

A Few Laps Around the *Non-Tenure* Track

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“Yo man. Let me get this straight. You teach five hours a week and they pay you 50 G’s?”

It wasn’t a rhetorical question. Calvin, who as far I know answers only to “Hot Rod,” was expecting an answer, and I wasn’t sure what to say – especially since I was pretty sure that Hot Rod didn’t even know that I don’t teach in the summers.

“Dawg, I’m *in* the classroom five hours, but I spend a lot more time preparing for class. It’s just like out here, baby (I shove the basketball in the pit of his stomach); I only teach your ass for about an hour, but I spent years perfecting those pretty moves.”

Hot Rod chuckles at the lie. I play hard, have a passable jump shot, and am a willing passer, but at 35 my quickness and jumping ability ain’t what they used to be, and they never used to be all that good. As Mister Señor Love Daddy likes to say, “that’s the truth, Ruth,” but I’m not complaining – far from it. I get to hoop three or four times per week, which isn’t too bad considering that, my conversation with Hot Rod notwithstanding, teaching is just one of several professional activities that I and other university faculty juggle. But I’m getting ahead of my story.

I go to college to study journalism. All right, I go to college because that's what everyone (including me) expects me to do after high school. But needing both a major and a potential career, I settle on journalism. It seems like a logical choice. A basketball career hasn't been a viable option for some time, but writing about sports seems appealing, especially since I fancy myself a good writer. Unfortunately, it doesn't occur to me during the college search to check whether each school actually offers a journalism major. My immigrant family, although very invested in my education, is in no position to advise me. Sure enough, when I scan the University of Pennsylvania course catalog for journalism classes, I discover they don't exist. My journalism career over before I take a single class, I spend the next two years considering a variety of other options, including international relations and communications. I finally settle on psychology, because the prospect of earning a living talking to people (I'm thinking about psychotherapy) seems almost as appealing as writing about sports. I don't yet know that a graduate degree is required to practice psychotherapy, nor do I know that I won't actually like doing therapy once I learn how to do it.

I start here to counter the myth that career journeys are linear – that all of us are in constant motion from point A to point B, as though we are born with the knowledge of what kind of work we want to do and just need to obtain the necessary education or work experience to be able to do it. No doubt some people actually have such linear journeys. But my path was always a process of discovery, always a combination of wrong turns and timely opportunities.

It's the end of my junior year at Penn. I'm completing a double major in communication and psychology but still don't really know what I want to do after graduation. Entry-level jobs in both fields seem unappealing, and my academic advisor finally deigns to share with me that a graduate degree is required to practice psychotherapy and that

research experience is required to be admitted to a graduate program. I frantically search for research opportunities. A staff psychologist at the now defunct Philadelphia Child Guidance Clinic is looking for research assistants for his study on expressed emotion, as is a graduate student working with Marty Seligman on learned helplessness. The staff psychologist's middle name is Sigmund. I don't know who Marty Seligman is (I learn later that he's one of the most recognized psychologists of our time). None of this matters; I just need experience. I apply for and happily accept both unpaid positions.

“What do you do?” Hot Rod asks.

It's how our conversation starts. It's how many conversations start. (The college version of this, of course, is “What's your major?”). And why not? For those of us with careers (rather than jobs), what we do at least partly defines who we are. This is so not only because who we are influences our choice of what we decide to study in college and graduate school (or even whether to go to college), but also because the process of preparing for our career shapes our personal values. But how to answer? Like every academic I know, I have one “job” but do lots of things.

“I'm a teacher,” I say, “I teach about race...”

More specifically, I am a faculty member in a psychology department of a very large state university. My official job title is “lecturer,” which is designed to distinguish me from 98 percent of the department and university faculty who are either tenured or tenure-track (i.e., on track to become tenured) professors. As far as the undergraduate students are concerned, the distinction is trivial. Like my tenured and tenure-track colleagues, I have a Ph.D., teach several undergraduate courses each year, and have graduate

students assist in grading, leading class discussions, and a variety of other classroom tasks. In addition, although students are not always aware of this, I also publish original research in peer-reviewed journals, review research manuscripts submitted for publication, and present my research at both academic conferences and community organization meetings. Yet, the distinction is not irrelevant. Although all faculty members are mostly engaged in the same activities, in most cases, there is a substantial difference in the proportion of time allotted to each. Tenure-track faculty are hired primarily as scholars. Their job is to produce scholarship – preferably “important” scholarship that moves the field forward. In the process, they are expected to teach a few courses (the “normal” teaching load in my department is the equivalent of two moderate size undergraduate courses per year), but they must be careful to prioritize their scholarship, as their performance reviews and job security are ultimately dependent on the quality and quantity of their research production. My primary job, by contrast, is to teach. The department is happy to have me engaged in research, but it’s not actually part of my job description.

My perception of my job depends a little on my mood. Most of the time, I think I have the best academic job on the planet. Since I am at a prestigious university (my department was ranked third in the most recent *U.S. News and World Report* rankings), I work and socialize with some of the brightest and most talented people in the world. Moreover, I enjoy teaching and the department allows me to teach the courses that I most want to teach. Yet, I still have time to pursue other professional activities, including research and community projects, and the fact that I don’t have to teach in the summers gives me time to travel out of the country – which my research often requires. Best of all, I don’t have to deal with the “publish or perish” pressure that is the hallmark of academic life. This pressure is intense and typically leads

junior faculty to work long into the evenings, as well as weekends – both because senior faculty members are often explicit about what it takes to get tenure and because of their own internal motivation to be successful.

