

CONVERSATIONS



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Discentes: Let's start by talking about your role in the department.

Dr. Julie Nishimura-Jensen: I have an interesting role in that I am not a full faculty member, so I am not involved in some of the faculty decisions. But I am full-time: I direct the post-baccalaureate program here. So I teach two courses each year for the post-baccs, and I also teach two non-post-bacc courses. I usually do the beginning Greek sequence. My role

is as an administrator and a teacher. I am involved in admissions right now, and I am also involved in advising—making sure that they have a good year.

D: What is your overall goal for students coming out of the post-bacc program?

JNJ: There are two outcomes we're looking for. We have students coming from all over the country and international students. They're here to decide what their next step should be. Most of them want to go into grad school in classics or a related field like ancient history or archaeology. And for some of them that's the right step. I help them with their applications and finding them the best match in a graduate program. Others come in not really sure, or they discover here, taking upper-level classes, that this is not really what they signed up for. For them, that can be sort of difficult, if you've been identifying yourself as a pre-PhD student then realizing, "Oh, this isn't right," is upsetting for some people, but it really is the right thing. An important part of my job is to help people understand that's fine, and that they might have a better life doing something entirely different. That doesn't necessarily mean that I can tell them what it would be, but I can help them figure out that this isn't what they want. And that's great too.

D: What would you say to a student who decides that graduate study in ancient history is not for them and feels like they might have wasted a year?

JNJ: I explain to them that serious study in any subject is going to sharpen your critical thinking skills, your analytic skills. Even if you're not going to use these languages, the ability to study something at depth is an important skill to have. And I think it's going to be fine on a resume—it doesn't look like they've been dinking around—and it's fine to explore different fields. It's a good time in their lives, too; it's a lot easier in your early 20's than in your early 40's. I tell

them that it's not a wasted year. It's some time that maybe feels like a dead end, but hopefully the critical thinking skills are things they can use later on. I certainly know a lot of classics majors who have gone on to law school, medical school, business school, teaching. There are so many things they can still do.

D: What first attracted you to Latin and Greek?

JNJ: I started taking Latin in high school because my sister told me to. It seemed like a crazy idea to me because it was a dead language. Who wants to take a dead language? At the time, I was taking French. You could go to France and seem very cosmopolitan, but my sister was four years older than me and had just done the Latin sequence and said, "You should do the Latin sequence. It's great! You'll do better on your SATs. It's really worth it." Since she was my older sister, I said, "Okay fine, I'll take Latin." And she was right. My teacher, Mrs. Small, was life-changing. She did more than just drilling of the language. We did history and art. It opened the whole culture up. It was just one of those transformative experiences. By the time we were done, I had fallen in love with Aeneas. In college, I knew that majoring in classics was a pretty good possibility. When I went to Carleton College, and they said, "Oh look, you have all this Latin. You should take Greek!" And I said, "Oh, yeah, I think I'll do that!"

D: How did you see yourself moving into the classics world beyond college?

JNJ: I thought about going to grad school while I was still an undergrad. I would get teased by my friends a lot. They would say, "Oh, you're such a classics professor, hahaha!" Every time there was something in a movie about a crazy Latin professor, my friends would always point at me. But actually, when I got to the point where I was writing my application essays, I couldn't think of a good reason to go to grad school except that I didn't know what else I'd do. That

didn't seem like a very good reason to go. It was also scary because it seemed like all of my other friends had a plan. I thought, "How do you *know* what you want to do?" I just didn't feel at all certain at that point that that was what I wanted to do. So I called my parents, and I said, "I don't think I want to go to grad school." And they said, "Well, what are you going to do?" And I said, "I think I'm going to move to Minneapolis and work with friends and maybe get a job and figure things out." I was dancing a lot, so I thought I'd try out dancing and see if that would lead anywhere. I danced and found that, even though I love performing, it was not something I could see myself doing long-term. It was just too hard a life. I also really missed the intellectual stimulation of academia. When I sat down to write my application essay, it was a lot easier because I really knew why I wanted to do this. Part of it was teaching—I taught dance, and I could see how teaching could be an extension of performing. So I did nothing academic at all for four years, but it was a good time in my life to do it. You can't do that when you have kids or are trying to pay a mortgage.

