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Reclaiming All My Parts: A Poetic Journey in Discovering Vulnerability

Carrie Wicks

It is not until we walk the road of transition that we truly feel the way it shakes, unravels, and awakens our core. Drawing from Jones, McEwen, and Abes' (2007) article, "Reconceptualizing the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity: The Role of Meaning-Making Capacity in the Construction of Multiple Identities" and acclaimed cultural critic, feminist, and author, bell hooks, I will explore the ways in which three of my most salient social identities helped to shape and direct my journey within student affairs. I will utilize poetry and personal narrative to explore the impacts that the change in context had on my class, gender, and sexual identity. Utilizing these mediums, I will share and advocate for the need to have access, space, and time for professionals to make meaning of their experiences in order to foster an authentic and vulnerable environment in order to best serve students in their own journey.

"Literature that helps inform masses of people, that helps individuals understand feminist thinking and feminist politics, needs to be written in a range of styles and formats. We need work that is especially geared towards youth culture."

hooks, 2000, p. 22

Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2000) suggest through the conceptual model of multiple dimensions of identity that applying meaning-making to the vast array of complexities within an individual's identity allows for the ability to understand each other in a more authentic and holistic way.

When we are introduced to a space that allows for us to process through changing contexts, without fear of ridicule and expectations from others, we may evolve more consciously and in turn create deeper connections with others. Empathy and compassion aid in forming the connection where our stories overlap and give us the ability to listen more intently when they differ. When I was interviewing for my first full time position as a Residence Director, I was asked what student development theory I used to guide my work. I shared that my

Carrie Wicks is a fourth year Residence Director at The University of Vermont. She received her undergraduate degree in Sociology at Kent State University and then continued her education at Northeastern University, receiving her masters degree in College Student Development and Counseling. Carrie's areas of passion are in women's advocacy work, gender and sexuality and counseling.

foundation was rooted in a multicultural feminist approach. bell hooks was an instrumental part of my development. I find her work to be accessible, inclusive, and compassionately radical. In hooks' (2000) *Feminism is for Everybody*, she addressed a multitude of identities including class, gender, race, parental status, spirituality, and an array of consciousness-raising ideals. hooks' focused strongly on intersectionality, which supported the model and her use of poetry as a critical thinker and gave light to a heroine who affirmed value in different forms of consciousness. Adapting hooks' work to the model of multiple dimensions of identity has allowed me to look at my experience through a unique lens.

Narrative

I graduated with a degree in Sociology from Kent State University in 2009. I remember my graduation day vividly, as I was embarking on a new journey to obtain a master's degree from Northeastern University in College Student Development and Counseling. I shared with my sister my nervousness around using appropriate language with students, as I knew the anticipation of becoming a professional was causing me deep anxiety. She said to me, "you better work on expanding your vernacular." In the next five minutes following that statement, I had completely questioned my ability to be a successful, valued, and capable graduate student. At the time, I could not define vernacular, let alone, expand it.

I began utilizing poetry as an outlet to help heal from moments and experiences at a very early age. I struggled academically. Poetry was a strong outlet to help me find meaning and make sense of a world that is highly critical of intelligence and the way in which it is measured and achieved. It is through my poetry that I will share my most vulnerable moments navigating my identity and the impact it had on my journey in the field of higher education. I will focus on my most salient identities and the ways they shifted, depending on the context of my positionality.

I was introduced to the model of multiple dimensions of identity during my first year of graduate school. Immediately drawn to the model, it resonated with me the same way as the work of bell hooks. I valued the importance the model placed on acknowledging the complexity of identity and understanding personal narrative and context. Abes, Jones, and McEwen's (2007) work finds one of the ten major key concepts in their study to be career decisions and future planning. A key factor in my decision to enter the field of student affairs was access to housing and health benefits; my queer identity influenced a major part of this process to include access to domestic partner benefits. Growing up in a working class family, leaning into a practical career with health insurance was priority.

*Things look funny here
Money falls out of their pockets
and everyone goes to school*

I recall having a conversation with my supervisor in graduate school; we were sharing stories about my interview day. She shared with me that I was the most self-aware candidate they had interviewed. We were talking in her office because I had come to a place where I felt so lost, insecure, and unsure about who I was in the world of higher education. She spoke to me about the power of perceptions. She was brutally honest, and I was angry because I knew she was right. I felt this overwhelming pressure to constantly be someone I was not. To filter my opinions and thoughts—to “play nice in the sandbox” as they would call it, even if, I had no interest. I began to feel as though filtering my past was just as important as filtering my present. I struggled deeply with feeling the pressure to hide from my past experiences. I strongly believed it was the collective moments I had up until my transition to graduate school that made me who I was. Those moments worked together to be the catalyst in my ability to accomplish goals I doubted for many years.

