

## How the Game Works

By Alice Kuo Shippee

All along the red brick path of Bruin Walk, the trees were mostly bare in October, a few crinkly brown leaves hanging on for dear life in the autumn wind. I stomped uphill in my boots, passing the Student Union on my right, toward the tall building with the stained glass windows and pointed turrets. Kerckhoff Hall is equal parts Ivy League and Harry Potter--old and castle-like, and I had never been in it before today. It looked important and felt imposing as I approached the wide stone steps leading toward the main doors. With one hand, I held my long wool cardigan closed in the front as I hustled up the steps, and with my other hand, I held onto the plastic handle of my portfolio. Other students spilled down the stairs to the right and left of me, headed to late morning classes. I stood panting slightly inside the doors, looking around to figure out where I might find the office of The Daily Bruin, UCLA's student publication. I had finally got up the courage to apply for a job as a staff photographer, but I was nervous as hell, and my heart racing from hurrying didn't help.

I finally found Room 118 and knocked on the door.

"Come in," a deep, masculine voice answered.

I pushed the door open to see a dim room, backlit by the light coming in from a small window that was made up of little triangles of amber and clear glass. The walls were covered in neat, full bookshelves from the floor to the low ceiling. A man in his mid-40's sat with his back to the window, behind a large desk. A bright pool of light shone onto the center of the desk from a metal lamp and reflected up into the man's face, illuminating it from the bottom and casting stark shadows upwards onto his forehead and in the hollows of his eyes.

"Hi, I'm Alice. I'm here for the interview for the photo position," I leaned over the desk and offered my hand.

"Great, have a seat," he shook my hand and gestured to the chair across from him. "Did you bring your portfolio?"

I smiled, “I did,” and handed it over the desk to him. In my collection were a total of about fifteen images, all hand-printed by myself in a rental darkroom in Santa Monica, back when those were a thing in the early 1990’s.

He set my portfolio onto his blotter in the circle of incandescent light. Without wasting a moment (as he must have been a very busy man, I reasoned, since he was an actual adult who ran the paper and not another student), he flipped to the first images in my book. He pursed his lips and raised his eyebrows as he flipped through, not in a rushed way, but seemingly quickly and methodically, as though he knew what he was looking for.

“Hmm,” he said shortly. “Tell me about this one.” He pointed to a black and white photograph I had taken of some of our student volunteers repairing a fence against a backdrop of what looked like rugged high plains somewhere definitely not in California. I loved this photo, because it felt artsy and National Geographic to me. It showed the close-up of a hand holding a crooked nail, and another gloved hand holding a hammer. It was gritty and interesting.

“That one I took while on Alternative Spring Break when my group went to the reservation in Teesto, Arizona. A few of us were working on building a fence for the goat pen, and we had to reuse nails, because we ran out of the new boxes of nails we had brought,” I explained.

He nodded and said, “And this one?”

“Oh, that one was from my friend’s dance performance,” I began. “I was trying to capture a moment backstage of what it’s like for the dancer just before she goes on stage.”

He was looking at the photo with an expression I couldn’t discern. Was it interest? Or was it criticism? He didn’t say anything. *I knew I shouldn’t have put that one in there*, I thought. I had shot from the hip, taking the photo quickly and spontaneously, when I saw the way the light was shining through her tutu and how her profile looking downwards was so full of anticipation. But the critical plane of focus ended up being on her shoulder and not her face.

“And that’s not my best photo,” I offered. “I know that the plane of focus is a little off.”

Without taking his eyes off my photo, he held his hand up in the universally understood “stop” gesture, and my stomach tightened into a little knot. I felt chastised.

He flipped to another picture and said, “This one is interesting.”

“Oh, that one. I like that one too,” I said. “But, I could have gotten the lighting a little better, I know.” I wanted him to know that I was open to criticism and willing to learn.

He flipped through to the end of the portfolio, closed it, and clasped both his hands on top of it. I was sitting on the very front edge of the pleather chair before him, my hands also clasped in my lap. He looked me dead in the eyes. It was not an uncompassionate look, but it was also not encouraging. Little did I know that at that very moment, he would say something that I would never forget, something that would come back to haunt me before I would truly learn the meaning of what he was trying to convey to me. Clearly, I wasn’t going to get the job, but surprisingly, I would in fact get something much more long-lasting--a bit of wisdom from a middle-aged white man to a female, Asian college student just starting out in life.

“Alice, I’m going to tell you something, and I really hope you’ll hear me.”

I leaned forward in my chair and nodded my head.

“Modesty will get you nowhere here in America. I know in your culture that it’s very important, but you can’t play the game here by using it.”

