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Reflections of a New Professional

Jacob L. Diaz¹

In May of 2001, I humbly accepted the Kenneth P. Saurman award on behalf of each of my colleagues in the Higher Education and Student Affairs Master's program at The University of Vermont. I learned much from their experiences and courage in grappling with controversial issues facing today's college students. I believe that the award captures the spirit of human forgiveness, understanding, and a willingness to work towards a just educational system for all.

Dear Higher Education and Student Affairs (HESA) community,

It is with great pleasure that I contribute this reflection piece to the 2001-2002 edition of *The Vermont Connection*. As I reflect on the events of 2001, I become overwhelmed with sadness and confusion, and yet I have hope for the future. Prior to the tragic events of September 11, 2001, little did I know how my perceived reality would change as I entered the world of student affairs as a new professional and as a doctoral student at The University of Vermont (UVM). In this narrative, I share how the tragic events of September 11th impacted my experience and reminded me of the importance of working towards a more humane and just world.

It was mid morning on 9/11/01 and I was sitting at my desk preparing for the day as a colleague of mine rushed into my office and exclaimed, "A plane just crashed into the World Trade Center!" I stared at her in disbelief and shock as the seconds ticked by. I felt frozen, unable to really fathom what had just happened. A few minutes passed by and then the same colleague rushed into my office and blurted out, "A second plane has hit the World Trade Center!" She looked distressed, and I began to slip deeper into a state of shock and disbelief. As the minutes passed by, and voices from a clock radio in the outer office updated us on the status of the incident, I found myself feeling lost and helpless, unable to understand what had just occurred. The minutes slowly ticked by as I tried to clear my head of the emotional cobwebs that had rapidly formed in my brain. Many questions raced through my mind, "How were my friends in New York City? Were any of them there? Was a friend of mine buried beneath the rubble?" These questions filled my head as I attempted to make sense of what was going on.

I felt lost and confused as I tried to figure out what my next steps would be. I felt helpless, and yet also felt an urgency to do something. I recall in those moments asking myself, "How many students are going to be affected by this? What is going to be an appropriate and genuine institutional response? How could I make an impact? What is my responsibility as a student affairs professional? What does this mean to me?"

As the day continued, I caught myself reflecting on my HESA experience and the colleagues with whom I shared two intense and meaningful years. It was as if my mind was working to reassemble our class where the question of the day was, "Ok, this tragedy just occurred, how do you respond to this as an educator?" The illuminating debates on various issues which we had in classes and meetings afforded me a set of skills such as listening, questioning, and discernment which helped me to understand how others were responding to this incident. I felt the tension in the University community begin to escalate even higher as overt acts of bias and prejudice began occurring against individuals who resemble or are of Middle Eastern descent. In these moments, I thought a lot about the importance of balancing multiple viewpoints while challenging perspectives that marginalize certain people because of assumptions and uninformed beliefs. Now, more than ever, I felt like I must take what I learned from my colleagues and the HESA experience and contribute my part to the healing process of our community.

I believe at this point, it is important to share that my HESA experience was not easy nor do I think it should have been. I was one of a handful of people of color who had transplanted themselves across the country to participate and learn

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about the field of student affairs and higher education administration at a predominately white institution. What I did not realize was that I was beginning a program where my values, beliefs, and identity would be provoked, abused, shaped, nurtured, and prodded to new levels of growth. When I say that my experience was not easy, I am really describing what it felt like to live and work in a place that does not mirror my cultural beliefs or heritage back to me.

This cultural isolation served as a double-edge sword each day of my life in Burlington and at UVM. On one hand, I began to explore my own ethnic identity in ways that I had not done previously. On the other hand, I faced overt acts of racism and bigotry as well as a constant feeling that I did not belong in the community due to my skin color. For example, one day I was shopping at a downtown store in Burlington, Vermont and had chosen a shirt to purchase. I proceeded to the cash register and gave the person my credit card. She glanced down at my name and then proceeded to ask me if I could teach her how to dance Salsa. I stared at her in disbelief and anger as once again I felt like my identity was belittled. This person had never met me but somehow felt comfortable in asking me such a question. Incidents like these contributed to my feelings of isolation and lack of belonging. Each day, like other individuals, I have had to make choices about how to respond to acts of oppression. Similarly, as the aftermath of the tragedy of 9/11/01 has unfolded, certain individuals have chosen to respond with aggression and hate towards others. I choose to respond with determined compassion and care, for it is what has helped me to cope with manifestations of misunderstanding and hate.

As I reflect on the tragic incident of 9/11/01, I think of how important it has been for me to share, collaborate, dialogue, and practice discernment as unfair treatment, human struggle for power, and suffering tears its way into the hearts and souls of many people. The incident served as a staunch reminder to me that all voices are not considered equal in our society. As such, I view my role as a student affairs practitioner as one filled with responsibility to address these inequities and create positive change in this society. Throughout my experience at UVM, I have begun to realize that the power of change rests within each of us. The spirit of human fairness, understanding, and a willingness to discern, I believe, may help further the struggle against inequality and unfair treatment of human beings. Whether it is race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religious difference, or ability, the tragedy of 9/11/01 seems to have served as a stark reminder that the responsibility to positively change the society we live in rests on the shoulders of each individual. We must make conscious decisions to share our privilege, dialogue, and we must challenge the system in which they live. This cannot be accomplished by one person alone, but by all of us working each day to make this unequal world more humane and just.

I have learned much from my graduate experience, faculty, friends, and family, and I am proud to have been able to contribute this reflection, for it reaffirms for me the value of determined struggle for human rights. I would like to thank all who have shared their experiences with me. This is dedicated to all whom have been affected by the events of 9/11/01 and all who struggle against the disease of oppression each day...let's keep working!