

## steinitz



March 28, 2006 4:00 am

The Apparently Bearable Unhappiness of Academe

Rebecca Steinitz

byline

Rebecca Steinitz shares the reactions she received when she left a tenured job at a good college.

When I announced that I was leaving a tenured position at a good college you've likely heard of, the response that shocked me was not my colleagues' surprise, not their anger, but their envy.

I wasn't one of those unhappy academics, the kind who avoids campus, complains bitterly whenever she finds a drink in her hand, religiously attends her annual conference, slips out of town on mysterious weekday trips in February, and spends March on the verge of tears. I'm the pull-up-your-socks-and-make-the-best-of-things type, so I served on committees, had students over for dinner, redesigned my department's curriculum, took my kids to see the women's soccer team play in the championship, and quietly plotted my escape.

Because I'd kept my unhappiness secret, leaving became a triple betrayal: I was giving up on academia, I was abandoning the college, and I was revealing the gaps in my supposed intimacy with my colleagues. I expected hostility and rejection, but I got confession. Older professors told me they'd tried to leave and failed, or weighed the options and resigned themselves to staying. Junior colleagues whispered about covert job searches, late-night fights with spouses who demanded exit strategies, and fantasies of alternative careers.

This could be read as a negative comment on my institution except that I heard it everywhere. Academic friends across the country told me I was brave, even heroic. They said I was a role model and an inspiration. Just knowing that I had taken action made them feel better.

I know there are happy academics, because I grew up with two of them. Despite tenure battles, evil deans and weekends grading papers (which begat in me a highly realistic view of academia), both my parents ended up with jobs that suited them: my father doing cutting-edge research at a top private university, my mother teaching undereducated adults at a public alternative college; both in the desirable city where they went to graduate school.

So you could easily read my thoughts about unhappiness in academia as a generational psychodrama: I failed to equal my parents' success; I was unhappy. But it's more complicated than that.

Unlike my parents, who shot straight into graduate school and never considered any alternative, even in the scorching heat of tenure battles with the most evil of deans, I was ambivalent from the start. I meandered my way into graduate school via several years of nonprofit jobs and travel. I came up with a new exit strategy every semester. I vowed never again to go on the job market the week before I got a job. For years my husband and I spent every date night discussing whether we should stay or go.

Of course it wasn't quite as miserable as all that. I loved my office. I loved my research, when I had time for it. I loved the classroom, when I didn't hate it. I loved my summers off, except for the guilt at never writing enough, due to the odd belief that summer was a great time to take the kids to the pool. But when it came down to it, and my husband and I turned 40, we decided we did not want to spend the rest of our lives in a city we didn't like enough, doing jobs we didn't like enough, at places of employment we didn't like enough, hundreds of miles away from a family we liked a lot.

My story, then, felt unique, until I heard everyone else's stories. There are an awful lot of people out there who live their lives in a constant state of low-level despondence: They have too many papers to grade, their colleagues are not interested in their work, their colleges are in constant crisis, they didn't get promoted, they live in the middle of nowhere, they can't find a date in the middle of nowhere, their partners live hundreds of miles away.

These may sound like the complaints that make older faculty members tell us to pull up our bootstraps and remember that they didn't even have boots to pull up when they walked 10 miles barefoot in the snow to MLA, but I wonder how many of those older faculty members have spent too long repressing the details of their own unhappiness. And then there are the people, like me, who don't complain, but live their lives atop a constant undercurrent of despair.

Some of this unhappiness, I would suggest, is endemic -- those repressed details -- and some is particular to the conditions of academe at this moment in time -- the job market, the decline in education funding, the increasingly corporate university. But what interests me is not just that academics are unhappy, but that so few of them do anything about it.

You could stop me here and argue that lots of people in many professions are unhappy, perhaps even most, and many do little about it. But I have a control group. My husband is a chef, and while we have lots of academic friends, we also have lots of friends who are chefs, line cooks, and servers.

Restaurant people certainly complain: someone forgot to call in the fish order, a big table stayed for three hours and left 10 percent, the dishwasher didn't show up, the manager is an ass. But the complaints are generally momentary: there's a problem, it's solved, life goes on. You rarely find endless streams of lament or quiet desperation behind the stove.

People work in restaurants because they love it, because they need the money, or because they need the money to do something else they love. Or, eventually, they stop working in restaurants. Restaurant people have few illusions as to the significance of their work or their own importance -- unless they are celebrity chefs, who don't do much actual restaurant work.

And here we reach the heart of the matter. We academics are deeply invested in our own significance. We were the smartest ones in the class. We believe the life of the mind

is sacred and we are living it. Our ideas are our selves. When we come up against biased tenure committees or uncongenial locations or grinding teaching loads, we convince ourselves that this is the price we must pay for the greatness we are meant to achieve, and we suck it up, complaining all the way.

I do know happy academics of my generation. Some are wildly successful, living out the myth. Others have found niches in which they can happily do work that satisfies them, giving up the myth. But too many of us hang onto the myth and let go of satisfaction.

When people say I'm a brave role model, I have to laugh. I don't feel very brave. Mainly I feel shell-shocked. Giving up the security of tenure and remaking one's life at 41 is hard, so hard that sometimes I ask myself why I'm doing it. Is it an act of hubris, based on the continuing belief that I am great and only need to find the arena in which my greatness will be appreciated, or is it an act of submission, acquiescing to my own ordinariness? I don't know the answer to that question, but I do know that no longer an academic, I'm a lot happier.

Rebecca Steinitz is a teacher, writing and consultant in Boston. Her essays have appeared in *The New Republic*, *Utne Reader*, *Salon*, *Hip Mama* and *Literary Mama*.

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### Comments on [The Apparently Bearable Unhappiness of Academe](#)

Posted by [Married2XAcademic](#) on September 27, 2007 at 8:20pm EDT

Wow, you academics are a long-winded bunch, aren't you?

sheesh.

Go, leave, run, be happy, and shut up.

**My experience**

Posted by [Senthil Kumar](#), Unemployed at Home on February 5, 2008 at 12:25pm EST

I asked myself What would I do if I had 1 billion dollar in my bank account without any debts or taxes to pay.

Then it became clear to me that I won't be working. So I quit my software job to become house husband 10 years back.

**huh?**

Posted by [james](#) on March 28, 2006 at 7:35am EST

Nice piece, but, in the end, I'm not sure that I entirely get it. Yes, there are unhappy people in academia, but I can't say that I've noticed that they are more unhappy than elsewhere. (In fact, all the data suggest just the opposite.) Perhaps it just wasn't for you? Still, I'm bothered by this piece. An elaborate justification for "taking the kids to the pool" in the summer?

**unhappy acedeme**

Posted by [sarah](#) on March 28, 2006 at 10:10am EST

James, I find your remark about an elaborate justification for "taking kids to the pool" to be a Perfect example of the self-centered-petty-tyranny-one-upmanship issues that plague the halls of academia. Attacking the personal in an "intelligent" response to her, seems well, hmmm a wee bit catty. I too grew up with academic parents and spent 30 years of my life avoiding the University but am currently doing the grad school shuffle. I didn't mean to do it -but there are three prof here whom seem to think it is "vital" that I get a PhD. It keeps me off the streets. Feeds my kids our low priced vegetarian fare and occupies what might otherwise be free time- but I don't fool myself. What I do is just as unreal and addictive as what "those people" outside (and you know what I mean) do- it is just my fix is harder. Our fixes are different- that is all. God bless ya Rebecca for bailing if that is what

ya wanted to do. Have fun with the kids and enjoy "your one and only precious life"  
Sarah

**Posted by Tom on March 28, 2006 at 10:25am EST**

"Is it an act of hubris, based on the continuing belief that I am great and only need to find the arena in which my greatness will be appreciated.."

Yes.

And, as an earlier response noted, the consistent findings of national surveys of the professoriate reveal a high level of job satisfaction and happiness. This is consistent with my own observation of colleagues at four different institutions during an academic career spanning 30 years. Not EVERYONE is happy or satisfied, to be sure, but the most unfortunate aspect of this essay is that it suggests that the writer's professional unhappiness is pervasive...and that most of us secretly hate our jobs and want to find an "exit strategy." This simply isn't the case. The good news is that she has left the profession -- good for her and her state of mind, but good for her students and colleagues as well.

**Posted by cm on March 28, 2006 at 10:25am EST**

Exactly!

I applaud your openness to self-discovery and your willingness to admit your reality. No academia may not be for all of us who choose it as a career (despite what the research shows). The important thing in life is to find that place or passion that fills you -- and even if you don't know what your passion is, to never give up on finding it. We all get lost in these patterns we create for ourselves -- college, marriage, family, more college, new career, and etc. Who ever said the road we choose initially is the "right" road? Perhaps combining skills from other careers and those aspects of academic life that you enjoyed is the road to take. Who knows? I just commend you for stepping out and sharing your story.

**Well-written article**

**Posted by R.A. Shaw on March 28, 2006 at 10:25am EST**

"...An elaborate justification for "taking the kids to the pool" in the summer?"

Dude .. have you ever lived in the middle of nowhere? As in, it's faster to drive than fly to the nearest metro area? As in, your friends can fly to London faster than to your house?

An acquaintance just gave up his TT position in a Deep South flagship to live in SanFran. I think he just couldn't bear living in the Deep South for the next 25 years.

To the article's author -- well-done. I'm sure, you're much happier in Boston than North Podunk.

**Please . . .**

**Posted by Tom on March 28, 2006 at 10:25am EST**

My first reaction is to say "get over yourself". However, on second thought, "welcome" to the real world. See, there are these institutions called corporations that don't have tenure, don't provide "summers off", require travel on a whim, demand command performance dinners with clients and arrange Sunday travel days for Monday morning meetings. However, what is most maddening is that corporations have this annoying habit of firing people when goals aren't met - don't sell enough widgets in 2006, you will be history in 2007.

While the worker bees in these places may not be quite as smart (as you see yourself), they seem to be able to get themselves out the door on trains before 7:00 a.m. and return home some time just after the kids are in bed. Also, while you were grading your papers on weekends, these drones were likely slumped over their Blackberries corresponding with irate clients who were just about ready to fire them (yes, in the corporate world you answer to "management" - kind of like deans, to "shareholders" - the ones who are demanding stellar returns for your efforts - as well as to "clients" - the ones that pay the bills).

However, since you have spent your entire life in "academia" none of this will make any sense to you. So, I'll just end where I started with a "welcome" to the real world.

**Show me the money..**

**Posted by Allen Ford on March 28, 2006 at 10:25am EST**

What was the catalyst for the exit? Very few can afford the luxury of simply walking out the door on any career...unless there is an incentive...unless the trade-off (money vs sanity; good money vs

great money, great money vs independence, etc.) makes sense...pun intended. Of course colleagues are envious because they know your motivation and what's on the other side of the door you are walking through. We, curious readers, don't which makes this a dull read.

