

Chapter 40. When Your Work Is Good, but It's Not Good for You: Navigating Career Pivots

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I have always had one foot inside and one foot outside of academia. Alongside being a graduate student and now tenured professor, I was a veterinary assistant, Emergency Medical Technician (EMT), and entrepreneur who owned three businesses related to my academic research. Currently, I am also a spiritual director and earning graduate certificates in pastoral leadership and Christian spirituality.

As an academic, I prioritized community-engaged research for the first 12 years of my career while researching technical communication, rhetoric of health and medicine, and emergency medical services (EMS). Drawing on my EMT experience, my then-growing EMS writing scholarship illustrated that medical report writing needed an overhaul. To do that, I collaborated with EMS organizations to conduct research, wrote publications and presentations for writing studies and EMS venues, and applied my findings to develop three businesses focused on EMS writing in initial training, continuing education, and on the job. Despite the EMS community's enthusiasm, good intentions, and agreement that report writing needed improvement, writing wasn't a priority, leading to stalled projects, fizzled out partnerships, and my feelings of disappointment, discouragement, anger, and hopelessness.

During this time, my spiritual director, someone trained to listen to our sacred stories, asked me, "The EMS work you're doing is good. But is it good work for you?" Slowly, I began to see reality for what it was, not as I hoped it would be. My EMS research was no longer sustainable, and I ended it with no clear next step. No academic models existed to help me know how to translate my writing and rhetoric expertise to my then-emerging research interests in public humanities, graduate education, and discernment. Grounded in the spirituality of St. Ignatius of Loyola, discernment is an intentional, life-long process of determining what brings a person closer to integrity and authenticity. So, I drew on my position as a spiritual director to create my own models, like the Discernment Map (Angeli et al.), prioritizing my inner life, heart, and intuition. I then considered not what I wanted to do but how I wanted to feel. That foundation supported my re-assessment of the next steps.

I reflected on key moments of my EMS research, focusing on how I felt as I recalled each moment's details. A pattern emerged: My jaw became tight, my shoulders stiff. I felt an urgency that was not my own. I also reflected on my

feelings as a spiritual director meeting with clients and integrating discernment practices into my writing classes. My body felt open, peaceful, and excited with possibility. There was no urgency. Although there was no clear path ahead of me with this possibility like there was with EMS, that uncertainty comforted me.

While following that uncertainty, a clear path emerged. I was invited to create discernment classes and workshops for students, faculty, and community members. This work delightfully blurred the lines of research, teaching, and service, and I continue to enjoy it. Yet, my EMS work felt unfinished, over a decade of dreams and work collecting virtual dust on my hard drive. I imagined what re-engaging with EMS could look like while maintaining the joy I felt with my discernment work. Instead of building my own businesses like I had as an entrepreneur, I partnered with already-established EMS companies, and I felt different in a more grounded, less frantic way; that feeling confirmed I was listening to my inner life. However, after a few months, the familiar, misaligned feelings returned, and I realized that, despite my hopes, EMS research no longer aligned with my long-term goals, taking me away from time I could spend on discernment work. I pivoted away from EMS and put my energy into work that would fuel the next chapter of my career, not knowing exactly what the next chapter would be. I moved forward into a new, promising uncertainty.