Chapter 23. Escape This Neoliberal Shit Show Now

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I envision you, dear reader, as a focused, motivated, intellectually-curious person who possesses a diverse array of interests and abilities. These are the odds. Right? Moreover, because I have found that most educators care deeply about their students and their subject, I imagine you by and large to be kindred spirits who would tend to inspire me to do my best. Given all of this, I look upon the task of giving you any sort of advice with reverence. It is from that of deep place of respect and gratitude that I endeavor to help you consider your career choices. Does that make sense?

Despite the fact that you possess all of the qualities I've just described, you may very well be living under the poverty line or close to it while preparing America's youth for their bright futures. And you may be earning half the salary of a tenured professor. In any case, thank you for reading this. I am writing because I care, and I hope that my story and ideas can be valuable to you. I aim to persuade you that if you don't love this teaching world, go forth into the night and use your prodigious talents elsewhere.

Context

In the spring of 2021, I was in one those Hollywood Squares Zoom meetings with which we are all now so familiar. It was a board of trustees meeting, and the playas were all there! My square was lit because I was speaking against our president's $20,000 yearly raise during the worst pandemic of our lifetimes, which was implemented without informing the faculty or the union (I don't even think they told the accountant) in a time when enrollment had plummeted and adjunct class hours were being cut. I and others showed up with our union Zoom backgrounds to make the statement that we were united. A few of my many brave and eloquent colleagues spoke with an honest clarity that evoked a perfect combination of heart and mind, the best of communication. It was an important moment of solidarity, as we were collectively steadfast in our indignity. So, damn. Right?

Let's zoom out. In 2016, at the age of 50, I accepted a tenure-track position to work with a group of kindred-spirit comrades at a small, unionized community college. It was the 50th anniversary (get the synchronicity?) of the institution, which was initially dubbed the "college without walls," having been started by a group of idealistic intellectuals, teachers who traveled to gymnasiums and high

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schools in nearby farming communities to teach required college liberal studies prerequisites (the 101s and 201s) to the nearby farming communities.

The college has a distinctively friendly feel to the campus, supportive colleagues, and hard-working students, and the course load is manageable; it is a wonderful place to teach. 1 However, despite this goodness, a stale, dysfunctional, neoliberal, three-layered, inequitable dynamic remains ever-present at all institutions, mimicking in microcosm the larger capitalist structures in the economy. This dynamic looms over all of us and creates tensions that underlie the surface friendliness, tensions that exist not only between the faculty and administration but also between adjuncts and the full-time faculty, and these tensions logically play out and cause all of us to be broken in a way, which begs the question of how we can better navigate out of these stale layers.

Imagine, hundreds of good, hard-working, high-achieving people being baked into a stale multi-layered cake. The inequities that we face are systemically embedded within a corporatized system. In other words, there is no escaping the shit show of higher education, and the school without walls of course now has walls aplenty and is awash with capital projects, including stylish dormitories and a learning center with so many windows one feels permeable with the volcano off to the east. Both are LEED certified. This reminds me in microcosm of my overcapitalized home institution even though it's much smaller, the place that just slashed divisions and programs because declining enrollments merged with overcapitalization.

That said, I love my colleagues and my students, and I'm glad that at age 50, I accepted my first and likely only tenure-track position at this institution. My now adult sons laughed that I finally got my first real job. I am fortunate, healthy (I say as my heart skips a beat), and, after decades of meditation, would not trade my current consciousness, as bumbling and fault-ridden as it manifests, for all the money or power in the world. It's all an illusion.

This job, though, as my friend Jane, who works as an adjunct and is married to my best friend of 35 years, who is also an adjunct, said to me when I lived with them for six months when I first moved to take this position, consumes my life. My job is my life. I do love it. It's the only paid work that I have loved, and it's arguable that it's the only job that I have been good at. However, my message throughout this chapter is that if you don't love your job, if you're somehow doing this for any other reason, get out now. This work will consume you. As mentioned, I have allowed myself to be consumed by this work, and after I finish writing this on a Friday, I have more reading that attests to such consumption.

Our state higher education system has been smart during COVID-19, as fac-

1. Moreover, administration, faculty, and students all seem to be devoted to anti-racist pedagogy, to curing our equity gaps, to doing our parts for a more sustainable future on this planet, though there have been signs that administration is furthering another sort of agenda in the name of anti-racism.

ulty have not been forced back into the classroom like so many of my friends and colleagues have across the country. Our union is strong and would work to protect our health if needed, though our new contract seems to attenuate the faculty's collective power, particularly the power of those in the arts and humanities, by agreeing to dissolve divisions in favor of giving the power to individual department chairs, which would seem to make our departments more dividable and conquerable in an age when top-down forces seem to steering our students away from a life of the mind and into a life of the more quantifiable components of a failing neoliberal capitalist structure.

