Tipping Toward a New Academic Consciousness

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Tipping Toward a New Academic Consciousness

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic and racial reckoning of 2020-2021 have led many faculty in higher education to see the profession and their place in it in a new light (Walton 2022). While people are broadly engaged in a large-scale cultural re-evaluation of work, labor conditions, and equity, this awakening has posed an existential threat to many academics’ senses of identity, purpose, and community. Through autoethnographic narratives, the authors make meaning of this tipping point through the feminist intersections of space, power, and consciousness. The authors explore coaching and mutual mentoring as strategies for creating and holding space for disrupting these norms and expectations and for reimagining mentoring, collaboration, and collective action in ways that respond to our current realities and to changing academic work, moving us toward professional work that supports faculty flourishing.

Keywords: Faculty flourishing, coaching, consciousness-raising, rhetorical space, faculty development

The COVID-19 pandemic and racial reckoning of 2020-2021 have led many faculty in higher education in the United States to see the profession and their place in it in a new light (Walton 2022). While people are broadly engaged in a large-scale cultural re-evaluation of work, labor conditions, and equity, this awakening has posed an existential threat to many academics’ senses of identity, purpose, and community. In our work as faculty, faculty coaches, and facilitators of mutual mentoring groups at a 40,000-student research institution in the Southern region of the United States, we are observing a tipping point in which a new consciousness is emerging, one which rejects traditional notions of academic service at the expense of self (Pope-Raurk 2022). We are seeing a shift toward faculty claiming the right to flourish (Seligson 2012) in the academy.

In this paper, we make meaning of this shift in terms of space, power, and consciousness through a feminist lens. We recognize, as bell hooks explains, how acts of “talking back” historically have allowed women and members of marginalized groups to create new spaces for discursive exchange to “reveal the personal” (1989, 1), creating solidarity with their words and impetus for social change and serving as “an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenge[d] politics of domination that would render [them] nameless and voiceless” (8). Applying Carter’s characterization of feminism “as a movement that empowers women to recognize and challenge intersecting forms of societal oppression through making connections to their everyday lives,” we aim to challenge the oppression of the academy by making connections to our own lives in autoethnographic narratives of our experiences at this tipping point – narratives that we discovered in our own solidarity-building conversations with each other in 2020-2022 (2013, 2). Finally, we call upon feminist scholar-practitioners to create space to foster a new academic consciousness that prioritizes “care of the self” (see also Foucault 1988).
The 2021-2022 Academic Awakening

Since early 2020, the COVID-19 global pandemic and racial reckoning have had significant effects on numerous facets of personal and professional life, prompting extended reflections on the ways we engage, acknowledge, and compensate labor in the United States and abroad (see for example, Abston and Bryant 2021, Kaushik and Guleria 2020). These conversations have been widespread in academic spaces as well (see for example Dali et al. 2021; Minello 2020; and Minello, Martucci, and Manzo 2021). The scholarly literature abounds with analyses of expectations for faculty work, including expectations for faculty on and off the tenure track, and the uncompensated labor expected of faculty who have negotiated remote teaching, increased mentoring and student support, and family and care responsibilities (McClure and Fryar 2022; Newcomb 2021; The Review 2022; Walton 2022). These analyses have revealed the ways in which academic work is incongruous with what is often termed work-life balance (Anwer 2020). Academic studies also have begun to reveal the disproportionate labor that women have taken on in managing during this time and the long-term effects this uncompensated labor may have on women faculty’s scholarly productivity and prospects toward tenure, promotion, and advancement (Docka-Filipek and Stone 2021; Minello, Martucci, and Manzo 2021).

