Standing in front of the parents at a Question & Answer session during freshman orientation, I knew it the moment the words left my lips--“...we want to have relationships with your sons and daughters; that’s why we are called “Student Affairs”...” It was one of those unfortunate turns of a phrase we all experience (please tell me we all experience them…) that causes whispers and snickers in the corners of the room. A double-entendre leaving no way to move forward gracefully, and no way to move back without attracting even more attention to the problem. So I just stood there with the poorly-chosen words hanging interminably in the air, and my mind whirling with even more poorly-chosen recovery schemes. Fortunately, I saw only a few raised eyebrows and scattered smirks and I decided to leave well enough alone.

Later, as a different group of parents filled the room for the next session, I reviewed my remarks and considered eliminating the whole “relationship spiel” altogether. (After all, why go looking for trouble when it seems to find me ably enough on its own?) During this reflection, I realized that relationships are more than merely a “spiel” for the parents, and more than merely decorative or incidental to students and staff. They are essential to the process of education and in the lives of those who foster it because they prove our greatest source of joy, our clearest means of instruction, and our greatest source of influence.

Our Greatest Source of Joy.

Humans are social creatures. Call it the herd instinct, the power of community, or just good old fashioned safety-in-numbers, there is something primal that draws us to one another. There in the crowd, we experience a magic in knowing someone else intimately and caring for them deeply that affirms our own identities and makes our individual lives bigger, more worthwhile, and more worth living. Undeniably, there are widely-ranging degrees of such commitment among us, social butterflies as well as hermits, but even the most misanthropic and introverted lives are touched by touching others because these touches seem to connect us all most directly to who we are, who we want to be, and to what our lives are really all about. The relationships we pursue become adventures in which we discover meaning and joy in our own existence, but like all good adventures they can be messy, unpredictable, and even disturbing things.

It takes only a passing glance at Jerry Springer’s circus or the countless “reality” TV
shows to see that relationships come only partially-assembled and require considerable time and emotion to fit and function well. Unfortunately, the bursting To Do Lists and perpetual stress of the typical Student Affairs educator render both these resources scarce indeed. Lacking temporal and emotional reserves, we press to make our work world as efficient and predictable as possible in order merely to survive it. Unfortunately, if not unsurprisingly, the survival we win by this efficiency is a cool and lifeless existence because it leaves little room for the personal and purposeful relationships that connect us to the broader meaning and deeper joy of our lives. Since when were the truly meaningful relationships in your life fostered efficiently, predictably, and as-scheduled? The ones in my life stubbornly defy such regimen. They demand extravagant “wastes” of time; they have a disconcerting tendency to resist my most deliberate cultivation and then to blossom effortlessly where and when least expected.

In my experience, the most meaningful relationships seem to stop time, or at least to ignore it for a while. They defy your penchant for predictability and threaten to consume you of their own accord. They submit only grudgingly to your careful designs and draw you, simultaneously reluctant and ready, into the unexplored adventure of themselves. In those connections, the planet, which only moments before seemed about to spin out of control with deadlines, commitments, and responsibilities, actually slows, shifts its axis and for at least a breath or two, rotates entirely around you and yours.

As educators, if we are comfortable with this notion at all, we tend to be more comfortable with it in our personal lives than in our professional ones. The press of administrative responsibilities and the disturbing frequency of inappropriate or exploitative relationships in academia make us more than a little leery of seeking deeply personal connections with students. This is crippling because it insulates us from the vital interpersonal connections that are the landscape and life blood of the Student Affairs profession.

Most of us entered this profession because in one fashion or another we loved college, or more to the point, we loved college students. We were turned on by the opportunity to connect with them personally and to participate directly in their lives and lessons. Yet, in no time at all, many of us found ourselves swept away by the business or busy-ness of Student Affairs and trying to control and minimize the very interactions that comprise that participation. There was simply too much to do, and our earliest professional lessons were ones of mastering coping skills that enabled us to check items off our To Do lists more efficiently. We learned to partition and de-prioritize the messy human parts of our jobs so that we could focus more attention on greedy political and procedural dynamics that demanded daily attention but never genuinely thrilled us in the first place.

There is a dangerous secret at the heart of the contemporary Student Development profession— it is neither about students nor their development. The laudable rhetoric remains, but the daily work of student personnel is frequently
more about institutional predictability and control than any kind of interpersonal connection or real inspiration with students. We save the inspirational, relational stuff for conferences and keynotes, not because it has become less interesting to us, but because it has become less pertinent, less apparently essential to our typical workday, and we do not have time for anything that is not essential in our workday. Oddly, we continue to seek and hire young professionals that are passionate about students and their personal growth, and then welcome them into job descriptions and institutional cultures that frame both as threats to their success. We talk passionately of community and learning, but our days are actually filled more with compliance, liability, and resource management. Is there any wonder, in the grip of such bait-and-switch, that so many once-promising professionals burn out and leave, or worse, burn out and stay?

