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January 2008

## Sister Katherine: An Example of Feminist Educational Leadership

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# Sister Katherine: An Example of Feminist Educational Leadership

*Barbara Thayer-Bacon*

## *Introduction*

When I was an elementary teacher, I had the good fortune of having a principal who continues to serve as my role model for good educational leadership. This principal's name was Sister Katherine, and she was an outstanding administrator who puts most administrators I've had before and since to shame. I have only had one other administrator since then to whom I have been able to say, "You have achieved Sister Katherine status!" Sister Katherine is my gold standard by which I measure others on their leadership skills, and now I find I have to measure myself against her, since I have crossed over the line to the dark side, and become an administrator too (my hope is this is a temporary condition). I have spoken about Sister Katherine to my colleagues for years, even publicly at a Research on Women and Education conference, but I have never written about her, and what made her so special. After a year of assuming the role of department head, this seems a very good time to reflect on just what made her so unique, and consider how I am measuring up to her standard.

Let me begin by introducing Sister Katherine, so that the context of her leadership can be known. However, I do not know many details about her life before she and I crossed paths, or afterwards, the details don't seem to matter too much. I will explain how our paths crossed for a brief time of one school year, unfortunately for me. I will then turn to examining the qualities of her leadership in more detail, with stories to help illustrate her approach, and contrasting stories to help us further appreciate her value. Next, I'll bring her approach as a principal to the level of higher education, by sharing stories about the one department head I have had the honor of working with who achieved Sister Katherine status. I'll close by considering how I am doing, in comparison to my gold standard.

I have several goals that I hope to achieve, by writing about Sister Katherine. One, writing about her will help me make sure I don't forget what all she did for me and it will give me a way to thank her and honor her. It will be a joy to go down this memory lane and share stories about her. Two, it will force me to pull myself up short and give myself a close look, to see how I am doing as an administrator in comparison to her. Most important, three, writing about her will give me a chance to share her example with others. I think she can serve as a living example of what a caring educational leader looks like. Sister Katherine embodies for me a vivid example of an educational leader whose practice supports feminist care theory and challenges us to rethink the role of a leader, just as feminist pedagogy challenges us to rethink the role of a teacher.<sup>1</sup>

## *Background/Context*

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Sister Katherine's one claim to fame as it was told, was that she was the pop star Michael Jackson's teacher, I believe at the preschool level. That got her a lot of status with the children in our school at the time! I know her as a small but mighty Catholic nun, small in size but big in heart and mind. When I met her I believe she was in her sixty's; she had been working as an educator for many years. She was a member of the San Diego Diocese, and she ran a Montessori school that was located on the San Luis Rey Mission grounds in Oceanside, near Camp Pendleton, the marine base. Not only did Sister Katherine run this school as its principal, she was the founder of the school, which she built up from a small preschool program to include a toddler program, three preschool classrooms, two lower elementary classes, and one upper elementary class, while I was there. Montessori classrooms are designed to be multi-aged with three ages usually placed together in a classroom, although Sister Katherine was flexible of this standard, depending on her student population. I was hired by her to be the teacher for the upper elementary class, which included 8-12 year olds one year, and 9-12 year olds the next year, as our population size grew.

Sister Katherine was committed to working on social justice issues, and the issue she chose to put her energy into was helping lower income children have access to a good education. She started the Montessori Center School for Mexican migrant workers' children but found it was very difficult to maintain a stable population with just them enrolled, so she opened up her enrollment to include other interested families in the parish, as well as families living in the general area. She was able to negotiate with the San Diego Diocese and they gave her use of some of the rooms on the grounds of the San Luis Rey Mission for her school at no charge, so that she could charge families a very low tuition rate. There were other nuns living on the mission grounds as retired nuns, and Sister Katherine rallied some of them to help her by tapping into their talents as music and art teachers, and as after-school childcare providers. I am sure they did not receive a salary for their work, nor did she; it was their contribution to the church.

Families could afford to send all of their children to the Montessori Center School for the tuition rate was around \$1,000/year and if there were multiple children, the siblings received a discounted rate. If they could not afford the tuition at all, Sister Katherine found a way to help them. While I was there she had a highly successful fundraiser going every summer, Christmas in July, which included music, food, and crafts for sale, and it made over \$25,000 each year. Artisans from all over Southern California applied to have a booth at this fair. Of course, all work was voluntary and most of the proceeds went to the school, which helped pay for low-income children's tuition. As a teacher who was a single mother working there, I was able to negotiate my three children's tuition as part of my salary, so that even though I made several thousand dollars less in pay than public school teachers in the area, I had health benefits and my children were able to attend the school "for free."

The children who attended this school had the opportunity to learn much about social justice issues and to witness a caring moral approach. They saw all the services the mission offered for people, including a senior citizens garden area, a recycle center, a battered wives and children shelter, a thrift store full of used clothes and furniture for the needy, senior citizens exercise classes, and bingo on Wednesdays, of course. While Sister Katherine was there, she taught the

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elementary children's "Religious Studies" class once/week, and she taught it as a "Situational Ethics" class. She used situations that were going on in the children's lives and on the mission grounds to stimulate discussions and get the children thinking about what is right and wrong. I remember sitting in on her classes and realizing I was working for a wise philosopher. I also remember her telling me, a non-Catholic, non-Christian, Unitarian Universalist, that I was the most spiritual teacher she had. She could not have paid me a higher compliment! Sister Katherine retired from running the Montessori Center School after my first year of working with her, because she decided she wanted to do something different to help lower income children receive a good education. She took on the job of administrating the Head Start Program for the entire East Coast of the USA. I told you, she was a dynamo in a small body!

