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The Final Word

Sherwood Smith¹

It is my honor to be asked to write this section of *The Vermont Connection* journal. Over the past eight years at The University of Vermont I have enjoyed being enlightened by Higher Education and Student Affairs (HESA) students and the Journal. Having agreed to write this section I find myself wondering what I should say.

How do I, a person who believes in the social construction of reality, write a section entitled “The Final Word” and stay true to myself? Let me try by telling you the context from which I write. It will, I hope, provide you with an understanding of the lenses through which I view the world and a means for you to access the usefulness and blind spots of your own lenses.

Everything political, social, and cultural must be scrutinized constantly. Deviations are intentional or unintentional misapplications of symbols and images which subvert the collective consciousness of our people. (Asante, 1980, p. 98)

Finding the connections with higher education in my life will always bring up questions for me. They are questions of time, place, and identity. Being a first-generation college student provided me with unique questions from my parents as to what I was doing, the meaning of my choices, and the reasons for the classes I was taking. Perhaps most important to them was what I would do with my degree. Race, class, and gender made my mother, a pragmatist, focus on practicality. In the words of Patricia Hill Collins (1990), there exists a “matrix of domination,” so that my family understood directly the issues of interlocking systems of power and privilege related to people and institutions. Their questions were as much about my maturity in decision making as they were about their concern for my safety in the world (Bell, 1992).

So I was off to Washington State to become a zoologist and ultimately a veterinarian. Halfway through there came that point of doubt. My experience of college life challenged my identities: Black student and zoologist, gender privileged in science, lower-middle class during breaks, and able-bodied on a sports team. By my sophomore year I decided I needed time-off from college. Thus, as many students do, I got a job for a semester. Only, it happened to be in Antarctica and involved work as a housing coordinator for the station visitors at McMurdo Station.

In isolation, I found community and time to reflect. There were many firsts for me: a real job, a trip overseas, total separation from family; or so it seemed to me. Mezirow (1991) defines transformation experiences as those that warp and change the contours of our thinking and understanding. My junior year was certainly that kind of experience. I returned to campus more assured and with more questions. That assuredness led me to become a Program Coordinator/Assistant Hall Director and began a career in student affairs that would last a decade. It reinforced my tentative love of travel and fractured my lenses forever, leaving me with a kaleidoscopic view of the world rather than the single and positivist view (Carr & Kemis, 1986) my previous education tried to instill (Loewen, 1995).

My view of the world until that point had been that of a fish in the water. I knew that there were other elements, like air for example, but it was all of one color, texture, and type. I was, at worst, a person who saw in only black and white. Dualistic in my personal development (Perry, 1981) and at best rarely seeing difference, I knew them to be of little meaning. My view, where cultural differences beyond the United States (US) were concerned, was that of minimization (Bennett, 1998). What does a fish know of candles, gas lamps, and burning logs?

My engagement in the university community changed both thinking and behavior. Change became something I felt I could create rather than just being a participant in a process conceived by someone else. To my mother's joy, I got the degree, Bachelor of Science in Zoology, and to her horror, I joined the Peace Corps and went off to be a volunteer in Tanzania for two years. In that experience I found that my education did have application and that I had even more hidden assumptions, prejudices, and cultural blind spots (Bennett, 1998) regarding education, culture, and gender. As an

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African-American in Africa I came to know myself as American and began to see the uniqueness of the United States' form of racism and the worldwide problems of the marginalized and silenced. After my two years I returned to the US, the long way home, via Asia.

Since then I have been a part of higher education in a variety of ways: as faculty, Assistant Director of Residence Life, and County Extension agent. What this has taught me is that the questions are often times more important and always more lastingly useful than the answers. While I continue to seek answers, I see them as steps on one of my many paths.

If the academy is to live up to its potential, I must ask questions that reflect issues of social justice. We must challenge our peers and welcome questions from others that challenge ourselves. Without an openness to questions, education becomes the "banking model" of Paulo Freire (1985) in which the teacher gives and we, the students, return with a small amount of interest. The currency never changes and the banker is in control. As a learner and teacher, I fear losing my hard-earned funds and so hoard my wealth so as to be the richer.

Cultural oppression (Blumenfeld, 1991; Caplan, 1993), racism (Allen, 1994; Banks, 1995), and all the other forms of prejudice (Allport, 1979; Bell, 1992) that prevent community and justice depend on not asking certain questions of ourselves and are based on a paradigm that says *this way* is inherently the best in all situations. "If deviations from the majority [Historically White Institutions] are considered abnormal, then many ethnic and racial minorities that exhibit strong sub-cultural differences from the majority" are viewed negatively and so suffer as a result of being assessed as less than normal or unconsciously demeaned and dehumanized (p. 9).

All too often we are like the young child who finds the car keys and tries to drive. The child knows all the steps but not their meaning or context and so wrecks the car. Or even worse we are like the person who has been driving for twenty years and never sees the new stop sign on the corner because driving is no longer a conscious action but only a set of thoughtless reflexes that put others at risk.

As a teacher I am most grateful to my students for asking me the hard questions, the ones to which the only honest answer is "thank you," because it opens my mind to new possibilities and opens up the borders of my choices. If change is possible it is because of action (Banks, 1989), and if the moving of theory into practice (Cervero, 1988; Schon, 1983) is to be made real, I must acknowledge the times I am privileged to not need to be concerned or involved. It is the passive watcher, silent observer, and unconcerned bystander who pose the greatest danger to justice and human rights.

As members of higher education communities we must foster critical thinking, nurture skills of cross-cultural understanding, and build intentional diverse communities (Astin, 1993; Cheatham, 1991). These should provide curricular spaces that ask the challenging questions of otherwise silenced voices (Astin; Belenky, 1986; Ellsworth, 1989).

It is questioning that gives access to understanding of multiple perspectives that different experiences create. Without questions, the issues of power, privilege, and perspective continue to go unnoticed (McIntosh, 1995; Tisdell, 1993) and issues of social justice go unapprised. We are like the dinner guests served a dish that they do not like but choose to say nothing. Yet on their next visit they cannot understand why the same dish is placed before them again. These same people will tell you how much they value honesty and openness. Yet, the possibility of discomfort and conflict sentence them and their cook to repeat their mistake over and over again.

I, at least, change under pressure. There must be some impetus to change my actions and hopefully my thought processes. In the absence of motivation I remain the unmoving and unchanging. I cannot ask of others what I am unwilling to do myself (Anzaldua, 1987). Equally, others have the right to ignore my words if my actions prove them false. I must prove I am willing to try and walk the talk.

Perhaps Krishnamurti says it best:

I wonder if we have ever asked ourselves what education means to live is to find out for yourself what is true, and you can do this only when there is freedom, when there is continuous revolution inwardly, within yourself... It is only when you are constantly inquiring, constantly observing, constantly learning, you cannot be deeply aware if you are afraid. So the function of education surely is to eradicate, inwardly as well as outwardly, this fear that destroys human thought, human relationship and love. (1964, p. 2)

So my final words are questions. What do you not know about yourself? What are you unwilling to be asked? Who might you unconsciously do harm to? When does your lack of action speak far louder than your loudest shouts?

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