Finding the Forest Through the Trees: A Conversation on Vicarious Joy with Joe Russell

Joe Russell

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Below is the transcript from the audio foreword, “Finding the Forest Through the Trees: A Conversation on Vicarious Joy with Joe Russell.” If you would like to listen along, the audio file is available via ScholarWorks.

[Excerpt, 26:26-28:18:]

Joe Russell: And I can hear David Attenborough’s voice talking about the forest needing that tree to fall over. Because it’s the only way that new vegetation and the new tree is going to be able to grow, to fill its spot, light has to pour through the canopy where that tree fell to give enough nutrients to the young seedling for it to have a chance to grow, to fill its place. And it feels like this is where the hope comes in. I’m hopeful that the moment that we are in now in higher ed is one of really thinking clearly about it. We don’t have to make the forest look exactly like it looked before. We don’t have to replace the thing that fell with the same thing. But what new, what more diverse, what new strategy, what new way of being, what new way of doing will grow in to fill that gap that changes the whole ecosystem of that area of forest, right?

All of the ways that higher ed has been exclusionary and has kept people out historically, how will that look different? This is the opportunity. This is a moment that we all have to kind of say: how do we grow some systems that will bear fruit 10 or 15 or 20 years from now, that will be completely different than what we have now. So I think that, for me, that is what gives me a little bit of hope. It is this sense of, alright, I think I can start to, in my own way, mourn and grieve appropriately and just move forward. Just move forward and start to see, well, what might it look like? What is the thing that will grow to fill that space? How do I foster it? How do I nurture it? How do I encourage it?

Joe Russell (he/him/his) is currently the Assistant Dean of Students at the University of Vermont (UVM). Joe began his career at UVM in 2005, and has held numerous roles over the years, primarily in Residential Life. In his current role, Joe leads the UVM Care Team and helps coordinate support and behavioral intervention for students at risk or in distress. In addition to developing systems and infrastructure to respond to students who are going through a difficult time, Joe serves as Deputy Title IX Coordinator for Students and Crisis Support Chief for the university’s Emergency Operations Group.

Originally from Kingston, Jamaica, Joe came to UVM having completed his undergraduate degree at Vassar College and maintains a passion for supporting international, BIPOC, and LGBTQ+ students and communities. Joe brings 20 years of experience in education to the classroom by instructing a 1-credit course that introduces HESA students to current trends, hot topics, and contemporary challenges faced in Student Affairs.
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[00:01–02:39] Introductions

[00:01] Robyn Suchy: Thanks for joining us! This year, the editors of the Vermont connection are excited to invite Joe Russell to share his thoughts and reflections on our journal theme “Planting Seeds of Hope: Transforming Higher Education.” In moving through the creative process, Joe has welcomed us to this reflective conversation of how hope, love and kindness can transform higher education as we know it.

[00:21] I’m Robyn Suchy, I use he/him pronouns. I am a part-time student in the University of Vermont’s Higher Ed and Student Affairs program. I’ll be graduating at the end of May 2024 and I’m excited to be here. I spend most of my time working full-time at the University of Vermont Prism Center, supporting queer students in identity development and leadership, and just centering their joy and growth and development.

[00:54] Gabi Cuna: Hi there. My name is Gabi, my pronouns are they/them. I’m the co-editor of this year’s TVC journal and also work as the Graduate Assistant for Diversity and Community Engagement and the College of Education and Social Services. I am also a second year HESA student and will be graduating in May 2023.

[01:13] Joe Russell: Hi everybody. My name is Joe Russell. I use he/him pronouns and I am currently the Assistant Dean of Students here at the University of Vermont. It’s super exciting that I have conscripted Gabi and Robyn into this conversation because secretly I’ve always wanted to host a podcast in my life, and this might be the closest that I get to do it. I’m super excited and super happy to share some time with both of you and with the broader audience. And before we dive in even further, I’m just gonna take a quick moment and shout out to the Vermont Connection family and friends out there in the ether who may be hearing this at some point. I started working at UVM in 2005, so I’ve been here for a number of years and so know many people in our Vermont Connection across the country and across the world. And so, if you are recognizing this voice: Hello dear friend, hope you are well and thank you for taking some time to listen to us. Gabi, Robyn, do you want me to get started here? I’m gonna ask you all to be the first to speak, if you’re okay with that. I’m curious and I think maybe people listen in, maybe also curious as co-editors, how did you all choose this theme? This theme really has spoken deeply to me and I’m curious about the process that you all went through in deciding upon “Planting Seeds of Hope” as our theme?
Robyn Suchy: Yeah, thanks Joe. I think Gabi and I both came into the year really hoping that we could take our time as editors of the journal to really highlight some hope and kindness and love and compassion and joy. You know, graduate school teaches us a whole lot about historical roots of oppression and higher ed and the ways that all the problems in the world continue to perpetuate through systems and institutions. And you know, I’m really grateful for the opportunity through our classes and our conversations, to be able to engage in such deep and meaningful work. And, when the theme of love and joy and kindness and compassion and hope feels like such a revolutionary theme to write about and to think about as scholars and practitioners, that’s probably a sign that we need this more than I think we even realized, because there just isn’t enough out there talking about all the really wonderful work we and our peers and our colleagues and our mentors in the field are doing to support students and really transform higher education.