An Already Broken System

The truth is, however, that the current COVID-19 pandemic is one new reality in academic work that has exacerbated an already broken system. This system has been described as the casualization of higher education and the widespread effects of neoliberalism on working conditions (Wånggren 2015). One significant facet of that system has been its reliance on exploitative contingent faculty labor—a new faculty majority of up to eighty-five percent in some disciplines—who are employed on limited, often semester-to-semester contracts without benefits or office space and who often teach courses with the largest enrollments across multiple campuses to piece together a barely living wage (American Federation of Teachers, 2022; FemTechNet 2013). Within our own U.S. context, women are disproportionately represented in the ranks of contingent faculty. The widespread move to remote and online teaching in early 2020 required both increased time for course preparation and additional support for students (American Federation of Teachers 2022). For numerous faculty this workload was negotiated in tandem with remote teaching for children at home, increased childcare, and increased care for other family members. The effects of these increased labors also have been disproportionately carried by contingent faculty. They typically teach a great number of courses each semester and a greater number of students at the first-year or general education level. During the pandemic, institutions were particularly focused on providing a “traditional” college experience for these students, one that included face-to-face classes and on-campus experiences with few interruptions, including interruptions in the form of masking, vaccines, and COVID testing. Collectively, these labors increased questions about the costs and rewards of academic work and its sustainability.

A second facet of this broken system is the centrality of passion in academic work (Cannizzo 2018). Many academics describe their work as a passion, explaining that they put up with the grading, the long hours, and the low wages because they love what they do. Erin A. Cech, an associate professor of sociology at the University of Michigan and the author of The Trouble With Passion: How Searching for Fulfillment at Work Fosters Inequality, explains that while “there’s nothing wrong with finding fulfillment at work . . . . passion goes further than that. It’s loaded with the expectation that you’ll do whatever it takes for your career, which . . . . can lead to exploitation and inequality in the workplace” and to “burnout, resentment, resignation” (Tam and Douglis 2022). Significantly, Cech’s research revealed that being able to pursue
passion in career choice already suggests a level of privilege (Tam and Douglis 2022). Cech’s research also highlighted “an unpaid apprenticeship process” in many fields, certainly the case for academic work, during which those new to the organization are expected to complete work that is uncompensated “showing that you’re worthy enough to be part of the organization” (Tam and Douglis 2022). And for many in academe, this “sacrificial labor’ where the catch-all category of ‘service’ effectively obscures the amount of unpaid work inherent in required career activities like journal publishing, policy writing, student advising and course development,” continues long after the apprenticeship process (FemTechNet 2013). Those whose work is “socially-devalued,” according to Cech, including teachers, are more likely to experience workplace exploitation, inequality, and overwork (Goodblar 2018; Tam and Douglis 2022). With Cech’s research in mind, we can understand how the issue is further complicated for contingent faculty who are often teaching general education courses more likely to be devalued or designated service courses for the university. Cech suggests “Having frank conversations with colleagues about what is enough” to disrupt dominant narratives about passion and overwork (Tam and Douglis 2022).

Within academic settings, the cultural norm is to be (or perform as) passionate about one’s research, teaching, and service, despite low pay and long work hours. The idea is that faculty get to do passion work and should be grateful for the opportunity regardless of the working conditions. Coding labor with “passion” was further exploited during the pandemic in how teachers were both championed and celebrated for the poorly compensated work they had taken on for so long and then vilified as lazy or insubordinate when they refused to sacrifice their health (and their students’ health) by returning to unsafe working conditions. Faculty identity, sense of self, and perceived fulfillment is so intermingled with their academic productivity and peer review of their work, that it fosters exploitation and high levels of overwork at the expense of relationships and health (Canizzo 2019; Tumbler n.d.).

A third facet of this broken system is that the events of the last two years also increased the labor consistently carried by BIPOC and other marginalized faculty (Anwer 2020). Across academic contexts, BIPOC faculty carry heavier service loads in developing and coordinating programs, serving as formal and informal mentors to students and faculty, and being called on to lead or make significant contributions to diversity, equity, inclusion, and anti-racism initiatives at the department and/or institutional level that require significant intellectual and emotional labor and often shape research agendas. This labor was compounded during the racial reckoning that began in 2020, as such initiatives propagated throughout the academy, and BIPOC faculty were tasked to lead and teach their colleagues in how to respond. In many cases these initiatives were performative and numerous BIPOC faculty communicated to us that the consequences were increased tokenization and uncompensated labor with limited, if any, meaningful change.

