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FIRST PERSON

Note to Father: This Is Hard

A Ph.D. tries to reconcile the profession he glamorized as a child with the one he is living on the tenure track

By [JOHN HATCHER](#)

I remember walking with my father across the campus of the University of South Florida, where he was a professor of English, and being in awe as students would call him "Dr. Hatcher." Sometimes I would go to his classes and listen to him lecture, convinced that his intellect was unsurpassed. He exuded a confident, comfortable demeanor; my father knew everything there was to know.

At some point, riding in his car, I leaned forward from the backseat as he explained to me what a Ph.D. was. It seemed you achieved it by going to school longer than anyone else.

I want a Ph.D., I announced. I began counting the grades from second on up to ... 22nd? I was pretty sure I'd never get one.

I did get one but it took much longer than 22 years. I didn't begin work on my own Ph.D. at Syracuse University until the age of 40, after leaving a career in newspaper journalism. By chance, the first semester in which I walked across a campus with Ph.D. after my name was also the last semester my father would do so before retiring.

What I felt in that first semester was not the confidence or freedom or authority I had remembered from childhood. Walking the halls, my students called me "John" or "Hatcher" or, even, "Hey, Hatch." I would prepare for a lecture secretly fearing that someone in the room would confront me and expose me for my lack of expertise.

Finally, a few weeks into my third semester as an assistant professor, I e-mailed my father with a message that read in the subject line: "This is hard."

His first e-mailed response was this: Buy yourself some land and a tractor. That was the key to contentment. He was being sarcastic — or so I assumed.

A few days later, he sent a longer and more-thoughtful response. It was one I shared with my fellow assistant professors the day I received it, and it's the reason I'm writing this now. His e-mail message contained many practical and useful tips on teaching and grading, but what stuck with me most was a particular perspective he had, not just on teaching but on living.

"One thing you need to know," he wrote, "no matter how well you teach, you could always do it better or devote more time and energy to it. It will suck you dry. ... You have to establish over time how much time you can give it, do a decent job with it, but save time for yourself.

"It will get easier, and one lesson you need to learn as early as you can is this — make it fun. Make it fun for you as well as for them.

"Finally (for now), the most important thing I can tell you is that your life has begun — it's not in the future. You have been taught over and over that if you work hard now, life will be good later on when you can relax. Not so. Life right now is it, and if you aren't enjoying parts of it, change those things that are bothering you and make them enjoyable."

My dad's encouraging words got me through the weekend. When I woke up the next Monday morning, I was determined not to let it all weigh me down. I walked to work instead of driving and listened to a podcast that made me want to do some writing. When I got to my office, I started writing a little something. I had no aspirations except to jot down a few ideas.

Today was going to be different.

And then I started on the work of the day and watched my whole life slip out of balance again.

By 7 p.m., I was swamped and tired when I sent another e-mail message to the colleagues to whom I had forwarded my father's advice. "I haven't stopped all day except to gobble down a few bites of food," I told them. "My day has been consumed by tasks and demands. My balance and optimism have been overwhelmed by stress and caffeine, and I am looking at an endless night of grading if I want to keep from falling even further behind."

Regarding my father's e-mail advice, I told them: Never mind.

And that's where this column sat for the longest time — with a bad ending. I just put it aside as I tried to reckon with two contrasting views of the position and the experience. I tried to decide what was different between what I had seen and glamorized as a child and what I was living as a tenure-track professor.

As the semester progressed, I thought about that conflict often. I thought of it when I read articles in trade publications that said professors were being asked to do more and more service work even as the expectations of scholarship increased. I thought about it as I went to workshops where I was told that today's students are akin to customers who expect a fair amount of service from the professor who works for them.

But gradually, in spite of what seemed to be mounting evidence that my career and my father's would be drastically different based on a changing environment, I began to grow reassured that my father's words were still valid, powerful, and profoundly useful. I kept coming back to a few key phrases. Make it fun. Write when you have something to say. It will get easier.

The semester is behind me now as I put a new ending on this column, and I have to say that my father was right. When I felt my enthusiasm for my classes begin to wane, I searched for ways to make them more fun and asked my students to help me. It didn't always work, but they seemed to appreciate the

effort.

Not all of my dad's advice worked for me. He told me, wait to start writing until you have something to say. Instead I drew on another piece of advice from a friend and tried to write every day. I was surprised by how much progress I made on projects that seemed insurmountable by breaking them down into small pieces and working on a bit each day (see <http://chronicle.com/jobs/news/2007/03/2007030801c.htm>).

By the way, my father may have been right about the tractor. I can't afford one of those yet, but this week when I mowed the lawn, I felt my stress and concerns about the summer's research goals fade away.

It will get easier, my father told me.

Thanks, Dr. Hatcher. It already has.

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