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They Say I'll Never Get a Job

*A master’s student who is thinking about seeking a doctorate asks, 'Shouldn’t I do what I do best?'*



William Brown for The Chronicle

By Ms. Mentor

Question (from "Olympia"): I am a graduate student, getting a master’s in the humanities, and I’ve just completed my first peer-reviewed article. I’ve won several awards and have presented at several major conferences. However, I am constantly being told by my professors that I will never succeed, specifically that I will not get a teaching job, or not a good one.

One professor took me out for coffee for the express purpose of explaining to me that I will only have adjunct positions and that I should quit and/or not go on to a Ph.D. I was told this in the same sentence as "your work is very, very good."

I am aware that the job market is very much less than ideal, but shouldn’t my professors be telling me how to succeed, rather than bringing me down?

I’m asking that question in partial humor and partial seriousness. I don’t want to become like my professors. The department is filled with adjuncts and they are all bitter, bitter people.

Answer: Ms. Mentor thinks your professors are singing the older generation’s perennial ditty: "Don’t do what I have done."

Sometimes that song gets heard, if the elders are tactful, kind, and tuneful. Usually it doesn’t. More often, conversations spiral down into some form of "Please, Mother, I’d rather do it myself." That’s what led Ms. Mentor to write her column, in fact: Newbies ignored her advice in face-to-face encounters, so she chose the written word to share The Truth.

The Truth is what your professors are telling you about the employment potential of a Ph.D. in the humanities. No matter how talented and accomplished you are, you probably will not get a tenure-track academic job. Ever.

But, you say: I always wanted to be a teacher and a scholar. I love research; I love sharing what I know. That’s what I want to do when I grow up.

Ms. Mentor thinks you may be barking up the wrong story.

The narrative you like—and she likes it, too—is the tale of a young person who’s Good in School. She’s bright, ambitious, and accomplished. Naturally she wants to continue: to use her talents, to get those strokes, to contribute to knowledge. Her Wise Elders should encourage her, she thinks. But instead they’re acting like bitter meanies.

The Truth? The original story no longer works. It hasn’t worked for years, although each generation of graduate students think they’re uniquely singled out for torment. In fact, there’s been a known shortage of tenure-track jobs in the humanities since the 1970s. When the Modern Language Association proposed a big celebration of its centennial, a bunch of feisty part-timers threatened to follow it with a ragtag protest, which they wanted to call "the parade of the adjuncts." That was in 1983.

Nowadays some 70 percent of college teaching is done by underpaid adjuncts—no job security, very low pay. Those are your bitter teachers, the ones who think—who know—that they could have been contenders.

So how should you rethink the traditional parade from honor society to Ph.D. to professor? Ms. Mentor suggests you identify your early drive, the thing that you wanted to do—and got praised for—when you were a tyke. Tiger Woods was already swinging a golf club when he was 2. By age 5, Mozart was composing music; Edith Wharton was making up short stories. Jean Piaget published his first scientific paper, on albino sparrows, when he was 11.

Can you make a living doing some version of your youthful drive? That is the stumbly step, and the point where you can be ruined by the Myth of Meritocracy: "I’ve always been the best, so I’ll be rewarded." Graduate school may seem to be the logical next step for someone who likes to write or read or calculate. But can it benefit you in real life, which is what most of us wind up living?

You may go to graduate school for the intellectual stimulation, or you can get seminar reading lists and read only what you choose to read. You may learn to write academic papers, but that’s not useful unless you’re an academic. You may revel in the esoteric, exciting new knowledge you gain in your dissertation research, but it’s unlikely that you’ll ever be able to teach it, especially for a full-time salary. If you get an academic job at all, you’re most apt to be an adjunct teaching first-year composition. You’re unlikely to ever be able to teach the specialized subjects you love, such as Irish folklore or Provencal love poetry.

Ms. Mentor recommends the blog called ["100 Reasons NOT to Go to Graduate School."](http://100rsns.blogspot.com/) There are currently only 93 reasons, but members of her flock can certainly supply more.

But, Ms. Mentor, don’t the best and the brightest eventually get academic jobs?

No, because almost every one in your graduate cohort is also the best. Nearly every one of the 200 people who apply for every tenure-track job in English or history is the best. Many of them are willing to move anywhere in the United States, or the world, for a job. Some have spent family savings. Many of them have put their personal lives on hold (no serious romances, no children). Since it now takes an average of nine years to finish graduate work for a Ph.D. in English, they’re spending their youth in pursuit of an impossible dream.

So how do you get one of the tenure-track jobs that are still available? Mostly it’s luck. "Barton," applying for an American-literature job, happened to have written an undergraduate paper on Robert Frost, and someone on the search committee was a Frostophile. "Charles," a former priest, could also fill in as a Latin teacher, and so he got an English-department job. "Deirdre" had published a book and won teaching awards and grants galore, but she was on the market for five years before she got a tenure-track slot—as a spousal hire.

As for Olympia, whose letter triggered all these musings: Ms. Mentor urges you to thank your professors for their honesty—both about your achievements and your prospects. Many graduate advisers still blithely tell youngsters, "Go to grad school, because you’re a star." Ms. Mentor thinks such advisers should be horsewhipped for corruption of the young. Your professors, in contrast, are ethical mentors. With their advice, and the glimpses into their bitter lives, they’ve taught you what not to do.

Even Ms. Mentor has had to be realistic about which talents we, in this vale of tears, can get paid for. She has a mellow contralto, an ability to charm goldfish, and a killer fastball. And no job offers for any of those.

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