

The Vermont Connection

Volume 36 *Shades of Transition*

Article 15

February 2015

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Recommended Citation

Kelly, Ph.D., Bridget Turner and Kelly, Ph.D., Robert (2015) "A Reflection on Transitions," *The Vermont Connection*: Vol. 36, Article 15.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc/vol36/iss1/15>

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A Reflection on Transitions

Bridget Turner Kelly, Ph.D. & Robert Kelly, Ph.D.

The reach of The Vermont Connection is strong. As we sit on the beach in Cancun, Mexico, we are in awe of the keen ability to reflect and discern on higher education and our own personal twists and turns. Lessons both taught and learned whether in Burlington, Maryland, Seattle, Chicago and now New York have illustrated the enduring power of faith, family and friends, and in the many ways the UVM community has played a part in our lives. This short vignette is about transitions; transitions of all types be they by choice or force, professional or personal, as a single or in a dual career partnership. It is faith, family, and friends that have made transitions not something to fear, but something to embrace.

Transition is not something from which we have ever shied away. Yet, we remained focused on such issues as institutional readiness to embrace the kind of leadership and scholarship that we wanted to share. We made personal compromises knowing that the professional benefits of any place or institution were inadequate when compared to the personal benefits of building the foundation for the kind of life that we have dreamed. Most of all, we communicated with one another and institutions on choices and decisions to shape the professional and personal boundaries of our lives. Over time, our family has grown, our connections strengthened, and our community has been enhanced. It has been through faith in God and things beyond ourselves, love of family, and the power of true friends that have gotten us here. The waves crashing on the sands of Cancun are indeed beautiful. Each wave brings new opportunities and reminds us that change is constant. Our story begins with UVM and ends with our new adventure in New York.

First Wave: Institutional Readiness

We were engaged to be married and deciding how to spend our lives together with me, Bridget, a newly minted PhD and Rob ABD (All But Dissertation). One offer for a visiting faculty position for Bridget and an assistantship for Rob was not tempting due to the temporary nature of both positions. UVM's offer for an administrative position for Rob and a newly created tenure-track posi-

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tion for Bridget was appealing but left us with questions about our personal and professional fit.

As educators of Color, we were somewhat concerned about UVM's White student population of 93%. Additionally, faculty and staff of Color comprised only 13% of the total population. UVM's ability to mobilize a team of staff and faculty and available funding made for a successful recruitment effort. UVM's first step was networking with colleagues of Color. While attending a professional conference, Robert was approached by UVM's then VP for Student Affairs about an opening. Even though Robert was not looking for a job, the VP sought him out and made an attractive pitch. When the VP learned Bridget was searching for a faculty position, he went into step two: collaboration. While there were no faculty positions open, he requested Bridget's vitae and contacted faculty and academic partners across campus to see if a tenure-track line could be established. Creative allocation of resources from the provost and willingness from an academic program made a new line possible. UVM's next step was persistence. A special assistant to the president, an African American woman, received Bridget's materials from Student Affairs and called to ask Bridget if she would visit UVM. Because of this call, Bridget agreed to hold off accepting a visiting faculty position at another institution until she had looked at UVM. We both agreed to interview at UVM. UVM's next step was preparation. During their interview process, we each had in-depth conversations with faculty and staff who shared their commitment to social justice. Connecting with educators of Color and White allies, we were able to learn about the specifics of their positions. Equally as important, we received honest responses about the campus climate for racial diversity. By the next week, we both received offers, which we happily accepted.

