Night of Ideas San Francisco
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How do we close the distance? Access. Building and supporting access will bring us together as individuals, communities, and nations.

I am a disabled person living in the Mission district who uses a wheelchair and ventilator full-time. Everyday I experience the very real distance between myself and the non-disabled world which by the way is the default we all exist in. The distance I am talking about is the ableism and exclusion embedded in our political, physical, and social environments.

A disabled person in a non-disabled world is forced to advocate for access, constantly having to provide proof and perform deservingness. When you're not in the center, you are subject to being doubted and under suspicion of getting unfair special treatment when access is actually a human and civil right.

And lo and behold, last March when San Francisco announced the stay-at-home order almost everyone had to adjust to new ways of working and connecting. For decades, disabled people who advocated for remote work and learning, for online conferences and festivals, for content in multiple formats, were told 'it's too difficult' or 'it takes away from the face-to-face experience.' In this new reality where being close can be deadly, access suddenly became available because non-disabled people were inconvenienced and had choices taken away from them.

As a high risk person, I have been out exactly one time in the last 11 months for a flu shot. Even with the arrival and distribution of vaccines to the Bay Area, I will continue to feel unsafe for the rest of this year because vaccines are not a panacea. Like so many other disabled, sick, and immunocompromised people, I fear that people will stop taking precautions such as hand washing, social distancing, and wearing masks because they are under the belief that vaccination will protect them 100% or that herd immunity will take care of us all.

Privilege is the distance. Access and the quest for justice is the way to close that distance. Both access and justice requires political will and the belief that everyone is interdependent and has value. That my well-being is tied up with your well-being. That access belongs to everyone.

However, this pandemic revealed how far we have to go because hypercapitalism and white supremacy made the conditions in which marginalized communities suffer the most, are considered expendable, and face the greatest inequities in healthcare, education, employment, and housing.

But what if...we decide to **not** go back to normal...that we learn from these difficult times and design a better world centered on access, care, and justice?

This would require San Francisco to acknowledge their complicity in fueling gentrification and structural inequality in our so-called progressive city. And this would mean acknowledging how certain populations have been harmed, criminalized, and disenfranchised by public institutions such as houseless people, older and disabled people, undocumented people, poor people, and communities of color.

We all have the capacity to create access for one another. And while things still feel bleak, I have hope for the future because we all have the potential to learn and grow **if** we close the distance **together**. I'll leave you with two questions to think about during this glorious night of ideas:

1) Who is missing in the spaces you inhabit and why?
2) What can you do beyond being a 'good ally' and advocate for access through actions and practices?

If you want to respond on social media, use the hashtag #NightofIdeasSF.

Thank you for listening.