**Posted by Lee on March 28, 2006 at 10:25am EST**

Another alternative to staying in Academe unhappy is to make a lateral move. After decades of teaching, research, and departmental administration, I felt confined, burnt out, and intellectually thwarted. So cushioned by my IRA plus Social Security, I retired weeks before my 62nd birthday and arranged to teach what now interests me, as an adjunct in cross-disciplinary programs and in a life-long learning scheme at the same university. I also became involved with an in-house talent-nurturing center for ambitious undergraduates, and with the institution's national publication for general audiences. Five years out, I am still delighted by day-to-day contacts with students and colleagues, gratified by my response to fresh intellectual challenges, and thrilled to be making a greater difference than I did before in the lives of my "cliente", both the very young and - like myself - in their green old age.

**Posted by Anabelle on March 28, 2006 at 10:25am EST**

As an administrator who, like most, works 12 months a year, I can only say. Those vacations you profs get are nothing to sneeze at. Not just summer vacation, but all the student breaks during the academic year.

Yes, I know you're doing research, writing, preparing class plans, grading, etc. But you have the option to spend days at the pool with your kids all summer; most workers don't. Yep-- the grass is always greener!

**Sounds familiar**

**Posted by Earl Grey on March 28, 2006 at 11:30am EST**

I think this piece is right on target--certainly not for all academics, but for many. And the problem goes beyond personal life and general contentment--it often affects the way the work is actually done. Personal unhappiness often bleeds over into a shared suffering in which everyone becomes complicit. But, of course, all of that is veiled behind a surface of collegiality and self-congratulation. In both departments that I've studied or worked in (major research universities), there has been a constant undercurrent of dissatisfaction and general ennui, but very little action on the part of even the established, tenured faculty to make changes (either in themselves or in the department).

As a grad student, every faculty member that I spoke to privately agreed that there were problems with recruitment and retention, funding, teaching loads, examinations or reviews, unfair treatment of adjuncts and TAs, etc. But even when these faculty achieved tenure or department head, none of them ever made the changes that they insisted were needed. Why not? Campus politics? Money? Or also a sense of personal helplessness and resignation? "This is how it's always been done. I went through it--why shouldn't they? What can I do to improve things?"

As an adjunct faculty member, I've listened to constant discontented murmurings about "politics," hiring practices, promotions, "recognition," bias, etc.--as if these things exist "out there" and not in the minds and actions of the people in the department! Rarely are these things discussed in faculty meetings (at least the ones I'm invited to) or formal discussions--rather, they're cocktail-party fodder or whispered hallway discussions. I can't help but feel that there's a general attitude of duck-and-cover, fend-for-yourself, and don't-rock-the-boat, even as we chatter on about department unity and shared purpose.

If unhappy faculty aren't honest with themselves, then it's unlikely, even impossible, that they'll be honest with each other. I, like most academics, find many things about my job enjoyable and rewarding--indeed, I haven't given up on it as a career. But if maintaining a career entails maintaining a silent and "happy" facade, I'm not sure that it is a place I'd want to be forever, tenure or no.

**On leave?**

**Posted by DW on March 28, 2006 at 11:30am EST**

Oddly, Professor Steinitz's website says she is "on special leave," not resigned from OWU?

[http://english.owu.edu/steinitz\\_rebecca.htm](http://english.owu.edu/steinitz_rebecca.htm)

What to believe?

**I did the same**

**Posted by cb on March 28, 2006 at 11:30am EST**

My journey parallels Rebecca Steinitz. I was at a flagship school in a state with which I had no affinity. I had tenure. I decided to walk away. The reasons were complex but ultimately boiled down to not being happy. I left 6 years ago and have never regretted it.

And I had the same set of responses from my colleagues. People with whom I had shared only a friendly hello came to my door to tell me they wished they had the courage to leave. Courage? Hardly that. But as I came to realize, they felt trapped.

I don't have any stats on how pervasive such unhappiness was, but my experience showed me there was more of it than I had realized. When I became a safe haven for confession, they came.

Part of the issue is tenure. Once granted, we feel we cannot give it up. And part of it is that "we are deeply invested in our own significance," as Steinitz wrote. These are different in other industries so measuring unhappiness alone doesn't give much useful information.

**Posted by Rebecca Shipman on March 28, 2006 at 12:05pm EST**

I liked Lee's comments best, perhaps because I could identify most with the idea of staying in academe, but in a different role. I teach at a public community college and have found the greatest zest in the classroom. I do think that there are a lot of people in academe who are unhappy, and yet we don't leave.

For my first twenty years of teaching I was not a mother. In my last twelve I have been. Teaching in a college does allow a person greater control over time; and this control is generally very enhancing to family life. Yes, my child often resents the fact that I bring work home, but it is a great thing to be able to have some control over managing the interplay of family and work life. I used to teach summers, but don't any longer because I want to have as much time as I can with my daughter.

It isn't easy being a full-time worker and a parent, but it is a reality that the bulk of women today face. When I am feeling depressed with the decreasing funding for higher education, my stagnant salary, the limited power I have to effect college policy or practices, and the disregard, disrespect, or misinformation that seems to frame the public view of education today, I remind myself of the pleasure of teaching, and parenting. I have a lot of power and control in those arenas; I can tolerate my relative lack of power in academe in general.

Retirement for me is in the foreseeable future. I expect that like Lee I will be 'tapering off' from teaching by moving into an adjunct position. That is another plus about being in academe - and I can see a future in which the increased reliance on adjunct faculty will seem like a boon to me!  
Rebecca

### Why I Left

**Posted by Catherine on March 28, 2006 at 12:25pm EST**

I loved my job at a small college in the extreme northern midwest. But as a single woman prone to depression (and northern winters are very long and very light deprived), I found, after four years, that the choice was between work and life. My only life was at work - I loved my students, loved my office, loved some colleagues - but going home was sheer unadulterated endless loneliness. That's why I left. Academics and the military are the two professions in which we have absolutely no control over where we live. I didn't know, in grad school, that where I lived was so important to me. I only learned in the process of taking on the job I was so suited for in a place that wasn't.

### on target

**Posted by ex-prof on March 28, 2006 at 12:25pm EST**

This article really resonated. I'm also transitioning out of academia, began recognizing the hubris endemic to academia as I began the transition, and now find myself liberated by leaving academia. As the author notes, most if not all academics were at the top of their classes in HS and their undergrad institution, and much of their self-definition is based on their view of themselves as supreme intellectuals. (Of course, the latter is often the case because many academics were labeled as nerds early on and came to prize intellectual pursuits in reaction to this rejection, if not also because they couldn't achieve a self-definition most of their peers would consider positive.)

The problem is, not everyone gets to stay at the top of the class—due to the Matthew Effect (see R. K. Merton and the sociology of science lit. that builds on his insight), only a few academics can stay at the head of the class post-PhD through publication and appointment at high status institutions. True, because even professors who haven't attained star status have students who hang on their every word and constantly remind them (however unpleasantly) that their grades and even their future lay in their hands, every professor can find a measure of identity support. But being at the head of a bunch of undergraduates is often not enough, particularly when many make it clear they are only writing down your every word to do well on an exam, after which they will promptly burn their notes and try to forget you forever. Hence, academics who haven't succeeded often do such things as diminish the accomplishments of their colleagues even to the point of forcing out promising junior colleagues, or decide that being a good teacher is the most important intellectual

accomplishment and that folks at the top schools (who got their because of superior research, of course) can't teach \*because\* they are good at research.

But the real problem for most academics is not determining how to rationalize their increasingly obvious failure to remain at the head of the class. Instead, it is their alienation from and rejection of a largely anti-intellectual society at large for whatever biographical reason. (How else can one explain, for instance, the nearly universal assumption among mass media researchers that most of their subjects are stupid sheep who blindly follow the media, despite a mountain of research indicating that the media has remarkably little effect on how people think about issues.)

Why is this a problem? Belief in one's self importance not only cuts one off from valuable relationships and experiences with non-academics, but also prevents one from engaging in the most fulfilling activity in life—humbly serving others (rather than doing so out of obligation or self-righteous pity). Humble service is so fulfilling because it leads to contact with those who have learned the most about the most important things in life. Those who suffer most in our society are at least the least delusional about how our society really operates and know the most about who really loves them and what real love is.

### Why so blue, panda-bear?

Posted by **Jack Trades** on March 28, 2006 at 12:45pm EST

Could some of this unhappiness have to do with the fact that many academics are required to sell their souls to dissertation committees, hiring committees, journal editors, and review committees just to maintain the "privilege" of doing the drudge-work of their departments? When you have to cater to the prevailing attitudes, "hot topics," or theoretical biases of your colleagues, dilute your convictions, "watch what you say," restrict your "free inquiry" to the approved areas, or pander to the vicissitudes of an ever-grubbing student body, it tends to take a bit of the joy away from that earlier ideal of the "scholarly life." When your efforts are rewarded with poor pay, increasing workloads, ambiguous expectations, secretive decision-making, and constant criticism (from within and without), it starts to sap some of that enthusiasm and energy that you hope to bring to the classroom. Vacations are nice, the benefits are decent, and everyone loves the flexibility of the academic life—but is that enough to make up for the lack of security (for many) or the diminishing returns of publishing more and more articles to meet the hungry demands of tenure and promotion committees?

But as the OP said: why do we feel so "trapped" in this situation? Because of the time and effort already invested? (yes) Because of doubts about our ability to move on? (yes) Because of some uncertainty about the greenness of the grass on the other side? (definitely) My question is more pointed: why can't we fix the above-mentioned problems?

### Spot-On

Posted by **Shannon LC Cate**, Dr. at Independent Scholar on March 28, 2006 at 1:15pm EST

You nailed it Dr. Steinitz

When I was finishing my own degree and waiting for my daughter by adoption, a colleague of my full-professor spouse asked me how I could plan for a baby when I might end up getting a job in another city. I told her I wouldn't. She asked "how can you control that?" I told her I planned to prioritize my family and she looked at me like I was speaking Martian.

She's famous by the way. And single. And childless/free (depending on your perspective).

And that brings me to a point Steinitz politely (I think) doesn't make. That is, women experience this very differently from men. Not so long ago the Chronicle published a study showing that women who have children before tenure lower their chances at ever getting tenure, while men's chances are increased by having children before tenure.

Why?

I suspect it's because they have faculty wives taking their children to the pool and/or providing a supplemental income to have the baby sitter do it among other useful things that "career" women still find themselves doing on the infamous second shift.

So thanks, Dr. Steinitz. Your courage should inspire those of us who leave to feel good about it and those of us who stay to fight to make it better.

Posted by **3 year special leave** on March 28, 2006 at 1:25pm EST

Hi

To clarify the previous poster -

The author's web site says she is on 3-year special leave.

Does this mean that she is going back?

I am glad to read that the author is making the best of her situation. So many people complain instead, so her attitude is a relief.

