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What's Love Got to Do with It?

Deryka C. Nairne & Holly Wilkinson

The life and work of student life professionals provide the glue in the academy. Being attentive to students' health, well-being, success, and leadership development is what we do. It is what keeps the heart of our institutions beating. While dedication to this field requires passion, it can also run us dry. Love for the profession and love for oneself are essential to be whole, resilient professionals and human beings. Professional development includes personal development. This article is both a scholarly personal narrative and a call to action. It weaves the voices of a young professional and her mentor through their own journeys of discovery with research in the importance of heart in higher education. This article offers insight about the need to integrate the essential inner work of self-love into our profession.

"Caring for the self is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare."

- Audre Lorde (1988)

Our relationship with ourselves is essential to how we each show up professionally. Webster's dictionary defines self-love as "regard for one's own happiness or advantage" (Merriam-Webster.com). Perhaps this limiting view is part of the problem. It is time to expand our vision and re-shape the meaning of core words and definitions that impact our sense of self and identity. An unofficial definition in response to Webster, is more broad: "self-love is the intent to improve and upgrade our self continuously in accordance with our values and ideals." This expands love beyond one's self and touches on the importance of what we bring the world. In our experience of our journeys and working with others, we define self-love is more than self-care and improvement. Self-love is both feeling and action. It is paying attention to our tenderness and our fierceness. It is being accountable not only for what we are doing, but how we are showing up, with our

Deryka Nairne graduated from the University of Vermont's Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration program in 2015. She works in residential life and uses the unique experience to further connections with her students. Professionally and personally, she loves storytelling and learning to love the self more through those stories.

Holly Wilkinson served on the Leadership Team of the University of Vermont Career Center for ten years. Her career spans academia, non-profit management, women's entrepreneurship and community development. Throughout her professional and personal life, a common thread is her interest in listening and connecting with heart.

values and intentions. It is connecting heart and action, reflecting, coming alive, and living our truth from a place of internal worth. This all requires intentional effort to give love to the people who are core to the future of this profession: ourselves and our students. Modeling that our whole selves are welcome and required at the table builds authenticity in the academy.

Reflecting on Our Past

We work in a field born of need. Students need more than going to classes and sleeping in dormitories. They need guidance. Thus, residential life positions, identity centers, career centers, and a variety of other offices exist - to provide a foundation for success.

Given current business pressures on higher education and the fast pace of semesters or quarters, some days can be a busy, barren landscape that does not allow for true relationship building. High volumes of meetings, needs, and attending to the unexpected is core to human-centric work. We can get buried in our to-do lists and forget to include time for self-love practices. We do not always model the hope for well-being we have for our students. The caring nature of the profession drives us to continue and even increase support but, often, at the cost of ourselves. In sum, there is a need for professionals to navigate their self-love journey so they can be whole people and professionals. We are calling on you, the reader, to include and honor self-love in the academy - for ourselves and those we serve.

Love is not simple or “extra.” It is an essential life-long journey that gives us stamina and insight to live with integrity between our inner knowing and outer work. Love is also not often spoken of in the academy, yet it is an essential element of life. Parker J. Palmer, an educator, community organizer, and founder of the Center for Courage & Renewal (2010), writes:

If higher education cannot deal with the messiness of real life, educated people will not be prepared to use their knowledge amidst the complexities and cruelties that constantly threaten to undo civilization. And they clearly will not know how to use their knowledge with wisdom, compassion, and love. Love itself is messy, risky and sometimes very dangerous... If higher education does not help people learn how and why to take the risks of love, its moral contributions to the world will fall far short of its potential. (p. 38)

We have a role in student affairs to model taking risks of love even with the pace of our busy lives. Love of self is a foundation for connecting with others from a place of integrity, clarity and authenticity. When we engage in the broader

action of love it helps us to expand our perspectives and fully embrace the journey.

Personal Stories

Deryka Nairne

When I reflect on my undergraduate experience, I recall student affairs professionals who helped me develop myself as a leader and as a person. They supported my development and gave me opportunities to realize my potential. My time with them helped cultivate my leadership skills but not my self-love. Giving myself love was unfamiliar and unnatural. What did (and does) come naturally is to offer love to those around me. This love of others led to getting involved in orientation, campus activities, hall council, and other organizations to help the collegiate livelihood of others. I felt pure joy when each person in my orientation group found their niche on campus. I loved watching someone realize their abilities and make a positive change. I loved giving love but did not retain enough for myself. For four years, I busied myself with ways to make their lives better and, in turn, not necessarily my own.

By the time I reached Holly's office, I was in need. Years and years of unaddressed issues (mostly my lack of self-love) manifested in ways that stopped me from thriving. I was exhausted from always questioning my worth. What little self-love I had was not allowing me to fully enjoy my graduate school experience. I would find tidbits of information on social media and get advice from friends but I needed more. I did not know at the time but I needed someone I could trust to help me start. It was not until my practicum with Author 1 that I was encouraged to dive into my story and intentionally reflect on growing my self-love. Through our meetings, the importance of crafting strategies to pair with my desire to nurture self-love revealed itself. It taught me to pause and ponder. It taught me to ask myself questions. The opportunity to have a supervisor who cared about me wholly and went deeper than surface interaction completely changed my professional perspective.

