

Chapter 9

Academics of the Heart: Maintaining Body, Soul, and Spirit

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As a baby boomer, I grew up in the '60s. I started college in the '60s and became a part of a generation that now leads the nation. A child of working-class parents who had less than an elementary school education, I savored the exhilaration of the era. The music, poetry, art, films, and revolutionary nature of the time penetrated the innermost part of me. Something was happening to me, something wonderful, something frightening, something beyond my imagination—yet to be discovered—and beyond my realm of understanding.

Today, as I approach a major milestone in my life (age fifty), something akin to what happened to me in the '60s once again stirs in my soul, at the core of all of who I am: Chicana/Mejicana/Latina, *mujer*, soul mate/partner/friend, artist, scholar, spiritual being. Today I understand more of what God wanted me to be. Bestowed with the wisdom and maturity of middle age, I find it easier to self-reflect and look to the future with anticipation, joy, and calm.

Coming to terms with who I am and becoming more centered is only a part of everything new and exciting coming my way. At this point in my life trajectory, a new challenge is in order for me, to be a part of a *movimiento*, a movement that will take the academy to all that it should be: a place of inquiry and discovery, a place of truth, a place of authen-

ticity, a place of imperfection, a place of acceptance and validation, a place of love. I am a part of a new kind of academic—*Academics of the Heart*.

This is a new state of being for me, one that did not come easily. How did I get to this point? The answer to this question lies with my past, with the constellation of variables that have come together to shape my identity.

WHAT'S IN A NAME? WHAT'S IN A SELF?

Academics of the Heart begins not with tinkering with the structural elements of the academy, but by critically examining everything that constitutes our self—who we are, where we came from, our fears, our strengths, our weaknesses. Let me begin at the core of who I am with how I got my name. My full name is Laura Ignacia Rendón. I was named after two people I never met: my grandfather, Lauro, and my uncle, Ignacio. I don't hear very much about my uncle Ignacio in my family. There is a family silence about my uncle Ignacio. Bringing up his name evokes tension, fear, loss, and grief. Over the years I have learned the story of why this is so. It seems that my uncle was a ladies' man. He worked hard and played hard. He liked going to bars and drinking with his friends. One of his lady friends got pregnant and asked him to do what she considered was the manly and responsible thing to do—marry her. Ignacio refused. Her brothers did not take kindly to my uncle's refusal. One night they waited for him as he drank at the bar. They waited to brutally murder him, a crime so unspeakable that the tragedy has affected the family for generations. Six years later I was born on the exact date he was born, July 31, also the day of San Ignacio. In some ways, I am a woman born of tragedy, given a name that carried enormous torment and responsibility. Recently, I went to visit tio Ignacio's grave site and I was overcome with emotion. Though I had never met him, and though I knew very little of him, I felt close to him. Perhaps he is my spiritual guide. Perhaps he is with me now when reflections of my past and present touch and become intertwined. Perhaps I am resolving both his pain and mine, as I begin a more creative, peaceful, and loving phase of my life.

¿QUIEN SOY YO? WHO AM I?

In his book, *The Anatomy of a Memory*, James McConkey (1995) writes:

[M]emory gives us a double perspective . . . not only does the past inform the present, but the present informs the past. In other words, the understanding of our present selves that memory provides us is capable of returning the gift, enabling us to know our earlier selves in a manner that eluded us then. (311)

It is only recently that I have come to understand the full power of my past. It was difficult for me to do so because I had erased my past. I had blocked off the pain, *el dolor*, and in the process I had blocked a part of myself. I became a tormented individual, a Shakespearean-like tragic heroine, extraordinarily skillful at presenting a fun-loving, carefree exterior and at hiding who I really was. It took me years to recognize the multiplicity of my identity.

¿Quien soy yo? Who am I?

Tejana, scholar, mujer,
Chicana de Laredo, Tejas.
Multiple identities born of
pobreza.
De padres que no tenían mas
sino el deseo de vivir
contentos escondidos en
Laredo—
a home safely removed from
the outside world.

In Laredo we could only see reflections of
who we were—mejicanos, pobres, mal
educados. Laredo was a place to
stay, not to leave.
How does identity form in a place like this?
In a place that rewards you for emulating
everyone else?
Here we appeared to be protected
from the gringos who we heard hated mejicanos.
But our familia never counted on
something—nadie se salva de dolor.