By the way, her website says that she is at Ohio Wesleyan. This college is not necessarily in the middle of nowhere, particularly for folks in Ohio. There are other more rural places..... Delaware Ohio is less than 30 miles to Columbus Ohio. Live in Columbus, a larger city, and commute to work.

Some of us with jobs in the real world drive over an hour to work each day in order to live in the middle of somewhere in order to have a life.....

**again, huh?**

**Posted by james on March 28, 2006 at 1:55pm EST**

I don't get what beef "sarah" and "r.a.shaw" have with my comment. I found it an interesting article too, but it left a very strange taste in my mouth. On the one hand, there is no evidence that people in academia are any unhappier than those in other domains (in fact, as I said, all of the evidence suggests just the opposite). OK, the author is/was unhappy. Glad she got out. But why all this business about how everyone else is secretly wishing to jump ship? And, if her colleagues did indeed "feel her pain" as she suggests, might it not simply have been a polite way of opening the door for her? What are they supposed to say, "bye, don't let the door hit you on the way out?" On the other - and I was more polite earlier - this seems to boil down to a tall tale that one might tell to oneself to justify jumping on the mommy track, complete with identity as "writer" and "consultant." Again, I've no beef with the author. The article just struck me as more than a little strange. Where is the "self-centered-petty-tyranny-one-upmanship" in my thoughts?

**Posted by Paranoid Professor X on March 28, 2006 at 2:30pm EST**

I have to thank ex-Prof. Steinitz for initiating this discussion. I am so used to having people tell me what a good job I have that I even feel guilty for being "bearably unhappy." As academic jobs go, mine IS a "good" job. However, I similarly comfort myself -- close to 10 times a day when I'm on campus -- by thinking I wouldn't really be any happier at any other institution, my colleagues are also unhappy, global warming is going to kill us all soon anyway.... I've even heard myself saying in response to a simple "How was your day?" from my mother, "Well, I didn't spend it in a rice paddy in southeast Asia." Is this any way to live?! Is there something uniquely icky about academics these days if one is not a superstar at an Ivy? Is the unpredictability of reward according to merit and reward according to local politics unique to the university? Does academic culture encourage us to deny our discontent with our circumstances? Has part of the job become learning to be "bearably unhappy"? I appreciate reading others' perspectives on these issues.

**Posted by PhilosophyProf on March 28, 2006 at 3:10pm EST**

I think that one of the things that might be in the background of the oneupmanship comment is a sort of "ding the bell"/"point for me" thing that happens in academia (and surely elsewhere as well). Often at conferences, colloquia, etc., when a person in the audience asks a question or makes a comment, it's almost as if they (figuratively) ring a bell afterwards, and notch up a point. The person does not seem very interested in having a discussion, and their question or comment sometimes reflects that they did not listen carefully to the paper or the speaker's project and aims, but just grabbed bits and pieces that concerned their own work. So there is sometimes a feeling that the interest isn't in the issues (or the truth, or all that good stuff that we thought we might be looking ahead to as graduate students), but is more self-serving. People don't necessarily intend any of this; it just becomes part of the general stance that they take and so part of the toxic air of academia.

I was actually writing just to say that it's probably hard for people not in academia to appreciate some of the complaints that the author of "Unhappiness of Academe" is making. From the outside everything seems peachy -- a few hours of teaching per week, summers off, etc. From the inside, there is a nasty kind of air that one often has to breathe -- having to do with prestige and self-loathing, power-plays, and the ever-present and sometimes intense and nagging feeling that because one is always on the clock and because one is never done (because there's always more one could do) that one should always be working. NOTE: this is not to say that this SHOULD be the air of academe, but just that to a significant degree it is. So I am reminded of the brother/brother-in-law in Field of Dreams who keeps saying, "Sell the farm, Sell the farm!," but who then says "DO NOT SELL THIS FARM" when he finally sees the players. I just don't think that an outsider to academe would see the toxicity. It starts early in grad. school and continues on and on, and folks outside of academe haven't run that gamut. But definitely the academic life has lots of plusses, as that would be crazy to deny. And academics surely don't see some of the negatives of situations that they have not lived.

### **fyi: Columbus ain't Boston**

Posted by **R.A.S.** on March 28, 2006 at 4:30pm EST

".. Delaware Ohio is less than 30 miles to Columbus ..

Pardon me .. I've lived in Columbus and Portland, OR. To be kind, Columbus has nice chain restaurants, insurance company HQs, an all-Republican state government, and rust seeping from OSU Stadium.

It will become Boston in approximately 1,000,000 years. Life will go on.

### **Philosophy Prof & RAS**

Posted by **Paranoid Professor X** on March 28, 2006 at 6:10pm EST

I intended to respond to PhilosophyProf, but RAS's comments are also relevant. I am interested in the way this conversation has oscillated between personal/individual experiences and generalizations about academia. Herein lies the usefulness of this kind of exchange, which may seem, at times, like self-indulgent kvetching. To the extent we kvetch in the same key, these problems are systemic; and we might work together at least to numb the pain—well, that was extreme. But this discussion has affirmed for me the importance of faculty exchange programs. Sometimes going into work feels like going home for Christmas three times a week. I'm guessing I'm not the only one who experiences her department as a dysfunctional family.

### **Greener pastures outside academe**

Posted by **Steve** on March 28, 2006 at 7:35pm EST

Dr. Steinitz is right on target.

A few years ago, on a Friday in May, I received tenure at a good liberal arts college in a small town that was rather culturally limited. The following Monday I resigned.

I remain in education but in a very different capacity, and I am a happier person. While I'm not sure that academics are as wholly melancholic as Dr. Steinitz suggests, I know that I am healthier and happier for not spending the untold hours of grading, advising, and sitting in on interminable committee meetings required of a professor. Getting four hours of sleep a night during the semester just wasn't cutting it.

When my family and I moved to a more vibrant locale, I got roped into teaching part-time at another college and discerned more clearly the problem of many academics. As the overworked Director of Composition put it, "It's an addiction." What she meant was that calling oneself a college professor is a powerful drug, an intoxicating form of vanity, and that many will suffer through the drudgery of academia simply to be able to say, "I am a college professor." (It is, after all, the most respected profession after medicine.) Later that semester the Director had a nervous breakdown—she had been unable to beat the addiction and was paying the price.

There are many happy college professors; there are many who are not. May the latter find the courage to walk away, as Dr. Steinitz and hundreds of others have done. Sometimes the grass *is* greener on the other side.

Posted by **Mark**, I lived it too on March 29, 2006 at 4:35am EST

I spent a decade of my life aiming at being a professor, only to achieve that goal, and then find myself rather lonely in a small town about a thousand miles away from my family, dateless and increasingly frustrated with my seeming inability to get published. Campus life was great, teaching was a joy, and the prestige of being called doctor/professor was what I needed at the time, but I ultimately saw that it wasn't going to work out. I entered into a depression that suddenly lifted when I realized that I needed to leave the tenure-track position. Then, I convinced myself that I was crazy for having thought that, and kept on teaching for a second year. By the beginning of the third year I admitted to myself and to my chair that he needed to replace me. I went on to a very different, frighteningly unknown life in industry which has worked out fine (I now co-own a business related to my original field). While life always has its stresses, I have made a life that works. And despite knowing that life is better now vs. then, from time to time I \*still\* feel like I've failed for having "not made it" in academe. Less and less as the years go by, but it still gets me from time to time.

### **2nd generation issues**

Posted by **Paris** on March 29, 2006 at 4:35am EST

What struck me most about this piece was that she is a second generation academic. She grew up in a family with two very happy academics, which meant academia was a very familiar option when the time came to decide what to do when she grew up. So she goes with the familiar and does alright with it. But what do you know, ambivalence the whole way.

While I am not intending to project onto her anything, I have noticed that the children of academics



have a profoundly different relationship to grad school than those of us whose parents left college when they graduated. They seem to be quite successful in academia, but have this whole host of issues about taking up the family business as it were.

### **Different when you're older**

Posted by **Jane** on March 29, 2006 at 4:40am EST

I'm posting to comment on how this discussion doesn't resonate with me--probably because I've now had tenure for 25 years. Until maybe 5 years ago, I would've agreed that academia is a rat race for prestige and esteem, but then I discovered that I don't HAVE to do that stuff. I now rarely go to meetings unless I'm interested in the topic, and so I'm rarely put on committees doing boring things. I teach undergrad surveys rather than graduate courses, because the students are fresher and livelier, and I write and publish when I want to, which is fairly often.

It wouldn't be the same in the sciences, but in the humanities, once you're a full professor you CAN really choose where to put your energies, and what to blow off.

I think what tires so many academics is an over-developed sense of responsibility--if I don't do it, it won't get done. In many cases, it doesn't have to get done, anyway, and if it does, the people who like committees (the equivalent of grade-grubbers) will do it. You CAN really soar above it all and do only what you want to do.

It's a heavenly life.

Posted by **db** on March 29, 2006 at 9:25am EST

First, only in academia would someone posit a restaurant business metaphor and somehow only talk about the chef. Subtly ignoring the historically high turnover rate of wait staff, cooks and hosts who are also in the "restaurant business."

Which brings me to the only beef with her article-- don't get me wrong, I generally liked it and wish more discussion of this open nature would occur on a public level-- but it trades its value on a myth she states but doesn't confront head on: that faculty have to hate their administration, aren't compensated enough, are expected too much of and must bear the cross of their success. I wish she would have explored why that perception has to exist as standard as opposed to taking it for the standard issue mentality. Somehow the 12-month administrator or staffer with a masters, PhD or EdD would disagree with the unhappiness of the intellectual, and this article does nothing to rescue the reputation of faculty as determined malcontents who are (Surprise!) even MORE unhappy than you think they are!

She does touch on an issue that interests me in regards to turnover: Gen X bleeds from all areas of academia (faculty, student affairs, administration, business, enrollment management...etc) and this gap between the Baby Boomers and Millennials will only get wider and cause more confusion, consternation/unhappiness as they find the teaching experience full of more disconnects without the number of translators other eras had.

### **Presumptions**

Posted by **finding a new plan** on March 29, 2006 at 11:30am EST

I see a trend in this thread, a number of the comments boil down to: you have summers off-be happy, outside academia is just as bad-be happy, your location is actually pretty good-be happy. I have spent some time loosely in academia and I do not think it is for me. Yet, many around me are envious of my schedule. Hearing that I should be happy because I have it easy and the real world is so much worse is less than helpful. I tend to agree with my critics, so I'm constantly left with "what is wrong with me" because clearly, I \*should\* be happy.

Perhaps some of the difficulty with situations such as Dr. Steinitz is that there really aren't people to discuss this with. Those outside the Ivory tower generally have no idea why I'd want to leave such a "nice soft job", and those in it don't want to seem unappreciative and avoid the topic.

Everyone thinks academics should be happy, so what do we do, where do we go, when we are not?

