



# Hither, Thither, and Yon

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## Beginnings

Place does matter when it comes to the development of our career pathways, as anyone who has moved to take a job knows. Indeed, the study of career development can be seen as a fundamentally geographic question about identity formation and place. Consider the common question: how did you get where you are today? When we answer this question we look back on our decisions and we track the relationships and experiences we have had in different settings, often noting how we have changed in the process. This is not to say that geography is destiny, but merely that place and performance help make us who we are and give definition to our careers.

My path to geography as a field of study and career has largely been shaped by overseas travel made possible by the fact that my mother worked for the State Department. We spent a very memorable two years in Belgium while I was in middle school. Among other formative experiences while there, I learned to speak French, visited Tangier, Morocco and wandered the labyrinth-like alleys of the old city, and traveled with my swim team by train across then East Germany and into the divided city of Berlin. My experiences, while certainly not unique, made a huge impression on me and I discovered that I enjoyed visiting new places and that foreign travel was exciting.

Not long after returning to Virginia, my mother offered to send me to a summer language camp in Switzerland so that I could try to maintain my fluency in French. I jumped at the opportunity. She had spotted a tiny advertisement, tucked in at

the back of *The Washington Post Magazine*, for an international language camp. We cut out that ad and wrote for information. When the large envelope arrived, the brochures made the camp look and sound even more appealing. Who wouldn't want to spend a summer studying and speaking French for three hours every morning and then participating in all kinds of sports and outings in the afternoons and on weekends? Off I went. My campmates hailed from different corners of Western Europe and we trekked on glaciers in the Swiss Alps, windsurfed on Lake Lausanne (at least we tried to), and made excursions to places such as Gruyères, famous for its cheese. These experiences, together with the earlier ones in Belgium, cultivated in me an appreciation for place and the wonders of the physical environment, an interest in cultural and linguistic differences, and the pure adventure of being away from home.

Meanwhile, my mother continued to look for other overseas jobs. There was a chance she might be selected for a position at the consulate in Jerusalem. She got the job and halfway into my junior year in high school we moved to Israel. There, most of my friends' parents worked in various capacities for the United Nations and were from places as diverse as the Philippines, Iran, and South Africa. Some of my instructors were American émigrés to Israel living in settlements in the West Bank, and some of the drivers employed by the consulate were Palestinians. I lived and worked for a short time on a kibbutz, enjoyed observing the transformation of Hasidic neighborhoods as Sabbath came and went, and

began to learn about the deep and complicated history of this land and its peoples.

By the time I started college I thought I might major in French, but soon after I enrolled in my first college-level geography class my plans began to change. I pursued a double major in French and geography for about a semester, when geography got the better of me. Ironically, it was while completing a homework assignment in one of my French classes that I hit upon something that I wanted to do. The assignment involved writing about what I saw myself doing or hoped to have accomplished in 30 years. One of my favorite textbooks was Terry Jordan's third edition of *The Human Mosaic*. I don't imagine that there are many people who, as students, had a favorite textbook. That sounds oxymoronic. But that book did help me make sense of cultural and regional differences I had observed in ways that no other book or textbook had. Cultural geography became a useful framework for learning about and understanding the world. That book must have resonated with me on some deep psychological level because my answer to the homework assignment was that I wanted to write a college-level textbook.

Beyond majoring in geography, however, I did not know what it would take to write a textbook and I never mentioned this to anyone except my French professor. Like most students, I was not seriously thinking much beyond college yet. Fortunately, though, my geography advisor must have recognized my naiveté and gave me some very valuable advice. During my junior year in college he told me to apply for one of the Geography Intern positions at the National Geographic Society (NGS). This was a relatively new program at the time and it was exhilarating to receive the call from NGS notifying me that I had been selected. My internship turned into a year and a half-long job at NGS, punctuated by a three-month hiatus while I bicycled across the country from Seattle, Washington to Bar Harbor, Maine. (By the way, bicycling provides a wonderful way of getting to know the landscape.)

