The Elephant in the Room: My Battle for Tenure

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Dr. Randy Pausch began his famous "Last Lecture" by remarking, "My dad always told me that when there's an elephant in the room, introduce it" (2008, p.16). This is good advice, recommending as it does a level of frankness and honesty that is increasingly rare in this era of political spin. Thus, I would like to begin my part of the presentation by introducing my "elephant in the room."

Stage I: Denial

It was a few weeks before Thanksgiving 2006, and I was very excited and a little bit nervous to receive my first level of response for tenure review. I had done some very good work in the five years since I was hired by the university. My annual reviews were generally positive and there was no reason to believe I would not receive a supportive recommendation. You can well imagine my surprise when I read the following words in the privacy of my office:

> *Dr. Kimberley Woo is a highly valued and welcomed addition to the College of Education, and to CSUSM. A careful examination of her file reveals a deeply held commitment to diversity, educational equity, and social justice, as evidenced throughout her work in Teaching, Scholarly Research and Creative Activity, and Service. . .*
>
> *The Peer Review Committee, based on a thorough review of the evidence, however,* ***cannot support Dr. Kimberley Woo's request for promotion and tenure***
> (Peer Review Committee, November 16, 2006)

I read that last part of the letter many times but remained in denial: "How can this be?" "This can't be happening!" "This must be a mistake." Eventually I went to a colleague and showed her my letter. It was only then that the impact of the words began to hit me; I cried.

Stage II: Anger

Though I shed many tears that day, I soon realized that I had two choices: to watch passively as events unfolded or to be proactive and fight. I chose the latter, because I was angry. I deserved tenure.

As I reflect on my decision to fight for what is just and due, I recognize that I now proudly count myself among the ranks of "faculty warriors" (Loo and Chun, 2002). I believe that the administration's response to my request for tenure reflects bias, and that "contrary to the notion that Asian Americans have no problems with discrimination, that Asian Americans, like other minority groups, face a glass ceiling in the ivory tower" (Loo and Chun, 2002, p.122).

Stage III: Bargaining

There have been many levels of recommendations since that first non-supportive statement. As I prepared for each subsequent review, I made silent bargains with myself, "If the next letter is supportive, I will work triply hard to get x-number of manuscripts in review, revised, resubmitted, etc. . . . I will make more time for family and friends. . . " While my bargaining did little to change the course of events, it helped me understand the origins of my self-doubt. My deal-making revealed ongoing angst about negotiating professional responsibilities (teaching, research, service); and personal responsibilities (wife, mother, daughter, sister, and friend).

I have also had to negotiate my professional and sometimes personal relationships with peers. Few of my colleagues know about my plight. Of those who do, some have urged me not to fight, but rather to accept and to move on quietly. Others have responded with awkward relief that they received tenure and then tried to console me by offering stories about others who have faced similar struggles. Perhaps the most painful response I have received has been colleagues' veiled professionalism. Rather than deal with me directly, colleagues speak with others **about** me because they do not feel "safe" speaking to me about **me**.

Stage IV: Depression (and Shame)

Given the magnitude of this life event, it is not surprising that I have had a hard time sleeping. I sometimes feel hopeless. I have wrestled with occasional bouts of depression. Even though my intellect understood the cause of my feelings, the voice inside my head did not allow me to admit that I was struggling: "You have to remain strong." "You are the primary breadwinner of this family." "Everyone is depending on you." "You chose to fight, so you cannot feel sorry for yourself."

I believe much of this inner voice stems from my efforts to resist the model minority stereotype. Though I am a fourth generation Chinese American woman, I openly admit that the pressures to succeed remain deeply ingrained within me. Like so many other scholars of color, Asian Americans in particular, I believed the dream that academic achievement was my ticket to success. I received my doctorate from an Ivy League University, won a few graduate awards, and secured a competitive, prestigious fellowship early in my academic career. I had accepted a job at an institution that placed a high value on teaching. Not receiving a supportive recommendation for tenure was a shattering experience, particularly since I believed in the concept of meritocracy.

Perhaps even more insidious than depression, though, have been feelings of shame. While my record clearly demonstrates that I merit tenure, the denial of it has caused me to doubt myself: Was I partly to blame? Could I have done things differently? Whom have I angered? At the same time, I felt shame due to a nagging sense that I had disappointed my family. Teramoto Pedrotti (2009) notes:

> [Shame is a] . . .major tenet shared by many Asian and Asian-American cultures. . . designed to "save face" or preserve honor and harmony. . .Disagreements are usually

> avoided and maintaining a polite and conscientious appearance is more important than winning an argument. This approach must be understood as appropriate for Asian-American children[.] Even children from American-born families may retain these types of behavior patterns, as they are central to the Asian value system.

The combined impact of depression and shame has catalyzed a clarity and course of action I never envisioned for myself. Despite my doubts, I realize now that I must fight for my beliefs. Regardless of the outcome, I am motivated to break the silence and isolation that often accompany feelings of shame, to create a safe space that allows the sharing of challenges, and to provide support for those who are maneuvering in the higher education political landscape.

Stage V: Acceptance

While I recognize the intractability of institutions, I do not accept it. In "Letter from Birmingham Jail," Martin Luther King Jr. (1963) penned:

> History is the long and tragic story of the fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture; but as Reinholdt Neibuhr has reminded us, "Groups are more immoral than individuals" (p.267).

King's words remind us that individuals may be the ones most likely to change the *status quo*.

If King's assertion is correct, I invite you to think about how we should respond to inconsistencies that exist between institutions' stated commitments to diversity, educational equity, and social justice; and individuals' experiences of inequity? For Asian and Pacific Americans and other scholars from diverse groups, I invite you to look at your relatively privileged positions from within the academy and the responsibilities that come with those

privileges. In particular, I urge you to consider the consequences of remaining silent about difficulties encountered by students, colleagues, or yourselves. Is it our responsibility to act on behalf of those who may not yet have been granted a place at the table of equity? Or is it ours to support the *status quo* and hide behind the mantle of "risk adversity," to rationalize non-action or refuse to act because doing otherwise might jeopardize our security within the institution? My purpose for this presentation is not to answer these questions for you. Rather, I want to stimulate your thinking about the ways in which silence and fear isolate us from each other.

It may be years before I know the outcome of my circumstance. I never imagined being the Rosa Parks of tenure on my campus, yet I now realize that part of the reason for my undergoing this experience may be to serve as an advocate of equitable treatment. I close this presentation as I opened it, with words of Randy Pausch (2008), "We cannot change the cards we are dealt, just how we play the hand" (p.17). I may never be privy to the multifaceted complexity of perspectives that do not value my work. The only piece of this puzzle within my control is the choice I have made to act on behalf of myself and others by continuing to wage a battle that will bring us a few steps closer towards ensuring equity for all who undergo the review process.

References

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