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Finding the Right Words: A Personal Reflection

DeMethra LaSha Bradley
2005 Saurman Award Recipient

When I began to think about writing this reflection piece for the 27th volume of *The Vermont Connection*, I asked myself, how would I start? What should I say in this reflection? The answer came to me when I was rereading *The Four Agreements* by Don Miguel Ruiz. Ruiz's (1997) statement, "what you dream, what you feel, and what you really are, will all be manifested through the word," (p. 30) prompted me to think about the words that express what I feel, what I dream, and who I really am.

Have you ever come across a quote that speaks to exactly what you are feeling, thinking, dreaming, or believing? I have come across many such quotes. They help me express my joy, comfort me in times of sadness, and aid me in making decisions. When I read a quote, my mind immediately takes a moment to reflect. Not every quote I read takes up residence in my mind; most of them have become a part of an electronic document that I have maintained since 2001. There are, however, a few quotes that have become indelibly printed on my brain. I would like to share three quotes with you that describe my dreams, my feelings, and the way I choose to live in the world, personally and professionally.

If you always do what you've always done, you'll always be [who] you've always been.
-Author Unknown

This quote guided me to apply for graduate study in student affairs and higher education. It is the opening quote on my statement of purpose for admission into the Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration (HESA) program at The University of Vermont (UVM). Quite ironically, it is also the quote that Professor Robert J. Nash read as he began to talk to an audience about the recipient of the 2005 Kenneth P. Saurman Award.

As I begin my post-HESA career, I am in a newly created position with the huge task of developing an entirely new programmatic component of an already well established center on the UVM campus. In accepting this position, I once again put this quote into action. Until I accepted my current position, my career path in student affairs had been filled with residential life, leadership programs, and fraternity/sorority affairs. Making the switch over to campus judicial affairs, specifically academic integrity, has been a professionally transforming experience. I enjoy what I do in my current role at UVM, and as a result I have come to better understand what I truly want my career path to include. Had I not elected to step outside of my comfort zone, I would not be having such a satisfying experience.

In my opinion, this quote can also speak to the changes that continuously happen in the realm of higher education. If professionals in higher education had continued to do what was traditionally done, our institutions would not be as diverse, welcoming, or attentive to our students' needs as they are today. A few examples that come to my mind include African, Latino/a, Asian, and Native American (ALANA) student services, increased resources for non-traditional students, and the creation of the field of student affairs as both an academic and professional discipline. These are clear examples that there are many of us in the realm of higher education who often do what has never been done in order to create campus communities that will hopefully continue to grow and increasingly better serve our various student populations.

Peace. It does not mean to be in a place where there is no noise, trouble, or hard work. It means to be in the midst of those things and still be calm in your heart.
-Author Unknown

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This quote best describes how I felt during the time between initiating my job search and the first day in my new position at UVM. This in-between time included initial interviews, phone interviews in my apartment, on-campus interviews, graduating from UVM, and waiting to hear from potential employers. During this time, I often sought peace. I knew that the noise, trouble, and hard work of graduating and conducting a job search were not going anywhere, but I tried to be calm in my heart during the process. I found my peace in the moments of laughter with close friends, solitude, and frequent trips to the movies! I remained motivated during these stressful times by keeping my mind on all the possibilities to which I had opened myself up and by replaying the wishes of good luck from my family and friends in my mind.

I believe that any transition, big or small, can cause a person to seek moments of peace in the midst of the noise, trouble, and hard work. One such transition that comes to mind is the one I recently experienced when beginning my current position. This transition required me to go to sleep much earlier in the evening in order to be at work by 8:30 a.m. I also had to alter my work attire to fit the more formal environment of my new office, and my schedule was no longer free in the middle of the day. Although a bit challenging to manage at first, I understood that I was going through a transition and that I had to find my peace. In this situation, my peace often came when I went home at 5:00 p.m. and did not have any papers to write or reading to complete. After two years of graduate studies, coming home and watching television or reading a non-academic book was my idea of peace. Most recently, I have also found the time and gained the financial resources to take clarinet lessons and to travel.