Before I could ask how he supposedly knew this about my culture, he went on to explain that he had worked a lot in Asia with several different companies over the years, and he saw how things worked there. He saw smart, young people hold back what they knew, in fear that they would be considered flashy or show-offs. He saw that knowledgeable people who had something to offer didn’t offer unless asked, because they didn’t want to stand out. He saw that sometimes people would be given jobs exactly because they’d say that they *didn’t* deserve them. He explained in no uncertain terms, “It doesn’t work that way here.”

Wow, my interview had taken an interesting turn.

“Your work here is good. Maybe not good enough for working at the Bruin this year, but it’s good, and you don’t have to put it down or make excuses for it,” he was still looking at me unwaveringly.

I swallowed, feeling embarrassed, because clearly I had done this interview wrong. I had been hoping to walk away from this meeting with a job, but instead, I was going to be carrying home this weird combination of shame and irony--that being self-deprecating led to a lecture in being self-deprecating. It wasn't that he saw my modesty as a cheap strategy to fish for compliments; he recognized my modesty as a misused cultural currency, like I was trying to pay for something in pesos while traveling in England--or in this case, yen while traveling in the US.

"When you show your work to someone, you let it speak for itself. Let people see your talent. Putting yourself down is not the way the game is played here. Being humble won't get you very far." He picked up my portfolio and handed it back to me.

"Thank you," I said, taking it from him. "I'll try to remember that."

"Come back and see me next year," he said and smiled.

It would take me another two years to remember what he had said.

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When I was in seventh grade, my family moved from Torrance, California back to Taipei, Taiwan, so my parents could help with the family business of running three private schools that had been founded by my grandparents. I thought, *Hey! Now I'll blend in with everyone, because I'm Chinese*, which was such a relief, because I was one of only three Asian kids in my grade in SoCal (which is laughable, because Torrance is full of Asians now). But alas, in Taiwan, I was surprised that everywhere I went, people could tell that I was American. I wore my hair in a long cascade of black down my back, but all the local girls had their hair cut into bobs, as required once they left elementary school. Hair was considered a distraction, and they wanted kids to focus on their studies. So, everyone could tell I wasn't from Taipei, and would nod in understanding when I told them that I attended Taipei American School. One time, an older man came up to me and yelled at me because I was wearing shorts. He called me shameless. I had no idea I wasn't supposed to wear shorts, so I guess even my parents had been Americanized enough in their fourteen years of living in the US that they didn't warn me.

Sometimes, at family gatherings or social events, relatives or friends might give me a compliment--say that my hair was so pretty or that I was such a good dancer if it was after one of my performances, or congratulate my parents because I had done well academically. And my mom would reject the compliment and say, "Ai ya! This dumb little egg? No way. *Na li, na li,*" which literally means, "Where, where?" I noticed that Chinese people always said *na li, na li* when someone gave them a compliment.

I would stand around awkwardly, my smile fading. I got used to it. I didn't understand why my parents weren't more excited about the praise; after all, I had worked really hard for it-- especially because they pushed me hard to succeed. The only thing that made sense in my mind was that whatever I was doing wasn't up to snuff. I chalked it up to being a disappointment, and for years and years, I just believed that I had let my parents down. Even though they came to every performance and seemed proud of me, they would swat away anything nice said about me or to me.

It wasn't until I was a full-grown adult did I bring this up with my mom in a conversation. I told her I knew she was disappointed in me, that I didn't turn out better. And her mouth gaped in astonishment. "What?!" She said. "We are *so* proud of you! You did so many wonderful things! You danced, you wrote poetry, you acted in plays, you won awards. Of course we are proud of you!"

"But you always said I was dumb in front of other people, Mom! It was so embarrassing!" I responded disbelieving and shocked.

"Of *course* I said that! What kind of manners would I have if I had accepted those compliments?! Ai ya! You dumb little egg!"

I laughed, "That's exactly what you would say about me."

"I have to deny the praise, Pei," she explained, calling me by my Chinese name, as I went by with my family, "If I had accepted those compliments, then we both would have looked bad. Immodest. But it doesn't mean that I wasn't proud. Those people would expect me to be modest about you, and they would expect you to be modest too. But they would still mean what they said. See, if you were really a Chinese child, you would know how this works, and you would have understood."

Ah, yes. How it works. How the game works. Of *course* I wasn't Chinese enough to know this, because *no one had told me*. I was plopped into 100% Chinese society at

the age of twelve. Even in America, she would act this way with Chinese friends around me--and American friends too. I didn't know that all those years, my mom was playing the socially appropriate game of modesty and humility.

She actually did believe in me. She actually was proud of me. And she was protecting my image, because if I had just said, "*Xie xie*, thank you," I would have looked full of myself, even though in America, that is *exactly* the way you're supposed to graciously accept a compliment! I had no idea, because when you bridge two cultures, you sometimes aren't taught social mores explicitly, and the two can get confused. My whole childhood, I just thought I wasn't good enough *because I didn't get the game*. And of course, the combination of modesty and insecurity was what I took to college with me.

