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Hold Your Head High

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In the spirit of sisterhood, I address this essay to young female scholars and teachers who will take leadership positions in their institutions. I teach at Macalester College, a liberal arts college in Saint Paul, Minnesota. I chaired the Department of Asian Languages and Cultures (which started out as the Japanese Language Program) at my institution from 1995 till 2015. Here is my story.

In the Beginning

My mother did not go to a four-year college and did not have a professional career, but she brought me up as a feminist. Most heterosexual women I know in my private life regardless of nationality and cultural background put their partners' (men's) needs before theirs. My mother is one of a very few who doesn't. When I was growing up, she often told me I should not get married until I was at least thirty. She herself married young (she was twenty-one) and lived with a difficult and conservative mother-in-law (my grandmother) who insisted on total control of every aspect of their family life. My mother tried to rebel against Grandma's reign, but she could only do so much in a provincial town in Shōwa Japan, where the rights of daughters-in-law did not really count. When she was young, she loved art but was not able to go to art school because her family could not afford it. So, after Grandma passed away, she earned a junior college degree in art by doing a correspondence course. She is now thriving as an amateur sculptor and painter. Her life undoubtedly affected my thinking as I grew up.

My father is politically liberal and socially conservative. I say the latter because he hampered my mother's freedom. For example, he told her that she could not start the junior college correspondence course when their kids were young because the course required her to be away from home for an extended period of time. However, he never inhibited me from doing anything, and he encouraged me to go abroad during college (a huge

double standard, I know). He also instilled in me a love of writing (he still writes our family newsletter at the age of eighty-six) and books (he introduced me to *Anne of Green Gables* and *The Diary of Anne Frank*), and was a role model as a leader and public speaker (he volunteered to lead the PTA at my schools for multiple years).

Professionally, my journey to my current position started when I met a great English teacher at my local public high school in Niigata. While my other high school teachers came across as just doing their job—doing the bare minimum—to earn a salary, Honma sensei gave his all. He taught English passionately, gracefully, and comprehensively, and delighted in lecturing on the finer points of English grammar and pronunciation (in much greater detail than what regional high school kids needed to pass their college entrance exams). Plus, he suffered no fools. His intensity, poise, and professionalism had a powerful impact on me and inspired me to pursue studying English in college. At that time, my future career goal was to teach English, like him, in a Japanese high school not too far from my parents' home.

My plans changed in college. I got to know my American teachers, David and Pat, who introduced me to other Americans and Canadians living near the college. These new friends asked me to teach them Japanese, which opened my eyes to another career possibility. I found the teaching of Japanese to be much more challenging and thus interesting than teaching English, because I did not really know how to do it. I also studied in England during the summer break of my junior year, and participated in a workshop on internationalism with Thai and Japanese students in my senior year. All of these experiences made me want to see the world after college and possibly teach Japanese language abroad someday.

When I had finished my undergraduate degree, the Rotary Foundation's Ambassadorial Scholarship brought me to the University of Minnesota. After a year, I applied to graduate school and started teaching Japanese as a teaching assistant. I *loved* teaching Japanese! While in graduate school, I learned about Macalester College, its small classes, progressive students, emphasis on internationalism, and charming campus. I thought teaching there would be my dream job. I requested an informational interview with two professors, who later offered me a class to teach. I started teaching there as a part-time faculty member while still in graduate school. A few years later, when Macalester announced a search for the chair of its Japanese Language Program, I hesitated to apply because I certainly did not intend to chair a department at such an early

stage of my career. However, several senior faculty members I had come to know at the college encouraged me to apply. They said they expected to open a second tenure-track position the following year, and they might be able to convince the administration to hire both a senior faculty member as the chair and me as an assistant professor during the current search. So that is what happened. My chair and I were hired at the same time. I was ecstatic. Little did I know then that my chair would leave after only a year and I would have to start leading the Japanese Language Program in my second year on the tenure track.