### *How Our Paths Crossed*

How I came to work for Sister Katherine is an important story, in itself, as it helps to illustrate her seasoned wisdom and her leadership qualities. I attended the first elementary Montessori teachers training program offered in the Washington, D.C. area, the second year any such program was offered in the USA (one used to have to spend a year in Italy in order to receive elementary training in the Montessori method). After working for three years in Pennsylvania as a lower elementary teacher, I decided to move closer to home and applied for jobs in southern California. I found myself in an enviable situation, for there were few elementary trained Montessori teachers in the USA at the time and there was a high interest by parents to enroll their children in Montessori schools. I applied to 20 schools and received 12 job interview offers, and chose eight to accept. All eight schools I interviewed with offered me jobs, including one in the Oceanside/San Marcos area. I chose to accept a job in Santa Barbara and proceeded to have a nightmare experience due to the political situation in the school that was already brewing when I arrived, unbeknownst to me. By the time spring break came around, I found myself being informed that I was going to be terminated, along with my co-teacher, for reasons that had more to do with a principal trying to change the direction of the school away from a Montessori school toward a wealthy, private school than anything to do with my teaching. In fact, I was first informed that my contract would not be renewed without anyone having ever observed my classroom teaching.

Mortified at the possibility of losing my job (remember, I was a single mother with three children, who moved across the country to take this job), I contacted all the other schools that had offered me a job to let them know I was going to be available for a position. While I realized they had probably filled the position I had interviewed for, I hoped they would keep me in mind if they knew of something that was going to be available for which I could apply. One of the principals who had wanted to hire me told her friend, Sister Katherine, who was looking to hire: "There is a teacher available for hire whom I wanted to hire last year, and wasn't able to. You are going to have a chance to hire someone really good, as I filled the position with someone else and don't need her now, but I know you do." That was the best recommendation I could hope for!

I applied for the job and interviewed for the position and met Sister Katherine. In her following up on my references, she contacted my Santa Barbara principal to let her know she planned to offer me a job. This woman, who had promised to support my efforts to find a job elsewhere, sought to stop my hiring by raising doubts in Sister Katherine's mind about my abilities to teach. Wisely, Sister Katherine contacted me and asked if she could come observe my teaching and talk to my parents. I said, "Absolutely! Please do so! I would be very pleased to have you come visit us for the day." That was all she needed to hear, to assure her that something was going on at Santa Barbara that had nothing to do with me, and my teaching. She ended up deciding she didn't need to observe my teaching, she had several letters of reference from parents of the students in my classroom as well as the recommendation from her friend, and she offered me the job. To this day, I think that decision was important to my continuing a career in education. I talked to her about her decision to hire me later, and she shared with me what had happened and that she had prayed about it, and sought the advise of the Father at the mission, who had suggested she go observe me if possible. She told me she was very aware of the politics that can go on in schools, and in the end I think it was that awareness, along with my openness and strong parental support, that swayed her decision.

### *Qualities of Sister Katherine's Leadership Approach*

The fact that my second experience with a principal had become a nightmare experience might have made Sister Katherine seem even better that she was as an administrator, but I don't think so. I had the opportunity to see her again ten years later, when I had become a professor in higher education working with future teachers and she came through my town to inspect our local Head Start programs. The very qualities I so admired in her as an educational leader when I worked for her were still there and vividly expressed in our short visit with each other. I laughed with glee to discover, she was still the same Sister Katherine I remembered so fondly.

What were the qualities of Sister Katherine's leadership style that made her so special? First, and maybe most important, Sister Katherine offered her teachers tremendous support. She truly believed her role as an administrator was to help us, as teachers, do our jobs more effectively, in whatever way she could. She viewed us as qualified, competent professionals and she saw her role as one of service and advocacy on our behalf, as well as to be an appreciative, grateful fan of our efforts. She was a cheerleader who cheered us on and a buffer for us, someone who protected our time and reduced outside pressures on us, so that we could do our jobs well. Her outpouring of support came to us in many forms.

For example, Sister Katherine never missed an opportunity to compliment her teachers on how well they were doing. She usually started whatever conversation she had with one of us with a compliment, such as: "I saw how you handled Marty in that situation and I think you did an excellent job!" Or, "Your classroom is looking so bright and cheery with the way you have decorated it!" Or, "Where do you get all of that patience?" after a hard day. She made sure to let us know if she heard any student or parent say something nice about us, and she encouraged us to let her know of our successes, so that she could brag about us. We all joked about how much Sister Katherine complimented us, and tried to make light of it when it made us feel

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uncomfortable, but we were also surprised to find out how much we appreciated it, and how good it made us feel. It was like adding fertilizer to already rich soil, the teachers in her school blossomed and grew in that rich environment of kindness and gratitude. We really enjoyed coming to work each day, and we worked harder than we ever would have, because someone was noticing our work and making us feel appreciated and valued for what we did. Sister Katherine's compliments boosted all our morales, even ones that didn't know they needed boosting. As a result, she helped us shine. I know I became a better teacher when I worked for her; I pushed myself harder and gave more of myself to my students, their parents, and to the school in general as a result. I have been back to visit this school many times and have always been surprised to find people I taught with twenty years ago are still there. Her spirit of kindness has lived on and it keeps the teachers there working for less pay and low benefits, just for the sheer joy of the work.

