

Stacey Boateng
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Same Journey, Different Era

For my project, I had the honor of interviewing my advisor Dr. Tanya Corbin. I chose to interview her because not only has what she has accomplished been so inspiring to me, she has never been a person who allowed being a woman to define or limit her in any way. Dr. Corbin is one of the four women in our political science department which has eleven professors total. There were a lot of similarities in the way we both grew up and I believe that there is power in what she has achieved and how she looks at life not only when she was growing up, but now as well.

I chose Dr. Corbin to be my advisor last semester due to some convincing of an old friend who graduated, “go to her, she will take care of you Stacey” is what my friend Megan said. Because I trusted her, I agreed although I was extremely nervous to be staying in the rapidly changing Political Science department here at Radford University. Several of the professors were in the process of retiring including my advisor at the time, there is actually only one veteran professor in the department. Dr. Corbin and I did not have much time to build a relationship, although I heard good things from my friend Megan, I was not sure if she would like me. Dr. Corbin’s mother passed away this year on September 20th to be exact. This is also the exact date my father passed away three years prior, because of this life change she took a leave of absence for a bit. I remember our first face to face encounter as I walked into her office, “I’m not free for hours” she said to me, I had read the chart on her door incorrectly. I thought then after that of how stupid I must have looked to her, she understood my confusion and we set up a time for me to come to her office for hours. I reluctantly emailed her about the interview, I was afraid she would tell me she didn’t have time but I was pleasantly surprised that she was happy to be interviewed by me. Before we got to the questions she was chatting with another student as I

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walked in about the grieving process and how insensitive others can be, especially family and I agreed. It was then that we found out that my advisor and I had stronger similarities than I ever would have imagined.

I found it interesting that although Dr. Corbin's mother was a very traditional housewife, there was not too much of that imposed on her at a young age. She did explain that after her brother was born, she noticed that he didn't have to do as much as she and her sister. "I don't know if it was because he was the baby or because he was the boy", she explained to me. She also spoke about the fact that although her mother was very traditional, it wasn't forced on her to be a certain way, the only girly thing she mentioned when it came to toys was having a dollhouse. When she was going to school she did mention that girls were not expected to do anything related to math. "My mom and everybody told me I wasn't good at math, which actually isn't true! I can do math but I remember none of the girls doing math". The only sport for girls in her school was tag, I found this quite laughable and she agreed that it was dumb as well. Although her family didn't impose too many roles and expectations based on gender, it is interesting that education in her time was the main way she was introduced to more of these expectations. When she and her family moved to California, she noticed that people were more progressive and didn't really focus on gender "we all played softball on the same team", she explained to me. Where women grew up geographically also seems to have an effect on what was expected from them. Dr. Corbin has done everything from owning her own restaurant, community service and working at a law firm. At the law firm she explained how she noticed that there was different treatment, women would tell her that she needed to wear heels and more makeup even though her job didn't really require interaction with others. Women were not taken seriously, "you have to work twice as hard to be taken half as seriously, and that's just what you

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do”. It was always engrained in her mind that although you could be the hardest working woman alive, you would not gain the same level of respect as a man. Dr. Corbin believes that things are actually much worse for women in the workforce now than when she was first beginning her career. “The women now take more of the back seat”, this surprised me because I expected to hear how strict things were back when she was first beginning but instead she believed that women were actually taken a bit more seriously. As a faculty member in a field that is 80% male dominated, women are likely to be marginalized and even ignored and treated as if she didn’t exist. She explained how shocked she was to witness this and she also explained how the kinds of questions and research conducted is skewed by gender as well. I asked her if she had ever experienced being disrespected in that way and she replied, “I would say so but I usually push back, I’m harder to ignore”. From what she explained about being a woman in this field, it seems like she has learned that if women are going to be taken seriously and listened to, they are going to have to fight for that respect and demand the attention of their male counterparts.

