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Relationships and Life: Some Lessons Learned

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2006 Saurman Award Recipient

When you see a new trail, or a footprint you do not know, follow it to the point of knowing.
(Uncheedah, The Grandmother of Ohiyesa) (Nerburn, 1999, p. 78)

Relationships inform who we are as individuals and enrich the lives of those around us. They allow us to explore those things that are unknown and bring us to a place of knowing. Relationships are often the foundation of many success stories, build bridges toward understanding difference, and help us navigate a world where loneliness is a feeling that can easily surface. As I reflect on my time in the Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration (HESA) program at the University of Vermont (UVM) and my current profession, I am struck by this one word: *relationships*. Prior to HESA, I never really thought about myself as a relational person, and I certainly took many relationships for granted, expecting them to occur and persevere in a vacuum. Much of why I chose to attend UVM's HESA program, however, was because of relationships I had developed with people in the program and those that were established in my time during interview weekend. In the same way, much of my decision to stay and develop as a professional at UVM was due to the relationships I had established and the people with whom I had closely connected.

The word *relationships* continues to surface in every realm of my life, and I cannot help but recognize the importance of relationships in my personal and professional life. Relationships, good and bad, inform who we are and who we want to become. I recently read Mitch Albom's book, *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*, and I connected strongly to some of the lessons learned by the main character, Eddie. I think these lessons can be translated in many of our own lives. This reflection will take a few lessons learned and apply them to my personal and professional life under the premise that relationships make life what we know it to be. Without them, we would struggle to make meaning of our own lives in every realm—personally and professionally. If one's life were visually mapped out, its blueprint would be guided by the relationships within that one life. It is our relationships that inspire us to keep going, follow our curiosities, and grow from a point of not knowing to a point of knowing.

Nick Negrete received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology and Chicana/o Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He graduated from the HESA program in 2006 and currently serves as the Student Services Advisor for the African, Latino, Asian, and Native American (ALANA) Student Center.

With Family

Sacrifice is a part of life. It's supposed to be. It's not something to regret. It's something to aspire to. Little sacrifices. Big sacrifices. (Albom, 2003, p. 93)

Deciding to go away to college was one of the most challenging decisions I have had to make. To some, this decision is not a difficult one to make, but to others like myself, there is much at stake when leaving family for a considerable length of time. My parents tried very hard to entice me to stay home and attend a university that was within fifteen minutes of my house. I turned down a car offer and gift money to get away and have a “traditional college experience.” At first, this was a decision I was very happy with, and I soon learned how to establish my own autonomy. After my first couple of years as an undergraduate student, however, I began to feel distant from my family. I noticed that our conversations had changed in ways that made me feel like an outsider. Others believed I thought I was too good for the family, being one of the only people in my family pursuing a bachelor’s degree. I soon realized that I had made a sacrifice in my decision to go away to college. I sacrificed relationships with my family members, both extended and immediate. I sacrificed family vacations, birthdays of loved ones, even births, deaths, and marriages. All of these life-changing experiences were the cost of my pursuit of a degree in higher education. Many say that everything has its costs. I never thought *everything* meant my family.

In retrospect, I do not regret going away to college. In fact, I think I learned what it meant to be an adult very quickly and how to be more self-reliant. I learned how to build new relationships and create a different kind of family, a home away from home. I learned how to cherish what I had at home and made a more concerted effort to strengthen my family ties. Even now, I am constantly reminded of the distance that exists between my family and me, both physically and emotionally. Being the only one in my family with a master’s degree is something many people look at as a success, and rightfully so. However, as I admire my degree on the wall, I am not only reminded of my successes and triumphs but also the sacrifices and challenges that afforded me such a degree.

As a student affairs educator who works closely with students, specifically first-generation college students, I witness similar struggles and sacrifices being made. Sometimes my students come to me and share how conflicted they feel about being so far away from home. Other times I can see it in their performance, socially and academically. I often refer back to my personal experiences as a college student and share my perspectives on family, relationships, and the similarly difficult decisions and sacrifices I made. My hope is that I am able to illuminate some realizations within my students and empower them to take the relationships they are so scared to lose and redefine them so that they have permanence in their lives.

