

# College as A House of Cards:

Finding Home/Making Home in Higher Ed

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The classroom where I teach my 100-level classes is in a beautiful but severe building built in the 1890s (see Image 1). The building itself is not conducive to home. It's pretty much a castle transported to the upper Midwest, which makes it majestic from the street and worthy of a sign on the Interstate as a historical place of interest. Students will tell you it's haunted, that they hear the pioneer-era piano in the attic playing eerie notes at night when no one could be there. It's also inaccessible in just about every sense of the word – you literally cannot get in this building without making it up stairs no matter which angle you come from (see Image 2). But fixing this expensive problem is further complicated by the very historical designation that gets it a sign on the highway. There is a bulletin board outside my office with a list of quaintly worded complaints from students in 1892, many



**Image 2.** (Photo credit: Christine Madden)



**Image 1.** (Photo credit: Elizabeth Coody)

of which are still a problem: “Our physical health has been endangered on account of the extreme coldness of the building... We have but one water-closet for both sexes, and that one unfavorably located.” Thanks to some twentieth-century improvements, I’ve never felt my physical health endangered by the cold, but it’s not a temperate place. The one water-closet was long ago split into two, but it’s still unfavorably located in the basement. However, this building is still where it is most natural for me to meet my students. They expect it to be my natural habitat.

The room I teach my largest classes in is structured to reinforce and embody every pedagogical habit from the Gilded Age: tables are bolted to the floor in a tiered U-shape, there is a narrow whiteboard with multiple boards that roll up and down (presumably so students can copy down what the sage on the stage writes there with his [really his!] back to them), but the screen for the projector pulls down to cover that up. The designers (whose unfortunate spirits I regularly curse under my breath)

could not imagine the need for many visuals. There are two doors, both behind where the lecturer stands (and the person at the front is clearly supposed to be lecturing) so that everyone can see. The position means that coming into the room puts you immediately, if briefly, on stage (see Image 3). Even though my classes are capped at thirty-five, the whole shape of the room makes it feel like this



**Image 3.** POV: This is the view when you walk in – imagine it full of faces, all made judgmental in your imagination. Even Bernice Goldstein’s portrait is another pair of eyes on you (Photo credit: Elizabeth Coody)

is a room where a passive audience is lined up watching a single speaker. Even though the U-shape does give some students a little bit of a view of their classmates, the three-level rows resist it. Most seats turn just to the front, to the center, to me (see Image 4). It’s not designed for a learning community or comfort. It’s designed to give you a good view of just one person at the front. So, what home there is, I have to make with my own body, in a space – physical and social – that often fights me. This struggle between myself and my haunted space is an exercise in ecology.

Ecology has a connection to home. Even though I want this piece to use what I know from my own body and not my research, I am compelled to tell you that this all works etymologically. The Greek *oikos* (home, or probably more properly, “household”) sits at the head of the word “ecology.” Famously, the Greek and Roman home is governed by its own particular gods and ruled over by women. Certainly, many people relate to the idea of “homemaking” that is often feminized and somewhat supernatural. No one is more surprised than I am that I have ended up writing this piece about homemaking – something that sounds so far from my public persona. I have directed my life in a way that “traditional” homemakers and I appear to have little in common – or might even fight. I am the opposite stereotype: a “career” woman trying to “have it all.” I am a white woman, yes, but also a college professor with no children. Yes, I have a home in Iowa, but the making of it has grown organically in partnership with my spouse. However, here in this piece, I have elected to do something different than my usual research. Instead, I invite you to hear the echoes of the many



**Image 4.** From the back row. I feel like you can see the clock more clearly than anything I write on the board. (Photo credit: Elizabeth Coody)

guests that are calling out to you from my words here. They have made me. Even as I itch to cite, I will resist in order to think with you about how what I am doing both is and is not homemaking as a remedy to commodification, hostessing as a play on these transactions that remedies the impulses of capitalism, and ultimately mothering in ways that create a home for students who would otherwise go homeless. These all make my work worth doing and combat some of the most pernicious fractures that I see students struggling to overcome. And home is the center of it – the *oikos* as the seat of good creation.