Sister Katherine taught me that compliments do win people over and get them working very hard for you, much more so than criticism. She also taught me that starting with kindness and words of appreciation will create a more cheerful and joyful working environment, and such an environment makes people want to continue to be there for they feel good when they are there. Sister Katherine taught me that expressing sincere compliments and words of grateful appreciation even make people more open and willing to listen to concerns and critique. They become less defensive and protective of their own self-image for they feel valued and appreciated. This feeling of appreciation creates a sense of security and helps people begin to trust that their principal (department head, or dean) has their best interests at heart and will not harm them. I saw Sister Katherine two times after I taught for her, and both times the first thing she said to me was a compliment. I was one of the best teachers she ever had! I laughed and thanked her, again, for her kind words. I told her how much I missed having her as my administrator. It had been a while since someone had administered to my self-esteem as well as she knew how to do.

Sister Katherine gave her teachers tremendous support in another important way. She protected us from too many demands on our time and honored us for the amount of time we spent doing our jobs as teachers. I have found this administrative protection of my time to be even rarer than words of kindness and recognition for the good work I do. What's surprising is how much it makes someone feel valued and respected, to know that people recognize the time teachers put into their work and to feel confident that they are making an effort to protect the teachers' work time rather than continually interrupt that work time or place more demands on them, thus forcing the teachers to have to make hard compromises and lessen the quality of their work.

Let me give some examples to help make it clear what I mean by "protection from demands on my time." When I first started working for Montessori Center School, I was surprised to find I was going to have a lunch hour, where I was free to go off and have a break from teaching and/or have some preparation time, and someone would have responsibility for my classroom during that hour. I was never offered a break before, and even though I often did not take it, because I didn't want to lose precious time working with the students, I did appreciate knowing that someone actually recognized teachers need breaks and that they have work to do outside of the

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classroom to help them prepare for in the classroom teaching. Sister Katherine was willing to pay for an employee to be there so the teachers could have a real, full lunch hour. That lunch hour offered me protection from continual demands on my time as well as a buffer of time I might need to improve my teaching.

When I went to my first school-wide parent meeting, I was surprised to find out Sister Katherine didn't expect her teachers to attend evening parent meetings. She told me she knew how hard I worked during the day and she did not think it was fair to ask teachers to come back to school in the evening to meet with parents. She considered our job to be teaching the students during the day, and that our evenings should be ours. She considered it her job to help market the school and represent the school to current parents and future parents, as well as the larger community. She also considered it her job to help educate parents about the Montessori method, and to help parents understand the important roles they play in supporting the teachers' efforts to work with their children. Again, I felt very appreciated for my hard work, as well as valued for my time was considered precious and not to be taken advantage of, and I felt tremendous support, knowing I had an administrator who understood my efforts, valued them, and was not going to try to take advantage of me or ask more of me than I could or should give.

Sister Katherine protected my time in many other ways. She set up our teaching schedules so that students had extended periods in the day for work time that was not interrupted for school events such as assemblies, school pictures, or fundraisers. She only had one fundraiser each year, Christmas in July, and it was in July when the children were not in school. She scheduled things like school pictures before and after school and during lunch time, and she scheduled pull out classes such as art or music at the beginning or end of the morning or afternoon, so that they would not interrupt students during a lesson or when they were working. If she needed to talk to one of us, she would catch us during those transition times, not while we were teaching.

Sister Katherine did not interrupt my teaching schedule for meetings with parents or students, either. As much as possible, if an issue came up involving a student or parent of mine, she would try to address that issue in her office on her time, not mine. If I needed to be there to meet with the family member(s), that meeting was scheduled before school, after school, or during my lunch hour. Sister Katherine's protection of my time as a teacher continually gave me the message that she viewed me as a professional and that the work that I did was important and not to be interrupted, if at all possible. Connected to that kind of support was her confidence in my ability to do a good job as a teacher, and to trust my judgment, if a problem should arise. Her confidence in her teachers' ability became a form of support that was expressed as protection, loyalty, and advocacy, when situations arose with students and/or parents. Let me give some specifics to help make it clear what I mean.

It is important for readers to understand that parents in private schools, where I taught, tend to feel emboldened to speak up for their children's needs and express concerns for their children's problems, for they are paying for this educational experience directly through tuition. Private schools are dependent on parents enrolling their children and paying their tuition in order for the school to survive and thrive, and parents know this. Their tuition dollars directly pay teachers'

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and administrators' salaries. As a result, it is not unusual to find private schools that cater to their parents and will stand by parents' complaints and concerns, over protecting and advocating for their teachers. Working for a school administrator who does not "look out for" their teachers is a nightmare experience, as I learned the year before I worked for Sister Katherine. If children learn that they can break school rules, even to the level of endangering themselves and/or their classmates, and "get away with it" without some form of repercussion, the teacher's authority is undermined and their ability to manage classroom behavior becomes seriously curtailed. If children learn that school principals will take their word for "what happened?" over a teacher's description of the situation, the students will manipulate the situation as much as they are allowed, and the teacher will find they are in the midst of a miserable situation where their own judgment and abilities are questioned while "the client's" (the child's) word is believed to be correct.

Sister Katherine never put her teachers in unsupported positions in regards to students and their parents. If a misbehaving child was causing so much problems that they were asked to leave the classroom, that child was escorted to Sister Katherine's office, and after having a talking to, was made to write lines from her Bible, before being allowed back into the classroom. She would meet with me and we would discuss the child's situation as soon as time allowed, and then she would communicate to the child's parents what the problem was and what we were doing to address it. If problems continued, Sister Katherine would meet with the parents to enlist their help in solving the concerns. In front of students and their parents, she always took a position of loyalty toward her teachers and presented their side of the story. She advocated for her teachers' rights as well as expressing her confidence in their abilities to handle the situation.