A Love Affair Begins

For a long time, I was at the bottom layer. Now, after earning a Ph.D., which took time and weekends away from my children during their childhood and teen years, I am probably on the penultimate layer from the bottom. In 2001, at the age of 35, I walked into my first class as a teacher. The Center for Lifelong Learning at Mt. Aloysius College, a small Catholic school in the hills of Western Pennsylvania, sent me a contract for $1800-ish to teach a three-credit composition class, a textbook, and sample syllabi.

At the time, I was working a full-time human service job at $20,000 per year supervising a home-based program for adults with intellectual disabilities. I remember being scared and insecure when I was thrown into my first teaching assignment in 2001. On the 40-minute drive, through the foothills of the Alleghenies, I was so nervous that I was popping valerian root tablets (the calming herb, du jour) the whole way there. My heart was beating so fast that I feared it would explode. *How I am going to do this without blowing a gasket before I start my class?* I wondered. *Is this worth it?* I remember thinking. All this angst for only $1,800 for a three-credit class. At the time, though, I was trying to support a family and needed the money.

I don't remember much about that first class. I remember holding the textbook and gesturing at the students with it. It was before I knew anything about teaching composition or cultivating group work; my ideas were guided by the processes and current-traditional modes presented in the textbook. I remember feeling a sense of elation or at least less fraudulent when some students looked interested or laughed at an attempted joke.

During that first class, a non-traditional student—a tough looking middle-aged guy—sat in the back, scowling at me with a furrowed brow. I taught the entire class assuming that he must hate the class and that he wanted to kill me or even worse. Maybe he was some sort of spy from the college administration and had recognized me as an obvious fraud. I pictured him calling security and saying, "An inexperienced hack has snuck into our hallowed halls and seeks to fill our non-traditional students' minds with a potpourri of nonsense! Come now! And bring the guillotine!" Class drew to a close, the rest of the students seeming to enjoy it.

As I said my goodbyes to the talkative, cheerful students in the front, the guy from the back—the scowling one—approached. I didn't know what to expect. He was expressionless. I pretended to be looking in my grade book. During class, he had asked a couple of terse questions, but that was it. I feared that my charade was over—he had my contract in his pocket ready to rip into pieces, or maybe he just wanted to punch me for wasting his time. He looked to be deadly practical, a working man who had little time for whatever I was talking about. I looked up as he reached the table.

"BC" he said, "thanks for keeping things interesting; I hated English class in high school, but I think I'm going to really like this class."

From that moment on, I was hooked. This was the job I loved. For the next few years, I taught at a local college's branch campus where many of the students were LPNs and laid-off coal miners working on nursing degrees. I taught at least two, sometimes three, courses a semester, supplementing my $20,000 per year human service job with roughly $10,000 in income for teaching five to six classes a year in what I now know is a three-quarters load. Then, it didn't feel like that. I just noticed that I didn't have as much time and that my fiction writing was replaced by paper reading.

In 2004, when my human service job was eliminated due to a budget cut, I got lucky and landed another job—a one-year, full-time, temporary position as instructor at my home university where I had received my master's degree and where, because tuition was suddenly "free," I was able to begin taking courses toward my Ph.D. I signed a contract for $40,000 and took the first sustainable-wage job I had ever had. I remember when I got the surprise call (I was 12th on the finalist list) from a medievalist who was the chair of the department. I felt like I had won the lottery. I was sitting in the kitchen having a beer with my best friend and my wife. I enjoyed this moment, this feeling that I had "made it" somewhere.

Needless to the say, I learned a lot—trial by fire. The students and the assistant chair pointed to numerous flaws in my pedagogy. After that one-year contract ended, I stayed on as an adjunct. All the adjuncts were placed on a ranked list for consideration for future full-time openings, and after a less-than-stellar observation the next year, I was bumped to 20th on the list. Over the years, I was placed all over this list that determined whether I needed to be on unemployment and/or needed to accept the additional meager wages offered by the language institute on campus.

