

# Neither Star Nor Gypsy: How I Found Happiness Outside Academia

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**A**round 1960 my doctoral advisor got his PhD in political science and, despite receiving multiple job offers, chose to join his degree-granting department as a comparativist at the University of Wisconsin. My dream was to follow his career path. But it was not to be. The job market—probably never propitious for theorists—had collapsed over the previous generation. Yet I remained blissfully impervious to this reality, in the end facing up to the facts only *after* I'd achieved my long-cherished goal of tenure. Less than 24 hours later, I gave up my now-secure academic career. What follows is the tale of where I ended up and what I found there. I offer it as a parable, in which academics play two of the three leading roles: “stars” who can write their own tickets, and “gypsies” who, because they cannot, have little choice over where they end up. The third leading role is played by PhDs who, like me, have found a professional life outside of academia. In Socratic style, my goal is not to advance an argument or empirical case but rather to suggest some of the key career questions that political scientists and those responsible for their training should ask—and answer.

## FOLLOWING MY BLISS—GRADUATE SCHOOL

After an abbreviated run at law school I was convinced that the life of a professor was for me and that nothing could keep me from it. I was further encouraged by hearing our respected grad advisor say that the only barrier to success in the PhD program was “will.” I was a hard worker and loved my classes. The faculty were stimulating, in some cases brilliant. My peers were smart and supportive, convening regularly on the Union Terrace for (well-lubricated) extra-curricular disputation (“symposium,” in Greek).

During most of grad school my almost Zen-like focus on present demands served me well. In hindsight I recognize that my nose-to-the-grindstone attitude, however conducive to my short-term success, left little room for reflection about life after graduate school. Then, too, I was brimming with confidence: confidence in my writing ability, regularly reinforced by my instructors, and confidence in my teaching, regularly reinforced by my mentor and students alike. I rarely, if ever, asked (much less answered) the kinds of critical questions that are so crucial to living what a philosopher might call “the good career.” Nor did anyone around me. As a result, I was sustained by the naïve belief that nothing much would change after I received my PhD.

But it would. When I went on the job market, I sent out no fewer than 29 applications and got exactly one interview.

Against the odds, I landed the job, and would join the faculty at Texas A&M University in the fall. My graduate school faith was rewarded; I was in academic heaven—or would be there in the few short years that it took to earn tenure. Or so I thought.

## FOLLOWING THE JOB MARKET—LIFE AS AN ACADEMIC GYPSY

My career epiphany was gradual, delayed first by the lingering satisfaction of having (finally!) graduated and the euphoria of starting my first job, then by increasing evidence that I would indeed publish, not perish. Sure, like all assistant professors I was worried about tenure, but A&M was clear in its expectations and supportive of young faculty. Young faculty were supportive of each other.

Yet soon the shine began to fade. I began to wonder whether anyone was paying attention to either my teaching or my scholarship. I also grew increasingly frustrated at having to perform what one of my senior colleagues bemusedly called “the dance for the discipline,” especially the two-step favored by my departmental colleagues, many of whom were either indifferent or even hostile to theory (a real irony, given the integral role that theorists play in that most mathematical of fields, physics). And it got harder and harder to deny that College Station was not only unlovely, but socially and culturally suffocating. I struck up friendships, some of them lasting, but these were almost of necessity limited to other faculty, which meant no escape from work. My wife and I never missed a movie debut at the local box theater, not even *The Lion King*.

Still the faith I'd had in graduate school persisted, though now in altered form: I was sure I could “write my out,” that I would eventually end up both tenured and in a place of my choosing.

As the years passed, my faith in having it all gradually dimmed. I published, but didn't seem on the fast track to star status. It began to dawn on me that I would soon be facing a real choice: tenure in the wrong place versus an uncertain career in the right place. The moment I received notice of my tenure, I happened to be looking out over the lake not 50 yards from where I'd received my PhD. Maybe that helped me finally see the light: it's easier to recreate a career in a place one loves than change a place one doesn't. In any case, I opted then and there for *terroir* over the ivory tower, in the process ending my life as an academic gypsy.

## HAPPINESS OUTSIDE ACADEMIA—CARRER AND PLACE

At last I'd learned that careers are about more than tenure and that life is about more than career. In my own case this meant

that happiness couldn't be separated from place, from the right geographical setting. Now I just needed to find a new job. It wasn't easy going. I was unemployed for three years. That gave me lots of time with our first son, which was deeply satisfying, but didn't fill the void of productive intellectual work. The faith that had been both my greatest asset and biggest blind spot was running on empty. Then, in late 2001, the phone rang.

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A week later I joined the Interactivity Foundation (IF), a non-profit whose mission is to promote and enhance democratic discussion ([www.interactivityfoundation.org](http://www.interactivityfoundation.org)). It was truly Manna from Heaven: an outfit that would have me practicing what I had preached as a democratic theorist for the previous 10 years. I've been doing so ever since.

