

The Vermont Connection

Volume 38 *Retracing Our Paths: Reclaiming
Narratives in Higher Education*

Article 16

3-4-2017

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Recommended Citation

Oseguera,, Tonantzin Ed.D. (2017) "Love as an Act of Resistance," *The Vermont Connection*: Vol. 38 , Article 16.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc/vol38/iss1/16>

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Love as an Act of Resistance

Tonantzin Oseguera, Ed.D.

I believe the concept of love has received a bad rap. Love is equated with being weak, liberal, matronly, motherly, a people-pleaser, and even touchy-feely. As a student affairs practitioner, love may even be considered taboo as we are taught to have strict boundaries with students and colleagues. As a Latinx person, love is part of my cultural DNA and language. My everyday experience of life is through love, so why would I not convey love in my everyday practice of student affairs? This article is an exploration of love and its intersectionality with Latinx culture.

Amor y Cultura

In Sanskrit, there are 96 words for love; in Persian there are 80; Greek has three words; and English and Spanish only have one word for love. Merriam-Webster defines love as, “strong affection for another arising out of kinship or personal ties” (Love, n.d.). In Spanish, *amor*, the word for love is defined in the very same way. However, it specifies a minimum of 32 types of love within that definition (Oxford Spanish dictionary, 2008). In their article *The Social Construction of Love*, Beall and Sternberg (2016) posit that love is best understood in terms of cultural conceptions, limited to an individual person, feelings, thoughts, or actions.

I experience love as a cultural value. I believe love is the critical tie that binds us to family, friends, and one another. Culturally, for me, this expresses itself through *familismo*, the strong cultural value and identification with family, loyalty, reciprocity, and solidarity (Pajewski & Enriquez, 1996). The practice of love first started within my family where I learned to accept family members’ flaws and

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goodness. Through my grandmother and my faith, I learned to understand the world and all living things as possessing the capacity to receive and give love. I experienced everyday life through acts of unconditional love.

My uncle Lolo, who helped raise me, showed me that love can be experienced both as joy and sorrow through musical choices. When he was falling in love with his then *novia*, now wife, he played the songs from Jose Jose, Rocio Durcal, and Guadalupe Pineda. Their songs expressed a deep love that you could feel in your soul; an unbridled ecstasy that makes you joyously sing, with the lyric “*Te amo, eternamente te amo*” (Guadalupe Pineda, Yolanda, 1984), or “I love you, I eternally love you.”

Consequently, I presume my uncle and his girlfriend hit some rough times when the turntable played “*Miss You*” by the Rolling Stones (1978) on repeat for days. During those days, my uncle was still in love, but it was the love that wounds your soul and makes you fall more deeply in love. At least, that was the way he expressed it and I made sense of it: Love is feeling so boundless that it permeates your everyday actions. As I moved through my personal and professional life, I maintained the value of love.

Loving at Work

Love as an expression of my culture is not always welcomed in professional spaces, even student affairs. Love in a Western cultural construct is perceived as weak and feminine (Cancian, 1986), not a value often associated with leadership. Love is not often discussed at work, and certainly not seen as a value to express at work. Only in recent years has love been discussed in organizational settings, most frequently in the context of servant-leadership (Patterson, 2010). I shied away from discussing love in my work. I feared that I would be viewed as motherly, weak, and not as a leader. Like many Latinx professionals, I repressed this aspect of myself (Center for Talent Innovation, 2016). Now in a senior position with more experience, I feel comfortable approaching student affairs through a lens of love.

The first time I pondered love in student affairs was when I was 25 and serving as Director of Student Activities and Leadership Programs. My Dean and I faced a serious learning moment, what I call a “desirable difficulty” with our student government. The recent student government elections were voided because some of the rules were not followed during the election process. Thus, candidates were given a week to campaign before another election was held. The learning opportunity came when I watched my Dean, a person whom I admired and later became my mentor, go into a room full of outraged students and tell them that the elections were a do-over. She took responsibility for a situation she

did not create. As I watched her give a speech that was informational, yet candid and from the heart, students yelled, in her face, and all agreed on one thing: they were mad.

