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Run Away

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Run Away

Melissa M. Carlson

Run Away (verb)

a : to leave quickly in order to avoid or escape something

b : to leave home

(Run away, n.d.)

Sometimes in life, there comes a moment that changes everything. These moments can be subtle, affecting gradual change without our noticing; other times these moments occur as bursts of upheaval that leave us breathless at the ensuing chain reaction. My moment arrived fifteen years ago, but its effects would echo throughout the rest of my life. It began, and ended, with a message left on my parents' cell phone with the words, "I'm sorry, your son is dead."

Running Away

My brother's suicide led to a series of events that began with my removal from school; it would be nine years before I set foot in a classroom again. My parents abandoned conventional living in favor of an old Winnebago motor home and the open road. We left a trail across all fifty states and many countries, and my childhood years ticked away as inevitably as the steadily mounting miles on our odometer. By my sixteenth birthday, my parents had depleted their accounts and were forced to declare bankruptcy. The Winnebago that had become my home was repossessed, yet my parents were determined to continue their vagabond lifestyle. They purchased a used Chevy that became our new home and sleeping in Walmart parking lots or on highway shoulders became our new normal.

It was during this same year that I found myself sleeping in a dirt parking lot in Quartzsite, Arizona in the middle of January with only an old sleeping bag to protect me from the elements. My parents slept beside me in a six-foot utility trailer that they bought from a fellow traveler, but there was only room for two inside. Weekly showers cost five dollars at the local fire station and the closest

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flushing toilet was the McDonald's off the next highway exit. Meals consisted of canned mini-hotdogs and evenings were spent rereading books I carried with me since the day we left our home. I was cold, miserable, and contemplating how my life had reached this point and how I could change the direction of the path I was on. Coming to the realization that I did not want to live the life my parents had chosen also came with believing that no high school or university would take on a student whose formal schooling had come to an abrupt halt in the fourth grade.

The dusty lot in the Arizona desert was my home for over a month before I began reaching out to fellow travelers to find out where they were headed and if I could tag along. That was how I traveled from one end of the country to another and picked up work as I went. Eventually, I hit an especially low point in my travels and reached out to my aunt and uncle looking for a place to stay. They agreed to let me join them on their yearly sailing voyage from the Bahamas to North Carolina. Living on the boat felt as if someone had lifted a weight off my shoulders. For the first time in several years, I did not have to worry about food, a shower, or the next destination. Everything was left up to my aunt and uncle. I later realized that it was the first time in almost a decade that I felt I could act my age.

My aunt was my role model, so when she encouraged me to apply to college to create a better life than the one I was given, I listened. I returned to the states and enrolled in an online correspondence school called Alpha Omega Academy to earn my high school diploma. My college search involved browsing university websites because I could not afford to make campus visits. The application process was difficult because neither my parents nor my grandparents had attended college. I remember not checking off a box for first-generation students because, at the time, I did not know what first-generation student meant or that I was one. Ultimately, I was accepted to Colorado State University.

Finding My Way Home

Although I was prepared for a lack of financial support from my parents, I was surprised by their inability to support my decision to pursue a college degree. In their eyes, college was only accessible to wealthy people and initially, I believed them. In preparation for my first semester away, my savings account quickly dwindled as I purchased the basic necessities: a pair of glasses, and a much-needed trip to the dentist. I was startled to learn that not only was I required to live in a residence hall, but that I would also be solely responsible for the steep price of the room. Adding to my stress level was how little financial aid I qualified for; I was forced to apply for and withdraw private, high interest rate loans.

In my first days, I juggled working three jobs and learning basic classroom skills such as operating a scientific calculator for the first time. College felt like something that could be taken away from me at any moment. However, as much as it was difficult to adapt to a new way of life, it was also a wonderful feeling to have my own bed, an unlimited meal plan, and a place to shower. I quickly made friends, although none of them were paying their way through college as I was. The differences in our experiences became apparent in the activities that I was invited to but unable to join, either because I had to work or was out of money. Winter breaks were also difficult; the residence halls were closed, which forced me to spend nights on friends' couches and make trips to the local food bank. It was during that first year when I came to realize the influence and scope of my nontraditional upbringing and low socioeconomic background.

Life on the road had positioned me for many unusual opportunities. However, as eye opening as some of my life-changing moments were, they did not prepare me to have a successful college experience. As such, my first year in college was one of personal growth and redefinition. It sparked an intense, albeit unformed, desire to share the same sense of belonging with other students. In my third year I found a way to express this desire in the role of a Resident Assistant. Being a Resident Assistant instilled a true love of working with college students and eventually led me to pursue a graduate degree in student affairs.

