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Risking Humility to the Point of Perfection: A Reflection on Transition

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The mounting anticipation of a transition, professional or otherwise, often prevents one from remaining balanced in the present. Granted, it is never easy to move on whether a transition involves a new home, a new relationship, a new job, or even a new breakfast cereal. In my case, last May, I transitioned from the Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration (HESA) graduate program at The University of Vermont into the open seas of the “new professional” student affairs job market. And, as much as I attempted to remain grounded and balanced in the interim between graduation day and the beginning of a new job, I found myself unwittingly entangled in something called the *quest for perfection*.

As I write this, I am aware that many of my friends in the HESA program may read this article as they, themselves, prepare to embark on their own transitions from graduate school to the professional realm of higher education. This reflection is for you, friends, as well as for any professional in the academy who is facing a transition. In a sense, everyone is continually transitioning in one way or another. Nothing remains the same from one day to the next, yet human beings tend to focus on the big transitions: the ones that are easier to distinguish from the rest, the ones we actually see coming.

The Big Ones

Post graduation, I found myself in a new state, both geographically and psychologically. I followed my partner to California where he had secured a job early in the spring prior to his graduation. In general, my outlook was positive. I believed that my professional options were wide open as I had recently graduated with a prestigious master’s degree, and I remained relatively open-minded to most job prospects that I discovered. However, finding a new job qualified as a big transition in my book, and thus it was accompanied by additional feelings of nervousness, stress, confusion, second-guessing, tension, and instability.

In addition to my confusion and anxiety, something happened amidst daily perusals of the online job opportunity lists. Something changed while endlessly tweaking my resume, writing cover letters, filling out application forms, and interviewing for multiple, often unrelated, jobs at various campuses. I began trying to be the perfect candidate for every job. And similarly, I started seeking the perfect job for me.

Addicted to Perfection

It is my belief that people do not want to admit that they are perfectionists because admitting this particular flaw would essentially prove that they are not, in fact, perfect. In my case, I refused to admit this flaw as I simultaneously fine-tuned my applications to fit exactly with the required skills and qualifications of each job. I overemphasized certain skills and underemphasized others depending on what I thought the search committee wanted to hear. I convinced myself that I was interested in and qualified for employment opportunities that had not originally been of interest. After a few months of striving for job search perfectionism, one can imagine what happened: I lost my sense of self. Ultimately, I wholeheartedly convinced myself that I wanted, and was qualified for, one particular job that was a professional stretch in terms of desire and prerequisites. Still, I put all of my eggs in one basket, interviewed my heart out, and then waited. And, when I found out that I had not been selected for the job, I crashed.

Humility Experienced

That crash was essential for me to realize that I had been searching for something that did not exist--the perfect job, at the perfect time, in the perfect place, for the perfect person. This concept of *seeking the perfect* can be related to any transitional moment in a professional’s life--striving to facilitate the perfect meeting, writing the perfect paper, giving the

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perfect lecture, or making a difference in someone's life by saying the perfect thing. What I find interesting about student affairs professionals is that they often advocate for students to seek balance and be gentle with themselves in life, but then fail to heed their own advice. I observe stressed-out, unbalanced student affairs professionals every day, working overtime, staying late to respond to every email, and trying to help everyone around them while forgetting to take care of themselves. I have come to ask myself, what is the point of striving for perfection?

In my case, I had lost my own sense of self in striving to be someone else for others' sakes. Following the news that I had not been selected for the perfect job I had been seeking, I was simultaneously offered a different job that I immediately disregarded. At the time, I was not ready to consider alternate options because my job search had not panned out as I had anticipated. I did not allow myself to envision an employment opportunity that had not been a part of my plan. In my situation, striving for perfection meant striving for control during a transition. Yet, what is so disturbing about losing control? As Kurtz & Ketcham (1992) asserted in *The Spirituality of Imperfection*:

When we really let go, we abdicate control, and it is this surrender of control that is so terrifying. What gets in the way here is the old danger of taking ourselves too seriously, of feeling that we have "got it," therefore have to "hold it." The reasoning seems sound: Why take a chance and let go of something valuable when it might not come back? (p. 165)

Human beings often attempt to control events that, ultimately, cannot be controlled. This attachment to control leaves many of us feeling stressed-out and wrought with anxiety. What I needed all along was exactly what happened. I needed to find myself off-course, off-centered, and off-put. It was time to reassess. Fortunately, I had some support and outside perspective, and I was reminded of the career goals I had set for myself prior to being wrapped up in a complex job search. I had found, as Kurtz and Ketcham (1992) found, that "what blocks release more than anything else is the refusal to 'let go' that comes from the demand for security, for certainty, for assured results. Release . . . requires risk" (p. 169).

The Willingness to Become

I had uncovered the difficulties associated with focusing on the perceived expectations others had of me rather than focusing on my own inner drive. I gained needed perspective by shutting off my quest for perfection and allowing for vulnerability, humility, surrender, and release. Instead of taking myself too seriously, I was able to laugh at myself. And once I reached that point--the point of humility--the blurry picture of my career came back into focus. "At certain moments in our lives, in fact, it seems that the most fundamental choice each of us has is between *fighting* ourselves and *laughing* at ourselves" (Kurtz & Ketcham, 1992, p. 190).

I discovered that I had to be "willing to become" (Kurtz & Ketcham, 1992, p. 92) someone that I would never be able to fully control or immediately perceive. Once I was able to do this, I realized that I had been overlooking a unique opportunity in the alternate job prospect I had been offered. I immediately took the position, and have since felt that I made an important decision to take an unknown risk. The lesson I have learned is that while holding oneself to high expectations as a professional, one should also hold oneself to high expectations of humility.

The Point of Perfection

Ultimately, I believe there is no point to perfection because the point of perfection is unreachable. It is somewhat like the cosmos. One can never reach the edge of the cosmos because the edge does not exist. Similarly, one can never reach human perfection, because it does not exist. I find wisdom in the following quote from a recent horoscope in a local weekly paper:

I invite you to figure out what thing you're not so good at – maybe even so bad that you're the worst ever. Why? Because you're entering the Season of Humility, that's why. You should celebrate all the flaws and failures that prevent you from turning into an arrogant know-it-all. (Brezsny, 2004, p. 42)

My hope in writing this reflection is that the identification of the idea of accepting humility will bring perspective to our roles as student affairs professionals and educators. Instead of getting entangled in the quest for perfection, I encourage all of us to take more risks with the issues and driving forces of professional concern, rather than being concerned with doing everything right or the best. I have come to appreciate that many of the greatest discoveries of all time, at the

moment of discovery, appeared ridiculous if not downright wrong, impossible, blasphemous, or imperfect. Perhaps we all need a dose of “crazy wisdom” in our lives, as described so eloquently by Tom Robbins (2004):

Crazy wisdom is, of course, the opposite of conventional wisdom. It is the wisdom that deliberately swims against the current in order to avoid being swept along in the numbing wake of bourgeois compromise; wisdom that flouts taboos in order to undermine their power; wisdom that evolves when one, while refusing to avert one’s gaze from the sorrows and injustices of the world, insists on joy in spite of everything; wisdom that embraces risk and eschews security. (p. 58)

If we as educators try to be perfect or even struggle toward perfection, we may miss out on our truest selves and truest discoveries because we never risked veering off course. Dig deep and search for crazy wisdom. Off-course may be the place to begin.

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