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Our Work According to Mister Rogers: Reflections from a New Neighbor

Jimmy Doan
2011 Saurman Award Recipient

When I received the letter from Kristin Lang, this year's TVC Executive Editor, with guidelines for writing this reflection, I had no idea where to begin. I started by reading reflections written by past Saurman award recipients for inspiration. I reached out to other UVM HESA alumni/ae for guidance. I even asked my six-year-old niece and four-year-old nephew for their sage advice at dinner one evening. When I realized that it would be difficult to write a reflection that incorporated Hello Kitty or Thomas the Train, I began thinking of other starting points. Upon returning home to my apartment after a program one late night, I realized that my inspiration for this reflection had been sitting at my bedside for the past five years.

I am a lover of cheesy inspirational quotes and hoarder of those little white strips of paper from fortune cookies. As this is no secret to my family and friends, it was no surprise that one of my best friends, Andrew, gifted me with *The World According to Mister Rogers – Important Things to Remember* for my birthday at the end of my sophomore year of college. Beyond being a fan of cardigan sweaters, I grew up watching Mister Rogers come home and sing, “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?” as he changed into his sneakers. The book, published after Fred Rogers’ passing, is a compilation of quotes from the friendly neighbor that I have found particularly relevant to my work as a student affairs professional these past six months. I earmarked a number of Mister Rogers’ quotes when I first read this book in 2007. As I looked back to the book for inspiration to write this reflection, the following passages speak to lessons I’ve learned these past six months after graduating from HESA.

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“More and more I’ve come to understand that listening is one of the most important things we can do for one another. Whether the other be an adult or a child, our engagement in listening to what that person is can often be our greatest gift. Whether that person is speaking or playing or dancing, building or singing or painting, if we care, we can listen.”

(Rogers, 2004, p. 171)

Jimmy Doan is a 2011 graduate of the University of Vermont’s Higher Education & Student Affairs Administration program. He earned his Bachelor of Arts degree from the College of the Holy Cross in 2009, where he majored in Economics. He continues his habits of hoarding fortune cookie fortunes and cheesy inspirational quotes, many of which fill the walls in his office at Bentley University, where he is the Program Coordinator for Student Activities.

LISTEN. How many times do we pause in our lives as student affairs administrators and practitioners to simply listen? We regularly work the over-forty hour weeks at late night events, answer the duty calls in the middle of the night, or advise students in our offices past five o'clock. How much of that time is spent listening to what is going on around us? How often do we stop to reflect and listen to ourselves? As a new professional, and even as a graduate student, I recognize that more of my time is spent doing rather than listening. I am an offender of this during one-on-one meetings with students when my mind is focused on what I need to do to prepare for my next staff meeting. It happens when I'm at an event and sit in the back of the room and catch up on email while students go on with their program. I am a culprit of this when I am running across campus in a hurry with my colleagues to be on time for our next meeting, missing everything else in my peripheral along the way.

How many times do we realize that it is the quiet and reflective moments in our busy lives that give meaning to the rest of the minutes and hours that go by when we are doing? As a new professional, I have found that one of my most important job responsibilities is to show students that there are individuals around them who care. As Mister Rogers reminds us, there is nothing greater than taking a second, minute, hour, or day to pause from doing to show that we care.

What will you do to listen to those around you and yourself more?

"People have said, 'Don't cry' to other people for years and years, and all it has ever meant is, 'I'm too uncomfortable when you show your feelings. Don't cry.' I'd rather have them say, 'Go ahead and cry. I'm here to be with you.'" (Rogers, 2004, p. 151)

FEEL. One of my most memorable moments as a new professional was sitting in a meeting with a student and directing my eyes to a tissue box on my desk, sending her a message that it was okay to cry and show her true feelings. She was holding back tears from a fear that she was failing a summer bridge course into which she felt she was truly putting effort. It's just a class—nothing to lose tears and sleep over, right? I let her cry. I encouraged her to do so. After a round of tears, I soon learned it was more than just the thought of failing the course. The tears stemmed from a deeper fear, a fear of disappointing her family if she did not matriculate into college. She continued to cry. Through the tears, she rid herself of the lack of confidence she had in her ability to improve her grades in the course. She nearly emptied the tissue box, but the last tear she wiped away was followed by a sigh of relief. She became determined. She left my office that summer day with a new determination. Her new determination enabled her to successfully complete the summer class and shine as a first-year undergraduate student.

Typically, I feel very awkward in situations where I am around others who are crying, and even more so when they are crying to me. My instinct is to look

down, twiddle my thumbs, and wish that time would pass quickly or that their tears would run dry. Honestly, I'm not quite sure what revelation I had on the afternoon that this student walked into my office, but my gut told me that I needed to be there. I was quickly reminded of my former advisors and mentors who had played the same role for me, remembering the value of their listening ears and their attentive eyes. Never having to say a word to her through the course of the conversation, I told her, "Go ahead and cry." That afternoon, the loss of a tissue box was outweighed by a gain in assurance that tears shed can allow students to realize their true potential.

How do you empower others to show their true feelings?

