

### NARRATIVE 3.

## MORE THAN MY TEACHING

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I have educators in my family going back four generations, and on both sides: my maternal great-grandmother taught in a one-room schoolhouse in rural Michigan, and my paternal great-grandmother taught Latin and Greek in New York City. My paternal grandfather was an art teacher; my maternal grandmother once worked as a nursing instructor. My parents were both professors.

So it only seemed natural for me to continue the tradition, and, in fact, a career as an educator was the only one I ever considered. It's easy to feel like being a teacher isn't just a job—that it's an integral part of who you are. That it's a calling. A moral stance. Think of the discourse around public school teachers, for example: So selfless, to do such laborious and important work for so little pay; such good people; so passionate about providing for our children—who are like children to them; so invested in our future.

Many educators are indeed drawn to such work because we enjoy building relationships with students. We feel gratified to see them grow. But this sort of discourse makes it difficult to resist the narrative that educators are happily self-sacrificing—people willing to dedicate everything to their jobs just for the love of it all. This is especially true for women—like myself—who are assumed to be naturally nurturing. And there is also an assumption—reflected in economic theory—that if work is considered moral—if it makes you feel good doing it—there will be a higher willingness to supply such labor. This, of course, makes it less necessary to compensate for that labor.

The position of graduate TAs is therefore particularly vulnerable. In addition to the tremendous pressure of doing good work—doing moral work and doing it well—our positions and our funding are highly competitive. Besides our coursework and research, we're expected to provide most of the labor that undergirds our institutions' most popular undergraduate courses. In many cases—like mine—we're even expected to design and facilitate our own courses as instructor of record—to function as faculty without any of the benefits, monetary or institutional.

But feeling good about doing good doesn't add more hours to the day any more than it adds dollars to your paycheck. At a certain point—no matter how

moral the work is—we all reach our breaking point. Theoretically, I'm compensated for the equivalent of 20 hours of work per week—on a salaried basis, of course. No overtime pay. So, at a certain point I began to wonder: If I'm not getting paid for overtime, why am I working overtime? Adopting this mindset was the first strategy I used to disentangle myself from the sense of shame educators are made to feel in treating teaching as what it is: not an identity—and certainly not a sacrifice—but a job.

Thinking about my teaching labor as 20 hours a week—factoring in all the unpaid preparatory work we're expected to do over summer and winter breaks—has helped me establish the necessary boundaries between my work and myself. It's not always easy, and not just because of the graduate school workload. The guilt and shame are still there. Even now, as I write these words, I have a nagging anxiety, somewhere deep down, that this makes me a bad teacher and therefore a bad person.

Make no mistake, I take pride in doing good work as a teacher. (You'll note I avoid saying "being a good teacher.") I do the best I can without compromising my values or my sense of self—and that requires me to acknowledge myself as more than my teaching, to respect my own time and labor in the same way I expect other workers' time and labor to be respected. My work is important, to be sure. That's why I still love it. But I do the work I'm paid for. Because—while I love teaching—that's not the same thing as loving myself. Teaching is not who I am. It's my job, not my whole life.