

Faculty Wellness in *A Pedagogy of Kindness*

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Parts memoir, invitation, synthesis, and guide, Catherine J. Denial's *A Pedagogy of Kindness* has one unifying goal: to combat the misperception that students and faculty exist in a power tug-of-war, one that consistently demands faculty play defense and leaves any instructors who do not susceptible to exploitation.¹ That misperception, which Denial believes runs rampant in higher education, creates a harmful and ineffective pedagogy, one that the "pedagogy of kindness" strives to replace. As Denial clarifies, "the pedagogy of kindness" is not about being "nice." Instead, "it's about attending to justice, believing people, and believing *in* people. It's a discipline."² In presenting the praxes core to that approach, Denial's book joins a growing conversation about kindness and teaching within higher education.³ The work itself is divided into four chapters: kindness to self, kindness in the syllabus, kindness in assessment, and kindness in the classroom. Years of teaching in higher education, first as a brand-new graduate student and now as the Bright Distinguished Professor of American History and Director of the Bright Institute at Knox College, have provided Denial with the expertise to craft an argument that will not only expand instructors' pedagogical toolboxes, but also improve their well-being.

In fact, Denial's very first chapter centers faculty well-being. "If we want to be kind to others," the historian writes, "we have to start by being kind to ourselves."⁴ Denial provides specific practices: a "social identity reflection" helps a reader think about their positionality and privileges; a list-making exercise invites readers to name their teaching concerns and then respond to them as a friend would; suggestions around email usage encourage establishing boundaries; and a "strong yes" test provides further thresholds for boundary setting. Denial quotes a refrain that has stuck with her—"If it's not a strong yes, it's a hell no"—to help readers discern when they might accept an invitation out of desire versus obligation.⁵ In outlining these strategies, Denial recognizes that an individual's identities and positionality will inform how people receive their boundaries and prioritization of self, especially for those of us who do not fit the collective imagination's professor archetype. "This makes self-care a profoundly political act," the historian, drawing on Audre Lorde, reflects.⁶

The first chapter concludes with the critical question: "When Self-Care is Not the Answer." Here, Denial rightly pushes back on the idea that laborers should concern themselves with "self-care" because it will make them better workers. From adjunctification to time scarcity, the historian refuses complicity in a system that tells faculty to "do better" without asking "do better how and for whom" and which places structural burdens on individuals' shoulders. Here, Denial briefly mentions some institutional interventions, such as the University of Notre Dame's "Compassion Fund" or The

Ohio State University's subsidized "Back-Up Care." While a fuller analysis might have illuminated the mechanisms that made these interventions possible, naming them provides a useful starting point for future scholars interested in researching how to enact change in higher education.

The most important contribution to faculty wellness that this book makes, though, extends beyond this first chapter. It is Denial's persistent willingness to reflect, name her own missteps, and model compassion throughout the work that shows her approach to faculty well-being in action. After all, as the scholar outlines, "Kindness toward the self . . . make[s] space for reconciliation, forgiveness, and accountability."⁷ She recounts, for instance, refusing a student's request for an excused absence when a pipe burst in his home. "I look back on my lack of compassion now," Denial writes, "and wince."⁸ When describing assessment, Denial reflects on how she previously structured a research essay. "I trusted that my students could intuit my meaning when I said 'Do research' or 'Write a paper,' but I did not spend a lot of time in class exploring those concepts," Denial seems to shudder at the memory. She confides, "Instead, I simply included a lengthy list of directions . . . to make up for the proactive work I should have done."⁹ Such reflective confessions fill the book. There is a real generosity in detailing one's own (perceived) mistakes and using them to model compassion for self.

It is not enough to simply "pardon" our past selves, though; that would be being "nice." For Denial, we need to also hold ourselves accountable to enact change and practice "kindness to self." Denial does just that by productively pairing such descriptions of (what she considers) missteps with how she now responds. Her syllabi chapter, for instance, compares an early syllabus to her "pedagogy of kindness"-inspired version. The old version relied on the conventions she had come to associate with the genre. It "cold-opened in a format that was not particularly welcoming or easy to parse," the header listing her name, email address, office hours, office location, and office phone.¹⁰ Many readers will see their own syllabus format in this description. A snapshot of the updated version follows: a welcoming message, including pronouns, and added visuals—small changes that make an important difference. In all, this reflective approach models how to hold oneself accountable with compassion and, in doing so, provides concrete examples of the "pedagogy of kindness" in practice.