In terms of faculty hiring and support, retention of underrepresented and minoritized faculty often receives less attention. Most faculty evaluation systems in place nationwide ignore the microaggressions minoritized faculty face inside and outside of the classroom and the bias that can shape the visibility and evaluation of their work. This bias is evident not only in research findings on student evaluations of teaching and student-faculty interactions, but also in scholarship exploring microaggressions and bias in the evaluation of faculty work across teaching, research, and service (Gutierrez y Muhs 2012; Huston 2006; Pittman 2021; Rideau and Robbins 2020). Regarding evaluation of faculty scholarship and intellectual work, for example, Diab et al. write, “Given the pervasiveness of microaggressions in everyday life, it is no surprise that they similarly shape writing activities, especially complicating one’s rights to speak, write, conduct research, and share expertise” (2019, 464). As a result, “When microinvalidations undermine people as knowers, they also undermine full personhood, which includes having one’s experiences acknowledged by others, being able to construct new knowledge, and being able to contribute as a knowledgeable agent within one’s community” (Diab et al. 2019, 464). Further, as Edmonds (2019)
describes it, BIPOC intellectual labor is often treated as disposable. So not only are BIPOC faculty overworked and uncompensated for much of their labor, but their contributions are also insufficiently recognized and systemically undervalued.

For many, these multiple and intersecting realities prompted a recurring question: Why do highly intelligent and accomplished people continue to work under these conditions? While questions like this have the potential to ignore and obscure systemic problems within the neoliberal academy, we have found ourselves and our colleagues asking them more frequently in the last two years. One possibility, we contend, is that it is a combination of sunk costs and moral servitude. Exploitation in academe is often perpetuated through morality and the idea that serving as an educator is a privilege that warrants the sacrifice of sufficient compensation, personal time, and even well-being, especially when the work is coded with passion, as we explore above. Just as Sinclair argues in her 2009 feminist critique of the leadership literature, some leaders, especially women, have taken the idea of servant leadership too far at the expense of well-being. The same holds true in education with the expectation that educators prioritize the service of learners and educational institutions above self. We contend that modern notions of servant educators are perpetuated to exploit faculty in the name of a higher good. This moral obligation combines with a sense of immense sunk costs of time and money invested in pursuing a doctorate, a faculty position, and for the privileged minority, tenure. These sunk costs, together with employability fear, the exclusivity of the academy, and the loss of identity beyond the academy create a mentality that makes it hard for many faculty to imagine and pursue better working conditions (Baker 2015).

The Tipping Point

Outside of academic spaces, workers have been leaving their jobs in droves throughout the pandemic, in what has been widely termed the great resignation. The faculty experience has been in some ways distinct, termed a “great disengagement” (McClure and Frye 2022). Faculty are reporting that the expectations of continuing to perform at the highest levels while changing teaching modalities, having to put research agendas on pause or reimagine them entirely due to lack of access to research subjects and or labs during the pandemic, increased uncompensated labor, and returning to campus to teach face to face in unsafe conditions has led them to lose their passion for work. While they had accepted these terms of engagement at the expense of their wellbeing before, the ask became too big, and they no longer could do so. While some are seeking work in other sectors or other academic institutions, many are disengaging. They opt to do what it takes to survive, show up for their students, and meet institutional expectations. Yet, the passion and spark has dried up and what for many is a central if not defining identity of academic has been called into question. This has led to a tipping point, one in which faculty are beginning to recognize that something is terribly amiss and that their past work-life disharmony and sacrifice of well-being cannot be sustained (Dolezal 2022; Pope-Raurk 2022).

