employees of color and women were also more likely to be leaving City employment without a new job lined up," the report adds. If the two of us choose to leave the City after our mental health break, we will be in this category.

To our colleagues at the City who continue to do this heavy lifting, we love you. We are indebted to the community that we have built together. Let us know how we can continue to support you, even if we decide to leave.

And to our colleagues who have not seen the emotional labor that others are carrying, please prioritize the labor of learning to feel your feelings, so that others aren't feeling them for you.

Would any of this be happening if, as citizens, we had a clearer picture together of how much trauma-informed work is needed to truly heal our society? Of how poorly suited our current paradigm of policy fixes is to handle the root causes of trauma?

This brings us back to elections.

This year, we can have an uplifting election cycle, if we all participate in making it so. We make space for our candidates to talk about vulnerability, and failure, and trauma, and the hard work of healing a society has continued to fail to solve any problem without generating three more. Let's stop pretending that someone must have the answer. Let's remember that the solution is on us, together.

How we run our elections is how we run our administrations. Let's do better this time.

Signed,



Boting Zhang

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