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Listening to Your Professional Compass

Jacob L. Diaz, Ed.D.

It is a true honor to have been invited to submit this piece for publication in this celebratory 30th volume of *The Vermont Connection*. As an alum of the Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration (HESA) program in 2001, I am grateful for my continued reflection on my experience in the program and, furthermore, on my professional experiences since.

When invited to submit this reflective essay, I asked the editor of this year's journal, Ms. Colleen Toomey, "What do you have in mind? Can you help me understand what it is that you and the Board of TVC are hoping for in this reflection?" In true professional and educative form, Ms. Toomey shared:

We would like you to reflect on how you make meaning of your career. This piece is pretty wide open for interpretation. As a board, we are curious about the following questions: How do you incorporate reflection into your work? How do you find ways to reflect? How do you make meaning of challenging experiences? How do you make time to reflect within a busy schedule? (personal communication, November 26, 2008)

It is in response to these questions that I share the following memories and reflections. Doing so has served as a way for me to remain connected to my purpose and mission for being in the field of student affairs.

The field of student affairs has provided me the privilege to keep learning, both professionally and personally. Most importantly, it is the people with whom I have developed relationships that serve as my most powerful educators. Whether faced with a critical incident, an issue of bias, or a decision to be made regarding resources, I have found colleagues whom I trusted and could rely upon for sage counsel. A continuous theme emerges in my professional life that sustains me: the concept of place. I often think that it is a privilege to be a part of the lives of students. They did not ask for us to be in their lives and last I checked, we didn't ask for their permission. We are stewards of a responsibility to challenge and nurture the human spirit and to ask students to reflect upon what Parker Palmer (2000) offered us for consideration:

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Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for what it intends to do with you. Before you tell your life what truths and values you have decided to live up to, let your life tell you what truths you embody, what values you represent. (p. 25)

Oftentimes, we pour our minds and hearts into the situations we are called to be involved with on our campuses. On a daily basis we are busy coordinating, advising, supervising, supporting, and even serving as chaperones. Our calendars are filled with multicolor schemes and our email inboxes are flooded with information eagerly waiting for our responses. I believe we do what we do out of a deep sense of commitment to something much larger than ourselves. In life, my experiences have shaped who I am and what I believe. They have also provided me a tool by which to sustain a strong connection to my professional/personal compass. I have found that when I do not reflect upon why I am in this field and what drew me to this work, I become frustrated and lost in the milieu of day-to-day tasks that help my institution function. When frustrated, I begin to wonder if I am simply an administrative tool to carry out tasks. When I am attentive to my spirit and take time to draw upon the memories, however, I find they contain a treasure chest of knowledge that explains and reminds me why I am here. It is this reflective practice that makes the challenging moments less consuming and my heart and mind much more open to learning from each decision I make. And while I cannot claim to have the magic formula for sustaining oneself in this field, I do agree with Parker Palmer that the source for the answer lies within the life that intends to live within us.

In 2004, I defended my dissertation entitled, “Marginalized Narratives in the Academy: One Chicano’s Story of his Journey in Higher Education.” In my defense, Dr. Bridget Kelly, a HESA faculty member and close friend asked me, “Jake, what motivates you?” to which I did not have an immediate answer. Truth be told, the question caught me by surprise and I am not certain I had ever been asked this before, at least not in the same way. Examining my motivations took me to a scary place I was not sure I was ready to explore. This meant asking myself about the origin of my motivation. This query proved to be a much steeper climb. Upon reflection, I discovered my spirit would not allow me to rely upon external legitimization that I was “okay.” My source of motivation needed something; I needed to believe that my legitimacy did not require a source from without but a source from within. As Palmer (2000) highlighted: “We must withdraw the negative projections we make on people and situations—projections that serve mainly to mask our fears about ourselves—and acknowledge and embrace our own liabilities and strengths” (p. 29).

