

Finding Meaning in the Little Things: Life Lessons for Student Affairs Professionals

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I am deeply honored and humbled to have been asked to write the Final Word for The Vermont Connection. Over the course of my professional career and specifically the last five years at the University of Vermont, I have built strong bonds and relationships with many connected to HESA and consider myself privileged to have been able to walk this same path. As both an administrator in Residential Life and a faculty member in HESA at the University of Vermont, I am quite blessed to have been afforded the opportunity to work with the very best that Student Affairs has to offer. Following Jackie Gribbons in writing the Final Word is rather daunting, but I will do my best to share with you lessons that have guided both my professional practice and personal life. I am inspired by Jackie and only hope that at the end of my career, I inspire students, faculty, and staff in the same way she has for so many years.

The University of Vermont has been a wonderful place for me. I have grown immensely and in the midst of the most blissful and painful moments of my life, I was able to find hope, faith, and friendship. More than anything else, I learned to slow down and live in the moment; to appreciate the here and now while recognizing the possibilities of tomorrow. I invite you to do the same. Perhaps this is best explained by sharing how I have come to know who I am, how I came to be able to answer some of life's most difficult questions, and how I came to find direction, definition, and destiny. Through this narrative, I grant others the privilege of seeing my true self and hearing my most authentic voice.

Who Am I?

I am a Black man. I learned fairly early that life as a Black man would not be easy. Ironically, I learned this very important lesson, not from my father, grandfather, or uncles, but rather from my grandmother. The more critical lessons I learned about being Black, about being a man, and about survival as a Black man, I learned from a woman. As a six year old boy, my grandmother sat me down and explained

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to me the legacy that I would inherit. She had watched as her own sons had gone down paths of destruction and assured me that I could live a different existence with hard work, perseverance, and faith in God. In making her point, she drew my attention to the difference that made me unique and special. She acknowledged that there is no anonymity associated with being a Black man; that I would never have the ability to blend or to be invisible. She recognized that I stood on the shoulders of greatness and taught me my first lesson about my ancestral history.

I have spent my life on a journey, in search of direction and definition and have often met with uncertainty. In many ways, I have spent my life in hiding; running from who I am and ignoring what I know to be the truth. In many ways I have been pretending to be what others have expected of me. I have on many occasions altered my look, my speech, and the intonation in my voice all for the sake of fitting into a check box that did not truly represent all of me. I grew up believing that Black men looked, acted, and talked as all of those in my home community did. Uncomfortable in my own skin for most of my life, I attempted to jam myself into a puzzle in which I just did not belong. Black men in my view all spoke slang, were athletic, had multiple girlfriends, sold or did drugs and had a certain roughness and toughness about them that others envied. Cognitively, I recognized that I was not that person, but I would do everything I could to fit the mold. In the end, I became more invisible. In the words of Ralph Ellison (1952):

I am invisible. Misunderstood, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me, they see only my surroundings, themselves, or fragments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me. (p. 8)

In the minds of many, I am angry, threatening, lazy, untrustworthy, shiftless, troubled, unmotivated, disgruntled, and aggressive. I bear the unique burden of being both Black and male and with that, the burden of being defined by society. I grew from an invisible boy to an invisible man. My invisibility is further reinforced each time I am called by the name of another Black man. I am not Rob, Randy, Steve, Darrell, Don, Alex, Tremayne, or the countless others for whom I have been mistaken. I do not fit neatly into a box representing all Black men, nor do I look like all Black men. I am uniquely Black, distinctively male and inimitably Southern. I am of poor working class roots and lived much of my life paycheck to paycheck. I have known what it means to go without food, to be without water and to live in darkness. I am faithful, spiritual and religious, and undeniably Christian.

I am dangerous but only in my dreams. I dream with my eyes open. I was once told by a friend and colleague to “live dangerously,” a statement that can be perceived to hold a multitude of meanings. As we continued in conversation, he later concluded

the statement with “live dangerously by dreaming with your eyes open” (Sawyer, 2002). I sat in silence because I had never before been so struck by the words of a friend. These words captured rather simply the way that I had always lived my life. I have always longed for my life to matter; a life that transcends degrees, titles, and money, but rather reflects my contribution to what my grandmother called the “greater good.” I was born into a circumstance that for many equates to a predetermined path from the cradle to the jail house, but the difference, I believe, results from my having been taught to live dangerously with my eyes open.

