

How – and why?! – Does One Go from the Classroom to the Dark Side?

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"There is a pattern to our careers, even if seen only after the events it comprises. The pattern, the shape, the name, or the metaphor we give to it may be as sweetly melancholy as a retirement tribute or as bitterly documented as an employment claim. For us who live these careers, each occurrence – each rainbow – is unique, but somehow they are all the same in the general shape they share....How do we give unique meaning to our rainbow by understanding the pattern itself?"

— A William M. Plater,
"The Rise and Fall of
Administrative Careers"

Today is Monday, April 13th. I'm in a coffee shop in Northfield, Minnesota, having come here straight from the doctor's office and my "travel physical," the first of many of the hoops I must jump through between now and August 1st so that we *might* return to Norway – this time to the

west coast and the University of Bergen – on a second Fulbright. (You can search from now until the Cubs win the World Series or the Vikings the Super Bowl, and I guarantee that you will not find a bigger fan of the fine and generous people at the Fulbright Program than you have in the author of this aimless column.)

I resisted the urge this morning to order my usual, a day-old discount scone, because my blood pressure was up a bit. The doctor reassured me it was not a concern and suggested it might likely have less to do with diet or genetics and more to do with stress.

“Are you sleeping well?” he asked, pecking away at the computer like Kramer on *Murphy Brown*.

“No, not lately,” I admitted, wanting to sneak a peek at the screen.

“Stressed?”

“A little.”

“About the Fulbright? The move?”

“Sort of.”

“Is there something else going on, something that might be affecting your sleep, and maybe your blood pressure?”

“I’m not sure,” I lied.

The thing is, I had strongly considered canceling this morning’s appointment, a cancellation that would’ve saved me time and awkwardness because – back in December – a few short weeks before I received the news that I had miraculously managed to capture lightning in a bottle not once but twice, a contact associated with my alma mater got in touch and asked if I had any interest in applying for the position of Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of

the College. After giving it some serious thought, I realized that, yes, actually, I would like to. I really would. I don't know why.

So, a few days later, I pushed open the laptop and hammered out the required cover letter and response-to-the-mission statement. And while I know it's cliché to say as much, I can't help but add here that these documents all but wrote themselves. I sat as a musician might at a piano and typed (in one tenth the time it's taken me to write this column) the two pieces. Then, I moved on. Or tried to.

Just over a month later, after tossing my modest hat into this enormous ring, I Skyped with the search committee. Several weeks after that, I made a trip to my old school to participate in a job search for a position I had not, until very recently, been looking for. In truth, I wasn't thinking remotely along these lines about my career this past winter break (or ever, for that matter), when checking my Inbox every few minutes for a message from Fulbright.

I convinced my wife this last spring that I should apply for another Fulbright, reasoning that – because we both loved Norway so much – we should ignore the odds stacked against receiving a second award to the same country and take another shot at it. Why not? What's there to lose? Money? Pride? I have neither of these things. Nobody does who spends his or her valuable spare time submitting articles and essays for publication.

Then this past summer – right about when I uploaded my Fulbright materials into the CIES web page – we sold our old house and bought a newer and much nicer one. In short, we moved in permanently to our lives here in Minnesota, knowing that – realistically, of course – we weren't likely to return to Norway for a long stay anytime soon.

In the fall, I received the unanticipated and very welcome message telling me that I had made it to the second level in the Fulbright selection process. I assured my wife that there was evidently a glitch in the system, and in this way put her at ease. Keep unpacking boxes and hanging pictures. We're fine.

The Skype interview, by the way, went fine. Just fine. That's all. Not great. However, the two women from the University of Bergen who interviewed me were, I wish to make abundantly clear on their behalf, brilliant! They knew my topic and the materials specific to my bibliography better than I did. And, as expected, they were kind and thoughtful. True Norwegians. True scholars.

