

The Vermont Connection

Volume 39 *Dear Student Affairs: Reflections on the Past and Hopes for the Future*

Article 10

4-12-2018

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Recommended Citation

Potestivo, Nicole M. (2018) "A Note on Self-Authorship: Resolving Pain for a Hopeful Today," *The Vermont Connection*: Vol. 39 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc/vol39/iss1/10>

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A Note on Self-Authorship: Resolving Pain for a Hopeful Today

Nicole M. Potestivo

A letter to my College Application Process. I hope it is okay that I write you today. It has been a while, 16 years to be exact, but sometimes a while is just how long things take before we are ready to address them. I blamed you for making me feel less-than, like I was not worthy of being someone's first choice for a long time. It was easy for me to draw that conclusion after years of mediocre academic performances coupled with your initial decision to waitlist me. I explored Marcia Baxter Magolda's (1999, 2009, 2013) research on the development of self-authorship in young adults. Her work identifies a framework for understanding the on-going process by which we make sense of the world around us. Self-authorship requires us to take a curious approach to life and continually reexamine our beliefs, identities, and social relations (Baxter Magolda, 2009). In doing so, we strengthen our critical thinking skills and define personal values that provide the guidance to navigate this complex changing world. A self-authored person lives their values in mind, body and spirit. If we learn through resolving our pain, as Baxter Magolda suggests, then I still have a few more lessons to learn from our relationship (2013). After much back and forth, I decided to reconnect through this letter, and all I am asking in return is that you read with care. Perhaps, you will come to value our relationship differently, as I have.

Dear College Application Process,

Our relationship was over before it started and for a long time, I blamed myself. Your system was hard to navigate and I assumed it was because I lacked intelligence. I know better now. Remember when you told me that I would have to wait and see if I was worthy of acceptance after you explored your other options? That made me feel so small and insignificant. Our inept relationship heightened my need to prove my worth. With some time and distance, I can see

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how you came to be the way you are. You operate from a place of fear, so you created a process that weeds out the people that do not look, sound, or think like the institutions you safeguard. I see how you were molded by others to fit their standards of achievement. You have such a hard time seeing beyond Scholarly Aptitude Test (SAT) scores, grade point averages, and advanced placement courses.

I have been working to make meaning of our past relationship because, while brief and seemingly minor, it affected me during a critical time in my young adult development. When I came across Baxter Magolda's work on self-authorship it gave me a framework to sift through memories of our interactions. I recalled the moments I was faced with renegotiating expectations of myself and others, while also reevaluating my beliefs. Baxter Magolda's work on self-authorship comes from a 21-year longitudinal study of 30 first-year students at a Midwestern public university (Barber et al., 2013; Baxter Magolda, 2009). She identified three phases in the meaning-making process that generally occur in a predictable order, beginning with a reliance on others called external formulas, followed by times of dissonance and reflective reevaluation referred to as the crossroads phase, and culminating in self-authorship (Barber et al., 2013; Baxter Magolda, 2009). The individual on a journey towards self-authorship is simultaneously working to discover who they are, what they believe, and what kinds of relationships they want to have with others (Baxter Magolda, 1999). It is my journey that prompted me to write to you.

The Chase

College Application Process, when you waitlisted me, you confirmed the thing I long suspected, that I was not smart enough. My fear of you being right drove my desire to prove you wrong. I guess we both operate from a place of fear at times. I attended Accepted Students Day with my friend who met you during the early admissions process. You two were a good match, she was an all-star athlete, honors student, and on her way to receiving a Girl Scouts Gold Award. I had not yet visited campus and this was a great opportunity to tag along. I attended the full day program with her and met the woman who signed my admissions waitlist letter. With little thought behind my actions, I shook her hand and told her that I really hoped to be accepted to the college. Within the week I received a phone call with an offer to attend the institution. As joyful tears filled my eyes and nervous butterflies fluttered in my stomach, I accepted.

Exercising and taking action based on my beliefs proved to reward me and, while empowering, it was those moments of failure that kept me clinging onto the approval of others to identify what was in my best interest. I had not forgotten that I was initially rejected. Like the participants in Baxter Magolda's study of

self-authorship, I entered college with a strong reliance on the thoughts, beliefs and actions of other people. This phase of meaning-making is what Baxter Magolda refers to as *external formulas*. While I sensed within myself that I had something to offer, I did not trust that I alone could make smart decisions.

Remember when you introduced me to your good friend New Student Orientation? I would not call it love at first sight but neither of us could deny the chemistry. I am pretty sure I woke up each morning of that two-day summer session and put on a full face of make-up, just to nearly wipe it all off with a tissue as to look effortlessly radiant. Orientation gave me a platform to shine in an academic setting that I had not had yet. As an incoming student I was able to play off of my strengths in relationship building, creativity and fostering team morale. Having made solid connections with peers and feeling a sense of belonging, I started to believe I could be successful in college. This desire to connect with other people helped me obtain several student staff positions within the Division of Student Affairs. My need for approval from others was sought out by taking on countless leadership roles within my university. I spent a lot of time chasing affirmations and while I found them, I was never quite satisfied. I stayed busy doing as I was told and pleasing others, and in doing so it was hard to hear the quiet hum of my internal voice gasping for air.