In the summers, I had many jobs. For instance, one summer I carried bricks. One of more consistent gigs was helping my friend with his lawn care company two or three days a week. Charles and I had followed remarkably similar trajectories. Both of us were writers and environmentalists and both were too principled to sell out to any sort of corporate job. We had both lived out West, loved the West, but returned to rediscover our home region of Appalachia with its opportunities for camping and its natural beauty. Charles would look at my crookedly mown lines on the country club lady's lawn and say, "Dickenson, that's what I get for hiring a scholar to help me mow lawns."

Earlier that day, we were mowing on scorched-earth areas near campus with garbage everywhere—students need to think about appreciating a sense of place. I waved to a couple of my students walking by. They looked confused at seeing a professor who mows lawns.

Think of merging lawn care and academia: "At University of the Future, we've thrown away all the hierarchies! Not only are our faculty members well-published in their fields, but also they are responsible for all lawn maintenance duties, hedge clipping, etc. In fact, several of our courses are taught by faculty members while they do lawn maintenance. You'll find yourself pruning and clipping hedges with some of the best scholars in their fields."

Fortunately, my family had a sense of humor. "Why don't you get a real job?" my then 13-year-old son, Brendan, teased after a recent three-day paper-reading binge. He showed his irony through his low, quasi-parental voice. Anyway, I sustained our family financially through odd jobs like this until the hard-fought sustainable work of adjuncting dried up when the university went to the business model of using TAs as almost free labor.

By this point, I had worked myself into being a seasoned professional with a Ph.D. I was generally on the top of the adjunct list, but that list, along with the jobs, disappeared. Fortunately, while my eldest son was going through college, I had managed to string together a few years of steady work, and he was able to graduate by taking advantage of the free tuition offered to university employees. Don't ever work in an institution that is not unionized. That is the lesson here.

The System Feeds Upon Us Easy Marks

In a way, I was an easy mark for adjunctification. "Come be an academic bohemian with me," said my high school acquaintance, whom I had always admired and who was now a safety science professor. A lot of us are easy marks—progressive, somewhat anti-capitalist—but mostly not enough to make any of us uncomfortable. That's telling, right? We're succumbing to a subculture run by profiteers.

My two cents? Run away now. Run away if you don't love it. And if you don't know if you love it, you probably do not. I am not trying to put words in your mouth, but I am trying to give you advice if you're wavering between two fields. Many of us progressive-minded educators who have sought rich lives rather than rich bank accounts are easy marks for adjunctification. From college onward, I was resistant to the environmental and economic atmosphere wrought by the Reagan-era deregulation of the 1980s. Thus, even though I had a business degree, it was safe to say that I was an anti-capitalist.

But the capitalist system creates many insidiously pernicious circumstances. For instance, I am now 55 years old and making over $80,000 in one of the most expensive areas in the country. This is a lot of money for a hippie bohemian, but because of the expensive cost of living in my region and because all those years of adjuncting at low wages left me without much savings, moving out here to an

economic boomtown caused me to raid all of my previous retirement funds to afford a down-payment on a home, and I am feeling the financial strain.

But even by today's standards, my education level, and the fact that I work far more than the 35 hours weekly for which I am contracted, I feel guilty because my adjunct colleagues are still making far less money than I am. I fear that my friend down the road who works as an adjunct is being worked to death. He seems to have twice the responsibility that I have. Even when I lived with him when I first moved to take this job, I noticed that he didn't sleep much.

This colleague, let's call him Sampson, who is an adjunct and who has never cared about money, has expressed his concern about the inequities he has experienced, saying that when he taught six composition classes per year (seven is a full load) over a period of years, he earned only $30,000 per year while his full-time colleagues earned over $60,000. Thus, we have in place a system of guilt for full-time faculty members.

I have a job in which I earn what I am worth, whereas my colleagues who have the same skillset are making in the neighborhood of three-fifths of what I earn. This problem is changing on my campus and on others. We are finding new ways to deal with the problem of adjunctification. For instance, an institution in another part of the state has no adjuncts or tenure. Everyone is hired as a full-time employee, and their union has a created a system in which individuals can persist equally.

To everyone who is struggling in the field, my advice is this. One, if you don't want to give everything over to a failing system that is reliant upon you being overworked and underpaid, run away. If you have a graduate degree, you have skills. I know nonprofit and government employees, and they report happiness at being able to attend weekend events and not having to worry about their next paycheck.

Two, if you want to continue to teach, you might consider redrafting or re-crafting your cover letter to fit a community college rather than a university. Community colleges, at least on this left coast, are looking to promote equity. They are trying to diminish the gaps caused by adjunctification. That said, try to find stable work. Don't relocate unless you land tenure-track, tenured, or full-time work. Best of luck to you.