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Honoring the Whole Person: Indigenous Wisdom and University Honors Programs

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Abstract: As part of the *National Collegiate Honors Council's* (2022) collection of essays about the value of honors to its graduates (1967–2019), the author reflects on the personal and professional impacts of the honors experience.

Keywords: higher education—honors programs & colleges; intercultural education; California State Polytechnic University, Pomona (CA)—The Kellogg Honors College

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Growing up in “Garbage City” on the outskirts of Cairo left little hope for a better life. Members of indigenous communities of Upper Egypt had been forcibly relocated to this landfill by the Egyptian government decades before my birth. These tribal communities were known in Egyptian culture as “the black savages” and “the trashy ones.” My parents were compassionate people of little means, and although rummaging through mountains of trash for food and shelter was often life-threatening, I was happy. Later I would come to learn that my “parents” were really my grandparents and that my real parents had left me shortly after my birth. Since then, my life has been a series of rejections, with rare life-altering exceptions. As a child from Garbage City, I suffered the double stigma of being a “savage” and living in abject poverty. People either avoided us because they considered us ignorant or they abused us because they considered us diseased. Indeed, life itself seems to have objected to my existence, having nearly died from malnutrition three times prior to turning five.

Some light through the darkness appeared when ranchers from Upper Egypt came to recruit homeless children for free labor. Al Salam Ranch lived up to its name, *Peace*, for it was where I first encountered plants and animals, beings who did not see me as ignorant or diseased. While other workers ostracized me because of my indigenous heritage, the rancher invited me to stay year-round because he noticed my dedication and care for the land. It was in this peaceful paradise that my love and curiosity for the natural world grew. When a humanitarian group came to our village, I met an older couple who would later become my adoptive parents. Our connection was rooted in our indigenous identity, my father being Lakota and my mother being a descendant of Black Seminoles. My parents' ranch at Standing Rock doubled as a shelter for humans and animals that had experienced abuse or neglect. While others in my Tribe treated me as a stranger and a half-breed, my parents affirmed their trust in me by asking me to manage the ranch and carry on their humanitarian work. It was in this haven that my passion for agriculture and concern for the vulnerable came to the forefront of my life's work.

Perhaps I was never destined to be an honors student, or so the rejection letter from the Kellogg Honors College seemed to imply. It made me question whether I belonged at the university at all. How could this be? I was an honors graduate from my community college, I had received the Student of Distinction Award, which was the most prestigious award on campus, and I had received all the highest awards from my academic department. I emailed the Honors Director, Suketu Bhavsar, and asked him what my weaknesses were so that I might improve as a scholar. Despite his incredible workload, he expressed confusion as to why I was rejected and invited me to meet with him. He informed me that my essay responses on the application fell below the 600-word limit and the committee therefore rejected me. I wondered, had they seen me work on this application after a 12-hour workday on the farm, working under candlelight in the tent I slept in at the time, would they have understood why I failed to read the instructions? Dr. Bhavsar, however, was confused because, to his mind, I had fully answered the questions without verbosity, which to him was the mark of a good scholar.

Like few that came before him, Dr. Bhavsar demonstrated that virtue that eludes most of us but is apparent throughout the natural world: wisdom. He was able to peer through institutional exclusionary "standards" to see my humanity, my potential, and the inscrutable journey that had brought me to his doorstep. Since then, this beloved mentor and I have shared many adventures and conversations, experiences that have enhanced my life's journey in

ways I am still discovering. If honors programs are going to be anything, they must be places where wisdom is the highest value. Are we pursuing the wisdom to see each other as whole beings, to become people worthy of honor, or are we cogs in the wheel of institutions that have prided themselves on whom they exclude rather than whom they include? Wisdom, seated on the throne of compassion, those are the people who shine a light in an otherwise dark world.

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