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Kenneth P. Saurman Award: The Tao of Student Affairs: Ruminations of a First-Time Hall Director

Laurel Dreher

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The Tao of Student Affairs: Ruminations of a First-Time Hall Director

Laurel Dreher
2009 Saurman Award Recipient

In her book *If the Buddha Got Stuck: A Handbook for Change on a Spiritual Path*, author Charlotte Kasl (2005) recounted one of my favorite philosophical tales on human beings' lifelong quest for knowledge:

In a well-known Zen story, an enthusiastic and smart university professor comes to an old Zen master for teachings. When the professor accepts the invitation to have tea, the Zen master pours the tea into his cup until it overflows. The Zen master keeps on pouring in spite of the obvious dismay of the professor. "A mind that is already full cannot take in anything new," the master explains. "Like this cup, you are full of opinions and preconceptions." To find happiness, you must first empty your cup. (p. 83)

After graduating from the University of Vermont's Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration (HESA) program, my mind was feeling particularly "full." Not full because I felt I had learned from HESA all that there was for me to know, but rather from the overwhelming number of emotions I was experiencing as I packed my life up to move (yet again). Accepting my first full-time professional position as a hall director at Roger Williams University has been both the most rewarding and the most challenging career move I have ever made. I would be lying if I said any part of this semester has been easy. Fortunately, I am blessed with having friends and mentors who continue to serve as my own personal Zen masters, especially in the moments where I lose sight of myself completely. In having the distinct honor of writing this year's Kenneth P. Saurman reflection, I would like to take a few moments to share just some of the wisdom I have gained from these incredible people in the hopes that it will help others to "empty their cups" along with me.

Since leaving the green mountains of Vermont, I have started a collection of central "truths" that seem to flow through my life experiences. So far, they are as follows: life is cyclical and imperfect, at its very best. The human condition is

Laurel Dreher is currently a Coordinator of Residence Education at Roger Williams University. She received a B.A. in Journalism from Ithaca College in 2007, and completed her master's degree in Higher Education and Student Affairs at UVM in 2009. She continues to attribute any success in her life to the amazing support and guidance provided by her mother, her friends, her students, and her colleagues.

a complex animal. As human beings, we all have a great capacity to do *good*, and though we may feel shame in acknowledging it, we all also have a great capacity to do *harm*. Inevitably, we are hurt by those who love us, and we hurt others in the same ways we have experienced pain ourselves. We lose sight of the present, get wrapped up in “big picture” thoughts, and let ourselves become absorbed by the more administrative parts of our jobs. At some point, the small educational “moments” we have with students no longer seem like “enough”; at some point, *we* feel like we are not “enough.” And in our darkest hours, when fear and doubt drown out the voices of self-care and self-worth, our inner resiliency falters.

It is during these darker moments that the importance of mindfulness and self-forgiveness truly shine. By way of being part of this “helping” profession, we must constantly challenge ourselves to role model the same kind of wellness we ask of our students. This means facing the harder parts of our work, the moments where we do not have the “right” answers, and the moments where we feel completely vulnerable due to lack of knowledge. In order to help our students understand themselves and the ways they interact with the world, we must be willing to do the same. This means confronting more than rooms that are violating “quiet hours” or students carrying “open containers.” It means confronting *ourselves*, knowing our strengths, knowing our weaknesses, and learning how to be okay with being human. Most of the time, we cannot do any of those things alone. To truly “empty our cups” of what we *think* we know, we must allow those we trust to enter our hearts at our greatest moments of weakness.

To the new professionals who are about to leave the haven of graduate school and enter the job market this spring, as well as to the professionals who have been in the field for 20 years or more, I humbly offer the following words of advice. By no means are they inclusive of all we have yet to learn in this life, nor are they brilliantly new concepts. These guiding words are simply an accumulation of heartfelt conversations, painful moments of self-analytical thought, and the compassion of friends who sometimes are quicker to offer me forgiveness than I am in offering it to myself.

Find Your Voice

Entering the “real” world of student affairs can be somewhat intimidating. Sitting through staff meetings with seasoned professionals can unintentionally leave one feeling like a “rookie” rather than a qualified member of the office team. Deep-seated campus traditions can make a new practitioner feel like fresh ideas and perspectives might not be welcome or worthwhile. Do not let yourself feel silenced. At the end of the day, you were hired over other candidates for a specific reason. Speak up, even if you are afraid. Say what is on your mind. Ask questions, even if you think they are simple. Pay attention, be mentally present,

and learn how to add your voice to the table, for it is probably more valuable than you might think.

Do Not Fear Self-Doubt

Despite graduating from one of the nation's top master's programs in our field and having a few years experience working with students under my belt, I continue to feel moments of insecurity and uncertainty. Similar to the guilt that some of us may feel in acknowledging our inherent privileges, self-doubt can be a crippling professional virus. Sit with it, struggle with it, but do not let it paralyze you. At the end of the day, self-doubt is a good thing. If you are questioning how well you are serving your students and your colleagues, then you are on a continuous quest towards self-awareness and self-improvement. With self-doubt comes humility, and with humility comes a mind (and heart) that is open to growth.

Take Time to Reflect

Coming to a deeper understanding of ourselves means making mistakes along the way. If we were born having already achieved self-actualization, life would be absolutely bereft of surprises and we would cease to grow. Make time in your life for introspection. Learn what you can from your past, then let it go. The knowledge you gain should lead you to a stronger sense of self and the ability to minimize harm to others in the future. Take care to act once you have reflected on lessons learned. It is one thing to grow from our mistakes, but it is another to never allow ourselves the opportunity to make mistakes again.

Give Thanks

If you have love in your life, then you have much to give thanks for. Beyond the menial paperwork and the never-ending list of phone calls you have to return, there exists a colleague who is grateful to have you working alongside them. For every judicial meeting you have with a student who is unable to see beyond their own anger and entitlement, there is a student who desperately needs someone to reach out and help. For every student who does not want to be held accountable, there is a student leader who grows professionally because of your direct supervision. Focus on the positives, show appreciation for those who help you, and never forget to pay attention to the "light bulb" moments you *do* get to witness along the way.

Hold on to the Center

This line from Stephen Mitchell's (1988) *The Tao Te Ching* will remain my personal mantra for 2010. Each day brings opportunities for growth, curiosity, and

introspection. Each new generation of students (and professionals) brings new challenges, new needs, and new adaptations we, as practitioners, need to make in order to simply keep pace. To exist amidst this flurry of constant change provides numerous exercises in flexibility and patience. However, it can also lead to feeling lost, overwhelmed, and out of control. In his book *Awareness*, spiritual philosopher Osho (2001) taught us to allow emotions and challenges to only exist on our periphery, to detach ourselves from reality, and let thoughts and feelings pass through us like mental clouds. Despite the organized chaos that may be happening all around you, there will always be a core piece of your identity that remains constant. A redeeming peace can be found in taking the time to be still and re-center yourself there.

There is a great Zen saying that goes something like this: the beginner can know everything; the expert has no room to learn. As you navigate the figurative obstacles of everyday life, accept the master's invitation to tea. Empty your mind of the preconceived notions you hold about yourself, your work, or the path your life appears to be on. Let go of all you know and seek out the beauty of uncertainty. For it is only through a lifetime of learning that we break through the complications of humanity and ever truly discover who we really are.

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