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Surviving to Tenure

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For most new faculty, anxiousness about the tenure application begins from the first day on the job. Surviving the six intervening years on the tenure track requires a range of time- and career-management skills that new faculty may only learn piecemeal along the way. New faculty need help in five specific areas in order to survive their path down the tenure track: 1) developing teaching strategies that will fit their personalities and reach as many students as possible, 2) managing their time to allow for research and publication, 3) determining what and how many service commitments to make, 4) existing peacefully and productively with their colleagues, and 5) preparing documentation for their tenure cases from the start of their careers.

Nine days from the date I am writing these lines, in November 2005, my tenure case will be decided by the evaluation committee at my college. I am hopeful. The prospect of a substantial raise, of job security, and of a life settled into my college and community all represent significant golden apples that I would love to hold in my hands in the near future. And I shouldn't underestimate my excitement at the possibility of securing a sabbatical next year, for which I am busily lining up writing projects and conference proposals.

Whether or not tenure falls my way—and by the time I am writing the last lines of this chapter, I suspect I'll know the answer—I can say at this point that I have survived *until* tenure. And that is no mean feat. In my 2005 memoir of my first year as an English professor, I chronicle the lessons I had learned from my first year in the faculty trenches: teaching seven courses, trying to maintain my writing projects, learning about committees and service, and struggling to balance a chronic illness and the obligations of a family with two small children. Nearly five years have elapsed since the conclusion of

that first year—and, God help me, three more small children have come along—and those five years have enabled me to gain some perspective on what I wrote, and on the lessons that I learned in my first year, as well as on those I hadn't yet learned.

In what follows, I will draw on my experiences over those next five years, and on my ongoing and informal study of the shape of faculty lives in the 21st century, to offer five broad guidelines for how new faculty can best survive their own paths to tenure. I wish the lessons lined up neatly, one learned or practiced per year on the tenure track, but they don't. They came to me piecemeal over the course of my 11 semesters on the tenure track, and some are lessons that I need to relearn constantly, reminding myself of them anew each semester.

No guidebook or set of rules will guarantee anyone tenure. But following these simple principles can smooth the journey and put new faculty in a position to make strong cases for themselves when they are preparing their tenure applications. These principles should also help ensure that faculty arrive at that milestone with enough sanity and energy to savor and make the most of that first post-tenure sabbatical.

In the Classroom

I suspect that most people come to teaching the way they come to parenting, if they have children. You begin by raising your children with the basic rules which governed in your own house when you were a child. My wife's family ate dessert every night, and her mother was an excellent cook, making gourmet meals for their family of four. I come from a family of seven, with a mother who cooked large, serviceable meals, and I lived with a diabetic brother. So dessert, which came once a week in our house, if that, meant a bowl full of *Jell-O* or some other lame pseudo-dessert. When our kids want dessert, they know which parent they should appeal to. I tell them dessert's a special treat, to be enjoyed rarely; my wife rolls her eyes at such moralizing and dishes out the ice cream.

The rules and strategies our parents used with us resemble the rules and strategies our college teachers used with us: They formed the initial limits of our imaginative horizons, confining our understanding of what was possible with our own children or our students. And my own experiences, as well as the experiences of many faculty members whose teaching I have studied or discussed with them, suggests that we often have difficulty stretching beyond the limits of the horizons formed in our youth, or in our own educational experiences.

When I was an undergraduate English major, I had three formative pedagogical experiences as a student. In a Renaissance literature class, the professor frequently told us to get in groups and discuss a question or issue that she raised at the beginning of the class. I *hated* that class. The group discussions seemed aimless and pointless, people contributed to them unequally, and I just wanted to hear what the teacher had to say.

In a general education class in theology, by contrast, the professor lectured to 100 or more students about the “Kingdom of God”—a title hardly designed to appeal to us undergraduates, who were much more focused on the kingdom of humanity. And yet, with his colored overheads (the advanced technology at that time), his amusing anecdotes and clear explanations, and his enthusiasm for his subject, he enthralled me. I rarely missed that class, despite the fact that no one took note of whether I was there or not.