### ECONOMY TO ECOLOGY

Often, particularly in the cultures of capitalism and higher education, this *oikos* is paired with *nomos* (the law or the norms), so that *oikonomos* forms the word “economy.” Economics is a site of concern for my students as the symbol of their striving toward security, framed almost always as financial security (“I am in college so that I can get a good job.” “How will this class help me in my career goals?”). My students understand themselves to be entering college in order to collect a degree and to arm their individual selves with the tools they need to carve their own path. A few are here to make friends but rarely articulate it. They are more comfortable thinking of themselves as here to “win” – at college and at life. It’s a game, and games have rules. While students expect *nomos* on that first day – and I do lay down a few laws! – I start by making ecology, pairing the *oikos* with *logos*, pairing home with word. Yes, we are heading toward the traditional “-ology” – toward study. But we start with the *logos*, the word. And they provide the words.

There’s this exercise I like to do in my freshman-heavy 100-level religious studies course. I give students a three-by-five index card at the beginning of every class period. On the ruled side that has one red line across the top and is otherwise lined with blue lines, they write their name (last name, first name), the date (just to keep them grounded in time), and a short answer to a prompt that recalls what they read or anticipates the work they are doing that

day (“When was Siddhartha’s story most like yours or least like yours?” “What’s the last book you read that meant something to you?” “Describe the ‘land’ that you call ‘home’ with as many of your senses as you can”). On the back unlined side of the card, they can make a request for the class playlist (the songs that I play as they gather) and ask me any question that they want (“What’s your favorite color?” or “SpongeBob SquarePants Y/N?” or “But why does anti-Semitism still exist?” or “What’s that whole Atman thing all about, really?” or “Is pineapple on pizza okay?” or “But does the church think I’m going to go to hell? Is there a church that doesn’t?” or “Isn’t Judaism just a type of Christianity?”). The front side is just an excuse to get them writing for me. The questions on the back are a profound window into what they are learning and often bring me up short – sometimes pushing me into deeper theological or ontological territory and sometimes warning me when I need to go back and cover some basics or care for some wounds. Students test me here – both to figure out what exactly it is that a PhD in religious and theological studies is supposed to know and also to try out silly questions to see if I’ll answer them. So far, I have always answered the questions. Some of them I answer with “I can’t know” or “I don’t know yet” but often I tell them about the research I did to find information I didn’t yet know or take them through my reasoning process (“A hotdog and a sandwich are both better described as tacos,” “Good pineapple improves a pizza, bad pineapple can only make it soggy, but neither is cause for alarm or coming to physical blows”). All these questions and answers establish mutual respect or a tone of inquiry or maybe a running joke for the room. One student asked, “Was Jesus Jewish?” on every one of his cards for months. The first time, it was genuine. I think the second was a mistake because he hadn’t listened to my answer the first time. But after that it was a running gag. I answered it every time with a straight face – after all, “Yes” only took a second. Silly, yes, but no one got that question wrong on the final exam! But ultimately, it’s not about course content. They are giving me their words, and I am making them part of the home we build together. They are delighted to recognize their own words on

my screen at the front of the room, their songs playing when they walk in the room. Ultimately, they make each class different by how their words bounce off each other, and me, and the subject, and the world we're inhabiting together. It makes it their own, even if it's also mine; their words make them feel closer to home.

### CUSTOMER TO GUEST

There are more fractures to repair than just the commodified understanding they have of education before they can be truly "at home." They are at first comforted by the idea of a simple transaction between us. I am the teacher, I'm giving them a supply of something they can then trade for cash or security or badges or some nebulous future. This education is a transaction, but I want it to be gift. They want me to be their warden or their salesperson, but I want to be their hostess and make them become my guests.

My students often have a fractured sense of home from the jump that makes it difficult for them to feel like comfortable guests. Most of them are young and away from their caretakers' house or farm or trailer or apartment for the first time and find their way into college through a whole series of funny accidents and long, ancestor-planned designs. But being unhomed can be hard at first: Some can't do their laundry quite right, or they can't quite find the time. I can see they come to class in their new free college shirts a little more often than their enthusiasm for their new school warrants. Looking out over a room of school-issued maroon is the sure sign of a freshman class! But there are more subtle problems. Some have trouble figuring out how to feed themselves on a good schedule at first, though it takes conversation or extremes for me to find this out.