Posted by **PhilosophyProf** on March 29, 2006 at 12:00pm EST

Jane I want to thank you for your post. The possible upside to academic life is indeed very high, and I think that I had forgotten that (maybe in part because I am still tenure-track and it all just seems so random and neurotic). It is so important to try to isolate the good and the bad components and to be active in taking the steps that are necessary to get the good to be as present and prominent as possible and to weed out the bad. I am sure that this is very difficult given the issue of bad air (that is there for the breathing), and given the kind of self-knowledge that would have to be involved, but it certainly seems possible.

### Conceptual Space and Actual Place

Posted by RC on March 29, 2006 at 1:25pm EST

While I'm not interested in praising or condemning the author, I do find interesting the way that "leaving academe" and leaving Ohio get conflated in both the article and the responses.

Because of the way our job market tends to work—highly regimented time-tables, deep commitments to tenure (often by the very faculty who feel trapped by it), geographic distribution of jobs that is more diverse than the geographic distribution of top graduate programs, etc. often means that the desire to leave a place necessarily constitutes a need to choose to leave academia.

### The "Easy Way Out" Route

Posted by RWH on March 29, 2006 at 2:55pm EST

As I often do with an IHE article, I did a quick scan of the Comments following Rebecca Steinitz's article before actually reading the article itself. Surprisingly, I read all of them before even reading one sentence of her thesis.

My initial thought after reading the article was ~~ZZZZZZZ~~

Then I read the Cliff Notes: Let's see ... "Had academic parents ... Got a Ph.D. ... Got a job ... Got tenure ... Didn't like or care that much about what I was doing ... Quit ... Got praise ... Don't understand or have answers for much of anything ... The End."

Okay, I can buy that ... but what's the big deal? Would a mathematics professor, finding herself in the same position, write a short memoir about it? I doubt it.

Then it struck me that there were two things about Steinitz's lament that were notable ... and, oddly enough, they are both consistent with one of my favorite theories about how a great many individuals end up in academia to begin with.

Steinitz said ...

1. "Older professors told me they'd tried to leave and failed, or weighed the options and resigned themselves to staying. Junior colleagues whispered about covert job searches, late-night fights with spouses who demanded exit strategies, and fantasies of alternative careers. But what interests me is not just that academics are unhappy, but that so few of them do anything about it."

2. "And here we reach the heart of the matter. We academics are deeply invested in our own significance. Some are wildly successful, living out the myth. ... Others have found niches in which they can happily do work that satisfies them, giving up the myth. But too many of us hang onto the myth and let go of satisfaction."

Now for RWH's Theory of Why Some (Most) Choose Academic Careers ... and, as much as I hate argument by analogy, it's very similar to Somebody's Theory of Why Some (Most) Choose Military Careers.

Step 1. At some stage of the game – grade school, junior high, high school, somewhere – I find that I have an aptitude for succeeding in school (not to be confused with having intellectual interests).

Step 2. I go to college ... not necessarily because I was "successful" at Step 1, but because EVERYONE goes to college. Oh, wow, for a reason that I may or may not understand, I do fairly well in college.

Step 3. Ouch! I'm confronted with a difficult choice. I guess I can go out into the hard, cruel world or I can – because I've got a feel for this sort of thing and it's pretty easy for me – go to graduate school.

[Note: Some go on to professional schools and, although there's a fork in my theory there, take my word for the fact that it still "works" for those who take that route. Of course, only a very few go to graduate school to get a master's degree. Master's degrees are consolation prizes for those who are not up to what is required to get a Ph.D. Those with master's degrees go on to be high school teachers (and coaches, counselors, or assistant principals).]

Step 4. Ouch! I'm confronted with a difficult choice. I guess I can go out into the hard, cruel world or I can – because I've got a feel for this sort of thing and it's pretty easy for me and because I was required to do some teaching/research as a graduate student – become a professor.

I know I won't make much money – teachers are notoriously "underpaid" – but society at large has these wonderful misconceptions about us selfless professors who eschew the financial rewards of our educations to devote our lives to their children. They also have the mistaken notion that educated people – and we're all educated aren't we? (that's the easy part) – are also intellectuals and scholars. I won't tell if you won't.

Step 5. I become a college or university professor ... and please call me RWH, Ph.D. Blaaaauugh!!!

I will concede that not all of us become academics via the "insecurity route" described above, but I challenge you to re-read Steinitz's article. I'll give you ten-to-one odds on \$100 that that was precisely the route she followed right up to her decision to retire. Her "myth of academe" is nothing more than another convenient rationalization we employ to "explain" our non-decisions to become academics.

In conclusion, I'll tell you why I could never do what Rebecca Steinmetz did. It's just that I would never WANT to do that. When I get up in the morning – and I'm pushing 70 – I can hardly wait to get on-line or get into school to hang out with ... interact with ... teach and learn with ... those students. If that doesn't get you out of bed in the morning, you're in the wrong business. Oh, but you already knew that, didn't you?

**Posted by kak on March 29, 2006 at 9:20pm EST**

Most academics I know are ambivalent. It's a small, biased sample, but I do think there are many reasons that academia is hard that are structural as well as personal. Contrary to what the author says, most of the people I know are not "deeply invested in their own significance" but rather to their own insignificance. We wonder if this type of work makes the kind of contribution to the world we value. I think this feeling may be more prevalent in the social sciences and humanities, but maybe not. I take issue with the comment that the University is somehow better off with her gone. The truth about academia is that most people refuse to see it for what it is – a job. And many people have ambivalent feelings about their jobs. I think this ambivalence is hard for some in academia to admit because they have been working towards getting where they are for a long time and because they know people who would happily take their place. Not liking your job, or feeling ambivalent about it, does not mean, however, that people cannot do their jobs well. We need jobs to live but academics often view their jobs as significantly different than others and in most respects it is not that different. One way in which academia is significantly different is that while for most it is low-paying, it is high status. That's the payoff. If it were low-paying and low-status I imagine there would be far fewer people staying in academia. When folks do become unhappy and this starts to outweigh the perceived benefits, it's the status that's hard to leave behind because it's the only currency many have been trading in so it's very valuable. But also most people don't see how they can exist in the so-called real world because some institutions and programs perpetuate the idea they are somehow not part of it and even look down on those who try to do work in and around it.

**Posted by bk on March 29, 2006 at 10:20pm EST**

Jane's comment really irks me. It's precisely that kind of attitude, which she can afford to have because she IS tenured, that leaves the untenured profs doing all of the "boring" committee work and other things she won't do. They then have to work that much harder picking up her slack and likely fulfilling higher requirements than she did for tenure and feeling that much more exhausted for it all.

**Real World**

**Posted by Real World on March 29, 2006 at 10:20pm EST**

I'm not an academic myself, I work in what some of you refer to as "the real world." An interesting choice of words since the very statement implies a recognition of the fact that what some of you do really has no bearing on reality. My wife, on the other hand, works in academia, currently on the tenure track. I also notice there are a few people that talk about having 25-30 years experience that seem to have no problem with the status quo of the academic world. Frankly though, I believe this is a topic that perhaps the amount of time you have spent in academia is actually harmful to your perspective, just as much as being male. The world has passed academia by and they do not even realize it. Perfect example is the first poster commenting on an "excuse to take the kids to the pool" or something to that effect - frankly you just proved part of the point. Just as much as a statement by a Provost that my wife heard, which essentially said that being a lecturer is perfect for women so they can just drop their careers and have babies. If anything was said like this in my "real world" by middle management, it would be called for what it is, namely, sexism.

Within this thread there have also been references to all the time off and how it should be more appreciated, and even the "welcome to the real world" statements seem to imply that somehow Professors are protected in a ivory towered fortification from something. But speaking from honesty it looks more like a prison from out here. To clarify, I believe things are actually worse for you. Now keep in mind that the world of academia varies to a huge degree depending on the field one has chosen to specialize in, so this hardly applies to everyone. For example, if you take a Business professor and compare his/her circumstances to an English professor's, their academic experiences are going to be very different. Not nearly as much politics will be heaped upon a business scholar as an English scholar. This is for one simple reason. As a Business or Law Ph.D. you are far more likely to be a phone call away from twice the pay - you just have to give up all those summers and vacation. For English professors, on the other hand, the perception is completely different; they are "stuck" in the academic field, therefore can be treated without the same regard as one with alternatives you might say. I say this due to witnessing many things that would get a professor fired, tenured or no, being overlooked in the case of the aforementioned fields.

Then of course there is the job security. Yeah, sure, you get tenure and it is very hard to get a job in the "real world" of the same job security. Let's look at three things here: first of all, what it takes to be fired in the real world. For the most part, these are lack of job performance, layoffs, or breaking some corporate rule (drug use, divulging sensitive material such as trade secrets, whatever). For the layoffs, this can happen to anyone: if your university loses funding, you will have layoffs. If you break a rule sleeping with a student or something, your tenure will not protect you. So then that leaves job performance: congratulations, you now have a system that protects incompetence of the employee. And who is to benefit from this fine system but the students and the fellow professors. The students now enroll and overload in better teachers' classes like a bunch of refugees just to avoid the tenured one, increasing the class sizes to unreasonable levels for the professors who excel in plying their chosen trade. Now you may say that the teacher should not allow the overload, but if the students still feel as if they get more out of a class if it is overloaded than if they took a sparsely populated class from the other, this alone should speak volumes. And even if they don't overload they are simply going to be more work for their next professor or the next term as they struggle to meet the requirements because they do not have the necessary groundwork even to take part at the next level. Furthermore, that lucky excellent (and probably junior professor) now has so many students that (s)he simply cannot work on research during the school year, or else has to teach so many lower-level "service" classes that the teaching has absolutely nothing to do with the research. Guess what happens to those ample vacations then? Screw taking the kids to the pool; there's writing to be done!

From an outsider's perspective, I can only marvel at the simple silliness that is the tenure review system anyhow. Once again the system seems to be set up to magnify the worst aspects of people. Excuse me, but being voted on by the tenured faculty is based on the assumption that everyone with a Ph.D. has leadership or management qualities. Sorry guys, you aren't all that and a bag of chips; as they say, there is diversity in every crowd. The best way to ensure a great quality of people is by upper management choosing the right people in the middle and it works that way all the way down. I by no means view this as perfection - the human condition itself ensures a certain amount of failure of this philosophy. I simply see greater fault in the system that is tailored to bring out the worst of it. By having the system the way it is, you are setting up greatly to increase the politics by essentially making the tenure system a 5-year game of "Survivor," complete with the ham-fisted backstabbing, subversion, and brown-nosing. Truly a system designed to ensure excellence of quality. (note the sarcasm) While tenure is good job security, getting there isn't - some administrations take pride in insisting that one cannot "earn" tenure. Even if you publish enough, teach well, work on enough committees, you can get shown the door if your colleagues just plain don't like you much. Honestly, would this happen in the average company, if you satisfied the clients and the shareholders? In fact, if you did a really good job and got canned for petty personal reasons, might this not be grounds for a lawsuit?

