

Why Everybody Loses When Someone Leaves Academe

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It happened in early January, when all my historian friends were at the annual meeting of the AHA, the leading organization in our field.

Pat Kinsella for The Chronicle Review

I was sitting at home, revising my manuscript introduction and feeling jealous of my friends, when I got an email telling me my last (and best) hope for a tenure-track job this year had evaporated. I'd promised myself that this would be my last year on the market. Of course, I'd promised myself that last year, too, and then decided to try again. But this time, I knew it was over.

I closed my laptop and walked out of my office. In that moment, I couldn't bear to be surrounded by the trappings of a life that had just crumbled around me. The perfect reading lamp, the drawer of fountain-pen ink, the dozens of pieces of scratch paper taped to the walls, full of ideas to pursue. The hundreds of books surrounding me, collected over nearly a dozen years, seemed like nothing more than kindling in that moment.

I cried, but pretty quickly I picked myself up and started thinking about the future. The circumstances of the job I didn't get were particularly distressing, so I discussed it with non-academic friends, explaining over and over again that yes, this is the way my field works, and

no, it wasn't surprising or shocking to me, and no, I wouldn't be able to "come back" later, at least in the way that I'd want to, and yes, this was probably what was always going to happen. And then I started looking forward.

Only now do I realize how messed up my initial reaction was.

If we don't see the loss of all of these scholars as an actual loss to the field, is it any wonder I felt I had no right to grieve?

I was sad and upset, but I didn't even start to grieve for several weeks, not because I hadn't processed it, but because I didn't feel I had the right to grieve. After all, I knew the odds of getting a tenure-track job were low, and I knew that they were lower still because I didn't go to an elite program. And after all, wasn't this ultimately my failure? If I'd been smarter, or published more, or worked harder, or had a better elevator pitch — if my brain had just been better, maybe this wouldn't have happened. But it had happened, and if I was ultimately to blame for it, what right did I have to grieve?

Despite the abundance of "quit lit" out there, we're still not, as a community of scholars, doing a great job dealing with this thing that happens to us all the time. The genre is almost universally written by those leaving, providing them with an outlet for their sorrow or rage, or allowing them to make an argument about what needs to change. Those left behind, or, as we usually think of them, those who "succeeded," don't often write about what it means to lose friends and colleagues. To do so would be to acknowledge not only the magnitude of the loss but also that it was a loss at all.

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If we don't see the loss of all of these scholars as an actual loss to the field, is it any wonder I felt I had no right to grieve? Why should I be sad about what has happened when the field itself won't be?

Even in our supportive responses to those leaving, we don't want to face what's being lost, so we try to find ways to tell people it hasn't all been in vain. We say this doesn't mean they're not a historian, that they can still publish, and that they should. "You can still be part of the conversation!" Some of you may be thinking that right now.

To that I say: "Why should I?"

Being a scholar isn't my vocation, nor am I curing cancer with my research on 19th-century Catholic women. But more importantly, no one is owed my work. People say "But you should still write your book — you just have to." I know they mean well, but actually, no, I don't. I don't owe anyone this book, or any other books, or anything else that's in my head.

"But your work is so valuable," people say. "It would be a shame not to find a way to publish it."

Valuable to whom? To whom would the value of my labor accrue? And not to be too petty, but

if it's so valuable, then why won't anyone pay me a stable living wage to do it?

I don't say this to knock any of my many colleagues who write and publish off the tenure track in a variety of ways that they find fulfilling. I just want us to be honest with ourselves about whom exactly we're trying to comfort when we offer people this advice, and what we're actually asking of those people when we offer it.

We don't want these people to go, and we don't want to lose all the ideas floating around in their heads, so we say, "Please give us those ideas, at least. Please stay with us just a little bit." But we're also asking people to stay tethered to a community of scholars that has, in many ways, rejected them, and furthermore, asking them to continue contributing the fruits of their labor, which we will only consider rigorous enough to cite if they're published in the most inaccessible and least financially rewarding ways.

We also try to avoid grappling with the loss of so many colleagues by doing just what we do with our students: reminding the departing scholar about all the amazing skills they have!

