CHAPTER 21

Panic Button

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A colleague and former student sent me a draft essay the other week, asking for advice about where to publish it. It was a brilliant text, discussing gendered aspects of translation and the strong, basically corporeal sense of not belonging that women sometimes feel in certain contexts and environments. I was impressed, but also distressed, because the essay contained a personal anecdote from her time as a student. The (male) teacher had written a sentence for translation on the whiteboard and said “This sentence is about you.” She was the only female student in the room. “I tried to understand how this sentence, a sentence that commented a woman’s body in sexual terms, could be about me. I was not a body? I was a student.” The function of this memory was to describe her own discovery of being reduced to a body, being reminded of her flesh. Framed by citations from Christine de Pizan and Simone de Beauvoir, it made for a strong case, but the reason why my heart started beating (in my own body) was that this incident had happened under my watch—at a time when I was responsible for all our undergraduate teaching.

I instantly tried to remember who had been teaching what course back then, in an attempt to identify the person who had done this to her, feeling ashamed and embarrassed that something like this had happened without my ever knowing or noticing. But it was a futile effort, because the time at which this would have happened was not only distant in time but also rather muddled in my memory, due to the kind of situation I had found myself in back then: new at the job and under constant critique from colleagues who wished someone else had been in my place. Was it even possible that she told me or wrote about this in an evaluation and I had simply forgotten? That thought made me even more distressed, reminding me of how easy it is to miss other people’s distress when one is feeling unhappy, tired and weak.

Then I remembered an email I had received a few months back from another young woman, a PhD student whom I had met at a few occasions. We had shared some bad experiences of a colleague misbehaving and wrote messages every now and then. In a recent email, she had suggested a remedy for bad behavior in drastic but memorable words:
Increasingly, when talking to friends and colleagues about these experiences, I have found myself wishing that we could install a sizeable red button on each desk in our academic environments, linked to a loud buzzer and a large neon red sign of the word INAPPROPRIATE at the back of the room. This is (though perhaps only half) a joke of course, but I think the idea illustrates the lonely feeling that goes with how often even public inappropriate behavior goes unchallenged. I have even experienced how awkward laughs that ensue from the discomfort of the audience can be perceived (by victim and perpetrator) as encouragement of bad behavior.

A panic button! That is what my student should have had on that occasion some ten years ago! A red button and a neon sign going INAPPROPRIATE! The shame would have been turned away from her and instead bounced back at that teacher, whoever he was. In fact, that email put words to something that had been at the back of my mind for quite some time: the culture of silence that reigns in classrooms and lecture halls, in seminar rooms and lunch rooms, in any kind of academic setting that I have ever known. We see things, we hear things, but we pretend as if they are not there. I don’t even think it’s out of spite, most of the time; it is rather an inability to cope, an embarrassment or awkwardness, not knowing how to deal with inappropriate behavior. The author of the email had recognized that as she wisely went on:

Clearly, as a community, we simply don’t know how to respond, or rarely have the presence or wherewithal to do so appropriately when these circumstances present themselves (and I recognize this in myself as well). Perhaps it’s a good idea, in absence of a red buzzer button, to offer simple ways to speak up, or other things to do, when inappropriate behavior presents itself in a public setting.

Yes, but this is the trick question, isn’t it? What other ways to speak up do we have, when there are no panic buttons and when so many are afraid to break the silence? I cannot even count the times that I heard people say “Someone should have stopped him,” or “Why didn’t anybody tell her?” I’ve said it myself, too. Spent sleepless nights trying to understand what stopped me from being the one who opened her mouth and saved someone else from a bad situation.

At the time when my student was being reduced to a body in a classroom of our department, I was trying to cope with being the object of what I would probably now call harassment. Back then it was seen rather as having “problems with colleagues.” And of course there were people who were convinced (and still are) that I was as much of a problem as the others. It’s in the past now
and I have no wish or need to revisit that shame of not being able to fit in or even properly defend myself, but I remember an amazing person in the department of human resources—one of the few people who seemed to take my problems seriously. After having listened to some of my stories, she said without hesitation: “These are master suppression techniques, you need to learn how to deal with them.” She explained to me how people would use these techniques in order to keep their own power and repress that of others. They were often directed against women and minorities, including younger colleagues or people considered “too young for the job.” They could consist of things like making others feel invisible by ignoring their comments in a seminar or taking a phone call in the middle of a conversation, ridiculing or shaming them for their ideas or looks, or simply withholding information by not telling them about a meeting or event.

It was such an eye-opener. Suddenly I could see the pattern of what had been happening since I was a student, not just to me but all around me. All those seminars of listening to male colleagues repeating what female colleagues had just said, but suddenly receiving attention and praise. All the eye-rolling at things other people said or the way they dressed. All the times my colleagues had held back information, interrupted me or told me what to do, since they
had “so much more experience.” But recognizing and knowing didn't make it much easier to deal with. It was still shameful to be the object of other people's techniques! Why me? Why now? After all, I had worked in other places where I had been getting along just fine with people, being respected and pretty well liked. What did I do wrong?

