Catching Up and Looking Back: An Honest Dialogue Between Friends

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Catching Up and Looking Back: 
An Honest Dialogue Between Friends

Cristina Vega & Edward (Teddy) Walsh
2015 Saurman Award Recipients

On a gloomy Tuesday in December, we were seated near the front corner of a bright and drafty coffee shop in a popular neighborhood of Raleigh, North Carolina. Although six months had passed since we sat in the same room together, we settled into our conversation with a sense of familiarity and comfort. Coffee in hand, we flipped through the recent snapshots of our lives – tiny victories, large frustrations, mistakes, and the funny little moments that kept us laughing when we wanted to cry. An hour or so later, we addressed the task at hand: to write a reflection about health and wellness. We immediately agreed that we do not necessarily feel healthy in the ways that many folks traditionally think of (e.g. running, eating well, feeling energized, confident, loved). We were stumped. We wondered, how do we write an honest piece without sounding cynical and defeated? At the same we thought, so what if we sound cynical? How can we do this when health and wellness are not salient for us right now?

There is something refreshing about reflecting with someone who can “get it”, someone who knows your soul. You can be brutally honest and say life has its challenges. Our lives were full of challenges - transitioning into our roles, wanting to feel settled, and wanting more from our lives and jobs than we had the energy to create for ourselves. We agreed that we dread the well-intentioned question “how is your transition going”? We also agreed that sometimes we minimize the challenges of our transition and other times we answer honestly. Throughout our conversation we noted the similarities between our transitions as one settled into

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Edward (Teddy) Walsh is a Residence Director at the University of Vermont. Before completing the UVM HESA graduate program, Teddy graduated from the University of North Carolina Wilmington in 2013. His professional interests include the anthropology of education, and men and masculinities.
their role at a new institution and the other moved into full-time work at their alma mater. We learned in our own ways the importance of friends, the difficulty of navigating institutional politics, the disenchantment of growing up, and the ache of missing HESA. Perhaps most importantly, we recognized our transitions were teaching us to stay whole. And suddenly, this was it! We realized how our transitions were connected to health and wellness: wholeness. In order to be our best, and healthiest, selves, we needed to be whole. In order to survive our respective transitions, we needed to find wholeness in our lives.

We talked for hours about wholeness in our transitions and our lives. A few cups of coffee later we distilled our conversation into three themes: a) staying, leaving, and sense of place; b) knowing sometimes the important details are outside the photo’s edges; and c) folks were right telling us to trust the process. Despite being different people on different professional journeys we deeply connected with these themes. Our reflection developed through conversation and as one thought led to another, we unpacked our semesters in a way that felt liberating and authentic. Our vision is to share pieces of our conversation to inspire a similar process of reflection within yourself, and among you and your colleagues.

Should I Stay or Should I Go? Or, When to Run for the Hills and When to Anchor Down

[Teddy Walsh]: A lot of people ask me why I stayed at the University of Vermont (UVM) and I can never answer that question the same way twice. A year ago my intention to stay was part of a larger plan for other things. Eight months ago, I wanted the professional development. If you asked me in July why I stayed, I would have told you it was a massive mistake that I regretted every day when I woke up. Now I tell people it was a feeling, my intuition was telling me to stay because my experience at UVM did not feel complete. There were spaces of myself that I wanted to fill, areas in which I wanted to grow. My decision to stay at UVM was always about growth and now, months later, I can pinpoint almost exactly where I am growing most.

[Cristina Vega]: I believe that having multiple answers, in a way, marked your transition not only into a full time role but also this bigger journey of authenticity. These reasons may have been different depending on the time but are all a piece of the puzzle. Even though I left UVM, I still had folks ask me similar questions. I knew I was ready for a different adventure, partly because I do not know if I could have survived another winter, but more importantly I felt full. Full of light, energy, and possibility. Essentially, I felt confident in my ability to be a professional. I felt loved and able to love others. The mentors I found at UVM helped me fill my soul to the point where I had this energy to flip tables, energy to start a new
journey sharing what I learned, as well as energy to seek opportunities of growth. If I could relive any part of my transition thus far, it would be this moment of excitement and passion for the newness that was waiting for me. I wanted that change in scenery.