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I'm not saying I don't have skills, or that my professional training hasn't refined them. Here's the thing, though. I got a Ph.D. in history because I wanted to be a historian. I didn't write a dissertation on 19th-century Catholic women to learn the critical-thinking skills of history and then go work in insurance. I didn't spend my 20s earning so little I ended up helping unionize my co-workers because I wanted to be in nonprofit work.

Obviously, when we're confronted with a colleague in the situation I'm in — someone who didn't want to leave and who doesn't know how she's going to pay the rent after May — we emphasize those skills because we want to reassure this person (and ourselves) that she can at least find gainful employment.

But we also emphasize them, I think, for the same reasons we encourage the departing colleague to keep publishing. We don't want to face how much knowledge that colleague has in her head that's just going to be lost to those who remain, and even worse, we don't want to face how much knowledge that colleague has in her head that's going to be utterly useless in the rest of her life.

I personally have forgotten more about Martin Van Buren and antebellum treatments for rheumatic fever than most people around me will ever know. I might find a job that uses that content, but in all likelihood, I won't. I knew what job would pay me to know a lot about stuff that happened in the past. I just couldn't get that job, and now I have to do something else.

Now, there are people who get Ph.D.s and don't want to be professors, and that's great for them. But let's be honest: Most graduate programs in history are preparing students to be history professors. We can talk all we want about alt-ac careers, but when it comes down to it, few of them actually require a Ph.D., and almost none of them need you to have learned as

much as I've learned about the day-to-day operations of rural 19th-century parishes. I learned all that because I wanted to be a history professor, and because that's what my program trained me to be. I certainly didn't learn all that because I wanted to find a new career at 35.

I started as a visiting assistant professor where I currently teach in the fall of 2015 and defended my dissertation that December. I remember feeling really sad at the end of that first month, coming out of the first Arts & Sciences faculty meeting. I wasn't sad because I didn't think I could do the job, I was sad because I realized that I could do it really well. Of course I could do it really well! This was what I had been trained to do. This was what I wanted to do. I was sad because I knew that I might already be on borrowed time — that I probably wouldn't get to do it for my whole life.

I don't know how to come to terms with the fact that I have so much in my head, and so much in my Google Drive, that is basically useless right now.

And now I know that I won't get to do it for my whole life. I probably won't publish my book, at least not in its current iteration. I won't teach anymore. I won't sit on all those committees that I actually wanted to sit on. If that article that's been under review for seven months ever comes back, I probably won't do the work to publish it in a prestigious, paywalled journal. All the stuff in my head — Emerson's ideas of vocation, how to interpret what a dean actually means, the archival collections I still need to go through, the entire life story of a woman I've spent the last eight years researching and writing about — doesn't matter in the way that I hoped it would matter: as part of a life spent researching, writing, thinking, and teaching as a member of an institution of higher ed and a broader scholarly community.

I don't know what I'm going to do. I don't know what I'm good for. I don't know how to come to terms with the fact that I have so much in my head, and so much in my Google Drive, that is basically useless right now. I don't know how to come to terms with the fact that the life I imagined is not going to happen. I've already stopped doing my scholarship, other than editorial work for forthcoming articles. In a few months, I'll be done teaching. I don't know how to come to terms with never doing those things again.

Most of all, though, I don't know how to come to terms with the fact that I'll probably never see most of my colleagues again. I won't get to work with so many of them that I'd hoped to work with.

I've lost a huge part of my identity, and all of my book-learning on identity construction can't help me now. What hurts the most, in a way, is that my loss has been replicated a thousand times over, and will be replicated a thousand times more, and rather than face what that means, we have, as a profession and as people, found ways of dealing with it that largely erase the people we lose, erase their pain and grief, and erase our own.

What would happen if we, as a community, stopped saying "he's gone to a better place," bringing a casserole, and moving on. What would happen if we acknowledged the losses our discipline suffers every year? What would happen if we actually grieved for those losses?

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version of this essay appeared on her blog, erinbartram.com.