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The Final Word: Seek That Which Is, But Is Not Apparent

Bridget Turner Kelly

What a blessing to be asked to write this article. As ecstatic as I was to write for *The Vermont Connection* (TVC), I stared at the blank screen wondering what to say to faculty colleagues who became dear friends, alumni who welcomed me with open arms, and students who taught me so much and whom I admire a great deal. I decided to share, not necessarily a Final Word, but rather a poem that holds a great deal of meaning for me, the essence of which is the sentiment—seek that which is, but is not apparent. “That which is” is that I am no longer faculty in the UVM Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration (HESA) program, but that which may not be apparent is that UVM HESA will always be in my heart and my mind. It was at UVM that I began my first full-time faculty position, and it was the HESA community that ignited my love of assisting in the development of student affairs educators.

Seek that wisdom
that will untie your knot
Seek that path
that demands your whole being
Leave that which is not, but appears
to be
Seek that which is, but is
not apparent
Rumi (1997)

I will take this opportunity to “unpack” this poem through the telling of my story. I hope to inspire you to derive your own meaning of it and its connections to your HESA experience.

Seek That Wisdom That Will Untie Your Knot

I never considered myself very wise, though I was encouraged to do so. My story begins in Lexington, Massachusetts where I lived from the age of 18 months until the age of 16. Lexington is a predominately White, Jewish town where roughly 85% of the students go on to college after high school. When I went through the Lexington school system, where my parents had purposely moved so that their children could have the best public education, most of the people of color who attended the school were bussed in from the inner cities of Boston, Roxbury, and Dorchester, Massachusetts. There were many tensions between the students of color who lived in Lexington and the students of color who were bussed to school. I lost myself. I tried to assimilate because the White kids accepted me and the Black kids did not. As Tatum (1999) relayed in her seminal book about race, it can be incredibly damaging to be rejected by other people of color in a predominantly White environment:

Terri [young Black woman] felt that “the worst thing that happened” was the rejection she experienced from the other Black children who were being bussed to her school. Though she wanted to be friends with them, they teased her, calling her an “Oreo cookie” and sometimes beating her up. (p. 68)

Though I only received threats and was never actually beat up, I did experience rejection from Black kids who were bussed into school. I dressed differently from the Black kids. I spoke differently from the Black kids. My hairstyles were different from the Black kids, and my parents had different occupations and degrees behind their names than the other Black kids’ parents. Going to college was a given in my family (more encouragement to be wise).

Bridget Turner Kelly received her Masters and Ph.D. from The University of Maryland. Having been an Assistant Professor in UVM’s HESA graduate program for the past four years, she is currently an Assistant Professor in Seattle University’s Student Development Administration graduate program.

I remember the year I was to graduate college my father and I went on a walk. I had attended another predominantly White institution for college. I literally had no plans as to what I was going to do after college. My father sought to remedy my indecision and so I began tossing out several possibilities. "I'll be a politician." He said, "If you do you need to go to law school." "No thanks." I said, "I'll be a psychologist." He replied, "If so, you need to go to medical school so you can be a psychiatrist." I said, "I'll be a teacher." He answered, "If so, you need to get your master's degree." So that is what I did.

I am sure that many of you, connected as you are to one of the best student affairs preparation programs in the country, chose graduate school because you had a passion for working with students. However, I know from talking with many of you that you did not know when you began, and many of you still do not know now, how wise you truly are. You did school (Clark Pope, 2003), and thus did not truly consider how talented you really were. Rumi (1997) encouraged us to seek wisdom, not for material gain or status, but to "untie your knot." I interpret this to mean that it is not conceited or self-centered to think of yourself as wise, rather it is the quest for wisdom that will help you answer those difficult questions you hold about yourself. One of the joys of being connected to the HESA community was watching students face difficult questions about themselves head-on and come out changed for the better as a result. The knots became untied as classes, assistantships, and internships challenged and supported students' personal and professional development.