IF's operational work involves many activities: developing discussion materials; organizing and conducting small group discussions using our own distinctive exploratory process; and training facilitators. I call it: "continuing citizen self-education" because we design our discussion materials and cast facilitators in the role of guides, not authorities. We work with citizens and, increasingly, in partnership with other groups, communities, and colleges and universities. As we've developed, we have refined our discussion process and accumulated extensive data showing that our discussions have a positive impact on citizens' skills, temperament, knowledge, and levels of participation.

Since joining IF 13 years ago, I've engaged in all facets of this work, first as a Fellow, later as a manager and research director. This professional development has been gratifying, as has the frequency with which I engage in collaborative projects.

Formal training in political science has added immeasurably to my job performance. A solid grounding in deliberative theory, supplemented by seven years leading classroom discussions, has positioned me well to develop and apply IF's own discussion approach. My training in empirical theory greatly assisted my efforts to move the Foundation's research program forward. Graduate school also refined my ability to digest, develop, and communicate complex arguments. Finally, having been repeatedly reminded by my mentor that political theory is as much "management science" as constitutional or normative theory, I feel comfortable dealing with the executive issues that are the bread and butter of running any organization.

And what of the result? I'm far enough along now to be able to say that, yes, I've succeeded in leading "the good career." To begin with, the path I chose allowed me to settle exactly where I'd always wanted to. Although I gave up tenure when I left A&M, I've always felt that my contributions to IF afforded me a functional equivalent. Not insignificantly, I'm better compensated, to boot. While I've not had summers "off",

neither do most academics, and I generally vacation when I need to. I've enjoyed the collaborative work at IF, and the flexibility, challenges, and freedom from bureaucratic constraints the Foundation offers.

As for achievements, I believe they surpass what I'd likely have achieved as a professor. I've published articles and books that I know other academics and practitioners actually read—and use. I've been part of an enterprise that's put together

hundreds of public discussions that, due to our research, we know have had a measurable impact on the thinking, temperament, and behavior of thousands of citizens. More recently, I've had the satisfaction of helping IF begin to connect its educational mission to positive social change through its work on Inclusive Dubuque ([www.inclusivedbq.org](http://www.inclusivedbq.org)) and other initiatives.

**QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY—AND ACTION**

Some political scientists are neither stars nor gypsies. In my own case, I was able to find my professional niche in the place I most wanted to live. The combination has been, on balance, both very different from, and even more fulfilling than, what I'd hoped for as a graduate student nearly 30 years ago.

Does my story offer any clear lessons for aspiring graduate students and their home departments? No, but it does suggest important questions that both should try to answer early in graduate school rather than waiting as I did for the tenure clock to force the issue.

**For Students**

In the first place, do you want an academic career? Academia offers job security, predictability, decent pay, status, and independence. I'll be the first to admit that there is something alluring about tweed and wide-eyed students. But perhaps academia's limitations and downsides (the tenure grind, flat pay, disinterested students, grading, committee work) outweigh these.

Second, if upon reflection the academic life still seems suitable, are you willing to do whatever it takes to become a (teaching or publishing) "star"? If not, are you willing to become a career "gypsy" and move to your own equivalent of College Station?

If the answer to either of these questions is "no," don't panic; my own career shows that you can use your political science PhD to good effect outside of academia. But you'll need to answer some additional questions, the sooner the better.

Start by considering whether you can thrive in the more fluid and dynamic settings you're likely to find outside of academia. Most place a high premium on such skills as communication and alliance building. Are you as much political

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animal as political scientist? If so, ask yourself what you like about researching or teaching the subject and using its methods—a logical first step in identifying non-academic sectors you can target for complementary practical certification, networking, and later job searches. Ask, too, where the jobs are, and how many of them there are likely to be in both the

questions raised by the parable of the star and the gypsy. For example:

- To what extent should PhD programs be responsible for gathering and communicating data on *non-academic* placements for recent PhD?

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short and medium terms. Careers, like politics, are the art of the possible.

This list will lead to other questions. Answer them. Doing so is all part of what IF founder Jay Stern liked to call “management by anticipation.”

#### **For PhD Programs**

While acknowledging that many graduate programs have recently made significant improvements, I wonder if they, too, wouldn’t benefit from confronting some of the

- Would it make sense to offer first year survey classes to allow students to explore non-academic careers and adapt their courses of study accordingly?
- Would it be reasonable to include internships or practical training as elective parts of the graduate curriculum?

A knowable percentage of political science PhDs are neither stars nor gypsies, but end up pursuing careers outside of academia. They deserve a proportional share of the discipline’s training resources. ■