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Hashtag: Journey to Me: Self-Fulfillment Via Education

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HASHTAG: JOURNEY TO ME - SELF-FULFILLMENT VIA EDUCATION

Introduction

I did not go directly to college from high school. Forty years later, however, I decided to pursue higher education after encountering repeated difficulty securing reemployment. A momentous change was necessary. Making changes called for certain reformations on my part because the critical components I needed for self-fulfillment remained wanting – I was experiencing a digital divide! That change necessitated having a college degree. Not just having a degree but understanding technological modernity. Therefore, what is someone like me, in my sixties, without a college degree and current skills to do? What preparation did I need to make to continue living a sustainable, productive life? Education was my answer, and the use of ‘hashtag’ is metaphorical as a call for me to act.

My self-discovery was a thought-provoking journey, because a true revelation of myself could be laden with discursive emotional upheavals that would be impactful, one way or another. Action or inaction were the only options available upon reflection. Inaction perpetuates sameness, whereas action, can be an infectious contagion that propagates more action until a satisfactory point of self-fulfillment is achieved. Individuals who take an opportunity, and are satisfied, are likely to avail themselves of a future opportunity when it is presented again. But, those who forsake an opportunity and experience regret, are less likely to do so, exhibiting inaction inertia. However, when individuals forgo an opportunity and experience regret, they are motivated to avail themselves of a similar opportunity when it is presented in the future (Patrick, Lancellotti, & Hagtvedt, 2009), which is what I did.

For me to advance on my self-fulfillment journey, I realized that a drastic change was necessary, and that change necessitated having a college degree. But, how? I was nervously

hesitant because I was not prepared as I would have been directly from high school. Della Costa (2001), citing Miglietti and Strange (1998), stated that “many students who are returning to college after an extended absence are women rather than men, and many adult students of both genders are returning to school under prepared to pursue a degree or certificate program” (p. 26). Changes were needed on my part because the critical component, a college degree, for self-fulfillment remained wanting. I was compelled to recognize my ignorance of digital technology and was determined to change. When one is not performing in the actual digital environment, such as obtaining on-the-job-hands-on experience, being left behind is the resulting consequence. Technically advanced young adults are the preferred employees because they are digitally engaged and understand technological digital modernity. One New York chief executive clearly displayed age bias, when he stated repeatedly in meetings that the young people in the group 'got it' when it came to the 'new media' of the digital age, that 'things will be different around here' Creamer (2006).

Therefore, what is someone like me, in my sixties, without a college degree to do? What preparation do I make to continue living a sustainable, productive life? Education was my only answer. Therefore, “Hashtag: Journey to Me – Self-Fulfillment Via Education” is very appropriate. Also, because I did not understand what a hashtag is or its significance, an examination of “me” was not just necessary, but prudent. I found myself unencumbered with the responsibility for others (children and eldercare provider) and didn't know, not what to do with myself, but how to 'do' myself, to become someone I 'felt' good about, 'doing' something that I felt good about.

I faced the brick walls of ageism and lacked a degree, which locked me out of the arena in which I once had some measure of success. My life's journey after high school directly into

the job market, and the achievements I experienced, despite not having a degree, was not enough to afford me long-term sustainability. Having a modicum of knowledge about digital communication is not enough. Digital communication has become very complexed and integrated into every area of society and it changes so rapidly that I was passed by while functioning on the fringes. Eventually, facing the brick wall influenced my decision to pursue a higher degree, although I would be considered a non-traditional student, because of my age. I would not be deterred because I still have something to offer as a participant in this society. Digital communication is ubiquitous. As an on-the-job trained participant, I did not realize that I was being passed by. However, once I was out of the realm, I realized just how much I didn't know.

Like a tree in a forest, so had I become (invisible) in this vast digital universe. Everything was being powered digitally and was required in all communication. Learning to communicate digitally is critical just to be able to 'learn'. Plunging into studying and receiving a degree in communications and digital studies will allow greater connectivity within the dense digital forest in order maintain, marketable, relevant, competency.

My life's journey after high school took me directly into the job market. The achievements I experienced, despite not having a degree, e.g., being self-taught with the latest digital technology, which propelled me to management positions, was not enough to afford me long-term sustainability. I eventually faced the brick walls of ageism and a lack of a degree, which locked me out of the employment arena. Having a modicum of knowledge about digital communications was not enough. Digital communication rapidly advanced and was being integrated into every segment of society and I found myself passed over for not having current, marketable technological skills. This influenced my decision to pursue a degree, although I

would be considered a non-traditional student because of my age. Non-traditional paths to a degree is becoming more than an option for many. It is becoming a way of life.

