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The Gift of Error

Kristi Jackson

I was troubled by my inept reaction when a coworker told me he was gay just before I left home to join the HESA program. Fear of error was the biggest culprit in my botched reaction. This fear was an undercurrent in most of my academic, professional, and personal behaviors until I attended UVM. Upon arrival in Burlington I shared my desire to learn more about the developmental issues of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender (GLBT) students on campus. Within 24 hours several graduate students offered to take me to 135 Pearl (also known as Pearl's), the only gay dance club in town. The combination of my personal connection with classmates, venturing downtown regularly to dance at 135 Pearl, and seeking out academic opportunities to explore GLBT issues taught me a great deal. In combination, these activities were personally and professionally transformative.

My collaborators on *The Vermont Connection* staff were especially gifted at educating me, laughing with me, and allowing me to stumble down this (and other) paths of learning. Our collective efforts on producing the journal changed us and the final publication, and improved our commitment to diversity. We were constantly seeing things we had not before seen in ourselves, in each other, and in our professional endeavors. In the process I worried less about being wrong or making mistakes because each misstep in my journey also brought hilarious moments, new friendships, and unpredictable intellectual growth.

I went to Togo, Africa during a break between semesters and learned that while homosexuality is taboo, men often hold hands in public. Togolese have very little privacy (by U.S.A. standards), and therefore holding hands is common among men. This gesture is not a marker of sexual attraction, but a marker of friendship. There I was, in the middle of a homophobic culture that allowed men to hold hands. A facet of diversity that never before crossed my radar was pinging loudly. I returned to UVM with a new appreciation for all the errors I make without knowing I am making them, even when I try to be open-minded. Starting then I set myself on a zigzag course to find and embrace my mistakes because

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each time I crack one open, unexpected phenomena tumble out.

Of the many gifts I received from UVM, the appreciation of error remains the most salient. Error is the rascal of learning. Error brings disruptive perks. Error is the foundation for constructing meaning. Error lives alongside a family of wonderful experiences like forgiving, diversifying, adapting, and loving. Since graduating from UVM, I founded Queri (www.queri.com), a qualitative research company. Unlike quantitative researchers, who control error and check that it is randomly distributed, qualitative researchers tend to seek out the hidden meaning to be found in error. While I cannot adequately thank all the people from UVM who helped me on this journey, I do think of you often, and I hope you bump into a really rewarding error today.