This does not mean that teachers never made mistakes or had bad days, or that teachers were not asked to make adjustments to help a child with a tough situation. What it means is Sister Katherine always waited to talk to her teachers to find out from them what the situation was before she passed any judgments. If there was a problem the teacher needed help with, Sister Katherine asked that they please let her know, so that she could do a good job of advocating for us, from an informed position, rather than finding out from a phone call or visit to her office, when she was uninformed and therefore not able to help as well. Sister Katherine always trusted that her teachers were professions seeking to do what was best for their students. She trusted that we had our students' best interests in our minds and hearts, and that we were advocates for our students. She served in the same role for us, advocating for us with parents and with their children. This kind of support and protection offered by her helped improve communication between her teachers and parents, as well as between her teachers and students, as a result. Again, it helped to boost teachers' morale and make Montessori Center School a great place to work. It also made it a great place to attend as a student, for behavior problems were not a big issue (who wants to write lines from the Bible?). Sister Katherine's trust and confidence in her teachers rubbed off on her parents, and helped them grow to trust the teachers' abilities as well. Parents felt confident that the teachers and principal were looking out for their children.

I hope I have managed to describe Sister Katherine's style of leadership enough to help readers appreciate what a joy it was to work for such a person! We all mourned our loss when she

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decided to retire and go help the Head Start program, even though we knew she would be able to make important contributions, and help more lower income children receive good starts in schooling as a result of her efforts. When one has had the joy of working for such a supportive administrator, one who truly believes her job is to create a caring environment and be of service to her school community, it is hard to say good-bye to that person, as all of us at Montessori Center School had to do. While I was so grateful to have had the chance to work with her, I sure did wish I had taken a job with her sooner, so that I would have had the chance to work with her even more. How many of you have had that kind of feeling for an administrator you worked with? While I have had other good administrators, I have only had that feeling with one other.

### *Sister Katherine's Leadership Style Modeled in Higher Education*

When I was invited to interview for a job at the University of Tennessee (UT), I had nine years of experience in higher education, and by then knew that it was very important to find out what kind of administrators the department and college had, as their styles of leadership greatly affect a professor's life, just as much as principal's affect teachers' lives. My first question to the chair of the search committee was, how is your department chair (now they are heads at UT)? I was pleasantly surprised to hear the search committee chair say, "Oh, Joy, she's great! We all love her!" That got my attention. Could she be that good? I wondered.

I met Joy DeSensi, Department Chair for the Cultural Studies in Education Program over breakfast, once in Knoxville for the interview. I found Joy to be an easy person to talk, someone who was a good listener and clearly interested in getting to know my research interests and me, personally. However, what I remember most about that interview was in regards to a salary question I asked. I know it is not good form to ask in an interview where one has not yet been offered the job, what will my salary be? However, I was an associate professor with nine years experience, and I was worried about whether or not UT could afford to hire me at that level, and if they could afford to offer me enough to make it worth my family's while to move, especially given that my loving partner would have to give up his job to come with me. Joy told me the salary range, which was the range for a beginning assistant level professor. I did not say anything, but I must have showed some concern in my face, for she immediately responded by saying she could be wrong, that the figures she was quoting were probably just for new, beginning faculty, and that she would talk to the dean and find out for me, while I was there that day. In that instance she revealed to me that not only was she a nice person who was interested in her faculty, she had excellent communication and relational skills, and she was an advocate for her faculty. She also turned out to be true to her word, for before I left Knoxville that day Joy let me know that she had been wrong in the salary range she quoted me, and that my range would be higher due to my rank and experience. UT was prepared to pay me a salary that would make it worth my while to move.

As it turns out, after I took the job and got to know Joy DeSensi better, I learned from her that I came in at a higher salary than she was making, as department chair and a full professor, after working at UT for 20 years. She told me I should have gotten what I did, and that she was very glad for me, that when I took the new job was my chance to negotiate and move up in salary. She

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let me know she was cheering me on. I, however, became immediately concerned that the longer one stayed at UT, especially as a woman, the more I would experience salary compression. I was shocked and appalled to find out I made more than her! I am very glad to say Joy has had some good deans since my arrival, who have found ways to rectify her salary compression, and I do not still make more than her, as it should be. Still, it says a lot about a person to know that an administrator is such a strong advocate for the faculty and will try to help them earn what they deserve, even if it means he/she surpass their own earnings.

I began to suspect Joy DeSensi might be of the caliber of Sister Katherine, when I started receiving compliments by her on a regular basis. Of course, I was not the only one. I noticed that daily Joy would say kind things to her secretarial staff. Joy knew a lot about her staff, their family, their health concerns, and was very willing to work with them if they needed some time off to get their car into the shop for repairs, to get to the dentist due to a broken tooth, to pick up a grandchild early who was sick and mama could not pick up due to her boss at work not being so flexible. Joy thinks about her staff when she goes out to lunch, and will offer to pick them up something at the restaurant. It is rare for her to return empty handed. Joy invites everyone in her department to her home for Christmas, and supports a gift exchange for all who come, with spare gifts always stashed away in case anyone arrives and needs a gift. No one goes away from Joy's Christmas party empty handed! I discovered that Joy knew the birthday's of everyone in the department, as she makes sure a birthday card is in your mailbox on your birthday, and she has established a regular practice of monthly celebrations of birthdays. Her faculty and staff gather in the central office area and sing to the birthday people and have some cake with them, as they wish them well.

