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Is, not Ought

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To paraphrase Eleanor of Aquitaine in *The Lion in Winter*, “I have a confession: I don’t much like my students.” It’s not that I don’t like them as people or that I wish them ill. It’s not that I don’t like discussing ideas, engaging texts, or pressing questions. And, there are even rare moments, when they have a genuine insight or make improvements in their abilities, that I don’t mind grading. What I mean, of course, is that students are self-absorbed, soul-killing, needy little monsters who think they are (or should be) my sole priority, that I enjoy repeating instructions (even after sweating blood crafting syllabi), that I have nothing better to do than monitor my e-mail, that I relish reading multiple drafts that fail to respond in any meaningful fashion to feedback, and that I want to be their friend, therapist, surrogate parent, and problem-solver.

Entre nous, I have other confessions: on any given day, I don’t much like my colleagues, my administration, my various editors, my contributing authors. It’s a long list. What do I like? I like ideas. I like pursuing intellectual questions that have ethical and political weight. I like trying to craft beautiful prose. That’s why I got into this business. But what I like about this job (and, in the final analysis, I love my job—who else gets paid to read and think?) so easily and consistently gets interrupted, delayed and marginalized by its other aspects.

As much as we must resist cynicism and remember how rewarding our jobs can be, we also have to recognize that our jobs are fundamentally impossible. The lesson I am still learning from my first years of teaching? We can't do everything we're expected to do. We certainly can't do it all equally well. So, we should stop trying.

Although it's a slow and imperfect process, recognizing the fundamental impossibility of our jobs has been liberating rather than a source of despair. If we can't do everything we're expected to do, then we necessarily have to choose what we will do and how we will spend our limited resources. While having tenure makes this process easier, tenure adds additional options to the menu. Much more importantly, prior to tenure, one establishes the habits and expectations for how one will spend time and focus attention. Figuring out where your passion lies and how to keep the main thing the main thing is not something that can be put off until later. (I say this to myself first.)

With respect to students, in my first years of teaching, I set patterns of answering e-mail with lightning speed, turning around meticulously annotated drafts in less than twenty-four hours, and setting meetings on students' schedules. I not only thought this was expected of me and that it would result in improved student performance, but that I wanted to dedicate myself primarily to being a "good teacher." Similarly, with respect to service, I established myself as the willing and responsible committee member because I have typically been very invested in the success of institutions of which I am a part. I was not sufficiently aware of how the size of this institution would forestall my ability to make change, and the ways in which competency is quickly exploited.

More recently, as I've realized that I have to set different priorities if I want time to pursue ideas, I've begun (emphasis on begun) to ask myself three questions: Is this interesting? Is it useful? Is it going to replenish or deplete my energy? These questions are not perfect; they don't always point in the same direction; and they don't eliminate the reality that a job is a job, which means I am often simply required to do things. But, they help. For example, commenting on student work in detail takes a great deal of time and can be quite boring, but I rarely have students contest grades or ask me to clarify expectations. Because I find one-on-one meetings and flurries of individual e-mails much more energy depleting than writing comments, I continue this practice. When designing courses, I try very hard to choose materials and topics that have some connection to my research questions—or, at the very least, are fun or easy to teach. When serving on committees, I try to find commitments that will allow me to shape policy that will make my life better (this relates both to topic and organizational level), or will reflect well on my department, or will allow me to develop intellectual—or social—relationships.

I am learning that I have to be very honest about what matters to me about this job. Should and ought talk paralyzes, and comparing myself to some fantasy of the perfect scholar-teacher is not much more helpful. I have to know which tasks among the hundreds I could perform are the ones I most (1) want and (2) need to perform. Then, with steely courage, conviction and determination, I must strive to do everything I can to spend most of my time doing those

things, or the things that most directly facilitate doing them, rather than the myriad that prevent me. These are deeply personal, idiosyncratic questions. We need to be kinder to ourselves and each other as we come to our respective answers.

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