

The Act of Becoming

As she assumes the superintendency during a global pandemic, the author asks, ‘How do we become who we are meant to be?’

BY JILL A. BAKER

“There’s power in allowing yourself to be known and heard, in owning your unique story, in using your authentic voice. And there’s grace in being willing to know and hear others. This, for me, is how we become.”

— MICHELLE OBAMA

I have Michelle Obama’s memoir, *Becoming*, sitting in a prominent place in my new office in Long Beach, Calif. It’s there for many reasons. Obama, while she doesn’t know it, is a friend and mentor to me. The book sits near the door to my office because it reminds me to listen for her voice when things get rough.

You know the words — “When they go low, we go high” — and, of course, many other life lessons and wisdom that she offers in telling the story of her own becoming. The book also sits there to remind me of the significance of becoming, something that feels near and dear to my heart as I reflect upon my experiences from the past six months.

In December 2019, my boss announced his

retirement. He had been at the helm of the Long Beach Unified School District for almost 18 years. He worked tirelessly for students, balancing the demands of working to close the achievement gap for students of color while ensuring that our district was a place where all students, no matter where they lived in our community, would get a good education. His legacy and connection to our local community will be felt for years to come. And I am fortunate to know that he remains nearby, cheering us on.

I was technically well-prepared to become a superintendent. I was a successful teacher and principal and then in 2005 I completed the Broad Superintendents Academy shortly after earning a doctorate in educational leadership from the



University of Southern California. From 2005 to 2020, I served in a number of assistant superintendent positions and as deputy superintendent of schools in Long Beach. In 2017, I attended the National Superintendents Academy, conducted by Atlantic Research Partners, to revisit my understanding of the roles and responsibilities of being a superintendent.

I am grateful for the many experiences I had prior to becoming a superintendent, but what has prepared me to assume the superintendency in the midst of a global pandemic, more than any training program, likely has more to do with my ability to “become.”

The Pandemic’s Arc

Like most of those working as superintendents, I have handled countless emergencies and crises during my tenure as a school and district leader. And while the response to COVID-19 initially had a familiar feel to it, I quickly realized this was a crisis of a different magnitude. The only easy decision to make was our first: to provide meals

for our 70,000 students in every school building starting on the Monday following our school closure.

From that point forward, life as we knew it was tossed about and we were left to sift through conditions, barriers, data and warnings as they fell upon us, to make thousands of decisions over the course of a few months. What became most striking to me was how destabilizing it was for my team (and me) not to be able to see the arc of the crisis we were managing. I believe it is often that arc that helps us to “hang in there” and to use self-talk such as, “Just a couple more days and it will be over.”

While we inherently knew (or maybe just wanted to keep believing) that things would get better, we had no way of determining when, which forced us to have to persist without an end in sight. In order to lead and support my team, I found several ways to combat the feelings that arose when the arc of the pandemic was nowhere to be seen and while the world around us had come to a halt. What did I do?



► **Creating and Staying in Community**

Starting on March 13, I filmed a daily message to our community. If you had told me on March 13 that I would film 50-plus messages during our school closure, I never would have believed you. But the opportunity to stay in community with staff and families became the motivation to stretch myself into a new dimension of leadership.

I quickly moved from thoughtfully crafted messages on a teleprompter to an authentic mixture of updates and words of encouragement, emanating from my true style of being an encourager. I researched ideas, incorporated things I had experienced in my own life and embraced the opportunity to build messages of empathy and empowerment during a very scary time. What mattered most to me was hearing from students, teachers, administrators and community members about the impact of those messages. They were my inspiration and my motivation.

► **Getting Comfortable With Being Uncomfortable**

I have a bad habit of being overprepared. It has served me well in my professional career and has contributed to me being respected in my field. However, leading our pandemic response required that I get comfortable with being uncomfortable. Because the conditions had changed so dramatically, there was no longer a way to be overprepared or even prepared for my day-to-day work.

My ability to get comfortable with being uncomfortable helped allow me to experience a

new degree of vulnerability and to connect with others in new ways. It also required that I trust my instincts and own the knowledge and experience I possessed simply for what it was without feeling the need to be more prepared. Having to state publicly, “I don’t know” or “things may change again, but we just don’t know,” required a new kind of courage, the courage to be seen as an everyday human, doing the best I could during a very difficult time.

► **Unplugging**

I don’t actually subscribe to the idea of balance, but I do believe in the need to determine our individual means of unplugging. Unplugging allows us to rest, refresh and regain perspective to be good teammates, good listeners and good leaders. While our district’s senior team continued to work from the central office throughout the pandemic, this actually created more of a need to encourage one another to find ways to unplug.