While the data is still being collected on how many faculty are leaving academic work and how pervasive their great disengagement is, our roles as faculty and faculty coaches uniquely position us to contribute to the scholarship on this tipping point. Not only have we tried to make meaning of our own faculty experience during the last three years, we have also supported our colleagues as they have tried to do so through our roles as faculty and leader coaches and facilitators of mutual mentoring groups.

We frame the sections that follow as a conversation grounded first by our individual experiences and then fused in a collaborative analysis. In an act of meaning making, we foreground these personal narratives, connecting our own experiences to the feminist literature on space, power, and consciousness-raising (Holt 2001; Imad 2021; Sparkes 1996; Wall 2008). We engage Ahmed’s articulation that “Feminist
ideas are what we come up with to make sense of what persists;” that we “build theory from description of where [we are] in the world” (2017, 12). In writing from where we are, we open our individual narratives with descriptions of our positionalities, including how our identities and privileges shape how and where we enter these ongoing conversations. This approach provides perspective at the intersection of the personal and social (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2010; Laslett 1999). As Acker and Millerson explain, this process of collaboratively “sharing thoughts about one’s experiences and analyzing them with regard to wider social issues” (2018, 1) prompts us “to compare our experiences and to develop connections” (8) that both inform our work and allow us to collectively make meaning in the tradition of feminist theory and practice.

**Letizia: Creating Space for a New Academic Consciousness**

For the last two decades, my professional identity has been shaped by disciplinary work in rhetoric and writing studies and gender and women’s studies, work grounded in feminist rhetorics and pedagogy and informed by scholarly conversations that align feminist theories with leadership and administration and with distributed power, collaboration, and collective meaning-making. As a significant part of my teaching and scholarship, feminist rhetorics have both informed my professional work and helped me give voice to my experience as a cisgender woman and child of immigrants grappling with liminal and contested space. Both inside and outside of the classroom—including the online asynchronous teaching and learning space where I have done much of my teaching—foundations of feminist pedagogy have grounded my collaboration with students and colleagues and have shaped the ways I envision spaces for discursive exchange, for collective meaning-making, and for identifying and interrogating dominant systems of oppression that shape the lives of community members both within and outside of our academic walls (Byrne 2000; Crabtree, Sapp, and Licona 2009; hooks 1989; Rinehart 2002; Ryan 2006; Shrewsbury 1987). As a teacher of writing, I have contended with the realities of an increasingly contingent faculty and of casualization of academic labor firsthand, both in my own faculty appointment and in my administrative roles. Within the United States, English departments, broadly, and first-year writing programs, more specifically, are often sites of the most egregious examples of exploitation of faculty labor, a fact that has been evident in scholarship within the field for decades (Schell 1998; Bousquet 2002; Fulwiler and Marlow 2014).

My work as a feminist teacher and feminist rhetorician also has led me to question who gets to speak, when, where, and to or for whom, to actively listen for silences and erasures, and to center those voices, perspectives, and lived experiences, including through intervention and discursive interruption (see Ede, Glenn, and Lunsford 1995; Hocks 1990; Reynolds 1993; Reynolds 1998; Royster and Kirsch 2012). The metaphor of consciousness-raising groups from the women’s liberation movement is a frequent touchpoint for me in various facets of my work, highlighting the connection between the personal and political, and providing a way, as it does in this current cultural moment, to identify systemic problems and persistent struggle and to create rhetorical space for conversation around those issues. With these broader goals in mind, I approach my collaborations with students and colleagues as opportunities for “talking back” (hooks 1989), for creating new spaces for conversation and counterstory (see Delgado 1989; Martinez 2020), for speaking from personal experience to expose dominant systems of oppression, and for identifying silent private realities as significant matters of public political concern. In many cases, these collaborations create tipping points of various kinds, with new meaning that grows out of shared experience and identification.