In my career, the moments when I feel I am at my best are when I trust myself to carry out my day-to-day responsibilities with care and community at the fore-

front. We exist in social systems that marginalize and where oppression continues to batter away at the self-efficacy and well-being of many in society. As a professional, I wrestle with privilege that comes from credentials, positional power, and academic status, yet reflect deeply upon what I will choose to do with my privilege on a daily basis. It is this tension that fuels my spirit; in return, my spirit reminds me when I may not be behaving in congruence with what I say I believe. “Vocation at its deepest level is, “This is something I can’t not do, for reasons I’m unable to explain to anyone else and don’t fully understand myself but that are nonetheless compelling” (Palmer, 2000, p. 25).

As a professional I cannot say I reach, each day, the lofty aspirations I set out for myself. In fact, I must work to be clear about the difference between external expectations and those that reside rooted within my calling. I am Chicano, the son of parents who are of Mexican ancestry. I came from a middle-class household where working hard and doing what you can with what you have was an important family value. Education was also an important value passed on to me by my family. I was raised in San Diego, California, a proud product of the community college system. I always enjoyed school but somewhere along the way in high school my academics slipped and I came to face the reality that my grade point average would not even be close to meeting the requirements to attend college. When I graduated, I recall thinking that college was intended for “smart people” which, of course, didn’t mean me. I had internalized the thought that one’s grades were an indicator of one’s intellect. While I understand now that this is not the case, at the time it was a very salient feeling for me. Thankfully, Southwestern Community College in San Diego provided a second chance for me to pursue college life.

I did not know my purpose for attending college, yet I attended because my parents thought it was important. It would be 2 full years before my purpose would present itself in a random way. It happened one day while walking across campus: it had just rained and the ground was still wet from the night before. As I ambled along, I looked down and saw a droopy flier taped to the ground. Its bold letters stated, “TRANSFER TO A UNIVERSITY.” I was simultaneously surprised and curious. I picked up the flier from the ground and, fortuitously, as I looked up, I realized I was standing right in front of the Transfer Center. I walked into the office, flier in hand, and asked a staff member, “Is this true?” to which she replied, “Is what true?” I pointed to the flier and she looked at it with a smile and said, “Yes, you can attend any college you’d like as long as you meet the requirements and are able to pay for the costs of attending.”

I recall that moment like it was yesterday because for the first time since I had been a student there I finally felt like I had a purpose; a reason for showing up, a second chance to pursue a college degree. With this new-found energy I im-

mersed myself in my studies and spent the next 2 years building an academic record that would hopefully allow me to transfer to a university. I did not know it then, but this moment provided me an opportunity to begin to trust myself again. I had been afraid to believe that I in fact was intelligent and had something to contribute. This opportunity was like salve to a wound. It gave me hope and a goal I could now call my own. This feeling of empowerment to own a commitment to myself is one of the many wishes I have for students I work with. I hope that all students embrace their own brilliance and feel empowered to be who they are even in the face of forces that may wish them to conform or go along with the currents of the tide.

Two years passed and I did transfer to a four year university where I was introduced to the field of student affairs. Immediately after setting foot on campus, I went to El Centro, a place that served Chicano/a and Latino/a students. I was eager to learn about the support services and even more intrigued by what it meant to be Chicano on campus. As I walked to the front desk, I was greeted warmly by a staff member who told me that there were counselors present each day and that I could make an appointment with them anytime I wanted. They would see me for academic as well as personal reasons. "Personal?" I asked her, somewhat surprised. "Yes," she answered. "They are here for you." I must have been smiling because she smiled back at me somewhat quizzically. She did not know that what she shared was music to my ears. I never knew there were people in college that actually cared about students' lives.

I believe the professional life that I am intended to live continues to reveal itself. I am happy that student affairs is the vehicle with which I carry out my calling each day. In my daily work, I periodically think about El Centro and what it provided for me: a sense of place on campus and a community I could make my own. This sense of place buoyed me while I explored what campus had to offer. I did not know it then, but I was becoming acquainted with the field of student affairs and would eventually decide that this is the way I wanted to give back for all I had received. Reflecting upon critical moments in my life as a student and professional consistently calibrate my life's compass so that I maintain a clear direction aimed at creating a sense of place where the lives of students (and my own) may thrive.

References

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