With Colleagues

Sometimes when you sacrifice something precious, you're not really losing it. You're just passing it on to someone else. (Albom, 2003, p. 94)

Upon arriving at UVM to begin my graduate work, I was asked the constant question, “Why UVM?” At first, I would ramble off an answer that was socially pleasing and portrayed the HESA program in a positive light. However, I finally took some time to really ask myself, “Why UVM?” As my time at UVM became a little more permanent, and I surprisingly took a job offer that required me to stay at UVM (as I was certain I was going back to California), I really began to ask myself, “Why UVM?” Through this questioning, I found myself reflecting on the strong relationships that were built at UVM with many colleagues—some who have moved away from Vermont and some who have given me much reason to work at an institution like UVM. Nevertheless, I truly believe that “sometimes you are where you are supposed to be and you may not even know it” (Albom, 2003, p. 58).

Entering the HESA program with a cohort of 17 people was enticing to me, as I was able to establish meaningful relationships with people who had come from very different backgrounds and experiences. The investment of such relationships allowed me to expand my worldview, and dig deeper within myself to answer questions like, “What is my student affairs philosophy?”; “How are my multiple identities infused in such a philosophy?”; and, “How do I enact my philosophy in the work that I do with those who may come from other philosophies and narratives?” There’s that word again, *relationships*. The relationships I had established allowed me to enact what we know as moral conversation and understand the various perspectives and experiences that inform who we are and what we do.

Of course, none of this would be possible without the personal sacrifices necessary to spend time in the classroom, at work, and in the community of student affairs. The precious sacrifices I chose to make are the friends and family back home that I left behind to pursue my chosen profession in student affairs. On the other hand, this allowed both my colleagues and me to share with each other our past experiences, which allowed us to establish a more grounded worldview of who we are and what we aspire to become, passing along to each other our wisdom, character, and personal narratives. For this, I will be forever grateful to know that my student affairs narrative has been shaped by those who have challenged me, nurtured me, and validated me, all the while experiencing their own personal sacrifices.

With the World

There are no random acts. That we are all connected. That you can no more separate one life from another than you can separate a breeze from the wind. (Albom, 2003, p. 48)

Higher education in the United States has gone through many transformations; however, those who experience it remain some of the most privileged people in the United States and across the world. Social responsibility is a tenet that I strive to infuse within my own student affairs philosophy and is one with which I hope our students leave college, embracing their roles as socially responsible and educated citizens. Institutions of higher education have the capacity to promote dialogue around social responsibility and empower students to enact such a tenet in ways that educate, enlighten, and enrich campus communities.

I like to think of myself as a world citizen—not just a citizen of my own city, state, and country, but a citizen who acknowledges my role in the world and how closely I am connected to world issues. My relationship with the world happens through my interactions with people, as I share with others my worldviews on life and understand the world from their own lenses. It is amazing how much one can learn by simply stepping out of the comfort zone of one's own backgrounds and perspectives, taking a moment to be enlightened in another's.

College should be a time in which students prepare to be world citizens and own the concept of interconnectivity, understanding that “we move through places everyday that would never have been if not for those who came before us” (Albom, 2003, p. 123). I challenge myself everyday to connect myself with the world in ways that put things into perspective for me, as I am developing a sense of who I am and who I want to become.

With Impermanence

Life has to end, Love doesn't. (Albom, 2003, p. 173)

Moving forward in my life as a student affairs educator, I have come to the realization that many students and colleagues will come and go, including myself. Nothing is permanent, and how we approach this reality affects the way we approach our own lives. There are numerous opportunities to establish relationships within a field in which people are at the center of our profession. People may come and go, but relationships have the ability to remain strong and persevere with change. Whether that is moving across the country, finding a new job, or coping with the passing of a loved one, I think the fear most of us have around establishing great relationships is the fear of losing them. Like death, it is our fear of impermanence in the world, or in this case, impermanence in someone's life. How do we make