Part of a Whole: A Personal Essay

BY TYLER GEHMAN

“No man is an island, entire of itself; Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.”

John Donne

In one of the first social work courses I took as an undergraduate at Millersville University, a professor referenced the John Donne quote above, and the saying has stuck with me. Although the language of the original quote is archaic and not inclusive, it still conveys a simple truth: a human being cannot survive in isolation. The professor used the quote to illustrate how interconnected people are: from the gravel used to create the roads I traveled to get to Millersville, to the citations the researchers used in the textbooks for class, my education is not something I achieve on my own. As a heterosexual male from a middle-class background, there are many things that I can take for granted without even trying. Because of certain characteristics that I was born with, I can move through life with more ease than the average person. It would be easy to claim my achievements are the product of hard work and merit, but the fact is, my education is not something I achieve on my own. As someone who has earned two degrees in six years here at Millersville University, I would like to share and expand upon this truth that has remained with me over the years. We live our lives on the backs of those who have gone before us, and we cannot achieve anything without building upon someone else’s work or without the assistance of others.

Throughout my studies in the School of Social Work, I have been reminded of one aspect of my identity: I come from a place of great privilege. As a white, Christian, heterosexual male from a middle-class background, there are many things that I can take for granted without even trying. Because of certain characteristics that I was born with, I can move through life with more ease than the average person. It would be easy to claim my achievements are the product of hard work and merit, but that is not the conclusion at which I have arrived.

It is impossible to be unbiased, but the person seeking human services at a human service agency deserves unbiased guidance and assistance. This unbiased provision is a key goal in social work. Part of being self-aware is recognizing biases and areas in which one is privileged. I am aware of many areas in which I am privileged, but there are probably many to which I am blind. But this essay is not about my privilege, nor about my journey realizing and recognizing my areas of privilege.

Every person is a proverbial piece of the continent, according to John Donne, an essential piece of the puzzle that makes up our human existence. While each person is a unique individual, it is impossible to thrive on one’s own. Individualism only propel someone so far until the individualism alienates those in that person’s vicinity. This is why cultivating allies is essential to success.

At Millersville University, students can achieve high grades working on solo projects and assignments, but this is not the pinnacle of the student experience. For students, the real exam exists after graduation. Life becomes much more collaborative when the education student becomes the teacher, when the social work student becomes the change agent, when the math major becomes the statistician, and when the political science student is on the campaign trail. To use another expression, in the real world, students face everyday challenges and problems to solve that are not typically encountered in the classroom.

I have had the opportunity to practice solving problems and facing challenges as a student working with several programs on campus. Through Career & Life Studies (CLS) and the Office of Diversity & Social Justice (ODSJ), I have been on the front lines of designing and implementing programs which require much collaboration and cooperation to even exist. Getting a program or event off the ground, even at a mid-sized state university, is a great accomplishment and the result of much collaborative effort. In CLS and ODSJ, I was not the key leader or the initiator of the programs; I simply worked with the programs and supported their development.

Through these experiences, I saw firsthand the essential nature of cultivating allies and collaborating with others. With Career & Life Studies, students with intellectual disabilities now have access to experiencing the educational environment at Millersville University. This did not become possible until there was collaboration between CLS and all of the offices on campus, as well as several state agencies. Developing collaborative alliances takes time and effort, but in the end, it brings results. No one is an island, and no one could have created a program like Career & Life Studies by oneself.

The cooperation I have observed between agencies and programs at Millersville University reflects greater trends of alliances throughout the years. From the military alliances that defeated Hitler to the allied social movements that brought about social and political victories advancing human rights, cooperation was essential to achieving these goals. In the human rights movements of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, it might have been easy to lash out in violence or force a radical change on society. But many times, it is the grass-roots movement that slowly gains supporters. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s approach is the one that is highly valued. His methods included nonviolence and civil disobedience, a slower, more peaceful route. In essence, having and cultivating allies paves the way to success, even if it may be difficult.

This has been one of the greatest lessons I have learned throughout my years of education at Millersville University. It is better to collaborate and cultivate professional relationships between individuals, agencies, and groups than to go about things alone. From a personal level to an international, political level, making friends and alliances is the higher, nobler road to take. If we recognize that we are not individual islands, but parts of a whole continent, we will have more friends to and will create a more inclusive society. The strategic plan of “Our Bold Path” at Millersville University also promotes this, with goals that inspire positive contributions from the University community and reflect a world in which graduates are prepared for successful engagement in career and life opportunities. This will only happen when we all recognize the fact that no one is an island, that we are part of the whole. Cultivating alliances is a sure way to lasting success because, in the end, we all need friends.

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