D: How is it having a full-time job—directing the post-bacc program, teaching—and also raising kids?

JNJ: It's always juggling, always balls in the air. It's different for every person, so I would never presume to tell people to do one thing or the other. But for me, it was very important to be with my kids as much as possible. I'm seeing this with one kid already in high school, how fast they grow up. In four years he's going to be in college. I know I'm never going to regret coming home early to make sure I'm home to make him a snack when he comes home and take him to soccer practice and take my younger son to track meets and over to his jazz band concerts. I'm very lucky that my job is such that I am able to do that, and Penn has been wonderful in making that happen. I came here as an adjunct, teaching just one

semester at a time. In some ways, that was very helpful when raising kids. But when I had a full-time job, I said, “I’m going to be on a 3:00 PM train every day,” and that was absolutely fine. I try to be as available as possible on email -thank God for the internet!—but I also make it very clear that when I’m home, I am home, and there are times when I say that I am not going to be monitoring the computer because I want to be able to help my kids with their homework, I want to be able to go to all their soccer games. I want to be able to be there for them all the time. I feel incredibly fortunate that I can do this. If I had been working for tenure when they were younger, there would have been times where I just couldn’t be there for them. I have friends who have done similar things to this, and they had to put their kids in daycare all day every day. My kids have been in daycare, and I understand that choice, but I’m just glad that I’m able to be there for them a bit more.

D: You mentioned that your husband is also a professor. What does he teach?

JNJ: He teaches astronomy at Swarthmore College. We’re fortunate because we live five minutes from his office. He’s a tenured full professor now, but he was working toward tenure when the kids were little. So I did feel like I was taking a step backwards for feminism when I was the primary caregiver in some of those years, and that was something that I struggled with—the sense that I was giving things up to be able to raise the kids so that my husband could have this job. On the other hand, with our first jobs, he gave up a great job to come with me while I was the primary breadwinner. This was before we had kids. I know that he would do that for me. With the options we had, it made the most sense for us to work this way. And frankly, I’m happy that it worked out that I’m home more than my husband is because I would be so jealous if he was able to come home in the afternoon and I had to be at

work all day. He's very happy, though. He does research, but he does make it a rule that he's always home in the evening. When he's home, he's home. He can help with homework, he can do whatever the kids need, he comes to all the soccer games, concerts, all that. So I feel like we've been very fortunate in our ability to be with them and balance these things.

D: I think that two-body problem is something that a lot of people are concerned about because a lot of the people whom you'll meet and interact with are academics and the chance of settling down with a fellow academic is pretty high. So how did you and your husband talk about that: who's going to make the sacrifice, how you're going to organize that?

JNJ: That's a great question. It is a huge thing that looms over a lot of people. For us, it was something we knew could be an issue very early on. I chose grad school partly because of where my future husband was at that time. It so happened that the program that I really liked was where he was. (He started a year before I did.) We got married while we were in graduate school, and we knew all along that we'd be finishing about the same time and looking for jobs at the same time. We talked about it quite a bit—we didn't go into this blindly at all—and we agreed that the thing that was most important was to be together. We knew that for a lot of couples they were okay with a year, two, three years apart, and we just said, "That's not negotiable." If we were an hour apart by car, maybe, but we wouldn't take jobs across the country from each other. When it came time to apply—with astronomy, like classics, it's not like you have your choice of jobs—we applied as broadly as we could. I was offered a tenure-track job at Arizona State University the same day he was offered a really good post-doc at Harvard-Smithsonian for astrophysics in Boston. They were both great jobs and not close at all. Luckily since we had talked about it, we said we want to stay

