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Standing at the Intersection: Comfort, Complacency, and Curiosity

Jilliene M. Johnson
2012 Saurman Award Recipient

Standing at the threshold of an intersection is something each one of us does, consciously or subconsciously, every day. The lives we lead offer a multitude of options about whom we will be and how we choose to interact with the world. Some of these options take only a few minutes or even seconds to determine, such as deciding on what to have for breakfast, selecting an outfit for work, or figuring out if you will actually attend that 6 AM yoga session. Other decisions take us a few weeks, months, or even years to discern. Should I pursue a graduate degree? Should I continue in my current relationship? Should I stay in my present job, or should I make a career change? Once we acknowledge this tension between comfort, complacency, and curiosity we must respond. The logical steps would be: 1) Acknowledgement, 2) Decision-making, and 3) Execution. This is not always simple. In fact, I have moments of doubt, anxiety, insecurity, and confusion when I am ultimately unsure of which path to follow.

My intersection revealed itself in the last few months in the Higher Education and Student Affairs (HESA) program. Uncertain of what I truly wanted to do after completing my degree, I cast a wide net and hoped for the best. The question I grappled with was: *Do I stay in residential education, leap into government relations at an institution of higher education, or charter an unknown territory – a congressional fellowship?* Adhering to due diligence and working to relieve my own anxiety, I took part in the industry standard, attending one of our national conferences, participating in intensive interviews, speaking with mentors and friends, and scouring the internet searching and applying for potential job opportunities.

My search spanned over five months and ultimately resulted in me accepting a position as the Education Fellow for the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation (CBCF). Reflecting on this journey, it became evident that I needed to critically consider each potential avenue of comfort and complacency in order to take a position that fueled my passion, offered opportunities for inquiry, and made an impact on the communities that mattered most to me.

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Nestled in Comfort

The idea of comfort sounds so blissful when you feel you are in multiple transitions and facing the looming reality that at some point you have to leave the familiar. For me, that place had become the University of Vermont and the HESA community. I could not have imagined that my decision to attend the HESA program two years prior would have a profound impact on how I make judicious decisions about my personal and professional life. My ability to find comfort in the HESA world was grounded in my past experiences of being a student, a residential educator, and my ability to build community. My acquired knowledge assisted me in navigating my environment on three levels: (1) institutionally; (2) structurally; and (3) individually.

At the institutional level, I felt I understood where I was. My zip code may have changed but working and living on college campuses had not. Vermont was certainly not Massachusetts or Ohio, but this world was not completely foreign. Although cultural norms, climate, and the overall community disposition varied, I took great solace in knowing that I would live in the building I worked in, have my students as neighbors, and a swipe card that could produce a warm meal now and again. Structurally, I would formally be back in the role of a student. I knew my expectations were to attend class, read scholarly articles, write papers, and participate in experiential learning opportunities such as the assistantship and practicum programs. At the personal level, I knew I would be able to foster relationships.

My choice to join the HESA community *just felt right* from the moment I came to the Interview Day. When I left that weekend I knew that I had made a heart-soul agreement. I was reassured to know that I would learn about social justice and how to be a student affairs scholar-practitioner in a community that was developmental and supportive.

The opportunity to build relationships with amazing practitioners, who also would become friends and mentors, truly allowed me to flourish personally, academically, and professionally. When I wanted to create a new practicum or present at a conference, I was met with neither hesitation nor reservation. Instead, I encountered intrigued colleagues that discussed my requests, raised deeper questions, and provided lists of resources to help me pursue my endeavors. I left the conversations feeling encouraged, inspired, and often times reassured that I could accomplish my dream because someone believed in me, even when I questioned its feasibility. What a powerful feeling – to have a community who believes in you and your dream. This precious gift of support certainly benefited me during my months of uncertainty, and still does to this day. Although I was in a nurturing environment, I had reservations about contentment and where I wanted to be as I considered my future career path.

Considering Complacency

The act of being complacent is often difficult for me to determine. If I had to define complacency it would be accepting the status quo because one feels secure with their current position. The only inherent problem with complacency is that it does not allow us to consider or pursue options external to our present circumstance.