Such an approach does, sometimes, come at the cost of fuller analysis and evidence use. Empirically, to take one example, I would have benefitted from some more specific data about faculty well-being and mental health, whether via surveys or observational data, to better situate how faculty are actually doing. What can labor organizations and professional associations do to help? Overall, additional engagement with research in cognitive psychology and the scholarship of teaching and learning would have deepened the work and provided those interested in learning more about a specific topic a pathway to do so.

Still, the reflective tone of the book and the personal storytelling make it accessible. And that vulnerability enables the self-recognition and

accountability which make up the core of Denial's understanding of "kindness toward the self." It invites all readers (whether new faculty or seasoned instructors) to hold themselves accountable, truthfully and with grace, and know that better is possible—a powerful message coming from the recipient of the American Historical Association's 2018 Eugene Asher Distinguished Teaching Award.

The other key contribution Denial makes in terms of faculty wellness is to name and celebrate pedagogical training.¹¹ In recounting her own trajectories, Denial identifies the programs that changed her teaching and bemoans the lack of pedagogical training graduate students receive. "It is manifestly unjust to place individuals in classrooms without proper training," Denial insists, "Yet this happens all the time."¹² Such pedagogical training and pedagogy centers tend to exist on institutions' peripheries; spotlighting their importance provides another way Denial suggests that institutions can further support faculty well-being. Absent that training, the book itself provides a useful starting point for new faculty.

Denial is clear throughout: Teaching is labor that institutions must fairly compensate and support. Individuals' passion for teaching should not be exploited by institutions or higher education more generally. It is also obvious, though, that faculty wellness and good teaching do not work in one direction. Good teaching does require faculty to care for themselves. But one way we care for ourselves is through effective teaching. We have all left a classroom feeling deflated when an exercise did not go as intended, when students misunderstood an assignment, or when we did not achieve the day's objectives. And we have all left a classroom buoyed by students' energetic discussion, eagerness to learn, and willingness to grapple with complexity. Good teaching, clearly, generates joy. Sara Ahmed has captured this beautifully: "When you begin to put the pieces together, it can feel magical: the wonder of the clicking moment, when things that had previously been obscured begin to make sense; when things fit into place," Ahmed concludes, "what a sound it makes; how important it is that this sound is audible to others."¹³ Denial clearly understands how hearing students' "clicking moments" invigorates instructors. And Denial's sharing of her own growth and trajectories will certainly inspire readers' own "clicking moments," even if she may not be in the same room to hear them.

¹ With thanks to my students and colleagues for practical suggestions and thoughtful discussions.

² Catherine J. Denial, *A Pedagogy of Kindness* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2024), 2, emphasis in original.

³ See, for instance, Shoshana Magnet, Corinne Lysandra Mason, and Kathryn Trevenen, "Feminism, Pedagogy, and the Politics of Kindness," *Feminist Teacher* 25, no. 1 (2014), 1–22; Airdre Grant and Sharon Pathway, *Enacting a Pedagogy of Kindness: A Guide for Practitioners in Higher Education* (London: Routledge, 2024).

⁴ Denial, *A Pedagogy of Kindness*, 15.

⁵ Denial, *A Pedagogy of Kindness*, 31.

⁶ Denial, *A Pedagogy of Kindness*, 17.

⁷ Denial, *A Pedagogy of Kindness*, 18.

⁸ Denial, *A Pedagogy of Kindness*, 3.

⁹ Denial, *A Pedagogy of Kindness*, 59.

¹⁰ Denial, *A Pedagogy of Kindness*, 43.

¹¹ Thanks to my colleagues in the Princeton Writing Program's Wellness Group, especially Diana Newby, for surfacing and thoughtfully discussing this idea of training and justice.

¹² Denial, *A Pedagogy of Kindness*, 19–20.

¹³ Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 29.