

Dear Okasan,

How are you? I hope well, despite all that is happening. As we approach the end of 2020, I am reflecting on the whirlwind of a year we have had. Here in Los Angeles, we have been in lock down on and off since March. For a full-time working mother of a five-year-old who just started kindergarten digitally, it has been one of the most challenging times of my life.

My days start with an 8am meeting, then back-to-back meetings until about 1pm, then a quick lunch. Then I play with my son until he is ready to do school. Then I would teach him science or social science class depending on the week, with an added music or art class on Wednesdays and Fridays. This is followed by a 40-minute walk with our dog, since five-year-old kids need regular physical activity, followed by snack time. Then several hours will be filled by Legos, brain flakes, drawing, sidewalk chalk – anything that would occupy my son while I arrange dinner. After dinner, I would go back to working several more hours, followed by putting our son to bed, walking the dog again, and cleaning the kitchen. At that point if I have more work, I will go back to work. If not, I collapse. This has been our life since March.

Just writing the routine exhausts me, but unfortunately my situation is not unique. In fact, I have many privileges that I enjoy, such as having a job that allows me to work from home, being a two-parent household, having a small but safe home where we can shelter ourselves and quarantine, to be able to take walks everyday outside due to the mild weather, and many others. When I talk with other parents, I hear exhaustion and burn out in their voices. I hear about their struggle with shame and guilt for not being a good parent, because of added screen time or inconsistent bedtimes. I hear about their anger towards the government that is not supporting their citizens in ways that are needed. But most of all, I hear about their grief. Grief for ourselves; for lost normalcy, for lost time, for lost personal space. Grief for our children; for not being able to have social interactions with their friends, to see their grandparents, to expand their curiosity through travel. Grief for our society; for the inequitable systems that harm marginalized people, for the racial injustices that have been thriving for hundreds of years, for the murders of Black people. We have all lost something or someone and it will take time and work from all of us to heal.

I have been thinking a lot about productivity. In our society, productivity is synonymous with success because in capitalism, we are only successful if we are producing more and faster. Even during the pandemic when everyone is dealing with grief and loss, it is expected that we stay productive. Now that we are always home, of course you can put in more hours for work, of course you can be available 24/7 for your organization, right? Now that you are not traveling and have all that extra time, of course you should be learning a new skill and taking up baking or exercising, right? If you have not acquired a new skill, you are doing pandemic wrong, right?

I also struggle with the notion of my self-worth being tied to productivity; that if I am not working hard and producing constantly, I am not worth anything. I acquired this belief in my youth, growing up in Japan. I was born and raised in Chiba Prefecture to a Japanese mother and Indian father. The Japanese culture I grew up in and my father's immigrant experiences both taught me that only hard work would lead me to success. I was often told that I was lazy and after hearing it so many times, I started to internalize it. After immigrating to the U.S., I overcompensated by working harder, longer hours, and

faster than the people around me, which often led to burn out or illness. I thought I had to prove my worth constantly to my employers and colleagues, particularly as a woman of color.

At the beginning of the pandemic, much of my time as an arts funder was taken up by conversations with artists who were struggling from the collapse of their whole industry. The work felt more urgent than ever and I took on too much work and started putting pressure on myself unnecessarily. I also put harsh expectations on myself with my son's education. Some of the pressures were coming from the organization I work at and my son's school, but it was also coming from myself. It took me a long time to realize that I don't have to meet any kind of expectation right now. That if I don't take care of myself first, I won't be able to take care of others. That I should be tending to myself with kindness and grace. That I am worthy regardless of whether I am producing anything. That if I chose this moment to be in grief and spent time resting instead, I am not lazy. That it's ok to listen to the needs of my body, my mind, and my heart.

Now as a forty-year-old mother to my own mixed-race son, I am working on dismantling the internalized narratives around productivity that I grew up with. Now I look at how far I have come, and I see beauty and resilience in myself. I look back on my life and see resilience in how I navigated living in different countries and how I found ways to thrive in them. My resilience keeps me going through this pandemic, to continue to show up for my family even if I am not the best version of myself. I look at my son and see the resilience in him daily, in how he is making sense of this strange time and still finding joy in every moment. He keeps me present in the moment and grounds me in what is most important. Within all this uncertainty, I know one thing for sure – that he loves me no matter what. To him, the most important things are that I am present with him and that I am there for him when he needs me.

I am wishing you and Daddy a restful new year. I hope that we will be able to see each other in 2021.

Love, Meena