It is *el dolor*, the pain, that gives me a large part of who I am.

¿Quien soy yo?

The truth is that I am more than what I appear to be today.

No one realizes that I am the four-year-old who my mother took with her *una noche* to find her father with *otra mujer*—their yells, my father's fist, my mother's hysterical tears
Still I felt nothing, did nothing
Just wanting it to stop.
I learned not to feel, not to get too close.

No one knows that I am the little girl who had open sores all over her still forming body, her mother wondering if it was all those sodas I drank, with sugar only to discover one dark night that bed bugs were sucking blood from my legs, my arms.
Y mi mama asustada burning the mattress that so well hid the culprits that were abusing my body for their pleasure.

¿Quien soy yo?

No one really knows that I am the young girl who wanted nothing more than a pair of moccasins for her sixth birthday.
They seemed to be such an extravagant purchase at the time.
It was the time we lived in a two room shack with an outhouse
It was the time that I had for so long cleverly blocked from my memory—
El dolor numbs the senses.

It was the time my mama had
 una escuelita where for
 fifty cents a week she would teach
 chicanitos y chicanitas how to spell, read,
 add, and subtract—mi primer educacion.

¿Quien soy yo?

I am the junior high student
 who ate lunch for 25 cents a day.
 Y un dia mi mama said, “Tienes que
 ser fuerte. Como las meras mujeres.”
 She had no money for
 lunch that day.
 Aprendi ser fuerte. I learned to be strong.

¿Quien soy yo?

I am the high school student
 who didn't get invited to the senior prom
 because she was unattractive,
 Unlike the girls who easily found their
 way into school clubs and organizations
 not for what they knew but for how they looked.
 The girl who was told by the sponsor
 of the Future Teachers of America that
 she would never be a teacher because
 she had made a “F” in chemistry.
 “Teachers don't make ‘F’s,’” she said.
 She didn't know I had sprained my knee
 so badly I could not walk to school for weeks.
 But there was no money to see the doctor
 Nomas no habia dinero—this was
 just the way it was. . . .
 Just like when I was three years old
 and fell hard on the pavement

Knocked out cold with a concussion—
 But no hospital, no medication
 Just a doctor's house call.

¿Quien soy yo?

I am the woman who decided that mis hijos, if I had them, would never have to endure el dolor. I am the mujer Chicana who endured an abusive marriage because that was just the nature of how things were in Laredo. “Todos los hombres son iguales. Me voy a vengar de todos los hombres,” decia mi mama—a victim of despair and dysfunctional relationships. I learned closeness led to violencia.

¿Quien soy yo?

I am the graduate student who left Laredo to take the risks my parents were afraid of, The Chicana at the University of Michigan filled with awe at the sheer fact that I was there, knowing full well mi familia did not understand what I was doing or where I was going, writing “ese libro que parece que nunca va a terminar.” “Que te crees tu,” mi mama had said to me in junior high when I told her I wanted to go to college— “El colejio es para los ricos.”

It was then, in junior high that I began not to heed her message— Where my identity began to evolve around the idea that I could be separate But that I would have to take the risks of being “different” to my familia and to mi raza en Laredo.

¿Quien soy yo?

Soy la mujer
 Haunted by my childhood memories
 buried deep in my subconscious
 Appearing to me in dreams of evil spirits
 wanting to penetrate
 mi cuerpo,
 Terrorizing my trembling body
 at night unable to sleep
 I am involved with someone I shouldn't.
 My memory never lets me forget the
 perils of closeness.

¿Quien soy yo?
 I am a multiplicity of identities
 that frighten me, guard me, teach me,
 love me.

I wrote this poem in 1994. It is an imperfect, incomplete assessment of who I really am because I am still in the process of discovering who I am. I trust that Part II of this poem will be less painful, more uplifting. For now, it is helpful to be able to give voice to my past, to finally be free to express it and to learn from it. For now, I am able to understand that my past, with all of its triumphs and tragedies, contained important early teachings, lessons to be learned in order for me to attain success in later life.

