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How Can We Do Scholarship When the World Is on Fire?

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Blog Series: Changing Scholarship

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I've been neglecting my scholarship since March 2020. That, in case you don't remember, is when the pandemic hit, sending faculty off into a mad scramble of Zoom, hybrid teaching, mental health emergencies, and social distancing.

Once vaccines allowed us to stick our heads back out, we began working on tasks we had neglected during that mad scramble. And all the while, wave after wave of terrifying news coverage hit. George Floyd. The invasion of Ukraine. "Don't say gay" laws. More talk about bathrooms than I would have thought possible. The seeming inevitability of another Trump/Biden election. Ever increasing temperatures, metaphorically and literally. Wildfires in the West, in Canada, and on Maui. Gaza.

In the middle of all this, I started my sabbatical. That is an amazing privilege, but it put me face to face with my demons because I hadn't even *looked* at my scholarship since March 2020 (except for the frantic days last summer when I wrote my sabbatical application). I couldn't remember what I was supposed to be working on. And when I reread my application, I realized that I didn't care. How could my research matter, to me or to others, in a world that increasingly literally is on fire?

The state of our profession made it even harder for me to delve into my scholarship. Majors and programs are shrinking, budgets are being cut, departments are closing. Every week

seems to bring more bad news. At the same time, most of us need to rethink our teaching and learn new pedagogical techniques because more and more students need more basic instruction than we are trained to provide. And we need to figure out how to teach in the era of ChatGPT.

So yeah. It's a lot.

Under these circumstances, how should we approach our scholarship? What can we learn, write, and do that will benefit us, our profession, and our students?

It depends. Some of us do find meaning by delving deep into traditional scholarship of discovery, examining the arcana of Greek and Hebrew terms, exploring manuscript variations and intricate scholarly debates, even while recognizing that few will read our work. Some are nourished by the intellectual challenges in that work and emerge refreshed and intellectually stimulated. Others don't, but find themselves constrained by circumstances. They need to do scholarship to earn promotion or tenure or to have a chance of landing a teaching position. These are all good reasons to dig into the obscure references and produce additional journal articles.

But what about the rest of us? There seem to be plenty of faculty who, like me, don't find meaning and purpose in the scholarship of discovery. And some of us, like me, are tenured. If we don't *have to* publish another peer-reviewed article, what else might we reflect on and write about?

There is an opportunity in this moment of crisis and uncertainty, an opportunity to change course and to engage in scholarship that feels more meaningful.

What that means will be different for different people. An increasing number of faculty are doing work in social justice. Some are turning their attention to climate change and the despair it induces in many of us. I am staying closer to home, focusing on some of the challenges in my own profession: I'm thinking about how academics in the humanities can move forward and how we can avoid burnout. How can we learn to live well despite having less stability and more uncertainty than before? Can we find good ways to grieve for the careers we thought we would have and for the fields that we love and then find meaning and joy in teaching new populations of students instead?

Philosophers and religious studies scholars have deep resources to draw on here, thousands of years of reflecting on happiness, meaning, and the human desire for stability and permanence in a world of rapid change. I'm diving in, reading about acceptance, grief, and hope in Buddhist and Christian texts, in psychological research, and even in self-help books. And I find inspiration in an unexpected line from a psychology journal article: "Hope can be practiced by locating a deep desire, value, or commitment and taking a step toward it." [i] For so long, I've thought that hope for our profession required believing that the numbers of majors, funding, and programs will increase again. That would be lovely, of course. But this line points towards a different understanding: Hope is the practice of teaching and working in a way that

expresses our core values and commitments and continuing to do so even though the situation is changing.

It is not all that I wanted, but it makes my work feel meaningful and important again. That may be enough.

Notes

[i] The quote is from James L. Griffith's "Hope Modules." He is paraphrasing Kaethe Weingarten's "Hope in a Time of Global Despair." (I have not yet read Weingarten's article yet, but it's next on my list).

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