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ADVICE

Location, Location, Location



Brian Taylor for The Chronicle

By *Alexandra M. Lord* | SEPTEMBER 12, 2012

I still remember the post office where I made the biggest mistake of my life. In the fall of 1996, I stood in its outer room holding a manila envelope in my hand, shifting it from hand to hand. To mail or not to mail? That was the question.

It was my second year on the academic job market, and although I had been fortunate enough to obtain a postdoctoral fellowship my first year out, I knew how rare it was to find a job ad that fit you. But this one clearly described me: It was seeking a Ph.D. in British history who could also teach the history of science, with a preference for a medical historian who specialized in women's history. What were the odds of my ever seeing a job ad like that again in my lifetime?

The problem was that the job was located in a region of the country where I did not want to live. I was 30 years old, and I knew myself, my likes, my dislikes, and my needs clearly. This job, for all that I was a "perfect" fit, did not fit me. As I stared at the envelope containing my application materials, I remembered everything I had been told in graduate school and as a postdoc. "You can always trade up." "You may wind up liking the region." "Have an open mind!" And most powerful of all: "Don't be prejudiced, you snobby East Coast urban elitist."

I closed my eyes and dropped the envelope in the slot.

I got the job. Even as I accepted it, I knew that I was making a terrible mistake. The job might have fit someone else perfectly, but I grew up in the Northeast and I had spent six years living a peripatetic life. I'd gone to graduate school in the Midwest, done research

in London and Edinburgh, and held a postdoctoral fellowship in the Bay Area. While I had enjoyed living in London and Edinburgh, and while I had begun my 20s believing that I could live anywhere, each move clarified how very much I wanted to return home to the Northeastern United States.

I am the fourth child of a close-knit family. I wanted to live near my widowed mom. I was also eager to be close to my siblings and my very new niece and nephew. Having grown up in a racially diverse area, I wanted to live and work in racially diverse places. As a historian, I loved living where the landscape clearly reflected centuries of dense occupation. Most worrisome of all, as a single woman who wanted to marry, I knew that opportunities to meet a potential spouse would be limited in a small town in the rural Northwest. But who wants to be accused of being an elitist? So I buried my concerns and took the holy grail, the tenure-track job with a 2-2 teaching load.

The next two years were hell—not because my colleagues were unpleasant and not because the job was difficult (they were not and it was not) but rather because I had compromised everything I valued to take the position.

Living in a small town, I was hesitant to see a therapist for fear that my colleagues would know. I had already learned the hard way that indicating that I was unhappy there was unacceptable. Single, I had no one in whom I could confide my unhappiness. I became severely and clinically depressed. Even as I struggled with my depression, I reminded myself that I had it all. The tenure-track job! Affordable living! Low crime! Good schools ... for the children I didn't have! I could barely get out of bed.

Desperate, I applied for all sorts of jobs—ones with higher teaching loads, visiting professorships. Anything, provided it was in the Northeast. After two years, I took a visiting professorship at a less prestigious university in another small town but one that was only 40 miles from my mother. The job had an expiration date, but so did I.

When that date came, I changed careers, left academe, and moved to Washington, D.C., to live in an area I had always wanted to live. I met my husband there. Yes, we live in a city where affordable housing is rare, but frankly, despite being mugged twice in our

gentrifying neighborhood, I love where I live. Other people might absolutely hate our neighborhood, but that is irrelevant; it suits me perfectly.

This all came back to me when I read David D. Perlmutter's column, "Embrace Your Inner North Dakotan." He advised new Ph.D.'s on the market to persuade "yourself to appreciate different—not 'lower'—standards for your first job. If you are seeking employment, not martyrdom, then a shift in how you view your potential employers is crucial."

But contrary to what Perlmutter and many academics may believe, the reasons that some people do not apply for jobs in, say, North Dakota, rarely have to do with elitism. In speaking to Ph.D.'s, both of my generation and those who have recently completed or are in the process of completing their degrees, what I have heard is that their concerns about certain geographic locations are more complicated and personal than just an aversion to a particular region.

Their spouse cannot find a job in a specific region, and they do not want a commuter marriage. They have a child with a disability, and they need a job in a place where the schools can handle the child's specific needs. They feel strongly about being Jewish, keeping kosher, and want to expose their children to a Jewish environment, which makes living in some isolated small towns impossible. Their family is racially mixed, and they want their children to be raised in a place where they will not be alone. They have an aging parent and need to be within a quick direct flight back to their hometown. They are gay and want to live in a place with a significant gay community.

The concerns I have heard over eight years of running Beyond Academe—a Web site that provides job advice for Ph.D.'s about leaving higher education—are too numerous to list here as they reflect the complex lives of real people. To anyone struggling with such concerns, they are not trivial, incorrect, or "snobby"—however much they be viewed that way by outsiders.

Critics often say: Shouldn't doctoral students have been aware of the realities of an academic job market in which you don't get to choose where you want to live? In fact, most people enter graduate school in their 20s, a period of intense change in which it's

difficult, if not impossible, to predict what your needs and desires will be eight years down the road.

Academic culture can be unforgiving. The message I heard in graduate school, over and over, was that a true scholar sacrificed for her career. My worries about my personal or family life were misplaced, especially as I did not yet have my own family. I listened to people who told me in subtle and not-so-subtle ways that I was wrong to feel as I did and that my concerns stemmed from elitism. And I bought into a culture that told me that leaving academe indicated that I was not a serious scholar or teacher and that I just did not love history enough.

Academe is, as a faculty friend once put it, incredibly infantilizing. It is one of the only places where faculty members feel no qualms in telling adults in their late 20s and early 30s how to approach the most important decisions of their lives. It is also a culture in which those who leave are often treated with disdain. Although I was an adult and although the people telling me to "try it!" did not know me, I was persuaded to ignore my heart.

Which is why it rankles now when I hear people urge graduate students to "try the academic job in the place they never dreamed of living" or when I read a piece telling Ph.D.'s to "embrace their inner North Dakotan." That is poor advice for most people, especially when it comes couched in an assumption that the failure to be "open-minded" in one's job search is a professional or even moral failing.

Recently a new Ph.D. told me that he had just turned down a "good" job as he recognized that taking the position would be a mistake in terms of his personal life. He struggled greatly with the decision and worried that his advisers and colleagues would view his choice as a lack of commitment to his scholarship. What does it say about the power of academic culture that this adult almost made a life-changing decision against his better judgment?

We need to shift the conversation. Don't push people into the choice that worked for you. Instead, speak candidly and without judgment to graduate students about all of their options, in and outside of academe, so that Ph.D.'s can make the very real and very

complex decisions they need to make about their futures—just as lawyers, doctors, therapists, and other professionals do.

We also need to recognize that if academe genuinely values diversity of opinions, it should be OK that some of us like cities—or rural areas—and that some of us do not and never will.

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