Okay, I had plenty of evidence that Joy DeSensi is supportive of her faculty and staff, in terms of helping them to feel good about their work environment. She knows how to express care and concern for people's well-being and to let people know she appreciates their efforts on behalf of the department. I could see that people work hard for their department head, and they enjoy coming to work. I could also see that they look out for her well-being too, since she does such a good job of looking out for them. Joy is a cancer survivor, and has also had both of her knees replaced since going through the medical treatments she had to endure for her cancer treatments, and her faculty and staff continually remind her to take care of herself and not push herself too hard. They try to protect her for they know she tries to protect them from too many demands on their time. She will take on tasks she should pass on to her faculty and staff, so as not to overload them. They try to remember to step forward and volunteer to help her out, so she doesn't do more than she should. When I came to UT Joy only had a one-course reduced load for being a department head, but she is starting to give herself more of a reduction as more junior faculty are hired and can step in and help teach courses. That reduction has come very slowly, for I have been at UT for six years now, and Joy did not teach this fall semester for the first time. Trouble is, she loves to teach, and students seek out her courses. However, there are other department heads across the campus, and even in the college, who do not teach at all.

More evidence of Sister Katherine status came my way when I started producing work once hired at UT. Joy DeSensi paid attention to the work I was doing, and wanted to know how it was

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going. She would ask for updates, and would offer to give me critical reads of applications for grants, and article submissions. When I applied for university support to help me with a research project my first year at UT, and I was turned down after my colleagues had reviewed my submission and given me good critical feedback, Joy went to bat for me in my resubmission. First of all, she encouraged me to resubmit. Then, in her letter of support she asked, “How can you not support the research work of someone we just hired to work here?” I received a three line letter from the vice president of academic affairs informing me I was going to receive the support I had requested after all. I am sure I only received that support due to her advocacy on my behalf. In subsequent requests for funding support for the same research project, after losing Joy as a department head, I was never successful in receiving any support from the university, only my department and college.

Joy DeSensi does not miss an opportunity to talk up her faculty and staff and let others know about the good work they are doing. She writes letters of support to help people get jobs, tenure, promotion, grants, and awards, and she brags about them regularly at college level meetings. She hosts wonderful retirement receptions for faculty and staff to make sure they know how much their work for the university has been appreciated. She takes advantage of every opportunity to recognize her faculty and staff and make sure they receive the recognition she believes they deserve. She is our biggest fan and cheerleader.

Joy DeSensi also does not hesitate to fight for a cause or issue, or question an administrative decision, if she believes one of her faculty members or staff has been wronged in some way. When I arrived at the University of Tennessee Joy was sitting in an awkward position, she had been asked to serve as department chair for a department that was forced to be together, with a program area that wanted their own department and chair. Joy was working in a hostile environment, with a less than effective dean who did not do a good job of protecting her, and of standing up to program area demands. If the program area did not get what they wanted, they would complain to the dean, and if that didn't get them what they wanted, they complained to central administration. The “forced marriage” never worked, and the stress of trying to make it work took its toll on Joy's wellbeing. Her health suffered while she tried to cope with the situation. I'm not sure how she did it, or why she did it. Most of us would have thrown in the towel and said, “You need to find someone else to be department chair,” but, not Joy. She protected the program she had helped to form and develop, and the new faculty she had helped to hire to work there, and kept serving as our administrator with a grace and style that is wonderful to behold. Our lives were disturbed minimally, due to Joy's skillful handling of a very tough situation. By the end of two years of Joy DeSensi as my department chair, I knew she was deserving of Sister Katherine status, and I told her so!

The third year I was in Joy DeSensi's department, the cultural studies program lost Joy as department head (this was the year all chairs became heads), due to a merging of two colleges and restructuring of the departments within the new college, to accommodate the changes. The sports studies side of us (sport psychology, history, philosophy, and sociology of sport) went back to their old home of exercise science and sports management, with Joy now serving as their department head, and the educational studies side of us (history, philosophy, and sociology of

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education) joined a department that included instructional technology and curriculum, research and evaluation programs. It was a great loss for those of us in the educational studies side of cultural studies, and we spent over a year mourning the split. We still maintained our offices in the health and physical education building with our sports colleagues, to avoid having to say good-bye, even though doing so positioned us as orphans without a department home near-by to look out for us. Our sports faculty and staff took care of us and helped us through the transition. They didn't want to see us go, even as they advised us that we should go be with our new colleagues for our own protection, so we were not forgotten and we had a voice in our department governance. When we packed up our offices and moved, the sports faculty and staff sent us off with a cake and farewell gifts, and promises that they would come to see us in our new home.

During that year of transition, I served as president/chair for the Research on Women and Education special interest group for the American Educational Research Association. Dr. DeSensi committed support to help pay for guest speakers and receptions, for it was my responsibility to host a conference in Knoxville. Her staff prepared our programs, and helped us with the registration process. Joy also attended the conference and introduced one of our guest speakers, a dear friend of hers. When she stepped forward to offer her assistance in this way, I thought again, ah, Sister Katherine status. It was at that conference that I spoke about Sister Katherine and tried to let people know what a special department head Joy DeSensi is.