Implications for Identity Development

Despite having a stable home, the consequences of growing up on the road and beginning from a lower socioeconomic status have lingered. As Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) point out, “high salience of a social identity in relationship to the core does not always imply positive self-perceptions of that identity” (p. 14). This is evident in the shame I hold even now with regard to my socioeconomic status, as an independent, financially stable adult. At times I am embarrassed to smile for fear that my crooked and broken teeth are blatant indicators of the fact that my parents could not afford to take me to a dentist, let alone an orthodontist. In my career in student affairs, my shame manifests as a constant struggle to overcome the obstacles inherent in missing both middle and high school. This part of my life is central in many ways to the formation of my identity. Although I am grateful for all I was able to learn and experience, the self-perception I established as a result of my socioeconomic status is something I carry with me more as a burden than a gift.

All of these experiences have combined to create my meaning-making filter, the lens through which I view the world (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007). Everyone's lens is unique, clouded, and scratched or buffed and shined by individual life experience. Each time we must make a choice, we are equipped with a lens that

influences how we view the situation and what we are able to learn from its outcome or the consequences that result. Due to the nature of my adolescence, I feel that the limitation of my own meaning-making filter is often highlighted in dialogue regarding education. As a nontraditional student, I sometimes struggle to understand the middle and high school experiences of my peers and the students I advise. Having never set foot in a high school, my conception of these institutions stems from overdramatized television shows and movies, thus the experiences which helped to develop my meaning-making filter are often vastly different than those of my peers. Although this can bring new dimensions to dialogue, in order to effectively serve students I sometimes feel the need to better understand their experiences before coming to college to grasp where they are developmentally.

Professional Philosophy

Robert Kegan coined the term self-authorship and defined it as the shift in meaning-making from external influencers to an internal belief system (Baxter Magolda, 2008). As cited in Baxter Magolda's (2008) article, Kegan believed that self-authorship occurs when an individual compiles their beliefs, convictions, generalizations, ideals, abstractions, interpersonal loyalties, and intrapersonal states into a larger whole that makes up their sense of self. This sense of self forms a new whole identity stemming entirely from an internal belief system. Kegan describes this new whole as,

...an ideology, an internal identity, a self-authorship that can coordinate, integrate, act upon, or invent values, beliefs, convictions, generalizations, ideals, abstractions, interpersonal loyalties, and intrapersonal states. It is no longer authored by them, it authors them and thereby achieves a personal authority (as cited in Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 270).

As theorized by Kegan, once an individual fully cultivates a self-authored identity, their values and belief systems become fully integrated parts of their self (Baxter Magolda, 2008). According to Baxter Magolda, the metamorphosis into a new whole is not a purely internal process but affects external relationships as well. Self-authored individuals no longer seek the approval of others but instead seek to create relationships that are built upon a foundation of respect and caring.

After learning about the theory of self-authorship in graduate school, I was finally able to create meaning and name my experiences in ways that felt authentic to my journey. I struggled for the first year of college with policies that suddenly applied to me and which felt overbearing after so many years on my own. This theory created a framework that helped me understand why I still have difficulty trusting those who hold positions of authority and why I prickled at the new

set of guidelines that were implicit in the college experience. I spent the first two years of my undergraduate career in a state of flux as I vacillated between the first and second phases, between trusting my instincts and doing what I was told, while I was establishing my sense-of-self. By better understanding my own developmental journey, I have been able to use this theory in my work with other non-traditional students who are going through similar experiences.

I spent the first four years of college hiding my upbringing from my peers and supervisors out of shame and embarrassment. It was only after fully incorporating both my past and present into my personal narrative that I was able to find closure with my childhood. Embracing my past has allowed me to help students work through their own stories and guide them through the process of becoming not just narrators, but authors of their own journeys. Coming to an understanding of who I am and where I come from allowed me to heal and begin reflecting my authentic self in both my personal life and my professional practice. This in turn enabled me to use my story for the benefit of the students I advise, supervise, and mentor. As Elizabeth Hoffman puts it, “I spent the first half of my adult life trying to escape my upbringing and the second half capitalizing on it” (as cited in Chavez, 2013, p. 19).

Continuing the Journey

As I continue on this journey of self-discovery, I am comforted by the following quote: “[...] identity stories are told, revised, and retold throughout life. We know or discover ourselves, and reveal ourselves to others, by the stories we tell” (Abes, Jones, and McEwen, 2007, p. 5). As I continue to create and revise my story, I hope that one day I will no longer find the need to skip chapters out of shame or, worse yet, for fear that others will be unable to relate to my experiences. As the prominent theorist, Ruthellen Josselson, points out,

Living our identities is much like breathing. We don't have to ask ourselves each morning who we are. We simply are. . . Identity is never fixed; it continually evolves. But something in it stays constant; even when we change, we are recognizably who we have always been. Identity links the past, the present and the social world into a narrative that makes sense. It embodies both change and continuity. (as cited in Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009, p. 10).

Moving forward, I no longer want to define my experiences as separate shapes, rigid and inflexible, but rather as pieces to a complex jigsaw puzzle with the potential to fit together in many different ways. Each time there is a connection it reveals yet another picture of who I am and all reflecting the pieces most salient to my core.

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