As a tenured professor who has moved between faculty and administrative roles and who currently supports colleagues across the university as a faculty developer and coach, my own “tipping point” grew out of significant burnout following an intense administrative position in the midst of the pandemic. I had been
moving toward this moment of shift and understanding for quite some time, recognizing that although I was passionate about leadership and the deep intellectual collaborations and collective problem-solving with colleagues, I could do more meaningful work as a colleague rather than as an administrator. In more than one case, administrative work had left me feeling as though I was the only one responsible for “returning the gaze” of overworked and often exploited faculty (Hansen 1995, 37). Instead, as a faculty member, I could work with colleagues to both analyze and “talk back” to systemic inequities surrounding our work in ways that felt less constrained and more authentic. For example, during a particularly challenging moment in my department, I had, with the permission of our department chair, organized a listening session as a faculty member concerned about our path forward. The event was well-attended and generated meaningful conversation, and although I had no intention of applying for a department chair position at the time, I had accepted a term as interim chair within a few months. More than anything else, it was a sentiment for healing, collaborative problem-solving, and collective meaning-making and action that would guide my vision for my interim term. These moves felt natural to me, as I would later come to understand more clearly: space and time for collective reflection and problem-solving, and opportunities to identify and “to make sense of what persists” (Ahmed 2017, 12).

While much of this work did happen in the year that I served as interim chair, including negotiating these values amid a global pandemic, what was more illuminating, and at times crushing, were the many, repeated instances when systemic inequities and misaligned values disrupted and often actively impeded this work. I also was not prepared for the ensuing emotional labor that seemed to infuse every facet of the job: translating and implementing administrative decisions that I often disagreed with, negotiating the liminal space between faculty and administration when I viewed the position as temporary, understanding the realities of inequitable working conditions for contingent faculty yet not having any power to shape them, and much more (Acker 2014; Acker and Millerson 2018; Cowley 2019; Davis and Cone 2018; Evans 2021; Gonzales and Rincones 2013). Most significantly, I found myself saying, “I never have time or space to think,” and it was this realization that would begin to shape my own “tipping point” following my term as interim chair with a broader questioning of what is wrong—and what has been wrong—with our current version of academic work.

During the Fall of 2020, I returned to a faculty fellow position at our Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) that had been interrupted by my interim term as department chair. This return to faculty development, and to teaching allowed me to begin to unravel the effects of burnout, overwork, and disillusionment with the work that had consumed nearly all of my energy for two decades. Key to this process was my participation in faculty coaching and my collaboration with colleagues and students in ways that reminded me of what was worth keeping in this work. I discovered that “I never have time or space to think,” signaled both the unreasonable pace of the work and the effects of persistent emotional labor, as well as the lack of space to make meaning (Imad 2021) and to accommodate “that impulse to raise questions about and reflect on that which has long been taken for granted” (Carillo 2007, 39). So many of my academic moves—in administrative work in particular—had been motivated by recommendations of colleagues and expectations—whether internalized or self-imposed—to prove my worth in a broken system. In addition to finding new ways to create space for myself in my work, I questioned how my own mentoring activities had been shaped by these experiences and expectations and how and if I had created enough space for disrupting these norms.

I found additional insights through the faculty development work I was now doing at CETL with department chairs. Once a month, I facilitated a mutual mentoring group that invited chairs to explore issues and topics of common interest, to share resources and best practices, and to draw on and offer peer support. Echoing calls within the literature on mentoring, Goerisch et al argue “that mentoring relationships are most transformative for all involved when they operate collaboratively—a framework of
mentoring with, not mentoring at or about” (2019, 1741). This collective sharing of experience and expertise “facilitates an intentional exchange of skills, information, and support. (Goerisch 2019, 1747). Notably, in combining collaborative mentoring with a feminist ethic of care, Goerisch and colleagues describe the potential for collective mentoring to shape leadership (see also Curran et al. 2019). Similarly, List and Socinelli identify mutual mentoring as a strategy “to support senior faculty, and more specifically late-career women faculty in leadership roles” (2018, 8) and argue for the ways in which formal mentoring groups like these can productively support a variety of colleagues “who share a research, teaching, career stage or identity interest” (14). Blending mentoring with a community of practice (CoP), Smith and colleagues (2013) highlight the extent to which members of CoP learn through shared practice and social and mutual exchange. This engagement in shared practice and learning also disrupts traditional notions of mentoring as information sharing or as preparing mentees for future work. Instead, “mentoring is supported through the development of relationships and affirmation of one’s identity as part of the community” (Smith et al. 2016, n.p.).