When I entered graduate school I did not even realize that my knot was untied (so to speak). But for me, seeking wisdom meant finding out why I did not love myself the way I should have. Part of the reason I did not love myself was because I had internalized negative messages about myself throughout my schooling. As hard as I tried to assimilate, I was met with daily reminders that I was not to be accepted in the dominant White world. I had also believed from my experiences with other Black students in school that I was not "Black enough" to fit into the Black world either. I know from my conversations with HESA students that many of you similarly believed you did not fit into the world, whether that be because of your gender, sex, sexual orientation, age, religion, etc. Many college students find themselves at this crossroad of non-acceptance, and I believe it is our experience with this nomad feeling that, if processed fully, can allow us to be effective educators. hooks (1994) called this type of wisdom "passion of experience, passion of remembrance" (p. 90). Because of your connection to the HESA program, you can capitalize on both experiential and theoretical wisdom.

Seek That Path That Demands Your Whole Being

My story continues in graduate school. I took courses in Black history and race. I found like-minded people of color who had grown up similarly to me, talked like me, dressed like me, and accepted me as a full-fledged member of the Black race. Though my racial awakening happened in graduate school, Tatum (1999) reminded me how fortunate I was to have had this experience at all:

Black students lamented the absence of courses in African American history or literature at the high school level and indicated how significant this new learning was to them in college, how excited and affirmed they felt by this newfound knowledge. Sadly, many Black students never get to college, alienated from the process of education long before high school graduation. They never get access to the information that might have helped them expand their definition of what it means to be Black and, in the process, might have helped them stay in school. (p. 67)

After graduate school, I had confidence. I began to think differently about myself and have different experiences. I developed a passion for education and a desire to teach other graduate students who may have been lost as I once was. I went on for my Ph.D. and while doing so, found my identity as a social justice advocate. It was only when I felt confident and secure in myself that I could set out on the path I am on now.

Facilitating a student's professional journey is largely the role of educators, particularly student affairs administrators who are charged with posing "thoughtful questions and engage[ing] students at a level beyond information sharing or surface knowledge acquisition" (Hippensteel, 2005, p. 84), but one that helps them own and create wisdom (hooks, 1994). Student affairs educators have a crucial role to fill in assisting students in wisdom seeking and creation.

Leave That Which Is Not, But Appears To Be

We pick up my story when I arrived at UVM nervous and anxious about assisting in the preparation of student affairs educators when I had never before been a student affairs practitioner. During college I was a resident assistant, secretary of the student government, and actively involved in higher education administration. Throughout my graduate education, I had studied college students, conducted research with them, and written articles about them, but I had not held a full-time role as a student affairs practitioner. In class, I often ask students to lean into discomfort because I know it is that state of discomfort where learning creeps in (Gurin, 1999). So, I bit the bullet and leaned into the discomfort of teaching higher education and student affairs courses. What I found is that I needed to “leave that which is not, but appears to be.” Rumi (1997) cautioned that one should look beyond the surface to find true meaning. I gave myself permission to leave behind the falsehood that only full-time student affairs practitioners could assist in the preparation of student affairs educators. Initially, I believed you had to be a practitioner before you taught a would-be practitioner. However, that is not the case. Many student affairs preparation faculty across the country have never been student affairs practitioners. Yet, they are role-models to me just as former and current practitioners are.

When I looked back on how I arrived at the place I am now, I saw the educators that helped me become a seeker of wisdom and started me on the path of social justice education. My father was the first educator and student affairs practitioner that nurtured me. He was a first-generation college student who became a residence hall director and Upward Bound coordinator during graduate school in higher education and student affairs at Indiana University. He encouraged me to always strive for wisdom. The next major influence was a former student affairs practitioner who switched roles and became a faculty member at The University of Maryland. She mentored me and solidified my desire to provide students with the competence to promote social justice. By far, the most profound influence on my desire to journey on the path of social justice has been the students I have encountered over my years of teaching. They have shaped the lenses through which I teach and give me strength to be the only faculty of color in predominantly White graduate programs and universities. Students, more than anyone else, have been my educators about student affairs and social justice. The reciprocal relationship I have been privileged to develop with students stems largely out of my desire to “teach to transgress” (hooks, 1994) and invite students in as cocreators of knowledge. I encourage all of you to take stock of the mentors who have shaped your quest for wisdom and desire for social justice.

Seek That Which Is, But Is Not Apparent

My story will continue to unfold as I know yours will. I trust that you will continue to seek that which is, but may not be apparent—you are wise, you are a seeker of wisdom, not for material gain or status, but to untie your own knot. As our knots become untied, we are free to assist students in creating wisdom and affirming their own uniqueness. I thank you all, the UVM HESA community, for assisting in my quest for wisdom.

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