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The Final Word

Dorian L. McCoy

I am humbled and consider it a tremendous privilege to have been invited to write *The Final Word* for the 34th volume of *The Vermont Connection*. I am truly grateful to have been at the University of Vermont for the past six years and despite leaving the University, I will always be a part of the HESA Family.

I spent considerable time thinking about what I would discuss. I reviewed Final Words from previous volumes of *The Vermont Connection* and that only increased my anxiety about writing the piece. It is a significant challenge to follow some of the distinguished *voices that have spoken so eloquently* about higher education, student affairs, and social justice among other topics. Some have shared the story of their journey, others have offered words of wisdom for both our professional and personal lives, some sought to motivate, while others have discussed challenges we face in higher education and student affairs. I began drafting one version of the article and then deleted it. It dawned on me while watching President Barack H. Obama's Second Inauguration that in 2013 we celebrate anniversaries for two significant historical events.

First, 2013 marks the sesquicentennial of President Abraham Lincoln signing the *Emancipation Proclamation* (January 1, 1863). Second, this year marks the 50th Anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s *I Have a Dream* speech (August 28, 1963). In addition, President Obama's Inauguration Celebration coincided with Dr. King's Holiday and a National Day of Service (January 21, 2013). I concluded I would attempt to use my words to motivate and challenge you as you continue your social justice journeys and assume leadership roles in higher education and society.

This past weekend, I participated in the University of Tennessee's Martin Luther King, Jr. Day of Service. We painted at a Boy's and Girl's Club located in the midst of a local housing project. As we engaged in this service project, it could not have been more readily apparent that as we celebrate/recognize the aforementioned anniversaries and President Obama's Inauguration that we continue to live in a society that is deeply divided. We have "Red" and "Blue" states. We have the

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99% and 1%. We have those in favor of increased gun legislation and those who believe the federal government is infringing upon the “unalienable rights” established in the *U. S. Declaration of Independence*. Access to higher education is increasingly becoming a “right” or privilege reserved only for those who can afford it. We have the “haves” and the “have nots.”

The theme for this volume is “*There is Hope: Breaking Cycles to Transform Higher Education*.” How appropriate given we live in a society that is deeply divided not only on the aforementioned issues but also on issues that are adversely affecting higher education. The continued attacks on affirmative action, access to higher education for historically underrepresented populations, funding, and *overly* ambitious initiatives are just a few of the challenges confronting higher education. However, I believe that we can address these challenges, “break cycles,” and “transform higher education” by promoting social justice and practicing servant-leadership—The 2 S’s.

Social Justice

Bell (2010) believes social justice is both a process and a goal. “The goal of social justice is full and equal protection of *all* [italics added] groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs” (p. 21). Social justice envisions a society where there is equitable distribution of resources and all members are physically and psychologically safe (Bell, 2010). We often discuss social justice in terms of a journey. In his second inaugural speech, President Obama (2013) stated:

For our journey is not complete until our wives, our mothers, and daughters can earn a living equal to their efforts. Our journey is not complete until our gay brothers and sisters are treated like anyone else under the law -- for if we are truly created equal, then surely the love we commit to one another must be equal as well. (para. 22)

There are those who will argue that the journey is complete and that equality has been achieved. However, given the issues we face and the climate on many of our campuses, we recognize and know that much work remains to achieve inclusive and safe campus environments. We know that higher education needs transformation. As student affairs educators and leaders, in what ways will you seek to break the cycles of oppression that prevent us from preparing our students to function in a multicultural and diverse global community?

A key aspect of practicing and promoting social justice is recognizing the privileges we possess individually and collectively. Privilege does not manifest solely on the basis of one particular identity, but manifests from the intersection of our multiple dominant identities. As an able-bodied, educated, Christian, male, might I use the privilege associated with those identities to break cycles of oppression in

higher education that prevent others from achieving their full potential? I ask that you critically reflect on how your identities privilege you and then reflect more on how you can use that privilege to break oppressive cycles and transform higher education. In essence, I am asking you to be an advocate for social justice in an effort to transform higher education.

Servant Leadership

There are numerous definitions of leadership. Despite this, there are common concepts that reflect what it is to be a leader (Northouse, 2012). These concepts include leadership as a trait, ability, skill, behavior, relationship, and influence process. Northouse defines leadership as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (p. 6). In his discussion on servant leadership, Northouse emphasizes a “caring principle” (p. 2). Servant leaders not only possess a caring trait; but are concerned with ensuring others’ needs are met. According to Greenleaf (1973), “The servant-leader makes sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served” (p. 7). Does this not cut at the core of what social justice is about?

As students in the University of Vermont’s Higher Education and Student Affairs program, you sought to develop certain professional skills and competencies. Many of these skills and competencies centered on social justice and leadership. You were asked to commit to serving all students, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation/expression, class, political persuasion, etc. The faculty, and assistantship and practicum supervisors sought to equip you with the skills necessary for effective leadership in higher education – organizational development, planning, integrating theory to practice, building vision, and ethical decision making. However, leadership is not only about traits and skills, but is also about behavior, relationships, and influencing others. As servant-leaders working to transform higher education, you have the privilege of establishing relationships and influencing students, colleagues, and the university community. Relationships are reciprocal. Leaders affect and they are affected by followers (Northouse, 2012). As a servant-leader what positive affect will you have on those you are leading, particularly your students?

Social Justice and Servant-Leadership

In many ways, social justice is about being a servant leader. Those engaged in social justice work are committed to ensuring that inequalities and injustices are eliminated. Dr. King recognized this when he stated, “An injustice to one is an injustice to all.” As leaders, what will you do to eliminate the injustices and inequalities that confront higher education and its community members? In what ways will you affect change to ensure that higher education institutions are inclusive of ALL students, particularly those with historically underrepresented

and marginalized identities? How will you work to transform higher education? I believe that social justice and servant leadership can intersect to interrupt cycles that oppress and marginalize. To transform higher education all must commit to promoting and developing socially just, safe, and inclusive communities. “Social justice involves social actors who have a sense of their own agency as well as a sense of social responsibility toward and with others, their society, and the broader world in which we live” (Bell, 2012, p. 21). In short these actors are leaders – leaders working to create an inclusive society. I challenge you to be that leader – a servant leader committed to social justice.

“The Final Word”

“*There is Hope: Breaking Cycles to Transform Higher Education.*” The aforementioned servant-leaders, Presidents Lincoln and Obama and Dr. King sought to break cycles and transform society. They provided hope to marginalized people. President Lincoln signing the Emancipation Proclamation provided the slaves with the hope of a new beginning. President Obama’s slogan for his first presidential campaign was “Hope” – the hope for change and progress in the United States. Dr. King provided hope not only for African Americans but for many disenfranchised people. He was in Memphis seeking better benefits for sanitation workers when he was assassinated.

The hope you provide may not be for a nation. The hope you provide may not be for an entire race or ethnic group. Perhaps the hope you provide is for one student; a student from an impoverished neighborhood who has been told that he or she cannot succeed in higher education. Perhaps the hope you provide is for the “out” queer students on your campus, who do not feel safe. Perhaps the hope you provide is for the Latino students who were stereotyped at a fraternity party. I ask, “What hope will you provide and how will you work to break cycles to transform higher education?”

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