In mid-December – when we were still waiting to hear how fine, in fact, I managed to do in my interview – my wife and I went out to lunch to celebrate her end-of-the-year bonus. I left my cell phone in the car, in order that I might dedicate my full attention to her, *her* many and incredible accomplishments and, perhaps, *our* financial future. Behind every aspiring (i.e., unsuccessful) writer is responsible person rooted in reality.

When we returned to the car, I had a text message from a friend in a 406 area code asking that I call later that afternoon. It seemed important somehow. I wasn't sure why. Maybe it was because the message was so unexpected. Maybe it was because he put a particular time in the text for me to call. I read it, grimaced involuntarily, and then aimed the phone at my wife after she got in and sat down.

“Sh%&!” she said. “What did you do?” She's very incisive and, apparently, can see into the future (as well as my past).

For once, I had done nothing wrong in the way of job hunting behind her back and could honestly speak to this fact.

“Well, before you call, find out if there are any positions posted,” meaning posted at my alma mater, the only school in that area code to which I have any connections whatsoever. With that, she returned to work, and I went home to grade papers.

My wife phoned an hour later to see if I had done my homework, and I explained that they did not have any openings posted, except for the Dean’s position. “So, *that’s* a relief,” I said while finishing up the dishes and wiping off the kitchen counter. She was quiet. And, again, way ahead of me.

A week later, we heard from Fulbright. I had been offered a second award. I couldn’t believe it. My wife couldn’t believe it. It was unbelievable. Nonetheless, I went ahead and clicked “Send” a few days after that, and, in this oddly simple manner, applied for the administrative position. Why? I don’t know exactly. I felt I had to.

In the months that have followed that click of the Enter key, my wife and I have done our best to go about our daily lives believing we will be returning with the kids in tow to Norway and to what we know to be an extraordinary and truly first-world kind of place. That said, there have been some distractions. In early February, for instance, I was invited to Skype with the search committee for the Dean’s position.

This time my Skype interview went, from my perspective anyway, much better. Though I’m not sure why this was the case, the questions seemed familiar and amenable, as if I had been thinking about these topics my entire career. Hearing my answers in my own ears, I felt the way you do when you’re being observed in the classroom and all is going unusually well – the

students are playing along, the discussion is lively, and you're both in the moment and outside of yourself at the same time.

It struck me after the fact as somewhat odd that I would struggle in the interview with the professors in Bergen about narrative theory (my alleged area of academic expertise) as well as about my teaching philosophy and personal hopes for a return to Norway; and then, a little more than a month or so later, have less difficulty answering questions about big-picture administrative issues and thorny campus-wide conundrums.

After saying "thank you" to what proved to be a warm, solicitous committee, I could not get over how good I felt. When the Skype call ended with its blee-blob-blob, I sat alone in our guest room wearing my new suit and tie and smiling stupidly to myself, content and at ease. Whatever happens, happens, I thought, trusting fully for the first time since I met my wife at a wedding in Montana – a place where neither of us lived at the time – that things work out for reasons we cannot control or explain.

A month later, I was invited to campus for two days of interviews. Once more, it was a surreal, fantastically charged and weirdly pleasant experience. I enjoyed every minute of nearly twelve hours of focused conversations and respectful interrogations. After the final on-campus event – a Q & A session with the full faculty – I walked from campus to my hotel sporting that same suit and that stupid grin, the one from back home in the guest room.

Throughout this inexplicable spring, something within me has known with odd certainty that I must pursue this possible parallel career in higher education to its end, even if success means leaving the classroom while also, at the same time, letting go of the Fulbright and the return to Norway.

—I just checked my email, by the way. As it was “updating...” I felt my heart race and wondered about my blood pressure. That little pulsing ellipse is a killer.

I am supposed to hear today or tomorrow about whether I got the position. But, nothing yet. No message. I am, as of this sentence, still a teacher and not the Dean. Maybe, at some level, I’ll always be a teacher, even if I become VPAA. I hope so.