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I Hope

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I Hope

Abstract

As I have gotten older, I have learned that no matter how hard I try, I am never going to be able to repay my mother for everything that she did for me. The blood, sweat, and tears she put into nurturing the sick and troublesome, five-year-old me, the rebellious and lazy fifteen-year-old me, and the clumsy, and sometimes lost me now, are insurmountable. I know she had more trouble raising me than she was supposed to. I know her first five years of being a mother did not include taking me to the park, sitting down on a park bench, and having a family picnic in the sun. Most of it was watching me struggle on the white sheet of the hospital bed. That is why I have always felt obligated to be her perfect child, to be a daughter so good that no one would be able to say that she had not done a good job raising me. And it was an obligation that I was very happy to fulfill, because I honestly loved being in the mold that she put me in.

[*excerpt*]

Keywords

cooking, domesticity, Education, Gettysburg College, income, marriage, patriarchy, retirement, sexism, Social Justice, Vietnam, women, Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Center for Public Service

Disciplines

Civic and Community Engagement | Education | Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | South and Southeast Asian Languages and Societies

Comments

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](http://www.gettysburg.edu) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at surgegettysburg.wordpress.com Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that –isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

I HOPE

December 1, 2016



As I have gotten older, I have learned that no matter how hard I try, I am never going to be able to repay my mother for everything that she did for me. The blood, sweat, and tears she put into nurturing the sick and troublesome, five-year-old me, the rebellious and lazy fifteen-year-old me, and the clumsy, and sometimes lost me now, are insurmountable. I know she had more trouble raising me than she was supposed to. I know her first five years of being a mother did not include taking me to the park, sitting down on a park bench, and having a family picnic in the sun. Most of it was watching me struggle on the white sheet of the hospital bed. That is why I have always felt obligated to be her perfect child, to be a daughter so good that no one would be able to say that she had not done a good job raising me. And it was an obligation that I was very happy to fulfill, because I honestly loved being in the mold that she put

me in.

Here is the mold that I fitted perfectly into: a girl who always excels in studying, who knows how to put on make-up but doesn't need make-up to be pretty, who knows how to dress up but doesn't need fancy clothes to make an impression, who doesn't have a boyfriend but can socialize with everyone around her. Of course, I have to thank my mother for these positive attributes. However, now that I am eighteen, I have another mold to fit into, that of a woman who graduates university with a degree which will get her a stable job and income, who will settle down at age twenty-five with a husband and have a child by the time she is twenty-six, who cooks delicious dinners for her family, who is always there to help her husband when times get hard. Every day, my mother is working on squeezing me into this mold.

She told me I need to be educated so that men cannot look down on me. I need to have a job so that I can help my husband take care of the family. I need to know how to cook because men like it when their wives can cook. I need to take care of my children so that my husband can do his work. However, I cannot be too smart, as it damages a man's pride when a woman knows more than he does. I cannot be too successful, even with my degree, because a man doesn't like it when a woman is more successful than he is. I cannot be too focused on housework because my husband will get bored of me. I have to be moderate at everything I do.

Before I came to Gettysburg College, I would have had no problem fitting into this mold. I just had to keep listening to my mother and keep my ability at a moderate level to please the man of my life. In the patriarchal Vietnamese society, a girl is expected to be a man's wife, not a woman. She is expected to achieve but not overachieve.

Yet at Gettysburg College, for the first time, people tell me to do the exact opposite. My advisors tell me I should study hard so that I can do the job that I love. My professors tell me I should be successful because I earned it. My classes teach me I should learn how to cook so that I don't starve, not so I can cook a myriad of dishes for my future husband. My female friend tells me I should be a mother because I simply love children. My male friend tells me I should not worry about the age at which I will get married, but rather worry about what I will have achieved by the time I get married. They tell me I don't have to get married because of social pressures. They tell me I should get married if and when I have found the right man to be my partner, whom I can be with through good and bad times, not because I am going to be twenty-six. My friend's parents show me that both the wife and the husband should do housework. They tell me that the molds that I am put into, the concrete presumption that I have of my future, and the things my mother has been telling me for my entire eighteen years, are not the things that I should be doing for myself. What I have achieved in the past and what I want to achieve in the future should not be influenced by a man just because I am a woman.

However, it is because my mother fits into that perfect mold that I am able to have everything I have today. My mother puts me into her mold because that is the only one she has ever known. And I conform to her wants because she my world.

Indeed, my mother worked hard to meet social expectations. But she was not the only one who was and is doing this. Every day, women in Vietnam are working hard not for themselves but for the way everyone else perceives them. These perceptions come from social norms: at home we are taught to leave the largest, most central seat at the dinner table for our fathers. At school, we attend cooking lessons while boys play soccer out in the field. Our textbook illustrations are filled with images of male doctors and female housewives. My mom receives a lower income than my dad, yet she has to buy food, new clothes for me and my sisters, and cleaning supplies for the house while my dad can just buy himself a bottle of wine that costs almost as much as my mom's income. Vietnamese law says women's retirement age is 55 and men's is 60, yet we question why women don't receive promotions as much as men do and are not as successful as men are. These systemic issues run across every generation of women and men have shaped the way we are today. Whether it is in the United States or Vietnam, sexism is deeply and unconsciously assimilated into our minds.

So, I think that what I am about to do is very reasonable.

I will work hard for no one but myself, so that other girls can also work hard for themselves. I hope they understand they don't have to limit their potential for somebody else. I hope they understand that gender will not be a limit to their potential unless they believe so. And finally, they should be unafraid to find out about themselves and have confidence to go against social norms, even if it means disobeying everything that they have known.

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