MY JOURNEY TO THE PROFESSORIATE

I became a full professor in my mid-forties. But I did not start my academic career with the goal of being a full professor. In fact, I spent about four years doing administrative work in community colleges and in the U.S. Department of Education before I took a visiting assistant professor position at the University of South Carolina in 1986. While this position was nontenure track, it got me in the door and allowed others to redefine me as a researcher. Laura I. Rendón, Professor—this title was new to my identity.

How does a woman like me pierce through the seemingly impenetrable walls of the academy? “You are so successful,” many tell me, “How did you do it?” An individual from a working-class background normally

doesn't aspire to be a professor; there is no strategic plan to go from point A to point Z. Rather, stepping into the academy is serendipitous, almost like destiny or some divine plan put us in these positions. We are at the right place at the right time, with the right credentials. Success, as Oprah Winfrey has put it, comes at a time when preparation meets opportunity.

Just about everything about me is nontraditional; I'm not the likely candidate for a coveted position in academia. Yet, a key reason for my success is that I bought into the Type A behavior that characterizes the traditional successful businessman. At some level, perhaps I thought that I had to convince others, if not myself, that I was indeed worthy of occupying a space in the academy. I was also keenly aware that I was Mexican American and a woman. I had to be twice as good in everything I did.

At the beginning of my career, I thought I was going to be a community college administrator, possibly a president. But a confluence of events changed all of that. People came into my life who saw my potential and my work ethic and wanted me to be a part of their team. I set very high standards for myself—everything had to be A+ work. I became an expert at juggling multiple tasks at one time. I worked long hours and devoted very little time to my personal life. My career came first. I rarely took the time to enjoy or reflect about my success; every finished project immediately led to another and yet another.

In many ways this was easy for me to do because all of my work was dedicated to the issues I cared very much about. I sincerely wanted to make a difference for working-class students who, like me, wanted to make something of themselves, break the poverty cycle, and realize their hopes and dreams. For me, my work has never been purely academic.

Work addiction is analogous to substance abuse. "Workaholics" need continuous projects to retain their "high." We're on a high when we constantly travel and address groups, when we finish a project and receive accolades for what we did, when we get involved in multiple projects with individuals who are the movers and shakers of higher education. But there is a psychological and physical downside to this kind of success. In my case it came in the form of severe stress, chronic neck and shoulder pain, headaches, and gastrointestinal problems. While in therapy, I learned that I was using my work as an excuse to not get close to anyone and to avoid resolving the pain of my childhood. Avoiding closeness leads to isolation and loneliness, as well as psychological and physical pain.

It took me years to understand what had happened to me, and I am still in the process of deconstructing my life and making sense out of it. This is, perhaps, a never-ending process.

ACADEMICS OF THE HEART

There have been many lessons in my life, and it has only been within the past few years that I have learned how important it is for me to pay attention to them. It is also important to create the time and the space for self-reflection and self-renewal. I am still learning these ways to better myself. There is now a new sense of wonder in my life.

I said earlier that it is at this point in my life that I feel I am a part of a new *movimiento* that I call Academics of the Heart. It is becoming more and more clear to me that there are many others in the academy who are at the same mental space in which I now find myself. We are wondering about meaning and purpose in our lives and in the academy. We are rethinking what it means to conduct research, what it means to educate, and what it means to be educated. We are taking risks, as I am now: exposing ourselves, sharing our innermost thoughts, fears, and anxieties, and exploring their connection to our academic work.

SHATTERING TRADITION

Around me I see evidence of this *movimiento*, of academics boldly and creatively shattering tradition and beginning to talk, write, research, and even teach differently. I see it in the work of anthropologist Renato Rosaldo (1993), who in *Culture and Truth* challenges researchers to go beyond thinking of culture as static, self-contained, and monolithic. Instead, Rosaldo argues for a renewed concept of culture, where “ethnographers look less for homogeneous communities than for the border zones within and between them. Such border zones are always in motion, not frozen for inspection” (217).

Rosaldo also dispels the notion of “detached” researchers, argues that subjectivity is unavoidable, and gives researchers permission to celebrate diversity, narrative, and emotion. Rosaldo writes, “The truth of objectivism—absolute, universal, and timeless—has lost its monopoly status. It now competes, on more nearly equal terms, with the truths of case studies that are embedded in local contexts, shaped by local interests, and colored by local perceptions. The agenda for social analysis has shifted

to include not only eternal verities and lawlike generalizations but also political processes, social changes, and human differences” (21).

