

My Leadership in Action (LiA) Adventure: Four Weeks of Embracing Solitude for Self-Reflection and Exploring South and Not-South San Francisco

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(One of my many sublime sunsets in the sunny state of California)

Abstract. Amidst exciting visions of work and adventure in South San Francisco during my LiA summer, an underlying uneasiness about solitude lingered. The discovery that I would lack a physical office space with colleagues to work with further prompted a unique form of solitude. However, reconnecting with distant relatives offered a genuine sense of belonging amidst the new landscape, and friendships with fellow Laidlaw scholars from home cheered me on in my travels. San Francisco's scenic wonders further painted over my initial worries. Exploring diverse neighbourhoods, from historic Chinatown to the Google headquarters, transformed my isolation

into a beautiful solo journey of self-reflection on identity and belonging. This journey ultimately illuminated the distinction between solitude and loneliness, the warmth of supportive family and friends, and the glorious and subtle beauty of alien experiences. As marvellous California sunsets marked the passing days, each moment of immersion in a new world reinforced the transformative power of exploration.

Before proceeding with my reflection, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Laidlaw Scholars Foundation for the unwavering support which made this journey of self-discovery possible. My heartfelt thanks also go to my LiA project advisor, Professor Joy Fitzgibbon, whose guidance and insights both preceded and enriched this experience. Additionally, I deeply appreciate the U of T Laidlaw Scholars Programme, especially my wonderful counsellor Shraddha Prasad whose support during my trip fuelled my determination to keep my head high. Thank you all for being integral to the realization of this remarkable journey.

Contemplation. The day after my 21st birthday I stepped onto a plane bound for San Francisco. This journey marked my significant coming of age both as a scholar and an individual. California was uncharted territory but my lifelong passion for travelling triumphed over the underlying anxiety of embarking on this solo expedition. Still, amidst visions of the CyberPeace Foundation's (CPF) office and weekends brimming with San Francisco adventures, a shadow of concern about solitude lurked beneath the surface - one that I would make my friend throughout this odyssey.

On a pragmatic aside, proximity to the CPF office was a deliberate consideration during my trip planning. Choosing the Rodeway Inn as my lodging, a mere 15-minute stroll from the office, I

soon discovered Google Maps' discouraging projection of a two-hour bus ride to downtown San Francisco. Still, I recognized that my journey to California was driven by LiA and not leisure, and so reconciled myself to rare visits to the city. This point will resurface later in my narrative.

Furthermore, as I was planning, the notion of family entered the picture as I prepared to depart. My Mother's casual mention revealed that I had distant relatives in California - a connection dormant in the recesses of memory, and one that I brushed off rather prematurely. I embarked on this adventure with high hopes of forming another professional network, anticipating the camaraderie that often develops within an office setting. However, upon setting foot in the city, reality unfolded differently. The absence of the CPFs physical office in South San Francisco, despite prior statements, brought forth a unique sense of solitude. The friendships typically nurtured through shared experiences were noticeably absent. While the idea of joining a Facebook group or conversing with strangers seemed plausible, the fleeting nature of my stay rendered these interactions somewhat superficial. As such, the prospect of reconnecting with long-lost relatives brimmed with newfound excitement.

Reflecting now, some of my fondest recollections of San Francisco intertwine with these newfound family ties. Together, we explored Santa Cruz—an enchanting experience amidst the backdrop of azure waters, lively boardwalks, and the cathartic rush of slightly reducing my fear of roller coasters, an exhilarating feat as I conquered America's 8th oldest ride! Equally remarkable was the opportunity to visit the Google headquarters, a rare glimpse into the epicentre of innovation, thanks to my step-uncle, a software engineer at the company. The vast expanse of Google's Palo Alto campus and the bustling ambience of Stanford University visited twice, once with my relatives and once by myself, evoked a sense of belonging akin to my campus in Toronto. It was thanks to

my relatives' thoughtfulness that I got to experience the exhilaration of driving across the Golden Gate Bridge, and from a lookout point that was beyond the reach of foot or conventional public transport. Their genuine hospitality also extended to driving me to the famous Muir Woods, ensuring that I could embrace the full extent of the natural wonders the region had to offer. These acts of true kindness, bestowed upon a person they had not seen in years, resonated deeply and warmed my heart to its core. In a world often characterized by fast-paced living, their gestures reaffirmed the enduring significance of family bonds and the genuine compassion that can flourish across time and distance.