As their teacher, I know more quickly if they are struggling to schedule their time now that their days are suddenly their own. I can see it when they don't make it to class. I notice when they fail to arrive. I let them know that I notice as gently as I know how to with an email with the subject line "Missed you in class," the content of which varies depending on them and the class, but which always

encourages them to talk to me. (I did once title it "Cthulu Calls!" for a student horror fan who otherwise clearly never read my emails. It worked once, at least!) So many of them have been told by teachers or popular culture that college professors live in cold ivory towers and only descend to humiliate them. They're often not expecting me to notice them at all, much less their absence. Sometimes letting them know I notice their absence is enough to bring them back into the fold, to get them back home. Sometimes it takes more persistence to find them under their often Midwest-inflected reserve. Sometimes, they don't come back. This always feels personal, even if I try hard to resist. They are – all of them – a little lost at first, but they often, beautifully often, eventually find they feel at home. For some, this is the first time they feel that delicious sizzle of knowing you might belong in more than one home. It can be frightening and ungrounding, as it has been, I suspect for every coming-of-age story.

The home I am making for them is nestled in the middle of a transactional ecosystem. More and more, colleges and universities like mine make choices that are centered on the pressures of their tuition-driven economy. Students become consumers and customers. Course evaluations function more like Yelp reviews. There are power dynamics at play between my students and me at all times. I am the teacher – the professor, even. They are being graded. Those grades matter *for* them, even if sometimes not *to* them – and not in the ways I thought they would matter when I first started teaching, but they do matter. Most people with degrees like mine cared about grades at some point or, minimally, about approval or academic success. How else would you sustain your ego through the process? It had been a long time since I had been an undergraduate when I started teaching them. I forgot that Cs could get degrees – not Ds, as I have to remind some students. As much as I want my grading to communicate their growing edges or reinforce the places where they are getting things right, the way my grades matter to them is almost always strictly a math problem: does my GPA make me eligible to play my sport through our conference?

If this were a clear pressure from the beginning, it might be more spread out and bearable. Certainly, my school has created several points in the semester that encourage students to check their grades and even use a series of color-coded flags. But for most of my students, this realization (or the real weight of it) crashes down all at once, and usually when things are looking grim. Then the freedom of unrootedness starts to take on the sheen of true homelessness. Or rather, they see the tender roots they've put down with their new team threatened. If they are customers they suddenly find themselves vulnerable, but it is at this moment that they sometimes find themselves to be guests.

I see my task as hospitality, the task of making a home for learners so that they can find the confidence to make a community and dig deeply. If I want them to rescale the way I make home, I need to show them something about how to do this. So I take on the role of hostess. I try to be a good hostess in the classroom, but I've learned from hosting in my home. That is, a good hostess asks questions, but gives people space to answer and even disagree safely. A good hostess gives people the wifi password without being asked; mine is posted in the guest room. A good hostess has coffee and tea available in the kitchen and even shows you what button to hit to make that coffee happen, but then lets you decide when to hit that button. But guests need to understand their role, too. They need to participate, to be game for an adventure sometimes. To offer the occasional compliment. To be able to entertain themselves. To be able to accept gifts.

How do I make students feel at home? I start with some basic principles of hospitality that I learned from my church and my upbringing. Walking into my church means getting handed an order of worship. Throwing a party means greeting everyone who comes, which is why the exercise I do with my freshmen doesn't actually start and end with the words. The homemaking happens throughout the exercise from the moment when I give them the card.

How do I make a home and guests by handing out index cards? It's a ritual creation. I start by carefully keeping the cards in my hand, never putting them in a pile to be collected. I follow each student as they find a seat and (usually) flee quickly from the exposed front of the room. (Those exposed doors do have the advantage of making students truly strive to get there early so they have a smaller audience.) But no matter when they arrive, or what seat they flee to, I walk up to them and plant myself squarely in front of them, often on the tier right below them so that we are at eye level. I use the chance to make full-on eye contact with them as I smile and say "Good morning!" or "Good afternoon!" as cheerily as the day allows. (My smile is big, often toothy, usually goofy, and as disarming as my Southern upbringing can make it. Sometimes I waggle an eyebrow cheekily to surprise them as I comment on the weather or ask them about the reading they've done or another class they're working on. I've been known to wink as I compliment their wild new hair color.) They're not quite used to this on any level – grinning teachers excited for class are not at all what they have been told college will be like.