together but we're also going to look at our job situation, what's the best choice for a couple. It's not like whichever job Eric gets that's better or whichever job Julie gets that's better. I had applied to some jobs in the Boston area, but I hadn't gotten offers or interviews, so I knew that those were dead in the water. But when I went down for my interview at Arizona, they said, "Legally, there are some things we can't ask you about, but if you want to tell us anything, now's the time"—sort of nudge, nudge, wink, wink. I have a hyphenated last name. I have a wedding ring. It's pretty obvious I'm married, so I said, "I have a husband who will need a job," and they said, "Okay, we've got something in place." They said, "Give us his resume," and he flew down and met everyone, and they said, "Okay, we'll find him a place." They hired him as a half-time instructor which wasn't nearly as prestigious and didn't pay as much as this other job he would have had, but we were able to be together. We were down there for two years. When the job came open here at Swarthmore, he applied in a really good situation because he had teaching experience at Arizona, he had taught high school, and he was researching. He got the job at Swarthmore, and I was left going, "Oh, but..." because I hadn't applied for anything that year. I had thought, there's no way he'll get this job. He was only two years out of his PhD, and Swarthmore is a really good college. I didn't think there was any way they'd hire him, but they did. Good for them! We were faced again with the two-body problem. At that point, we had decided that there was no way I wanted to stay at Arizona State—just didn't like the big university, hated Phoenix. I took a year's leave from Arizona, and we both moved out here. He took the job, and I immediately started calling around. One of the first people I called was Ralph Rosen: "Hi! You don't know me, but I have a classics PhD." He was great. We met for coffee, immediately clicked, had a great time. He put me in touch

with a bunch of people and said, “Oh by the way, we often need people to teach a course or two. Would you be interested?” I said, “That would be great.” About that time, Eric and I were thinking, we also want to have kids. We decided this would be the perfect time. When we moved here, I was pregnant with Alex, our older son, so I said, “I don’t want to teach *right* now but soon!” The first few years were kind of a blur because Eric had this new job, was working really hard towards tenure, we had a baby, we were in this new place, I knew no one, and then I started teaching. Through all that, we had a second kid, and Eric got tenure so he was set. I was still adjunct and balancing. That was the point when I thought, I’ve thrown my career down the toilet by moving here, having kids. I don’t have a job. And thank god for Ralph Rosen and Bridget Murnaghan—she was chair at the time—for getting me set up here. I had been teaching at Penn for five or six years, off and on, when this job came open as the post-bacc director. They said, “You’d be a great person for this,” and I said, “Yes, that would be perfect.” By that time, Tim, our younger son, was just starting kindergarten, so we had a more regular schedule with the kids. The timing was perfect. It did end up happily-ever-after, but it took a while. We faced the two-body problem for quite a while. Every time I would hear about someone who managed to do this, I thought, great! But then I’d always hear about people who were still living apart and trying to juggle kids. I just wasn’t willing to do that.

D: There’s a big debate these days over adjunct faculty. It seems like almost an abuse of labor by the universities—paying measly sums for people who are, more or less, qualified to be full professors. Having been an adjunct professor, what is your perspective?

JNJ: I feel like I’ve been extremely fortunate not to have been in that rat race. I know people who only get a thousand

dollars for a class with no benefits, and they're teaching eight or nine classes at two or three different schools at the same time. I've been so lucky that personally I haven't had to deal with that. My husband has had a stable job, so it hasn't been as big a deal for me. Even so, Penn and Haverford and Swarthmore all pay a lot more than a lot of other schools. But it's so unfortunate for so many people who are fully-qualified but can't find a job. I think it should be the role of academia, of the field to think about how many PhDs they're granting because, when you have a glut of PhDs, they just don't have a future. It's been self-perpetuating with these poor, exploited people who are teaching so much and making so little.

D: Academic departments pay for PhD students—they pay them a stipend in addition to the education and services they're giving them—so it seems like there would already be a financial argument to reduce the number of new PhDs. Can you theorize as to why that hasn't happened?

