

I LOVE TO TRAVEL BUT MY ADHD, SENSORY PROCESSING DISORDERS AND CHRONIC PAIN GET IN THE WAY

This is a sequel to my earlier blog titled, “A Blog About How to Understand Your Adult Family Member or Friend Who Has ADHD, Sensory Processing Disorders and Chronic Pain (Or a Combination of All Three Like Me)” where I discussed how I have struggled all of my life in large, social gatherings. This new blog’s focus is on why I sometimes struggle on trips, starting from childhood. I offer some solutions and adaptations I have learned to offset reactions by people with similar disabilities to mine, or ways to prepare for the likelihood that something unexpected could happen while traveling away from home.

Here is the link to the last blog:

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a258a1e0abd04962c1cae34/t/6349816f2349c630981ed2e4/1665761647438/Notes+for+Blog+About+How+to+Deal+with+a+Friend+or+Family+Member+who+Deals+with+ADHD.pdf>

What inspired me to write this blog was my most recent trip for a three-week retreat at the Dorland Mountain Arts Colony in the Temecula Valley in Riverside County, California. I found out about it through “Poets & Writers” Magazine and applied on June 23, 2022. I got accepted on July 13, 2022, with a reservation from October 31, 2022 through November 21, 2022. I was very excited about this opportunity to devote three weeks solely to writing. I spent the rest of the summer and into the fall of 2022 organizing what to bring to make the best use of this opportunity.

Travel is something that has been a part of my life since I was five months old when my mother backpacked me around Japan while doing a month-long performance tour with her late friend, Japanese dancer Suzushi Hanayagi.

Even though I love to travel, I also struggle with the unpredictability that inevitably is a part of leaving home. This is because I have ADHD, sensory processing disorders and have to manage chronic pain. Because of my disabilities, I don’t like any type of change, even small changes. I was told that when I was in third grade I got extremely upset because my desk had to be moved a few inches to avoid a leak in the ceiling, a now curious, even amusing example of how this particular sensitivity has always been with me. Fortunately, I don’t remember this incident. My reactions to change can confuse people, because they can’t understand why what to them are small changes can feel like huge problems to me, which in turn frustrates them. Then their reaction sometimes causes me to feel insecure about myself or get angry at them.

I have always been considered an overly sensitive, fearful person, which are personality traits that commonly accompany disabilities like mine. Add exhaustion, jet lag, homesickness, being around strangers, being in an unfamiliar place, loneliness, something going wrong, a sudden change in plans or something not going as planned--such as a missed plane or train

connection or a hotel booking mysteriously not on their register—these are the kinds of circumstances sure to make an already uncomfortable situation even worse for me.

Even though I am in my mid-forties and am a much better traveler than I was as a child, teenager or young woman, these feelings related to travel have continued throughout my life, even though my travel experiences are probably more extensive than most people. By the age of two or three I began accompanying both my parents or just my father on trips where they were doing residencies and giving lectures at colleges, universities and conferences, or doing research, and receiving awards. Since the age of nineteen, I have acted as my parents' travel agent for professional engagements, serving as their general assistant and documentary photographer. Sometimes I read from my own work at venues independent from my parents' bookings or as part of their events. Until they passed, if we were close by, we would visit my two grandmothers, one who lived in Buffalo, New York, and the other who lived in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and later, Rockland County, New York. Starting around the age of nine I traveled without my parents mainly on school trips and summer camping trips but the biggest one was to study abroad in England between my junior and senior years at U.C. Berkeley.

I was very happy to return to traveling after having to take a twenty-month hiatus due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I have already taken four trips since I got vaccinated, three of which I have taken by myself including one artist residency and one artist retreat. I am about to take another one soon. I stay up to date on vaccinations and strictly follow all the health directives, which so far has kept me from getting sick with the virus. One thing I do is to eat in the Admirals Club instead of in the main terminal. There I am able to easily space six feet apart from other people. If I can't socially distance on the plane, I don't take my mask off to eat or drink. I don't work out in the hotel gym or eat in the hotel restaurant. I eat in my room and if there is an outdoor pool, I use that. I also walk outdoors. I double mask in the airport, in the hotel lobby or any other large, indoor space, especially now that masks are no longer required in most places and I have been around a lot of people who cough and sneeze without covering their mouths or noses. I sanitize my hands frequently and wipe everything down including the belt buckle on the plane. I bring at-home COVID tests with me just in case. I get a precautionary PCR COVID test four days after I return.