My Beginning Journey

My journey began in 1952, the year I was born. Technology then was not as it is now. According to Digital Preservation Management's digital technology timeline, in 1952, Grace Hopper develops the first compiler, laying the foundations for programming languages, and IBM introduces IBM 701, the first commercial scientific computer. I mention these two specifically because they are forerunners of the digital technology we are using today. During my maturation, I discovered my learning style was kinesthetics, hands-on learning, a talent that advanced me throughout my work-life. The description of a kinesthetic learner is preferring the tactile sense, learning by doing, expressing emotions physically, and have an outgoing personality (Vincent, Ross, 2001), and learn best by engaging in hands-on activities (Kanar, 1995) is appropriately descriptive of me.

In spite of self-taught proficiency, I eventually found myself experiencing ageism, a systematic stereotyping of, and discrimination against, people (Butler, 2002), in employment. I became so adept teaching myself new software and systems that I would be designated as an official trainer for my coworkers as part of my regular duties, though not ever officially certified. It wasn't until I was absent from the workforce that my digital technological skills began to diminish. New computer technology software, apps, and systems were rapidly advancing; therefore, as I sought reemployment opportunities, the reality of my diminished technological capacity became painfully noticeable. After experiencing employment as a regional manager for a telephony company, an administrative specialist and management analyst for a government contractor; those positions ended, and I could not even get a job as an executive/administrative

assistant because I did not have a degree or certifications. I'd reached middle age. The Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967 (ADEA) protects certain applicants and employees 40 years of age and older from discrimination based on age in hiring, promotion, discharge, compensation, or terms, conditions or privileges of employment U.S. Department of Labor. However, I didn't feel the protection. I continued to experience ageism throughout my reemployment efforts. Consequently, it was decision making time! If I wanted people to take me seriously when I spoke, I needed credentials -- scholarship letters behind my name.

On the Path to Higher Education

In 2012, my wonderful middle-class salary was halted by the crash of my government contracts! Ugh! Double Ugh, Ugh!! What was I to do? For years my employers encouraged me to return to school, but the time never seemed to be right. Life kept getting in the way! Well, when life started crashing around me, and slammed on the brakes of my existing lifestyle, the time was finally right. So, I entered Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) in 2012, at the tender age of 59. Talking about being nervous!!! Let's not. At least not now.

My NOVA Story

When I decided to enter college for the first time, I was doubtful about my ability to keep up because I knew that there had been so many, many changes. I'd told myself that all I wanted to do was just pass and get my degree – even if it was with a D-average! A degree is a degree, was my attitude – primarily because I thought that I would just squeak through. Well much to my surprise, I did very well – honors even! Go figure!!!

The first day of classes was interesting. Of course, I got to most of my classes late because I could not find the rooms. Now, that is laughable because there were only two

buildings at the time. Furthermore, I did not know what the abbreviated building codes meant for each building. I soon learned that I was not the only one with that problem.

When in class, I only wanted to sit in the front, or as close to it as I could get. I am not a back-row kind of person in any respect. I like to see and hear what is going on, regardless of where I am. It just so happened that all of my classes afforded a front-of-the-room opportunity. I quickly learned that most of the very younger classmates, 18-25, preferred to sit in the back because their phones and computers were more compelling than focusing on the instructor. I noticed that the classmates that were over 40 primarily preferred to sit as close to the front as possible. Thankfully, I lived to tell another day. Graduated with honors receiving an Associate Degree in Sociology and moved on!

My UMW Walk

When graduation ended my love affair with NOVA, I was faced with the question, where do I go next – George Mason University (GMU) or the University of Mary Washington (UMW)? Everyone was encouraging me to attend GMU. Well, not really everyone, but you know how the vernacular goes. Everyone consisted of my classmates with whom I'd established good relationships and who chose to attend GMU. So, I applied, was accepted, and attended a fantastic orientation with free food! I was 99% certain that I would be attending GMU. But, that nagging 1% would not let me go. So, long story short--I am a UMW EAGLE!!!

I am very pleased to be attending UMW. From the first moment I set foot on campus after my acceptance, I met some incredible people. The staff and faculty are second to none and assisted my know-nothing-what-do-I-do-where-do-I-go-self to navigate through all of the processes and procedures, ensuring that I was not only timely with my paperwork, but explored all of the opportunities offered at UMW. I have had fabulous instructors and classmates. They

have been very helpful and understanding (given the various issues that can come with aging, but there's no need to decry the fading process of a once, shall we say beautiful mind, and let's not mention the body! at least right now).

Communication. Communication/Digital Studies (CDS) was a fairly new program at UMW. I switched my major from sociology to CDS after speaking with an admissions adviser to consider the Bachelor of Liberal Studies (BLS) program. The CDS program was a very important and influential factor in my continued educational path. Its concept sounded very interesting. I thought that it would be just the thing I needed to develop in-depth communication skills and learn more about social media. It also meshed well with my sociology interests. Another big plus was, there was no foreign language requirement, which was a very exciting and persuasive. The instructors in the CDS program offered very dynamic means of study. As communication change – the evolution of social media with the progressive development of digital interface — instructors maintained awareness, introducing and engaging students in communication techniques and current digital channels from literature, storytelling, to social media platforms.