Since moving out of the health and physical education building and into the education building, the cultural studies faculty only have occasional opportunities to see Joy and our former colleagues. However, that does not mean we do not still find ways to work together, or that we don't send our students to take each other's courses. We still serve on each other's students' dissertation committees, and on faculty search committees for each other's program area. It should come as no surprise that Joy stepped forward to help us when we lost one of our colleagues to a very exciting job opportunity elsewhere. In typical Sister Katherine fashion, she celebrated our colleague's success even as she mourned his loss to another university campus and his leaving us behind. She agreed to serve as my mentor as I agreed to become department head for our new department, and she agreed to take my place as mentor for our junior colleague in cultural studies when I had to step down from that role to become her department head. Joy is still looking out for us and advocating for us and helping us keep cultural studies alive and well at the University of Tennessee. She is still celebrating our successes and cheering us on. She is still offering her support. She and I meet regularly for lunch so that I can seek her advice and share with her a status report, so she knows how we are doing. I try to offer her my support as well, and to let her know I am there for her too. I try to thank her and let her know how much I appreciate just having the opportunity to work with her. I wish I had taken a job with her sooner so that I'd have had the chance to have her as my department head for longer. How many administrators in higher education have you felt that way about? That's someone who has achieved Sister Katherine status!

*How am I doing?*

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Now I come to the very difficult task of reflecting on how I am doing as a department head. How am I measuring up to the gold standard of Sister Katherine and Joy DeSensi after one year of administrative responsibility? In 15 years of higher education work, I have served as chair of numerous committees, as a course director for a large “Introduction to Teaching” course, as a program coordinator several times now, and as a president of two professional organizations, but never as an administrator at the level of department head or school principal. When one has had the great fortune of having two such wonderful administrators as role models for educational leadership, it can be intimidating to try to step into that role. However, knowing how wonderful it is to work for someone who sees their role as one of support and advocate, facilitator, mentor and guide, and service to their colleagues, I feel called to honor their efforts and at least try, so that my colleagues may have an experience something like what I have had the opportunity to experience more than once. I don’t have any desire to be an administrator, I love to teach and do research too much, but there are no more bodies left for me to hide behind. I am called to step forward and take my turn. So I do so, with fear and trepidation, hopeful that I can achieve something close to the wonderful grace, style, and loving kindness, as well as fighting spirit I have had modeled for me.

I find myself relying on my elementary teaching skills that I honed while working for Sister Katherine, to help guide me on what to do as a department head. We are a small department of fourteen, give or take one or two as people retire or take jobs elsewhere and are replaced with new hires. We have five fulltime staff members, and our programs range in size from around twenty to sixty graduate students. On top of our own program needs, all of us teach service courses that students in other programs take, such as first aid and women’s health at the undergraduate level, instructional technology and social foundations of education for future teachers as part of the teacher education program, epidemiology or qualitative research, which masters and doctoral students in many programs in the college take. We come from diverse discipline areas and are drawn together because we address health and education in larger contexts than just k-12 schooling. This does not mean we are not interested in what is going on in schools, in fact for many of us our research is centered around the public schools, but we all address health and education issues within the larger context of cultural, social, economic, and political influences.

What I have just described as a common thread that pulls our department together is something I had to learn when I became department head. Like many of my colleagues, I had my head down, worrying about my own courses and program area, as well as my own area of research, and my professional service interests, and I was not paying very much attention to what my other colleagues were doing. Becoming a department head forced me to look up and take a broader view. Now I worry about how all five of our programs are doing in our department, and I want to have a better understanding of what my diverse colleagues are doing, so that I can find ways to support their work and advocate on their behalf.

When I first took on this role I felt like I was on a raft in the middle of a roaring river; there was a large backlog of issues and concerns that needed attention and hadn’t been taken care of. Morale was down, people felt stressed and unappreciated for the work they did. People were

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unhappy with each other, even mad at each other, and hurt by previous harms done to them. People were also very distrustful of administration, due to decisions that had been made by previous deans and department heads, without consulting them or sharing information with them. People were generally unhappy, and not functioning at their best. They were on the defensive. And, yet, amazingly enough to me, while many were resigned there were many who were still hopeful that things could improve. Under these conditions, I began.

I started my turn as department head by meeting with each faculty member for an hour in their office. I decided we were a small enough department that there was no reason why I could not take the time to meet with each person in their office and get to know them better. I also wanted to listen to their concerns, and assure them that I had no intention of making decisions that would affect their lives without consulting them. I also wanted them to know I assumed they knew their program areas much better than I did, and I would be turning to them regularly for advice, and I would support whatever they recommended for their program areas, as much as possible. I let them know I was there to help them thrive, not to get in their way or thwart their efforts. I met with each faculty member individually again when I had to do evaluations, and we all came together for a retreat in the fall to share our research with each other, so the rest of the faculty would have the chance to know more about their colleagues' work, not just me.

I scheduled a regular monthly meeting with program area coordinators, and set them up to be my advising council essentially. I pass on to them many emails that come to me from the dean's office, for them to see and respond to, and they share these with their faculty members as needed. Often I feel like my role is to be the director of traffic, email traffic. I also scheduled regular monthly meetings with the faculty at large. I have an agenda for these meetings and I share that agenda a week in advance, along with any documents, such as previous meeting notes, or draft materials we need to review. I encourage participants to suggest any item they think needs to be added to the agenda. We meet for the time allotted, and no longer, for I know we are all very busy and our time is precious. I take notes for the program coordinators meeting, and our department head staff and I both take notes for the department meeting. We type these up and share them with the faculty as soon as possible prior to the next meeting. We take turns on where we meet, as the programs in our department are housed in two different buildings, across campus from each other. Half of my department is in the HPER building, the very health and physical education building I started in with Joy DeSensi's sports studies group. I am back in "the gym," as we lovingly call it! I spend time each week holding office hours in the two buildings, so no faculty members or staff feel like "orphans" to their own department, for I know how that feels. I also meet with the staff regularly, to check with them on how things are going, and make adjustments in work assignments as needed.

