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Still Have Some Growing To Do

Deborah E. Hunter, Ph.D.

I was happy to be invited to write an essay for this year's TVC, but being asked to reflect on transitions in my life was a bit daunting. Frankly, change usually makes me uncomfortable. I graduated from college never once changing my major. I was reluctant to give up my single life and didn't do so until I was 40. We've been together for a quarter of a century and live in a home that was built in 1810. I love that old house and have no desire to undertake major renovations. So, I admit I fretted that I wouldn't have much to say in this essay.

The TVC invitation came in the fall when Vermont's autumn was in full glory, and the foliage was breathtaking. I prepared that first draft in my old farmhouse, which seemed so still and quiet, a real empty nest, and my twin boys were off for their first year as college students. Gone were their backpacks and school books scattered throughout the dining room, dropped socks in the mudroom and basketballs which seemed to live in the living room. That first draft reflected the transition that was most present for me at the time: my shift from being a Mom of kids living at home to the parent of young adults with whom I no longer shared a roof.

For 19 years, I left UVM's campus at the end of the day and shifted gears to my "mom" role: feeding hungry kids, tidying up, chatting and listening and cheering at their games and meets. Now, I return to a quiet house with everything in its place. Only the cats, dog and tank full of fish greet me, and so it is until the weekend when Gene makes his commute north from New York City. The old farmhouse now seems so big and certainly too silent. With my sons happily off at school this past Fall, I had time to ponder the question of what to do with all my newly freed up time and energy. One decision I made was to gear up my courage and take yoga classes early in the morning, even though at the age of 62, I was admittedly unfit and far too inactive. I took comfort in the fact that I wasn't the oldest or least flexible in the class. The instructor had a curious way of remarking "not yet", whenever any of us found a pose too difficult. Was it really possible that I could take up something new and improve over time? I also found myself thinking differently about my commute to UVM. I looked forward to escaping the quiet and coming to campus to connect with others. UVM came alive for me as a "collegium," and I viewed the campus community with renewed delight.

Dr. Hunter has been a faculty member with the HESA Program since 1985, serving as Coordinator for 19 of those years, as well as Associate Dean of the College. For the past five years, she has served as the Chair of the Department of Leadership and Developmental Sciences.

I give credit to our beloved HESA program founder Jackie Gribbons for spurring me to revise that first draft of this essay. As Fall transitioned into Winter, I found myself frequently thinking about Jackie, whose health suddenly failed during these months one year ago. I pass Jackie's picture on the HESA office wall each day as I enter my office. I still have the typed letter of welcome (typewritten – not computer printed) she placed on my desk when I arrived at UVM in July of 1985. Keeping her letter under my desk blotter all these years helps me recall the joy with which I began my new life as a Vermonter and as a new professor. Jackie was a constant presence in my major life transitions, both personal and professional, as well as in times of joy and difficulty. She was the first person I told outside of family when I learned I was carrying twins. Jackie formed a warm relationship with my parents when they moved to Burlington, and she shared my grieving when my widowed mother died six years ago. I took it hard when Jackie took ill last winter. I don't think I handled her illness and dying very well. We had already made fun plans for the Spring when the weather warmed and we could return to my camp in the Northeast Kingdom: canoeing, feeding the ducks and enjoying happy hour around a lakeside campfire as the sun set. I simply wasn't ready to lose Jackie, too. So, it was with a sense of melancholy on this anniversary of losing her that I revisited the first draft of this essay over semester break. But the unexpected happened: I could hear Jackie's voice chiding me, "Hunter, buck up and get over yourself!" With a grin, I knew I needed to broaden my perspective and revise my essay.

The next draft centered on the transitions I've experienced as a member of the UVM community these past 29 years. I recall the upset I felt attending my first faculty meeting in Fall of 1985 when the Dean of the College of Education and Social Services announced he would be stepping down at the conclusion of the year. As an insecure new professor who had just moved across the country for the job, I had expected to be able to count on the Dean who liked me enough to hire me to remain as I journeyed through the tenure process. I chuckle now at how naïve I was about institutional realities. Since then, Presidents, Provosts and Deans have come and gone through what seems like a revolving door, and much of the time, that is for the good.

