

My Office Mate the Whiner

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With Support From



Image: The Big Lebowski (1998)

Question (from "Luanne"): I'm in a bullpen office with half a dozen adjuncts, some of us sharing desks, all of us crowded, overworked, and demoralized. But that's not what I'm writing about.

"Dana" manages to make it so much worse with his chronic complaining. Every day there's a new crisis — noisy plumbing, bad drivers, barking dogs. He hates the weather in our part of the country, and despises the local politics. His students, he rails, are all morons. And we, his colleagues, will never measure up to the world-class professors he knew at his Ivy League grad school.

He's known as "Dana the Complainer" and making fun of him behind his back is a common pastime. I'm not happy with that. (I'm probably called "Luanne the Pollyanna.") I can't get any work done, with his fuming and stomping around.

Holidays are the worst, when he scolds the staff members about Christmas stuff on their desks. (They're mostly single moms from the small Appalachian towns near us, and they have to be polite, no matter the provocation). I agree that religion doesn't belong in the university. But I also believe in tact, which is a foreign concept to Dana. He loathes "mindless politeness" and values "people who speak their mind, no matter what."

How can I deal with him? Our college pays so little that I can't even hope he'll be fired. There's no line of people wanting his job.

Answer: Ms. Mentor sympathizes. We all suffer in these barbaric times, and who among us needs to hear more

kvetching and moaning? But the worst office mates are sometimes the best mentors.

As a young duchess, Ms. Mentor toiled in just such a bullpen, a valley of woe from which no one ever ascended to the promised tenure track. One member of said bullpen, "Gyorgy," spent his afternoons pining for his golden youth in olde Budapest, where adoring students vied to carry his briefcase. Now his every student was a dummkopf, hopelessly shallow. None of them had ever been to Paris. He spent his office hours berating them: "How could you make such an egregious mistake? Do you even know what 'egregious' means?"

His office mates, choking down their lunches, tried not to listen as they prepared for class. Gyorgy was the ruin of many an afternoon.

But he was also Ms. Mentor's first anti-mentor, a cautionary tale. He showed her the damage that academic snobs can do: No one measures up, no one learns, and no one is happy. Gyorgy wasn't the only member of the bullpen convinced he deserved to be someplace better. Some of Ms. Mentor's other office mates back then politely took turns whining, as if in an opera. In their minds, none of those instructors had lived at their current university.

That, Ms. Mentor learned, is what whiners do. They park their psyches somewhere else and lose their keys. They look before and after, and pine for what is not — and never seek out sage advice.

Now, Ms. Mentor could suggest things for Dana the Complainer. Meditation, cooking classes, swimming. Meetings of local groups of any kind. Support groups for anything. Lectures on climate change (that's where he'd find the secular humanists). If Dana opened his mind and made friends, he might stop sneering and wailing.

Meanwhile, poor Luanne should not have to be the Complainer's sounding board or reluctant hostess. She just has the desk next to his. She is not his keeper.

She must not fall into the compassion trap, even if her supervisor tells her to. Luanne is not responsible for Dana's happiness. (She may give him a chocolate-chip cookie now and then, but no more.) If he approaches her desk, Luanne may have to trot out the eighth-grade repertoire of evasion: unfriendly body language, no eye contact, a sudden race to the bathroom. An open laptop should mean "I'm busy," but sometimes it takes a phone to the ear or a large sign — "Grading Papers" or "Office Hours."

The answer to "Got a minute?" is "Sorry, no."

Men in academe are rarely expected to do extra duty as confidants, office wives, or listeners, and women should not be assumed to want those unpaid jobs. Rather, Ms. Mentor suggests that Luanne fortify herself with her own "Luanne's Bill of Rights." Some possible amendments:

- I am responsible for well-prepared classes, conscientiously graded papers, and professional relationships with my colleagues.
- I am not responsible for my colleagues' social or emotional well-being.
- I do not wish to hear about weather or traffic or the good ole days. Ever.
- I do not want anything explained to me unless I ask.
- If I'm drafted to be a psychologist, nurturer, or doormat, I am free to say, "I'm sorry, but I need to be [grading papers, preparing classes]. I'm sorry, but I have to put my professional responsibilities first."
- "I'm sorry" is not the sign of a wimp. It is polite self-protection. No one can argue with "I'm sorry."
- If I don't like my job, I'll find another.

To be a successful professional, Ms. Mentor learned long ago, one can't be dragged down by the dramas of others. Martyrdom is its own reward — and it doesn't pay very well.

Question: My department chair, who controls my future, is a fanatic supporter of a sports team that was recently in its playoffs, or tournament, or terminal throes, or something. I think sports are boring and infantile. When my boss says, "How 'bout them Gargoyles?" should I sincerely groan? Or hypocritically pump my fists in the air, shimmy like a mad peacock, and roar, "Go, Gargoyles!"

Answer: Roar.

Sage readers: As always, Ms. Mentor welcomes gossip, rants, and queries. Recognizing that 2016 has been a difficult year for most Americans, she invites predictions of changes that may ensue in academia, hopes as well as fears. The Monty Python ditty, "[Always Look on the Bright Side of Life](#)," can be a comfort. Ms. Mentor regrets that that she can rarely answer letters personally, and never speedily, and she recommends regular perusal of *The Chronicle's* [forums](#). She cannot give legal or psychiatric advice. All communications are confidential, details are scrambled, and anonymity is guaranteed. If you wish to tattle on or praise your office mate, your secrets are safe with Ms. Mentor.

[Ms. Mentor](#), who never leaves her ivory tower, channels her mail via Emily Toth at Louisiana State University at Baton Rouge.

Her most recent book is *Ms. Mentor's New and Ever More Impeccable Advice for Women and Men in Academia* (University of Pennsylvania Press). Her e-mail address is ms.mentor@chronicle.com.



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