Within the mutual mentoring group meetings I’ve facilitated, we’ve had conversations on diversity, equity, inclusion, and anti-racism in the chair role; strategic communication and communicating up; supporting faculty during COVID-19; managing difficult conversations; and navigating annual reviews, among other topics. These conversations not only help to fill a need for professional development and preparation for the role, but also foster conversations that in turn shape how chairs mentor and support faculty in their departments. Most significantly, they bring to light the shared challenges of department chair work, including the significant emotional labor required of middle-management.

In addition to opportunities for learning and growth, mutual mentoring groups like this one create new physical and rhetorical space for critically analyzing “entrenched academic hierarchies” and traditions and often unreasonable expectations (Costello 2015, 7). They also can foster “frank conversations with colleagues about what is enough” and begin to disrupt dominant narratives about passion and overwork (Tam and Douglis 2022). As I work with colleagues to imagine more equitable and transformative feminist futures, I aim to create space for solidarity, for claiming agency through lived and shared experiences, and for reflective meaning-making to foster change.

**Esther: Care as an Act of Resistance**

Joy is central to my work in support of faculty as my university’s Director of Faculty Success and is the motivation for the faculty and leader coaching program we initiated during the pandemic. Poet Toi Derricotte states it well with the subtitle of her 2009 poem, *The Telly Cycle*. She begins with “Joy is an act of resistance” (n.p.). I recently rediscovered this idea in Tarana Burke and Brené Brown’s 2021 anthology about shame, resilience, and the black experience. In her contribution to the anthology, Austin Channing Brown quotes Dericotte’s poem, then writes,

> Traditionally, the Black community has relied on a spirituality born of hardship and humanity to declare a phrase popularized by gospel-music artist Shirley Caesar, “This joy I have, the world didn’t give it to me, and the world can’t take it away.” This is not to create a monolith of the Black community; I am in no way suggesting that all Black Americans have found refuge in the gospel of the Christian church. Instead, I mean only to point out a shared, rooted resilience in joy. Contained in this one sentence is a staunch declaration that if the world will take from me, it will do so only once, not twice. It cannot have both tragedy and my joy. (2021, 18)
This gets at the heart of so many interactions with thousands of faculty in my 11 years as a faculty developer at two very different public universities. While the collective negative experiences of faculty pale in comparison to the collective atrocities and repeat traumas suffered by people in the BIPOC community, what I have discovered is that so many of us have lost our professional joy and we feel it has been taken from us by a broken system of exploitation. Too many faculty feel emotionally, psychologically, and even physically (through stress and overwork) abused by the academy. This is especially so among my minoritized and contingent colleagues. The joy we once found in the deep study of our disciplines and in teaching has been stripped away and/or we have lost sight of it. For many of us, this loss began in graduate school and has bred a compounding self-criticism, distrust, and resentment throughout our careers that strains and at times brings toxicity to our professional relationships, which in turn impacts our ability to achieve our professional goals.

Because of this, I propose that we flip on its head Sayre’s Law (Sayre and Kaufman 1960), which Henry Kissinger famously took credit for when he stated in a 1997 speech at Ashland University, "I formulated the rule that the intensity of academic politics and the bitterness of it is in inverse proportion to the importance of the subject they’re discussing. And I promise you at Harvard, they are passionately intense and the subjects are extremely unimportant." (n.p.) This notion misses the point entirely. The subjects are extremely important. The subjects of academic politics are faculty and their identities, emotions, and struggles for power – recognized as three of the most important elements in conflict writ large (Jones and Brinkert 2008). My experience as a faculty developer leads me to believe that the reason university politics is so intense is because of the institutional dehumanization of and repeat traumas experienced by faculty (Imad 2021) that are perpetuated by notions of passion-work, service, and the self-sacrificing mentality that foments it. Coaching is my act of resistance to this dehumanization. It is resistance in the form of caring—of helping others find, reclaim, celebrate, and/or even demand their right to professional joy.

