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Rosemary J. Perez
Iowa State University

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Lessons Learned and Unlearned on the Journey Towards Embracing my Full Self

Dr. Rosemary J. Perez

Many thanks to the editorial board for the opportunity to contribute to the 41st edition of *The Vermont Connection*. This year's theme, "Embracing the Whole: Sentience and Interconnectedness in Higher Education," resonates deeply with me since it speaks to what brought me to the field and the tensions that I have navigated since beginning my career as a student affairs educator 20 years ago.

When I made the fateful decision not to apply to medical school as a senior, I was drawn to student affairs graduate preparation programs since I had a desire to help and to mentor undergraduate students. After enrolling at UVM, I was quickly convinced that I had found the right career since the field was committed to helping others and to educating the whole person. In many ways, student affairs has created space for me to be more whole and to not compartmentalize myself as I had done while pursuing my degree in the biological sciences. But the longer I've been in the field, the more I find myself asking, "What does it really mean to educate and to honor the whole person in our work?" My response to this question and my views of what it means to be whole have continued to evolve as I've come to understand myself, my work, and how both of these things are shaped and constrained by systems of power, privilege and oppression.

While a HESA graduate student, I found myself interrogating and renegotiating what it meant for me to feel whole and what would help me feel this way. I am a second generation Filipina American who grew up in the predominantly white suburbs of Cleveland, OH so I thought I knew what it meant to live in white spaces. And then I moved to Vermont which was so overwhelmingly white that my brownness and my Asianness were palpable. As an introvert who wanted to go unnoticed, I felt like my otherness constantly made me stand out at UVM. My feelings were somewhat familiar and yet so different that I did the only thing I knew how to do – I kept my head down and did the best I could in my classes and at my assistantship. At that time, I did not have the language to articulate how my racialization was affecting me nor did I have the consciousness to think that I could say anything about it. I had inklings that I wanted and needed more to feel

Dr. Rosemary J. Perez is an Assistant Professor and Division Head of Higher Education at Iowa State University. Her research focuses on college student learning and development and her contributions to the field have been recognized with awards including 2016 ISU Multicultural Student Affairs Faculty/Staff Change Agent, 2017-2019 ACPA Emerging Scholar, and 2020 ACPA Diamond Honoree.

like myself, but had no ideas what that “more” was at the time.

During my second year as a HESA student, my experiences in our Cultural Pluralism class made it crystal clear that I wanted and needed more. Though the class was intended for us to collectively learn, my initial experiences in the class tended to center the needs of my white peers. I was frustrated, but honestly did not think about voicing my concerns until my two cohort mates of Color said we should talk to the instructor, Dr. Kathy Manning. Rather than being defensive, Kathy’s response was to work with us to create the learning experience we needed. For several weeks, the Students of Color met with a community organizer who encouraged me to read Frantz Fanon’s work (1963; 1967). These texts helped me realize how deeply rooted internalized dominance and colonial mentalities were in my being. Whiteness pervaded my world, but internalized dominance led me to be silent and passive, complicit in my subordination. Once I started to recognize how oppression had shaped and worked to subordinate me, my critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) began to develop and I started to more regularly use my voice to advocate for myself and other minoritized individuals and groups. Although difficult at times, my Cultural Pluralism class was transformative. I learned that I had to unlearn if I wanted to be whole. I learned that as a Womxn of Color, I had to ask or create what I needed since it was unlikely to be given to me. And I learned that friends and colleagues who are committed to each other can work to co-create space for healing and shared learning. I doubt the aforementioned were the intended learning outcomes of Cultural Pluralism. Yet, they were some of the most valuable lessons during my time in HESA and they have continued to inform my career.

My time at UVM and in particular, my learning and unlearning in Cultural Pluralism led me to be more intentional about the career opportunities I sought. As I looked for my first job, I longed to be somewhere more racially diverse and where I felt I would be challenged and supported to grow. Fortunately, I secured my ideal residence life position where another HESA Filipinx alumnx, Ray Quirolgico, was my supervisor. I can say with great honesty that I began my career at a place that lived out its Jesuit values by caring for the whole person in the ways I needed. Being a Hall Director can be difficult since the boundaries between work and home may cease to exist, but I was in a department that recognized this and regularly attended to our wellbeing. I flourished being in community with people who took their work but not themselves too seriously and who were committed to social justice. However, I knew I had more self-work to do. I wanted to engage more deeply in intragroup and intersectional dialogue so I could grapple with my dominance and my subordination, and I was supported to attend the Social Justice Training Institute and to begin my engagement with what is now ACPA’s Coalition for Women’s Identities. My first position made me believe that work-life balance was possible in student affairs and that institutions were invested in my well-being,

learning, and success as a Womxn of Color.

In some ways, my ideal first job set me up for some difficulties going forward. Finding a position and institution where I thrived led me to naively think I'd be able to do the same in the future. I was lulled into a false sense of security that if I asked the right questions and was intentional about selecting my professional opportunities, I would land in positions where my humanity was honored and growth was supported. My naivety and eagerness for new responsibilities led me to accept a position that was a poor fit since I was attracted to what the department aspired to be rather than what it was when I entered. I quickly realized that I underestimated what it meant to try to shift departmental culture to center student learning and development and the labor of being a mid-level manager and a Hall Director. Instead of keeping my head down as I had done previously, I advocated for myself. Some departmental leaders listened, but I didn't feel heard and little changed. I regularly found myself feeling drained and I longed for more opportunities to learn rather than constantly do. If I stayed in this role, I knew it would steal my joy and I was not going to let that happen. This position taught me that doing my job well means that I will always be asked to do more and that I could do good work, but not at the cost of myself. It also taught me that sometimes, the best thing you can do for yourself is to find somewhere else to thrive rather than expending all your energy to stay and survive.

Struggling in one of my positions was the catalyst I needed to pursue my goal of earning a Ph.D. with the hopes of becoming a student affairs faculty member. My road to the doctorate, to the professoriate, and towards tenure have been long ones, and along the journey I became a wife and a mother. In this new phase of my life and career, I've moved away from seeking work-life balance to engaging in work-life negotiation. I am in a system that rewards particular kinds of production, but not without costs. As I navigate the tensions of academia and work to create the life I want to live, I continually ask myself "What does it mean to be my full self?," "What am I not willing to compromise to be here?," and "What does support look or feel like?" My responses may change as oppression shapeshifts, but I'm clear with myself and others that I refuse to sacrifice my family, my wellbeing, or my integrity. I have embraced my whole self, and in doing so, I resist the logics that tell me to do otherwise.

I hope my story and the manuscripts in this year's *The Vermont Connection*, provide opportunities to reflect upon how our work in higher education has both honored and contested our humanity. I also hope we consider how we have contributed to and detracted from others' humanity while engaging in our work. In doing so, may we collectively work to (re)create educational spaces that fully honor the whole person.

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