I owe my excitement for the CDS program to the instructors. That is probably because the instructors were out of the box thinkers and challenged their students to be the same. As an example, the DS101 class was divided into five groups and each group was told to develop a Statement of [class] Values. That was an awesome exercise. It revealed similarities, differences, and the importance that each student placed on specific values. We discussed all values and combined them as the basis of class interaction. Why not be an out of the box thinker? Since the academic environment prepares one for the work environment, thinking outside of the box is critical because all possibilities should be considered for optimum accuracy. I received an

enlightened discursive view of communication. I gained more of a comprehensive understanding of the art of communication through research and digital rhetoric courses.

Research, Research, and More Research. I did not particularly enjoy the research component of my core classes. What was my hypothesis? What was I trying to prove? How was I going to prove it (methodology)? Conducting quantitative and qualitative research has left an indelible effect upon me -- quantitative had to do more with quantifiable measurements (data collection/coding/surveys) and qualitative had more to do with observation (patterns/methods/participant interviews or focus groups) -- the amount of work that was involved was mountainous. I learned that each personal assertion must be supported by another scholar's work, cited properly using APA citation. Citing scholarly work, that was citing someone else, was sometimes problematic because it must be written a specific way. I was not always sure that my citations were correct and that cause me a certain amount of consternation. I found conducting research via the internet to be very accommodating. The internet has become an everyday communication tool with a variety of potential multiple uses in research (Ahern, 2013). I'd finally reached a point of understanding research, so, in that regard, mission accomplished.

Learning the Art of Digital Rhetoric. Prior to learning about rhetoric, my use and understanding of the term was in a pejorative sense as it was with a large segment of the general public, of which they tended to use the word rhetoric stylistically, depicting feign and manipulative arguments. (Eyman, 2015). Aristotle established rhetoric as the art of persuasion in speaking and writing employing three main forms -- ethos, logos, and pathos. This definition held until modern digital communication emerged. Eyman, referencing Sullivan and Porter (1993), explained that digital rhetoric is hard to define because defining a concept is a limiting activity

when attempting to establish a common meaning. He further contended that digital rhetoric is not yet established as a field because it's in its infancy, compared to the long held Aristotelian definition, modern approaches to rhetoric go far beyond Aristotle's 'art of persuasion' in terms of theoretical complexity (2013).

Based on what I have learned from this course, I would argue that the power of rhetoric as a tool of persuasion and informing remains indispensable; however, digital technology has given greater tools for rapid dissemination of information and galvanization of many into action, such as hashtag activism; therefore, digital technology as a medium of persuasive discourse contributes to the continuing search for a working definition of rhetoric within the community of rhetoricians. The question remains in my mind, is this a new form of rhetoric, or just a new mode of disseminating rhetoric?

Closing My Digital Divide.

Pursuing CDS was very satisfying; however, the one course that gave me the most angst was Digital Studies 101 (DS101). This class caused me to hyperventilate when I learned that I had to set-up a class blog and sign-up on something called #SLACK! A blog?! I didn't know what a blog was, much less how to blog! What in the world is a #SLACK? I thought. What does it do, and why do we need it? I soon learned that #SLACK is an interactive program for sharing information. Then, I also had to sign up for HYPOTHES.IS?! What?!?!?! To do what? Annotate?!? Collaboratively?!? Online?!? ARE YOU KIDDING ME?!?! I'm screaming within. At this point, I am mentally (and somewhat physically, well a little anyway) hyperventilating throughout this beginner's process. However, I did learn the systems and enjoyed using them! Remember the fading process.

Well, because I am the least technical person anyone would ever want to know, I began to second guess myself and asked, “Why am I doing this? Why do I need this stress? What good is this going to do me in the long run? Hmm. The long run. At my age I don’t have much longer or farther to run!” But then, I remembered why I’m in college and what I’d hoped to achieve. My excitement for learning returned to my pitiful, frightened mind. I wanted to take this class because of this very reason – I didn’t know anything about technology/social media and I wanted to be more technically and social media savvy. I was a communication major and I didn’t even Tweet! (Or is it Twit?) That’s right. No tweet/twit, Instagram, Flickr, or the rest. BUT! I did have a Facebook page, thanks to my children. I only view Facebook, for the most part, when I’m told to look for something they have posted.

