

University of South Florida

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2015

On the Tenure Trek to Equanimity: ¡Oh, Cúan Lejos Llegarás!

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/vonzell_agosto/29/

Chapter for the Book

On the tenure trek to equanimity: “¡Oh, Cúan Lejos LLeGARás!” In F. Hernandez, E. Murakami, & G. Rodriguez, (Eds.). *Abriendo Puertas, Cerrando Heridas (Opening Doors, Closing Wounds: Latinas/os Finding Work-Life Balance in Academia* (pp. 21-33). Charlotte, NC Information Age Publishing. **Agosto, V.** (2015).

On the Tenure Trek to Equanimity: ¡Oh, Cúan Lejos LLeGARás!

Through writing this self-reflective inquiry into the hyphens between work-life, life-work, and life-world I am crystallizing a way of walking in the world that feels good to me ethically, spiritually, and emotionally. I characterize this initial leg of my academic journey as being on the tenure trek to equanimity. My developing ideas about equanimity are framed in part as a culturally diverse discourse of thriving in academia that highlights central concepts in my educational philosophy and research program: culture, justice, and curriculum. To discuss equanimity in relationship to being on a tenure trek, I refer to the scholarship of McRae (2013) who draws on Tibetan Buddhist philosopher and yogi Patrul Rinpoche (1808-1887) to advance a feminist-Buddhist concept of equanimity. She describes equanimity as a feeling with affective and cognitive components that is cultivated through the reduction of aversion and craving in order to develop emotional maturity, self-awareness, and openness needed to reduce bias and prejudice which interferes with loving relationships and moral judgment. Equanimity concerns balance as an evenness in temperament rather than evenness in effort or time expended.

In seeking equanimity rather than balance I am heeding Caproni's (1997) claim that “you can't get there from here” (p. 46). She asks if balance is even what one should seek given that the discourse of work/life balance is shrouded in “language that promotes predictability, control, individual achievement, hierarchy of values, constant movement toward goals, and compartmentalization of life” (p. 47). I find equanimity to be more consistent with a notion of balance symbolized by the Egyptian goddess Maat rather than with the Roman goddess Justitia.

While balance associated with Justitia was represented by scales of justice symbolizing the weighing of contributions to justice and injustice, balance associated with Maat involved order, truth, and justice in the universe and among people as well as the weighing of one's heart or conscience. Furthermore, images of Justitia portray her as blindfolded while not those of Maat who therefore more closely symbolizes the impartiality (elimination of bias) as described by McRae (2013): a stance one cultivates rather than a position one undertakes (to act as if one is veiled or blindfolded). McRae (2013) characterizes equanimity as a practice of impartiality that eliminates bias at the interpersonal level and expands our sphere of genuine concern by removing the major psychological obstacles (i.e., craving and aversion) (McRae, 2013).

My aspiration to develop equanimity is becoming clearer to me through using *currere*, which is the Latin root of the word curriculum signifying movement around a track as well as a phenomenological and existential approach to understanding educational experience. Unlike Pinar (1975), I am engaging the method of *currere* without having “sat zazen, the Zen Buddhist meditation” (p. 5). Instead, my trek has been informed by “working the hyphen” in inquiry with others (Fine, 1988), as well as myself. According to the life-world philosophy of Ogata Masato, one should seek connectedness: a strong the sense being connected organically to a rhizome-like life-world and to those from one's past and present (a spiritual community). Life-world is a translation of the Japanese terms ‘seimei sekai’ (生命世界), or ‘inochi no sekai’ (いのちの世界) (Yoneyama, 2012). It is a philosophy that provides ethical and spiritual dimensions that are not covered by the system-society perspective. Likewise, in the method of *currere* the investigator has an obligation to speak from where she lives and make clear her biographic basis (Pinar, 1975).

