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Chucks and Pearls: Teaching with Confidence and Agility

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Vice president of the United States, Kamala Harris is known for wearing Chuck Taylor Converse sneakers and pearls that are emblematic of her historical significance as the first African American and South Asian woman to assume this high office. Girls and women everywhere donned the shoes and pearls to celebrate “Chucks and Pearls Day” on the day of her inauguration, January 20, 2021. Chucks and pearls have surplus meaning for VP Harris, and I would argue, for theological educators as well, and not just in the US context. I am an American teaching at a seminary in Canada where I find a strong investment of support for Harris’s achievements and optimism about what her leadership brings to the global stage.

Is it sexist to focus on what women in leadership wear? One could look at it that way. The infatuation with Bernie Sanders’s mittens, however, might even the score. Conversely (pun intended), one could find inspiration in the “Twenty Pearls,” the esteemed early twentieth century founders of Harris’s historically Black sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.

Biblically speaking, pearls are symbolic of wisdom gained through experience, and their value is juxtaposed against the swine of the world. Even after thirty years of teaching I seek confidence boosters to help me in the classroom, whether I literally or metaphorically “wear

them.” Those ‘pearls of great price’ who came before me and braved male-dominated theological education, and my sister-colleagues who witness against sexism, racism, and classism, are confidence boosters for me. When there are confidence busters (like a vengeful comment on a course evaluation, or a double standard toward female faculty), the boosters offer examples of tenacity. When I feel I need to challenge a student on an unexamined idea, I muster the courage and grace to do so from the pearls in my life. If I feel spiritually or intellectually dried up, I go to the wisdom bearers of my tradition.

The Converse sneakers were Harris’s go-to on the campaign trail. She was “laced up and ready to win” (“Why are Women Wearing Chucks and Pearls Today?”). Harris viewed the shoes as energizing and as telling a story about who she is as a well-grounded, everyday person. She saw them as a symbol of universality, an equalizing force, pointing toward the unity she seeks for the country. Harris has more than her share of detractors, but in her poise, one can see deep strength and steadfastness. The political arena, like the classroom--also political-- puts one in a vulnerable place. Confidence and agility are two invaluable personal resources in both spaces. And in this world of virtual and online teaching we especially need flexibility and an embodied, “real” presence.

Teaching has a “ready to hit the ground” quality that requires quick movements and agility—dodging, shifting, and taking chances. Confidence comes with comfort in one’s body bringing a presence to the space. In the power dynamics of teaching and learning, confidence is not to be confused with cockiness or authoritarianism. It is the willingness to offer hospitality, to say under one’s breath, “Yes, I have a PhD which gives me knowledge and expertise in my field, but I still wear sneakers. I am a learner too.” Confidence is the readiness to be challenged by students in order to calibrate one’s own thinking. It also has the quality of standing firm when necessary. For example, sometimes students do not want to read something they disagree with or that causes a visceral reaction. I might persist with the assignment, knowing that it will hone our practice of discourse with those holding different views and allow us to explore what those reactions teach us. Such discourse is important in the democracy Harris defends.

Does this mean that all theological educators ought to go out and buy Chucks and pearls to be in solidarity with our new VP? No. It isn’t about stuff, or that we need a good luck charm to help ward off evil or help us cope with the passing criticism. We do, however, need reminders that the pearls who have guided us are yet still with us and that we have within our souls (pun intended) the ability and agility to embody good teaching.

<https://wabash.center/2021/03/chucks-and-pearls-teaching-with-confidence-and-agility/>