I put the index card in their hand – or if they don't reach for my outstretched hand, sometimes right in front of them on the table where they are sitting. There is sometimes a very brief moment of contact here as our fingers perhaps brush lightly. It's not at all what these pandemic-raised classes expect. I try hard to make them comfortable about it, though. I'm aware of the wide variety of cultural and neurological diversity that these students possess. I'm not on the attack here – I'm as disarming as I can be. Often, usually, mostly, I get a little smile back. They are so vulnerable at this moment, but so am I. They drive the conversation here as I invite it. The people who walk into my classroom in this Gothic building in the Midwest are so marvelously different (even if they are often all wearing the same school color) and their reactions run the whole gamut: from the standoffish natives of the region who aren't quite sure how to deal with me this close to their personal space (and on the wrong side of the podium), to the timid ones who seem grateful for someone talking to them today, to the ones from

cultures where this sort of eye contact is preferred and who have some witty reply (I've had quiet, private little running jokes from students that range from the confident afternoon class student who cracked a grin and told me "Good morning!" every time to the pretty sheepish one who would dodge me, grinning silently, until it became almost a game of tag). It gives me a chance to look at each of them closely – in some semesters I have seventy across two sections, in addition to my other course. I learn their names more quickly this way. It lets me keep an eye on them. It's delightful to track their morphing personal styles in their first months away from home. It's sobering to watch the ones who were a big deal on their high school football team slowly come to the realization that they are, in fact, not quite the incredible athlete here that they were back home. It's warming to feel them slowly start to expect my little questions and offer up something they are thinking about as the songs they've chosen play.

I remind myself of their humanness before we share a class together.

I remind them of my humanness before we share a class together – my humanness is hard to ignore when I'm looking at just you and asking about your day and complimenting your fit. It's not really about what they write to me, however profound some of them are – it's about handing them the card to begin to show I care. I begin to mend the tears worn into them.

### **MOTHERLESS TO CHILDREN**

Part of the fracturing of students' home is the usual disturbance of college in their young lives, but it's also more than that and something deeper and more horribly specific to our fractured age: they often feel they must build their lives alone without roots in a tradition, or that it is their responsibility to choose and dictate traditions. Even the ones who have the most conservative ideas of themselves think of their plans to be exactly what their parents want them to be as countercultural. They are a pack of lone wolves. They have been trained or taught or forced not to trust or

they have never had a chance to try it. Of course, the shape of this motherlessness varies according to their contexts, traditions, and identities, but they are almost all the same at first in this feeling that they must make a path alone – that following in someone else's footsteps is ultimately boring or a sign of failure or doom.

The feeling I'm pointing to here is different from the usual healthy rebellion. I write about weird comics and raucous punks in academia; I love a good rebellion! I get a little worried when students show no signs of rebellion – at nineteen, if your parents are still your first and best role models, I wonder if you have gotten to know them well enough yet. And even as I respect that choice for some of them, I wonder what happens next without a little more variety in their lives. One can feel oneself to be "motherless" in this way I am working on while also revolving one's life around the hopes of your parents. No, this is not rebellion: they are individualized in a way that is key to late modernity.

This loneliness is compounded by the way that the most recent iteration of the digital environment has always served them what they want, material specially designed to take their attention away from whatever is in front of them. The "for you page" (FYP) of TikTok is typical of the internet design they have known from childhood – even though it was only launched in 2016, that's still their entire adolescence. They don't have memories of a world without iPhones, even if their families didn't have them as soon as they were available. As an elder Millennial, I was first introduced to an internet in my adolescence that was more DIY than FYP, full of people's scrappy personal projects on free sites that reflected their style and the limitations of the form with flashing gifs, waving flags, and garish color-schemes. You could find the end of pages then. (I do sound like an elder, don't I?) You could stumble into odd rooms – sometimes they were funny and sometimes they were terrifying, like the time I stumbled on a Ku Klux Klan fan page that was run by someone who was probably a student at my high school. Despite that unsettling feeling, the point was that I could know him. The aesthetic of the internet for my students now is

both richer and flatter. It's better organized and social, but social with people we will probably never meet and run by a series of black-boxed algorithms that are designed to keep us clicking and our eyeballs locked on.

No wonder my students feel disconnected, rootless, unhomed, and motherless. A whole system has taken away a sense of home, but I might guide them collectively toward finding that home anew as a community in the classroom. It's a small step toward understanding that we can't make home alone.