I have asked the program coordinators, faculty and staff at large to keep me informed of issues and concerns, as well as successes, so that I can celebrate with them, advocate for them, and help protect them if needed. I try to do the same for them, and let them know what's coming to me from the dean's office, and higher. I read my email daily, sometimes not until the evening if it is a busy afternoon full of meetings, and I try to respond back to people as soon as possible. I gave my office hours/schedule over to my department head staff to keep track of so that students and

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faculty can make appointments whenever I am available, and they don't have to go directly through me to get those appointments. I did this the very first week I became department head, as I made the mistake of double-booking myself and realized right away I needed help keeping track of where I was suppose to be when.

I take every opportunity I can to let the people who work in our department know how much I appreciate the work they do. I thank them in some way with every email I send, and every conversation I have. I give everyone a birthday card that expresses appreciation for the chance to work with them and get to know them better, and I really mean it. We have once-a-month birthday celebrations in our office now, where we come together and sing the birthday song to each other and have some cake, to celebrate our faculty, staff, and graduate assistants who were born that month. I have hosted a luau in my home and a barbeque at my housing subdivision pool. I have held a colleague's hand in the hospital as she recovered from two very serious surgeries. I have mourned the loss of a loving spouse with another colleague and tried to step in to help him with health check-ups now that his wife is no longer able to do so. I have bought bagels and muffins, as well as submarine/hoagie sandwiches for my staff to thank them at the end of the semester for their work, and to welcome new staff members to our department. I am learning I work with great people and I am so glad I have made myself take the time to get to know them better. I wonder now, why did I wait until I became a department head to make the effort to do all of this? To be fair to myself, I was doing some reaching out before, but now I am doing more.

I try to find a way to compliment our faculty and staff, and show them I notice how much effort they are putting into their work, and how much pride they are taking in the quality of their work. I also try to encourage them to appreciate each other, and value their diverse contributions. This is not easy, I don't want to paint a rosy picture about life in our department. Like every department in every college and university, some people like each other and have become good friends, and some people don't get along. Some people keep their opinions to themselves and others gossip about each other. I tell my department members, "We don't have to all like each other, we just have to treat each other with respect and dignity. And, we need to stop passing judgment on each other, if/when we are not alike." Instead of finding our differences troubling, I am trying to get my colleagues to see how our differences are assets. From our students' perspectives, having diverse faculty in a program area gives them more opportunities to find a faculty member they would like to work with, and it shows them that there are diverse ways of doing things, and advantages and disadvantages to whatever way any of us teach, the research we do, as well as how we relate to them. I am trying to encourage professional behavior as much as possible, which includes keeping confidentiality and not speaking poorly about each other in the public work place (including open office areas and in our classrooms). What we say behind closed doors and away from work is our own business, but that's where it needs to stay.

Some people in our department are very easy to work with and require little attention on my or our staff's part, and some people demand instant attention, and much of our time. I learned a long time ago, as an elementary teacher, that it was not fair to give some students so much of my attention and time, and not make sure the other students got my attention and time as well. I

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learned I wanted to be careful not to reward impatient “squeaky wheels” and ignore those who were patient and waited for their turn. I needed to reward those who were patient, and didn’t ask for more than their fair share, by attending to them equally, and letting them know how much I appreciated their patience. I also learned that some people really do have greater needs, for a variety of reasons. I try to thank each and every faculty and staff member who is easy going and has a great sense of humor, for they are the ones who help to make our work environment enjoyable and fun. When someone is demanding and requiring more than their fair share of our time, I point it out to them and let them know what is occurring and that it isn’t fair to the rest of the faculty, whose needs also must be met. I am not a professional therapist and I am dealing with adults now. There are places they can go for help, that my elementary students didn’t necessarily have available to them. People are getting better and better at monitoring themselves in this regard, and they are respecting my time and needs more and are showing me that they are looking out for me. When they do this, I try to make sure I thank them and let them know how grateful I am that they are finding ways to solve their own problems without needing my help.

I also learned as an elementary teacher that I needed to look out for myself and guard my own time, that the work would still be there tomorrow, and at the end of each day I needed to be able to let it go and go home. This is not easy to do! I promised myself when I became department head that I was not putting in more than twenty hours/week on department work, so that I still had time to do my research, teach my course(s), meet with my students (the activities I enjoy which are the reason I became a professor), and have a life outside of work – with my family. I asked my family, the people who really love me, for help in looking out for me, so I wouldn’t try to do too much (my weakness), and harm my health as a result, not to mention my relationships with them. The first couple of months I was department head I felt like I lost ten years off of my life, I was working so hard. Too hard! Eighty-hour work-weeks are not good for anyone’s health! I don’t believe any job is worth dying for, I and I want to be around to watch my own children parent another generation of children. I am doing a better job now of staying within the boundaries I tried to set. Some days and weeks I do better than others. But, twenty hours/week on department work remains my targeted goal. As one of my colleagues and former department heads reminded me when I first started this job: “This isn’t a sprint, it’s a marathon. Pace yourself!”

One other important thing I have tried to do is support my colleagues work efforts in as many ways as I can find available to me. First off, I studied our department budget and discovered we had lots of money! After getting over the shock of realizing there was plenty of money to support faculty efforts, money that we had previously had to beg for and had often been denied, I vowed to change this situation immediately. While I was department head I was going to use the money we have to help my colleagues, staff, and our students do their work. I opened the budget for all to see, and we elected to give ourselves more travel money for conferences, as well as our students. I took requests for needed supplies and equipment, and we purchased what people needed. I said “yes” to every request I could support, and tried to help my colleagues and staff think of more things that maybe they hadn’t thought of asking for. I funded any guest speaker requests, or sponsorships for conferences. I bought new printers and computers (but forgot to get one for myself). The staff ordered all the supplies we could anticipate needing for the next year,

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before the money had to be turned back in at the end of the fiscal year. We had a lot of fun finding ways to spend our money, and still we didn't manage to spend it all. All spring semester I kept wondering, why were the previous department heads unwilling to help support us in this way? Morale soared with this kind of generosity.