Despite the fact that I organized myself as much as I could for the Dorland Center trip, I did have a pretty bad panic attack on the second evening after I had arrived, even though I was fine during the day. I wrote two new poems, worked on an archival project for my father, took a couple of walks around the Center and petted the resident German Shepherd, Duchess, who belongs to the executive director. The panic was probably triggered by a number of reasons. I was rushing to get a lot of things done before the trip so I wore myself out, and I didn't get much sleep the night before. This experience contained many unknowns for me because it involved going to an unfamiliar place with people I had never met, compounded by the fact that I didn't sleep well the first night because I was in a strange place, which got rather dark in spite of a nightlight I had brought with me. (Darkness is another panic trigger for me. This is a fear I have had all of my life.)

As the day went on, I tried to fry some eggs for lunch but the stove did not work. I was informed I would have to make do with a microwave for the rest of my stay. That meant that I couldn't cook most of the food I had just bought at the grocery store. I also learned the Center would only provide a washing machine but no dryer. These changes, and lack of sleep made me start spiraling into a panic cycle. I thought about coming home on November 11 or November 14. My parents talked me out of the panic, especially as they pointed out, I was only in day two of the trip. They thought I should remain there for the entire three weeks. They reminded me that later on in life I would be glad I had this experience and that I would be disappointed in myself if I didn't stick it out. They also reminded me that I was exhausted and would surely figure things out as the trip went on. The next morning, after a better night's sleep, I came to the conclusion that I could continue to wear the same outfits over and over again and wait until my return to the Bay Area to wash them. I had already set aside one outfit, to keep clean for the trip home. For the smaller items, I figured out a way to hand wash them. For food, going forward I ordered fresh fruits and vegetables and otherwise selected items that I could microwave. I used Instacart to order my groceries and to vary my menus, I ordered prepared meals from GrubHub over the weekends and on Wednesdays. That proved to work out well. I also got a lot of writing done, which was the goal of that trip. I continued to work on *Ladybug*, my new poetry collection that I had been slow to start at home, this blog, and a sequel to my second memoir, *Back Story*.

To try and prevent as many unexpected changes as possible, I have learned a few tricks. I arrive at the airport at least two hours ahead of time for domestic trips and three for international trips. I started doing this quite a few years before the pandemic, but since there are shortages of TSA staff, the lines are longer now. Now that severe weather has become more and more of an issue, I try to take the first flight of the day if I can because there is less of a likelihood that it will be delayed since the plane isn't coming in from somewhere else. I also know to give myself a lengthy layover, especially in a big airport like Dallas/Fort Worth, for instance, because it's always possible I will have to change terminals to get to my connecting flight. Also, I always have a Plan B now that delays and cancellations have become more of a problem due not only more extreme weather, but also because of airlines overscheduling despite the fact that they still are short staffed. I really got a glimpse of how short staffed the airlines are when returning home from a three-week trip to Florida in October of 2021. American Airlines suffered a severe operational meltdown from October 28th through November 1st. Severe weather at Dallas/Fort Worth and Miami, two of American's major hubs, was partially to blame. Crews were stranded all over the country. I was fortunate that both of my flights were only slightly delayed. However, my fellow passengers weren't so lucky. They had been stuck in Dallas for two days. Things are a little better now that more flight attendants returned from voluntary leave and from being furloughed and American Airlines hired additional flight attendants, some of whom were sent home from training in March of 2020.

Other ways I prepare myself to make sure that my flight (s) go smoothly is that if I am flying on an aircraft that I am not that familiar with, I go to a site called Seat Guru. There I learn which seats are rated the best and which are rated the worst and why. From there, I choose my

seat (s). I download the airline's app on my phone and iPad so I get alerted immediately if there is a change of gate or departure time. I can track my bags and see where my plane is coming from if it's coming in from somewhere else. I can check if that flight is delayed because there is a possibility that the delay could affect my flight. I also learned, even before COVID, that purchasing trip insurance not just for flights but also for train rides and hotel rooms is a must.

I pack a snack or a meal to eat before or during long flights in case I can't find what I want at the airport or on the plane. Also, some airports don't sell plastic water bottles, SFO being one of them, so I bring a water bottle and fill it up at one of the filling stations, which is right past security. In my carryon backpack I include a change of underwear and socks as well as a couple of extra disposable face masks, deodorant, a small tube of toothpaste, a toothbrush and a hair brush in case something happens with my luggage. I also pack extra medication, which I carry in my back-pack.