Dr. Corbin and her husband have been happily married for eighteen years, this is something she did not necessarily expect to happen. She explained to me how she does not believe we can “have it all”. Fortunately, their relationship is an equal partnership and there are no gender expectations. He does most of the cooking. They do not have children, partially because Dr. Corbin did not want to have the same lifestyle her mother had, “I didn’t want to be trapped at home and when it came to a point that I thought I might want children, we found out I couldn’t”. There was a lot of scrutiny from her parents expecting grandchildren and other outside voices, there was a bit of annoyance in her voice as she mimicked their expectations. Her parents gave up and she received less pressure since she has siblings who were able to have children. Although there is a lot in her life that she could not necessarily control or predict, it is very

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intriguing how this motto of “you can’t have it all”, has shaped her life. Indeed, she couldn’t have it all but for the most part she chose and worked hard for the things she did desire to have, such as a self-sufficient lifestyle and prominent career. Dr. Corbin was around college age during the early 90’s and explained that this was when the year of the woman took off, she also explained how the first gulf war was not as supported as the second war in Iraq. Foreign policy did not become a large factor until after 9/11 occurred, “the 90’s was the most peaceful decade, the cold war had ended and there was no major threat, after 9/11 people became more scared”. There was a time when a plane ticket to Las Vegas was twenty dollars and people could just walk up to a plane and board immediately, I sighed at this as I imagined what it would have been like to live in a time without fear. She explained how the world is also a lot more judgmental and critical now especially when it comes to religion, I completely agree with this because when one person makes a mistake or acts in an un-uniform manner, they bring a negative stigma upon every other member of their group. We see this when it comes to the word feminist in society currently, a feminist is thought of as a lesbian who doesn’t wear a bra or shave and a Muslim is a terrorist, my own mother refers to our neighbors as the Taliban (I told her she was setting a bad example for my siblings by saying that).

The topic of friendship was something Dr. Corbin enjoyed genuinely. “I know the most amazing women, they are tough but kind, they are supportive of one another and they go through a lot but find resilience”. She explained that the friends we make in higher education tend to be the most powerful and lasting relationships, she only recalls staying in touch with two people from high school, but is still very good friends with the women who came in her life during undergraduate, graduate and her time in the workplace. Because we live in a world where women have to constantly fight in order to be acknowledged, Dr. Corbin has chosen to only keep

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around her friends that build each other up. There is no sense in wasting time being around women who do not make her feel equal and empowered. My generation, there is a lot of fear in even uttering the word feminist on your lips, this is something Dr. Corbin also noticed as something that is different. “feminist is a bad word now, when I was your age we were all saying we were feminists. It wasn’t radical to admit that we wanted to be treated the same under the law as men”. We seem to have taken a couple steps back when the hope was to continue moving forward. She mentioned the fact that when she was my age, all the women loved Gloria Steinem and today Hilary Clinton is very unlinked. “If people feel like they can’t say that (feminist), then how do you talk about the important ideas”? Civil rights was not achieved by the activists sitting in corners living in fear, they stood up for what they believed in boldness and in the same way women need to open their mouths and claim their basic human principles. She explained that college is something that challenges us to explore new ideas and figure out who we are, it is hard because things are a much larger deal friendship is hard. “one of the only things about getting older is friendship, time is scarce and valuable and if someone is not kind to me, I don’t spend time with them”. This is a lesson I learned very early but I am glad that things do get better in regards to friendship as we age. There is so much manipulation and competition in the stage of life I am in and it is nice to hear that friendship only gets better as we get older. “you’ll find your good people, its better to invest in the people who are real”. This outlook has shaped her life in such a positive way and I just find it so inspiring.