Like Joy, I started writing letters asking for support for my faculty and staff, as well as our students. I write letters just about every Friday now, letters of recommendation, letters of nomination for awards, letters of support for grants, letters requesting gender equity pay for female faculty, letters for retention, letters for directive status, letters for merit evaluations, and letters for tenure and promotion. I am sure there are some I am forgetting. Most often this is a very fun part of my job. I have been writing letters for many years now trying to support and thank others for their work. But, now that I am a department head, my support has more weight, so I am trying to use that weight as much as I can to be a supportive advocate for others. Hopefully it is working. It is not always a fun part of my job, however, because now I also have to write letters that do not support a faculty member's efforts. I have to write evaluative letters. Now I have to sometimes write letters of reprimand that let people know they have violated university policy, or acted in a way that is unprofessional, and these are not fun letters to write. Caring is not just about acts of kindness and agreement, it is also about sound judgment and critique. Caring involves the heart and the mind, and includes not just appreciation and support, but also responsibility and accountability. When a colleague is disrespectful to a staff member or a student breaks the trust of his peers and teachers, I am the one who has to step in and hold people accountable. I try to do so with as much loving support as I can offer, while maintaining my professional role, and upholding my own integrity. Most important to me is the ability to live with myself. I hold myself to the high standards of Sister Katherine and Joy DeSensi.

### *Conclusion*

I have learned that the job of department head is a tough job! I now suspect that principals of schools are in the same boat. I have to try to please a lot of people: students, faculty, staff, other department heads, associate deans, deans, vice provosts, provosts and chancellors, and presidents of the university. Principals have to try to please: students, faculty, staff, parents, other principals, assistant superintendents, superintendents, and school boards. I am sure I am leaving off people from these lists. I am directly in the line of fire now; I am the person whose name is listed as the place to contact, for anything. I am directly responsible for all hiring and firing within our department, all management of funds, including the paying of all our bills (from ordering paper to payroll). If funds are mismanaged by any staff or faculty members, as they have been under my watch, I am responsible. All faculty are evaluated by me, and recommended for tenure and promotion. All grade changes, drop-add slips, IRB forms, travel forms, and course completion forms are signed by me. This is just a sample. It is a lot of responsibility!

As can be imagined, with all that responsibility resting on my shoulders, it is pretty safe to bet that at any given time, someone is probably unhappy with me. I am an easy target for blame, for I am the one who has to say "no." If the university policy does not allow someone to do something, I am the one who has to make sure we follow the policy, and/or write the letter of

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appeal to try to get an exception to the rule. I am the one who may cause someone to have to delay something they want to do such as submit a grant, interview a candidate, graduate, because they have not done what they needed to do in the time allotted and they need my signature to help them. Maybe life just got in their way and kept them from meeting a deadline. I try to give them the benefit of the doubt and a generous read of why they find themselves in their current predicament. Unfortunately, I can't always help them as quickly as they need my help, for I cannot be in two places at once and I have already been booked for meetings with other people on this day, and the next. It is easier to get mad at me, or blame me, than to take responsibility for one's own actions, or plan ahead, or do the hard work needed to complete the task at hand well on one's own in a timely manner, or seek advice and assistance if not clear on what to do before it's too late.

I have learned to really appreciate the people I work with who are responsible and reliable, the people I can count on, whom I can turn to for help and they will say "yes, of course I will help." I have tried hard to earn my colleagues' trust, and let them know I will not ask them to do anything if I can avoid it, I know they are busy, and I will not ask them to do more than their fair share. I will protect their time and energy as much as possible. And, I have tried hard to come through for them and do what I say I will do. I try not to create a bottleneck, or blockage to the flow of their work. I understand better now why administrators appreciate "can do" attitudes, it's exhausting and debilitating to continually have to face moaning and groaning. I am reminded continually now that we all have limits to our time and energy, and we need to use our limited resources wisely. Fighting and arguing takes more energy than I have these days. I am addressing anger and distrust with care, with kind words and actions, with gratitude and appreciation, with respect and dignity, with Sister Katherine as my guide.

It seems to be working! Our morale is up, we laugh more, we have fun together, we enjoy each other's company, we are excited about each other's work, we know each other better, we want to collaborate with each other, we spend more time with each other, we thank each other more, we complain less, we take care of our own responsibilities more. It's exciting to see all we have accomplished in one year! Our student numbers are up, our productivity is up, our staff and faculty numbers are up. Everything is on the rise, and our students and faculty are doing amazing things! People keep telling me things are better, their lives are better as a result of whatever it is I am doing. I am so glad, but I am not surprised. I know what it felt like to have Sister Katherine as a principal when I was a teacher, and to have Joy DeSensi as a department head as a professor. I am trying to give back what has been given to me. I am doing this job the way it has been modeled for me, as an act of care. If my colleagues decide they do not want me to do the job, I will gladly step down. Many days I have hoped someone would please come in to my office and tell me I should step down from this administrative role. I would love my former life back again! But, no one has asked me to step down, yet. Sigh. I am changed forever as a result of taking my turn, for now I know how great the people are I work with and for. I love coming to work everyday just to see them, and because I wonder, what problem will I/we need to face and try to solve today?