Gabi Cuna: Yeah, early on, I think in our cohort’s classroom experience, I think you know first couple weeks of our first semester, a growing theme that we saw in our classes was like we were very quick to point out issues. We were good at that, we could point at a system and be like “this is broken, this is terrible” and I thought a lot about like the cycle that that creates of we point out that there’s an issue, we are overworked and burned out and don’t have the capacity to fix the issue, and we continue to point it out and it just kind of like perpetuates until people leave the field. And so, I thought a lot about like what it meant to break that cycle and like, how brave it is to have hope despite everything that’s going on in the world and in higher education in general and how that is, like Robyn said, a revolutionary act. So, we were really excited to have that theme come up in the call for theme suggestions. Every year, the TVC crowdsources suggestions and ask the community what they would like to see, and we had multiple people that proposed something along these lines of something focusing on hope or love or care and so, being able to have that all coalescence of this theme is really exciting.

Joe Russell: Well, thank you both. Again, I’m gonna say out loud how appropriate and apt and timely the theme is. I had you both in class; I have the privilege of teaching this one credit course in our HESA program, albeit the title of the class is “Problems in Higher Education”. Which maybe is part of the challenge, or maybe it’s also part of what brought us here together to be able to have this conversation, this awareness that we can’t always just focus on problems. There also needs to be focus on how we sustain ourselves to address and fix and right these problems over time. So anyhow, I’m tremendously grateful for the opportunity to be a part of this. I think the TVC journal every year is
amazing and I’m humbled and privileged to be a part of it this year, in a small way, by providing this audio podcast foreword for the journal.

[06:28] Robyn Suchy: Yeah, Joe, I was gonna ask when we asked you to write the forward, what were you thinking? What have you been kind of reflecting on since we asked that?

[06:38-12:14] – Joe’s reflections on the theme and process of writing the foreword

[06:38] Joe Russell: It’s a great question. The first thing I remember thinking when Gabi asked me this question was “Oh my gosh, no way!” Imposter syndrome, immediately set in like the idea of, like, you want me to write the forward for the journal? Oh my gosh. I have skillfully circumvented the imposter syndrome of writing by recording an audio podcast with you both, so again, I’m grateful. I have been thinking about it a lot, Robyn. If I’m honest, the first thought that came to mind really was this idea of, well, isn’t this the work that we all do every day, day in, day out, right? This idea or the imagery of planting seeds, I think is what keeps most people in student affairs, really engaged and really active, and feeling fulfilled. Again, without being too cliched. Really, this imagery of the gardener who is tending to a garden, right, creating an environment, planting seeds, trying to have the right level of water and shade from the scorching sun or fertilizer or nutrients or whatever it might be. I think a lot of us are called or find joy in the work that we do because we think that.