JNJ: There is some shrinkage. Seeing it from the post-bacc side of trying to get my post-baccs into programs, there are fewer slots open in PhD programs in classics. But I think that there will always be a larger number of people who go into a field thinking that this is going to be what they want to do but with the reality that there just aren't that many jobs. There will always be a mismatch, and sadly, I don't see how that's going to change.

D: At a dinner a few weeks ago, I was questioned aggressively about why people are still studying classics, something that's been done for two thousand years. I answered the why classics question, and the other person said, "Okay, so how many people do we actually need doing this stuff?" What is your reaction when someone asks you, "How many people do we really need studying the ancient Mediterranean world?"

JNJ: Honestly, I do think that there are too many people who

go into it just because the job market is so uncertain. People need to have a realistic view that you need to really love something to get a PhD in it. You can't be doing it thinking, this is what I'm going to do for the rest of my life. You need to think of it in the shorter term: I'm doing this because I really love it, and then we'll see what happens. In some ways, it's easy for me to say that in my situation because I have a job. To come out at age twenty-five, thirty with a PhD but no job prospects is really scary. Even if you say, "These are skill sets that transfer," it's not easy to make your case: "Oh, I have a PhD in classics *but* I can do whatever you want!" In terms of the numbers—how many people studying classics—I don't really know what the right answer is. When I'm questioned, "Why would someone do this? Why do we need this?", I ask, "Why do we need other fields?" There are so many things that humans are interested in, and there are always new ways of looking at things. Whether that translates into an actual job, though, is a big question, a big problem. You have to be interested in the ideas enough to say, "That's enough." It's wonderful if you can get paid to be a student, but you need to be prepared and aware that it only qualifies you to do a few things, and there are not many slots for that. I wish I had a better answer. It's something we come back to a lot in questioning our reasons for having a post-bacc program: "Are we benefiting our field as a whole by existing?" I think we are. There are so many people who are interested in going on in classics who don't have the background in Latin or Greek, and we help them. I do think it's a really important part of our mission to help people think about whether this is the right thing for them. We see ourselves a little like gatekeepers. There are some people who are just not strong enough students that we can ever see them getting a job at the end. It's kinder to tell them no now rather than have them go through the post-bacc and possibly go through an MA

program and barely getting to the end. Those are the people who are not going to get jobs. It's a hard conversation to have with some people, saying, "I'm sorry. I just don't think you can do it." Some people say, "I'll come back, and you'll see!" My response is "Great! If this lights a fire under you, great! But I've seen a lot of students in the post-bacc program, so you kind of get a sense."

D: How do you think those tough conversations relate to the culture in the U.S. that has developed into "you can do anything you set your mind to" and "everyone is special"?

JNJ: That kind of drives me crazy because not everyone is special. I do find that whole culture really disturbing. I see it a lot with my kids: you have to get a ribbon for coming in last. I understand that, when they're five, it really helps to get a ribbon, but by the time they're in middle school, no. It's like the idea that you have to have a snack for everything you do. No! That is not necessary. I really think it's doing people a disservice just to think, if you put in the hours, you're there. Some people are naturally talented at different things. Some people are not naturally talented at languages, and no matter how much they love it, it's not going to come easily. I can't imagine going into classics and not being a naturally gifted linguist; it's just going to be such a tough life for you. It doesn't make any sense. We have this culture where people believe that they're somehow entitled to do this. We get students who really feel like this should be handed to them. Having to come in and say no is difficult because you are going against years of ingrained sentiment that, if you work hard, everything will work out in the end. I love those up close and personal things at the Olympics where they say so-and-so worked hard. Things like that are very inspirational, but you know that those people would not be in the Olympics if they weren't naturally athletic. It's that and hard work. It's not just the hard work. You couldn't turn me into a champion

skier. I remember they did a feature on Michael Phelps, the swimmer. One of the things I really liked about it is that they talked about how hard he works but they also talked about how he has a really freaky body. He has unusually long arms, and his feet are weirdly flexible. So he's really clumsy on land, but he's built for the water. It's great that they said this because it points out that Phelps has these genetic anomalies that allow him to swim so well. I'm sure hard work helped, but it didn't make his arms grow.