Finally, in a required course for undergraduates in the College of Arts and Letters—the equally lamely titled “Ideas, Values, and Images”—the professor ran the course entirely by discussion. For each new reading we filled out a worksheet that summarized the reading and then gave our opinion of it. In class, the professor initiated the conversation, and then let us have at it. And have at it we did, much to my great pleasure. Those discussions were some of the most charged intellectual experiences of my life.

The limits of my pedagogical horizon were largely formed by these three courses and offered a simple prescription for my own teaching: be witty and entertaining in lectures; hold life-changing discussions; *never* use group work.

Sit through a week of classes with me these days, and you will see a minimal amount of lecturing, a very small time allotted for potentially life-changing discussions, and lots of group work. When students aren’t working in groups or holding discussions, they might be writing in class or helping me organize facts or information about the topic for the day on the board, in anticipation of that life-changing discussion—a discussion that we sometimes never get to.

So what happened?

What happened was something I believe should happen to every faculty member at some point in their careers—and the sooner the better. In my first year of teaching, I came to the simple realization that students learn in different ways. Some students—like most of us who earn advanced degrees and teach in higher education—learn best by reading and listening to lectures. Other students learn best by participating in discussions and exercises designed by the teacher. Still others learn best when they have the chance to work with each other and to move together to meet and overcome intellectual

challenges. And one student I know—and she surely can't be the only one—told me that she only learns material when she reads it aloud!

While I was smoldering in those group discussions in Renaissance literature, some of my fellow students were no doubt engaging with the text in ways I couldn't understand. And while I was happily listening and taking notes in my theology course, other students may have been nodding off, or having trouble keeping their notes caught up. Those life-changing discussions in my seminar may have seemed like pointless arguing to some of my peers.

The lesson here is simple but has important pedagogical implications: Not everyone learns the way I did, and not everyone learns the same. Therefore, however formative my educational experiences were, I need to look beyond them and consider how I can vary my teaching methods in order to reach the largest numbers of students. The only true statement about teaching that I know is that there is no one right way to teach. I would add to this the corollary that, given that, and given the different learning preferences of our students, I should teach in as many different ways as possible: lecture some, hold some discussions, structure some group activities, have students write or solve problems in class, and so on.

I used group work reluctantly in my first year of teaching, remembering my own awful experiences with it. When the student evaluations came at the end of the semester, a significant minority of students wrote that the group work days had been the best days of the course, and that I should use more of them in the future. So I followed their prescription and began to incorporate more group work into class. But I held on to the other activities as well, so that the students out there like me get to sit and listen for a bit. In a 75-minute class, I might plan three or four different activities, each of them designed to appeal to different kinds of learners.

Of course, new faculty will find that one or two styles of teaching have special appeal to them, and they may find themselves more or less talented in certain forms of teaching. But if they want to succeed in the classroom—and they want to earn the positive student evaluations that will mark that success to their tenured colleagues—they should vary their teaching methods on a regular basis, designing classes which will appeal to multiple kinds of learners.

At the Writing Desk

Poet and novelist Jay Parini (2005) argues that the best route for faculty to become productive researchers and writers is to write a little bit every day. "A little work every day," Parini says simply, "adds up" (p. B5). Parini explains that

he made it a goal to write two pages of text every day, and that he often did so in the small, 20- or 30-minute spaces he found scattered throughout his day.

I read with some amusement the discussion forums in the weeks following this column, since I have always worked in precisely the way that Parini recommends. While Parini's argument had some defenders, many writers argued that publishing scholarship in such a manner was not feasible.