*I'm tired of lying to myself when people ask me
Why it is I do what I do
I compared myself to 12 other resumes today
I spent more time looking at the structure of the design
Then I did their credentials
I admired the young woman who outlined hers in pink
I'm always watching my step in the name of professionalism
Probably because I've never been good at it
Or maybe
Because I just had a different idea about it*

A few years before graduate school, I had begun writing poetry about perception. In my very early twenties, my writing often revolved around alcohol, cigarettes, and talking for hours on end with women who felt just as lost in life as I was at the time. We were learning to understand each other and who we were as people; it was what we craved. We shared things in common that made our bond feel unbreakable. We laughed and cried intensely at each other's pain and connected to it deeply. It was the context of our lives that pulled us together. Whether it was shared identities or our sociocultural conditions, we formulated a space to create a deep sense of self-awareness for one another. A sense of self-awareness gave us confidence in who we were as people, even if we were not achieving what others and society perceived as successful and valuable. I use my experience to tap into a space of empathy and time when I was struggling to understand myself to

help guide myself when working with students. It is not always the actions of our students that should determine how we listen to them. It is our responsibility to discover the catalyst behind those actions to truly understand what these moments mean in their journey. Vodka and astrology were symbolic tokens of groveling through my own self-acceptance. The ability to evolve past these moments in my life required space and time to make sense of my decisions that were free of judgment and partnered with a strong dose of empathy.

*I sat on a hotel floor once
reading an astrology book out loud
in between signs
we took shots of vodka out of paper cups
and chased it with a two liter of lemonade*

*We are slowly developing
our coping skills*

*I don't know who I am anymore-
unless I'm drunk
and or rambling about
trying to figure myself out*

*When you quit smoking
it's harder to develop
that mysterious look people formulate about you*

I will never forget the first day of my graduate assistantship. Nerves slightly ran through my body, but curiosity and the confidence I had built from home guided me. To prepare for this day, I wore my favorite t-shirt and a nice, comfortable pair of jeans with a hole in the right knee. As I walked into the room, suits, padfolios, Blackberrys and (what I perceived as) confused stares surrounded me. I never asked about the dress code, and I looked down at my phone— that could not read emails— feeling displaced and unworthy. Cultural capital was not part of my vernacular at this time. Over the next 24 hours, I had to build a dress wardrobe that did not exist. I consistently asked about what looked right and what looked wrong. The context of my socioeconomic culture took a dramatic shift when I moved to Boston. The salience of my queer and gender identity felt forced to be put on hold. I began to equate my value with expectations of a professional wardrobe I could barely afford. A space to coexist within multiple identities was not available and would soon have a toll on me.

The internal turmoil I was experiencing with the adjustment into my assistantship reflects Kegan's (as cited in Jones & McEwen, 2007) third order of consciousness,

in that “the third order is characterized by making meaning through concrete relationships to which one’s own interests are subordinated. Relationships define identity, and no process exists for negotiating conflicting relationships” (p. 4). I had a very limited understanding of wealth. My parents were determined that I would have it better than they did. I was raised to be grateful and that college was not an option.

*I gazed so heavily into the wood on my desk
I nearly thought my eyes would get splinters*

*I had a classmate tell me tonight
She believed 80% of the US goes to college
I felt tears well up in my eyes
She is 26 years old*

*I am out of my element
And highly misunderstood*

*Some people would spend the last 67 cents they have
For malt liquor*

*Chances are,
I'll wake up in a better mood tomorrow*

My social identity as a lesbian was strongly connected to my core, when I had developed a strong sense of self-perception in my years as an undergraduate. As my context shifted and I moved away from my comfort zone, my salience switched to my socioeconomic status, and a flood of emotions began to rattle my core. I became hyper aware of all the messages that I had subconsciously retained from my upbringing in a working class family. The messages that I retained brought me to one common emotion— fear. This recoiling effect that the deep immersion of my class background had on me led to an ongoing struggle with anxiety and depression. I found myself wrapped in a cycle. Mental health was a signifier of my inability to be a successful professional, and I began questioning my value through the lens of financial capital. Even as I began my years as a full-time professional and shifted out of a working class background, I held onto the messages that I had subconsciously internalized. This created an internal conflict that triggered instability in my mental health and launched me into a new journey of self-exploration. I had to learn to release the fear that came from an unexplored part of me and reintroduce all the parts of myself.

*What is about the wind
That makes us so fearful to let go of
The kite*

*It does not belong to us
But the experience does*

*In the freedom of consciousness
We should recognize
That our bodies are still connected to the ground
Because next
It could be bubbles
That we are growing scared of*

Conclusion

Having the space to coexist with the complexities of who we are as people allows for the deepest sense of consciousness possible. It is with this possibility that we begin to create spaces large enough to invite others in. When we allow ourselves to heal, we pave the way for others to do the same. There is purpose in doubt, confusion, and struggle. For ourselves and for those we serve, we must make space to live this purpose publicly and unapologetically.

I want people to know that I was completely under the influence when I landed in the field of higher education. I laugh, grow, and love with colleagues who do this work and have a clear vision of how they came to do this work. There were times when I experienced such extreme shame and disconnection from why and how I ended up in student affairs that I devalued who I was and how it influenced my position in higher education. This shame and disconnection made me question my ability to add value to my work and the people around me.

I owe my deep sense of development to my experience at The University of Vermont and to the space and people that have borne witness to me. I have worked with colleagues that have taken the time to listen to my whole story, allowed me to sit in deep spaces of doubt, and encouraged me to push the boundaries of a dominant paradigm and say my truth out loud. I am learning that my story has value and that by hearing others, I am creating powerful spaces. I am learning, simply, about how to be happy with my whole self.

3/10/2012, 1:07 AM

Baby Wicks! How are you—
Hope you are great. I just
wanted to share that I
recently came out to my
mom as her bisexual baby!
Wanted to let you know that
even if you don't know, you
have had a huge influence on
me finding the comfort to
come to terms with who I
am. Hope you're holding
things down up there!
Sending love and positive
energy from Aussie! Hope to
see ya soon! :)

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