Contrasting with those numerous personnel changes at the top of UVM's leadership hierarchy was the stability found in the core of the HESA program team. In addition to the steady presence of Jackie Gribbons in the HESA office, for decades Diana Dubuque served as the cheerful voice of the program as she answered the phone, patiently listened to applicants' questions and offered her optimistic perspective to HESA students seeking her counsel. I had a year to mentally prepare myself for Diana's retirement, but I still feared the coming of that day last May. What would it be like to work alongside someone new? Could I be my goofy, irreverent self around a new staff member? Could this new staff

member tolerate my absentmindedness?

Jill Tarule then announced by late Fall that she, too, would be retiring at the end of academic year. While Jill was a full-time faculty member for only the last few years, splitting her teaching duties between the doctoral program and HESA, she had served as our Dean for the 13 years before that. Again came the haunting questions: how would we ever replace Jill who was a skilled counseling psychologist, accomplished administrator, renown scholar, not to mention a kind and wise woman?

Then, as if knowing Diana and Jill would both be retiring wasn't enough to test my capacity to handle change, my blood pressure shot up upon hearing Kathy Manning, my colleague of 24 years, announce in May that she decided to move up her intended retirement and exit at month's end to take on travel and new adventures. For just shy of a quarter century, we shaped UVM's HESA program and grew it to be the most competitive HESA program in the nation. She was highly regarded throughout the profession for the quality of her scholarship. With Kathy's retirement, coupled with that of Jill and Diana, what was to become of our beloved HESA program? But, at the same time, how could I not be happy for the three of them? Was I too old to handle this much change in my life all at once?

Fortunately, search committees can do wonderful things and one of the biggest things I learned throughout the process is that we really can't replace people. We shouldn't even try. Instead, we should aim to invite and attract new people to bring their talents into the mix. By Fall, the HESA program had welcomed not only another robust cohort of eager and delightful first year students, but two dynamic new faculty members (Vijay Kanagala and Kelly Clark/Keefe) and a new staff member (Margie Dunki Jacobs). Although new to their posts with HESA, Kelly and Margie were already well familiar with UVM. Margie's previous post had also been in UVM's College of Education. Supporting graduate students and wading through graduate applications was something she had been doing skillfully for years. Kelly returned to Vermont, where she had previously lived and earned her doctorate at UVM, after teaching for ten years in the higher education and leadership program at Appalachian State. She is a Mom of a son, and I hope my experiences juggling childrearing and faculty life can be helpful as she finds her own balance. Vijay joins us from the University of Texas San Antonio where he was teaching in their HESA program and conducting research after earning his doctorate at Iowa State University. With his red sofa visible in the doorway in what used to be Kathy's office, how different things look around here! Together, we are building upon the great UVM HESA tradition and crafting a curriculum suited for changing times in academia. As we've all gotten to know each other and figure out how best to work together as a team, I've discovered I had new energy to my work. Surrounded by new faces, my job can't help but feel new, too. How

can something so familiar feel so new and exciting?

And with those thoughts I was set to conclude my essay on transitions for TVC when I had an experience in January that prompted me to revise my draft yet again. During the semester break I read 152 applications submitted by aspiring UVM HESA students. One snowy January day, I was sitting by the fireplace in my old farmhouse reading through the batch of application materials I had assigned myself for that day when I came across a sentence in a letter of reference that gave me pause. This applicant, said the reviewer “has a lot of growing to do.” Oh dear, I thought, that is a red flag the writer had cleverly injected to alert us of the candidate’s immaturity. I hastily concluded that candidate was destined to receive a disappointing letter from UVM’s Graduate Admissions Office. But, as I continued to read through other applications I found myself haunted by that reference. “Has a lot of growing to do.” Why had I so hastily concluded that it was a bad thing to have a lot of growing to do? As I tried to concentrate and continue reading other applications I kept staring into the fire thinking about the life lessons that spurred my growth. Don’t I, as a 62 year old still have “a lot of growing to do?” More transitions ahead? Isn’t it desirable that we should all continue to grow and even grow a lot? My yoga teacher would say if I can’t do something now, I can think of it as a matter of “not yet.” Maybe tomorrow or next week or next year, I will learn how. And that is how it should be. Pondering these thoughts brought to mind William Perry’s thoughts in his work, *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years* (have to make a scholarly reference in this piece somewhere) “perhaps development is all transition, and ‘stages’ or ‘positions’ are only resting points along the way” (Perry, 1968, p. 78). And so, I hope I have a lot of growing to do. I hope you do too.

Reference

Perry, W. (1968). *Forms of intellectual and ethical development in the college years: A scheme*. New York: Rineheart & Winston.