Professionally, I remain peaceful by always doing my best in the work that I do. Whether it is a conversation I have with a student, a meeting to further clarify policies and procedures, or time spent talking with my mentor about my career path, I always strive to do my best. I acknowledge that my best will change depending on my health, my energy level, and other factors, but I am committed to doing my best in every situation. I have gained a deeper understanding of what doing my best really means by once again drawing on the words of Don Miguel Ruiz. Ruiz (1997) states that “you know you’re doing your best when you are enjoying the action You do your best because you want to do it . . . not because you are trying to please other people” (p. 89). I know I am doing my best when in the midst of the noise, trouble, and hard work, I am still calm in my heart.

“Never looking back or too far in front of me, the present is a gift and I just want to be.”
-Lonnie Rasheed Lynn (Common), 2005

The final quote I would like to share is a lyric from the title track of the album *Be* by musical artist Common. This quote speaks to my desire to enjoy the moments that occur in my life as they unfold, and it also reminds me that there is a difference between taking brief looks back at my past and staring at my past. I acknowledge the areas of my life, professionally and personally, where my abilities to plan and to be reflective have enabled me to achieve many of my goals. Yet, I have come to realize a need for me to practice being fully present in the moments of my life and to leave my past in the past.

I seek ways to take time out to celebrate each of my accomplishments as opposed to planning my next move based on the accomplishment. For example, after completing a policy revision, I take a moment to acknowledge my hard work as opposed to immediately planning the date by which I will have the next set of revisions ready. In my personal life, I find great joy in learning how to read sheet music for my clarinet. While I look forward to being able to read more complicated sheet music, I make sure to celebrate and enjoy the fact that I can read some sheet music.

I have often observed my classmates and colleagues become overwhelmed by what they must do next, even though what they just accomplished was extraordinary. When I talk with colleagues about the many programs in place on our campus, our conversations rarely stay on the accomplishments of a program for more than a few minutes. The conversations quickly shift to the work to be done, the next project to be completed, and where the program will hopefully be in the next few years. I urge each of us to take more time to celebrate our achievements without crowding the celebration with the future.

Pondering A Few Personal Learnings

Prior to starting the HESA program at UVM, I must say that the majority of my accomplishments, as well as the areas in which I knew I always did my best, were in my student leader and professional positions. In becoming a part of the HESA community, I also made a choice to become an active learner and create some academic accomplishments for myself. I stepped out of my comfort zone by moving to a completely different environment and pursuing an advanced degree. I believe as a result of this great risk I have reaped great rewards—an increased sense of academic achievement, invaluable mentoring, and the Kenneth P. Saurman Award.

As a new professional, I find myself full of questions and, therefore, always seeking answers. Each day my career goals become clearer, and with the help of my mentor, I continue to plan to attain these goals. I enjoy acquiring new skills and exploring various ways of existing within the field of student affairs. I continuously ask myself two questions: Do you know where you are going? Do you like the things that life is showing you? From a professional and personal point of view, the answers are always yes, no, and sometimes. And that is okay! I am learning to enjoy my journey, not just my many destinations.

It is my hope that this reflection piece inspires those of us in the realm of higher education to take some time out and identify the ways in which we express our feelings, dreams, and how we live in the world. As educators, we often encourage our students to do this type of reflective exercise, but let us make sure to take the time to do this for ourselves. Let us make sure to challenge ourselves to try new things; to identify what peace looks like for us as individuals and how best to achieve or maintain it in our lives; and to celebrate each of our accomplishments in the moment. I'll end this reflection with these words from Erich Fromm (n.d.), "let your soul take you where you long to be . . . Close your eyes, let your spirit start to soar, and you'll live as you've never lived before."

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