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Just before graduation at UCLA, an opportunity came up to get recognition for doing community service. I had spent the last three years as a part of the Community Service Commission on campus: I started as a volunteer for the Alternative Spring Break program that took students to areas of need to spend spring break building homes, digging wells, and moving outhouses instead of partying in Vegas or Cabo. That year, I was one of fifteen students who chose to go to the Navajo Reservation. The second year, I ran the program as a manager, planning, organizing, and fundraising for the very trip I had gone on the year before, supervising our fifteen volunteers. And the third year, I became a director in the commission itself, in charge of all five different spring break trips with over 100 volunteers. I spent hundreds of hours in the commission office with the other directors, figuring out how to make things happen on shoestring budgets, writing stacks of literature and recruiting materials, communicating with all the communities we would visit. At least a few nights, I would fall asleep on the old, cracked leather couches, wondering if I should bother walking all the way back to my apartment just to have to get up and come back in the morning (I always chose to go home, because schools are creepy after hours). Of course this was all on top of carrying a full load of classes and having a part-time job at the North Campus Food Center.

Two months before graduation, undergraduate students can apply for the Chancellor's Service Award, which is given in recognition of outstanding service over the four years of college. You get to wear this really gorgeous silver medal around your neck on a blue ribbon, and it seemed like a real honor.

I did not apply for it.

I never felt that I had done anything *outstanding*, despite the countless hours, days, weekends, and breaks I had spent working at the Community Service Commission, despite not only being a volunteer, but also being a student leader there in the highest position except for being Commissioner (that was my friend Scott). *There is always someone working harder*, I thought. *There is always someone who has done more*. Out of the entire graduating class--thousands of us across multiple disciplines, there's no way that I can qualify as someone who has done *outstanding* service.

I put the application in the trash and forgot about it.

A few days later, one of our new volunteers Stacey came up to the office to see me. She was also a senior and had done one trip with us that spring, with the group that worked with Habitat for Humanity. I remember Stacey attending the first orientation meeting that explained the mission and a general overview of Alternative Spring Break. After she chose Habitat, she came to some planning meetings, but not all. She was pleasant enough and went on the trip with our group of 20 students. I think in all, she spent about two weeks with the program.

"Hi, Stacey! I didn't think I'd see you again, since you're graduating," I said. "It's too bad we won't get another year out of you!"

"Yeah, it was a great time," she answered. "And I'm applying for the Chancellor's Service Award, so I brought you this form to sign." She pulled out the application form from her backpack and handed it to me.

"Oh, sure," I said, thinking I didn't want to burst her bubble and tell her that there's no way she was going to get it, since she really hadn't done much and had waited until her senior year to start. Sure enough, on the form, she had written a short paragraph of about four or five sentences about her experience with Habitat for Humanity. I swished my signature at the bottom of the page where it said something like, "Verification of Service Hours," and handed it back to her.

“Thanks so much,” she said, “see you around!”

And I didn’t give her another thought...until graduation day.

On a typically warm, sunny SoCal day in June, I arrived on campus proudly wearing my cap and gown, with my proud parents, my cousin Lily, my best friend Shannon, and my boyfriend Darren. We threaded our way through the throngs of blue-robed graduates rushing along Bruin Walk, milling around in the Quad, and taking photos in front of Royce Hall’s Italianate splendor. Everyone’s silky robes glistened in the bright light, flapping in the breeze. Graduates held onto their mortarboards with one hand while holding bouquets of yellow or red roses in the other. There were thousands of us all over the different parts of campus that day--first gathered in Pauley Pavilion for the giant group ceremony, then later in our departments for smaller celebrations. I hardly remember much of the large, overwhelming gatherings, because it was just so much to take in, and with such large campuses, you might not even find friends that day to be with.

But guess what I do remember?

Seeing Stacey in the crowd. I didn’t even know what department she was in, but somehow, I caught a glimpse of her, standing with other blue robes. And around her neck, she was wearing the distinctive blue ribbon with the heavy silver medallion that was the Chancellor’s Service Award. And you can bet your ass that medal sparkled in the SoCal sun.

And suddenly, I was looking over the entire crowd, seeing five, then ten, then at least twenty people with the medal on. And as we walked from one place to another, I saw them, more of them. There were lots of people with the gold cords for their high GPAs, looking oh-so regal with them. But every time I saw someone with the Chancellor’s Service Award dangling from their necks, I felt jilted. I felt tricked--by my own mind, my own upbringing, that had taught me to be humble, not look for recognition, believe that there was always someone better than me who had done more than me. And it was my own fault that *I didn’t even apply*. What would have been the harm in applying? I had no idea how many medals they awarded--I hadn’t even asked. All I had believed was that there was no way I could have been considered *outstanding*.