So in closing, I would like to say in earnest "welcome to the real world;" there are always employers out there who are looking for not necessarily direct experience in a field, just the best and the brightest that can catch up quick and surpass their peers. The dedication that it takes to get a Ph.D., though not saying everything, does say a lot about an applicant. They have lemons too, just like in your fields; the difference is, they are prone to getting rid of theirs so they can hire useful people, like quite possibly yourselves. These employers, once you find them, and it does take a lot of effort on your part (relying more on networking perhaps), will value you more than the system in which you are currently working. Once you have established yourself, things will probably get better because then you have experience and places to go, and as people value you, you have options and room for advancement. It is quite a wonderful propaganda machine your establishment has set up seemingly unintentionally, instilling the fear in your younger untenured academics that they have nowhere else to go because the big scary boogeyman, the "real world," just does not care about them the way you do so they better put up with all your useless establishment crap.

Sincerely,  
The Real World

#### Quick note to bk and anyone else reading

Posted by Jane on March 30, 2006 at 4:21 am EST

I should've added that I do mentor younger faculty and tell them what I told this thread: that you don't have to do all the scutwork assigned to you. I help them pick through what needs to be done and not, compartmentalize, and decline service on committees that are very controversial or time-consuming. I help them write letters declining.

In my R-1 dept., too, the tenure standard is what it's always been: a book a rank. I'd published 3 books when I came up for tenure, and have published 11 now. I'm not a slacker, just someone who dislikes busywork and trivia.

#### 2nd Generation Academic

Posted by Catherine on March 30, 2006 at 11:00 am EST

I'm another 2nd generation academic who has walked away from academia. Both my parents were English professors and I am/was one too. English departments have been my life. 1st point: back in the 60s, there was more flexibility to choose where you wanted to live. When my mother became

unemployed in the early 70s (bad job market / maternity leave), she was still able to eventually find teaching in the same area that we lived in. I can't do that. 2nd point: I'm an archivally-based literary historian. Not sexy. My research didn't get me academic job offers -- my teaching did. I wish I were still teaching college students, but given the research-first hiring practices of most schools, I'm never going to get that chance again.

That's why I'm looking for high school teaching positions.

### Is Happiness the Goal?

Posted by **Anonymous**, Asst Prof at urban public univ on March 30, 2006 at 11:35am EST

There seems to be an assumption that being "happy" is the goal of employment and by extension life. This is a peculiarly American idea that is not shared by the rest of the world. Adulthood consists of shedding the quest for happiness and enjoyment and making other values primary.

I wrote letters of recommendation to two students who were admitted to first-rate programs this year. Midway through their first year, each of them contacted me for new letters because they were unhappy in their programs and wished to switch. I asked if the work was too hard or they were mistreated and that was not the case -- they just didn't feel the excitement, passion, happiness they had anticipated.

Grad school, academic life, life in general can be very hard and it seems very foolish to expect it to be otherwise. Things that are hard and not generally fun or even pleasant. I don't understand where the idea comes from that accomplishment should result in happiness -- it may result in pride or satisfaction, or even relief when completed -- but why happiness?

I love my job because I feel that I am helping students reach their goals, making this world a more educated and thus more democratic, peaceful, prosperous place. I see my progress toward understanding human behavior (my research) as contributing to that goal. I am generally neither happy nor unhappy but confident that I am doing worthwhile work.

I can't help feeling that a quest for happiness is shallow -- that's a value I am far from alone in holding. As academics, aren't we supposed to live a more examined life? Shouldn't one's examination result in a firmer commitment to values beyond the self?

In the movie the Big Chill, the husband who seems the despised sellout ad executive says an important thing -- "Somehow no one ever told me life was supposed to be fun." I find myself wondering whether the structured career path of academia might prolong adolescence by preventing someone from actively confronting decisions along the way, resulting in a delayed understanding that personal pleasure or pain is no way to make important long-term choices.

### Le vrai monde

Posted by **Frenchie** on March 30, 2006 at 11:51am EST

Why portray academia as separate from the real world? Academics put in 40+ hours/week prepping classes, interacting with students, researching, writing, grading, attending committee meetings, applying for grants, taking students abroad, supervising clubs and other extra-curricular activities, e-mailing and blogging. We earn a respectable salary, have families, have free time, enjoy ourselves during our vacations (which sometimes feel like stolen moments). We are organized because (with the exception of classtime) most of our deadlines are fluid. Our discipline comes from within, not without. Those of us who are mothers often work at odd (I like to say "flexible") hours, planning our schedules around kid drop-offs, pick-ups and yes, pool time. This may seem different from the business world, but is it any less real? Perhaps some see us around the pool in the afternoon, but fail to see us burning the midnight oil behind our computer screen.

Sure, academics are privileged. We teach subjects we have studied in depth, enjoy our students' reactions and comments to lessons we have prepared. We learn something new every day - often from our students, who bring their life experience to our classroom. Most of us have a true passion for our subject, which we are thrilled to share with our students. In addition, our students keep us young. We enjoy interacting with them, spending hours e-mailing and advising each one. We write glowing letters of recommendation for them so that they may succeed in the career of their choice - in the real world.

We academics live in the real world, with all its joys and problems. I wouldn't trade it for the world, but I certainly respect and admire those who leave academia in order to be true to themselves. Vive la différence!

### Academic Unhappiness

Posted by **Professor Zero** on March 31, 2006 at 6:00am EST

Many academics are ambivalent for good reason. They went into their fields because they were committed to them, and they now have jobs that don't allow them to devote enough time and energy to their actual work. They are doing these jobs in weird towns far from home, and they don't make

enough money to travel. In these situations, ambivalence is natural.

There is something else I've noticed, though, since sometime in late graduate school: some people seem to think it's 'cool' to be unhappy, or that if you're not suffering, you're not working. I've wondered whether it's some sort of romantic-poet-in-the-garret myth they've gotten trapped in, as it were. I have had colleagues who seemed to be happy being unhappy, and lived to stir up drama.

I agree that 'happiness' may not be the highest goal in life. It's hard, though, not to feel that one is doing something useful. And it's hard to live in a situation that sucks your energy and doesn't inspire you.

So, if the author in this piece is ready to go on to the next thing rather than stay stuck in ambivalence, and she is in a position to do so, why shouldn't she? And if her institution is able to place her on leave while she regenerates and figures things out, why shouldn't it? Maybe she'll do something else great, and maybe she'll return after 3 years with greater interest in OWU.

Finally, I'm not convinced by those who say the 'real world' is worse. That isn't the point. Why the competition over degrees of suffering? I do not find the author's goals for her life unreasonable.

**Posted by Working in the Toxic Place on March 31, 2006 at 6:00am EST**

Wow. I cannot believe I just read every single comment thus far. I'm a 41 year old married mother of two small boys. My father was a French and German teacher in a private highschool. He managed to get a Masters along the way. He died in 2002. My point being, I felt the need to carry the torch. As a registered nurse, I went to graduate school at an expensive private well-known college and graduated with honors in 2002 just before my father passed. I now teach in a local community college in the nursing school on a tenure track line. It's one thing to love your students and feel that excitement when you go to work, and quite another to deal with the employer's expectations of new faculty. It's highly catty, biased and just plain silly when your Chair does not advocate for you, not to mention a contract violation. Hey, lucky for me I can go back over the fence and make 10% more in staff education in a hospital. I am going through the union just to learn the lessons I need to learn. But here's the point - I think being true to your passion and your "well-being" as my father used to say, and being content under the dispensations of God's providence (play the hand you've been dealt) is what I need to do right now (and forever). I will not feel "guilty" for putting my children first sometimes, or be made to feel small in front of my committee hearing coming up. I stand tall knowing that many of my colleagues are indeed burned out and bitter, resentful and full of slander and gossip in the remembrance of a promise I made to myself "When teaching ceases to be fun I will quit". The teaching is still fun, it's the political environment that has become toxic. I will never confuse them again because I have realised that my title assistant professor does not mean a doggone thing! I am not high on myself, because I do not define my self worth by what I do. I define my self worth by what I love. And I had a good mentor who taught me that. A very spiritually-minded mentor, at that. Assistant professor is just a title the poison people have given me to see if I'm fool enough to believe in my own self importance. I am me and being true to myself is the main message I heard from the article. I am glad I read it, and all your commentary! It has really helped me to see the toxic environment I am in as pervasive and stuck. Incidentally, nursing education is pervasive and stuck too. Change begins with increased awareness. Where to start? A good teacher elevates their students. You would think a good higher learning institution would do the same for it's employees. Instead, it is a good old boy regime still at work, condescending and punitive. Where is the joy? The sense of well-being?

**movin on**

**Posted by fred lapides on April 1, 2006 at 4:20pm EST**

Not sure why the article. You have a job. You dislike it. You leave. Goodbuy...why now the justification, the lengthy explanations about those that stay and those that leave or want to? You did what you want, then that is that. The rest is--dare I say it?--academic

**Whatever...**

**Posted by It's All About Me on April 1, 2006 at 10:10pm EST**

What is it about academics that makes them feel the compulsion to share their unremarkable life stories with an indifferent world. Between this article, many of the comments offered in response, and the godawful "First Person" stories in the Chronicle, I think I've read enough solipsistic navel gazing to last three lifetimes.

Can you imagine a bus driver writing something like this? "After 10 years driving the crosstown express, I just didn't feel fulfilled anymore. So I decided to change careers at 41, taking a three-year leave of absence from the MITD in case I changed my mind and wanted my old job back (yeah, right!). As I said goodbye to my coworkers, I was shocked to discover from their comments that many bus drivers are unhappy with their career choice, the long hours, the steady streams of

ungrateful passengers, the unfilled potholes, and the soul-crushing lack of self-realization."

As many have said before me, it's very simple: if you don't like your job, find a new one. Or don't. I really couldn't care less either way.

**Posted by HDS on April 2, 2006 at 9:50am EDT**

Steinitz' article seems to have freed up some deeply felt yet strongly repressed ambivalences among more than a few academicians.

In my own instance, I retreated from the traditional university setting as an English prof and ventured into the for-profit sector of higher education as an administrator some nine years ago. Without tenure and with job performance being judged by real-world results, I find I can take much more satisfaction in helping faculty to help students (while also beefing up my for-profit employer's bottom line) than I ever did in the ostensibly pure pursuit of scholarly knowledge for its own sake.

But I have seen a great many traditional academicians flounder when they reach our for-profit shores because of our insistence upon successful student outcomes and our de-emphasis on publishing and research.

If you're considering that type of career transition, you might think twice about submitting yourself to judgment by the marketplace and not by your peers.

**The Supposed Discipline of the Marketplace**

**Posted by It's All About Me on April 2, 2006 at 12:05pm EDT**

Good lord, I can't tell you how tired I am of people outside academia (or those in the "for profit" sector) lecturing us on our inability to make it in the Real World of the marketplace.