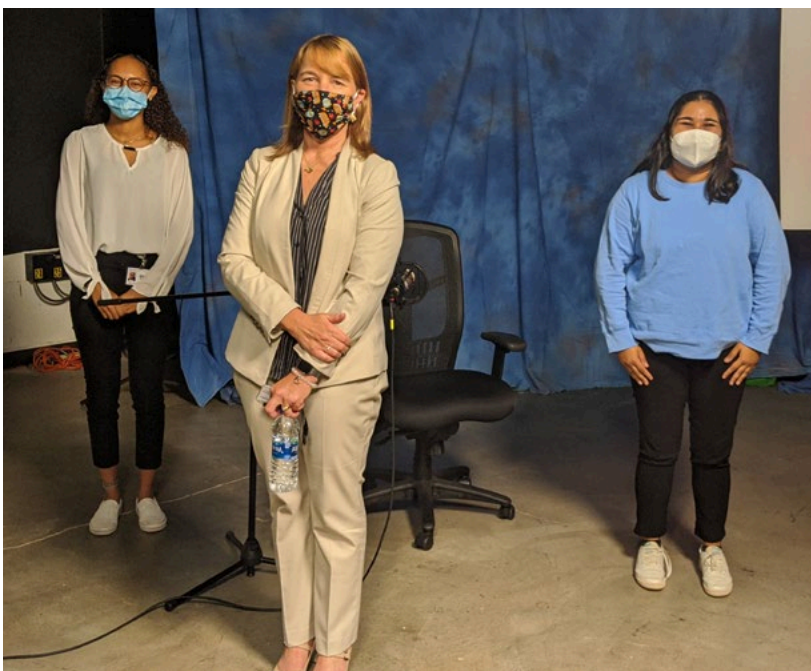
I found that long weekend walks helped me to clear my mind and look beyond the immediate. I embraced the practice of noticing — for me that means gaining perspective by finding joy in what surrounds me. On one of my walks during the pandemic, I explored a local park and counted how many different flowers I could name. On another walk, it was counting the variety of dogs I encountered. On a walk at the beach, I tracked how many people I could get to return my smile.

► **Becoming**

In the midst of leading our pandemic response, I participated in the entire process of interviewing for the superintendency. On March 16, after a weekend spent preparing for the first day of meal service during our school closure, I engaged with a panel of 25 community stakeholders and district staff for my first interview. Several weeks later, as the pandemic raged on, I completed my final interview via Zoom, while the board of education safely convened in a room together. My selection was announced via a livestreamed special meeting of our board of education conducted via Zoom.

I will never forget this process or the timing of it all. I will never forget ditching my fancy interview suit for pants and tennies and quickly getting out to our first day of meal service. I also never will forget how a new version of me emerged through these processes.

During a summer of uncertainty, Jill Baker included students in several of her daily video messages to the students and their families in Long Beach, Calif., where she assumed the superintendency in July.





From the start of the pandemic, Jill Baker produced short daily video messages of encouragement and empathy for her school community in Long Beach, Calif., before moving in July from deputy superintendent to superintendent.

How do we become who we are meant to be? I have been studying this question for many years and hoping that each of the steps that I have taken are helping me to answer that question. Did my experience in battling breast cancer help me in becoming? Did the years of being a working mom help me in becoming? Did my failures and frustrations with work projects help me in becoming? The answers to all of these questions is yes.

An Emerging Voice

For me, the act of becoming is a continuous process if we allow it in and encourage it to be. While I speak freely about periods of time when my professional and personal lives became more closely aligned, I can't recall a time in my life when I have experienced as much becoming as in the last six months, which included leading our district through the response to a pandemic and transitioning into the superintendency.

The love I hold for my community was cause for my usual behind-the-scenes nature to show up as a bold connector. My quiet confidence emerged as a courageous voice, embracing a sense of courage over comfort. I rekindled the habit of unplugging as a healthy way to gain perspective and to reboot my energy to be a good leader and teammate.

For the first time in my professional life, I

feel as if I am my full self. Perhaps this is what Michelle Obama meant when she said, "There's power in allowing yourself to be known and heard, in owning your unique story, in using your authentic voice." Perhaps in the midst of leading through a global pandemic and transitioning to the superintendency, I am becoming. ■

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Video Connections

From the start of the COVID-19 pandemic's shutdown of school operations, Jill Baker has produced short video messages to her community to keep them abreast of the latest thinking and planning by leaders in the Long Beach Unified School District in California.

The first, appearing on March 13 when the decision was made to cease in-person teaching, ran two minutes. Others, running longer, feature Long Beach students posing questions to the superintendent about remote schooling and the superintendent interviewing students via videoconferencing on how they have been spending their time at home.

Baker was promoted from deputy superintendent to superintendent about 3½ months into the pandemic.

The videos can be found on Long Beach Unified's You Tube Channel: www.lbschools.net/youtube.