

On Life and Meaning

MARK PERES

Episode 94 – Clarence Armbrister – A Nurturing Place

Blue Ocean Shift

And now a personal word,

I've been to the Johnson C. Smith University campus many times. It is just a few blocks from where I teach at Johnson & Wales University. My campus is on Trade Street which turns into Beatties Ford Road where Johnson C. Smith University sits high on a ridge overlooking the City of Charlotte. Our two campuses often get confused. It's the name, of course. What are the odds of having two completely independent universities with the first name Johnson being blocks apart? The two universities have other things in common: our student body is roughly the same size of between 1600 and 2000 students. Our two campuses serve many students from the same background: first-generation young women and men from challenged socioeconomic circumstances. The majority of students on both our campuses are students of color. Faculty and staff on both campuses have the privilege of helping change lives.

There are many differences between the two institutions – history, mission, curriculum, programs – but that's a tale for another day.

I interviewed Clarence Armbrister in his office in Biddle Memorial Hall. The building is the oldest on the JCSU campus. The stone and brick and wood have the weight and texture of time. The steps into the building are indented and worn. Inside are plaques of names of men who served during the two world wars. A small and narrow elevator took me to the 4th floor that opened to a spacious hallway with heavy furniture on Oriental rugs. I spoke with President Armbrister in his ceremonial office appointed with a beautiful desk and conference table and seating areas that invited conversation. His working office was behind a door. That room had a small desk cluttered with papers. He had photographs of family and friends on the wall, including one of President Obama shaking hands with Mayor Michael Nutter of Philadelphia. He then closed the door to his working office, and we returned to his ceremonial office where we talked seated in comfortable chairs.

President Armbrister is one year into the job of guiding Johnson C. Smith University into the third decade of the 21st century. He is leading a university that was founded to educate freed slaves after the Civil War. That's 152 years of history in between. Most of those years were years of racial segregation. Today the university is forging a path in an age of integration.

As President Armbrister talked about his career in law and public service and education, I imagined being a college president. I've thought about it many times. It takes a certain set of skills, intellectual and pragmatic, visionary and administrative, personable and executive, to lead academics, students and staff. It's a noble enterprise to lead a college. Raising money, building buildings, charming alumni, persuading faculty, inspiring learners. A college president embodies the culture and purpose of the place.

On a good day I can see myself doing what college presidents do. I think I would be particularly good assessing and recruiting talent. But there is a reason I haven't pursued academic administration, at least the work of department chairs and deans: I don't like managing people or being managed, I don't like charts and emails and graphs, I'm not particularly fond of goals and objectives and metrics, I don't like forms or databases or reports, only a few meetings interest me, and I still schedule my day using a paper calendar. I would love being a college president, but I wouldn't love all the tasks that would be required of me to get or keep the job.

The best part of the work I do on campus is learning something new and sharing it with students who are prepared and ready to learn. The challenge and reward of my work is engaging students who are not always prepared and ready to learn and inspiring them to lead lives of meaning and purpose. Leading students to insight is good. Learning from them is even better.

But if I were a college president, and good at it, then there might be something as good as interacting with students. I would be thrilled by the strategic work of moving a historic institution forward. That is the charge that President Armbrister has leading Johnson C. Smith University. The work can be technical and dimensional: improving retention and graduation rates, developing programs and support for coursework, helping students emotionally and intellectually persist, and solving the cost and value equation of earning a degree. It requires asking deep questions and involving every department of the enterprise. It requires facing daunting realities. The work can shift the university from a red ocean to a blue ocean. From a place that is stressed to one that is vast in possibility. It can take an institution into spaces not in existence today. President Armbrister is bringing his life experience and skills to the task.

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