Friends, if you've managed to complete a Ph.D., write a book or two (or several articles), managed the daily challenges of undergraduate and/or graduate education, and participated in the governance of a dept/college/university, you have all the skills needed to succeed in the for-profit world. It is not the discipline of the marketplace that you have avoided, but rather its capriciousness. If the past 20 years have taught us anything, it is that the private sector routinely discards hard working, effective, and conscientious employees for no better reason than the fact that someone in Bangalore is willing to do the job for half the salary.

As to the for-profit education sector, I'll be impressed when the nation's elite start sending their children to the University of Phoenix rather than Harvard, Stanford, and Berkeley. Buck up, my traditional academic colleagues--you're every bit as good as they are.

**Posted by cynic on April 2, 2006 at 3:35pm EDT**

Whether or not it was a good article, whether or not it was a self-indulgent whine, it sure pushed a lot of hot buttons.

I've taught at a professional school at a "top 25" university (whatever that means) and I like my job. I love students. I love engaging with really bright young minds in the classroom. I love writing about my field. I like my colleagues (with some exceptions). But academia has a hollow aspect to it. First, at least in my discipline, it's all identity politics, all the time. Dispassionate inquiry? Openness to new ideas, especially those to which you might be initially skeptical? Get over it. Second, it's not accountable in the way the profit sector is. Losing money in corporate America? You're in trouble. Turning record profits? The world's your oyster. But in academia you can be a superb teacher, selfless giver of time to students, steady and productive scholar of interesting work, and a reasonable colleague, but it doesn't mean much of anything. Maybe that's peculiar to my field, but I doubt it.

That said, I'll stick with it because it's sufficiently rewarding (unless one of a handful of non-academic opportunities that appeal to me should be presented). But I wouldn't recommend an academic life to my children; there are far too many mediocrities in the business today, and they all fixate on petty issues.

**tragic**

**Posted by martin on April 5, 2006 at 1:20pm EDT**

As the husband of a PhD struggling with the same problems confronting the author of the article, I find it tragic that some academics trivialize the important questions of life: children, a place to live, happiness. It's doubly tragic that academics teach students about issues of real concern to society, but refuse to personally engage with the substance of them because of fear of being denied tenure or funding. Somehow, they manage to make important subjects seem irrelevant, concerned perhaps only with their own standing in their field.

Posted by **PhilosophyProf** on April 8, 2006 at 12:35pm EDT

Some of the above posters seem to have the view that it is bad even to have any of this discussion. Could one of them provide an argument to this effect? I just can't imagine what such a thing would even look like? Why would it be bad for some folks to communicate with other folks about their experience, esp. when it appears to be shared to a not-insignificant degree? It only takes a few minutes for each post, so it is not as though we are spending all day on the site and thereby neglecting our professorial duties (as I think was suggested in an earlier post).

**Podunk**

Posted by **near retirement** on April 8, 2006 at 12:35pm EDT

If anybody can find happiness by changing the way that they earn their living or where they do their living or with whom they do their living, I congratulate them.

What does trouble me are the scornful references to "podunk" that appear in a few of the comments. Presumably "podunk" is relative. Somebody from Paris may scorn Manhattan. By the way, if having a Republican governor is a characteristic of being "podunk," Boston, NYC, and San Francisco have to be put in the same sad box as Delaware, Ohio. By some definitions I have lived in "podunk" nearly all my life except for some research time in London and a summer in Cambridge, MA. "Podunk" is not all that bad and is improving (Internet, Netflix, even the belittled chain restaurants to replace the local greasy spoon). I never have had the time to attend all the lectures, films, and recitals available to me. Some of us even like small towns. Maybe my expectations are low. Neither of my parents graduated from college, and I did not see them as happy every moment of their days. I don't blame the limits to my own happiness on my being a college professor in "podunk."

Part of the problem for academics is that they compare wherever they teach with their Ph.D. institution.

**And those of us at Christian colleges . . . .**

Posted by **wondering** on April 8, 2006 at 7:50pm EDT

I have read the ongoing conversation with interest. Let me throw another perspective into the mix. For little over 20 years I have taught at Christian colleges. (Please continue to read—I voted for Kerry!) For a couple of years now I have been wondering if I can remain because, oddly enough, I fear I may lose my faith if I do. Believe it or not, there has been in the past a more diverse range of perspectives than one might think at such places, but I see more pressure for that range to diminish, and it saddens me. My faith tradition is important to me—it compels me to be progressive politically. Aridity is setting in that I have not experienced in the past. Combine this with the fact that I teach poli sci and each day have to drum up some ray of hope about the dismal American political landscape, then leaving academe, or least where I am becomes more inviting. (I would be interested to know if other poli sci profs have been as depressed as I have about teaching these past years.)

Perhaps I have been thinking about this more lately as our institution 'prepares' for a visit by Equality Ride, a group of GLBT young adults who are visiting religious colleges and universities and two military academies to protest the anti-gay policies of these institutions ([www.equalityride.com](http://www.equalityride.com)).

Those of us who attend welcoming and affirming churches (churches who welcome and affirm GLBT folks), do we 'cover' this part of us, to borrow the term Yale law professor Kenji Yoshino uses in his book, *Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights?* Yoshino, who is gay, suggests that, in the workplace in particular, but in other settings as well, some are asked to downplay or mute certain identities. So the religious student at a secular institution mutes his beliefs lest she be thought stupid or irrational. In other words, she can be a person of faith, but she can't be expected to be taken seriously. The gay person can be gay in the workplace, but can't be 'too' gay. At my university, I can attend a welcoming and affirming church, but I shouldn't make a big deal about it; in other words, don't rock the boat. Does my silence or at least muted voice contribute to violence against them? And what is the cost to my own soul?

Posted by **Ken** on April 11, 2006 at 3:55pm EDT

There are highs and lows of teaching, just as in real life. Some days or weeks are good and others are not so good. For many of us most days are good. And then there's that one student... Or, the committee you are on to serve the faculty and the college, hacks off the dean or president...

I've worked with a few jaded professors who should leave the profession, for their benefit, as well as students who might enroll in their classes. Some of those professors, so involved in the politics, research and other distractions simply forgot what we are there for. We are there for the students, not vice versa. If we keep our focus and remind ourselves as we experience those lows that "stuff", compared with teaching students, is insignificant, then we shouldn't have to leave the college for "greener" pastures.

I do admire the unhappy writer who had the courage to leave academe, rather than staying, as some do because of job security, or who have lost their passion for teaching.



Like many who spent most of their lives teaching, as well as experiencing the real world outside of education, I will enjoy other things when I "retire", but I will always be a teacher.

Old Teachers never die, they just lose their class.

### 2nd Best Job According to Money Magazine

Posted by **QuakerProf** on April 13, 2006 at 5:50pm EDT

See the newly released list:

<http://money.cnn.com/magazines/moneymag/bestjobs/top50/index.html>

What's so bad about a career in which you can do good work that helps many, harms none, is completely nonviolent, and can (with tenure) be completely secure?

As the Buddha said, desire is the source of all suffering.

### You believe everything you read?

Posted by **B.J.** on April 18, 2006 at 6:15am EDT

This "study" cited the dean of a medical school as the top position. I've worked with thousands of professionals in my career -- only one MD-school dean. Also, including those kinds of folks probably skewed the financial data, upward, don't you think? What about the 50% of humanities PhDs who can't find academic jobs?

The Buddah quote was nice. Here's another one -- "believe nothing you read, and only half of what you see."

Posted by **QuakerProf** on April 18, 2006 at 6:55pm EDT

B.J.,

Saying that 50% of Ph.D.s in the humanities don't find jobs doesn't really show that professors are unhappy. I would venture a guess that most of the unemployed (in all "fields of unemployment?") are unhappy. Yet, we don't count disgruntled, unemployed people with B.As in business as unhappy financial planners, right?

### What?

Posted by **B.J.** on April 20, 2006 at 10:05pm EDT

"Saying that 50% of Ph.D.s in the humanities don't find jobs doesn't really show that professors are unhappy.."

Silly me. All those articles about unemployed/underemployed PhDs working in Starbucks must be media lies. Dam.

".. Yet, we don't count disgruntled, unemployed people with B.As in business as unhappy financial planners, right?"

What are you talking about? ABBA in marketing or a BBA in operations management is a heck of a lot different than a BBA in accounting or a BBA in finance. What you wrote makes no sense at all.

A Big Ten med-school dean can make \$300,000+. Anyone with an iota of stat's knowledge understands how that out-lier can skew data.

Posted by **Neville** on April 22, 2006 at 7:55pm EDT

Hilarious. Presumably this tangle of emotions and despondency has something to do with the way academics look down with such bitterness on the rest of us happy though by comparison mentally challenged souls outside academia, and so frequently presume to tell us how we should live our lives.

### Does art really reveal the truth behind reality's illusion

Posted by **Alan Gerstle** on April 22, 2006 at 7:55pm EDT

Jean Cocteau thought it did. Hasn't anyone read the poem, "Richard Cory"?

**The only thing that is unbearable is this article!**

Posted by **NF** on April 27, 2006 at 12:55pm EDT

This whole article is much ado about nothing - a narcissistic blogger entry disguised as an article. Good for her for leaving a situation she was unhappy with. Luckily she had the luxury to do so while so many people do not. The article could have had more impact if she actually addressed some of the problems she saw in her profession, and even proposed solutions (that is the boot-strap approach).

There is no validity in her points on the happiness level at higher ed institutions, other than to realize that people are happy and unhappy everywhere in all professions and places in life (I've known quite a few restaurant workers who have been unhappy, and in the past, I was one of them!!!). To come to that conclusion at age 40+, and serve it up as an epiphany, simply shows how out of touch the writer has been with - yes, "the real world", and perhaps even herself.

The self-congratulatory tone of the article and her framing herself as a hero may be necessary for her to do in order to have the motivation to move on, but really, I would hardly call it heroic. This is just your life and what you want to do with it. Also, if it WERE truly a courageous or heroic act (leave it to academics to describe quitting a job in those terms), why in the world would the writer tie up her university by taking LEAVE and not QUITTING? This information is readily available as fact on the Ohio Wesleyan website in her bio information, and her neglecting to tell that to readers is a copout at best and a lie at worst. The writer is taking advantage of the luxury of the University system with its many benefits, yet her article positions itself as her NOT doing that. Steinitz ends up simply being part of the problem of what many complain about - the hiring of adjunct professors, no job security before tenure, departments in upheaval, etc. Surely her university has to go through all these things in order to cover her three year "leave".

And finally, after living in New York City for over a decade (and R.A. SHAW, Boston ain't no NYC) and currently residing in an area of which many would consider the middle of nowhere, I have to say the middle of nowhere for some of us ex-city dwellers who manage to ignore the ignorant viewpoint that there is "fly over" country and work to use our intelligence, imagination, self-motivation, and an appreciation of simpler things find that what you put into your environment comes back to you in spades if you put forth the effort.