Second Wave: Compromises

We were happy at UVM and were blessed to build such lasting professional and personal relationships with so many people during our years. We initially came because of our commitment to stay together and not do long-distance relationships; yet we compromised by being in a place that felt, at times, like a fishbowl because of the overwhelmingly homogenous university, town, and state. Rob came to UVM needing to finish writing his dissertation and compromised by not being in close proximity to his dissertation chair and cohort. Bridget was in a dual-position that caused her to split time between two programs and prove that she was worthy of the newly created tenure line. Over time, Rob defended his dissertation and was recruited for a higher-level administrative position. The position provided a chance to return to Jesuit education after being educated at a Jesuit high school and college. Bridget was recruited for a tenure-track position in a student affairs program but compromised by losing a year toward tenure to take the position. The other compromise we made was to live far away from our

family and friends. We reasoned that we were relatively young and could take the risk to be far at this point in our lives. Transitioning to new institutions brings many challenges: how to read the culture of the institution, judge the political/social/ intellectual/spiritual network of the department, unit and program, and find the best version of ourselves in the environment. The benefits are numerous: opportunity to establish new working and personal relationships, resources for establishing our leadership and scholarship, and building on what we learned from previous experiences. What we also gained in this transition was strength. Our own strength for making a significant leap of faith; but also the strength of mentors, friends, and others who provided a platform to create and build something for which we could both be proud.

Third Wave: Parenthood

All of the professional transitions paled in comparison to our transition to parenthood. We struggled with how we would build our family after miscarriages and relied heavily on God, family, and friends to grieve and refocus our efforts on becoming parents. Making the decision to adopt and then being blessed to parent Alex was quite the miraculous transition. We negotiated time with him as a family, time we had with him separately and then time we would focus on our marriage and have someone care for him in our absence. Being a parent helped us remember to unplug from work and connect with parents of our students and co-workers in new and meaningful ways. Being parents also meant we needed a greater support network and desired to be closer to our own parents. Hence the next transition in our careers was to move closer to family and friends, and this coincided with Rob getting recruited for a senior-level administrative position at another institution and Bridget for an associate, tenured faculty position. This move brought us within an 8- hour drive from Bridget's family, and 60 minute drive to Bridget's grandfather, aunt, uncles and cousins. One year after moving, we became parents to Addison, our miracle birth child. Transitioning to being parents to two children felt like a crash course but became more doable with family and friends who could easily get to us for coverage during out-of-town meetings and conferences. The kids became part of special events on campus and knew about higher education before they even reached kindergarten. And in this new place we were able to provide professional opportunities for others, reinvigorate programs and processes, and truly be of asset to yet another set working environments.

Fourth Wave: Communication

Managing two people's careers has only been possible with constant and supportive communication between us. With the addition of two children, we prioritize our rituals of communication. We began our relationship with Rob leaving love

notes on the windshield of Bridget's car parked outside a graduate school parking lot, transitioned from emails to texts, and now try to hold date night sacred so we can talk uninterrupted. Whenever a new transition emerges, particularly around a professional career move, we tend to spend many late nights talking. These talks take on a different tone than the regular communication over schedules, national politics, dinner choices, and instead focus on what we believe God has in store for us, what do we think will make for a safe, healthy and joyous life for our children, what will challenge and inspire us in our respective careers, and what environment would best support two Black, Christian, heterosexual, cisgender, middle-class, temporarily able mind and bodied individuals? These conversations are lengthy (sometimes), difficult (often), fun (relatively), meaningful (deeply), and brings us closer together as a couple (always). This type of communication is one of the reasons we have come to embrace, rather than fear the transitions life brings. We communicate with God, family, and close friends about these life transitions in much the same way we talk with each other. Relying on prayer and listening to people we trust and care for deeply encircles us in a network of love and provides the means to get through transitions by our own choice and transitions by forces external to us.

As we close and the sun by the Caribbean Sea sets here in Cancun, we reflect on our most recent life transition. Rob was offered a dream job working in a new role in higher education within an environment that is enriching and one that is a three-hour drive from his parents, brother, and close friends. Bridget will commute from her dream job with friends who are colleagues, students who teach and inspire her, and a research agenda that excites her with possibilities for a more socially just campus life. Being together, being with our children and staying as close as we can to God, we are ready to begin this new adventure in New York. Transitions are like the waves before us, constant...but so is our focus on faith, family, and friends...constant.