I have no doubt that my grandmother’s focus and investment in my life, her teachings of hard work, honesty, self-respect, and self-worth, are reflected in the success I have achieved thus far in my life. I imagine someone in your life has done the same for you. Have you recognized them and the contribution they have made to who you are? Have you expressed your gratitude for their guidance and support? Do those individuals who have been the most significant in your journey know what they mean to you? I am a college graduate because of my grandmother, and I assure you, long before she died she knew the significance she held in my life. I hope your beacon of light also knows.

When I entered college, I did so as the first in my family and with enormous expectations from my family, friends, and community. I attended North Carolina State University, a predominantly White college in Raleigh, North Carolina, where I became one of 30,000 students. It was at this point that I began to truly explore my own identity. My involvement with the Society for African American Culture and the African American Heritage Society helped me to move away from my immersed state and more militant attitudes and towards a greater understanding of the world around me. I became involved in a number of other student groups and learned to appreciate people for all that they brought to the table. It was also during this time that I took a critical look at myself and moved away from an existence that revolved around my own self-gratification. It was only after the death of my grandmother and Dwight Willie, a close college friend, that I started to truly appreciate relationships. This was the single most important turning point in my life.

After the death of my grandmother and Dwight, I approached my personal and professional life with passion, conviction, fire, and determination. No problem has ever been too small or too large. Life’s journey, filled with its trials and tribulations, has been an ever-changing course from which I have learned greatly and lived fiercely. I have laughed loudly, smiled boastfully, cried profusely, and angered easily, but with each emotion felt, I have also walked away with a lesson learned. The words of Roy Matthews from *Common Fire: Lives of Commitment in a Complex World* (1996) represent best another lesson learned from my grandmother.

But just as the problems are larger than we, so are the issues, the ex-

cuses, the aspirations; just because there are ambiguities and paradoxes, doesn't mean we can't work with them. It is in the very unpredictability of people that my hope lies. We don't know enough to be pessimists. I don't know what else to do other than keep going forward. For me to stop would be a sign of death. So the small victories will have to do. The small victories will have to do. (as cited in Parks Daloz, Keen, Keen, & Daloz Parks, p. 95)

My grandmother inspired me to be more reflective, modeled the importance of living a balanced life, and provided an exemplary model of a woman and leader of great character, fortitude, ethics, and conviction. Though she held no formal titles, degrees, or leadership positions, her intrinsic call to action represented all that I aspired to be. The promise of tomorrow was not in solving mankind's problems, but rather in the promised smile of a close friend, the resounding laughter of a small child, and the towering leap of another into action.

I see myself through the eyes of my grandmother, whose eyes are much like Maria's were to Steve Camden in *Leading With Soul: An Uncommon Journey of Spirit* by Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal (1995). My grandmother died on November 12, 1997 during my senior year in college, five days after the death of Dwight. Needless to say, this was one of the most difficult times in my life. I continue to grieve over their deaths, but with the recognition that they suffer no more. I recall very vividly one of my last visits with my grandmother one week prior to her death. I am reminded of this visit each time I read the following passage from Bolman and Deal; a passage that I have read almost weekly since completing the book, because of the solace that it has provided me:

He missed seeing her eyes. They were so important to him. Intense. Beacons on his journey. Reflections of his soul. He sat and waited. Not for long. She seemed to sense his presence. She smiled broadly when she saw him. Her usual vitality seemed to return. (1995, p. 124)

My grandmother's life and death represent for me truly what it means to lead with soul. I learned a great deal from her in her physical life and I have learned even more in the spiritual awakening that I have experienced since her death.

In my interactions with my family, friends, colleagues, and students I know that I am on a personal but interconnected journey to hope, faith, and heart. I am on a search for something bigger. I am on a mission of giving gifts from the heart that breathe spirit and passion into life. I am on a search for soul, spirit, depth, and meaning in my life. In interacting with anyone and everyone, while I often have a job to do, I must first recognize and connect with the person who has just entered.