**summers at the pool**

Posted by **Overworked**, Associate Prof at Major Research U. on April 29, 2006 at 6:50am EDT

I have been on the engineering faculty at Major Research U. for 10 years now. It is interesting to read in a forum like this about life at other types of institutions and in various disciplines. Let me tell you my side of the story, which I believe is the same for many other faculty in major research universities.

I advise 6 PhD students and a number of MS and UG students. My week includes 30 hours of meetings with students, colleagues on joint research projects (I have 4 large interdisciplinary grants), committees, and teaching. An additional 10 hours a week are spent on grading and office hours. Add 5 hours at least per week in course preparation. Reviewing papers for journals and conferences takes another 5 hours a week on average. Add to this time to answer email, and of course, to do research. Overall my weekly workload is in the 70-80 hour range (that is 8am-7pm at least 6 days a week + at least four or five evenings 10pm-midnight). Overnights at the lab (involving me as lab director and the students in the lab) happen all the time, especially close to demo and paper deadlines.

I have only had 2 weeks of vacation since I started back in 1996. I see my kids for dinner for 30 minutes per day during the week and for a few hours on weekends, at least on weekends that I am not away on trips. I don't even know where the pools are in town.

Adarification - my university pays my salary for 9 months a year. Federal agencies such as NIH and NSF pay for three summer months as part of the research grants. The university then asks faculty in such a position to sign away their right to a summer vacation. Not that there would be time for vacation anyway (we usually spend the so-called Christmas break in the lab).

JS

Posted by **Claudia** on May 2, 2006 at 4:35am EDT

My goodness!!! All this unhappiness in academe? That is a frightening thought. I am getting ready to dispatch my offspring to a large northeastern university to be educated by a group of unhappy individuals who might regard her and her group (undergraduates) as "grubby". Additionally, she will be at the mercy of this group, and I will have to pay over \$100,000 over a four year period for her to be taught by individuals who feel this way. How sobering!! I wish I had read this before May 1 or even last year. I would have instructed the girl to opt for something else beside a college education where she will be "taught" by unhappy people who hate their profession. Goodness!!! I shudder at the thought. Perhaps in Derek Bok's report on underachieving colleges, he should have taken into account the variable of pervasively unhappy professors who teach these unwitting students.

### Me to We

Posted by **Me to We** , A completely different perspective on May 4, 2006 at 5:20am EDT

Abit off topic, but still relevant for every single person who posted a comment or who reads this and doesn't post a comment. Read the book "Me to We" by Craig and Marc Kielburger.

It should change all your perspectives on everything. That's all I have to say.

### The Blog

Posted by **Matthew Price** on May 8, 2006 at 4:40am EDT

It is perhaps something that we might want to look at that those who are here on this site might be more inclined to be looking for other work or positions to begin with, so the opinions given here are more likely to be provided by those who are unhappy enough to be looking for other options, which, if this assumption is correct, would skew the overall timber and tone of the comments left on this blog.

Remember Kissinger: "University politics are vicious precisely because the stakes are so small."

### Response?

Posted by **Alan** on May 8, 2006 at 3:20pm EDT

It's already been mentioned in many of the posts, but I think the author needs to respond to the point about going on leave versus leaving for good. If she in fact does have the option to return (or is slated to), this undermines the whole point of the piece.

Posted by **Alice** on May 10, 2006 at 5:00am EDT

Honestly, it shouldn't matter if she took leave or quit. She's not applying for sainthood, here. She doesn't even make herself out to be a hero in her article. She points out that she was surprised that \*others\* treated her as such. She would have to be silly not keep all options open, including the ability to return to the university if she changes her mind.

My own experience at a major research university supports her observations. I was employed in grant-funded "outreach" and found that the university is not friendly to the free exchange of ideas. Compared to my previous career working for a Fortune 500 corporation, the university proved only marginally more socially redeeming, significantly more stifling and less rewarding professionally, and of course extremely less remunerative.

### Leaving or Taking a Break?

Posted by **Alan** on May 10, 2006 at 2:40pm EDT

"When I announced that I was leaving a tenured position at a good college you've likely heard of, the response that shocked me was not my colleagues' surprise, not their anger, but their envy."

Sainthood is not the issue, and if the author had the chance to hold on to her position, of course she was wise to do so. But if she did, the above statement at the beginning of the article is inaccurate.

Posted by **savitri** on May 16, 2006 at 10:35pm EDT

Hey Rebecca,

Do what I did and become a corporate lawyer!

Great hours, great pay, they treat you great (especially in those fab summer training programs - and working as an associate is just like that), no outside commitments (except when you make partner and have to rainmake, but we can discuss that later), lots of friendly reinforcement, everybody loves it so lots of happy colleagues...

Oh, wait.

### What?

Posted by **Matt** on May 18, 2006 at 1:00pm EDT

from earlier post:

"Academics and the military are the two professions in which we have absolutely no control over where we live."

I find this hilarious - they are colleges and universities in nearly every town and city in the country-

many with numerous choices. Academics is one field where you have almost total choice over where you want to live.

**Posted by Caleb Crain on May 20, 2006 at 7:00pm EDT**

Though it's now almost a decade old, there's some statistical data about job satisfaction in this *ADE Bulletin* article, "[From Rumors to Facts: Career Outcomes of English Ph.D.'s](#)", which looks at what happened in the 1990s to people who got English Ph.D.'s in the 1980s and how happy they were about it—or not. Since English was Rebecca Steinitz's department, the data seems pertinent.

In the slang of the article, non-academic careers are "BGN" (business, government, non-profit). If you look at figure 6, you'll see that BGNs at the managerial level have slightly higher job satisfaction than tenure-track English professors. BGN writers or teachers have roughly the same job satisfaction as tenure-track profs. *Non-tenure-track* professors have lower job satisfaction than any other category surveyed.

Also interesting is table 6, which gives a little more detail about what people like about their work. BGNs and profs express roughly comparable levels of satisfaction about the following categories: autonomy of work, content of work, and flexible work situation. BGNs are dramatically more happy about their jobs in these categories: spouse's job, prestige of organization, work environment, and career growth. The table doesn't list any categories where academics are notably happier than BGNs.

**and loving it**

**Posted by bradley at Spokane Falls CC on May 21, 2006 at 2:25pm EDT**

I can see how the writer wouldn't be happy living in a place she didn't like. I grew up in the Pacific NW, Seattle in particular, but spent a lot of time where I am now, Spokane. However, I "did my time" in Las Vegas, five-and-a-half years in the desert. I couldn't wait to get closer to home, nor could my wife, and Spokane was it. I consider myself lucky to be doing what I like, teaching English at a community college, while also living in a place where I have some roots (my father's home town and my wife's almost home town) while being close, but not too close, to my and my wife's family. If I was still in Las Vegas I would at the very least be looking for a way out of town, and if it meant a job/career change, I'd probably go that way. But yeah, the time off, despite that meaning I work at home instead of on campus, is a great perk, plus my job calls for reading the literature I want to read, even when students may not.

**But she's only on leave ...**

**Posted by Leslie on May 25, 2006 at 8:05am EDT**

Having left academia myself several years ago, I really enjoyed reading this article. I believe that, while maybe not necessarily unhappy, most academics are not very self-actualized. There is a lot of dysfunction in the ivory tower (sure, it's everywhere, but you gotta admit there's something uniquely dysfunctional about that environment in particular). So I enjoyed reading this. But then I went to the author's academic website (at Ohio Wesleyan) and saw that she was on some weird kind of special leave and that she hadn't really left academia. Now I feel betrayed. What's that literary term for a narrator who you find out is lying and thereafter can't trust anymore? Unreliable narrator or something like that. Inside Higher Ed ought to get someone who really left academia to write an article like this - someone who really knows what it feels like to jump off that cliff WITHOUT a safety rope.

**Posted by App Crit , junior member on any committee at Mediocre U. on May 26, 2006 at 8:55pm EDT**

In my last two years as a grad student at Intense Research University, the talk among my peers (from my IRU and other IRUs) was all about the market.

Then, most of us defended and got tenure track jobs or are working the adjunct circles.

In the two years since defending/graduating, the talk among my peers (alums of IRU and other IRUs) is all about *other markets*, i.e. how to get the hell out of the academy as a thirty-something with the wrong initials after the name, competing against twenty-somethings who have the right ones (JD, MBA, CPA, etc).

More and more junior faculty and PhD-adjuncts are looking seriously into the world off campus. It's still taboo to talk about it on one's own campus, but not to others and not at conferences.

Why stay much longer? To be like the happy folks on my P&T committee who sacrificed marriage, family, parenting, and earning potential just to be there?

### Unhappiness in academe

Posted by **Congratulations!** on May 28, 2006 at 9:30am EDT

There's not much more to add to this discussion. But, I'd like to encourage all of those who are so unhappy to leave and go where they are happy. Many of the unhappy make so many negative comments that they drive those who are satisfied crazy. Don't drag us all down with you.

### Academic Makes Me Sick

Posted by **Idealistic&disillusioned**, PhD. Professor (Fired) on June 5, 2006 at 8:00am EDT

After suffering with my partner, a former award winning full professor, assoc. dean, and now disabled with an autoimmune disease brought on by job stress, I have come to the conclusion that academia makes me sick, literally. The blatant nepotism, the lack of ethics, collaboration among colleagues, and the push for more and more grants (whether the research is actually bettering the human condition or not) is a conflict that I just can't stomach.

Personally, I'm out a here too. I am a woman who got her doctorate at age 50 because as the only college grad in my family I was taught to prize education, the exchange of ideas, the importance of learning to evaluate evidence, to think critically, and to debate with civility. I value literature, art and the humanities while my doctorate is in the social sciences and I teach in the health professions. That's not what college education is about any more. My students want answers to pass tests, they complain constantly about alternative student centered pedagogies. Everyone believes he or she should get a higher grade than they have earned. If they don't its the faculty member's fault even though they admit they never opened the book, some can't even read or write at the college level.

The students in my health profession courses across the board have no interest in learning for the sake of broadening their perspective or learning to think, to evaluate options. They want the RIGHT answer. So, I'm gone and will look for a way that I can contribute to creating a learning environment that values a truly liberal arts education. Call me old fashioned, call me idealistic. I am grateful that when I was going through college and getting my masters I had peers who were willing to think outside the box and an administration that valued creative teaching. No one thought of the students as customers, not even the students themselves. Why am I, an academician so discouraged and heart sick, because it's just not what and education is all about? When more votes came in for American Idol than any president in history, and we are paying for a war that we didn't want or need, and we have a media that can't tell the truth and nobody cares, sure I'm discouraged, I'm heart sick, but I'm not going to be able to make it any better stuck in an institution of higher learning fighting over departmental resources. No, for some, its not because we're so full of ourselves, or because we aren't at the head of the class any more. I never was, thanks to my ADD. Its because we can't waste any more time fighting for the right to teach at the expense of teaching students how to engage and evaluate contemporary critical issues.