[08:00] Even through difficult moments, this is the work that we’re doing. We are helping for our students and for each other. We are helping create an environment that hopefully positive change will grow out of at some point. I think for me, in the most difficult of times, there is this again, hope that well, maybe one day far in the future I might not see it, but some positive something good will have come out of that conversation or interaction or difficult moment or accountability or whatever it might be. So that was, I think, the first place my mind went to, and I’m not surprised. I think many people in our field kind of have that and hold on to think about the work that we do. And I will name, fairly quickly, it evolved, and my thinking got complicated by this reality that it felt a little bit too one-sided. It felt a little bit transactional right? Like here was this farmer tending to students like crops and like it felt super problematic. It felt super, and maybe not problematic, but certainly incomplete. It felt to me incomplete that this idea, that equation or that transaction is one-sided, a farmer or a gardener tending or sowing seeds in students that will bloom felt very one sided and a part of the reason I like the work that I do and enjoy the work that I do is that it’s not one-sided. It is this give and take. Again, thinking back to being in the classroom with you all and I learned as much and was inspired and enjoyed that conversation, I hope, as much as you might have learned from me in that class. So it really helped me kind of start to think differently about it.
And, far more complicated it in my mind, I think the whole idea of what are we doing and what are the seeds of hope that exist now for us, also made me start to really ask the question like what does that mean for me, right? I again, I’ve been now in the field, this will be my 20th year of entering the field of student affairs. And I don’t know that I reflect intentionally often enough on the things that are seeds or seedlings, or they’re really young things in my own life, my own career, that really are not going to bear fruit anytime soon. So, what does it mean now at year 20, that there might be some things just being planted by you all, by students, by the experience that we’ve had through COVID, by a whole bunch, that is not gonna really grow into fullness for 15 years. I’m likely going to be in a different position at a different institution. It could look very different, but what is that like? What are those things that the circumstance right now is helping cultivate, that I’m not gonna see actually bear out for quite some time.

Maybe lots of people have this reflection. Maybe many people think like this, but I think there is, for myself, this what the default is. Students or people entering the field are having those thoughts, and I wonder whether or not it’s something we could all do a little bit more of is spend a moment and do that reflection for ourselves. I’m not sure if you all have any thoughts as again, you’re soon to graduate. You know, grad students entering the field of student affairs. Like, what are you reflecting on, that could be the things that you might not see bearing fruit right now but, when you are now 20 years into the field, what will it look like?

— What will bear the fruit in 20 years?

Gabi Cuna: I think for me, something I rely heavily on is like an imagined fruit. Like if I plant the tree now, the students are very transient, I’m not gonna know that student in six years, possibly. They’re going to take the lessons that they learned from me advising their student org and I’m gonna write them a letter of recommendation, and I don’t know where it goes from there. Sometimes I don’t hear back. And so, I think that it’s helpful for me to kind of daydream about like, they did get into that school and they really love it, and now they’re doing like a really successful thing, that they’re really happy and fulfilled by. So I think that it’s sometimes nice to just kind of daydream about the seeds that you’ve planted and hoping that they are growing out there, even if you don’t see them growing or don’t have the evidence of them growing yet.

Robyn Suchy: Yeah, I think what you’re getting at here is, is one of the reasons I really love higher ed. I love students who come into this experience with so much energy and passion and excitement and, in a lot of ways, energy that we might not have anymore, even being somewhat young
in this field. It’s hard in September going to all the things and meeting all the people and having all the students with all these great ideas coming and saying we should do this and this and this and this and knowing that like, one of those things might materialize, but you know, as the year goes on and as every day gets harder and as papers are due and inboxes explode and all the other little things that pop up, I think students really help me sustain some energy for our work and I think students now more than ever are really thinking about their impact on the world around them. So while higher ed is this kind of really wonderfully self-contained four, five, or six years, I see students going out to the world saying, like, I have learned these things here and I’m going to apply them and it gives me a lot of hope to, you know, have mentored students in the past and see them out there working in politics or as teachers or as doctors or like in business and just being a little bit more aware of the world around them and really thinking about and reflecting on their role in that world.

Joe, it’s funny you said that you don’t know many people reflect, you know, on kind of this journey or think about the seeds that they’re planting, and I feel like that is actually really hopefully a big part of being in education for me of keeping that image and keeping that, you know, daydream, as Gabi put it, that like these students are gonna be so well equipped and so smart and so effective at positively impacting the world and I can’t wait to be in a world that they’re running.

Joe Russell: Well, again, I agree and I will, without trying to be too redundant, I’m just gonna thank you both for the opportunity to take some time and reflect. I think that’s also a part of what happens is we get so busy and there’s always something to attend to, some crisis or some difficulty or some policy or one thing or the other that I do find it sometimes hard to do that work unless you really build in intentional pauses and moments to sit back and say, like, well, what does this actually mean? How am I doing or what do I think about or what’s coming next? So I will name for you both gratitude for this opportunity to take a brief moment and do some of that reflection with you, with you all.

Gabi Cuna: Yeah, speaking of these little pockets of reflection and moments of like, sustainability, you in your role encounter a lot of difficult situations and conversations. Could you tell us a little bit more about how you keep going and like, get through those hard moments?

