

Ask Aleksandra!

With more than two decades of experience in Slavic Studies and lots of chutzpah, Aleksandra will share with you her hard-won wisdom. Under a cloak of anonymity, you can safely ask Aleksandra anything you like, and in doing so you'll help not just yourself but probably others as well who no doubt have the same questions. Please send your questions to awssnewsletter@gmail.com and put "Ask Aleksandra" in the subject line.

Dear Aleksandra,

Although eventually I was awarded tenure and promotion to associate professor, my tenure experience was so agonizing that I feel I have post-traumatic stress disorder from it. I revisit this negative experience every year when I write my faculty report and receive from my department chair a letter, which inevitably ranks my teaching behind my service and professional development. The weights assigned by the faculty handbook to each category always make my numbers appear low. In addition, the chair always writes that my teaching evaluations are not good enough to support my promotion to full professor, yet my achievements in other areas are very good. Every year when I read this letter from my chair, I have a horrible day of self-doubt as to whether I even merit tenure. I feel quite paranoid that the department will now try to seek its revenge and never give me promotion. Is there anything I can do? The facts in the chair's evaluation are generally correct. More importantly, how do I move past this "PTSD" from the horrible tenure experience?

*Yours,
Tenured but Traumatized*

Dear TbT,

I think you are not alone in the tenure process leaving you bruised. After tenure, I felt like I'd climbed a mountain, but I couldn't shake the thought "now what?" In your case, it sounds like the climb was torturous and the outlook now bleak.

Your letter raises two entangled, but distinct issues. One is that getting to where you are has left you with persistent pain that is re-triggered during your annual review. The second is that moving further up the food chain appears to be in doubt, your road blocked by a departmental chair who is less than satisfied with your performance. These problems are clearly related, but they demand different lines of attack.

Let's start with making peace with the past. Do you know those pithy, yet profound aphorisms that appear in your Facebook feed? In response to the wave of nausea that typically overcomes me at the sight of these chestnuts of wisdom, for a time I blocked every single person who posted picturesque waterfall images accompanied with quotes from Gandhi, Thich Nhat Hanh, et al. In my dotage, however, I've gone soft; I just avert my eyes most of the time, because every now and then a real gem does surface, like this one from Jon Kabat-Zinn: "It's not a matter of letting

go—you would if you could. Instead of ‘Let it go’ we should probably say ‘Let it be.’” You may never be able to heal completely the wounds that the tenure process dealt to your self-esteem and confidence, but you can say to yourself, “this happened, it was awful, but it is now in the past.” Try to remember, as Ram Das would say, to “be here now.”

But your annual reviews are here and now. Triggering those old feelings is one thing, but something else is also happening. Your chair is telling you that if you want to move further up the professional ladder your work in the classroom is not good enough. The most urgent question that needs to be asked is whether or not the chair’s criticism is fair.

You need to be brutally honest with yourself. Can you do better as a teacher? If so, how exactly will you lift your game? Or is something personal going on here that perhaps merits discussion with the chair or, if that is too uncomfortable, with the university’s ombudsperson?

It is vexing, but irrelevant that “the weights assigned by the faculty handbook to each category always make my numbers appear low.” You can choose to devote more time than expected to research, for example, but you cannot expect the institution to reward that choice if it has set a premium on teaching. The joy of tenure is that you live by your own priorities, but if you want promotion to full professor you have to allocate your time according to the institution’s priorities.

Nowhere is it written that you have to finish your career as a full professor. Maybe your research is what really gets you out of bed in the mornings. Would you rather spend more of your time on your research, even if it means not making it to full professor? Maybe you would. But make a conscious choice to take that path and let go of the quixotic hope that you will be rewarded for pursuing an agenda that does not meet the expectations of your institution. You have choices. One final word: PTSD is serious. Unlike academia, it is a treatable disorder. Even if you don’t have a full-blown case, you might benefit from professional counselling to get a handle on the past and figure out the healthiest, happiest way forward.

In comradeship,
Aleksandra