For Whom the Red Carpet Rolls

Frank Shushok, Jr.
Faithful Colleagues,

If I ask you to call up a mental picture of the Academy Awards, chances are good you’ll envision dresses and speeches and personalities on the spectrum from dazzling to disappointing. Chances are even better the first thing your mind will see is the red carpet—the grand, celebrated, wildly watched and photographed entryway into Hollywood’s Dolby Theatre. Most of us never expect to attend the Academy Awards at all, much less walk down the red carpet. No, we all get that the red carpet is reserved for an exclusive few whom the rest of us watch from afar. What we don’t like to admit is that there are red carpets everywhere, including higher education.

Although it is the foundation of my own life's work and identity, I have come to wonder whether the red carpet of higher education is one onto which too few are gaining access. I know this is a vexing claim, as our field is famous for rolling out the red carpet of inclusivity. To offer just one case in point, my own institution has entered a period of intentionally planned enrollment growth. This would provide a surer step onto the carpet for some—a widening of the carpet so to speak. So I was startled recently when I heard a group of colleagues and students question this move. The conversation was not about whether the new prospects could succeed but whether this directional shift would devalue their own degrees by causing a dip in the rankings and prestige of “our” institution.

It is interesting that the human desire to be “in” often translates to initiatives to keep other people “out.” One irony is that the institutions of higher education most loudly calling society to be more inclusive are often among the most exclusive in their own makeup. These contradictions have philosophical, political, and “matters of the heart” implications that demand the kind of honest look in a mirror we frequently hope to avoid. As individuals and then as institutions, we are guilty of offering red carpet access to a few who remind us of ourselves, and we relegate thousands of others to a “red tightrope” because they are not like us. At the institutional level, if we’re not careful, resources (financial, human, or otherwise) become opportunities to grow our prestige, which is only possible if we have a strong foundation of exclusion.

But what if inclusivity is actually the first step toward the prestige of a more humane and just world? If so, the next bold move may be more focused attention on those true “others” who are outside our campus walls. Could this mean growing our enrollments, starting new campuses, and even sharing our financial resources (especially when we’re fortunate enough to have billion dollar endowments) with other colleges and universities that emphasize access? In what ways...
can we literally share our “stuff” with no expectation of “return on investment”?

Ironing out the kinks in the exclusive red carpet seems overwhelmingly and irrevocably connected to systemic forces beyond which our individual lives have influence. As soon as society becomes more inclusive of one marginalized population, new groups of people are recognized on the sideline. It’s no wonder some throw up their hands and extol, “It’s just the way the world works.” It’s also no wonder we fiercely protect our own privileges, however large or small, and we become cynical about our potential to influence the plight of justice in a deeply troubled world.

In one moment of moping recently, I shared my discouragement with my wife, Kelly, who was sitting at the kitchen table surrounded by a stack of theology books (Kelly is a United Methodist minister and was preparing for her weekly sermon). Feeling aware of my own privilege and somehow wishing I didn’t like it, I admitted my own red carpet seemed to be fraying. Kelly introduced me to Yale theologian Miroslav Volf and his book, *Exclusion and Embrace*.

Volf says there are two ways that are open to human beings. You can embrace people and open your heart to them, or you can exclude people and grow cold and distant to them. Volf says most people choose the way of exclusion because they have never experienced the way of embrace. He thinks as a society we have tricked ourselves into believing that achieving is the best way to find fulfillment—and achieving often means finding our way toward exclusive status (think prestige). But this way requires a kind of solo journey, a “look out for number one” mentality, a self-protection that necessarily requires many to be left out. We learn early that sharing costs. Embrace, I believe, says, “I am going to share my resources, my stuff, and my time, because I believe there really *is* enough to go around. I know I close myself off when I try to withhold or stash or be protective of my stuff. Sharing is the natural expression of service, and stash is the wrong kind of service for changing the world. Stash, unfortunately, is service to myself.”

I don’t believe any of us want our large, systemic, greatly watched and photographed red carpets in higher education to be marked with exclusion—and I believe, at the center of things, we truly are convinced that the way of embrace will change the world. Often, we just can’t see how to make that approach work for everybody, and we do know that exclusion works for at least a few of us. However, what if, instead of trying to secure our places among the exclusive few, we responded with simple alternatives shaped by the mentality of embrace? It may be that our hope is bound in our daily living, in the decisions we make as people even more than as institutions, day-by-day and person-to-person, that widen the red carpet one inch at a time. Maybe one day, we’ll even be able to roll up this exclusive entree altogether.

With Hope,

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