Relationships are at the core of who I am both personally and professionally. This value remains deeply rooted in the foundations to which I am connected. I agree

with the sage in *Leading With Soul: An Uncommon Journey of Spirit* that my head and hands have taken me as far as they can. It is time to try a new route, a journey of the heart, as my heart is more than just a pump. It is my spiritual center, courage, and compassion. I now live for my grandmother, my friend Dwight Willie, my colleagues, family members, friends, and the countless students who I work for each day who remain faceless. My satisfaction comes not from my own success, but from seeing others achieve.

Dwight Willie was one of the most amazing people I have ever encountered in my life. He was one of the most genuine, thoughtful, and compassionate men I have ever been honored to call a friend. Dwight and I met during our second semester of college. We were both enrolled in a first year experience course designed to assist students with their transition to college. We also played on both an intramural basketball and softball team during our first year of college. Despite our numerous interactions, it was not until our sophomore year that we became more than acquaintances. I was the Resident Advisor on Dwight's floor and had met his roommate Kevin. Kevin and I had begun hanging out and by default I also began hanging out with Dwight. In the course of our friendship, we would continue to play intramural sports together, develop a love for tennis, travel together, worship together, and tattoo our bodies at the hesitance of our parents. I spent countless hours in Dwight and Kevin's room throughout college, as they remained roommates into our senior year. We never lived more than a five minute walk from one another and spent significant amounts of time in conversation. My most memorable college moments all involve Dwight. His presence in my life contributed greatly to my understanding what is truly important to me. He taught me about friendship and brotherhood and I did not know it until he was gone.

Dwight, more than most, represented what is good in this world. He saw the good in all and worked tirelessly in the pursuit of equity, education, and opportunity for those less fortunate than he. My development as a Black man is very much reflective of the many lessons I learned from him. A few months younger than me, Dwight was mature and wise beyond his years. He was my role model and confidante. I was unfortunately only able to realize how much I had truly learned from him after his death. Dwight died on Friday, November 7, 1997. Despite differences in opinion, views, backgrounds, and experiences, we shared a strong bond. Each Friday, our bond was strengthened by the time we spent together playing basketball. Basketball was not just a time for us to run and play, but really was an opportunity for us to talk, catch up, and learn from one another. Dwight opened a door for me that had long been closed. It was through my relationship with him that I truly began to understand what it meant to be a Black man, an area that had been very conflicting for me. Everything about him reinforced my notions of "being Black." It was not about the way I spoke or dressed. It was in fact, something I could not control. It sounds ridiculous to me now, but it was

earth shattering then.

Dwight often spoke of taking the road less traveled and being a trailblazer, of living your life not always for yourself, but for the good of humankind. This is evidenced by his decision to major in Environmental Engineering so that he might live professionally as he had chosen to do personally and work to improve the human condition on a level that had gone unnoticed and untouched. From Dwight, I learned the importance of family and friends, of love, and most importantly of recognizing those who have made your life worth living while you have the chance. I live for my parents, siblings, nieces, nephews, friends, and colleagues, who in me, see hope for the future. I live for tomorrow, as I know tomorrow is a brand new day filled with promise.

I have found in leadership a sense of purpose: The capacity to find the values that make risk-taking meaningful. I am no longer swept up by the events that surround me, without maintaining perspective. I approach leadership from a caring place. I am often characterized as a quiet force, largely because of my introverted nature, but I am also assertive, not in a way that paralyzes, but rather in a way that allows for crystallizing experiences for those with whom I interact. I have not always been this way. Courage and compassion I have needed because I have often felt marginalized and oppressed. My introverted nature was of no real help, as it tended to push me further and further away from those who cared about me the most. I feel no differently as an adult, but now possess the tools and resources to unpack my feelings and emotions. Rather than retreating and dealing with my feelings and emotions internally, I am now able to talk through my pain, my hurt, and my anger with those who have caused it.