Disappointment and Trust

Baxter Magolda's *crossroads phase*, points out that a time will come when one calls into question their personal beliefs and the ideas they had adopted from others and commit to a path of their own (2009). A significant entry point into the crossroads phase for me took place following an incident when I greatly disappointed a supervisor during my senior year of college. I could hardly look myself in the mirror, the shame and guilt I bore for acting dishonestly and in turn, inflicting pain on another, made me unrecognizable to myself. I did not know who I was if it was not in relation to making other people happy. This incident caused me to take personal responsibility and interrogate my values, identity and relationship to others. One thing that became clear to me was that if I did not want to repeat the same mistake twice I would need to develop the skills to engage productively in difficult conversations. Uncovering this inspired me to take advantage of an opportunity to complete a graduate certificate program in Mediation and Applied Conflict Studies when it was offered as a workplace benefit.

The challenge and support offered by the faculty in the Mediation and Applied Conflict Studies program pushed me to try on new communication styles and complicated my thinking, asking me to embrace the "and stance." Professor Portilla of Champlain College introduced this term to me and used it to

acknowledge that multiple truths can exist at once. Instead of this OR that being true, it invited the possibility that this AND that could be true. It challenged my assumptions and offered new ways to tackle old problems. Applying this approach helped me to understand that placing me on the waitlist could be both about my qualifications AND your broken system. Today, I can hold the multiple truths that exist between us and believe that I was put on the waitlist AND I am smart enough.

Applying the “and stance” broke long held rules I had subscribed to by asking me to suspend judgement, remove binary thinking, and image the unimaginable. College Application Process, I hope you can sense how uncomfortable all of that can feel at first. Embracing the “and stance” consistently came with time, for a while it was my exception to the rule, used only when I was feeling comfortable with uncertainty. The more I began to practice taking the “and stance” the more it became my default. This was a defining development that secured my trust in a new perspective and an openness to uncertainty. However, it has taken many years and numerous experiences, most notably my divorce, to strengthen consistent trust with my internal self.

It's Not You, It's Me

The decision to get a divorce came just as I wrapped up my first semester of graduate school at the University of Vermont in the Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration program. It was winter break and I had 21 days to sort out some semblance of a plan that provided financial independence and kept me in graduate school. In my opinion, my then husband and I were similar to many couples eight years into their relationship: somewhere between how do we still not have this figured out and maybe it is time to have a child? That place that teeters on hope and looming failure. The end of our marriage came into sight much like the popular 90's Magic Eye picture puzzles with some frustration, blurred lines, culminating in a grand reveal. Hidden among compounded moments of doubt, distance, and failed expectations a truth revealed itself that would end our relationship.

College Application Process, if ever you experienced a sudden loss, you may recall the feelings of utter disbelief. Divorce was disorienting, words did not have feelings, feelings contradicted thoughts, and thoughts threatened actions. With that said, at a time when I thought my life would be consumed by a love lost, it became overwhelmingly about a love found. Compassionate student staff asking how I was doing, almost aching for a piece of my story to help lift the burden of the heartache they imagined I was in. Colleagues finding time to make sure I had my essentials covered to be successful in the classroom and to live comfortably in my new home. Classmates giving extended hugs and gentle reminders that feeling

pain and anger is valid. They held me accountable for tracking the timing of my emotional responses and white woman tears, which consciously or not could be used to silence classmates of color (Accapadi, 2007).

Extracting myself from a life I had been planning with someone taught me a lesson of impermanence. I was required to nurture my internal voice who could no longer rely on a romantic partner to make decisions. I found strength and comfort in my workplace community who served as learning partners in helping me to process my pain by respecting my thoughts and feelings, offering support, and believing I could move through this challenging time, even at times when I did not (Baxter Magolda, 2009). It is not uncommon for colleagues and students to serve as *learning partners* to Higher Education professionals. My *learning partners* helped make me feel cared for when my world was flipped upside down and reminded me I had the choice to ground my own two feet and assume the “and stance.” My intuition was persistent in demonstrating that I knew a thing or two about what was best for me. I am thankful that it gave me so many chances to earn its trust, despite me thinking others knew best for so long. As I work to live a more *self-authored* life, I recognize that life events will continue to challenge my belief system and will require that I return to what Baxter Magolda calls the *shadow lands* to regain trust, refine my internal voice, and develop new commitments to live by (2009).

A Healthy Relationship

College Application Process, there is hope for both of us because you and I have something in common, strong ties to Higher Education and Student Affairs. I have come to know Higher Education and Student Affairs to be a field that offers a support system that encourages growth, makes room for one’s personal life in the workplace, and sets a high bar for professional performance. Knowing you are made up of the collective mindsets and values of Higher Education professionals makes me hopeful for your ongoing development. I understand now that we are both flawed and those flaws alone do not define us. Looking back, I do think you were doing the best you could with what you had. I had a choice in how I responded to your decision, and while it took years, today I respond in joyful awe of all the ways I can overcome obstacles. The landscape of Student Affairs is one that continues to give me hope because of how it helped to support my development during several challenging times in my life. Oh, and next time you send out a letter informing someone that they were not accepted or placed on your waitlist, try typing it in Comic Sans, at least then they will take you less seriously.

With fresh eyes,
Nicole

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