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The Transformative Power of Education: Engaging the Minds, Hearts, and Hands of the Next Generation of Leaders

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Introduction: Humble Beginnings

As a product of the education system of a former British colony in the West Indies, I came from humble beginnings, which oddly enough made me very rich in my self-worth; not once in my childhood did I feel poor. My family foundation was strong. I have a mother who achieved so much with an eighth-grade education, who believed that making an investment in her children would pay dividends. I know she is sitting proudly in the winter of her life as she looks in the rearview mirror at her handiwork and her own life's achievements manifested through her offsprings. My dad is gone now, has been for many years, and was taken too soon, but left an indelible mark on us. The combination of his strength and determination along with grit and self-confidence are strong markers in our DNA.

My journey into academia began many years ago. I was primed in my youth after having grown up in a place that was underdeveloped: no electricity until I graduated high school. School was a beacon, and the weekly library van was a much-anticipated event

for my siblings and I. Reading was the best vacation. It took me away from the drudgery of the country lifestyle. While my friends were out enjoying themselves, I was transported to fictional places, reading in the trees with the light of the sun or with a flashlight under the covers at night. In high school, I got in trouble for spending too much time in the library and frequently missing the chartered car home.

I always found myself in the role of teaching and sharing knowledge. Teaching Sunday School, leading church when the Priest didn't show up for our small Anglican congregation, and even running tutorials for my peers to assist them in completing homework and preparing for the common entrance exam.

After graduating high school at 16 years old, I ventured away from the comforts of home to discover the world I had read so much about. To the chagrin of my parents, I decided to start college early, no extended high school for me! There began the next phase of my educational journey at the College of Art, Science & Technology (CAST) (now known as UTECH) in the capital city of Kingston, Jamaica, and I was ready for it.

I seemed mature and would hang out mostly with the senior class, popular thanks to my gait and confidence, but more so, due to my superior preparation and academic prowess. I breezed my way through the equivalent of an Associate's Degree in Institutional Management.

This education equipped me to teach at the high-school level, which I did for a few years, teaching Home Economics at Queens High School in St. Andrew in Jamaica. While there, I started my tenure at the University of the West Indies on a part-time basis with the goal of obtaining my BS degree in Hotel Management.

My Next Chapter

Working full time and studying was no easy feat; balancing personal and professional plus academics meant a challenge to my quality of life, but it was worthwhile. Heading off to the Bahamas to concentrate on my degree was a turning point. With my scholarship in hand and intentionality to become something greater, I dove into my studies with fervor. There, I made lifelong friends and learned about the business of Hospitality. I was hooked; line, and sinker!

Upon completion, after amassing a wealth of industry experiences and several life lessons, I returned home to pay the government back for the Ewen Pringle Tourism scholarship I received. I was bonded: no free lunch, even in Jamaica! I spent a few years working in the field gathering valuable managerial experience with various

assignments at the Jamaica Tourist Board and National Hotel properties. Fast forward to... migration to a foreign land.”

I thought that to set myself apart, a graduate degree from the US would give me a qualifying edge. However, my foreign degree from Jamaica was frowned upon by those who weren't knowledgeable enough to understand the value. It spurred me on even more when my supervisor and “mentor,” a Black female who had her Master's degree, discouraged me from moving forward with the MBA, making it harder to maintain my employment. This hindrance only increased by determination. Despite the added juggling act of balancing school, work, and family obligations, I would not be deterred from completing my Master's degree.

The decision to continue my studies and to pursue a doctoral degree came after much consideration. I eventually realized that I needed to go the extra distance if I were to remain in education and secure my place in the upper echelon at a quality institution. Teaching at the instructor level with a full course load and managing a household with a teenage daughter, while also pursuing the doctoral degree was the ultimate challenge. Adding additional pressure, the wages were paltry; my bid for tuition reimbursement from the college was denied by a Black female which seems entirely contrary to what one would have expected.

It has taken grit and determination to overcome the roadblocks but I have always been persistent. As a person who strives for excellence and quality, I also understood that self-investment would pay dividends in the long term, and it has. I have enjoyed working in academia and the benefits that come along with it: nine months on, summers off, sabbaticals, collaborating and networking with colleagues from across the globe, adding to the body of knowledge, being an influencer in the industry, contributing to the development of young minds, and exploring the world. I would do it all over again!

When I started teaching almost thirty years ago, however, I did not envision that I would have made it this far; I had my sights set on other things. I quickly realized a sufficiently engaged “mind” was not enough: I had to engage my head, heart, and hands to remain central to the mission of educating the next generation of leaders. I quickly grew to understand the dynamics that would lead to mutual success. The relationship-building that meant breaking down barriers and establishing trust on both sides was critical. I realized that I had to make myself available to students by being fully present, both emotionally and physically. As a college professor, I see my role as that of a facilitator of knowledge, enabling students to reach their goals and achieve their highest potential. A holistic approach to excellence in education is necessary to foster a culture of engagement that adds value and lays the foundation for a sustainable future.

Academics have the opportunity and power to impact lives, to influence the future through our students who are, in some ways, an extension of ourselves. They are a mirror of us and, at the same time, they are a reflection of the academy. We are interconnected. This responsibility should be at the forefront of our minds as we educate students, one at a time. The principles of research will develop the culture of knowledge and enhance future directions for the experience economy. In sharing research, an institution is able to elevate its visibility and forge cooperative partnerships with hospitality organizations. Through the sharing of research, institutions can garner funding to support programs and provide scholarships, attract elite scholars, and bolster their role in shaping the future.

I have mentored thousands of students over the years. I challenged them to reach higher, think harder, and seize the opportunities that they may have missed otherwise. That is the legacy of teaching that lives on forever. The manifestation of their goals and lifelong aspirations are wrapped up in my own, and in the end, the self-gratification is a result of the multitudes of efforts and energy that we put into it.

Teaching on the university level is an extremely fulfilling career of service, and the benefits are sometimes understated. I have traveled the world on this educational journey, often with students in tow, seeing their curiosity, and watching them grow before my very eyes. I believe that the four walls of a classroom are often too confining; the world outside offers an abundance of unlimited possibilities.

That is not to say one won't encounter barriers along the way. I happened into Hospitality academia at a time when inequality and a lack of diversity ran rampant and plagued our industry. The importance of DEI is evolving and slowly gaining ground in the Hospitality industry. As one of the founding committee members of this P.O.C. Ph.D. Pathway Program in Hospitality and Tourism, along with like-minded academics, we are determined to increase diversity in Hospitality academia by actively recruiting minority students into classrooms on both sides of the table: a virtuous cycle of more students and professors from underrepresented groups. After all, college is a microcosm of the world we live in.

It is our obligation to create a succession plan, to reach back and pull each other up. Representation is needed from every perspective. As lifelong learners, we are students of the trade. We must pass the baton to our youth and continue to grow the Hospitality discipline globally as we step into a future of both uncertainty and promise.

Thanks to those who hold a special place in my life as mentors, advisors, and supporters on this journey. You know who you are; I hope I have made you proud. Namaste!