D: I was looking at your CV, and it says one of your chief interests is Hellenistic poetry. How did you become interested in this subject?

JNJ: When I started grad school, I was sure I was going to do Latin poetry, having read the *Aeneid* at a very formative time. I thought Augustan poetry was the best and brightest and nothing could top it. But I actually took a Hellenistic poetry course in grad school and thought, this is the best thing I've ever read. That one class just blew the top off my head. I couldn't believe how self-referential and interestingly modern it was. In this course, we read a bunch of different poets, and they were all coming at the idea of poetry in a slightly different way. But they all went in thinking, we all know this body of work, and we're going to see what we can do to try to twist it and change it. It wasn't just the way you think of poetry like Homer is the ocean, Homer is everything, and Vergil recreated it with this lovely Roman gloss. The Hellenistic poets said, "Let's take Homer and everything we know, and we're going to forget about it. We're going to change everything up." I thought that was fascinating. The work I was doing for my dissertation was about genre in Apollonius' *Argonautica*. Even though it's an epic in form—it's in dactylic hexameter, it's long, there's a hero on a journey—there are so many parts that are so not epic which I thought was really interesting. A lot of scholars you read say

it's terrible. All the older criticism I was reading for my dissertation said, "Vergil does this, and Apollonius—ugh!—he had no idea what he was doing." I remember reading one about how he couldn't control his narrator—as if his narrator was somehow running amok. I thought, these are all conscious decisions! And this is a really interesting aesthetic program. It's very different from anything you find in Homer or Vergil. It seemed so modern with the narrator interrupting himself to say, "Oh, you don't want to hear that." The criticism said, "Apollonius couldn't decide what he wanted. He couldn't control this narrator," and I said, "No, it's a way of calling your attention to what he's not saying!" There are these bits that look like bits of tragedy or comedy embedded into this epic narrative. It's continued to be something I'm really interested in: how the Hellenistic poets are taking these known stories and known genres and saying, "We're not going to follow convention. We're going to see how much we can twist this until it breaks." It makes you rethink your assumptions. When people think about classics they generally think about seriousness. Yes, there's Aristophanes, and he's funny and bawdy, but you tend to think about The Poetry as beautiful and serious. So much of it, though, has these really interesting things that are going on. There's an idea of pushing boundaries, asking, "Where are the boundaries of a genre?" Clearly, they weren't set. The artists themselves were trying to do different things with them.

D: Have you seen the seventies film version of *Jason and the Argonauts*?

JNJ: Oh yeah! That's a wonderful one with the Harryhausen skeletons.

D: As someone who is so interested in the intricacies of the text, do you still enjoy the story as portrayed in a different medium? This could apply not just to the *Argonautica* but to other Hollywood representations of classics.

JNJ: I find it really interesting. There is always the impulse to say, “That’s wrong”—like seeing the movie *Troy* you want to shout, “That’s wrong—totally wrong!” But at the same time, I really enjoy the idea that creators are taking these old stories and seeing what you can do with them in these other media—changing them and figuring out at what point is it no longer the story. There are times when I look at them and think, this is so wrong, but at the same time, sure, why not? In antiquity, that’s what they did: stories were retold in different ways. It’s completely natural. The Disney movie *Hercules*—again, totally wrong, so many things are wrong, but it’s a great movie. You’re taking these elements that are absolutely right classically, that make sense and putting them together in a different way. Sure, come up with something new.

D: And if you could ask Hollywood to make one ancient work into a film?

JNJ: That’s tough. I would love to see what Disney could do with *Medea*: Medea, the Disney princess. In some of the earlier versions, she did not kill her kids; that was a later innovation. When Euripides did it, it would have been very shocking. They’re surely not going to have a Disney princess kill her children, so how could they get around that? I would love to see how they deal with that challenge.