My ideas about walking, working, and living are developing through reflection on my positionality and the relationships I have had with people and contexts, past and present. The people, places, and relationships invoked, explicitly and implicitly, in this self-reflective inquiry are shaping me in the current moment (Smith, 2013). Moreover, the distance between the researcher and subject (I, me) is bridged and a clearer understanding of the present is gained by outlining the past, present, and future (Pinar, 1975).

My roots inform my educational trajectory from teacher to aspiring doctoral student and professor/scholar. I am a woman who identifies as mixed-race and multi-ethnic with African-American/Black and Mexican-American heritage that includes creole roots from New Orleans. While kith and kin of Latino descent are central in this reflection on how I am coming to think about and seek equanimity across work, life, and world, honoring them should not be understood as the devaluation or neglect of people and ideas from other racial and/or ethnic groups who have contributed enormously to my personal and professional growth. In the fashion of currere, my narrative flows from reflection on events and relationships into my analyses of them to affect the development of my thinking about equanimity, or as I have learned to say in Black English Vernacular: “stay cool”. To communicate this trek I use additional languages of beauty, from the whimsical rhymes of Dr. Seuss (in Spanish and English) to concepts invoked in Buddhist and Chicana feminist philosophy.

How Far I Have Come to Be Here

Almost a decade ago I deliberated about whether or not to remain a high school teacher or leave it to pursue graduate studies. My friend Roman, who is also multiracial/ethnic (Mexican-American and White), had been accepted into graduate school and received a fellowship that was paying for his tuition and providing him a stipend. As more of a whim than

the pursuit of a life's dream, I sought a similar arrangement. Roman gave me his Graduate Record Examination (GRE) note cards and soon after I was accepted (to my surprise) into two doctoral programs. However, when it came time to decide whether or not to leave teaching I weighed the decision more heavily for it meant that I would be leaving Latino males in the hallways. Those who I urged to class each day, while most other teachers passed by them, might be left them posturing against their lockers. They, like I, were in a position to consider Dr. Seuss' questions.

Do you dare to stay out?

¿Te atreves a quedarte?

Do you dare to go in?

¿Te atreves a entrar?

¿Cuando puedes perder?

How much can you lose?

How much can you win?

¿Cuanto puedes ganar?

I entered my first semester of doctoral study in a research extensive institution with the thought that I had no clue about what was before me and whether I would succeed.

I cannot recall being told that I would go far in life. Although elders seemed to think I was smart in some way, they did not tell me with any consistency what path I should seek. Although talk of a career path was non-existent in my family, I have to realize that I was being prepared to be a kind of person, not a kind of worker, so that no matter the career path I chose I would have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to be in relationship with other lives (including my own) in a non-destructive way.

You have brains in your head.

You have feet in your shoes

You can steer yourself any direction you choose.

Con cerebro en tu cabeza.

Con pies en tus zapatos.

Cualquier dirección escojerás que tus pies quieran encontrar.

I was being taught to be docile: to accept the authority of adults without question and remain quiet unless spoken to. But I was also being taught to be socially skilled (listen, pay respect, be parsimonious). In the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, docile is both defined as 1) easily taught and 2) easily led or managed (merriam-webster.com/dictionary/docile). While the latter definition is more commonly used today, I see both operating in schools today as educators struggle with the boundaries between them. This struggle is perhaps more prevalent today with the word discipline given that one of its meanings is fading into obsolescence: instruction (merriam-webster.com/dictionary/discipline). The paradoxical nature of docility was demonstrated to me by the first Latina I met, my mother. She was Mexican-American, a second-generation U.S. citizen who was bilingual (Spanish/English). As far as I know she was attracted to Black/African American men (one of which was my father) rather than women. Although I saw her as someone with a quiet disposition, I also learned to see her as disobedient with regard to the status quo of racial politics during the time she was coming of age (1940s-1950s).