As a young woman Dr. Corbin wanted to have a career and travel and see the world. She wanted to be self sufficient and had no desire to ever rely on a man or anyone else in order to be taken care of. Growing up in a family that struggled with finances shaped these dreams but although she wanted to be self sufficient, it wasn’t about the money, it was about the knowledge

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and the experiences she would receive. "I didn't want things and a lot of money, they say people are happier when they spend money on experiences versus things". She and I are very similar in this way; the reason I chose the career I am working so hard for is because I desire to travel the world one day. I desire to be able to not only support myself, but others as well. My family does not have a lot of money on my mother's side and there is always financial struggle. My mother was also in a horrible marriage that ended in abuse and divorce and has a horrible record of being mistreated by men. I do not ever desire to be dependent on a man or anyone else for that matter in any way, especially financially. Doctor Corbin achieved her goals of being self sufficient and independent, she did not go on to have children, she has and continues to travel, and although she didn't ever think she would be married or have a PHD. Neither of us had the dream of being stay at home housewives, her mother was trapped and had to re-marry right away after her husband was unfaithful and walked away leaving her and the children with no support. We both shared the thought that marriage could be seen as a bad deal for women, but she has been fortunate enough to be married to her best friend, someone who neither worships or degrades her, he treats her like an equal. Not expecting this, another reason Dr. Corbin did not desire to have children, she didn't want to be trapped the way her mother was. She didn't want her children to be trapped and unsupported. I believe that this is an extremely selfless way of thinking, there are so many women in society today that have children they either cannot or do not support. She did clarify that she is not against women having children and explained that there is a time when some will be sure they are able to support and are fit to have children. "You'll feel different", she explained if having children is something meant to happen of course. As for the dreams of young women today, she sees the lack of confidence in the dreams of her students, she feels a lot of us hold back and let the men do all the talking. "the women are really prepared but the men talk, so people

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think they know more but they don't. I wish they were more confident, I see them give up kind of quickly and I don't like that". She expressed to me that success is embedded in failure and we need to continue trying and also have networks of support. It is easy to think that life is supposed to be easy and when things do not work out we stop. We live in a society no where instant gratification is the norm and nobody desires to work hard especially if success is not guaranteed. Dr. Corbin notices that women are not seeing each other as allies in this generation and extremely competitive. She has seen that we are all fighting the same battle and realizes we all need to support each other in order to ensure victory.

I was able to share with her some of the topics we talked about through this course about aging in society and how the media just expects women to disappear when they reach a certain age. She explained that as a woman, when you get older you become invisible. "The trick is to not base your self-worth on your appearance because that goes. You look your best in your 20's but you feel your best as you continue to get older". This is something I have never really heard especially when the media idolizes youth and sexuality so much. Dr. Corbin explained to me how getting older has made her a much better person and capable of handling situations in a better manner as well. She loves being in her 40's even though she doesn't love the way it looks. She explains that nobody expects to be old, in her mind she is not old. A plus she mentioned about aging is the pressure is off to look a certain way "You're Just an old middle aged lady now", she said as we both chuckled. For her she felt that becoming older is more of a subtle change and there is liberation from caring about things that don't matter. "I don't think women can have it all in our society, there is not enough support". It is interesting that thorough the course of this interview, this phrase was something that remained constant. There is support for men having it

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all and that being okay but when it comes to women, there are choices and as for Dr. Corbin she decided not to go for everything.

Dr. Corbin's greatest peace stems from surrounding herself with kind and supportive people, and her greatest satisfaction comes from helping others. I find it amazing that although we live in a world that breeds selfishness, she still strives and finds joy in supporting others. Her advice for the younger generation is "work twice as hard to be taken half as seriously". Doing this allows us to be seen, "we cannot level justice until we get on the field and in order to do this we need to run uphill a little bit". In order for minorities and women to be seen as present, we all need to be willing to do the work required to ensure change, this mindset is one that has given Dr. Corbin success and authority. She explained that we shouldn't allow the way things are to get us too discouraged, our focus should be on the way things could be. This interview was not what I expected at all, but it did remind me that although I am in my early 20's and my advisor is in her 40's we are not as different as I perceived, we have a lot of shocking similarities. We are on the same journey despite the generational difference.