

You're Super, and a Hero—Not a Superhero

By Katie Rose Guest Pryal

It's not your job to save everyone. But sometimes it's hard to see how to stop doing all of that saving.

Women (most women) do most of the service work—at home and on the job. We notice things, like the empty printer tray, the empty coffee pot and the empty Post-it box in the supply cabinet. (How did everything end up empty?) When we see all of that work that needs doing, we do it. We don't brag about it. We just fill the printer tray.

Men (most men) don't question where the refills come from. They just print, drink and Post-it away, oblivious to the invisible labor that goes on in the background.

I have worked in newspapers, law firms and universities, and this division of labor has never changed. And it has remained the same regardless of rank. The point is, my sample size is large enough for me to draw this conclusion. Men (most men) expect women to save them, and they don't even realize they're doing it. It's expected, invisible labor, after all.

Unreasonable, Gendered Standards

Additionally, women are expected to do more in order to achieve the same amount—or less—in careers in higher education; we are trained to overwork ourselves. In short, we are told that if we aren't in the fast lane, we aren't working hard enough. Last month, I wrote about the middle lane, which is a new way of looking at being a woman in the academy or any workplace where you feel the need to overachieve. Running in the middle lane is about standing up for yourself, your time and your money. It's also about self-preservation.

Now, I'm taking on a slightly different angle: one reason we often end up in the fast lane is because we're always swooping in to rescue others. I'm here to tell you that it's time to stop saving the world. We need to recognize that we are not superheroes. And more than that, we need to not only be okay with it—we need to be giddy about it. After all, if we're not superheroes, it's not our job to save anyone but ourselves and those we love most.

That's a job we can handle.

But what made us into superheroes in the first place?

It Starts With Imposter Syndrome

I started to wonder why I allowed myself to get sucked into all of the committee work, curriculum design work and the rest of the endless unpaid labor when I was junior in my field. And I realized, at the time, I was so eager to prove that I belonged, I would agree to anything. I was terrible at setting professional boundaries. And I ended up having all my time sucked away by service work. In short, I had Imposter Syndrome, and I didn't even realize it. In fact, if you'd told me at the time that I had Imposter Syndrome, I would have denied it with a laugh.

But I did have it. And I compensated for it by overworking myself to near death (not an exaggeration).

In 1978, psychologists [Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes](#) defined Imposter Syndrome in this fashion: "an internal experience of intellectual phonies." People "who experience the imposter phenomenon persist in believing that they are really not bright and have fooled anyone who thinks otherwise. Numerous achievements, which one might expect to provide ample objective evidence of superior intellectual functioning, do not appear to affect the imposter belief," they write.

Imposter Syndrome is highly gendered. "Thus, unlike men, who tend to own success as attributable to a quality inherent in themselves, women are more likely either to project the cause of success outward to an external cause (luck) or to a temporary internal quality (effort) that they do not equate with inherent ability," Clance and Imes write.

Imposter Syndrome drove me into the fastest lane, and it drove me to superhero behavior. A departmental memo needed revising late at night? I would do it. A student was in crisis? I could handle it. I graded papers while sitting on the hospital bed in labor so I wouldn't turn my grades in late.

Everyone turned their grades in late.

But I couldn't see what was right in front of my face. I couldn't stop.

We need to recognize that we are not superheroes.

You're a Superhero: Now What?

Choosing the middle lane means choosing not to overachieve in order to protect ourselves and make ourselves become happier, healthier people.

It means meeting our own expectations instead of the impossible expectations set by others. But what happens when unexpected responsibilities get dumped on us by others—at home, in the workplace or by our extended families?

We're trying hard to ride in the middle lane, and then we realize that our child's monthlong project hasn't even been started because our spouse dropped the ball. We're trying to ride in the middle lane, and our department chair comes to us and says how much he wants us to serve on a special committee—last minute—because if we don't, the committee will be all men. Or all white people. And it's our job to save the committee. (Or is it the chair we're saving?)

We don't want to serve on that committee—no, we really don't—because we don't need another service commitment. But, if we don't serve on that committee, our chair will be unhappy—we know that's true—but also we will feel guilty because that panel will be all men or all white people. Don't we have a responsibility to prevent that from happening?