After some time, everyone calmed down and cooler heads prevailed. Disagreements about the election turned into conversations about how to best move forward. As I looked at her with tears in my eyes, she looked back at me with tears too. She said, “You have to love them all, we love all students.” I was stunned. My Dean quietly and humbly went back to her desk and began to work again. I thought to myself, “What do you mean you have to love them all? Did you just see what those students did in there? That they were uncivil, yelling and belligerent over an election because some of them used chalk on the sidewalk and the others didn’t, I mean, come on!” Those thoughts were still swirling after I went back to work. Later that evening, I compared the students’ uproar to what the Dean said to me earlier that day. My colleague’s response: “Love, ah no love here, we just have to serve them all.” This too made an impression, and I was perplexed. I thought about it more and then I did what many of us do when we want confirmation: I called my mentors and friends. I called my former graduate student supervisor and friend, and asked if we as student affairs professionals should love, or just serve, our students. Unequivocally, she said, “to love.”

I then started asking everyone in the field who I respected whether student affairs professionals should love or serve. My former academic adviser, Dr. Kathy Manning, said, “You need the dedication to serve all of them no matter what, but you need love. If you don’t start with love, then what are you doing in education?” I asked more people in the field. Some said love, most said to serve, and some said both. To this day, I ask professionals and still get different answers. The answers vary mostly by years in the profession, current position, and what is happening on campus.

Throughout most of my career, I opted for loving all students, though sometimes I was pushed to the limits of that love. In 2014, I was confronted with a difficult moment in which I had to stand in a room of students who were both angry and sad. I was reminded of how challenging it is to love all students and even more, to accept them where they are where they are at. We had evidence that a sorority held a racially themed party as part of recruitment training. We called an emergency chapter meeting and I had to let the women know that we were suspending their recruitment until an investigation was concluded. The women were crying and upset. I tried to remain calm in the face of their lack of sensitivity and statements telling me that their gang, sarape, and sombrero costumes and pictures were just a joke. One woman asked why I could not take a joke and that moment I could have judged them, chastised them, and embarrassed them. Many colleagues and students thought they deserved it.

For me, though, this experience was the moment to embrace the unconditional love that I need to have for all students. I chose to feel empathy and compassion for their situation, all while resolute in maintaining accountability for their lapse in judgment and lack of awareness. After all, we were in an institution of higher education. If they thought that type of party was okay, had the university and I failed as educators? The next day, I attended meetings with each of our multicultural group councils and explained what transpired at the party. Only the sorority knew what happened because although there were pictures taken, none were released. We did not need to tell the multicultural groups, yet we chose to because the entire community needed to learn from this.

The group of students from the multicultural groups were not crying, they were livid. They wanted the sorority chapter closed immediately and banned from returning to campus. I listened and felt the same empathy and compassion as I did with the sorority. Every group I went to, I asked all students to engage in dialogue and for us to work together and to learn from one another. At the end of the day, we were all California State University, Fullerton students, we were Titans, we were all still going to be on campus and go to classes together. Being mad at each other would get us nowhere. We committed to engaging in dialogue. We met in small groups and talked through the incident and how we could improve relations on campus. Thankfully, our students rose to the occasion and through mediated dialogues, training, conversations, and tears, we learned together and remained Titans.

Pedagogy of Love

I utilize love as a tool to build character. In higher education today, we need to assist our students in cultivating a *wise heart*. I define a wise heart as one that can respect a marketplace of ideas, that sees each other as human and not an “us,” an “other,” or a “them.” I think when we merely serve students, we can begin a downward spiral towards preferring and loving only certain types of students, the students we think deserve to be loved, that we prefer, that we think are right, or that share our perspective. As for the other students, if they receive services, then we succeed in doing our jobs. After 15 years in student affairs, I know I have committed to loving all students, each one, everyone, regardless of circumstance. As an educator in a profession that I love, to solely serve students seems too crass. Service is a transaction, something I give because I must do it, not because I want to do it. hooks (2000) proposes that without love we treat relationships like Dixie cups that are disposable, that serve us once or twice. In this manner, love is not a committed bond and I am not responsible for caring or fostering a meaningful relationship.

I caution against service as the standard for student affairs. I contend this is the devolution towards not caring. I think this is how some presidents and deans allowed themselves to feel less caring about the Black Lives Matter movement, sexual assault victims, and marginalized groups. They preferred serving other students and stopped caring for those that did not fit their mold of an ideal student. Instead, I choose love. I wear my wise heart on my chest: full and open, both as a sword and shield from the hate, fear, intolerance, and violence that is so prevalent in today's academic setting. Love is my gift to this vocation and all students. Love is my act of resistance.

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