(Unveiling a fantastic fresh view of the Golden Gate Bridge from the Marin Headlands, courtesy of my relatives' kindness)

Another magical memory stems from watching "Spiderman: Across the Spideverse" in South San Francisco - a movie that unexpectedly resonated with my journey by emphasizing themes of

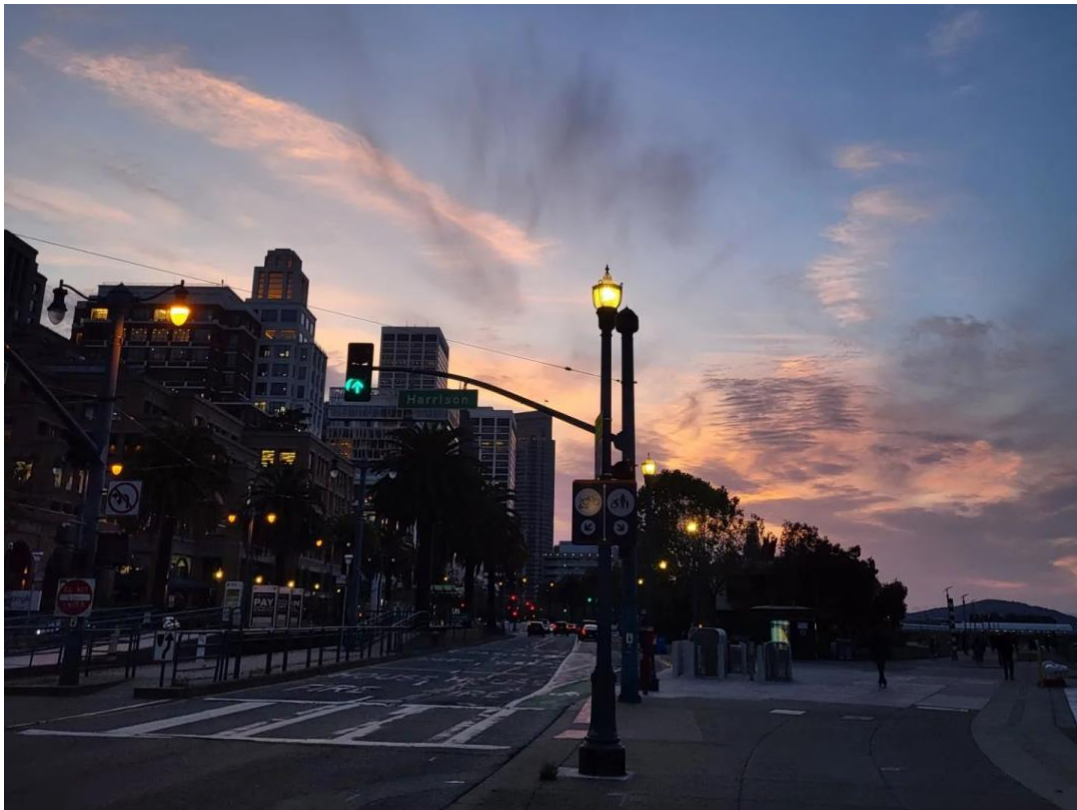
belonging and forging one's identity with the unshakeable foundation of family and friends' support. In that regard, my fellow Laidlaw Scholars deserve a special mention. Though unnamed for privacy purposes, they remain deeply cherished. As these friends were getting ready to undertake their own LiA summers, they intimately comprehended my circumstances. Hearing me express my initial worries about solitude, they reached out with frequent messages and calls throughout my adventure, providing much-appreciated light and support.

Still, the core of my odyssey was solitude – intimidating, alluring, and then peaceful solitude. The symphony of my solo adventures in downtown San Francisco were starbursts in my journey, bright in my memories. I stumbled upon a surprising revelation within the first few days of arriving in South San Francisco - the Cal Train station, a mere 15-minute walk from my Inn, offering swift access to the heart of San Francisco. This newfound ease of transportation unveiled the vibrant cityscape, a hilly landscape of urban charm. Embarking on this railway adventure for the first time on a crisp May morning, I found myself atop a steep hill, where the iconic Golden Gate Bridge stood tall against shifting grey clouds and the navy expanse of the bay - a sight etched indelibly in memory.



(Dual vistas of the Transamerica Pyramid; the first captured during a morning stroll through Chinatown, and the second later that same eventful day en route to dinner and home)

Another memorable narrative unfolded on another day and another train ride downtown; I embarked on a 27-kilometre odyssey through the city's diverse neighbourhoods. From the historic Chinatown to Café Trieste, where long-gone literary musings of Francis Coppola, hard at work over *The Godfather*, whispered through the air, each step bore witness to the city's multifaceted allure. The Exploratorium, a haven of scientific marvels, stirred wonder within me, while a tranquil path tracing the water's edge led me to an enchanting vista beneath the majestic Golden Gate Bridge. The episode's culmination - a resplendent pink sunset - cast a radiant glow over a day defined by wonder.