[TW]: A change of scenery is sometimes necessary for folks. For me, a change in perspective was necessary. The scenery and landscape of my workplace has not changed dramatically, but my coordinates, or where I am on the landscape, and the lens through which I see the scenery have certainly changed, and as a result my relationship with my job feels different than I how anticipated it would. The transition into the job was, and is, difficult - at times I feel like I do not know what is happening or that I make a novice mistake, and I think that is the way it is supposed to be. I still experience the growing pains of a new position. But remaining in a familiar environment gave me space to think about all the things I pushed away in grad school, like my hobbies, old friendships, personal goals like losing weight, or catching as many concerts as possible. Staying has allowed me to re-center those things in my life and to fit work around them. I have a chance to re- and de-construct parts of my life and fit them together in a way that functions well for me.

[CV] The piece about building parts of your life, making and creating choices for yourself feels salient. I truly wanted to create my experience, to have choices. Somewhere along the way I stopped feeling confident and I started to question if I had made the right choice being at Elon. I did not feel like I belonged in the same way UVM had become home. I work with truly exceptional colleagues at Elon and I began to wonder if I measured up. This lack of confidence overflowed into my sense of place. Through this transition I felt like I was trying to find a balance between control and adaptability. Moments where I simply wanted to get through the day and start again tomorrow, or fleeting moments of clarity and light that I wanted to hold on to. I can best describe these past couple of months as a roller coaster ride.

[TW]: I like the way you put that. The roller coaster makes so much sense to me because you are moving along at such a fast pace that you can only see what is directly ahead of you, there is no peripheral vision. But I have to admit, the moment I realized I was on the roller coaster I wanted to get off the ride as soon as possible. It required an understanding of what put me on the ride in the first place. Eventually I realized I was thinking about my life one dimensionally. I saw work and home as discrete units, but the reality was that one impacted the other significantly, and vice versa. Stress at work showed up in my relationships, and stress in my relationships resulted in loneliness, which made an appearance on my waistline via lots of ice cream. I thought the same way in HESA. I was so focused on doing it “right” that I did not spend enough time learning about the UVM
community, the city of Burlington, the state of Vermont, or myself. Because those things were peripheral, I knew my journey at UVM was not complete. By the end of HESA I felt more comfortable with some of the technicalities of work, like collaboration and professionalism, and I was comforted to know that whatever I had not figured out would eventually come. But I still had no idea how I would do the work. I saw the opportunity to stay at UVM as a chance to spend more time with myself and to reconfigure what it meant to bring my whole self to work. I focused on little things like identifying the value I bring into spaces, learning to advocate for myself, building and maintaining appropriate emotional boundaries with students and colleagues, having new friends in my social circle, and making the best decisions for myself and my life, and not just for my resume.

[CV]: I have found that my time as a professional is spent making decisions - plenty of yes’s and many no’s - some of these choices were easier than others. A few months into the semester, I was offered a job in Florida and all of a sudden the roller coaster I was on came to a halt. It was abrupt and unexpected, and now I had yet another choice to make, but it was not glamorous - it felt like a fog had set in. More questions arose than answers, and I got caught up in wondering why I was even contemplating leaving when I had just arrived. After a few conversations with mentors and friends, I started to realize that belonging and sense of place do not necessarily always happen magically. Rather it takes time and effort to build a community, I had to let folks in and trust that it could happen. Spoiler, in the end I stayed and I anchored down. What I wanted out of this first role was to feel confident, settled, and put together.

[TW]: So, when given an opportunity to leave a place that did not “fit”, you stayed. You mentioned that community kept you grounded at UVM. Was it community that kept you at Elon?