My reaction to the article, and to the debates that followed it, was split. On the one hand, I work precisely as Parini recommends, sometimes sitting down to write just one paragraph on my current project, for no more than five minutes, on any given day. At the same time, I agreed with the readers who responded that scholarship which required substantial research was extremely difficult to produce in this manner. The writing I do in this piecemeal fashion has always been creative writing—nonfiction essays aimed at more popular periodicals, or essays like this one about academic life (which was produced over a month of brief, daily writings). I find that producing research-based writing in my scholarly field requires longer ramp-up times before I can write—time to review my notes, to reread what I have written, to consult sources, and to craft sentences that will face more critical academic scrutiny than my creative work will.

Most faculty members will be producing scholarship of this kind, and—outside of summers and winter breaks—will find the large chunks of time necessary to produce such scholarship infrequently in their first years on the tenure track. And yet the pressures of tenure hardly allow time and space to ignore research projects until three or four years have passed by, and new faculty are settled into more predictable routines.

So what to do?

The faculty members whom I have seen successfully produce scholarship while managing demanding teaching loads take the spirit, if not the letter, of Parini's recommendation and find ways to accommodate it into their schedule. The literal recommendation to produce a piece of finished writing every day may not be feasible. But taking some action to further your scholarly project—reading a journal article, typing up a page of notes, spending a half-hour photocopying materials in the library—certainly should be. Even if new faculty accomplish five small tasks like this each week (giving themselves two off days), they will be making progress in their scholarship.

The real work of that scholarship will likely have to come on days when they can set aside larger chunks of time—breaks and holiday weekends, or an odd day in the semester when they have no grading to do and they've done all the reading, and they find themselves with a free afternoon. Eventually they will learn to foresee these chunks of time on the horizon, do the preparatory

work in the days leading up to them, and set reasonable writing goals to accomplish during them.

But for me it has been equally important to acknowledge that some weeks during the semester—when, thanks to my poor planning, I have 90 essays to turn around in a 10-day time frame—will be times when I free myself from the obligation of any writing or research. In my fifteen-week semester, teaching three or four classes, I find this happens to me for three or four weeks, mostly near mid-semester. During those three or four weeks, I tell myself that I need to concentrate on my teaching for a short period of time, and I absolve myself of any guilt for doing so. That absolution makes me a more efficient grader and teacher, and allows me to return to my research or writing the following week with fresh eyes.

So much of this seems psychological, and I believe that to be true. Finding the time and energy to commit yourself to scholarship while you are teaching means accepting very limited goals for yourself and having the doggedness and the patience to meet those goals on a daily and weekly basis. A close friend of mine, and next-door office neighbor, writes in the same genre as I do. He writes in bursts, though, and doesn't sit down to write unless he sees one of those big chunks of time before him. When it came time for him to apply for tenure, he looked back over his publication record and saw that he had published only seven pieces of writing, all of them brief nonfiction essays.

"I guess I just haven't been as productive as I thought," he said to me in dismay.

My colleague is a wonderful teacher, puts in long hours at his job, and has far more natural writing talent than I do. But he recognized at that moment that his working habits had betrayed him and kept him from producing at the level he would have liked.

Your new faculty members may not be the sort of people to whom daily writing or small goal-setting comes naturally. I'm not either. Many days the last thing I want to do at 10:30 p.m. is sit down and crank out a paragraph or two on a current project; reading the newspaper or watching television always seems like a more attractive option. But as my growing family of small children left me increasingly small chunks of time in the evening to advance my writing and research, I became the sort of person for whom daily writing and limited goal-setting formed my routine.

Any new faculty member can become that sort of person too—and doing so will help make them more productive and efficient scholars, without compromising their standards in the classroom.

On Committees

Each year the nominations committee at my college sends an email to all faculty listing the college-wide committees and the open positions on each of them. We are asked to respond with our preferences for the committees on which we would like to serve. No one is obligated to serve on any committee, of course, but tenure-track faculty do have to demonstrate their willingness to contribute to the college community from their first year on the faculty.