Joe Russell: Yeah, speaking of these little pockets of reflection and moments of like, sustainability, you in your role encounter a lot of difficult situations and conversations. Could you tell us a little bit more about how you keep going and like, get through those hard moments?

What sustains you through difficult moments?

Joe Russell: Yeah, I think there are many things I think over the years in my career, it’s been helpful to develop some infrastructure of how do I care for myself, how do I find the right boundaries, right? We always talk about self-care in this field and I really am the champion for it. Like one day I
want a T-shirt that just says “boundaries are self-care.” I think it’s that we don’t often frame really intentionally that sometimes the best things that we can do for ourselves are to draw boundaries around work, especially. So, that’s been part of it. For me it is creating, or having some infrastructure internally to be able to not feel burnt out or completely swamped or completely rundown by difficult circumstances or difficult conversations.

[17:21] So it’s been helpful for me to kind of get to the root of what are the things that sustain me in this work? Especially coming out of or that we continue to be in a global pandemic from COVID, it’s been reading a little bit more about collective and vicarious trauma, you know, and how we as practitioners can both be impacted by but then also help be supportive to others in this context of trauma. One of the interesting things that I read was around a concept that I had never really heard or seen written down before. The concept was vicarious joy, right? I think I had heard about vicarious trauma before. I had never heard of this concept of vicarious joy. Like “what does that mean? I would like to learn more, please!” And had this experience randomly recently, that was like a good for me. It highlighted a little bit of what that looked like or what it looks like for me.

[18:35] I forget the exact day and evening, but one evening at home was really trying to just relax and take my mind off of things. I was snuggled up on the couch next to my chocolate lab, Obi-Wan, who is lying down behind me as we speak. And pulled up Netflix and was like, not sure what to watch, and stumbled upon this documentary on Netflix called “Mission Joy: Finding Happiness in Troubled Times” and it was based off a book that was written several years before that featured the stories of and how both His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu were able to live joyous lives and for two people who have been through very difficult, very challenging things in their lifetimes, how they were able to find joy during difficult circumstances.

[19:33] I was like “This sounds interesting, let me watch it, and at least if it’s not interesting, that’s fine.” So I started watching it and basically this is like an hour long documentary of these two men giggling and teasing each other. And it was this moment of, like, just watching pure joy on TV, watching again, His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, these, like, huge figures, right, exhibit this childlike joy with each other, and in their friendship, quite literally, teasing, and tickling, and poking, and giggling with each other like schoolchildren! And I didn’t realize it until the very end of the documentary that I was smiling so hard through it that my cheeks actually hurt. Like I had to take a moment and be like, oh I gotta relax my face, I’m smiling. I’m smiling so much watching them that my cheeks started to hurt.
It brought me back to this place of, sometimes seeing joy in others is also uplifting to our own souls. And how much we need those moments, especially in difficult times, especially when we’re having a rough time at work or hard time in our personal lives, is recognizing that we do experience vicarious trauma and that we also have the ability to experience joy in community and joy from and with each other. And so it made me wonder, you know, how am I paying that forward? What are those moments of laughter and joy at work? There are times that I feel a little bit just like I’m so rundown or I’m so overwhelmed that who has time to laugh? I’m like “no, I don’t have time. I have to go do this thing”. And I think those are the moments that help get us through that. In the darkest of times, those are the moments that help be the spark for someone who’s having a rough day, that maybe all of a sudden their day is a little bit less rough.

I think back to, again a class that we had together, that there was as much laughter in that class as anything else. There were these moments of just silliness and laughter, and I’m grateful for those moments, and I’m grateful for the opportunity to be able to experience joy, maybe exhibit joy or include others in my joy, and when it’s hard for me to find that, to look to others and at least have a little bit of an experience of being uplifted vicariously.

That’s a very long winded answer to your question, but that’s a little bit for me of how I get through those very difficult days at work, or difficult conversations or difficult crises or emergencies or things.

Robyn Suchy: When you look towards the future, what makes you feel hopeful about the field?

Looking to the future, what makes you feel hopeful about the field?

Joe Russell: Well, again, I’m going to name it out loud, I think hopefully reading the articles in the journal are gonna inspire lots of hope for the future. Again, I think a part of the reflection that I’ve been doing. And I’m going to answer the question Robyn and Gabi and in a slightly...not direct way. The hope for the future is...is the unknown. Is the, again, the things that are yet to bear fruit that maybe are only small seeds or seedlings now, but 10 or 15 or 20 years, if I’m still in the field at that time as those things become more well established, I’m curious about how the field will look.