Being the Chair

I thus landed my dream job, but with hugely added responsibilities. In order to get tenured, I obviously needed to teach classes well and publish my research. At the same time, I had to keep the fledgling Japanese Language Program running. In addition, I started a family. All of these goals and needs clashed with each other and competed for my time. For example, during my pre-tenure sabbatical leave, I had to search for a tenure-track replacement of the senior faculty member who had left, while I was also caring for my first-born, who seemed to pass through every possible childhood illness that year. I was always pulled in different directions and especially torn between the need to get my research done and the perceived societal pressure to be an attentive mother.

At that time, I did not possess a grand vision for my program because I was not at all prepared to be the chair. My first priority was to get tenured so that I could discuss having a vision from a stable perch. During these early years, it was not clear whether or not the Japanese Language Program was going to continue to exist at my institution. In chairs' meetings, several of my senior colleagues often mused about the fate of my program, rather insensitively, in front of me. These men would casually say things such as, "We should introduce Chinese language classes because China's going to be a great economic power, and then we could get rid of Japanese. We don't need two Asian languages, do we?" I played deaf and focused on my research. I survived, and so did my program.

I received tenure, and I ended up chairing my program for twenty years because nobody else got tenured in that time. During most of those years, the upper administration was either indifferent or hostile towards my program, as well as towards other language and culture departments. Although my circumstances were a bit peculiar, I believe it is unfortunately quite common for college/university administrations in the

United States to not be supportive of Japanese language education. Thus, the following story of my program's survival and eventual triumph may be of interest to you and readers in general.

By the time I got tenured, I had ideas of what the future program should look like. I now had "a vision." The Japanese Language Program at that time was staffed with three full-time faculty (one non-tenure track and two tenured/tenure-track) who taught Japanese language and culture courses. In addition, we had received some funding to start Chinese language courses, and thus housed two part-time faculty who taught Chinese. We offered a Japanese minor but not a major. I wanted the program to become a full-fledged department with three full-time faculty for Chinese and three full-time faculty for Japanese, and to offer a major and minor in both Chinese and Japanese. The chance to take a step towards this ideal came during my most difficult year as the chair, when an administrator I will call Bill (a pseudonym) tried to restructure the Japanese Language Program.

Bill's idea was to take the non-tenure track position from the Japanese side of the program and give it to the Chinese side. The college would provide another full-time Chinese instructor position. Then, this new structure, which would be called the Department of Asian Studies, would have two full-time positions in Chinese and two in Japanese. The department would offer an Asian Studies major in which students would choose either the Chinese or the Japanese track. This plan, which might have looked reasonable to outsiders, did not at all please me, the other members of the program, or the members of the Asian Studies Steering Committee (we already offered an interdisciplinary Asian Studies major). It did not make sense to us to reduce the number of instructors in Japanese when we had received a grant to start Chinese on the basis of the strength of our Japanese curriculum. Also, practically speaking, having only two positions in each language would have meant that the department would offer only language courses (which had healthy enrollments) and no culture courses. The curriculum would be completely diluted, and we would end up with a mediocre Japanese program and a mediocre Chinese program.

Therefore, we proposed an alternative plan in which the new Department of Asian Languages and Cultures would house three faculty in Japanese and two faculty in Chinese (the college had already promised one; another would be funded with a grant) and would offer a Japanese major. I explained the merits of our alternative plan in email messages sent

to all the faculty. My colleagues and I campaigned for our position intensely and extensively. We were able to more or less count on the support of our colleagues in the Humanities, Fine Arts, and Social Sciences, from which the Asian Studies Steering Committee members came. The unknowns were the Natural Sciences and Mathematics departments (Bill was a scientist). I went door to door to visit each one of my science and math colleagues in their offices and to explain our plan. Some of them were surprised to see me in their building. Most of them welcomed me and listened to my arguments with an open mind.

On the day of the all faculty meeting, Bill presented his idea first, followed by me and my two Asian Studies colleagues. That was the first time I took the podium at a faculty meeting. I was nervous but somewhat optimistic. After our presentations, faculty in the audience spoke. One after another expressed support for our position. It was gratifying to hear our colleagues from the Natural Sciences departments speak on our behalf. When the time came for a hand vote, we won by a landslide. This is how my department was established and the Japanese major was launched. A few years later, Bill wrote me an email. He said he had recently seen the high number of Japanese majors in the college's institutional report, that it was a wonderful testament to me and my colleagues that we had built such a successful program, and that he had been wrong to try to push for a reduction in the Japanese language faculty. I must admit that I was thrilled to receive this message, and I appreciated his candor.

