

The Vermont Connection

Volume 45 *Rage and Revolution: Change and Transformation in Higher Education*

Article 3

April 2024

Shaping a Spark

Gabi Cuna

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Recommended Citation

Cuna, G. (2024). Shaping a Spark. *The Vermont Connection*, 45(1). <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc/vol45/iss1/3>

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THE KENNETH P. SAURMAN AWARD

This award honors Kenneth P. Saurman, who will long be remembered for his dedication to the field of student affairs and to the graduate program at The University of Vermont. After his death in 1980, a memorial fund was established for a prize recognizing the outstanding graduate in the program. This award is a reminder of the professional excellence and commitment Kenneth P. Saurman inspired in his students and colleagues. Each spring, a committee of faculty members in the College of Education and Social Services selects a student, or students, who best display(s) the established award criteria. Those recognized: (a) show a record of outstanding achievement; (b) demonstrate ability to make outstanding future professional contributions at both local and national levels; (c) demonstrate future ability to make outstanding intellectual contributions to the field in the areas of research and scholarship; (d) show evidence of having fostered a sense of community and cooperation among peers, staff, and faculty; and (e) show evidence of outstanding contribution to the University through internship and practical experience.

In May 20223 the Kenneth P. Saurman Award was proudly presented to: Gabi Cuna.

Since graduating from the University of Vermont's Higher Education & Student Affairs Administration M.Ed. program in 2023, Gabi has enjoyed their time outside hiking or reading and playing board games at their new home in Seattle. When they aren't enjoying all the Pacific Northwest has to offer, they work as the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Coordinator for a local government.

Shaping a Spark

Gabi Cuna

Had you asked me a year ago about my thoughts on rage, I would have told you that rage is not one of the primary emotions that I experience with any sort of frequency. More often than not, in the place of rage, I often default to shame, or guilt, or defeat. In the last couple of years, I could easily count on one hand the number of times that I myself experienced rage or anger. So, when I sat down in front of a tauntingly blank Google Doc to write this reflection about Rage & Revolution in Higher Education and my experiences since graduating from the HESA program in 2023, rather than thinking about my own experiences of rage, I read about how others think about and feel rage. Throughout my reading, I found a common denominator in most people's experiences: a lack of control. Even in its most formal definitions, rage is described as a violent, uncontrollable anger.

The more I read about rage, the more I was able to see it in my own emotional repertoire, even if I didn't immediately recognize it as such. While I can't necessarily relate to feeling anger or violence with any sort of regularity, I do quite often find myself desperately grasping to moments that provide a sense of control. Our lives - the oppressive capitalist, colonialist systems that we exist within - provide ample opportunities to feel as if we do not have a modicum of control over our destinies. In a world dominated by thousands of brands (all owned by just a few megacorporations), the freedom to vote for our political leaders (in an electoral system dominated by two ruling parties nearly indistinguishable), and in the face of an ongoing genocide of the Palestinian people (funded and supported by our own government), even the rare moments where we're presented with a morsel of choice it can feel overwhelmingly futile. And in reflecting, I realize that this futility - derived from a constant unmet desire for control - is where I find my rage.

Conversely, in thinking about revolution though - what I often perceive as the answer to the rage-inducing futility - I find myself stuck in the contrast between the two concepts. In my experience, revolution inherently necessitates control. Revolution is organized. It requires strategy. It demands intentionality and thoughtfulness. A revolution does not happen simply based on the urgent feelings of a group of people. Rather, these feelings must be met with a cycle of planning, execution, debriefing, regrouping, and reengaging.

Consider a bonfire. Without an initial spark, all the perfectly arranged firewood in the world will not create a roaring inferno. And without the masterfully placed pieces of timber, a spark will quickly die out in a puff of smoke, leaving no indication that it ever existed at all. If not handled with care, a bonfire can quickly spread into a blazing wildfire. If not continually nurtured, it can burn out prematurely. Rage and revolution require the same careful balance. Rage might be the spark, but the revolution requires intentionally placed kindling and firewood. Now through this lens, I can see my rage. Not as a raging inferno, but as a spark that I have learned to masterfully channel into avenues that make me feel as if I might actually be able to have an impact on these seemingly unchangeable, devastatingly heavy systems.