These committees range in purpose, gravity, and time commitment from demanding curriculum-setting bodies like the Standing Committee on General Education Requirements to lighter obligations such as serving as the faculty liaison to the campus bookstore. There are dozens of committees, and as a new faculty member I had a hard time determining which ones seemed both appealing to me and not too demanding.

Of course, these college-wide committees don't represent the only opportunities we have for service—or that any new faculty member will have as well. Our department has committees on which I can serve—planning an annual dinner for our seniors, search committees, committees to craft and re-craft our departmental mission statement—and every search committee on campus consists of one person outside the department, so there are always opportunities to serve on search committees for other departments.

Students, too, offer up opportunities for service commitments. Student leaders invite us to the dorms for talks or meals with students; publications and clubs need advisors; and students need faculty advisors and mentors in both formal and informal settings.

New faculty members will be faced with this same bewildering array of possibilities to demonstrate their commitment to their institution—and they know that they have to demonstrate this without allowing these obligations to push their pedagogical or scholarly priorities too far off the screen.

So how do they make this decision?

They need to keep the end in mind from the beginning. Most institutions ask that faculty who are applying for tenure write a self-evaluation as a part of that application, one that includes a listing and analysis of their service contributions. In that document, a faculty member wants to be able to put together a picture of someone who has a distinctive contribution to make to the life and community of his or her institution. This can be done by selecting service commitments, from the first year on the tenure track, which are connected by common threads.

Faculty will have trouble doing that if they randomly choose new committees on which to sit each year. Trying out some different committees in their

first year or two can help give them a broader picture of how your institution works, but by their second or third year they should be settling into patterns in terms of their service commitments.

One of my colleagues, who came to our department to teach journalism and writing, has focused his commitments to the college in that area. He advises the student newspaper; he sits on the writing emphasis committee; he arranges for visiting writers to come to campus; he started a literary magazine on campus. In his self-evaluation, he was able to make a very convincing case that he has dedicated himself to raising the visibility of writing on campus and to helping our students take writing more seriously and become better writers.

In preparing this section of my self-evaluation, I found that I was not able to put together quite the same level of coherence in terms of my service commitments, and that made writing my self-evaluation, and defining my contributions to the college community, that much more difficult. I did have at least one extended thread, which spun out from a number of initiatives I had helped to develop to promote dialogue about teaching among the faculty, but I had a host of other random commitments that I had a hard time putting into a coherent few paragraphs in my self-evaluation.

New faculty should take a year or two to learn about what kinds of service obligations are available to them—serving on one or two of those strange committees if they can't make up their mind—and then figure out what they have to offer to the campus community outside the classroom, so they can build up a service résumé that presents a coherent picture of their commitments to the college or university community.

With Colleagues

During my first year as a new faculty member, I had little sense or understanding of the past or present conflicts within the department (and conflicts and unpleasant histories exist in every department). I was too buried in papers and meetings and deadlines to worry about which of my colleagues didn't like each other. As far as I could tell, everyone seemed likeable and seemed to get along with everyone else.

Late in the spring semester of my first year, an extremely contentious meeting—the nadir of which occurred when one of my colleagues looked another in the eye and said, in a voice dripping with venom, “You talk too much”—opened my eyes to the fact that the department was not the collegial paradise I had envisioned. From that point on, and especially as I found my-

self with more leisure time to contemplate my surroundings in my second and third years, I began to look more carefully at interactions among my colleagues and at how they spoke to one another and voted on each other's proposals in meetings. The battle lines emerged slowly, and although I could never fully understand the reasons they disliked each other, I could see who usually argued with whom.

And of course, like any human being would, I wanted to know the sordid stories that had led to the outrageous display I had seen in that meeting and that caused the air to turn a few degrees colder when certain colleagues passed each other in the hallway. By my third year I had found a colleague, a junior faculty member a couple years farther along the tenure track than me, who was more than willing to divulge as much of those sordid histories as he knew.