I was fortunate to work at NGS at the end of the 1980s, heady times for geography education and the growth of the state-based Geographic Alliances. While I worked at NGS I met numerous geographers and was encouraged to continue on to graduate school. Later, I learned about Carl Sauer's views on this. In "The Education of a Geographer," he states, "...I doubt that undergraduate majors in geography are to be recommended as those who should continue as

graduate students" (1963, 397). It is a good thing no one mentioned this to me, because I became the proverbial card-carrying geographer, eventually earning my bachelor's, master's, and Ph.D. degrees in geography.

## Transitions

I was interested in graduate school because of my desire to learn more, and I arrived at university teaching as a career through my love of learning. Conventional wisdom characterizes our career trajectories in the form of discrete stages, however such stages superimpose and reify a constructed linearity when, arguably, our careers and career development are much less neatly lived. The concept of career transitions may better accommodate the nature and range of career experiences (Greiner and Wikle 2013).

I am presently an associate professor aiming to obtain promotion to full professor in the next few years. By another common definition, however, I am a mid-career faculty member because I have been tenured for more than five years but am (presumably) still a long way away from retirement (Austin 2010; Canale, Kerdklotz, and Wild 2013). The "boundary" between mid- and late-career faculty is not easily or consistently defined, and illustrates the challenge of constructing career stages suitable to everyone. In contrast to early- and late-career faculty, mid-career faculty may constitute the largest and most diverse group of academics (Austin 2010). We face different challenges than junior faculty in part because we are not new to the demands of teaching and research. Undoubtedly for some, the transition to mid-career is liberating because it affords opportunities to explore new research projects or wrap up projects that had been on the back burner. For others, however, the pressure to make tenure can leave mid-career faculty exhausted and burned out. In situations where the signposts for promotion to full professor are unclear, it can be easy for mid-career faculty to lose focus on and momentum toward one's goals, particularly as they are expected to perform more service to their department, university, and discipline (Austin 2010). Those early-career faculty who postponed having children until tenure was granted may now face the added pressures and challenges associated with starting a family and maintaining an effective balance between work and family (Austin 2010; Canale, Kerdklotz, and Wild 2013).

In retrospect, I was much better prepared to succeed as an assistant professor than an associate professor even though my institution did not have as much support for new faculty as it does today. This is an observation, not a lament: New tenure-track faculty in my college today get a one-course course release, are assigned two faculty mentors, and are usually sheltered from heavy service commitments. These practices reflect the much greater awareness today of the rigorous demands and expectations placed on new hires. Naturally, some institutions and departments are better than others at supporting their new tenure-track faculty. Even though my institution did not have as many resources for new faculty support way back when I was hired, other women in geography—both graduate students and faculty—proffered advice about making the transition from graduate student to assistant professor, and suggested helpful books and resources. Comparatively speaking, fewer such resources exist for mid-career faculty, although that seems to be in the process of changing. A number of commentaries and publications have called attention to the “issues” faced by mid-career faculty including the so-called “mid-career malaise,” and some faculty and administrators now recommend mentoring programs for mid-career faculty (Anonymous 2012; Baldwin, Lunceford and Vanderlinden 2005; Gillespie, Douglas and Associates 2010; Rockquemore 2011; Wilson 2012).

## Surprises

Over the course of my career, a number of things have surprised me about being a faculty member. First, the landscape of higher education has changed considerably in the almost two decades I have worked as a faculty member. Changes in technology including the rise of online learning environments and the spread of social media have not only transformed the classroom, but also the ways in which we interact with students. In my experience, undergraduates are much less inclined to make use of traditional office hours today because of the almost 24/7 access to faculty via email or online classrooms. In addition, noticeably shorter attention spans and the urgency students have toward completing assignments means that it is challenging to get them to appreciate and engage in the slower, meaningful processes of thinking and reflecting in ways that promote deeper learning.