Greenleaf (1977, 1991) suggested,

Leaders must have more of an armor of confidence in facing the unknown – more than those who accept their leadership. This is partly anticipation and preparation, but it is also a very firm belief that in the stress of real life situations one can compose oneself in a way that permits the creative process to operate. (p. 28)

As a leader, most often I employ a calming presence in a high stress environment and utilize creative approaches to life's simplest problems. I have never had a job in that sense of the word, as I have always approached my work with the same intensity that I approach all things in my personal life. As such, I have often found difficulty maintaining balance, saying no, and making time for me.

I learned recently from a close friend that when stressed, I retreat inside. When frustrated, I tend to isolate myself from others. This is when the introvert that I am truly begins to manifest itself. I need time to process and think so that I might better understand my true feelings, beliefs, and emotions; yet another lesson

learned under my grandmother's tutelage. She was a woman of great stature, and great strength, and it is this image of her that I hold of all women and to which I aspire in my own life. It is from her that I garnered my caring and intuitive nature, my awareness, and creativity. The best parts of my grandmother are very much alive in me. I am now attempting to be a beacon of light for those I encounter, as she was for me.

It was also from my grandmother that I learned what it means to be a transformational leader. Throughout my life, she served as a constant model of great character, motivation, and intellect. It is because of her that I desire to serve as a coach and a mentor to those whom I encounter. Coleman (2002) defines transformational leadership as encompassing the four 'I's: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. The transformational leader models behavior and acts as a role model, encourages the development of each person, and acts as a coach or mentor. In my personal and professional dealings, my approach is consistent with my desire to be an agent of social change. It is reflective of my desire to stimulate further thought and to bring about a fresh new perspective. It is indicative of my desire to inspire in others what has been inspired in me. My life's goal is to impact my piece of the world in the best way that I can, so that those whom I encounter might be impacted and those who come after me might have an easier road to tow. It is to this mission and countless others that I have committed my life.

The courage that I have exhibited over the course of my life and even today as I work in higher education has not been without cost. It has often pulled me away from my roots and those that matter most to me. The road that I now travel has infinite possibilities, but I struggle mostly because there is no clear end in sight. I do not now have, nor in the recent past had, any visions of grandeur. I approach life and leadership realistically, with the knowledge that while I maintain some control over the direction that my life takes, there are many unknowns that are bound to impact me along the way. I thank my grandmother for the courage she modeled, as it has informed many decisions along my journey.

It was from my grandmother that my first lessons on leadership were learned. She was a true servant to all and the matriarch of my family, and I have for my entire life tried to emulate her strength, courage, and veracious nature. From the beginning, I have attempted to serve others with the recognition that I come from a great and mighty ancestry. Rosalyn Williams in speaking of her rise to leadership in *Common Fire: Lives of Commitment in a Complex World* stated that:

One of the gifts of blackness is being connected to a sense of history, so that one's life isn't just for today, but it's for the hundreds of years that went before and the hundreds of years that come after...all those people paid a terrific price so that I can have the opportunities I

have...When you have that sense of lineage; it's really powerful. (Parks Daloz, et al. p. 98)

From my grandmother, I learned that I had a story worth sharing. It has been my goal from the beginning to inspire others into action.

I believe it to be my personal responsibility to share my story with students through my work. Today, as the Associate Director of Residential Life for Residential Education at the University of Vermont, I continue on my journey as both a teacher and a student, seeking to learn and to be educated. I view learning as both a noun and a verb, active and passive, and reflective of both an outcome and process of education. It is a reflection of my experiences and interactions. It includes the acquisition of new knowledge and skills, and the sharing of that knowledge and skills with others. It is a reflection of different people, environments, and situations. Learning is simply experience. The classroom serves as the greatest catalyst for learning in that it provides for the free expression of ideas in an environment characterized by diversity in experience. It is however the co-curricular experience outside of the classroom that provides me with the opportunity to impact students' lives. In my daily interactions, I work first to connect with my students. It is important that I get to know them, but also that I allow them that same opportunity. I have as much to learn as I have to teach. I expect that my work in Student Affairs will be based on reciprocity. In fact, I imagine that I will learn far more than I will ever give. It is for this reason that I most value my work in higher education.