Even later, at the time of my birth, when the racial politics included the illegality of interracial marriage (at least in one state) she defied her family. Despite her mother's expectation that she would seek a Mexican or Mexican-American partner (i.e., husband), my mother did not conform. Her challenge to the racial status quo of the time is a spirit I have undertaken, which

comes across in my research interests in multicultural education, participation in a global mentoring network, and preference for being in the company of people from various racial and/or ethnic groups - romantically and platonically. The hyphen between my racial-ethnic identity markers (African-American and Mexican-American) means that I am working the margins daily as a mixed-race person and as someone who sees the margins as bridges and bridges as good places to hang out - not just points of transition to and from other places.

If my mother was docile in her temperament, she was less so in her praxis. According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, temperament is defined as the constitution of a substance, body, or organism with respect to the mixture or balance of its elements, qualities, or parts (merriam-webster.com/dictionary/temperament). Through her life I have been taught to attune to temperament as a constellation of elements that constitutes the substance of one's character and consider the body as racialized, gendered, classed, and organized within a larger set of structures (i.e., organizations such as institutions such as marriage or of education, and society). I find the word temperament to be closer to what I mean by equanimity and relevant to praxis: a way of walking in the world. I wonder if by some rhizomatic meandering I have come to land on the body and organisms/organizations as characterized by Deleuze (1969) or Deleuze and Guattari (1980): a body without organs. At least I am certain I have returned to Moraga and Anzaldúa and their articulation of a theory of the flesh based on the physical realities experienced by women of color: a theory conducive to forming a society in which they can heal. My return to their scholarship is characteristic of the method of *currere* in which one attempts to extract the existential meaning of the present to create a fuller portrait of the curriculum of one's life that includes the physical self (Pinar, 1975).

Theory of the Flesh

During the second semester of my first year of teaching as an assistant professor in a research extensive university, a student informant disclosed to me that other students in the Master's level course had questioned if I was Black. In hallway discussions some expressed uncertainty about my race and ethnicity and tried to determine it through analyzing the texture of my hair. According to the informant, on one occasion a fellow student left class asking classmates if I was married. The student noted that I mentioned having a child but they did not see a wedding ring on the index finger of my left hand. Even though I was an assistant professor and well past my teenage years, their comments and questions revived my memory of stereotypes about unwed teenage girls of color (especially Latinas and African Americans). I recalled my determination as a teenager to avoid becoming an example of the stereotype featured in Public Service Announcements (PSAs): poor Black/Mexican teenagers who become pregnant and undereducated mothers. I felt the students' comments were building into a role, and I was being typecast as the unwed mother with my child as the bastard son. My trust in students had been challenged and I felt a painful loss after having taught youth (high school, undergraduate level) the prior two decades with joy.

And when you're in a slump,
you're not in for much fun.

Cuando en la bajada estás,
divertida la cosa no la será,

Un-slumping yourself is not easily done.

Y des-bajarte ardua empresa resultará.

My soul was wounded upon hearing that these, and more scathing comments (communicated by another informant), were being circulated by students (which the first

informant labeled racist). As a first year assistant professor, my hazing signified a “struggle of the flesh, and struggle of borders, an inner war” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 100). The body, in general, provides a site from which to theorize the “flesh and blood experiences of the woman of color” (Moraga, 1981, p. 23). A sense of self-doubt clouded my thinking and I grew conscious of my fingernails. I questioned whether I should polish them or avoid polishing them for fear the polish would peel and students’ disgust for me could be provoked and attributed to my body rather than my race, ethnicity, and gender: to my less than pristine nails. A sense of dull heaviness arose and I looked down at my nails in judgment and fought back the extension of that sensation into my lips, toes, buttocks, etc. Such moments remind me how permeable the hyphen between work and life can be. The sensation of being assaulted traveled from their comments on my hair and index finger toward my fingernails, thereby illustrating the idea of the body subject: the direct relationship between the human body and its world (Buttimer, 1976).