The information came filtered through his viewpoints, of course, and those viewpoints were strong in their support of certain members of the department, and even stronger in their condemnation of other members. Along with two other junior colleagues, I became increasingly drawn to this faculty member's perspective and to his clarifying vision of the department. He knew who was evil, who was good, and who didn't matter.

After almost every department meeting we held, we would find ourselves out with him at the bar, where he would reinterpret what we had seen and heard in the department from his perspective as the omniscient narrator. He would explain to us the "real" reasons for the arguments people were making or for the votes they were casting. These sessions became exercises in the art of hermeneutics. Everyone's comments and votes had a subtext that called for interpretation on our part, and we set about the task with a glee that I am ashamed to recollect.

The more this activity continued, the more I began to feel as if I were working in a highly antagonistic and fraught environment, one in which every word I heard from any of my colleague's lips had multiple subtexts. I recounted to my wife the theories I had developed—or had been told, more accurately—about my evil colleagues and marveled at their duplicity and ill intentions.

And, mentally and emotionally, I became consumed by these matters. I spent so much time practicing the hermeneutics of suspicion that departmental politics became more important to me than my teaching or writing. Every lunch, every time we met for drinks, every trip into the offices of one of the colleagues on our side—they all became occasions for griping and interpreting and plotting.

I was saved from all of this, fortunately, by the actions of the very colleague who had ensnared me in this web in the first place. He had lost his temper and behaved in a highly unprofessional way in that contentious meeting way back in the spring semester of my first year. I had overlooked it then; after all, I came to believe he had right on his side. But as I was most deeply caught in his perspective on the department, I began to see him lose his temper more frequently—at my colleagues, at a student, and once even at me and the other colleagues who had supported him.

After one of these events, I told him that while I supported his positions in the department, I really couldn't support him when he lost his temper and insulted my colleagues. Another cohort conveyed a similar message to him. And that was it. He retreated from all of us, friend and foe alike, and we have hardly spoken since.

Almost from the moment it happened, I felt an overpowering sense of relief. I felt as if I were breathing the free air again for the first time in years. I looked at everyone around me, in the department and the college, with a fresh pair of eyes—my own. Once I climbed out of the tunnel of his perspective, I found that the landscape of the department had changed entirely.

My colleague had convinced me that a group of my senior colleagues were in a cabal to block positive change in the department and to ruin his career. I looked more closely at their behavior over the past few years and realized that they were no more guilty of plotting than my suspicious colleague (and the rest of us) had been. I saw that my senior colleagues had a vision for the department, one that they were willing to fight for—just as I was willing to fight for my own vision of the department, or my colleague for his.

I remembered then that this was how democracy worked. I remembered too that programs or decisions that emerge from debate and discussion and compromise are usually more thoughtful and productive ones than those that emerge from exercises in groupthink. I began to value their opposing positions—even though I still disagreed with them—rather than seeing them as evidence of sinister plots to stifle us.

But most importantly, I abandoned at that point the hermeneutics of suspicion and adapted instead the hermeneutics of collegiality. The hermeneutics of collegiality rely on the premise that everyone seeks the good for both themselves and the department. They ask you to see people's proposals and statements in that light—exactly as you would want people to see your own proposals and statements. The hermeneutics of collegiality ask you to take the statements of your colleagues at face value—to assume they mean what they say. They ask you to respond in kind. The hermeneutics of colle-

giality don't believe in projecting hidden intentions or sinister motives onto people's statements and behaviors.

The hermeneutics of collegiality have a potential downside; new faculty may, in fact, end up working with a colleague who is undeniably selfish, or mean-spirited, or ill-intentioned. Practicing the hermeneutics of collegiality with this person may lead a new faculty member to Pollyannaish responses that open them to injury.

They should practice it nonetheless. The injuries to which they may expose themselves from practicing the hermeneutics of collegiality, in this faculty member's opinion, will be far less damaging to their career than the mental and emotional strain and exhaustion they will feel from practicing the hermeneutics of suspicion.