I see evidence of this *movimiento* in the work of doctoral students like Kelly Clark, who interviewed me for her dissertation study of first-generation women academics. Her study involves mixed genres—autobiography, case study, commentary, and artistic expression. Interwoven throughout her dissertation is her art, color copies of paintings she completed as visual expressions of her writing.

Evidence of this *movimiento* is all around us. It is in feminist scholarship that presents a new model of “connected teaching” contained in the book, *Women’s Ways of Knowing* (Belenky et al. 1986). It is in Mike Rose’s account of nontraditional students in *Lives on the Boundary* (1989). It can be found in Latina feminist books such as Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Making Face, Making Soul: Haciendo Caras* (1990). It is in Parker Palmer’s book, *The Courage to Teach* (1997), which asks faculty to abandon the linear model of teaching and bring students into a community of learning around the subject itself. It is in the book *Common Fire* (Parks Daloz et al. 1996), which presents profiles of people who lead lives of commitment and community.

BEING AUTHENTIC

The meditation of my heart shall be understanding.

—Psalm 49:3

Recently, I was invited to participate in a seminar sponsored by the Fetzer Institute. On the first day of the seminar, we sat in a circle and were asked to respond, in one word, why we had come. I responded, “enlightenment.” For years, I had been struggling with how I could have more balance in my life. And I was now wondering about how I could carry out my work and not lose myself in the process. It was at the Fetzer seminar, together with other colleagues who I consider to be a part of this *movimiento*, that I learned both about the authentic and inauthentic part of my identity. I thought I had been behaving authentically because all of my work was dedicated to making a difference for students from working-class backgrounds. If I was true to my people, I surmised, I was true to myself. Yet this was only partially correct. While the success I found created a workaholic “high,” there was a part of me that felt incomplete, empty, and unfulfilled. I had allowed myself to get psychologically ill, to become exhausted, and to experience physical pain,

all because I thought that was the price to pay for getting what I believed in done. I felt my passion for my work was making a difference. I developed a comfort zone of workaholicism—it became unattractive to just be still.

Here was the inauthentic part of me. Not only was this inauthentic mode of behavior diminishing me, it was deteriorating those around me. I was modeling bad behavior for my students. I was a poor partner in love and family relationships. At Fetzer my colleagues and I discussed how we had been rewarded for constant overload, how we had let the academy absorb us, and how we had bought into this model of inauthentic behavior, a model that did not have a lot of slack or breathing room for us to fall back on. The model did not emphasize the spiritual values of love and caring. We were exhibiting inauthentic behavior because we had been shaped by a system that valued and rewarded inauthentic behavior. Yet we embraced this model in part because we knew of no other operational mode that would give us the same rewards. What we thought was functional was really dysfunctional.

During the Fetzer retreat, we proceeded to outline how we could be more authentic. Below I share the list my group (here, I thank and bless them!) developed:

1. Attention to self

- To be authentic begins with self-renewal. Find a place to separate from the craziness of life and to process who you are—this could be anywhere.
- Go to a place for self-reflection every year.
- Take a vacation for *reflection*, not just to get away.
- Fulfill your *own* agenda, your own sense of mission and purpose.
- Don't wait for a crisis to self-renew. Make it a part of daily life.
- Recognize that to be real is to be imperfect, calm, centered, and loving.
- Think of yourself as having different talents, not as a clone of others, with your own strengths and weaknesses.

2. Balancing workload

- Find some quiet time during the day (15–30 minutes) for meditation and self-reflection. Honor this time for self-renewal.
- Part of being authentic is taking care of yourself—saying “no.” Understand that by saying “no” you are not rejecting people or devaluing their request.

- Do not commit yourself for at least twenty-four hours before you take on another project that will create overload.
- Don't feel you *always* have to meet other people's expectations.
- Develop others to do your work; recommend others to do the work; get your own ego out of the way. We would not be as overloaded if everyone else carried some of the load.
- Find other things besides work to satisfy you. Study photography, learn to paint, or play a musical instrument. Develop the discipline to set aside this important time for your own personal development.
- Model authentic behavior, don't get caught up in extremes, don't be caught off balance. Don't get caught up in ridiculously high standards of excellence.
- Recognize that some faculty and administrators are holding down the possibility of change and demoralizing the academy.