I recall having the sensation of dull heaviness come and urge me to look at my fingernails while playing volleyball. This instance was particularly disturbing since the volleyball court was my refuge from the academic institution and I had not identified any institutional space that would allow me to express these sensations as I felt them. The discourse in the institution regarding the annual review process and teaching narratives emphasized reflection and change in response to various demands and expectations. However, there was risk in attributing the low ratings of my teaching to others’ racial bias. I continue to feel the burden of having to internalize the problem so that I can reflect on areas where I need to improve; taking full responsibility for those who enter the classroom pre-judging me as incompetent, unwed, and too smart to be a woman of color. Over time, I have come to know the types of students who find me problematic (by gender, class, race, intellectual experience, and ideological leanings). If a divide truly existed

between the *work* of teaching and *life* then the effects would not enter other spaces and places nor matter in the materiality of my annual evaluation to affect my income and professional status.

During my first year as an assistant professor I developed a refrain: recovery through resubmission. It communicates my determination to harness whatever energy I have left after being rejected and redirect it into the same or a different activity where I would like to be successful (another publication, proposal, course development). Even though this approach helps me to work through disappointment and redirect it into resilience, it does not liberate me from the pressures of having to perform. “[T]here is a deep alienation in the experience of constantly living to perform” (Lynch, 2010, p. 55). Additionally, recovery through resubmission serves as a strategy in my pursuit of life-work and life-world equanimity. For instance, recovery from the semester described above led me to analyze the role of the gym, how working-out mattered. I found that spin class (stationary bike riding to music) allows me to release negative energy; yoga allows me to relax into a brief nap; volleyball allows me the connectedness that comes from working collaboratively as part of a team; and lifting weights allows me to develop strength and stamina. Practice that involves healing, energy, naps, connectedness, strength, and stamina has been critical in helping me mediate the intensities that have been provoked in me during the first five years of my tenure trek.

Fortunately I have taught many students who have embraced me, and my teaching, even in that semester. They helped me to heal the wounds. As that particular course section was ending, another student read from the book by Dr. Seuss, *Oh, the places you’ll go!* She offered an inspirational tale in which a former teacher encouraged her to continue her education. She (a

White woman), the informants (who were women of color), and a few other students in the class helped me to persist into the next semester.

¡Oh, cuan lejos llegarás! ¡Que divertido será!

Oh, the places you'll go! There is fun to be done!

Hay puntos que anotar. Juegos que ganar.

There are points to be scored. There are games to be won.

However, it has taken a few years for some of the joy of teaching to be replenished, which is now intermittent at best. Just recently, my struggle of the flesh while teaching has been rewarded in 2014 after winning the Social Justice Teaching Award from the Leadership for Social Justice (LSJ) Special Interest Group (SIG) of the American Education Research Association (AERA).

The Hidden (in the Closet) Curriculum of Academic Lives

Adding to the celebration of the moment was that my dear friend Frank was taking minutes as the SIG's secretary. Frank is a man of Mexican descent whose spirit I feel intensely healing. We had met ten years ago in graduate school during a seminar he co-taught on diversity and educational leadership. Soon after that we were sitting at the table as graduate student representatives as part of the Student Government. Through meeting him I was able to bridge my personal and academic lives in the transition from educator in a secondary school with a racially diverse student, staff, and faculty to doctoral student on a campus with a student population that was predominantly White.

In was in a seminar Frank led where I first saw a White woman cry after watching someone shout accusations of racism in a video. I was stunned at her reaction and wondered why she was crying when the people of color in the class were not, and why she did not hold back tears as I had. I was also perturbed by the event, her explanation (a feeling of helplessness and

uncertainty about what do about racism), and that much attention went to comforting her rather than those who were holding back tears. I did not speak but listened instead, as did Frank who was the facilitator and model. I was challenged to check my biases, show restraint in order to work toward understanding through dialogue, and calm myself. “Whenever we are able to respond to a situation without reacting out of feelings of craving or aversion, we are exhibiting equanimity” (McCrae, 2013, p. 452). Overall, the seminar also challenged my perception that educational leadership was an academic and professional field devoid of concerns for diversity and social justice. Having such a friend, mentor, role model, and ally allowed me to transition my focus from work-life to academic-life and adjust to the social and academic demands of graduate school. Frank was instrumental in helping me develop equanimity across life, work, and world. He is also the only one in my academic community who has met my previous partner - Chris.