[CV]: I will admit that during the first couple of months I was skeptical about this new community I chose. I found myself quickly wishing that I could have moved my community with me. I miss, and still miss, Women of Color brunches, late nights turned early mornings in the prac cube of Student Life, and hanging out with folks who quickly became my family. I wanted the kind of relationships that I forgot took me two years to build, I forgot it requires mutual trust and vulnerability. I forgot that in order to be whole at this new place I needed to have both feet in. This place could be my home. Once I started to believe that, things started to change.

[TW]: We have so many things pushing and pulling us in different directions - family, community, professional opportunity, the economy. The decision to stay or to go is made with difficulty and it is always going to be a gamble. We may arrive someplace with expectations that can never be met and we may stay in the
same place only to succumb to apathy and complacency. What I hear you saying, though, is that we have to give it a fair shot and we have to accept the outcome of our decisions. We have to welcome growth in the places we least expected it to happen. To be honest, that is really difficult for me to accept. But to hold all of that - the hopes and fears and the reality - is wholeness. And I think it helps me keep my feet on the ground.

To summarize, we found it important to hold on to the things that keep us grounded, but also the things that keep us curious along the way. Our initial expectations were clouded with idealism and excitement, only to fade away revealing an unsavory reality. Sometimes it is worth sticking it out, making an extra effort, and other times it is time to pack up and head to the next adventure. Either way, trust that you have made the right decision. Even if it is not what you expected, you have learned a little more about yourself and your journey.

**Crop, Filter, and Post: Perfecting the Imperfect**

Social media allows us to stay connected to the folks we may not see as often as we would like. Posts about new offices, cool projects, trendy restaurants, and adventures often highlight the good and the exciting in our lives. Undoubtedly, many of these moments were cropped and filtered to ensure the best presentation possible. But are these posts an accurate portrayal of everything that is happening? What would it look like to see beyond the snapshot? Are we willing to pay the price to tell the whole story?

[CV]: I have to admit that even as we write this reflection I wanted (and might have already) glossed over certain pieces of this transition. I am not sure when the “Instagram effect” took over - as in cropping and filtering moments to show my best side or one that appears more put together. How honest can I be? What if I sound like I am complaining? Or what if I hurt others? Or without feeling less? Or even lonely in the struggle? To share an example, earlier this semester I had my first concussion (it is a pretty silly story). For a week or two I was struggling to remember things. At first I chucked it up to being tired and adjusting to a new job. But after a few more days I started to feel like I was losing it. Actually losing my mind. Friends would finish my thoughts and I would be stunned that they were getting so good at knowing my thought process, only to realize we had already had this conversation. It was not until I finally reached out to someone (who thankfully had the wisdom to know this clearly was not normal) that I realized I should have reached out sooner. Although this is a pivotal moment, I have this terrible habit of answering the question of “how are you?” with “great!” or “so good!” even if I am not. I cannot help but acknowledge that if I had shared that I was feeling foggy and forgetful I would not have spent so much time feeling hazy. Cropping or filtering the truth has allowed me to mask that vulnerability.
[TW]: I definitely gloss over my shortcomings and mistakes. I remember the first time I made a mistake at work. Not the small mistakes you correct yourself, but the kind of mistake you have to admit to your supervisor because it impacted something larger. I spent days building it up in my head, dreading the moment the words had to come out of my mouth. I do not even remember what I did, or did not do, but I remember the fear of appearing incompetent and incapable. I remember the heavy chains of failure I carried. I was so worried about admitting my mistake to my supervisor that I decided to bring it up at the beginning of our one-on-one meeting. My body contorted in my chair, head cocked to the side, I began with a long “so…” and told him. He looked up from his computer and quietly said, “okay”. He blinked and said, “just make sure it gets done by the end of the day”. The relief I felt was indescribable and the knot in my stomach slowly untangled itself. That was the moment I began to feel more comfortable with my mistakes. This was the moment the urgency I placed on my work dissipated.