I was talking with some colleagues the other day and had the opportunity to spend some time with Bev Belisle, the Director of our Mosaic Center for Students of Color, and Bev was sharing this sense of, for many of our students of color on campus from 10 or 15 years ago till now, some of the
experience feels like higher ed and UVM hasn’t changed a whole bunch. They’re running into some of the same challenges or struggles or difficulties now as they did maybe 10 or 15 years ago. And so this this wondering of how will things change 10 or 15 years from now does have me really curious and hopeful.

[24:14] I’m going to try and share a little bit again of another analogy. So very different to the analogy of the gardener sowing in seeds is this analogy or this vision or this idea of a rainforest or a forest. I grew up watching nature documentaries, the voice of Sir David Attenborough is like emblazoned in my mind. I can hear him talking about fill in the blank kind of, you know, oceans or Antarctica, or forests, and rainforest is one of those things. When I think back over the past several years and what has happened since the beginning of the COVID pandemic, it is this analogy of and and and I think it holds true both like in the field but also in this internal, just looking within myself in terms of strategies and skills and things within me, is this idea.

[25:16] It looks like a rainforest and in COVID a whole bunch of the very old reliable trees that we’ve come to really look to have been blown over. And so there are these, gaping holes, these gashes, or scars in the forest, and I will name, I think, for me, it’s been hard to come to terms with the loss of those things. Those could be people, those could be, again, the things that we’ve relied on or I have relied on internally that have kind of always worked. I’ve looked to them as stable. The things that kind of like, no, that is a part of the horizon or a part of the landscape that has always been there. And now when I look, it looks completely different, like that whole section of forest just looks different. Again, it’s easily, and I think this is connected to the theme, around how we easily go to a place of seeing the holes and the gaps and the scars and the forest. For me, I go easily to a place of nostalgia and grief and loss of all the things that I am mourning and missing.

[26:26] And I can hear David Attenborough’s voice talking about the forest needing that tree to fall over. Because it’s the only way that new vegetation and the new tree is going to be able to grow, to fill its spot, light has to pour through the canopy where that tree fell to give enough nutrients to the young seedling for it to have a chance to grow, to fill its place. And it feels like this is where the hope comes in. I’m hopeful that the moment that we are in now in higher ed is one of really thinking clearly about it. We don’t have to make the forest look exactly like it looked before. We don’t have to replace the thing that fell with the same thing. But what new, what more diverse, what new strategy, what new way of being, what new way of doing will grow in to fill that gap that changes the whole ecosystem of that area of forest, right? All of the ways that higher ed has been exclusionary and has kept people out historically, how will that look different? This is the opportunity. This is a moment that we all have to kind of say, how do we grow some systems that will bear fruit 10 or 15 or 20 years from now, that will
be completely different than what we have now. So I think that for me that is what gives me a little bit of hope. It is this sense of. Alright, I think I can start to, in my own way, mourn and grieve appropriately and just move forward. Just move forward and start to see, well, what might it look like? What is the thing that will grow to fill that space? How do I foster it? How do I nurture it? How do I encourage it?

[28:18] And I will name, I’m not trying to be blindly optimistic. In the interim, we’re going to have to figure out like, how are we going to live? How are we gonna do the work that we do when that tree has fallen over and that tree did serve a purpose in the past. So it’s not all just roses and sunshine. They’re gonna be some challenges that come with it. And I’m gonna always come back to in my own mind, or the things that help sustain me again in moments of feeling a little bit overwhelmed by that grief and loss is this question of, well, what does it look like 10 years from now, 15 years from now? What role do I play? What role does Gabi and Robyn and you know, what are the things that we’re gonna do? Robyn, you talked about again, students really going out into the world and making it a better world. How will higher ed and how will student affairs look different in the near, medium and long term future?

[29:16] I don’t know the answer to that. And yet I am inspired and optimistic and hopeful, and it sustains me in not just focusing in that scar in the forest, but focus in on what will that forest look like when that gap in the canopy is gone and the forest has kind of rebounded and healed and it’s going to be new. There’s gonna be new life and new things happening in that forest. And I think that that excites me. It’s pretty cool. I can’t wait to see what that looks like. And I can hope that I’m one small part of helping make that new version of the forest even more amazing than it is now.