Wearing comfortable clothes and shoes when I travel is a must. I wear a lightweight fleece sweatsuit from Air Jordan that I save for plane rides. Underneath the pullover I wear a lightweight long sleeve tee shirt from a Japanese brand called UNIQLO. These "Heattech" tees aren't bulky, so they fit well underneath dresses, hoodies and pullovers. They are great for the plane because I am usually freezing. For shoes I wear the Nike Air Vapormax Plus sneakers, which are my everyday sneakers as well. They are expensive, but worth it in my opinion. They provide my back enough cushion to walk on those hard, airport floors. They are good for really big airports like New York/JFK, Dallas/Fort Worth and Los Angeles. I keep them on during the flights as well. I feel safer and more secure with them on than being in my socks only. Speaking of socks, I don't wear ones that are too tight around the ankles or legs in case of swelling, a couple effects of flying. I wear the brand Hue's mini crew socks, which can be found at Macy's.

I am also grateful for TSA PreCheck, which I decided to invest in after having major back surgery in 2021. It speeds up the process of getting to a gate by reducing the number of people in security lines and letting you leave shoes on, etc. I do like to book my own flights rather than dealing with a travel agent for many reasons, especially since I have mobility issues, and sometimes agents for wait until the last minute to book the flights when it is likely the seats with extra legroom are already taken, or they don't want to pay the extra money for the seats with extra legroom. That causes problems for me. Sitting in the back of the plane has become worse as the airlines have cramped more seats into the plane meaning there is less space in between seats and less legroom, although I have always hated sitting in the back of the plane long before that started happening.

I find that it is much easier to book through the airline directly and not through a third-party site like Expedia, Cheapoair or Kayak. I find it very difficult to book flights through a third-party site for several reasons, especially since the third-party sites don't have my frequent flier and TSA PreCheck numbers already in their systems. I also have better options in terms of flights when I book through the airline instead of a third party. If something happens to my flight, I am better protected if I book my flight through the airline than through a third-party site.

Speaking of which, I like to stick to one airline, which is American Airlines. This has been my philosophy since I was seventeen years old. To me it doesn't make sense to earn miles on multiple airlines when I can rack up a lot of points on one airline, especially since I rarely fly on other carriers outside of American Airlines. Over the past decade and a half, I have redeemed over one-hundred thousand miles on American Airlines, mainly for its Transcon flights from San Francisco to New York/JFK. For hotel stays I have also become a member of Expedia, which saves me money on rooms. I have also become a member of the Hyatt, which is my favorite hotel brand and the Hilton, which is my second favorite.

Traveling with me can prove to be both difficult and expensive because of my low back problems. I travel with a special cushion that I can attach to my backpack. I can unfold it and put it on my seat to minimize the pain of sitting for hours on a plane. Not only do I need the extra legroom like I mentioned above, but even finding appropriate lodging can become tricky. I have to stay in a place where there is an elevator, which rules out a lot of apartments listed on Airbnb or Home Away, especially in big cities like New York City where many apartments are in older buildings that don't have elevators. One time in 2017 I made the mistake of not checking my reservation through Home Away and ended up with an apartment in a building that required a four-floor walk-up. That aggravated my low back problems, which had been deteriorating over the last year and a half. My days of sleeping on a cot or sagging sofa bed are over. Now I need an actual bed. I like having a bathtub as well and a TV. I also hate having to live out of my suitcase. I now call the hotel to confirm my reservation three days ahead of time. I also go to the site hotels.com to look up the full list of amenities that the hotel has. The three things I mainly look for are if the hotel has an elevator and if the room has a safe and a bathtub. I also request that the hotel room has a refrigerator and microwave. That saves me a lot of money on food. If I don't know the hotel, I look up images of the hotel property to get a feel of what the lobby and the rooms look like.

I actually did wind up cutting my trip to the Temecula Valley short. I came home on November 15 instead of November 21. One reason was because severe weather was predicted in the area from that Tuesday evening through that Wednesday evening. The predicted Santa Ana winds were supposed to gust up to seventy-five miles per hour, which is the wind speed of a category one hurricane. We were warned that trees would be toppled over and that there would be widespread power outages. There was also a fire warning. I worried what would happen if we had to evacuate, especially since I didn't know where I would go and I didn't want to be in a large evacuation center with a bunch of people who could have COVID. Plus, if the power did go out, who knew when it would be restored. Or if roads were blocked, who knew when they would clear. My parents and I decided that I had done enough writing on the trip and that I could revise my new poems at the airport and at home, since that was my objective for the last week I was going to be there. A few days after I got home, we all agreed that in the future, should I return to the Dorland Center, it would be enough to book a two-weeks stay instead of three-weeks stay.

I was fortunate enough to be able to take the same American Airlines flight home and get the same seat assignment that I would have if I had come home on November 21st. I was also able to rearrange the ground transportation from the Dorland Mountain Arts Colony to LAX and from SFO to Oakland. These experiences showed me that planning is useful although despite how organized I try to be when it comes to travel, things sometimes don't go according to plan. However, it is always possible to figure out another plan.