I am not talking about joy in the sense of a fleeting emotion, but instead in the sense of flourishing as described in the psychology literature as sustained well-being (Keyes 2002; Keyes 2007) fostered by meaningful engagement, positive relationships in which one feels cared for, and a sense of achievement, in addition to positive emotions (Seligman 2011). All of these require time and space dedicated to care and together result in many outcomes which the institutions we work for value, including increased productivity, and the ability to adapt quickly to challenges (Keyes 2007). However, the academy as a system does not support, and so often undermines, care of faculty. This is so much so that countless colleagues and administrators have told me they do not have time for self-care, they are too exhausted to begin to think about how to make space for it, and they have depleted their emotional and energy reserves to the extent that they are no longer able to care for their students and research like they used to.

Making joy, flourishing, and care central to my work is resistance because I am building community through one-on-one and mutual mentoring group connection and support, through seeing and hearing others as they wish to be seen and heard, and for validating their authentic experiences as important and meaningful. This is after years of being told that what is most important is the narrative they write in their annual reviews and tenure and promotion portfolios to please their peers and campus administrators. I invest my time in this at the risk of not being able to report on measurable productivity outcomes because the pandemic and racial reckoning context has shifted my priorities toward care, specifically providing a space for my colleagues to care for themselves and experience being cared for at work. I do so even though I fear this work will not be valued in the academic context of quantitative primacy and masculine utility and rationality (Rose 1993). This shift is important because as Ahmed explains,
In directing our care towards ourselves we are redirecting care away from its proper objects, we are not caring for those we are supposed to care for; we are not caring for the bodies deemed worth caring about. And that is why in queer, feminist and anti-racism work self-care is about the creation of community, fragile communities, assembled out of the experiences of being shattered. We reassemble ourselves through the ordinary, everyday and often painstaking work of looking after ourselves; looking after each other. This is why when we have to insist, I matter, we matter, we are transforming what matters. (2014, n.p.)

For me, a big part of transforming what matters is not letting myself feel threatened or diminished by others’ power and what they can accomplish when they are flourishing. Sow and Friedman (2020) call this shine theory. Adaptive leadership theory (Heifetz and Laurie 1997) is also helpful in this regard as it provides an arguably feminist perspective (Sinclair 2007) that distinguishes between adaptive and technical issues that require a different approach to power. With adaptive leadership, the leader identifies and questions the assumptions they bring to the table instead of assuming they have the knowledge to define and solve the problem (Bierema 2021). In this way, the leader makes space for members of their community in the problem-defining and solving processes.

My interpretation of this is that the leader in so doing makes space for the power that others bring to the table—makes space for them to shine. This is in line with feminist scholarship’s long tradition of studying space and power. Enke, for example, considers space and power in the context of geography (2003) in her study subtitled “Race, sexuality and the politics of space.” Ahrentzen (2003) examines space in the context of feminism and architecture, and Massey (1994) does so in her sociological edited volume, *Space, Place, and Gender*. Most relevant for my purposes is Massey’s idea of power geometry, which captures the idea of movement and control within a space. As I see it, we each have an opportunity (and perhaps duty) in higher education to relinquish some control of the space so that others can manifest and grow the power they bring. This is done in dyadic movement in coaching following the coactive notion of “dancing in the moment” (Kimsey-House et al. 2011), where no one is in control but both are flowing in movement together, taking turns leading. The role of the coach in the co-active model is to hold the space and keep the movement focused on the client’s goals.