Posted by **Ed** on June 5, 2006 at 12:25pm EDT

As a professional in science who worked in both industry and government before becoming a prof, I am grateful for my good fortune in having a choice to enter an academic career. I love it, My regret is that humans don't have 300 year lifespans so I could do this longer. Where else can you be free to learn what you want to learn when you want and discover how many fascinating things there are to learn? Where else can you be in the company of positive energetic young people, whose primary deficiency is only not yet knowing how to learn or having experienced any thrill of discovery? To have as your primary work replacing that deficiency through sharing one's own joy of learning—Wow! What a deal in how to make a living!

A book now two decades old called "Working" by Studs Terkle revealed that most people hate their jobs, and that those who don't are usually those who can see a product as result of their efforts. Seeing the lights go on in student after student has to be a terrific source of satisfaction for those who produce it. The many ritual committees that divert hours of life into producing paper reports of no consequence has to be one of the greater sources of dissatisfaction. Institutions would be smart to eliminate ritual committees and call task forces together only when something needs to be done. "Need" in such cases has nothing to do with administrators trying to move their work out onto the faculty. Institutions with such people would be wise to hire new administrators. The academy, in general, is stupid about use of time. Nowhere else is there such a disillusionment about peoples' time being free.

There is work outside academe, and then there is the idea of the work, which academics who have no experience with it hold. That idea is quite a contrast to the reality of it. Shortly after my leaving a particularly lucrative private industry, my former supervisor was hauled off to a non-academic kind of institution to dry out. Months later, his supervisor blew out his brains in his office. THAT is unhappiness. I never saw such a concentration of miserable highly-paid people anywhere. All were as well educated as any faculty in any average college, and all were marginally wealthy.

I sometimes think that no one who has spent their entire lives in the academy should be allowed to teach college students—there should be a minimum of four years immersed in life outside the academy so one actually knows those life options rather than just knowing about them.

Achieving a doctorate or a job title like "professor," "dean" or "provost" does not provide squat in

qualifications about how to live. The statement that people who hold these titles need to learn some life basics will be most offensive to those with the greatest need. Why can't you take kids (or yourself!) to the pool, for ice cream, fishing, camping, playing and still be an academic? There's nothing done anywhere in the academy by anyone that is so important as to preclude having that kind of happiness in your life. If you are not having that now, get over your job title (or your supervisor's illusions of grandeur about his or her title) and give yourself permission to live. You don't need your president/chancellor's permission to do this and you don't have to give up your livelihood either.

Ahappy prof and administrator

**Posted by Happy(ish) on June 21, 2006 at 5:25am EDT**

I've enjoyed this article and thread very much, particularly Jane's comment above. I'm a left-leaning graduate student with a tendency to mild depression, which means: I don't like that I have to have a job, and that gets me down sometimes. I think that also makes me a rather typical American. My sense being in the university is that part of the problem that many of us have here is an over identification with the work we do. This makes problems with the work, the workplace issues that every job has, deeply personal in a way that I think many other jobs don't have. My father dislikes things about his work as a tradesman. He also doesn't feel like his work building houses is a part of his real true self. I don't take anything so pre-postmodern as a "real true self" seriously (I'm in the humanities, after all), but I do act and often feel as if my work is an expression of some essence of me. For the most part, I like my students, colleagues, the books I read and the work I produce, but when I get stuck in the rut of essences then my mere "like" is nowhere near adequate to the depth of passion I have for the (hand on brow, dramatic pose, eyes fixed on the horizon) world-historical matters to which I devote myself ...! It's hard to avoid. When I can avoid it, I'm much happier. It's a nice life. A good job, as jobs go.

**getting over ourselves**

**Posted by aliceinnewyorkland on June 21, 2006 at 6:15pm EDT**

I'm fascinated by the heat this has generated. Could this perhaps have anything to do with the fact that as academics we are (a) over-invested in our titles, (b) hugely conscious of the zillion years it took us to earn them, (c) horribly underpaid by middle-class standards but perceived by the rest of the world as being well-paid for doing next to nothing (with summers off), (d) ridiculously overworked, with no boundaries to our days (and see (c) above), (e) working in just about the only profession in the world in which one "needs" to justify one's departure because the brass ring is lifetime employment, and (f) widely perceived as being out of touch with the "real world" (whatever that may be) and without real-life marketable skills, and (g) extremely defensive about all of this? I've worked in the "real world." And as someone who supervises staff, faculty and students, plans and runs courses, deals with a budget, sits on committees, and otherwise uses her interpersonal, managerial, administrative, communication, planning and (shudder) math skills pretty much every day—just like lots of other academics I know—I resent being told that I don't understand what it's like to "really" work.

Many of us come into academia straight out of our undergraduate programs, and have no idea what we're getting into; we don't see a lot of other options (see Garrison Keillor: English Major). We don't understand that the world is full of other lines of work, not all of them terrible. We forget that most people change jobs—a lot. We're trained to believe that EVERY full-time academic job is a good job, that we should be grateful to be employed—no matter where we are, no matter what the conditions or the pay—especially since so many people we know in academia are NOT employed, or (more accurately) are miserably exploited in adjunct gigs. We don't talk about money enough, because academia is supposed to be beyond money, but many of us are struggling to earn enough to live decent lives. And while we know that we're all the smartest and the best, we also know (thanks to the infantilizing experience of grad school and the misery of the academic job market) that everything we thought we knew about ourselves is wrong.

Plus also: in a business so devoted to smartness, giving it all up seems...stupid.

Horrors.

I think this posting is brave. I think it says what lots of us are afraid to say: that we want to be able to take a day off from writing/reading/prepping for class/grading without feeling terrible (you know—like other people do on those mysterious end-of-week events called weekends?); that the vaunted quality of life that academia offers is perhaps not so high quality for everyone; that maybe staying in the exact same job for your whole entire life could, under some circumstances, be less than satisfying.

That the idea we are so strongly inculcated with—that any academic job (especially any tenured job!) is a good job—is, perhaps, false and destructive.

I'm not a "bitter academic," either. I "love" teaching. I think teaching is desperately important. We teach other people how to think harder, to communicate, to question. We should be valued for that; instead, we're excoriated for our overprivileged ivory-tower lives by the rest of society and treated like expendable widgets by our own industry. How sad is that?

**Response To Matthew Price ...**

**Posted by RWH on June 26, 2006 at 4:45am EDT**

Sorry Professor Price, but Henry Kissinger doesn't get credit for that completely inaccurate and grossly misleading quotation.

Scroll to the top (left) of this document, type in "Faith, Scholarship and the College Classroom" (February 1) in the search box, and read the post headed "Starting My Crusade Right Here."

I'm quite certain Kissinger is guilty of plagiarism here and probably liked the result so much he failed to reveal his source.

### Been There ... Done That

Posted by **RWH** on June 26, 2006 at 5:50am EDT

In an earlier post, Leslie wrote "Inside Higher Ed ought to get someone who really left academia to write an article like this — someone who really knows what it feels like to jump off that cliff WITHOUT a safety rope."

As a matter of fact I did precisely that -- but I definitely don't want to write an article about it. In fact I have left so many secure academic appointments during my career in pursuit of "excitement" it's difficult to keep track.

In 1988, after teaching for thirty-five years, I found myself teaching at a top ten business school, and like many b-school profs, I was doing a great deal of consulting. I decided to do it full time for five years and then return to academe. So I started a small consulting company (in the quality "sciences") and readily got some significant contracts with the American automobile industry (shhh ... please don't mention that I helped Ford and GM "improve" the quality of their vehicles ... ouch!). At the time, the so-called Big Three were only a decade or so behind the rest of the industry in process and systems design, development, and implementation ... and a little further than that behind in information technology. I found myself "branching out" and often had a small group of computer science masters and Ph.D. students working with me on a project by project basis. You may be certain it was a major learning experience for me ... not to mention that it was a Hell of a lot of fun.

As an academic, my schedule was not unlike Overworked's schedule (see post above), but I never felt overworked per se ... exhausted plenty of times, but that was by choice and the associated exhilaration made it all worthwhile. At my company I was lucky enough to have a small number of full-time employees who enjoyed the work as much as I did. I mention that because there was virtually no difference for me between life as an academic and life as a full-time "businessman" and consultant.

Somehow five years turned into twelve -- how time flies when you're having fun -- and by the time I was ready to return to academe, and I knew it would be at a less prestigious university, ageism was biting me on the butt. I gradually cut back on my business, spent two full years job hunting, took what seemed to be an interesting position at a fairly mediocre private university, and was fired five years later.

It is noteworthy that I did not do my homework sufficiently well before starting my small business. I imagined that it would be my responsibility to (1) hustle the work for my company and then (2) deliver on it to the client's satisfaction. No one warned me that (3) "following up on the work" (including getting paid in the first place and diplomatically refusing unpaid add-ons) would be so time consuming. Especially for the former Big Three, we were often paid six months or longer after completing the job ... and long before we were well into another job for the same company. I imagine it's much easier -- although not nearly as much fun -- to go to work for someone else ... and, as my previous post implies, the vast majority of academics are better suited for that option anyway.

### It's not for everyone

Posted by **Liz , Dr.** on July 6, 2006 at 6:00am EDT

So, the point is, academia is not for everyone. You should have other life experiences first and be sure that academia is what you want--the teaching, the research, the bizarre HR practices, the good summers and flexible hours. If this is not for you, don't do it. You'll just be miserable and make your colleagues and students miserable. I think everyone should have other jobs first. I worked 8-5 before returning to grad school; every time I want to complain I remember what it was like to talk daily to people who didn't read much and to have a boss who counted the seconds I was late and made me sit in my cubicle until exactly 5 even if there was absolutely nothing to do. I love my job, I love my students. And so I'll put up with some of what makes academia bizarre. I know there is nothing I'd like to do more. But if it's not for you, it's not--and you should leave b/c in academia, our unhappiness causes students a whole lot of unhappiness. And I get really tired of hearing my colleagues whine and complain about how much their jobs suck. If they really suck that much, try something else. If we are so darn smart, trying something else shouldn't really be that difficult.

I think the only reason more people don't leave academia is because it took so long to get there. At least 6 years post-undergrad to even have a chance at a TT job, then 6 more years to tenure. It's hard to say "Whoops, that was wasted time, this just isn't for more." But I think things would be

better if more people could bring themselves to say that.

#### **cultural differences?**

Posted by **Canadian academic** on July 10, 2006 at 4:35am EDT

I wonder to what extent these are highly contingent factors? Having skimmed this thread as a new Canadian academic (but who has done graduate work in the US, but not in English, which also strikes me as a particularly tense field), I think the picture looks very different in Canada re gender (extensive maternity leave provisions) and faculty unions. That is not to say Canada is paradise but I wonder how many of the trends are comparable. There seems to be something particularly dysfunctional about the American academy and I think the lack of unionization (see Yeshiva decision in US Supreme Court) and lack of maternity leave are two big problems. Fix those and you will probably have happier academics.



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