Beyond these broad changes within higher education, however, another surprise of my career has been discovering the sheer quirkiness of the academic environment. There are many reasons for academia's

exceptionalism, not least of which is the vision (or lack thereof) of administrators, the absurdity of some university policies, or the inability of people to get along. At times, this quirkiness stems from the selfishness and self-centeredness of academics, specifically the sense that the work each of us does is far more important than the work anyone else does and the idea that no one else is nearly as busy as we are. In other instances the eccentricity of academia derives from the fact that faculty can be an especially whiny and disgruntled lot. Moreover, some of the most disgruntled types are often the most vocal and not the least bit hesitant to use the reply all function in email as an open mic for tiresome rants.

Another attribute of academia that has surprised me is the isolation and apathy that can beset faculty. The mobility of faculty can mean the loss of great colleagues from across the university whose career, goals, or needs take you or them elsewhere. But isolation and apathy can also lead some colleagues to minimize their involvement with the university. Sometimes faculty, for example, simply will not participate in university or departmental events, and they begrudge the notion of a community of scholars. There are myriad reasons for this apathy and cynicism, but infrequent pay raises and feeling unappreciated can play a role. In addition, the increasing emphasis on metrics in all realms of the work that faculty perform has also come as a bit of a surprise. As a metric, teaching evaluations now pale in comparison to DFW rates (the percentage of D, F, and W grades in a course), program performance measures captured in the National Study of Instructional Costs and Productivity, also known as the “Delaware data,” impact factors, and even the h-index. At a certain point using and privileging these metrics can become dehumanizing.

Happily, however, the unexpected opportunities that have arisen over the course of my career have been a tremendous surprise. Each of us has special stories to share in this respect but among the highlights I have experienced include being invited to Korea by the Northeast Asian History Foundation and the Korean Geographical Society and serving as a Geography Education Delegate. This led to participation in an international conference, travel to key historical and cultural sites in Korea, as well as the creation of new friendships and networks. Another highlight involved being invited to give a colloquium presentation to the Geography Department at Hong Kong Baptist University. This turned into a wonderful

opportunity to engage with students and faculty about topics and themes in cultural and historical geography.

One of the biggest challenges I have faced is dealing with geography's cliques. Every discipline has them and many departments have them, to the extent that it is not unheard of for members of a clique to sit together during faculty meetings. Perhaps because of the comparatively smaller size of geography the cliques can seem more dominant, even oppressive at times.

Geography has its territorial fiefdoms which consist of like-minded individuals who marshal the fences of different domains. Academics are most likely to encounter these cliques in the process of trying to get manuscripts published, only to have reviewers tell them that the manuscript does not mesh with their version of a particular subfield. But it has also been disconcerting to have colleagues judge you more by their impression of your Ph.D. advisor than by the quality of your work.

Certainly among the outstanding experiences of any career are successfully attaining the goals one sets for oneself. For me, having the opportunity to work with a major geography publisher and author a college-level textbook in human geography has been awesome. But equally as outstanding are the unsolicited comments from students who tell you the impact that your textbook or a course they had with you has had on their lives, their thinking, or even their career. That kind of feedback really is priceless.

## Futures

One of the most important pieces of advice I can offer is to set clear boundaries between work and home, and maintain them. We need boundaries between work and home because it is all too easy to burn out. Boundaries help us create time and space to renew and refresh ourselves. For a lot of us in academia, much of our work is our life—it is what we enjoy doing. There are many faculty who find they work better at home, but this can also increase the sense of social isolation.

A second piece of advice is to have a plan and stick to it. More specifically, it is a good idea to have a few plans that involve short- and long-term goals. In addition, learn to be strategic in terms of how and when to say no. Naturally, you cannot participate on every committee or project that comes along, but you also cannot say no to everything. Think about what projects or committee assignments are most interesting to you, will utilize your strengths, or will expand your skill set or leadership experience. Although it is much easier said than done, do not feel guilty about saying no when you do.

Lastly, follow your passion. Careers in geography and academia afford so many ways to do that which you enjoy most. I especially appreciate the variety of roles I perform in my work as well as the different kinds of work, from researching, writing, and publishing to teaching, advising, and even cartography. Embrace the possibilities.

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