Jumping Through Hoops

Every new faculty member should become a pack rat.

At the landmarks of tenure and promotion, pack rats will find themselves the envy of their colleagues who like to keep their offices purged of old lesson plans, day planners, and long-forgotten computer files.

When the time came for me to produce my self-evaluation, I had kept most of my publications updated on my curriculum vita, as well as other basic information about new courses I had developed and the numbers of times I had taught each course. I remembered many of the major service commitments I had undertaken in my five years at the college, such as service on college-wide committees or search committees.

But it wasn't until I pulled my old day planners off the shelf that I remembered the times I had been invited to student dormitories to spend an evening critiquing resumes, or the film screening that I had arranged for my class but opened up to the college. I saw many events and contributions recorded in my daily log that would have otherwise escaped my attention but that contributed substantially to the picture I was trying to paint of myself as a faculty member who believed in the student-centered mission of the college and supported it with my time outside the classroom.

Electronically filed lesson plans also proved instrumental to me in making my tenure case. For each course I teach, I keep a separate folder saved on my computer, and into that folder are saved the lesson plans for every class session. Sometimes those plans are so basic that recording them seems silly; other times they include extensive lecture notes, discussion questions or issues, and handouts or worksheets I use in class.

One of the pillars upon which I rested the teaching portion of my self-evaluation was the idea that I am constantly trying new strategies in the classroom, experimenting and hoping to grow and develop as a teacher. I was able to make that case—and able to support it with an appendix full of evidence—because of all those old lesson plans I had saved, and I could return to and remember the experiments that had failed, those that had been so successful that they folded into my regular teaching routine, and those that I am still tinkering with. Tracking my own development as a teacher through that electronic pile of lesson plans, while I was writing my self-evaluation, was both a fulfilling and helpful experience.

Of course, tenure-track faculty will jump through a good half-dozen of these hoops before they write and teach and serve their way to full professor: first-year reviews, third-year reviews, tenure reviews, applications for promotion to associate and full, and perhaps even post-tenure reviews, which seem increasingly likely in all of our futures. The good news is that those hoops are clearly mapped out for new faculty members from the moment they step onto the tenure track.

They'll sail through them with less effort if they're saving and filing from day one on the job.

Coda

Today I found in my mailbox a letter from the provost indicating that the college had granted my sabbatical request for the 2006–2007 academic year. It's customary at my institution that sabbatical requests are granted before we hear official word about our tenure cases (since those cases need the stamp of approval from a variety of bodies, figurative and literal, some of which meet irregularly). But I've heard that the college withholds that information from faculty members whose cases are in trouble—so while it's not official word, it's a heck of a good sign.

Whatever happens with my case, by the time you read these words I will have survived until the close of my tenure application year—and I will have been deeply and richly contented with my life on the tenure track. I will have seen many hundreds of young people walk through the doors of my classrooms and offices, and I will have inspired some of them to think differently about their lives, to write for love and money, and to burn a novel or a poem into their memory forever. I will have spent many happy hours at my writing desk, shaping words into sentences and paragraphs and essays, an activity that gives me more personal satisfaction than anything else I know. And I will

have spent a lot of time on campus, and off campus, interacting with intelligent and interesting colleagues, people who speak many languages and have traveled the world and write books and make music and study lobsters and dig for lost civilizations.

None of which is to say that I won't enjoy equally getting away from it all, and spending my sabbatical on the projects I have been rolling over in my mind for the past couple of years, projects that needed larger chunks of my time and mind than I could give them even during the summers. In my home office, I won't be far from campus physically (2.3 miles, to be exact), but in my mind I'll be on the other side of the world.

And yet still a small part of me will feel the tug of the tenure track, and the tenured track, and will miss my classrooms and my colleagues and my office at school. And when my year is up, though I'm sure I'll regret the loss of that unstructured ocean of sabbatical time, I'll be ready to return.

References

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