And coming home means coming to a place where people love you. Except when it doesn't. Of course, home is a fraught concept. There are dangerous homes; many of my students come from homes that offer none of the generous comfort and love that I associate with my own home and upbringing and mothering. I don't know this from the first moment we meet, but I sometimes come to know that their homes were terrifying places that they are gladly escaping. I do not think I know this for sure about all of them for whom this is true, but I know what I want out of a home for them – perhaps my homemaking is an example of a positive home. But it's also a fraught space itself; in trying to make this home I'm fighting not just the space but a larger ecosystem of higher education, late capitalism, misogyny, and numerous other often-hostile environments. How dare I try to make a home with index cards? Is it truly a house of cards?

I don't know when I realized that it was the handoff and not the card that counted. It wasn't a carefully planned pedagogical exercise. Like most things that I ultimately understand to be key to my own teaching, I did it first on instinct trained by good teachers, and then backed into what was so wonderful about it. I know I did it on the first day because I had an exercise planned for them to write on it. I probably heard from someone – perhaps my kind predecessor in the role – that filling out an index card with your information on it was expected at my school on the first day of class. I know I didn't want to ask them the usual questions. I began (and still

always start) by asking them on the first day for their name, their pronouns, where they were raised, the first name of the person who mothered them the most and about where that person was raised, and the first name of the person who mothered them and where they was raised. I did this because that first day walking into a room of undergraduates, I was afraid of how to start class, and I had seen Dr. Vincent Harding start conversations with big rooms in this way and make them feel like home. Dr. Harding (who insisted he was Uncle Vincent and called me his sister – and everyone else who spoke with him his sibling) was a Civil Rights veteran and powerful, hopeful man who called Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. "Martin" casually in class because of their relationship. I have the good sense to follow good leaders, I think. It was a good start that first time.

And I still ask my students those questions on the first day because of the wonderful way it makes us all feel to hear those names ring out together. I'm Dr. Coody and I was raised in Shreveport, Louisiana. My mama is Johnny from Atlanta, Texas, her mama was Celesta from southern Arkansas. The names humanize them for each other – students from wildly different parts of the world or life situations find their mothers have the same name. I'm not asking them for their major (which many of them don't know yet) or what sport they play (which some of them already feel too defined by). Instead, I make them say Pam or June or Sachiko or Verna or Margo or Dan or a thousand other names. It's not about biology or the person who birthed them. Mothering is a verb. Someone had to mother them, I say, or they would not be here – we can't survive alone. Someone cared for them. Calling their name gives them a spiritual space in the room that gets us started on that homemaking.

And I think I handed them another index card the next day because I wanted to know more.

And I did it again because it felt right.

And then I started to feel lost without something to hand them when they walked in the door.

And then I just wanted an excuse to look them in the eye, despite the sensibilities of the Midwest.

And then a student told me that saying his mother's name and his hometown and not just that he was a soccer player from Denmark made him feel seen for the first time in the United States.

And then the habit was a ritual, and I was hooked on homemaking for students – creating an environment, a whole ecosystem in miniature, that loves them. They are guests in my home, and ultimately children, no longer motherless.

But all my students are going to leave the home I'm making and try to make another home again – somewhere out in the hostile world, out in the beautiful world, out in the exposed and terrifying, horrifying, harrowing, and loving world. But this classroom is my territory. It's not pretend for me either – it's real.

Very few things offend me in feedback, but I deeply resent the idea that anything is "busy work" that's somehow irrelevant or not real! I try to give my students a little more "inside baseball" about what we're doing and why. That is, I've considered every assignment, every reading. My home is my castle. Sometimes I tell them that I only assign books that I would like to read again – which is why my class is very short on traditional textbooks and long on good stories and classic writings. Every assignment is a practice version of something I want them to be able to do when they're working on their own territory.

Despite the fact that they will leave it, the home I have made is not a playhouse. What we do is real, even if it is on a different scale. It's a map, not a territory, to borrow a phrase. This map is my territory – and they are guests there. My goal is not to make a lot of new religious studies scholars – the field couldn't accommodate them

all, even if I could turn them out! Instead, I'm going to make around one hundred slightly better citizens every year. One hundred slightly more compassionate people. One hundred slightly more skeptical thinkers. One hundred slightly more critical readers who are nevertheless sometimes able to find joy in what they read. I want my students to turn my territory into their maps, orienting themselves to a world that does have things in common with my classroom, but doing it at their own scale.

It rattles me when I have occasionally heard my class called "easy." That disturbs me more than the gendered insults in the feedback. I've even heard about faculty talking about religious studies classes being easy. It flummoxed me at first, but I think I have figured out what they mean. They mean that religion is a seemingly familiar subject. That familiarity means it is on a family footing. But families, multivalent and complex as they are, are never easy. This is a perverse familiarity. The first thing you learn in an Introduction to Religion course is that religion is not quite familiar, whatever you think it is.