It was also painful to come to understand that women use the same techniques as men, especially to other women. So far in my career, I hadn't had much of a problem with other women, but now that I had a proper job, all female colleagues, or at least those who were older than me, seemed to hate me. One told me how sad and worried she felt about the male candidate who didn't get the job. Others simply ignored my greetings in the corridor. Yet another invited me to lunch just to explain why I should never have been offered the position in the first place. It was devastating but slightly fascinating: to go through all that trouble just to humiliate someone over lunch! Oh, if I had only had that panic button ... But I didn't, and being humiliated by other women was somehow worse than being ignored or bullied by men. It felt like being back in high school, being watched by the mean girls who deliberately talk loud enough for you to hear. The feeling of wanting to disappear, just not get out of bed in the morning because you know there will be another day of whispering and smirks and dismissive comments.

I know that my memories are exaggerated. I know that I have made all this much worse than it was in my head, simply because it made me so miserable at the time. I'm convinced that some of the people around me never noticed. I kept my head high, I clearly stated my ideas and stood my ground. To some extent, I think that made it worse, provoking those who wanted me to show more respect not only for them as persons, but for the system as a whole. A decisive turning point for me was a discussion with a senior administrator, a man who had worked at the university for some thirty years and who had seen everything. We were having lunch and I complained, as usual, about how people treated me as a little girl and didn't see me as a real professor of X because I didn't fit the template, just couldn't live up to people's expectations. It wasn't the first time he heard me saying that. He looked at me and sighed, then said: “But look, now you are the professor of X at this university, so a professor of X at this university is just like you.”

It sounds silly now that I try to put it on paper, but that was more useful than anything others had said to cheer me up or support me. It finally gave me the strength to fully accept my new role and not to care so much about what others think. It helped me decide who I wanted to be in academia, which was exactly whom I had already been but with more self-assurance and confidence. It didn't stop people from being mean to me, but it helped me cope.
And I don’t regret my experience of harassment, regardless of how painful it was, because it has helped me to see and notice what happens around me. There are no panic buttons, so we all need to take our responsibility and raise our voice when colleagues misbehave. Those of us with permanent positions have the greatest responsibility because we have nothing to fear, but we are all part of the system, from undergraduate students to the vice chancellor: we are the system, so when the system fails, we need to do more than just blame it as an abstract entity. We speak up not only for ourselves, but for those who come after. To make the system better. I strongly believe in that, but some things in particular still worry me.

One is all the things I know I don’t see, even though I think I’m being watchful. The anecdote of my student is only one example, but a scary one because it happened so close to me and I feel I should have known. Other things have happened in close proximity without any suspicions on my part. The male colleague whom I thought was simply a bad and lazy supervisor, even a bit of a womanizer, but who turned out to secretly harass his most attractive male students. How on earth could I not have known, having spent so much time at the center of that environment? Did I not want to see? Did I care less for the young men than I would have for young women? Was I less suspicious because of my gendered presumptions of who harasses whom? Why didn’t anyone tell me? Did I not appear as a person who could be trusted? These questions are haunting me and I think they should. Only by questioning ourselves can we make things better.

The other is the way in which I see women behave to other women. I now most often get a better treatment than I did fifteen years ago, but that’s clearly because of my current status and my age—I finally look old enough to be who I am, more or less. But the fact that I am treated better doesn’t help when I see constant gender and age discrimination all around me, not only from men but from women. In fact, anything that stands out as odd is being commented on and often made fun of, regardless of what kind of deviation from the norm it is. Being a heterosexual man in gender studies is also a deviation of sorts, let’s not forget about that. Or a straight blond woman in queer studies. We’re all judgmental, that’s for sure. And why should women be better than men, you might say—but why on earth should women keep suppressing other women when so many men are finally starting to change? The topic is very tricky, because criticizing other women is not comme il faut. It easily falls back on you: aren’t you then a nasty woman who doesn’t like other women? The commonplace of women being mean and competitive by nature is so prevalent, it even contributes to the way in which we accept all kind of things going on around us, because we don’t want to be accused of being a bitch. It saddens me and drives me crazy.
This fear of being a trouble-maker or annoying in any way stops us all, but especially women, from acting as panic buttons, and in the end it really stands in the way of a better academic work environment. One of the things I learned from my advisor in the human resources department was how to confront people using master suppression techniques by simply asking then, nicely, what they meant by saying this or that. This is not something that always works, especially if the technique in question is to ignore someone. But this is where we need each other: if someone ignores me, I want to have a person there who says, “But why are you ignoring her?” When one of the men repeats something a woman just said but now gets acclaim, I want someone—and not always me—to say, “But that is exactly what X just said.” When someone said, “Is green nail polish really suitable for a professor?” I wish someone had said, “Why do you comment on her looks?” We have to be each others’ panic buttons—there is no other way. But if we all dare to do it, the behavior will change.

To my former student, I want to say that I’m sorry. I wish one of the other students had interrupted the teacher and said, “Why do you talk to her like that?” I wish I had been there for you, to tell you that you are not just a body, but that being a body is also not a bad thing. Perhaps I was too caught up in my own problems to see or understand yours, which is not an excuse but possibly an explanation. Yet I hope, and know, that you have learned from that experience, that you would never to treat others like that and that you would speak up if someone does it to someone else.

Wouldn’t it be great to have panic buttons in every academic setting! But in the meantime, let’s simply speak up. Nice could be the new brilliant.