The Heart of our Practice

Frank Shushok, Jr.
Faithful Colleagues,

Five years ago this spring, I wrote an article for About Campus called “When Good People Happen to Bad Things: Student Learning in Unfortunate Times.” Back then, I was one year into my role at Virginia Tech, where many good people were beginning to experience the odd truth that tragedy, albeit unfortunate and difficult, may foster openness to the biggest questions of life and learning. This has certainly been the case in my life.

Though I authored the article with Virginia Tech specifically in mind, I was surprised when the process brought to consciousness a difficult time that occurred in my own experience some 20 years earlier. Most poignantly, I recognized the ways in which the death of my college friend, Scott Adams, that year’s Diadeloso chair, had become my friend during the first few weeks of my college experience. Although Scott and I had gone our separate ways as our undergraduate years unfolded, I held Scott in high regard and looked forward to our unplanned encounters around campus here and there. By late afternoon on that day, Scott was riding in the back of a pickup truck charged with collecting signs and other materials that had been used during the day. While Scott was holding a sign, a strong gust of wind surprised him, lifting from the truck and depositing him headfirst on the road. Scott never regained consciousness. I can still picture myself at the moment I heard the news of Scott’s death. It was devastating. One minute, I was an invincible 20-year-old college student. A moment later, the reality of life and death engulfed me (p. 18).

Through Scott’s sudden death, I felt forced to engage the tenuous and fleeting nature of life. I was troubled that Scott’s good living had ended, yet mine was still intact. A relentless internal barrage of questions confronted me: What is the purpose of life? What is a life well lived? How can I offer the kind, thoughtful, other-centered actions I observed in Scott? These aftermath questions, especially in retrospect, fostered a new direction for me—even in the face of death. Scott’s death will never make sense to me, but it did by some great providence, help me make sense of me. I stared ahead at the life I hoped to live and I was wrapping up my junior year. This special day was part of a long-standing tradition at Baylor in which classes are cancelled and the campus bustles with activities for students, most of which are coordinated by a student organization called the Baylor Chamber of Commerce. Scott Adams, that year’s Diadeloso chair, had become my friend during the first few weeks of my college experience. Although Scott and I had gone our separate ways as our undergraduate years unfolded, I held Scott in high regard and looked forward to our unplanned encounters around campus here and there. By late afternoon on that day, Scott was riding in the back of a pickup truck charged with collecting signs and other materials that had been used during the day. While Scott was holding a sign, a strong gust of wind surprised him, lifting from the truck and depositing him headfirst on the road. Scott never regained consciousness. I can still picture myself at the moment I heard the news of Scott’s death. It was devastating. One minute, I was an invincible 20-year-old college student. A moment later, the reality of life and death engulfed me (p. 18).

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wandered through the kinds of decisions that would take me there. I played out who Scott would have been if he’d had the opportunity, and I played out who I was becoming with the same opportunity Scott suddenly lost. I asked myself what Scott would do if he had one more chance at the gift of life, and I wondered how I would live the chance I was still holding. I wanted to be remembered well. I couldn’t shake that Scott’s kindness and compassion in his life were even more compelling in his death. What Scott’s friends and family remembered about him were the things I wanted to be true about me. Scott’s death taught me about life.

As fate would have it, this story continued to unfold even after my article was published. In April 2011, I was startled to open my inbox and discover an e-mail from Russell Adams, Scott’s dad. He and Scott’s mom had returned to Baylor to attend a scholarship luncheon in Scott’s honor. He wrote to me, “I googled Scott’s name and your article popped up. It brought tears to our eyes and it blessed our hearts to know that you still remembered him some twenty years later.”

I wrote back, sharing that I had been remembering Scott for 21 years. I wrote: “Scott and I were on freshman council together and I vividly recall a particular evening when we ended up in my residence hall room talking. Although my typical disposition wasn’t vulnerable, I found it easy to share with Scott.” Some 20 years later, my article was advocating that colleges and universities “create a campus ethos that teaches all members of the community that being vulnerable with their feelings, emotions, and life circumstances is valuable behavior” (p. 22). In my memory, a conversation with Scott numbered among the first times I took that risk as an 18 year old. Now, I’m spending my days encouraging students to take that same risk.

Since this dialogue with Scott’s parents in 2011, my awareness of Scott’s goodness and intersection with my life has remained acute. I recognize that Scott’s life and death, in some small way, played a role in my “becoming,” and that it still speaks quietly in the day-to-day life I live with students on a college campus.

I thank God for Scott Russell Adams.

Who are the people you carry around with you? What indelible prints have they made on your life? I hope this edition of About Campus will share with you some new stories, and also remind you of some of your own.

With hope,
Frank Shushok, Jr.
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