It's also, of course, gendered. The fact that I am a woman weaves through everything. I live in my body all the time, like most all of us do. I live in a culture that still, still, still does not take the voices of women as seriously as those of men. My classes must be easy because I am a woman. Even though men are slowly leaving my part of higher education, I teach a lot of men from traditionally male fields with traditionally male ideas about women. I have to attend to those expectations early on. If they hear they're being signed up for an easy class and walk in and see me smiling warmly, pressing a card into their hand, or playing with markers and crayons, they've unfortunately been socialized to believe this means they will not have to take my class seriously. But, despite every effort, students fail this class every semester. Grades are distributed around the letters. Even with all my rebellious feelings toward the way grading commodifies our work together, I use them as they are designed, for the most part. Students often mistake mothering for something gentle or permissive, when I think





**Image 5.** (Photo credit: Elizabeth Coody)

everyone should know that mothering means loving you enough to make you.

And if it's not clear yet, I love these students. I love them with every atom of my being. I love them when they are frustrating and when they are diligent – when they are doing exceptionally well and when they are failing utterly. I love them so much that I get lost sometimes in the hours I spend trying to make something

for them or make a home for them. I know that this is starting to sound motherly, and it is. Mothering is a verb. I making home. If I'm not here to make them better human beings, I'm not sure why I'm here at all.

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What do I do with all the cards at the end of the semester? It happens on the second to last day of class – the last day of new material before we have a huge review for my cumulative final exam. I try to offer a little comfort and healing. At the end of this class I tell them that they'll be able to use one of my index cards during the exam with anything they care to write on it. But, before we get to that treat of a card, we discuss how religions are involved in how we understand time. This is how we bring together and remember the many concepts and communities we've brought up during the term. As we talk about ways to mark time, I bring out a long box full of index cards, filed neatly week by week. I announce that these are all their index cards from the semester. I explain how I have read every word, treasured every doodle. Sometimes I mention some notable questions or reveal my admiration for their developing style. Some of them perhaps didn't consider what it means that I took them away at the end of class.




**Image 5.** (Photo credit: Elizabeth Coody)

That I read them. That I paid attention. That I valued their serious musings and their silly thoughts and every day in between. They are suddenly confronted with the entirety of the semester and my memory of them day by day. They are usually rapt and attentive. They lock eyes with me. We have a moment together, usually, if I play it right. I have known them as new freshmen, finding their feet, and here at the end of the semester, I have measured out their lives in index cards. They are faced suddenly and unexpectedly with my attention and with my love for them.

Homemaker, hostess, and mother have power in my classroom. A box of cards is something each of these figures would recognize as a measure of memory and love: calling cards, greeting cards, recipe cards, and the sketches of children stuffed in boxes. All of these are a common sight in a comfortable home. I face the homemaker-hostess-mother's problem with them too; once I have shown them to the room and made that final point, I don't know what to do with them. It's only been six years since I started doing this, so I keep stuffing them into a cabinet (see Images 5 and 6). I know it's unsustainable, but I somehow can't recycle them. There's something so comforting about them all there – some little piece of the students I've had, a physical reminder of the measure of their meaning to me. It's fraught, too, with valences of hoarding or disorganization or simply how I cannot maintain what I am doing here. This is not a measure that works well in institutional assessment. My box of cards will not fit into the set of metrics presented to our board. Those memories are too often short, but I am training mine to be long. Unfortunately, most of the institutional decision-making processes of higher education are not outfitted with ways to account for a long memory or my cards or my love. Our training has often devalued these immeasurables, these homemaking skills, by design or simply neglect. I struggle to express it, even here. But this fragile, vulnerable house of cards I am building here is everything to me.

When my students finish their final exam, they walk over and pick up the cookie that I have baked for them. Since I figured out how to

make it work, I have them give me a high five before they leave the room. Sometimes they ask me if I want them to hand over the card they used on the final exam. "No," I say, "Keep it." I laugh a little, quietly since people are still taking the exam, and sometimes say: "Put it in your sock drawer. See if you need it again." Sometimes they recycle it before they get out of the building, even before they get to the stairs. But I hope, like every teacher, homemaker, hostess, and mother, that the right things stay with them.



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