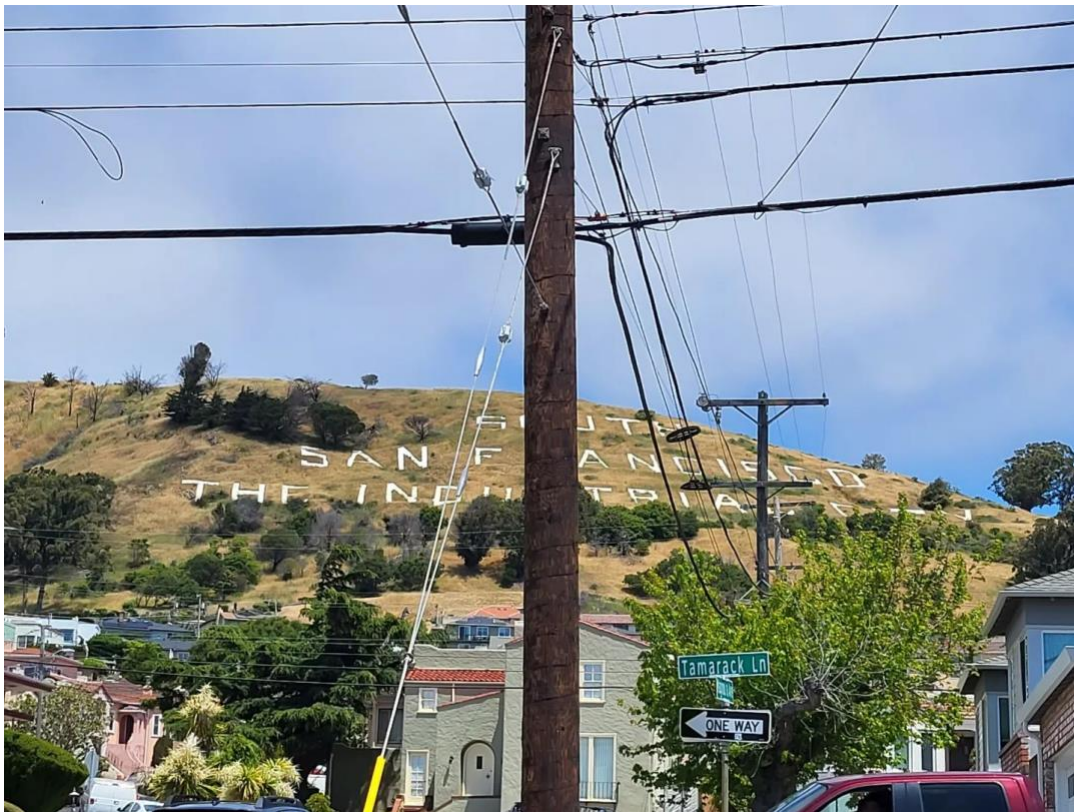




(The radiant sunset that followed my long walk, and the cheerful lights of Chinatown guided my way back to the train station)

Another high point of my San Francisco explorations materialized with a long-awaited pilgrimage to Alcatraz Island - a destination that held a coveted place on my bucket list even before I arrived in the golden state. Determined to relish this iconic landmark before the crowds arrived, I greeted the dawn on a cool June morning with anticipation, waking up at 5 AM to complete my regular morning regiments and catch the early train downtown. Aboard the Alcatraz ferry, the island's stoic silhouette against the backdrop of early morning greys heightened the sense of intrigue that enveloped me. Wandering through the labyrinthine cells, I absorbed the haunting narratives of its history, a poignant reminder of the complexities of human experience. As I returned to the mainland, warming under an afternoon sun, the resonance of the past lingered, etching a lasting mark on my consciousness.

While San Francisco's allure did lie in its scenic magnificence, some of my greatest takeaways from this trip transcended visual grandeur. Rather, they were nestled in quiet days spent in South San Francisco. A cascade of cherished moments marks my reflections on the journey. The delight of sipping a Spiced Rose latte at Dead Eye Coffee encapsulated the essence of simple pleasures. Juicy mandarins and maroon cherries bursting with sun-soaked sweetness reminded me of life's delights waiting in small, unrecognized bowls. The playful caress of the wind atop the picturesque hills carried whispers of life, while a shady bench next to South San Francisco's city hall became a haven for working, reading, and silently contemplating life's unfolding chapters. Amid these moments, the constant presence of aeroplanes overhead, like guardians of my aspirations, offers a reassuring echo of my roots as a pilot's daughter. The familiar roar of engines evoked memories of home and family, creating a comforting symphony that embraced me even in new surroundings.