[CV]: I think it is interesting that the visions I come up with in my head are of angry supervisors and disillusioned mentors and friends when the reality is that I have received nothing less than love and even forgiveness when I have come up short. I have made mistakes and have frustrated more than a few folks, but the repercussions of withholding parts for whatever reason comes at a cost that is often personal. The internal conversation with myself has become exhausting - even in writing this reflection there are pieces that I had initially shared and then after some thought I left out. My perspective is not objective. At the end of the day it is still my point of view. I would have happily left pieces out and moved on. However, you helped remind me that these were such pivotal moments in my transition. They add depth and clarity to our reflection. After taking a step back and putting it into words, it feels refreshing. Not that I want to share every moment with everyone, but I do think there are, and have been, moments worth sharing for more than being a good story.

[TW]: Agreed. Vulnerability is difficult as a new professional, especially if you carry marginalized identities. Speaking of good stories, I think I have a tendency to hyperbolize situations at work, which diminishes how much I learned from the situation. I think it is healthy to vent, but I think it is more important to keep things to scale. I worry that to make things seem larger than life or to over inflate my role in a situation shifts the center of the event from others to myself, and that feels really disingenuous. I work with people, not movie characters. And I am not a superhero fixing everything in disarray around me. My role is to empower people. I want people to know that I am here if they need me.

[CV]: Yes. Empowering folks does not only include how great life is, but also the bad, the ugly, and the seemingly uneventful. What I want out of my professional life is also what I want for myself - to feel confident, settled, put together and
more importantly, to do it on my own. The challenging part is that learning to do my job well and the idiosyncrasies of a new place is full of hiccups. I have found that I am far more critical of myself than I need to be. When I struggle silently and celebrate publicly, I create unhealthy expectations for myself.

[TW]: Definitely. I have a number of unhealthy expectations of myself, as well. These unhealthy expectations manifest in so many unhealthy ways, including my diet and friendships. I remember an afternoon back in September when some of those expectations began to shift. I gave into the fact that work will always be there and the fact that I do not have the capacity to do everything. I also realized that even my very best efforts are flawed. This realization was freeing. I still felt tired when I came into work the next day, but I did not feel as heavy. I feel like this realization was a step toward authenticity for me. I do not have to make it look effortless anymore.

[CV]: In finally feeling like I can share some of my struggles in this transition, I am reminded of how I have conveniently chosen to overlook the more challenging times at UVM. When folks ask me about my graduate experience, I initially think of all of my favorite memories. I have held on to the great moments: graduation, presenting at my first national conference, weekend trips with friends, orientation, the inherent community that I was surrounded with, and the list goes on. There were also several moments where I experienced defeat such as my first literature review or the winter struggle. I imagine others have had similar experiences while at UVM. Those two years feel like such a big part of my life, I am happy that they were filled with learning about myself, students, and theories.

Trust the Process: An Exercise in Wisdom

*HESA is a transformational experience. HESA is also a community. In a space where things move at galactic and glacial speeds, how do we make sense of our experience? In HESA, “trust the process” is more than a trite student affairs expression, it is the reassurance that the journey is just as important as the destination.*

[TW]: What was the most important lesson you learned in HESA? Is there a piece of advice or wisdom that you call upon every day?

[CV]: As I think about all that I learned while in HESA I find myself thinking about some of the unfinished lessons - the things I am continuing to learn, the things I want to master but cannot seem to grasp. For some reason, I had a flashback of my HESA interview weekend. Sitting in the affinity space with folks of Color who were so real, raw, and encouraging. That night I laid in bed (well really an inflatable mattress) and I could not fall asleep because I was cold (little did I know) but did not want to disturb the others. In an effort to distract myself, I grabbed a copy
of The Vermont Connection journal and skimmed through the articles before landing on Queena Hoang’s article. This was the first time I heard of the imposter phenomenon and it was a magical moment in that I found myself seeing myself in the text. I had a lot to think about - I knew that HESA would not be easy, but I was naive enough to pretend to be confident.