Chris is Puerto Rican. It is from her that I gained my surname Agosto. Over the first ten years of our relationship we have loved deeply and hated one another nearly as intensely. Across the next 10 years we settled into a relationship for which I have not found a name that seems appropriate. At some time during the first 10 years, I came home one day after having a difficult week of teaching and meetings concerning a student whose violence was directed against students and adults. Chris said I could quit my job if I wanted to and not worry about paying bills. Although I did not quit, I will always remember that feeling of calm that came with knowing I had a choice of leaving if I wanted while also realizing that I wanted to stay. Equanimity “has a clear affective component, which is the light and expansive feeling of calm and peace” (McCrae, 2013, p. 453). That is the kind of calm I seek today on the tenure trek, which has more to do with my perception and deliberation about opportunities I take or make.

My survival in academia is coming through the development of my perceptual ability to know and respond to external and internal cues about where to direct my energies and how to be affected by energies coming at me. I seek to maintain equanimity despite varying intensities and regardless of the im/balance in the quality or quantity of the workload that faces me.

Nunca olvides ser diestro y hábil.

Just never forget to be dexterous and deft.

Y nunca enredas tu pie derecho con el izquierdo.

And never mix up your right foot with your left.

Although these prior experiences while teaching and studying illustrate moments in my coming to embrace equanimity over balance, the current moment (as I prepare to submit my application for tenure and promotion at the end of my 5th year as an assistant professor) comes with a clearer understanding of how these prior experiences are feeding my story of persisting on the tenure track. More troublesome in this story of persistence are the forces that I feel pulling me to be a particular kind of person: one who is careless.

Carelessness and Care-fullness

In the academy, care is valued when it is professionalized rather than personalized (Lynch, 2010). Lynch (2010) describes how the new managerialism of higher education has intensified the need for a care-less form of competitive individualism in which the “idealized worker is one that is available 24/7 without ties or responsibilities that will hinder her or his productive capacities” (p. 57). The emphasis on workers without a care (who are care-less) has disproportionately negative consequences for women in academia, who tend to be the primary care-takers of friends and family members. “It is assumed that even the care of one’s own emotional wellbeing is incidental” (p. 57). In contrast, care-fullness is more inclusive of one’s

professional *and* personal life. Yet, in order to maintain care-fullness I must seek calm amid competing professional and personal demands.

While I was a high school teacher I read the *Celestine Prophecy*, which reinforced my belief that energy exists between the organic and inorganic and between the living and the dead. I still believe that all energy circulates as part of the universe - not just the university. From that point of view I am never alone and any pain I cause or bad vibes I give out will likely resonate out into the universe to affect me and others. Both care and justice are intertwined ethics in my attempt to participate in the cosmic community while embracing an academic role. So when I started to face pressures related to external yet internalized demands (publish or perish) I had some confidence that community and energy (positivity, asset perspectives, activity) would offer life support in order for me to persist in what I beginning to define as my life's work. This perspective is congruent with the life-world philosophy that favors connectedness and communicates the tensions between individual initiatives and institutional pressures (Elliott, Katagari, & Sawai, 2012). Fortunately, my previous experience had prepared me to enter academia by first scouting out my community to support my well-being. From there I was able to start collaborative research projects through which I have built a support system through good work and working relationships. Also important in my persistence are personal relationships.

My first year on the tenure trek was situated in an agreement, between Cornelio (the father of my son) and I. Since I had provided the majority of care for our son for the first his three years while completing my dissertation and job search, Cornelio agreed to take over being the primary caretaker of our child and home for the next three years. Cornelio left his family and relocated to Florida, meaning the care and acculturation that he and my child had been receiving from family was interrupted. For the first time, Cornelio was leaving his family to live in another

state. This was not insignificant for him or his family, which has a strong tradition of family gathering and find kinship invaluable. These customs and cultural assets are as strong as depicted in many broad-stroke descriptions of Latino culture (or more specifically for Cornelio – Chicano culture).