(Watching over my sojourn in the city, the 'South San Francisco: The Industrial City' sign stood as a symbol of stability and opportunity. On one of my last days in this vibrant locale, I ascended the steep hill, savouring the glorious vantage point that allowed me to witness my own small universe from above - a glory as sweet as the golden, juicy mangoes of the local grocery shops.)

When I orchestrated my journey to South San Francisco, my expectations crafted a bracing balance of work and exploration. Anticipating a relentless 9-to-9 cadence, I envisioned industrious labour in the CPF's office, local discoveries of nature and nourishment, and mindful self-care. Focusing on the latter, reading has always been central to my mental well-being routine. Thus in my travel arsenal, I stowed three companions: "Klara and the Sun" by Kazuo Ishiguro, a mesmerizing narrative from the perspective of a caretaking robot navigating love, mortality, and faith within a single-mother household; "The Wires of War" by Jacob Helberg, a topical exploration of Sino-American cyberspace competition's implications for democratic societies and the responsibilities

of American corporations in upholding democracy; and then, a masterpiece deserving its spotlight – "My ABCs: Argentina, Brazil, Canada: Stories, Letters, and Poems about Identity and Belonging" by fellow Laidlaw Scholar Mariela Sol Torroba Hennigen. This literary gem resonated deeply, illuminating Mariela's strong, kind persona in precious new lights and intertwining her experiences with mine, as I resonated with navigating the crossroads of two cultures, Ukrainian and Emirati, before coming to embrace a third in Canada. A crucial truth unfurled through her masterful use of touching, inviting, living language - the significance of cherishing family and cultivating a supportive network as keystones for resilience in new circumstances. A highlight of my new circumstances was one warm June morning when Mariela and I had a long Zoom call to discuss her wonderful writing – I came prepared with sincere compliments and questions, taking full advantage of the time to talk to my Published Author, capital P and capital A, friend about her writing process and wonderful way with words.

Returning to late May, upon my arrival in South San Francisco, time made its presence felt like an unexpected companion. While my Cyber x Democracy workshop creation commitment retained its prominence in my schedule, the absence of a conventional office space to walk to every day, coupled with the initial exciting promise of supplementary tasks in the same setting, afforded me an unanticipated bounty of hours. Neighbourhood exploration and Californian sun-soaked interludes beckoned. Swiftly devouring the books I had brought along in the first few days and evenings, my curiosity propelled me to enter the South San Francisco public library, right in the middle of the city's only main street. My affection for libraries has been a constant thread throughout my life. Perhaps it's a trait passed down through generations, as my Mom was a librarian before becoming my Mom. Fond memories of libraries have accompanied me since

childhood, and that love has endured through my present days, including my time at U of T's Robarts Library. The South San Francisco library's bright, inviting expanse, resonated with the hum of communal engagement. Computers hummed with activity, and 3D printers materialized creativity. Wielding my new SSF library card, I returned to this tranquil environment repeatedly – a noteworthy rendezvous being my borrowing of "Pegasus: How a Spy in Your Pocket Threatens the End of Privacy, Dignity, and Democracy" by Laurent Richard and Sandrine Rigaud. Amidst its pages, the disquieting yet vital portrayal of the Pegasus malware's implications for democracy, particularly press freedom, stoked the fire of my ardent passion for cybersecurity. The invisible yet palpable threat, traversing democratic and non-democratic realms alike, underscored the paramount importance of safeguarding the digital foundations of our societies.

As my days unfolded against the backdrop of South San Francisco's vibrant research landscape, a recurring thought tugged at my reflections: my unique amalgamation of 21-year-old youth and Laidlaw scholarly aspirations. An age never to be revisited in this setting, under these circumstances. Each passing sunset coloured the timeline of my four-week journey, a reminder of wondrous fleeting moments. Despite the twists that diverted my path from its original course, the experience etched an indelible chapter in my life story. Amidst the unscripted narrative, I found myself on an unexpected odyssey of self-discovery, a journey that rekindled my appreciation for solitude and my inherent ability to shape moments into meaningful experiences. The journey showed me what I already knew: that the world, vast and captivating, awaits exploration. Recognizing the value of social connections, the fear of solitude must not ward off a drive for seeking novel experiences in alien lands.

As I wrap this chapter of my journey, hope lingers in the air. The lessons learned and the growth experienced are lasting companions that will guide me forward. The reminder that I can embrace the unknown with an open heart and a resilient spirit fuels my aspirations for the future. Just as the sun sets and rises anew, I carry with me the assurance that life's unexpected turns can lead to some of the most profound personal progressions. While this voyage may have concluded, the path ahead is illuminated with the promise of uncharted horizons, where challenges and triumphs await, each contributing to the ongoing story of my evolution.