[TW]: Wow. It is so sobering to hear that you felt you were naive enough to pretend to be confident, but I trust it was true. It was true for me, too. I almost wonder if that is a universal experience in HESA. The fake it ‘til you make it mantra. The fake it ‘til you make it mantra was dangerous for me because I had no way to know when I made it, so to speak, and it allowed me to minimize all of my accomplishments. Was there a moment for you in which you knew you could stop pretending to be confident? When it was not an act anymore?

[CV]: I did not know it then, but looking back now, that that cold, lonely feeling would continue to follow me, it was a weight that was hard to carry. I was looking for resilience, or even the ability to trust myself enough to know I would graduate. When HESA began, the confidence I had melted; it was lost between the readings, assignments, and newness of Vermont. I was juggling too much to keep up the facade. I spent those two years knocking down walls to make room for myself. I was unlearning and learning all at once - one minute I was rethinking how I define professionalism and then the next figuring out my professional philosophy. One moment I am hurting others and the next I am feeling hurt, it was all just... messy. In the process, I learned to make room for more than myself. I went from being mentored to mentoring but there was no certificate, class or ceremony. All I have is hope that I am half as good of a mentor to these students as the mentors I have been lucky enough to have. In a way, reminding myself to be an advocate for them keeps me grounded in my work. I want to role model honesty, health, and humor and will even settle for two of the three.

[TW]: The way you describe the cold and the loneliness seem so appropriate to me, as if it were inescapable. I can think back to specific moments of HESA when I felt like I was crumbling, somehow a ship plowed open by cannonballs, or just completely destroyed. Those moments were absolutely terrifying. Those were the moments that defined my character and I think about those moments very differently now. Instead of destruction, I see purification. It was as if I was boiled down to my purest, most concentrated elements. That is what I leaned on when it got tough. Over time I learned to reconstitute myself with other things, like books and music and poetry. I began to take new shapes. I was better insulated against the cold. I see now, in the moments where nothing made sense, that I was never too far from an outstretched hand.
[CV]: These character-defining moments remind me of what I have learned. The most jarring lesson I learned continues to remind me that I am flawed and still whole. I learned that the cold loneliness I experienced was a part of my seasonal depression, and also a part of trauma I had bottled up for years. I learned that even though I left HESA feeling powerful, loved, and whole, feeling like an imposter would cause me to stumble in my current role and momentarily forget those other pieces. I forgot about how I started HESA feeling unprepared and incapable of finishing. It is because of poets like Nayyirah Waheed, supervisors, friends, and mentors that I made it and continue to make it through those dark moments. Sometimes you need a community to remind you that you are full of love and light. UVM gave me a strong community, but now I get to create an extension of my community at Elon. It is a bit surreal to look back at my time at UVM to celebrate the victory of that M.Ed., and to think about all the potential that lies ahead. As I think about this transition and health, I am hopeful that the lessons I have learned are lessons I do not have to keep relearning. Maybe during my next transition, I have a bit more insulation.

The Last Sip

At some point, we realized several hours had passed and it was pretty late. Our cups were empty and folks headed out of the coffee shop. We, too, were among the people headed other places with other plans. Though our evening together ended, in many ways the conversation had just begun. The themes of our transition, staying or leaving, perfecting the imperfect, and the willingness to trust the process, were connected to many other lessons we did not have a chance to discuss. As we parted, we recognized the incredible ways the other had grown as a person and as a professional. We also recognized something small yet remarkable: thanks to HESA, we were prepared. Prepared to confront the complexity of working with students. Prepared to power through long nights in the office and early morning duty calls. Prepared to know when to stick out our necks and when to quietly advocate for our needs. Most importantly, we were prepared to do our best work as our best selves. We are never the same person twice, you cannot be the same person you were yesterday. We now know that wherever we are headed, we shall journey as our whole selves.