

Sunday Review | OPINION

She Wanted to Do Her Research. He Wanted to Talk 'Feelings.'

By A. HOPE JAHREN MARCH 4, 2016

Honolulu — OVER the past two decades as a professor, I've grown thousands of plants, studying how their biology shifts in response to our changing environment. Soon I'll begin to design and build my fourth laboratory; I'll teach classes and take on more staff members, as I do every year. Like all professors, I also do a lot of extra jobs for which I was never trained, such as advising former students as they navigate the wider world. Last year, after one of my most talented students left to start her next adventure, she would text me now and then: "This is such a great place," "I am learning so much here" and "I know this is where I am supposed to be."

Then, a month ago, she wrote and asked me what to do. She forwarded an email she had received from a senior colleague that opened, "Can I share something deeply personal with you?" Within the email, he detonates what he described as a "truth bomb": "All I know is that from the first day I talked to you, there hadn't been a single day or hour when you weren't on my mind." He tells her she is "incredibly attractive" and "adorably dorky." He reminds her, in detail, of how he has helped her professionally: "I couldn't believe the things I was compelled to do for you." He describes being near her as "exhilarating and frustrating at the same time" and himself as "utterly unable to get a grip" as a result. He closes by assuring her, "That's just the way things are and you're

gonna have to deal with me until one of us leaves.”

Women are no longer a minority within higher education. According to the most recent statistics released by Unesco, women’s enrollment in graduate education in the United States has been greater than men’s for each of the last 30 years; as of 2012, there were 13 women enrolled for every 10 men. Yet, every school year, science, technology, engineering and math programs — known as the STEM fields — shed women the way the trees on campus lose their leaves in the fall.

Within my own field, physical sciences, the results of this shedding were clear. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, seven B.S. degrees are granted to women for every 10 granted to men; three M.S. degrees granted to women for every five granted to men; one Ph.D. degree granted to a woman for every two granted to men. The absence of women within STEM programs is not only progressive, it is persistent — despite more than 20 years of programs intended to encourage the participation of girls and women.

Plenty of explanations have been offered as to why women leave science, but the reason doesn’t appear to be performance. The University of Washington found no difference in G.P.A. between the women who remained and those who transferred out of its STEM programs from 1991 to 1996. Within the same study, women reported both isolation and intimidation as barriers blocking their scholarly path; and while 23 percent of freshmen reported not having experienced these barriers, only 3 percent of seniors did.

In the rare case when a female scientist becomes a faculty member, she finds herself invested in the very system that is doing the weeding, and soon recognizes that sexual harassment is one of the sharpest tools in the shed. My own experiences as a student, scientist and mentor lead me to believe that such harassment is widespread. Few studies exist, but in a survey of 191 female fellowship recipients published in 1995, 12 percent indicated that they had been sexually harassed as a student or early professional. My experiences have

also convinced me that sexual harassment is very rarely publicly punished after it is reported, and then only after a pattern of relatively egregious offenses.

The evasion of justice within academia is all the more infuriating because the course of sexual harassment is so predictable. Since I started writing about women and science, my female colleagues have been moved to share their stories with me; my inbox is an inadvertent clearinghouse for unsolicited love notes. Sexual harassment in science generally starts like this: A woman (she is a student, a technician, a professor) gets an email and notices that the subject line is a bit off: "I need to tell you," or "my feelings." The opening lines refer to the altered physical and mental state of the author: "It's late and I can't sleep" is a favorite, though "Maybe it's the three glasses of cognac" is popular as well.

The author goes on to tell her that she is special in some way, that his passion is an unfamiliar feeling that she has awakened in him, the important suggestion being that she has brought this upon herself. He will speak of her as an object with "shiny hair" or "sparkling eyes" — testing the waters before commenting upon the more private parts of her body. Surprisingly, he often acknowledges that he is doing something inappropriate. I've seen "Of course you know I could get fired for this" in the closing paragraph; the subject line of the email sent to my former student was "NSFW read at your own risk!"

So much for the contents of the first email; now let's picture its recipient. She's shocked: Is this for real? She's confused: Did she do something to make him think she wanted this? She's worried: She has to see him tomorrow. Her thesis isn't done, and she still needs his signature. What if he says no? She's scared: If she rebuffs him, will he get angry?

The scientific method may be impartial, but the scientific culture is not. From grad-school admission on up through tenure, every promotion can hinge on a recommendation letter's one key passage of praise, offered — or withheld — by the most recent academic adviser. Given the gender breakdown of senior

scientists, most often that adviser is a man.

Perhaps she decides to ignore this first email — and this is often the case — knowing that she has little to gain, and a lot to lose, from a confrontation. Once satisfied with her tendency toward secrecy, the sender then finds a way to get her alone: invites her to coffee, into his office, out for some ostensibly group event. At said meeting he will become tentatively physical, insisting that if people knew, they just wouldn't understand. At this point, any objection on her part wouldn't just be professionally dangerous, it would seem heartless — and she's not a horrible person, is she?

Then there are conferences, field trips, cocktail hours and retreats, whispering co-workers, rolling eyes and sadly shaking heads. On and on it goes, and slowly she realizes that he's not going to stop because he doesn't have to. She thought she was there to learn, to work and to be useful. She feels stupid, and she's been told that stupid is the opposite of what a scientist is supposed to be. She wants to go back in time, before this whole mess happened, and have it not happen. She knows she can't have that, and so she starts to want the one thing that she feels she can have at this point: She wants out of science.

Brilliant men make for good copy, even when they fail at their jobs. Recently, reports of sexual harassment and assault within science departments at the University of California, Berkeley, Caltech and the University of Chicago have been in the news. Academia will have to respond. A great chorus of formal condemnation shall be lifted up, and my male colleagues will sputter with gall, appalled by the actions of bad apples so rare they have been encountered by every single woman I know.

Female scientists like me will be solicited for constructive solutions that don't involve anybody getting fired. Female students will be advised to examine how their own behavior might have contributed, and I will have more than my usual trouble keeping my mouth shut. Human resources offices will

issue statements reminding employees that “we do not tolerate such behavior.” These statements will be filed within cabinets already stuffed to bursting with reports of jokes that weren’t funny, of grabbing that wasn’t an accident, of infatuations unwelcome and unwanted. And in the end, science — an institution terminally invested in believing itself honorable — will sort of come close to admitting that it isn’t.

IT’S not something I can put on my C.V., but I believe that one of my most important duties is to walk young women through emails like the one my former student received, and I am called upon to do it many times each year. I emphasize to them that the first email is important because it is the one that the powers that be will point to and say, “Why didn’t you do something when you first got this?” I talk to each woman bluntly and advise her to write back immediately, telling (not asking) him to stop.

I teach her to draw strong professional boundaries and then to enforce them, not because she should have to, but because nobody else will. I insist that she must document everything, because someday he will paint this as a two-way emotional exchange. I wearily advise her to stick it out in science, but only because I cannot promise that other fields aren’t worse. And I hope that this is enough to make him stop. But it never, never stops.

My former student is still receiving late-night emails, notes and presents left on her desk, and her co-worker is still insisting that they should meet “outside of the hectic hours of work.” She doesn’t feel that she can go to her personnel office; she’s heard plenty of stories from the other women at her institution about how this happens all the time and how nobody ever does anything about it. She was the best student that I had during the year that we worked together. The last time she talked to me, she told me that she was thinking of quitting.

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