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Dear Student Affairs

Rachel Kiemele

Dear Student Affairs,

Can you believe we have known each other for almost a decade? Given how much time we have spent together, I think you owe me a candlelit dinner, or at least one of those singing anniversary cards come August!

Asking the Big Question

A few letters ago you asked a question that I – conveniently – ignored, but it has been on my mind ever since. You asked, “So, now that you have had some time to think about it, was HESA worth it?” At that point, I could not give you an answer. Part of this is because 2017 was a whirlwind; looking back, I can sum the year up in two words: change and choice. I began the year as a graduate student and ended it as a graduate. My partner and I moved from on-campus housing into an apartment. Our immediate family grew bigger (we adopted a puppy!) and our chosen family shrunk a bit with friends moving on in their careers and out of Vermont. I was hired into my dream position, but taking it meant accepting interim status and living with the uncertainty and anxiety of another job hunt come February. I gained several new colleagues, my supervisor resigned, and my father decided we were no longer talking, only to change his mind a few months later, no less than three times.

Throughout this year-in-flux, there have been days when all I can do is fall into bed, asking: Why can we not have just one day where nothing goes wrong? One day without a student, staff, or faculty member in crisis? One day without an emergency trip to the vet, or the sudden realization that I forgot to do laundry only to find we’re out of quarters…and clean clothes? One day that my partner and I do not have to worry about whether we will have jobs next year, or argue over staying in Vermont for one more year or the next five? I hesitate even as I write this, because I cannot help but think how small these ins and outs of daily life appear against national and international backdrops. How can I be upset about dirty pants when the Great Barrier Reef has been declared dead? How

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does the $500 vet bill measure up to trillions of dollars in national debt? So when you ask me, was HESA worth it, my immediate impulse is to complicate, weigh, and define exactly what the “it” is in an effort order to justify relative worth. This brings me to one of the two most important lessons you, Student Affairs, taught me:

If it matters to you, it matters.

I have spent far too much time and expended too much energy resisting this lesson. Said time would have been better spent questioning what that resistance was rooted in. It was while reading Brené Brown’s definitions of guilt and shame that something clicked, and I realized why I was so completely at odds with this straightforward declaration. According to Brown (2007), guilt is, “holding something we’ve done or failed to do up against our values and feeling psychological discomfort” while shame is, “the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging” (p. 29). In other words, guilt is I did bad while shame is I am bad. Belonging is mattering, and mattering means being of worth; what I had been fighting all along, which this simple affirmation would not allow me to refute, is that I matter.

So…Tell Me What Brought You to Student Affairs

I thought I knew my own story (especially after telling it countless times, in every application, every interview, and every…single…class) but the thing about you, dear Student Affairs, is that you really know how to throw a person for a loop. You taught me that this work is best done through constant, critical analysis of self, and that those moments in which I am genuinely sick to death of me can present some of the most acute opportunities for growth. After all, what is identity but another way to describe who we are and how we came to be? What I have known, but cannot claim to have understood, is that I cannot speak to who I am without acknowledging who and what made me that way. This has been (and still is) a painful process, especially when I discover roots of shame permeating ground I thought I had already covered. However, this process is vital to living authentically and to creating my best life.

I have learned that this is holistic work, but not holistic as the buzzword it can so easily become (ho·lis·tic: adjective; striving to fulfill every possible and as yet undefined required and desired qualification for admission and/or hiring in the near and uncertain future to prove one is well-rounded, balanced, and overall the perfect candidate; see graduate school). Rather, WHOLEistic, as in we are always working with whole, complex, multifaceted beings. This may seem an obvious point, but the more I thought about it, the more I realized I have a tendency to compartmentalize myself into “Rachel: the professional” and “Rachel: the person” and that this habit is deeply rooted in my past. It all comes back to believing
that I matter and to giving myself the grace to live fully as a whole person. So, as you have been asking me to do for quite some time, I am writing this letter to tell my story, to honor my WHOLEistic self by acknowledging who that self is and how she came to be, how that “self” shows up in the work I do day-to-day, and how this connects to the bigger picture – the life I want to lead.