The remedy to this dilemma is to recast what is essential and to do what too often seems least productive, least efficient— to emphasize real relationships with students-- to spend the time we genuinely don't have over a Coke, talking about something that has no bearing whatever to the meeting we are convening after lunch, to neglect something significant on our To-Do Lists for the sake of something significant on a student’s, to spend more time listening to the exploits of a student’s weekend than talking about the contents of his or her next assignment. To prioritize a slow walk through the quad and a Frisbee throw or two over that phone message or the six e-mails that have arrived since you started reading this article.

One caveat: real, meaningful relationships engage all participants-- educator as well as student, and many of us must re-pose ourselves to be genuinely pensive and to experience the uncomfortable complication of feelings. (Some of us quietly gave these up long ago in the interest of efficiency, and are surprised now to find them so real and so consuming.) The introduction of genuine feelings to our relationships with students changes the experience considerably and makes us entertain the notion that we may not actually be in complete control of the most genuine and productive relationships we foster. They prove to be preoccupying and even painful, but also invigorating and empowering, and they mess up the hard-won predictability of our world. Somewhere in this messiness, in the discovery that we are part of something bigger than ourselves, lies the secret to the joy we seek.

Our Clearest Means
Of Instruction

Relationships also provide the arena in which our students best apprehend the meaning of the fast-paced world they experience. The Information Age has brought with it phenomenal access to knowledge, but this does not mean that students’ learning has correspondingly improved. Surprisingly, this much-touted MTV generation, needs relationships to give context to the barrage of images they take in. For our students,

“…the media are flashing two thousand images a day. They can’t deal with that, so they ignore the images. As a result, young people are a hundred times more sophisticated in handling images, but not in attributing significance to them.

Purposeful Relationships
The young eat images like popcorn, older adults eat them like a meal...Today's young people see almost 1,000 percent more images than 55-year-olds saw in their youth. Surprisingly, though, they don't have a corresponding understanding of the images they see...the images have no symbolism, no moral value. Inanimate messages—anything other than person-to-person speech—lose value as you get younger in this culture.”

Unquestionably, there is a place for distance learning and myriad on-line curricular experiences, but many of these simply offer more efficient means of delivering information, and it appears that students need more than mere information to learn. They need guides. They need to know us and to participate in the process of learning with us, because it is that particular connection that enables them to make so many others. It’s as if the heat generated by our lives rubbing together thaws brains frozen by the endless barrage of data, and warms students to the task of assembling all that information into real understanding.

If there is a deeper question shaping and supporting students’ collegiate experience than “What should I know?” it is “How should I live?”, and the answers students find at the university must serve them well long after the grades are in and the sound of the alma mater fades. Their success, and concomitantly our own, is ultimately measured in knowing not only how to make a good living, but in how to make a good life. Their ability to do this, to craft a worldview that will sustain them, one that is cohesive and compelling, depends upon their personal connection with individual examples during their university experience. Stephen Garber (1996) emphasizes this in The Fabric of Faithfulness:

Ideas inherently have legs, human legs...the ethic of character teaches that beliefs are most clearly seen in behavior. For a student to truly understand the content of his convictions he must see them lived...Students need to see their worldview incarnated in the lives of their teachers, if it is to be grasped in a way that can make sense of life for life (p. 172).

It is a bit daunting to think of ourselves as incarnations of anything. Most of us signed on to be administrators, educators even, but never really bargained for “incarnation”. But daunting or not, a picture is still worth a thousand words. Our deepest impact on our students frequently comes less from our ability to articulate brilliant ideas and laudable aspirations than from our ability to embody them. We, ourselves, are the text that is most vivid and most compelling, if not most instructional in our interactions with students. In relationship, they are able to apprehend that text more fully and to process it for application in their own lives. In relationship, students transcend the sterile and too-tidy Petri dishes of ideas that many conventional curricular contexts have become and see values and ideas practiced messily in context. Relationships become vital studios and laboratories in which they experiment and explore new ideas and their own dispositions more genuinely, more deeply and more courageously.

This emphasis on incarnation is not to recast education as mere replication; our goal is not to simply reproduce ourselves in the lives of those we teach and lead. Rather it is to make ourselves, our real selves, vivid and accessible
to them so that they might better choose their own way. Some of the best educational experiences I have experienced have come in relationships with students who have chosen decidedly different paths and convictions than my own. Without a relationship, we would have simply encountered one another as opposing kingdoms in détente, polite and productive but guarded and ultimately impervious to one another. It was only in the genuine relationship we shared beyond the strict confines of our roles as teacher and student that real learning occurred. In it, we could explore our differences deeply, consider alternative perspectives genuinely, and ultimately reaffirm our own choices. In the end, it is the relationship itself that provides the most powerful learning context and means of instruction.

