



WABASH CENTER

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“We’re Not in Kansas (nor Cambridge) Anymore”

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Arriving onto the campus of my first fulltime teaching job in higher education was not unlike finding myself in a strange land with a little dog under my arm. “Toto, I have a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore,” I remember saying aloud, wondering what I had done in accepting this new job I thought I wanted. I was disoriented, to say the least. I’d never expected to land a teaching job—too competitive, options quite scarce, two-career family. I certainly had never intended to come back to the area in



which I grew up, southwestern Ohio. I had left there with good reason, after all, choosing to live in big cities and pursue various ambitions in well-established institutions. Yet, here I was, an assistant professor in a freestanding seminary in an economically depressed area of the Midwest. This short clip isn’t far from the sense of it all. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vQLNS3HWfCM> to ‘clip’)

Without proceeding to the bemusing images here—the Yellow Brick Road, flying monkeys, the Wicked Witch, or the Wizard—you should know I now spend time regularly between Oz *and* Kansas. I love them both, and have met marvelous companions (Wabash and others) along the

way in both 'locations.' What do I mean? Some days, I wouldn't trade what I do for anything; I'm Home in 'Kansas,' with family and cherished colleagues who can frustrate me to all ends. On others, I'm wearing these glittery red shoes on a journey with strange companions to ask a Wizard to get where I'd left behind; I'm on my way to Oz with a deep sense of a lost Home.

I invite you into the very real divide within every new faculty person I've encountered, including myself: a tension between "having arrived" at the rare privilege of a fulltime job, perhaps even tenure-track, and the dawning realization that you are in a strange land with a dog under your arm. The politics you had to weather to successfully defend your dissertation? Vastly different and unhelpful for the politics and skills you need to learn as a fledgling professor with responsibilities as a faculty colleague. The research-writing skills you honed to pursue your passions? Minimally significant, except to fan the embers of your passions and those of your students. And did anyone tell you the vast differences between doctoral institutions and those of the majority of teaching posts? Of course not, because doctoral mentors rarely know the realities of such things for themselves. It can feel a bit like wearing a lapel pin that says, "Congratulations! Now you're on your own." All of this makes most of us scan the horizon for that One Place where we could finally do what we thought teaching in higher education would be. Oz, in other words. Do you find yourself scanning the "Job Openings" to resolve the tension? A sure sign of a new faculty member. Sadly, some of us never grow out of that. Some of us never realize that Oz and Kansas are actually the same place, that the Wizard is really only a drab little man behind the curtain.

Yes, the realities of teaching are nothing you could have known, nothing you thought you were choosing. No, you're not doing what you thought your discipline or role would require. Yes, the institutional trappings of this new place are nothing like the institution of doctoral formation, nothing like you knew higher education "to be." Of course it would be like that. It's so obvious to me now, nearly ten years later. Institutions are *vastly* different, with *vastly* different educational missions related to their own contexts and communal narratives.

The invitation I wish I had known was coming, if you asked me today? Don't get lost in the terrible splendors of some imagined Oz, nor the black-and-white frustrations of today's Kansas. The marvelous trick is to develop a levity and amusement about *being in both places at once*. Buy a pair of glittery red shoes, if you must, but don't waste your energies trying to get to the Wizard. He's old, timid, and tired. Learn the politically-fit ways to develop your passions and become a colleague within institutions focused upon important concerns of economic stability, administration, and constituency-development. Get to know your own strengths and limitations better so you can steward both for the good of your institution. It will thank you for it, eventually, and if it's some place good for you to be, you both will become healthier. Avoid those who are obsessed with Oz and find companions along the way who will make you belly-laugh out loud, who will encourage your best self in a life worth risking into things your mentors never knew.

Not only does this make teaching a lifelong vocation of fascination and wonder amidst real challenges of hard work and foibled companions. It allows you to discover and realize your

gifts in Kansas—which needs the color of your dreams, incidentally—instead of constantly looking for them in some imagined Oz, over the rainbow. When you can see Kansas in Oz and Oz in Kansas, teaching in higher education becomes both a child’s nightmare and wise woman’s dream, shared in bemusement with companions along the way...including Toto, or in my case, Marley.

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