My Trip to the Pacific Northwest

I was up in Portland and Seattle last week for a bunch of meetings, and I had a chance to have many wonderful conversations with some old and new friends and colleagues. Here are three takeaways from my trip:

1. Groups with soul and purpose. In Portland, I had a chance to catch up with [Jelly Helm](#), who has devoted his life to telling stories about organizations with purpose. Jelly was [preparing for his upcoming potlatch](#), and while showing me an eagle button he was planning to give away, he told me a story about [an eagle that thought it was a chicken](#). The moral: We are eagles who have been raised to think that we are chickens. We need to spread our wings and leap off cliffs and be who we are meant to be.

Two days later, I had a deja vu moment with [Gideon Rosenblatt](#), someone whose blog I've followed for a while, but whom I was meeting in person for the first time. Gideon has had a distinguished career at Microsoft and at the nonprofit technology consultancy, [Groundwire](#). He recently left Groundwire to think and to write. What is he thinking about? Organizations with soul.

Last year, when [Kristin](#) and I first started thinking about what we wanted to build together, we rapidly converged on this intent to serve life.

It's been a very consistent theme as Groupaya has come into being, and it's central to [our vision](#) for the world and for society. And while we've been bold about naming this, going so far as to making it a prominent part of our [home page](#), sometimes, it's scary. "Respectable" people do not necessarily look kindly on such squishy language. My conversations with

Jelly and Gideon helped revitalize my resolve not just to work toward a world with purpose and soul, but to do it proudly and openly.

2. The challenges of open conversation. Pete Forsyth, an ex-Portlander, suggested that I visit Free Geek while I was there, and he introduced me to his friend, vagrant, who gave me a tour. Free Geek is a cooperative computer recycling center founded over a decade ago. It is, in a word, amazing. Not only are they a large, self-sustaining operation, they embody a free software, community-centric ethos.

Like many cooperatives, they are consensus-driven. Like many successful, rapidly growing operations, they have found maintaining those consensus-driven principles wrought with challenges. vagrant and I talked for hours about Free Geek's story and these challenges over dinner, and I walked away with lots to think about.

The timing, once again, was serendipitous, because the next day, I found myself in a meeting with folks from [Occupy Seattle](). They had asked to meet with [Travis Kriplean](), a doctoral student at the University of Washington doing amazing work in online deliberation tools, because they were interested in how to apply their principles of compassionate communication in online spaces. Travis invited me to sit in on the meeting.

I was moved by their desire to create a better world for all of us. They asked me many questions about group process, but I found myself reflecting back their questions. On the one hand, I think I (and many others) have a lot of basic literacy about collaborative practices that we all need to do a better job of sharing. On the other hand, there are a lot of experiments happening within the Occupy movement right now, and all of us have a lot to learn by watching them.

I did walk away with two thoughts. First, culture plays a big role in whether and how group process works. Culture is also vulnerable to growth. You can invest in culture, but you have to do it intentionally. Most people fail to do this, either because they take culture for granted, or because they don't know how to invest in culture.

Second, when we consider online deliberation, we often conflate engagement with conversation. Conversation is a form of engagement, but they are not one and the same. Often, it makes more strategic sense to use the Internet as an engagement tool and to rely on face-to-face for conversation. This may change over time, if folks like Travis have anything to say about it.

3. Defining "we." I began my trip by giving a brown bag at [Dachis Group's]() Portland office, hosted by my friend and colleague, Matt Adams. I walked into the room of visual thinkers with a handful of thoughts about shared artifacts and their role in collaboration. I walked out armed with new

insights and this [1968 essay by Stringfellow Barr on dialogue](#), courtesy of [Tom Bennett](#). And it all made total sense.

Throughout the week, I met with an ad executive and an anarchist, an engineer and a social activist, an entrepreneur and an acupuncturist. I met with two ex-nonprofit technology consultants turned scholars, both trying to figure out how to make a bigger impact in the world in their own special, brilliant ways. I met with [Nancy White](#), who is probably most similar to [me and my team](#) here at Groupaya, and yet the only way I feel comfortable describing her is, "chocolate lover."

Who are all these people, and how are we connected? The best I can offer is that these people are our community, and that we are connected by a shared passion for collaboration, action, and social good. While we may defy easy labels, what we do is important, and we need to start coming together as a community and learning from and supporting each other more aggressively. I'm always energized and inspired by being around such amazing people, and I feel a renewed desire to do what I can to help this community come together.