3. Getting feedback from significant others

- Put yourself in the company of individuals who challenge what you are doing and why you are doing it. These could be friends or associates.
- Create a space with your friends to challenge/reflect on what you do, to provide honest feedback. Self-renewal involves asking: "Why are you doing what you are doing?"
- Share helpful books, diets, exercise techniques, technology, etc., with your friends.

This is only a partial list, one that needs to be expanded as more critical thought and reflection is given to what we need in order to be better functioning academics and more caring and compassionate human beings. To be authentic requires a great deal of personal work. Much of this work will evoke emotion. At times we will cry for ourselves because there is a part of us we feel sad for. At other times we will shed tears of joy. Some of this work is to be done alone and at other times with others. In the process, you may feel lost, but losing yourself does not mean you cannot find yourself. There is always hope.

It was at the end of the first day at Fetzer that I went back to my room and wrote a journal entry: "Today I have learned that there is a new kind of academics—Academics of the Heart."

THE DIMENSIONS OF ACADEMICS OF THE HEART

In many ways, there is evidence that we are heading toward a new model of brilliance and excellence in higher education. The group discussions at Fetzer led me to identify at least five dimensions to Academics of the Heart that can give the academy a new, more authentic, sense of purpose and meaning. The dimensions of the model target:

1. Individual behavior—focusing on self-renewal, creativity, commitment, connectedness, spirituality, and what it means to be authentic.
2. Teaching and learning—making sure students succeed; changing the expert model of delivering information to students; finding ways to integrate knowledge and to focus on the interdependence among faculty, administrators, students and staff; preparing students for lives of commitment.
3. Leadership—getting leaders to think more about community, authenticity, and purpose; getting leaders to engage in “followership.”
4. Research—validating the use of mixed genres, acknowledging that there are multiple sources of truth, permitting subjectivity and imperfection, linking research to teaching.
5. Rewards—recognizing and rewarding creativity, giving individuals the time and space to discuss and create, providing resources to allow individuals to be innovative, creative, and different.

In Academics of the Heart, the focus is on artistry, authenticity, self-renewal, and connectedness. Gone is the need to feel detached, to numb emotion, to function in isolation, to feel superior, to set ridiculously high standards so that only a few can succeed, to be an expert. Being authentic is being spiritual, ethical, committed, connected, centered, artistic, loving, imperfect, rhythmic, harmonious. There is no evidence that excellence cannot occur under these circumstances.

WHAT TOMORROW HOLDS FOR ME

Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go.

—Genesis 28:15

I articulated earlier what I had learned about being authentic when I attended a seminar at the Fetzer Institute. The evening before the seminar ended, I had a cathartic experience that is still having an impact on my life. That evening Larry Sargent, a psychotherapist who had also been

taught by teachers of indigenous cultures, engaged the participants in the teachings of the Aztecs and the Mayas. Together, we played with rattles and whistles, paying tribute to the earth and the sun, and to our ancestors. We sang and chanted in the language of the Indians of the southern hemisphere. All of a sudden, it became clear to me that the answers to my questions were in my culture and in my past. When I noticed how musical instruments from all over the world carried so much resemblance, I also became keenly aware of how interconnected to the world we really are.

My last journal entry at Fetzer reads as follows:

I came to search for answers about the meaning of my life.

Last night my ancestors came to visit me
Los Aztecas y los Mayas from
the heart and soul of Mexico.

They came with a white man who had been
deeply touched by their spirit and wisdom.

The answer for me is that the resolution of
my life is in my culture and in my blood,
mi sangre, mi pasado.

The answer is that people of all colors and
backgrounds can be touched by this
kind of eternal wisdom.

Que Dios bendiga a todos los que lleguen
a este lugar maravilloso!

May God bless all who reach this marvelous place!

At this point in my life and my career, I feel it is time for me to work toward a higher level of personal development. As I do this, a new role is being carved out for me: to be a missionary for change toward authenticity in the academy, to be a part of an exotic group of individuals who believe there has to be a better way for our educational system (indeed, the world!) to operate. There are still many mistakes to make and many lessons to learn. But I am less afraid. The power of divine guidance, the spiritual presence of my uncle Ignacio, and the wisdom of my Aztec and Mayan ancestors are my strengths. And I know that to them, I am never a failure.

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