Say it's a panel at a conference that might be all men or all white people. Say it's a national committee for your professional organization. Say it's a campus administrative committee to oversee something really urgent. Don't we have a duty to make sure that our campus isn't falling apart, just like we do at home?

If we don't step in and save them, who will?
But that's the thing—it's not our job to save them.

First of all, and this should be really apparent to the chairs/panel organizers/committee organizers: they shouldn't have created an all-male or all-white committee that needed saving by a token white woman or woman of color in the first place. How did that happen? How did it happen that it is coming down to the wire and you are the only person left to save them from their sexist or racist behavior? You are not the anti-sexism or anti-racism superhero. That's too much for anyone. In any case, if you're going to dismantle the white supremacist patriarchy, you get to decide when and where.

You're not a superhero.

You may very well be a hero. And you may very well be super. But you are human, and you need a break. And if the people around you aren't giving you one, then you need to give one to yourself. 

Women on the Move, *continued from page 10*

- **Dr. Carmen M. Simone** moves from president of Trinidad State Junior College CO to executive director of the University Center-Sioux Falls of the University of South Dakota.
- **Gabrielle Simpson** becomes VP and director of communications at Barnard College NY.
- **Felita Y. Singleton** moves from director of student veteran services for Portland State University OR to associate dean of students for Warner Pacific University OR.
- **Dr. Judith Stoddart** becomes associate provost for university collections and arts initiatives at Michigan State University.
- **Sharon Strange-Lewis** moves from director of women and diversity programs and other alumni programs at the University of Maryland to director of alumni relations at Howard University DC.
- **Dr. Zoe Higheagle Strong** becomes executive director of tribal relations and special assistant to the provost at Washington State University and director of the Plateau Center for Native American Research and Collaborations.
- **Dr. Jennifer E. Swanberg** becomes dean of the School of Professional Studies at Providence College RI.
- **Dr. Darryl Todd** moves from interim to associate vice chancellor of student affairs and enrollment services at the University of Tennessee Health Science Center in Memphis.
- **Dr. Irene Vásquez** becomes director of the Southwest Hispanic Research Institute at the University of New Mexico.
- **Dr. Brooke Vick** moves from professor of psychology at Whitman College WA to associate provost for faculty and diversity initiatives at Muhlenberg College PA.
- **Renee Wells** moves from director of the GLBT Center at North Carolina State University to director of education for equity and inclusion at Middlebury College VT.
- **Beth Zilberman, JD,** moves from teaching fellow in the College of Law at Michigan State University to director of the Immigration Law Clinic at the University of Arkansas School of Law. 

PROFILE: Adams Promotes Gender and Racial Diversity in Engineering, *continued from page 11*

Her mantra is “partner and leverage”: Leverage the relationships she has and partner with other people who need her skills and in return provide their skills for the greater good of engineering education.

With the goal of diversifying engineering faculty at ODU in terms of race and gender, Adams has been working with department chairs on how to manage search processes. This involves everything from where the positions are advertised to how to expand the pool of candidates. Adams has spent time studying and researching how to build a diverse pool.

Adams sees inclusion as separate—making sure diverse hires feel welcome. Annually, she meets with women faculty to discuss their experiences. If they're not having a favorable experience, Adams brings the information to the department chairs.

It's important to speak with students about why diversity matters, and Adams says that needs to be addressed through curricular activities. It is being introduced into the first-year curriculum.

“It's awareness. It's talking about it. It's programming. It's holding people accountable,” Adams says. “Those are the things I've been doing thus far.” 

PROFILE: Leading From an Artistic Perspective, *continued from page 12*

“My life is on the margins.”

Although just a few months into her new position, Herzog has noticed a striking difference to teaching. “One of the things I realize now that I'm working as a dean is that the rhythm is different,” she says. “The rhythm of the day, the semester, the year is different.”

Working for the past 26 years at a school that historically was a women's college, Herzog believes she has fewer problems as a woman in administration. “I don't feel disrespected or marginalized as a woman,” she says, unlike her experiences in graduate school.

For instance, when Herzog decided to have a child while a graduate student, many in the academy thought, she says, “that was a no-no.”

Another perceived no-no was accepting a position as an art historian and gallery director in 1995 at a small liberal arts college instead of at a Research I school. “It felt like it [Edgewood] kind of tapped into all my art-related interests,” says Herzog.

“Maybe that's why I stayed at Edgewood for as long as I did,” she says. 

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