The support that Cornelio has provided to me while starting this leg of my career is immeasurable. For the first three years I had minimal responsibilities at home and spent very little time with him or my child. While the tenure clock was ticking so was the period of me being free of cares (careless) at home. Despite the freedom this arrangement provided, I also awoke each day during years 2 and 3 in a fright - counting my publications and checking the calendar. I did not know what stress felt like before I became an assistant professor. In addition to starting many days with pain in my shoulder blade from typing, a hoarse throat from being exhausted, and feeling upset about not being able to clear my mind enough to get an adequate amount of sleep, I knew that he was sacrificing his own career goals. Though he was bonding with his child, his other personal and professional connections were growing more distant. I treated the first three years on the tenure clock as if the mid-tenure review would be my tenure and promotion review to be scheduled for the 6th year. Knowing that I would have to take more responsibility at home meant that I worked with the expectation that I had three years to build a foundation of scholarship that would support my productivity as I transitioned back to doing home-work. Honestly, adding to the pressure, I thought my contract would be terminated at mid-tenure if I did not have 2-3 publications per year, etc., etc.

In year three, a friend/colleague asked why I kept saying the university will let me go and why I refused to hang photos in my home. Through our discussion it became clear that my fears were unreasonable given the history of the institution and my productivity up to that point.

However, I felt little concern from the institution that I was not caring for myself, or my family, outside of maintaining my position or ensuring that my contract and career would continue. I began to question for whom I was working and what I wanted to feel like en route to becoming tenured. The demands to provide service to the field and institution, produce scholarship, write grants, and teach were ever present and I suspect will continue to be so. In year 4 and 5 I needed to reconnect with me and my family to ask us what really mattered and how I might care-fully about life-world - work-life.

Pisa con cuidado y gran tacto

Step with care and great tact

y recuerda esto: La vida es un gran juego de equilibrio.

and remember that Life's a Great Balancing Act.

Today, I am much more aware that in addition to gender bias forces such as neoliberalism influence institutions of higher education in ways that support its commercialization and urges carelessness as a moral imperative (Lynch, 2010). I take my cue going forward from those who have shown me care (Roman, Frank, Chris, Cornelio) and from McRae (2013) who reminds me that in “properly cultivated equanimity, the love we have for our family members does not decrease but rather serves as a standard to which we raise others” (p. 458). I also have more clarity about the relationship between presence and service, its commoditization, and how it comes with a price tag. To colleagues who request more of my “presence” in the office (2013 annual review) and more service to the institution (as a responsible citizen), I say I have done that and better for I have gained some presence of mind that helps me to act constructively and direct my energy toward building an international presence. Demands to be present locally and careless with regard to the amount of service I render take a toll on the care I give to the larger

community, myself, and my family. Care-fullness comes from being present with those for whom caring and just relations are central. Equanimity supports a life-world of care-fullness for the universe - not just the university. It braces me to work within a system that can be counterproductive to that which it asks of me: to be research productive. Despite the competing demands and forces that would diminish my sense of care (make me careless) in order that I serve the institution, my inner battle to maintain composure is greater. Acquiring the capacity to sustain calmness or evenness of temperament is congruent with care and justice for it dis/positions me to challenge neoliberal forces that reduce care to a commodity, gendered biases that benefit men over women, and discourses of care that neglect the value in expressions of care I am giving to and receiving from those outside or marginalized inside the academy. Care-fullness can be a vehicle for developing the emotional maturity, self-awareness, and openness needed to reduce the bias and prejudice that interferes with loving relationships and moral judgment. A tenure trek to equanimity is at minimum a journey to express the full range of care that goes into establishing a *career*.

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