My professional experience is completely influenced by my time with Holly. She taught me the value of being heart-centric in higher education. Our relationship gave me the confidence to pursue higher education lovingly and intentionally. When I work with my students, I am careful to begin with learning their story. I am also not shy about sharing my own. Each unique relationship is shaped by my ability to be vulnerable with them about my own journey. Partnering my authenticity with curiosity and love gives rise to honest conversations which holistically supports the student.

At the end of my second year as a professional, I received a beautiful gift. It was a compilation of handwritten signs from my students thanking me for my impact

on their lives. The sign that stood out said, “thank you for helping me realize my worth” and, in that moment, everything clicked. I realized how simply living my self-loving truth led to deeper, more impactful conversations. This is because I fully embrace sharing my journey with students. That is it. I did not need to incorporate any special strategies. All I did was be real, open, and honest. This was enough to spur them to action.

My journey of self-love brings me through places of constant healing, learning, and re-learning. My interactions with my students influence me to continue working on myself because I see how the struggle for self-love is not only my own. In an evaluation, one of my previous resident assistants wrote, “Deryka’s legacy will be love” and that entirely sums up who I am. Engaging with my students around their self-love experience contributes to my own journey, path, and purpose.

Holly Wilkinson

Supervising practicum students was a wonderful part of my job as Assistant Director at the University of Vermont Career Center. Each week we attended to both the doing and the being of professional development. Walking alongside practicum students provided me insight into the pace and pressure they were under. There is so much to do, learn, reflect and manage to become student affairs professionals. How to balance and tend to the inner journey is not often a part of the conversation in higher education. However, I found that the practicum students who came to my door were interested in the whole picture, not just strategic resume building. In their hunger for authentic and open conversations, I found myself encouraged to do my own inner work to incorporate and value love in the intellectual culture of the academy. Caring for oneself, caring for others are core competencies that bridge the gap between head and heart. While academics provide the curriculum for learning, student affairs provides the container for development.

Deryka was my final practicum student before I left the academy to follow my own heart-centric career path back into community-based work. Our conversations reminded me that part of becoming a professional is finding one’s voice. While I listened deeply to Deryka’s journey, I listened to my own as well. What I found is that heart matters. Love matters. Values matter. I now run an organization called WholeHeart where love is the core foundational principle of individual, team and community work. Through listening across difference and to one’s inner authenticity, the hard, messy work of love opens and informs. This work embodies two of my core values - listening and generosity - which nourish the inner life and the role of the professional.

Generous listening is powered by curiosity, a virtue we can invite and nurture in

ourselves to render it instinctive. It involves a kind of vulnerability - a willingness to be surprised, to let go of assumptions and take in ambiguity. The listener wants to understand the humanity behind the words of the other, and patiently summons one's own best self and one's own best words and questions (Tippet, 2016).

Listening is an act of love - both listening generously to others and to ourselves. It requires transparency and authenticity and if we ask others to go where we ourselves aren't willing, there is hollowness rather than wholeness. The practice of listening with love, requires that I too pause, reflect, and live with integrity. This is a daily job of diving in deeply to find what needs attention and discovering what offers buoyancy for the challenges at hand. Being a mentor is not about having the answers, but authentically sharing the journey of discovery.

I found I am more than a busy professional taking care of business. I need heart, reflection and love. This requires spaciousness to listen deeply to others and myself, to shed light on the rough, raw, strengths and gifts we each have to offer the world.

Hope for the Future

Our hope is that as student affairs professionals, we not only take great care for the students' lives we are cultivating, but include ourselves in the essential journey of love. Discoveries take time. You cannot check off the on-going journey of self-love. Instead you need to create attentive space for hearing and healing. The quality of our inner lives impacts how we show up in the world.

How we tend to our self-love is a unique journey for each of us. It takes hard work and attentiveness to sift through the cracks and wounds to find our wholeness in our broken world. It requires care and kindness, persistence and pauses, solo time and companionship, both rolling up your sleeves and diving into vulnerability and setting down your load to let in some joy. In the pace of this work and the focus on the student, we as professionals and people can get lost. Given the complex needs of the world, we cannot afford to lose our way. Our students are worth it. We are worth it.

One way to begin is to ask yourself, daily:

What is the most loving thing I can do right now?

What needs spaciousness to open in me?

How can I fiercely love?

Conclusion

Love takes actions. It is not soft or simple. It is hard to know or control where

it will lead us. Yet it is worth the risk in service of our “beings” alongside our competent “doings.” Being in service of love vs. fear, we can find ways to crack open space for our authentic and genuine selves. It begins with how we speak to ourselves and to our colleagues. Next time you hear yourself (or a colleague) share how busy you are, what might shift if you asked: *what would be the most loving thing I could do right now?* When we see ourselves and others as more than “worker-bees,” we open the door to authenticity that creates deeper connections.

'i love myself.'

the

quietest.

simplest.

most

powerful.

revolution.

ever.

-nayyirah wabeed, 2013

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