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Book Review Spousework: Partners Supporting Academic Leaders by Teresa Johnston Oden

iUniverse –2007 – ISBN: 978-0-595-45609-3

80 pages,

Reviewed by: Janet M. Haynes, Ed.D.

This book is not a first about supporting spouses in leadership roles, however it appears to be the first book to describe marriage with a spouse in educational leadership as “spousework.” Spousework defined by Johnston Oden is “supporting our leader-partners in an artful, intelligent way”. The book is written from the leadership perspective of a wife partnering an academic leader in a marital relationship and an institutional relationship.

“Spousework” is about a self described “introverted, seclusion loving personality” who believes the role of headmasters wife is analogous to “moving to a foreign country” requiring a “load of emotional adjustment.” This book has ten chapters and the first half of this book describes life in an old mansion without mortgage, utilities, or maintenance and the familial sacrifices involved that include alumni house guests, indoor catered house parties, and which wing to designate as the guest area. Spousework is a book about leadership with vague references to Affirmative Action as the reason that search committees “tiptoe” around spouses. Perhaps they “tiptoe” because only one person is the potential paid employee and any relationships; spousal, significant other, etc. are not an employer’s responsibility.

Chapter 4 describes life in an official residence and includes an apology for those readers who think the author sounds ungrateful. The book describes delegating household responsibilities as feeling “infantilized” and at the same time like living on a movie set. Everyone knows where the house is and others have keys. The book describes feeling guarded and expectant captured with a story about security coming in and checking the house while they slept because the unset security alarm self activated. Johnston Oden says her lack of panic can be attributed to feeling watchful all the time. This chapter further details the author’s relationship with windows. Prior to moving in the official residence, windows were thought of as a way to look out and now that has changed to a way that others can see in. Students who tell them they know which room is the master bedroom by the lights reinforce these thoughts. It also describes the mystique associated with the official residence, which is probably no different than any other grand house where people are naturally curious about the décor and the occupants. Repair calls take on a social cadence because the maintenance or repair people are also connected with the institution. According to Johnston Oden, those relationships would not allow you to ignore the person as you could in a private home. The notable perk is that maintenance calls to the official residence take priority.

The second half of this book discusses entertaining and how to communicate effectively with catering

staff; finding time to be together without being on display; and bemoaning the loss of routine discussions regarding appliance selection. The next chapter discusses the children and the decision to publicly educate or not in an attempt to facilitate a separate identity that is not tied to their father who is also the school's headmaster or leader. Nothing new here. Parents who teach or otherwise have gainful employment in an educational setting make the same or similar decisions regarding whether their progeny are educated where they work or elsewhere.

The basic story is a tale of one person's struggle as the wife of an academic leader. The book proposes to fill the gap between traditional helper roles versus "leader-partner" roles of female spouses with a few sentences at the end of each chapter devoted to male spouses. The book also purports to examine the lingering expectations of female spouses in these roles. Johnston Oden does not describe a contemporary perspective and the stories read very sadly of a time when gender equality was non-existent. What separates this book from other self help books is the suffering depicted and the lack of voice denied to spouses by trustee boards that make promises "they can't deliver."

The end of the book describes a network of spouses as a solution to the present lack of preparation and insight into challenges and changes they will face. Johnston Oden also applauds the idea of "early intervention" for the spouse along with a transition team for induction. With rising educational costs, who will pay for a spouse learning center? While contemplating that aspect I will try to find the "leadership" in this book.

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