Digital Studies 101 (DS 101). Social media. Modern technology. I could ask, who knew, but that would make me look more foolish because evidently most people knew. Those of the millennial, y, and z generations definitely have an advantage over us baby boomers. Technological history consists of four factors: awareness, knowledge, access, and technological capacity of the user’s social collective (Carlson & Isaacs, 2018). I was able to benefit from my ‘forced’ digital lessons because I advanced in all four areas. I was able to successfully complete a video parodying assigned reading material for the DS101 class which I entered into UMW’s Digital Knowledge Showcase, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aiDNa_e3ioI&t=1s. I successfully, completed my Digital Approaches to Fine Arts-104’s final project with an emotional revelation of my experience in this class. I gave quite a bit of consideration to how my emotional roller coaster ride in this experience could best be reflected. There are several images available representing various emotions and selecting the optimal ones took quite a bit of consideration.

Digital Art 104. I presented my Photoshop (PS) project as I did because I struggled with concept and creativity in my projects. Therefore, I decided to showcase my growth by presenting various emotions and using tools such as [accurate] scanning and batch cropping; adding text; opening in bridge and inserting documents in layers; adding, rasterizing and merging text with layers; and, embedding a layer that is not part of the original document, such as my head shot. Completing this final project took longer than I'd hoped because I made quite a few errors along the way. However, it was, overall, quite a learning experience. <http://jrileydigiart.beu-bme.org/blog/posts/final-project/>.

Social Media Creative Project. My social media class was quite an eye opener. I learned so much about social media platforms and their best appropriate usage through a Hootsuite application, where each student could receive certification upon completion of a short test. The course also demanded that each student conduct a Twitter and Instagram project and post said project on the UMW Student account. I'd tried to learn how to use Twitter and Instagram unsuccessfully for a few weeks. Eventually, success! I finally posted six tweets, six retweets, and three Instagram posts. For me that was amazing! I eventually learned that the most simple and important part of the project was to sign out of my personal Twitter and Instagram accounts, previously set-up for me in a prior semester by a classmate for a different project, then, log into UMW Students. That may be laughable, but when you don't know, you don't know!

Conclusion

Being on this CDS path of education has been a God-send to me. A specific void has been filled, not in my life as a whole, but in my ability to effectively communicate my capability. That void was a feeling of education inadequacy. Associating with collegiate individuals and not having the ability to express myself as they did or be taken seriously by potential employers

because of an educational deficiency, made me feel insufficient. I started questioning myself and my ability in certain areas. I felt a little out of sorts, as though life on this earth was passing me by. I repeatedly experienced difficulty effectively discussing current events containing technical and digital jargon because I lacked understanding, such as hashtag anything. Not knowing and understanding the meaning of hashtag, or the use of the pound/number sign (#) was enough to know that there was a serious insufficiency in my life.

After caring for so many others most of my life, which I thoroughly enjoyed, I knew that it was time for me to focus on myself. If I wanted to move forward in my hopes, I knew that I needed to make a change, a change not just for change sake, but a change that would allow me to know myself better, as well as feel accomplished. Education as a communication scholar, has done just that for me.

As a communication scholar at UMW, I've learned so many important lessons. One lesson significantly impactful was a speech given by my digital seminar professor, Dr. E. Johnson-Young (2018) at my Lambda Pi Eta honors induction ceremony. It was not only encouraging, it encapsulated the overall significance of our responsibility as communication scholars, of which I share the following excerpt, "What we do requires hard work—critical thinking, an understanding of culture and cultural implications, knowing how to use new technologies and examine it, a sound hold on a variety of research methodologies—and the list could go on...So what else can we do with this knowledge in our discipline and others, outside of academia? Yes, we can reach out in interdisciplinary ways—but not just in research. We (and this includes all of you), can pair up with other disciplines for community and public outreach... where people from the "hard" sciences and communication professionals and scholars come together to try to communicate relevant issues to the public in a casual setting...but it's also

about communicating these to non-academics and in friendly environments, which is where we can also fit in.” This speech was significantly impactful upon me because it gave me a fuller overview of the importance of, and relationship to, all other disciplines, because they all need effective communication specialists who construct and convey complex information to the public, business, and government entities.

Not only do I feel accomplished, graduating at the age of 66, but I’ve developed a better understanding of the importance of communication and digital studies, and how influential such scholars are to other disciplines, and their effect upon the general population as a whole. Confronting adversity, with determined overcoming action, creates amazing opportunities to be equipped for expansion within the forest despite its density. To give up should not be an option, but to ‘forward ever’ on a path of knowledge, striving to achieve great accomplishments, should be the goal. Be you! Believe entirely in not giving up! Run the race and finish the course because there is a prize at the end. My educational journey has not been for naught. By God’s grace, with great help from classmates and instructors, the mission of my journey has been accomplished. Hashtag: Journey to me – Self-fulfillment Via Education can now be written with understanding as #journeytome, #selffulfillmentviaeducation, #iansweredthecalltoact, and #ThankYouLord!

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