As a coach and facilitator of mutual mentoring groups, I don’t take up the space with my own privileged ideas or advice, even though I am tempted to do so as faculty express the overwhelm, exhaustion, and disengagement they are experiencing. It is their space and I am there to support them. They make the substantive contributions in the conversation. I just ask questions and provide the space for them to reflect, connect, find support, and in the case of coaching, evaluate where they are and where they want to be, and make plans to reach their work-life goals. Coaching clients remark to me all the time that they have never had this kind of space before to share, when someone really, deeply listens and doesn’t give advice. They find the space to share their stories and creative power liberating and rejuvenating.

I was taught how to create this kind of space through my coach training, space that is completely focused on care of another in support of their flourishing. I began my coach training in the early days of the COVID 19 pandemic, within weeks of the murder of George Floyd, and as Black Lives Matter protests filled the streets. The contrast between the systemic disregard for human life that was dominating the news and the space for care I was learning to create was shocking and led to my own tipping point. I provided support to faculty in my official capacity over the following two years and concomitantly wrote my tenure and promotion narrative in my own space at home, physically disconnected from my institution. In this isolation I spent so much time reflecting on what I was seeing in the news as well as the faculty experience, including my own.

Almost every colleague I talked to was similarly reflecting, and in my role, I talk to hundreds of colleagues each semester. We were each isolated in our own spaces, coming to the same conclusion: the
systems around us are broken, including academia. We do not feel well, mentally, emotionally, and physically. We are horrified by systemic dehumanization and we must do something about it, as overwhelming as the problem is and as stuck in the systems as we feel. McLure’s January 2021 article that named “the great faculty disengagement” (n.p.) and Rebecca Pope-Ruark’s 2022 book on faculty burnout made me wonder if that disengagement is indicative of a larger tipping point, one in which we are collectively disengaging from that which dehumanizes us and discourages care of self. I know I am. I am seeking a space that supports my flourishing, where there is room for my well-being and the power I bring, and I want the same for my colleagues, especially the minoritized and contingent faculty who have been systemically dehumanized the most.

Conclusions

As we returned to campus in fall 2021, we began discussing our individual experiences as faculty and coaches during these trying times. We quickly realized that we were led via different paths to the same realization about the importance of space at this tipping point in higher education. The compulsory remote work at the beginning of the pandemic isolated faculty physically from their institutions. This separation in itself created space, as did the disruption to our work habits and collective norms. As we adjusted to a new normal in the most difficult of circumstances, the early days of shock and dismay led to a deeper sense of overwhelm and grief for both the traumatizing new normal and the passing of the familiar. As we sought to survive and find meaning in this context, we turned our attention to caring for the faculty we serve as educational developers through a new coaching and mutual mentoring program.

In so doing over the course of two years, we witnessed a tipping point in faculty priorities. As they were isolated in their own space, they sought out new spaces for community, care, and support. In these spaces of mutual mentoring and coaching, a new consciousness emerged about the shared experience of exploitation, an unethical culture of overwork, and service at the expense of care of self. As participant-facilitators, we realized with our colleagues how unsustainable and unacceptable this was. Upon further reflection, we are struck by how much this resembles the discursive interruption of consciousness-raising groups of the women’s liberation movement. We suspect this is at least in part at the root of the great disengagement and that the great disengagement itself is indicative of a tipping point in which faculty are rejecting the norms of the academy and claiming the right flourish. They are taking time to connect and make meaning in community. They are realizing they need to take time for care of self even though they feel like they don’t have the time to do so, and this has made them call into question the power they have given the academy over their lives. Some are leaving, many are disengaged, and we don’t know what the future holds. We are at a tipping point, and we do know that space is central to it. Therefore, as feminists, we issue a call to members of the academy to make and hold the space for disrupting these norms and expectations and for reimagining mentoring, collaboration, and collective action in ways that respond to our current realities. We call for changing academic work to support faculty flourishing.

References