Our Strongest Means Of Influence

Ultimately, education is neither a spectator sport nor room service; it is neither played out by others for students’ entertainment nor delivered by others for their consumption. It is far more participatory than this. Perhaps a more apt metaphor for education would be a bicycle--- the wheels of education (and indeed, the wheels of students’ minds) don’t move unless they do. Contemporary emphases on customer service and quality in the academy have helped our efficiency, but they threaten to recast our students as consumers, and learning as our product. Though well-intentioned, this perspective is too linear and ultimately too compartmentalized to be suited to the business of learning because our “product” depends entirely on the active contribution of the “consumer”. Factories and outlet malls hawk their widgets to a discriminating but disconnected populace. Their success depends solely upon their ability to curry favor, to affirm consumers’ preferences and to present what they want. Alternatively, the university’s success depends upon its ability to transform rather than merely to affirm its “customers”, and try as we might, we cannot accomplish such transformation without their personal engagement in the process. Our product is ultimately the customer him/herself, and the quality of our product depends largely upon the potency of our collaboration with our co-producers: the students.

This recognition bears strongly on how we exert influence on students. Titles, policies, and other formal institutional authority structures may suffice generally in gaining their compliance, but rarely do they illicit the kind of real individual commitment on which deep learning depends. In fact, the titles and trappings of educational leadership frequently pose barriers to be overcome in the quest for the genuine personal connection on which this commitment depends. Anywhere such a personal commitment exists is fertile ground for development and personal change, and where it is absent, no sophistication of argument or pedagogical wizardry will suffice. This is why peer relationships prove so powerful in shaping the dispositions and directions of our students---it is not because peers are wiser, more artful, or more determined than formal educators, it is because they wield the power of a more genuine relationship. Participants in any relationship
become both more credible and more pervasive to change as they grow more known and connected to each other.

Perhaps this principle is more visible in paintball than pedagogy. In my first foray into the combative world of paintball, I discovered, to my chagrin, that I am a sniper at heart. The risk of face-to-face combat disturbed me, and I longed to pick-off my opponents with impunity. I longed for a gun that was more powerful than my enemies’ and would enable me to hit them while I stayed comfortably out of range of their return fire. Unfortunately, it took only a couple skirmishes to discover that all our guns were the same, and that any hope of engaging the enemy came with corresponding risk to my self. Simply put, there was no way I was going to be able to hit others without the risk of getting hit in return.

Embarrassingly, many of us try to develop students like snipers. We assume the escalated power of our thought, the breadth of our experience and preparation, the height of our title or reputation, etc. will allow us to reach out and impact students at a distance that enables us to remain impersonal, disconnected, safe ourselves. In the end this proves frustrating and fruitless. As even our best-aimed attempts fall short of their mark we realize that we can not reach our students without coming within reach of them ourselves. We can make no meaningful impact on their lives without coming close enough to be impacted in return. This is because real influence requires real connection, and concomitantly, real vulnerability. When we develop real relationships with our students, we connect to them in deeper individual ways and we allow them to connect to us in return; we gain influence with them as we permit them to influence us.

Accepting the fundamental reciprocity of influence does not mean that we must trade our role as teacher and guide for that of a peer. We are decidedly different than students’ peers in that we are called to change them by their association with us. We are not simply to provide good company for the journey, but to inspire and insist on a journey that is meaningful, and transformational, worthy of their commitment and our own. This elevates both our responsibility and our perspective above their peers, but it does not free us from the dynamics on which influence is built. In fact, our role as educator and our peculiar commitment to make students better raises rather than lowers both the significance and the challenge of a fostering the kind of personal relationship on which that influence rests.

▶ Conclusion

This is what frames the concept of Purposeful Relationship. In an educational culture that unproductively distinguishes the process of educating students from that of building genuine personal relationships with them, it is important to advance an ethic that expresses the interdependence of the two. It is important to reaffirm formal education as a personal collaboration and to recast our own engagement with students as both highly professional and deeply personal. Erring too much to either perspective is ultimately unproductive. If we focus exclusively on our professional role, we find ourselves increasingly knowledgeable and professionally polished but
bafflingly unsuccessful in actually transforming those we hold in trust. Our students constitute only raw materials for the cold practice of our profession. On the other hand, if we focus exclusively on the personal, identifying and building deep connections with students, we may cede the credibility of advanced knowledge and experience and find ourselves popular but impotent, possessing insight into students’ lives but lacking the wisdom and leverage to shape them in meaningful ways. It is only in the development of genuine but purposeful relationships that we gain both the influence and the opportunity to guide them forward. In this powerful confluence of personal commitment and professional capacity, we ultimately discover the joy of our calling and the ability to transform the men and women we serve. Bring on the parents, my relationship spiel is ready…