Since then, our department has added tenure-track positions to the Chinese side and started offering a Chinese major and minor. It is no longer a fledgling program but a well-established department.

Advice to Future Female Leaders

First and foremost, seek older female mentors and friends on campus. If they are people of color or immigrant/international faculty, all the better. Find the people who will empathize and laugh with you about the unnerving or funny encounters with sexism and racism that you are likely to have. Listen when they share the obstacles they faced, the disappointments they endured, and the strategies they developed. I give this advice emphatically partly because when I was young, I had not one but two chances to develop such relationships, and I failed to do so.

Juanita was a charismatic Spanish instructor from Mexico, who loved literature and art and cared deeply about the underprivileged. She was a well-known figure on campus with many friends in different departments.

She took a liking to me and invited me to dinners and poetry readings. Mahnaz was a fashionable Iranian sociologist who wrote about race, ethnicity, immigration, and family. She was a bit reclusive, but we hit it off and often went to lunch. She was the first and only faculty member on campus who told me about the pain of academic rejection. She said when a journal rejected her article, she was so heartbroken that she could not even look at the article for the longest time. I was in awe of her honesty and willingness to show her vulnerable side. Both of these women were so generous and inviting, but I did not realize the value of their friendship until later. As I was raising young children, I saw them less and less. Neither of them had children, and I foolishly thought that meant we didn't have much in common. As my children grew up, I thought about reconnecting with them, but by then it was too late. First Juanita and then Mahnaz died of cancer right around this time. I still wish I could talk to them sometimes about what it means to be an immigrant faculty or a female senior faculty member, but they are gone. Thus, from my sad and bitter experience, I urge you to reach out to older female colleagues, who are likely to have rich life experiences and could become confidantes and mentors to you.

Second, you should be direct and honest in your communication with colleagues. This is hard to do, especially when you have to tell colleagues that they need to improve their teaching or research. When I was a young chair, I did not dare to do this because it was so uncomfortable to give that type of feedback. Plus, at that time I thought: who am I to tell others what to do? I thus neglected to do an important part of my job, guiding non-tenured faculty. My lack of candor and confidence probably contributed to the instability of the department personnel in those early days (nobody else got tenured in my department for a while). Since then, I try to be completely honest in my communications. I believe being forthright is especially important when you are mentoring junior faculty. A candid conversation in which you tell your colleagues that they need to publish more or that they should teach differently is often not well received. Most people do not like to hear about their limitations and often become defensive, at least initially. They might resent you sometimes. However, most people will eventually come around to appreciating your advice and respecting you as a leader. They will know they can trust you because you always tell the truth. But even if you are not lucky enough to receive your colleagues' gratitude, you still need to give them honest guidance, because that is your job. Try not to shy away from your responsibility.

Lastly, remember to hold your head high. Much of a leader's job is invisible (unfortunately, managing interpersonal conflicts among colleagues or fighting against budget cuts cannot go on your curriculum vitae!). Our job is also often thankless. For example, if you are a department chair, you are expected to pay attention to your department colleagues' wellbeing and ask them to go to lunch with you or invite them to your home, but the invitations tend not to be reciprocated. Thus, you might occasionally feel dejected or lonely, and start to wonder why on earth you are doing all this hard work. During these times of distress, remember that younger women (especially younger Asian women) are often looking up to you, even when they don't show it. Earlier this year, I received an email from a Vietnamese American student who graduated fifteen years ago. She wrote that my style of teaching, advising, and leadership in and out of the classroom had had an impact on her, and still influenced how she tries to present herself in the workplace. I was surprised and thrilled to receive this message. She had never mentioned any of this when she was a student. Comments like these remind me of the importance of serving as a role model for students and junior faculty on campus, as female Asian leaders are still scarce in higher education in the United States. Hence, my advice is to keep your cool and hold your head high.

I wish you very best in your journey.

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