



THE PROMISE OF OHIO UNIVERSITY: DIVINE INTERRUPTIONS

By

Wendy Merb-Brown

Director, Learning Communities Programs

February 6, 2009

Interruptions. Recently I began contemplating the role of interruptions in the course of my work. I've been trying to figure out how to get more accomplished in the 24-hour period we call our days. One of my theories was that the many interruptions that I face prevent me from staying focused and distract me in the pursuit of accomplishing tasks. When I get on a roll with my work, interruptions stop my momentum. If I could only live and work in an isolated environment, I would be so much more productive! Or is there a greater purpose to those interruptions?

Deciding that my theory required greater thought, I first remembered my over thirteen years of work in the residence halls at Ohio University. While many of my responsibilities were administrative in nature, the majority of my job centered on getting students (including student staff) involved in our campus. Most of what I recall spending my time doing *were* interruptions of one sort or another. Whether a student had a pressing need (which took precedence over paperwork) or a problem needed to be solved *quickly* (such as a hot water leak,) I had to put something on hold to deal with the situation. If I hadn't been interrupted, would I have gotten to know the custodians as well, or benefited from the relationships that resulted from working with our maintenance staff?

One day five years ago, our office was busy with phone calls and personal visits from anxious incoming students and their parents. The classified staff members were occupied answering questions about our campus and I stopped what I was doing to assist. That basically means I answered the phone. On that specific day, I answered a call from Katie, an incoming student who had questions and concerns about her transition to Ohio University. She had several exceptional characteristics that required our conversation to go longer than what was typical. After we spoke, I offered to treat her to lunch once she settled into her routine on campus. I have often made this offer but not all students have taken the opportunity. Katie called me within a few weeks of the beginning of her first fall quarter and we began a connection that continued through the completion of her graduate degree in education last year. Not only has Katie continued to keep in contact with me, but she has encouraged her younger brother to participate in a learning community program.

About ten years ago, while attempting to clear the clutter from my desk, I opened a letter requesting my involvement in an Administrative Senate committee. I took a few minutes and filled out the form to become involved. Through that committee involvement, I was asked to run for a senate seat and have been intimately involved in the organization ever since. That minor interruption of filling out a form has allowed me to build relationships with others across our campus and more importantly, learn about issues of relevance to our campus community. If I hadn't stopped my flow of work for that moment, I might not have had the opportunity to serve on campus-wide committees. Nor would I have met so many amazing faculty, staff, and students.

The learning communities have had great impact on our campus because of these relationships. Some of our learning communities began as a result of my working with a colleague who had an idea about how to help his or her students learn. The connections that I have made have allowed me to ask questions, explore options, and grow in ways I might not have thought possible. The learning communities themselves are opportunities for students to closely interact with one another as well as our faculty and staff, which allow those students to develop richer, lasting connections to our campus. By knowing others in their classes, students can study together and ask questions of one another to clarify the knowledge they are acquiring. Students' peers play a critical role in getting them involved in activities and organizations. We have been able to connect hundreds of faculty and staff to the students in a personal, intentional way. These connections are invaluable in assisting our new students in their transition to our educational community.

So many of the interruptions I experience relate to questions *to* me, but also responses to questions I have posed. I realize that I am often soliciting input from people in Housing, the Registrar's Office, Admissions, Communications and Marketing, our various colleges, and most recently in the Finance divisions. So am I guilty of interrupting those who help me? Upon greater reflection, would my work be accomplished if I *didn't* have those opportunities to ask questions? I know that the questions from Dave in IT regarding our online learning community application have resulted in a much more effective application than if he had taken my request and simply implemented it. His knowledge of what can be accomplished with technology far surpasses my own and I am smart enough to allow those with expertise to do their jobs without my interference. His answers to my questions have allowed me to address student inquiries more thoroughly and to have a better understanding of the possibilities of technology. Questions have an essential role in learning...whether from others or from me.

Most of the students with whom I had a close connection are actually those who "interrupted" me with a question or concern. Is this a problem or an opportunity? There is a greater purpose in the interruptions. Just the other day I received a phone call from a former student who graduated with his undergraduate degree from Ohio University in 1999. He was attempting to find an appropriate gift to express his gratitude to a faculty member for her support of his graduate

school application and wanted my perspective. I not only was given the opportunity to reconnect with Nathan, but gained an appreciation for his mentor's assistance, an "interruption" that affirmed what we at Ohio University are about...relationships with our students.

One of my mentors had a solution to interruptions in his day. He would expect the unexpected, which I always thought made no sense since the word unexpected itself implies that you can't plan for it. Anyway, he would arrange his schedule in such a way that if a person needed his assistance (and we did regularly), he could drop what he was doing and focus on our needs. As a supervisor, Frank realized that he could help us be better at our work if he gave us the opportunity to meet with him as needed. By teaching us to address the minor concerns, he prevented greater problems from occurring.

So if I plan for interruptions, I might be more productive. I can do that by realizing that most of my phone calls occur at certain times of the day and that students rarely seek my assistance early in the morning. Obviously, there are times when I need to learn to shut my door and work in isolation, or not answer the e-mail "ding," or forward my phone to voice mail. I am sure that prioritizing my "to do" list helps with that. But more often than not, I have found that I enjoy the breaks in my day. I see phone calls, e-mails, and especially people stopping by my office as opportunities for connections and collaborations. We all have different working styles and I have definitely recognized that I am not a person who can work in isolation, which fits with my job.

No interruptions. I imagine a day where I am working at my desk, nobody "dropping by," without unexpected phone calls or e-mails. Meetings begin at the exact time they are scheduled – and they are all scheduled – with everyone involved attentive to the tasks at hand. On second thought, it sounds pretty boring. Maybe the problem is with "disruptions," which has a negative connotation? The interruptions more often than not are our work. As a staff member at Ohio University, I understand that every student and every colleague is different, yet important, and every interaction I have with them allows me to learn more about their needs and experiences.

Please excuse me while I answer the phone...