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Rest Stops & Scenic Overlooks: A Call to Professional Renewal

BY TOBY S. JENKINS

I used to be one of those no-nonsense drivers. Fuel up early, pack lunch, drive a steady 15 miles over the speed limit and don't stop until we get there. Then, many summers ago, I studied abroad in South Africa and took a road trip with my classmates to Kruger National Park. They stopped at EVERY scenic overlook. I honestly didn't even know what a scenic overlook was. In the States, I just sped by the signs. In what might have been the longest drive ever, we saw incredible mountain views, had wonderful conversations and got in the car singing at the top of our lungs. We eventually got where we were going, but more importantly we got there happy.

This scenario is a metaphor for what often happens in higher education. Too many colleagues are driving full speed ahead, never stopping to renew and soak up some inspiration. Those in student affairs are working an insane number of hours on campus. They are in the office by the early morning for an all-day slate of meetings, one-on-ones, training, strategic planning sessions, etc. By 8:00 p.m., when many others are comfortably home, student affairs professionals are often gearing up for some major campus event. The day is packed so full that there is literally no time to think.

Those on the academic side also have their feet pressed to the pedal. The race to tenure has created a culture of work-crazed scholars. Faculty routines are packed with committee meetings, multiple projects and pressure to publish, not to mention teaching. Everyone is in a race to be the busiest person on campus. Still, being the busiest professional in your field does not make you the most productive person in life.

We all need to pull over — to get off the assembly line. An assembly line is about uniformity and expediency, everything is made quickly and looks the same. Such is the case with higher education. Our campuses are formulas and our career trajectories are simply templates. And the deeper questions still remain, “What is your purpose in life?” and “What specific innovation and creative imagination do you bring to this field?”

We need to cultivate a culture of contemplation and joy. When I led a student affairs office, I did work crazy hours. However, I also made it okay in our office to embrace the word “no.” That simple word can feel like freedom when it is used wisely. We said no to some campus meetings. We allowed ourselves to close our doors and think. You should stop for students who need you. But let's be real, every student visit is not an emergency and every campus meeting isn't urgent. If you are actively engaged with students, a student can walk by a closed door and know for sure that you are busy working for them. They will come back because they value both your work and your wisdom.

I've spent much of my career working in overdrive, and I literally wore my body out. In 2009, I decided on a lifestyle change and accepted a faculty position. I had dreams of my new faculty lifestyle — reading books at cafes in the afternoon. But as much as I joked about taking it easy, admittedly ambition and competitiveness were in the passenger seat as I headed into my new career. I secretly planned to take the professoriate by storm, but, after accepting the new job, I was diagnosed with lupus, a disease in which an overworked immune system begins attacking the body to death. Then, six months later, another bombshell: breast cancer. I was a 34-year-old, single, African-American woman. My life completely changed. Lupus and cancer

forced me to a complete stop. My body simply couldn't take it anymore.

I had to learn as much about health, disease and nutrition as I know about culture and college student development. I had to put me first. In the long term, putting me first means making the time to go home and rest, to cook healthy meals, to exercise, to meditate, and to have fun with friends and family. For years, I watched college students live full lives — pursue careers, dive into relationships, party, take road trips, volunteer, grow and develop. That seems like a master plan for happiness. Maybe they should be teaching us.

With a new view of life, I still managed to have a fulfilling first year as a faculty member. I published articles, planned a campus program, sent off book manuscripts and chose to teach while undergoing chemotherapy because teaching brings me joy (not because teaching will win me points). I only did things that fulfilled my spirit. I was productive, but most importantly I was happy. After cancer, the race for awards, tenure and recognition doesn't matter. In fact, no award can even compete with the feeling after receiving a clear CT scan. My life is in perspective. And I hope you can join me, pulled over on the side of life's road soaking up some sun, purpose and inspiration. ▣

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