Moving Forward Means Looking Back (but not for too long)

My dreams and hopes for the future are a product of my existence as a whole being. I cannot speak to those dreams, to the life I am creating, without acknowledging how I got to this point. But first, I have to let you in on a secret… this is the fifth or sixth version of this letter that I’ve written. Every time I have finished, it has not felt quite right, and it is always right around this point. After reading all the versions several times, my mistake became apparent. Despite my best intentions to show you what I have learned by examining how I got to be the person I am through the lens of my HESA experience, I end up spending paragraphs describing my relationship with my dad. You see, my father is a master of manipulation and evasion with an all-consuming need to exert complete control over our family. Growing up, my world revolved around my father’s need to be the center of everyone’s attention. While this had a huge impact on my life, and I know that much of my shame and self-doubt is rooted in being my father’s daughter, this is not my father’s story, and I do not need to write his narrative in order to find value in my own.

Despite his best efforts, my father did not have enough gravitational pull to drag me away from my books. Reading has always been the constant, and sometimes the escape, I did not – and during my childhood could not – recognize as needed. I read anything and everything I could get my hands on because it was one of the only choices allowed to me. I fell into stories the way my siblings watched TV and played video games – as if the outside world no longer existed. My grandmother checked out books on the sly and gave me free reign of her personal collection. I loved fiction, especially fantasy that featured the discovery of new worlds and the cataclysmic ending of old realities. My relationship with my grandmother and her encouragement to keep reading gave me hope. No matter what was going on in my life, there was always a new story waiting for me. Looking back makes me realize that I learned to split my “self” very early in life – there was “daddy’s perfect princess” and then there was the person I wanted to be, the characters I saw reflected in the stories I read who were strong and kind and always stood up for themselves.

Identity Diffusion, Foreclosure, and Moratorium Walked into a Bar…

Attending college was a turning point in my life because, for the first time, I
was accountable to no one but myself. College was the quintessential experience that American media makes it out to be. I left the nest, made a lot of mistakes, travelled, came out, and fell in love. When it came to exploring my personal identities, I grew in leaps and bounds. However, answering the question, “What do you want to do with your life? Who do you want to be?” was beyond me. I did not know how to make these decisions, how to pave a path rather than follow a pre-designed route. I applied to graduate school to continue my English degree, because school provided structure, routine, and safety – someone to tell me what to do. When those plans resulted in rejection letters, I was frozen with indecision. Going from too many choices to none at all meant that I reverted back to the models my parents had taught me and did what I thought responsible adults should do: I started working for Starbucks and got an apartment.

Fast forward two years and a quick climb up the corporate ladder. I had just moved to Vermont with my partner, who was beginning her own journey through the UVM HESA program. My time in the “real” world thus far had taught me a few important lessons:

• The maximum number of espresso shots you can do in 1 hour is 12 – any more than that will induce heart palpitations
• Finding roommates through Craigslist is a terrible idea, and moving into a new apartment and back out again three weeks later shows you who your real friends are
• A Tempur-Pedic topper makes sleeping on an air mattress for a year ALMOST bearable

Finally, the most important lesson I learned is that it is all too easy to become stuck in the rut of “mediocre” – that learning to be brave and to live as your whole self takes both practice and a willingness to engage in risk. I stayed in a job I hated for far too long because I was too afraid to make a different decision. My love of reading saved me as a child, and it saved me again almost twenty years later. About a month into my partner’s first year in the HESA program, I found an old high school English paper that I had written on one of my favorite poems. This excerpt is from *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, by T. S. Eliot:

Do I dare
Disturb the universe?
In a minute there is time
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.

For I have known them all already, known them all:
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;
I know the voices dying with a dying fall  
Beneath the music from a farther room  

So how should I presume?

In the paper, I tore poor J. Alfred apart with a cool disdain for his waffling – his unwillingness to choose, to live because he feared that any decision he made MIGHT be undone. Reading the work of my younger self was a slap in the face. I was Prufrock in so many ways; measuring out my life in coffee spoons, painting my face with a too-cheerful smile as “Thank you, have a nice day! What can I get for you?” dropped from my tongue with machine-like efficiency eight hours per day, six days per week. I had become just another cog in the wheel. I shared this revelation with my partner, who told me in no uncertain terms how worried she was, that I seemed to have stagnated and appeared deeply depressed. It was not the first time she shared this with me, but it was the first time I really heard her. I knew something had to give; it was just a question of which would break first, my shame or my “self.”

