What It Felt Like to Lose My Deanship

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Advice

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By George Justice April 22, 2018

"Administration" is a cold word. Yet — whether our many campus critics believe it or not — most full-time administrators have very deep feelings about the work they do. I was no exception. I got into the racket as an advocate for doctoral students in English, and I approached all my administrative work as a calling.

So losing my deanship at Arizona State has been a significant life event, and not only in terms of my day-to-day work and compensation. It has also been a crushing personal crisis that has affected my friends, my family, and my own understanding of my place in the world.

I can't speak for all administrators who leave their positions to return to the faculty — voluntarily or, like me, involuntarily — but I'll quote a good friend who made the same transition a couple of years ago: "Therapy helps." And if there's one piece of advice I would give in this

column, that’s it. Find a good therapist.

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I can’t say that my firing came as a surprise. Nevertheless, I felt it as an immediate blow. Less than a year earlier I had been a finalist for a deanship at an excellent private institution in a great city, and I had been talked out of going for the on-campus interview by the leader of my university. In that moment, I had finally decided to ignore the siren song of executive recruiters, lash myself to the mast of our massive aircraft carrier of a university, and try to change the world from here.
But my time as dean had been rocky from the get-go. Turning down that interview was only one of a number of bad professional decisions I made since taking the position and moving my family here in 2013.

There were internal reasons the writing was on the wall, too. The team that had hired me was no longer in place. I was on my third provost and my second executive dean, both of whom were very much unlike me in style and in their history with the university. They were longtime administrators who had worked their way up rung-by-rung. I had been hired from the outside by their predecessors with what I interpreted as a mandate to forge a strong vision for the future of the humanities. The message I heard from my new bosses, though, was "don’t rock the aircraft carrier."

But I was hell-bent on fundamental change, believing that for the humanities to thrive we need to energize our fields and prepare for the deep demographic changes we will see in our country over the next 50 years. Everything we do must change — our research, our curriculum, our pedagogy. If I had planned my revolution more systematically, perhaps I could have succeeded in time. But I seized opportunities I saw ad hoc, and steamed through caution lights regardless of resistance. It didn’t help that my treatment for Stage 3 colorectal cancer in 2015 made it difficult for me to establish a relationship with the new provost.

I was numb and afraid for the first 48 hours after being informed that I would finish the academic year as dean and then return to the faculty. Holy crap! It was the first time I’d ever been fired, the first time things had gone terribly wrong in my career. I canceled my appearance that evening at a fund-raising event, locked myself in my office, and called my spouse and texted my best friend at the university.

Those initial feelings quickly morphed into a heady cocktail of shame and rage. I felt deeply embarrassed at what had happened. I had failed. My colleagues would mock me. I would certainly be losing status and prestige. The iron hand of power had smote me, and the whole world would soon know about it.

At the same time, I was extremely angry, in a toxic self-righteous kind of way. I believed that I'd been doing an excellent job: hiring great department heads and strong faculty members, building research (check out our national rankings!), and pushing for a new and energized curriculum.

Why did *I* have to be the one to go?

The sense that one has been treated unfairly is extremely common among soon-to-be ex-administrators. Yes, a white-hot supernova of rage is the first big response, but it soon mellows into a black hole of sadness.

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I became extremely anxious about my family's future. No doubt about it, I have been lucky in my career to have had secure and well-compensated university positions. Losing my administrative salary meant my family's finances were going to take a hit. My mother had died when I was young, and it has always been a top priority for me to ensure that my children would be financially supported if something ever happened to me or my wife. Something almost did happen to me during my 2015 bout with cancer, and, as I will recount below, it almost happened again.
I knew I had to get back to work in a couple of ways, including looking for leadership positions elsewhere. If that search didn't pan out, I planned to resume my work as a teacher and scholar with gusto. But in those early months, I worried more than I actually accomplished. I could tell myself that tenure (and the contract I had signed in 2013 that stipulated what my salary would be when I returned to the faculty) protected me, but I felt vulnerable.

As the fall continued, I passed into another stage of mixed emotions — some lingering rage, yes, but now commingled with bemusement.

It really is no fun watching your university search for your replacement. I tried not to pay attention to things like the job advertisement, the dates for the airport interviews, the on-campus visits by the finalists. But the morning each of those things happened, my ironic posture gave way to anger and disappointment. I stayed far away from the candidates' open forums, and managed to resist filling out the surveys asking faculty members for our impressions about the candidates. (N.B.: The university ended up making a great hire, and I look forward to the arrival of the new humanities dean in the fall of 2018.)

It took a while for the university to scrub its website of places where my name was attached to my old title. I would gaze with an attitude that was supposed to be ironic at the stream of messages that still flooded into my email inbox. Delete. Delete. Better forward that one. Delete.

And then life took a crazy, crazy turn. I went to the doctor for my two-year CAT scans, which showed new lesions on my liver. A follow-up MRI confirmed, for the radiologist, that I had five metastatic growths on my liver. My next emotion (and this is one that most ex-administrators

probably don’t experience) was complete despair. My surgeon assured me that I wouldn’t die "this year, or next year, or probably the year after," but even that optimistic timeline wouldn’t allow me to see my boys graduate from high school.

During my earlier illness in 2015, my excited frenzy over the administrative work I was doing propelled me through radiation, chemotherapy, surgery, more chemotherapy, and more surgery. But the prospect of starting chemo within a few weeks, followed by surgery on my liver, followed by pretty bad outcomes, really destroyed me emotionally.

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Amazingly, and through a sequence of events involving multiple hospitals on different sides of the country, the physicians decided that the new diagnosis had been a misdiagnosis. I was un-sick. (I am still undergoing multiple scans at regular intervals to confirm that finding.)
During the month I was facing all of that, there was not a moment — really, not a single moment — when I thought, "Damn, I wish I were dean of humanities." The whole experience cauterized the gaping wound of my firing. Once I could put despair to bed, I felt excitement and happiness about the prospects for my life, including my life as a professor of English right here where I had been dean.

So now I have my course assignments for the fall — great classes I love to teach that are already filling up (I check every day). I am finishing a long-overdue research project and am excited about the work. And of course I’m writing a book about the deanship in American colleges and universities. The world has reopened up.

While my health circumstances made the past year a little more tumultuous than most dean-to-professor transitions, I am convinced by many discussions with former administrators that we all feel a similar sequence of stages. For months I had a Post-it taped on my computer monitor, a phrase my spouse was continually repeating: "Detach and rebuild." I am still detaching. I have no doubt I will always feel some pain about the course of my career. But in this moment, I feel engaged and successful.

So I guess I have two pieces of advice: (1) Get a good therapist and (2) Let time run its course. You will emerge. In my next column I will discuss how your relationships change when you leave administration.

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