I had believed that anyone who got that medal had to have done more than me to deserve it, but here I was looking at Stacey, who was a two-week volunteer in her senior year, whose hours of commitment I signed off on because I was actually the director of the program she was in. If she deserved the recognition, how did I not?

And how did I rationalize it all in my mind? I told myself that if she got the medal, I didn't want that medal, because I didn't feel like she had done anything *outstanding*. If she got the medal *and* I got the medal, what would that even mean? It wouldn't mean anything, because it wouldn't make any sense. And I looked around at all the other medals I saw, and suddenly none of it meant much anymore. Somewhere there was a committee that read the applications, and they chose who got the medals. Maybe they gave them to everyone who applied. I would never know.

But what I did know was that I had underestimated myself once again, and I hadn't played the game. I wouldn't have a Chancellor's Service Award to put on my graduate school application like Stacey (and probably 500 other students would). I hadn't asked for recognition, because I never did all that community service to get recognition in the first place. But it would have been nice. When I saw Scott, the Commissioner, that day at graduation, he was wearing the medal too, and I was truly elated for him. He deserved it.

"Where's your medal, Alice?" He said, when he hugged me.

"Oh, I didn't apply for it," I smiled ruefully.

"Aw, that's too bad," he replied, and squeezed my shoulder.

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"Modesty won't get you anywhere in America." Those words came echoing back to me that day at graduation. I saw how playing down my accomplishments had not served me in the game that is the merit race. I was frustrated by my own value system, which didn't seem to work with the larger social system I was a part of--college. But don't worry--I finally learned.

When I applied to graduate school a year later, I knew that my Statement of Purpose had to be a home run. I knew that I had to pop off the page, because I was applying to the three of the most prestigious teaching colleges in the US: Stanford,

UCLA, and Berkeley. I knew my grades were good enough, and I knew that my analytical GRE scores were almost perfect. There was no reason to be modest at this moment. I would have to put aside my entire upbringing to toot my own horn--and loud.

The last line of my Statement of Purpose for my Stanford application read: “My parents said that I’d make a great lawyer, but I know I wouldn’t because I wouldn’t love it. I know that I will be a fantastic teacher.”

I put every single thing I’d done on my application, because I decided all of it was worth something, and maybe, just maybe, everything together would make me *outstanding*. And when I got into Stanford, I knew, deep down, it’s because I declared I would be fantastic. I owned it. I willed it into being. I believed that I was deserving. I didn’t fabricate lies, I just told the truth. I didn’t make excuses for my work or put down my efforts. I sang them loudly from the rooftops.

And I learned that that is not arrogance or conceitedness. It is self-advocacy. It is self-marketing. And that is how you play the game in America.

Years later, as I reflect on these experiences with my friend Joanne, she makes the astute observation that *of course* I didn’t apply for the Chancellor’s Service Award--that would be akin to *nominating myself*, which would be ultimate act of self-promotion that would go against what I had learned about modesty. I realized that’s why I was so aghast when Stacey received the award--she had nominated herself and gotten it! Now, I realize that *applying for anything*--for college, for graduate school, for a job--is so difficult because the very act of applying is an act of self-nomination; it is saying, “Ahem, hi! I’m the best person for this job, and I deserve it!” In most cases, it’s not enough to deserve it; you have to fight for it, because a lot of other people might deserve it too. Cover letters are hard for modest people. Job interviews are hard for modest people. Instagram is a whole platform for self-marketing, and I realize now that I’m not always eager to use it to endorse *me*, but I love using it to champion others. The head of the Daily Bruin was trying to explain to me that *modesty comes off as insecurity* to American bosses who are looking for big personalities who are comfortable with self-promoting, and that my culturally-Asian modesty would ultimately not serve me as I made attempts to get ahead in this (American) world.

But here's what's interesting and something I want my kids to learn: It's okay to be a chameleon, to flex and pivot with what the situation asks of you. It's okay to be proud in America and then modest in Taiwan. It's okay to sing loudly during your solo and sing moderately when you're with the choir. It's okay to show off on Tik Tok and then hype your friend instead on Instagram. It's not only okay--it's necessary. It's a part of belonging, and it isn't dishonest. These are all facets of ourselves, and like prisms, we reflect and shine and project rainbows depending on how we are positioned, how we are angled toward the light or the shadow. Being able to be different things is part of being whole, and when you're multicultural, like I am, or multiracial, like my children are, being whole is something that we make ourselves, because if we leave it up to others, we will likely be too Asian or not Asian enough, or too American or not American enough, depending on who we are with. And we have to know, deeply and truly, that we are more than enough and never too much, whoever we are. And while you're out there hustling, stay humble. But you don't have to be modest.