As a Student Affairs leader in higher education, I investigate and understand the intricacies of organizational development and change. I continue building upon my graduate education from North Carolina State University and my years of full-time work experience. I seek an opportunity for self-reflection and assessment of my personal knowledge, an understanding of educational history, philosophy, and debate, and the opportunity to participate in scholarly research relevant to the student experience. Don Sawyer (2002), a former colleague and my best friend, in giving a keynote speech at the Student of Color Leadership Retreat at Syracuse University closed by quoting John Gardner, a proliferate writer in the area of leadership:

All too often, on the long road up, young leaders become 'servants of what is rather than shapers of what might be.' In the long process of learning how the system works they are rewarded for playing within the intricate structure of existing rules. By the time they reach the top, they are very likely to be prisoners of the structure. This is not all bad; every vital system must reaffirm itself, but no system can stay vital for long unless some of its leaders remain sufficiently independent to help it change and grow.

I am moved by Gardner's words because in many ways it represents a call to action.

He suggests that while rules exist, they may be altered to reflect the changing needs of the group. I refuse to be a prisoner of a system that was not made for me or structured in a way that supports my growth and development. From Gardner's words I gained a revitalized sense of purpose.

“Live dangerously by dreaming with your eyes open.” These are words that will forever move me. Living dangerously is my state of being. It was represented in my pursuit of higher education. It is represented in my mere existence as a Black man in a world that was not designed with me in mind. Living dangerously means looking forward with a realistic eye, seeing what is actual and what is desired. It means living in this space, in this time, and working to influence change in my small corner of the world. Living dangerously means resisting the temptation of living life for self-gratification. It means sharing my limited resources with those who are not as fortunate as I or with those against whom I compete. Living dangerously means recognizing the impact of my existence and living my life accordingly. It means dreaming of the infinite possibilities and believing in their ability to come true. Living dangerously, as I view it, is nicely summed up in the poetic words of Anthony Moore, as recorded in *Chicken Soup for the African American Soul* (Canfield, Hansen, Nichols & Joyner, 1999).

I am the brown clay God scooped from the sand. He molded me, then blessed me, with his own two hands. He breathed life into my lungs and sat upon the land. I am God's finest creation and he called me man. I am the beginning of humanity, intelligent and strong. My life will be full, and my days will be long. My mind is the birthplace of philosophy and mathematics, position of stars, motions of planets, I know the schematics. I am the creator of civilization and master of architectural design. Knowledge, understanding and wisdom flow from my mind.

In my heart pumps the rich blood of kings and queens. I am the descendant of those who knew all things. Adam and Eve, Noah, Moses, and Abraham, The blessed Mohammad, are just a part of who I am. Formed in the womb of God's most perfect gift, the black woman, with her perfect skin, full lips and hips. The angels look down while doing protective duty, and secretly wished they possessed beauty. I am her child, her father, her brother, her lover. God is the only thing I can place above her. I am the past. I am the present. I am the future.

I am the beginning. I am the end. I am what moves you. I am only beginning to understand truly who I am. I am God's glory and God's love. I am the Black man. (pp. 223-224)

In my simplest form, I am a Black man. Long before I knew anything else about myself, I knew this simple truth. I am a Black man with southern roots with a hint of a southern drawl, but unequivocally a Black man. Beverly Daniel Tatum

(1997) suggested:

The concept of identity is a complex one, shaped by individual characteristics, family dynamics, historical factors, and social and political contexts. Who am I? The answer depends in large part on who the world around me says I am. Who do my parents say I am? Who do my peers say I am? What message is reflected back to me in the faces and voices of my teachers, my neighbors, store clerks? What do I learn from the media about myself? How am I represented in the cultural images around me?

Or am I missing from the picture altogether? (p. 18)

I am who I am and that is who I forever will be; sometimes more, sometimes less, but not what you see. I am a Black man. Who are you?

On my journey, I have found direction, definition, and destiny. It was in the one place I never looked; within me. I will never be invisible again. I will never be silenced or without voice again. I am truly on my journey now. I hope you will join me on a journey of your own. I invite you to live dangerously, to dream, to lead with soul, to find direction, definition, destiny and meaning in the little things. I did, and I know you will, too.

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