"The thing I remember best about successful people I've met all through the years is their obvious delight in what they're doing...and it seems to have very little to do with worldly success. They just love what they're doing, and they love it in front of others." (Rogers, 2004, p. 42)

LOVE. As many people can probably relate to, I had trouble when I graduated from college with a degree in economics and reminded my parents that I was going to graduate school to learn how to be a professional college student for the rest of my life...or at least learn how to work with them. Sharing my overwhelmingly positive experience outside of the classroom was not enough to explain why I would not consider other job opportunities with larger salaries. When it came down to it, the only way to truly express why I was venturing into the career path that I chose was because of my love for what I would be doing. As a student, I loved having a getaway space to the Campus Activities Board office to procrastinate from doing work. I loved being around the staff of the Student Programs & Involvement Office, sometimes just sitting in my advisors' office for an hour or so with no purpose. I embraced the idea that I, too, could change students' college experiences and lives.

It was about four months into my job when a colleague told me that I was still lucky to be young and love doing what I do. Initially, I did not think twice about this, and even took it as a compliment. After thinking more about the comment later, I suddenly became confused. Did my colleague consider himself unlucky? Did he no longer love what he was doing? This instance allowed me to reflect on what I loved in my work as a professional. I love the conversations with students that have no direction. I love seeing students overcome unexpected challenges at an event and seeing them come out on the other side. I love working with colleagues who put students' best interests first. I love the "aha" moments. I love the unpredictability that the next workday brings. As a new professional, I go home every day after work and find at least one thing I loved about my day.

Why do you love doing what you do?

"When I think of Robert Frost's poems, like 'The Road Not Taken,' I feel the support of

someone who is on my side, who understands what life's choices are like, someone who says, I've been there, and it's okay to go on.” (Rogers, 2004, p. 37)

MENTORS. Much of the past six months was spent recalling the moments in college when I realized I wanted to pursue a career in student affairs. Remember that person who may have contributed to your decision to pursue a career in higher education? I often think back to the conversations that I had with my mentors in Starbucks coffee shops and on park benches during college and ask myself, “What would they do right now?” Often times, realizing that what they did may not be what I should do is the biggest lesson to learn. However, the thought of knowing that someone is always by your side to listen, to support, and frankly, to tell you that you’ve done something stupid, is comforting.

The “someone” who Mister Rogers speaks of is perhaps one of the most important people for all of us to have in our lives. Whether you are a graduate student or seasoned professional, having someone to call who is willing to offer sage advice or listening ears is one of the most rewarding benefits of having a mentor. It did not take long as a graduate student at UVM to realize that I was no longer only playing the role of seeking out mentors, but I was becoming a mentor to others. While this was a scary thought, it was one that I whole-heartedly embraced. I looked forward to being on the other side of the long conversations about my students’ struggles with academics, finding balance in collegiate life, and even helping a student navigate the coming out process. Suddenly, I found myself not only saying it was “okay to go on,” but also sending that message to others.

How do you remember your mentors while being a mentor for others?

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“I have always wanted to have a neighbor
Just like you!
I've always wanted to live in a
Neighborhood with you.
So let's make the most of this beautiful day;
Since we're together we might as well say,
Would you be mine?
Could you be mine?
Won't you be my neighbor?” (Rogers, 2004, p. 141)

COMMUNITY. Did you really think that I was going to end this reflection without including some words from one of Mister Rogers’ famous melodies? Remember that I said earlier that I’m a lover of cliché quotes and sayings, so it is only appropriate. In March of 2009, I vividly remember Deb Hunter welcoming twenty plus prospective HESA students to The Vermont Connection. From that point on, we were a part of this network of individuals who would become our future classmates, colleagues, and family. Some of us would get to know each

other better over the course of the following two years as we embarked on the journey that many of us know as “HESA.” Through the course of these two years, we learned how small of a family UVM HESA truly is with our own cohort, the alumni/ae that came before us, and the prospective students we met during Interview Weekends. We learned that this network extended on to our professors, current and past, and staff around the University of Vermont who supervised and mentored us through our two-year journey, and beyond.

As I reflect on my past two and a half years since visiting the University of Vermont for the first time, the one thing that stands at the forefront of my mind is the neighborhood that I’ve moved into permanently. The walls of our apartments and residence halls may change as we move from one position to another, possibly leaving the field to explore other passions and opportunities or going on to become nationally recognized student affairs practitioners, but our neighborhood continues to exist and extend well beyond Burlington, Vermont. It is a neighborhood that I’m quite proud to be a part of and one that I look forward to seeing grow beyond my years in HESA.

How have you been a good neighbor?

During our time as HESA students, we are encouraged to process our thoughts, consider haunting questions, and dig deep to answer, “What came up for us?” As a new professional, I have found comfort in asking myself these questions and pondering these thoughts regularly. In addition, I have reflected on the above actions and themes. As the gentle, soft-spoken television personality famously closed out each of his weekend shows, he committed himself to a snappy new day. To close, as we look ahead to snappy new days, how are we ensuring that we listen, feel, and love? How are we remembering the mentors who have guided us while being a support for others? How do we remind ourselves of the community that we are a part of?

*It’s such a good feeling to know you’re alive.
It’s such a happy feeling: You’re growing inside.
And when you wake up ready to say,
‘I think I’ll make a snappy new day.’
It’s such a good feeling, a very good feeling,
The feeling you know that we’re friends.*

References

Rogers, F. (2004). *The world according to Mister Rogers: Important things to remember*. New York, NY: Hyperion.