



When Care is Stepping Away

By Patricia Ybarra

I am making a manifesto that asks for infrastructural care of our community: faculty, staff, and students. I admit to having done some research on this topic. I have spent a large portion of my life—my professional life—stepping in and trying to mentor students through the research university while naming the forces of the research university that inscribe violence even as they also open the possibilities of deep thought, community, and possibility.

These forces should be named:

- 1) The confusion of whether graduate student teachers are workers or apprentices and the ways in which that changes decision-making about their infrastructural support.
- 2) The idea that, to remake oneself as a graduate researcher, faculty need to break a person down and rebuild them as writers in ways that parallel the processes actors go through in their Masters of Fine Arts programs.
- 3) The idea that at every single moment we should be pursuing the next step to a job or a promotion in such a way that we endanger our health or well-being.
- 4) The constant drive to prove one's excellence and rigor to deans, chairs, advisors, dissertation committees, and heads of programs so as justify one's belonging in the program or workplace.
- 5) The idea that one is always in the position of potentially being an imposter if one "missteps," is unsure, or admits one does not know something.

I spend a fair amount of time pointing to these modes of violence to educate and not gaslight my students into thinking that these processes are about them.

I come to these practices from a certain place and position. I will own my vulnerabilities here. I want to fix what is broken because I have been around a lot of brokenness, including within myself. So I am often the person who comes on as an emergency committee member. I am often the one who signs the paperwork from home two hours before it is due instead of making someone wait. The one who sends twenty emails to help a student get health insurance. I am the person who puts the glass left on the table in the sink. I am the one who takes the shopping cart back to the stall. I am the one who picks up wrappers left on the floor on the way to the garbage can. I am a mother. I am a child of essential workers—a Mexican cis man and working-class white cis woman. I am a child of alcoholics who was taught to pick up after other people's tantrums.

And the last time one of these moments of crisis happened, I did not step in. I took a weekend off, knowing there was no way to run in without taking responsibility for something that was not my fault.

As I wrote this last Spring, I felt guilty and twitchy. My heart was racing. I was—and am—so used to fixing things and cleaning up after other people make messes that when I stopped, it was utterly terrifying. And it is a hard habit to break. Hopefully, this is where it ends.

It is unbelievable how destabilizing making this public statement feels. And at the same time, I wonder if this form of stepping back (but not stepping away) is not a better model for my students, because for once, they are not seeing a Latina step in and clean up after people (mostly white) with more power. I hope the next generation of POC, working-class, and femme academics do not take this crap. And perhaps by stepping away, I am modeling something else. Taking care by stepping away.

Caring, I think, is ceasing to model this rather insidious form of imposter syndrome—the obligation to clean up after others for others. Who knew that in trying to stop other people from having imposter syndrome, I may have been passing it on?

Caring is not passing on institutional, raced, gendered, and class-based trauma out of the best of intentions.

I am keenly aware of my generation as I write this; the generation of many people on this panel was the first in our field that had more than a handful of scholars of color who attained tenure and/or leadership positions in the field. And as a result, we paid it forward until we chipped away at our own well-being. I hope this moment, when many of us Gen Xers are questioning this behavior, and Generation Z is flatly rejecting it, we can transform the institutions—who ask us to do this in implicit ways by not taking care of people—through careful structural work.

Infrastructural care, a new form of being in the institution, would be a welcome change that would create structures of well-being within our institutions instead of around them.

Here are some preliminary ideas:

- 1) Create schedules for graduate students and junior faculty that will allow people to do good work at the proper pace. This would mean arguing for a more holistic understanding of health and well-being in relation to creating scholarship of great quality, which asks for more time rather than less. Such schedules might build in breaks or different forms of experiencing life that would enrich our scholarship along the path to a degree.
- 2) Offer full medical care for graduate students and adjuncts as well as full time faculty, including community and non-medicalized forms of mental health care as part of insurance policies.
- 3) Re-create mentoring systems that would not allow toxic mentoring systems to be endemic to the academy. (MIT currently has a grant to help students get out of these situations). But rather than repair injury, we could prevent it. We could create modes of mentoring relationships that are less personality-driven and more community-centered and plural from their conception. Rather than a furtive shuffling between disagreeing advisors, we could create regular conversations that consider the work as part of a community of thought amongst people with different ideas and suggestions to be considered as part of a team. (Of course, this might eventually ask humanities tenure standards of the monograph to change also.) Critique itself could be a community practice of care from peers and colleagues that made sure we all made it to the end, however rigorous our questions. This might ask that we expand rather than contract the professoriate. But it could also mean we could see graduate students as peer mentors and as part of this process.
- 4) Build real collaboration and solidarity by collaborating across rank and/or status to create fair structures and policies in our departments and universities. Let's collaborate with junior faculty and graduate students to create best practices for departmental procedures. Let's pay them to do it.
- 5) Recognize the way in which imposter syndrome hurts us all. Here are some guidelines for dealing with the consequences of this part of our academic lives.
 - a. Realize that imposter syndrome was given to you. You did not make it yourself, but you might perpetuate it or be in a place where it is perpetuated. This is not your fault.
 - b. Know that you belong t/here.
 - c. Speaking up when you do not understand something when you feel safe enough to do so might relieve someone else of Imposter syndrome. Practice this kindness when you can!

- d. Remember that what you don't understand is also a form of knowledge production in itself that will improve the academy. You may know things from your lack of access to the academy that could be helpful to someone else.
- e. Remember that a person who shames you for not already knowing something (including yourself 😊!) is the person or part of oneself that needs to be abandoned—not your own confidence!

It is here that I thank my graduate students for helping me think about these issues in explicit or implicit ways within our conversations. Thank you.

In conclusion, what I am asking for is an infrastructural care that functions as academic Medicare for all—so we do not have to “go fund me” emotional labor on a daily basis. Doing this will create structures to flourish. Doing so would mean there could be an outside to our working lives. We could have more joy in our work. We could have a model for care rather than simply “modelling care” in individual interactions. Each of us could even have the option of stepping away for a bit.

A Coda, from *Virginia Grise's Your Healing is Killing Me (2017)*:

Capitalism is toxic. No amount of body butter or eczema creams will act as a salve for its toxicity. As a system it cannot be fixed. The only way to defend ourselves is to destroy it. The only way to destroy it is to create something better. In the process, we must be willing to assess, to prepare, to study, to fight, but we must also be willing to live to listen to ourselves and each other, to change, to transform, to care for ourselves and each other.

It's a process.
A daily practice.
Embodied.

Do you like your job?
Yes, I have to admit.

I am an artist. As an artist I believe my greatest creative project is to imagine, to imagine something, something better where our dreams matter, where as a people we are free (2017: 83).

I believe that as scholars, artists, and scholar/artists, we can all follow Ms. Grise's advice and free ourselves as a community. I look forward to building that world with all of you.

Bibliography

Grise, Virginia. *Your Healing is Killing Me*. Pittsburgh, PA: Plays Inverse Press, 2017.