Honestly, parts of me were satisfied professionally. The work I did prior to HESA and my work as a graduate student made me happy, and more than that, I loved the people with whom I worked. It was gratifying to see my students discover their identity, explore their world, and question their future. I even enjoyed working in my office until 11:30 p.m. and having my students stop by to chat or seek my advice about their dilemmas. But at the core I appreciated how vulnerable I could be with my students. We discussed a range of topics from our greatest joys to the moments where we felt discouraged, isolated, and marginalized. The student-teacher/teacher-student relationship is powerful and it challenged me to grow and reflect on my past and current philosophic approach on life.

As a practitioner, I came to understand that possibilities only emerge when we authentically connect. If I left the student affairs world, would I lose the ability to have these types of conversations? Would I miss seeing my students around campus and supporting them at their events? Is it possible to find colleagues who would challenge me out of a place of care? I was unsure if leaving the student affairs arena was worth the sacrifice. If I stayed on the “higher ed track” I theoretically could have this while I moved into a comfortable mid-level residential position. *But would it be enough?* I was still yearning for more. Was I being selfish or fearful, especially when wanting more only led to unfamiliar avenues and could mount to unhappiness?

Curiosity Leads to Clarity

It was over the course of interviewing for several positions that these queries continued to linger, which prompted several reflective journal entries about what mattered most to me and *truly* excited me professionally. As the summer progressed, job opportunities were presented and with each I asked, *does this honor me and my vision?* Often I already knew intuitively, but there were always other elements to consider such as how would this decision affect me and my loved ones? As I considered various positions, I also remembered a fellowship opportunity that I learned about in 2008. The CBCF program was designed to increase the number of African American professionals in the United States Congress, and provide subsequent generations with increased access. I envisioned this learning opportunity as a platform to gain the necessary skills to create systemic political

and legislative changes for the betterment of American higher education and the health care system. Specifically, being a CBCF Fellow would provide a foundation to be a change agent. Federally, I would be able to advocate for justice and challenge convention. As a Black woman, I had encountered marginalization and discrimination in my life, but as an educator, I was also becoming aware of it professionally. When I spoke with my students I heard it in their voices and saw it in their eyes, and I wanted to bring those experiences to Congress.

Even with a clear vision about what being a Fellow would mean to me and the community I served, I was still anxious. The process of reviewing applications was delayed due to the high volume of applicants, which meant I had to make decisions on job offers prior to hearing back from the Foundation. Talk about needing to lean on my faith, family, and community! I did my best to stay faithful to my dream of the fellowship, but it was my support system's unwavering commitment that kept me determined to not give up.

In the role of a practitioner, I still felt some pressure to know the correct answers, but as a fellow, I felt there was room for further inquiry and intentional development. I understood that I lacked knowledge about the legislative process, possessed a basic understanding about how Congress worked, and even less knowledge about how to navigate politics. What I did know however, was the adverse impact laws may have on marginalized communities and the dissatisfaction I felt seeing people denied access, equity, and equality. I felt that my HESA education prepared me to be acutely aware, raise questions, and pursue change in the academy, but my curiosity about the legislative process was essential because legislation serves as a vehicle to inform our policies, and our policies guide our practices.

The Vision for Heart-Soul Agreement

Now as I enter my fifth month of the fellowship, I can clearly see the importance of process. In the beginning of my quest, I craved a clearly defined familiar path where I knew I would excel. And yet, what I yearned for was the challenge – the challenge of not knowing the correct response to a question, having to learn a new language, and learning how to navigate a new environment – Capitol Hill. I have realized that I do not have to be perfect, but I can at least be brave.

In the Student Affairs profession, we challenge our students to dig deeper, look harder, and pursue their dreams. As educators, we must always remember that we too, must adhere to our own words of wisdom. If I am to serve as a leader, I have to reflect the values I so passionately preach. This year's journal theme is *"There is Hope: Breaking Cycles to Transform Higher Education,"* and this is our call to act. As staff, faculty, and administrators, we will be faced with opportunities to speak up and out about the needs of the communities we belong to and work

with. Personally and professionally we will have moments when comfort, complacency, and curiosity may be present at our intersection; but it does not have to define our destination.

My hope is that we are not bound by complacency and fear, but rather uplifted by hope and faith to listen to what feeds our soul. We can all dream about how we will have heart-soul agreement, but we must start with a vision. Our vision of who we want to be and how we will interact with the world often emerges from the continuum between love and fear. Mine was born out of experiences and stories of dissatisfaction about what happens to the voices that often go unheard. As I continue my journey I have come to understand that my vision to serve will continue to be honed over time, and at the core it must have heart-soul agreement if I am going to be authentically me.