Audre Lorde wrote that, “poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence” (1985, p. 36). Somewhere in the midst of this responsible adult life I had created, hidden in the difference between working to live and working to survive, I lost my vital necessity. Though much of my self-learning occurred long before I set foot on UVM’s campus, it was you who enabled me to name the vital necessities of my being. It was hovering on the outskirts of my partner’s HESA journey, reading Paulo Freire, Laura Rendón and bell hooks so that I could gain enough context to help edit her papers, that made me crave the classroom again. It made me remember how much I love to read, and I realized that reading had become only my escape, when it used to be my resistance. I remembered how I used to throw myself into my writing, that once upon a time I had proudly proclaimed myself a closet poet, literary analyst, and burgeoning novel writer. I remember falling in love with Dickenson, Lorde, Plath, Rich, Angelou, and Carson, staying up until dawn debating the worth of poetry versus prose or finishing those last few chapters. I remembered that there is more to life than turning paychecks into shelter, food, and clothing; that my mind and my soul required sustenance as much as my body. I remembered how to dream.

**Defining my Borderlands**

“A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague, undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p.3). Choosing to pursue this degree in Student Affairs required that I face the borders I have created and the emotional residue that permeates them. It has been easier, less painful, to split my “self” into tidy
boxes, to determine how I will act based on my location. Rachel-at-work is always laughing and throws herself into tasks; Rachel-at-home is a sassy domestic who loves to cook and hates doing dishes, laundry, and honestly cleaning in general; Rachel-in-play is selective of both activity and company; Rachel-as-academic is quiet, she sometimes chooses silence and is afraid to trust that her contributions are valuable.

In the absence of someone to dictate my daily life, I wrote myself a set of instructions to follow and locked them away, so that I would not have to live with the fact that I am still afraid; afraid that I will make the wrong decision, fail, be less than perfect. Afraid that my worth, which I can no longer measure in terms of my father’s happiness or how many cups of coffee I’ve sold or the number of A’s on my report card, has disappeared or perhaps never existed. My borderlands are a place where I have to face the fact that I have taken the ridiculous expectations my father set for me and made them my own. It is a place that requires me to live with the knowledge that the perfection I have spent years trying to achieve, doesn’t actually exist. Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) defined the need to matter as the “feeling that others depend on us, are interested in us, are concerned with our fate” (p. 165). My quest to be the perfect daughter, student, and employee has always been about proving that I matter, because I have never believed that I do. We say that parents are supposed to love their children unconditionally, but one of mine will always be incapable of doing so. In his world, the cost of love is perfection, and the only way to attain that type of perfection is to give up one’s self, to knowingly choose silence. But that type of love is not really mattering.

Becoming the Author of My Life: Finding the Ability to Choose and Believe

Don Miguel Ruiz, said that, “we dream according to the framework of what we have been taught and what we have agreed to believe” (as cited in Rendon, 2009, p. 23). I was taught to believe that my worth must be measurable in units external to myself. The relationships I have formed, both within and outside your world, have proven that living with this belief is my choice; that my voice matters and that I can choose to believe differently each and every day. In Sentipensante, Rendón (2009) states, “…we have lost sight of the deeper, relationship-centered essence of education, and we have lost touch with the fine balance between educating for academics and educating for life” (p. 2). While I have witnessed this loss, I have also been incredibly lucky to experience this type of people-centered education every day for the past two and a half years through the relationships with my colleagues in Living/Learning, my practicum sites, professors, friends, and the little family my partner and I have created together. Each experience has made the vision of who I want to be, not just as a professional, but also as a
WHOLE person, a little clearer.

I addressed this letter to you, Student Affairs, but I think it was meant for someone else. Humor me for just a moment, while I tease this out. One of the reasons I love poetry is because, like so much student development theory, it represents the distillation of complex selves into a few lines, perhaps even a single word. It is a dialogue between author and audience of, “Look. I see. Listen. I hear. Remember. I Feel. Look again.” In the case of this letter, author and audience are one and the same. Poetry is resistance - because how I choose to break form is as important as how I build it - and together these can become revolutionary acts. This act of defining what is vital to one’s existence forms the core of the relationship-centered philosophy I am striving to build. Learning to love myself, to use my voice, to trust that I have worth has formed the foundation of my resistance. I believe that to claim your own vital necessity as essential is the greatest of revolutionary acts, because we cannot truthfully reflect to others that they matter if we don’t believe it of ourselves. I grew as a daughter, a student, and as a professional for the love of reading, learning, and growth. I choose to grow as a whole being, whose personal is professional and inseparable, for the love of me. Last year, a dear friend and mentor shared a poem by Upile Chisala with me. It reads, “heart, tell me when you’re ready.”

I’m finally ready to listen.

Love,
Rachel
References