But, of course, there is a downside. As a lecturer, I'm (at least so far) not included in the department's official decision making (this includes hiring decisions, graduate admissions, and curriculum changes). I'm ineligible for most departmental and university committees and administrative positions, and I'm not allowed to sit on master's and dissertation committees. I also get paid substantially less and do not qualify for a sabbatical every seven years. To most academics, mine is a second-class position, and there are moments of insecurity when I internalize this attitude, doubting my ability, questioning my productivity, and generally feeling like an under-achiever – especially since I used to hold a tenure-track rank prior to my current position. But most of the time, on most days, I like the trade-off. I get to teach and do research and be involved in the community, but still have time to hoop and talk to Hot Rod afterwards, as well as spend time with my family without feeling that I should be working.

It's my freshman year at Penn. My friends and I are standing in line at the theatre ticket counter, waiting to buy tickets for Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*, which has just been released. It's a long line, and my attention focuses on the group of young Black men standing directly ahead of us. They are boisterous and loud, seemingly oblivious to the rest of us waiting in line. I watch them because they are in front of me and because I am enjoying their fun. After a time, I notice that four or five are wearing identical T-shirts with the words "It's a Black thing, you wouldn't understand" printed

on the back. I am flooded with anger at the perceived injustice. I want to go up to them and say “How dare you make assumptions about me? How do you know I wouldn’t understand? Why don’t you try explaining it to me first?” But I don’t have the courage, so I just stand in place, watching them, seething. I like the film – feel bad for Sal and his family, as well as for Radio Raheem and think that, no, of course Mookie didn’t do the right thing. But as I walk out of the theatre, I notice that the African American audience seems agitated. They seem to take a different message from the film, but I don’t know what it is. Did they think starting a riot was the right thing to do? How could they? How could anyone? I feel angry at their anger. They have no right to think that way.

Two years later I am again in line, this time waiting to buy a late-night cheese steak. This line is short, and within a few minutes I’m placing my order with the short-order cook. “The grill is closed,” he informs me. I nod and head to the back of the store to rummage through the pre-made food options in the refrigerator. The door chimes as two men walk in. They head to the grill and a few minutes later are hunched over a small table, enjoying their cheese steaks. The two men and the short-order cook are Black, and I am usually perceived as White (I was born in the former USSR and identify as a Russian Jew). I assume that I just experienced racial discrimination. I am more incredulous than angry. I want to say something to the cook, but again I lack the courage. I slink out, trying not to make eye contact with anyone in the process.

These and other experiences stay with me. I don’t yet have the knowledge necessary to engage in an analysis of what the interactions mean or why they happened, but I instinctively know they’re important. I apply to graduate programs. I get many rejections but also several interviews.

An offer comes from the only Black professor I interview with. His research is based in Jamaica. I accept the offer.

Three years later I arrive in Jamaica, along with five African American undergraduate students who, under my supervision, will conduct structured interviews with Jamaican kids who had been identified as having emotional or behavioral problems by either a family member or a teacher. One of the future interviewers is a friend, a former MSU football player from Detroit who gave up football in order to better focus on academics. He had worked in the research lab for several years, and we hit it off almost from the start. Usually thoughtful and reserved, Stan is nearly giddy with anticipation. He sidles up to me as we walk through the airport.

“You know,” he says, “the airport security is Black, and when we get on a bus, the bus-driver will be Black, and hell – everyone else on the bus will be Black too.” He is clearly liberated by this thought. I can’t really relate.

A few weeks after our arrival, the undergraduates and I decide to have some drinks together. We walk into a bar. About 20 people are spread out among the tables. My eyes instantly gravitate to the one White person there. He looks to be near 50. It is likely that we have nothing in common. In the U.S., I wouldn’t have noticed him. In Jamaica, I find myself fighting the urge to walk over to say “Hello.” What would I say after that? “I couldn’t help noticing that you’re White.” Of course, I do no such thing. But I think that maybe I have a slightly better understanding of what Stan is experiencing.

I love working in the field of race relations. The topic fascinates me, engrosses me, challenges me – constantly – even after more than 10 years. It’s ubiquitous, affecting how children are tracked in the education system, how employees

are hired, evaluated and promoted, how laws are passed and enforced, and how health services are delivered. Even personal choices, such as whom to befriend, whom to date, and which neighborhood to live in, are either explicitly or subtly influenced by race. All of the above are well documented. Yet, many of us live in blissful unawareness of how race impacts our own lives and those of our neighbors, while others make a deliberate political and personal choice to deny the documented reality and pretend that race has no meaning. One good example of this is J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series, in which she clearly uses "half-bloods" to condemn group stereotypes and prejudice, yet creates a parallel universe where race exists (it is used in character descriptions) but is never actually mentioned or acknowledged by any of the characters. This lack of awareness (or denial) exists despite the fact that the White power structure of the Wizard world (there are no adult characters of color in authority) suggests a similar racial climate to our real universe.

The seeming inconsistencies beg discussion, demand exploration. How can one not be captivated by some aspect of this topic? I love the research questions and the self-examination that it inspires. I love that it brings me into contact with people of different backgrounds all over the world. I love that my work has taken me all over the country, as well as to Jamaica, Israel, and Germany. I love that it provides the opportunity to work closely with not only different types of psychologists but also historians, sociologists, political scientists, and cultural scholars. I love the students, particularly those who really engage with the material, who are honest (not just with me, but with themselves) about the impact of race on their lives, who are willing to question me and challenge the ideas and theories from class – even when, especially when, they know where I stand. This doesn't happen to me in other classes I teach. I

love how these relationships have enriched my life in ways I could not have predicted, and I look forward to continuing my professional journey, even as I have little idea where it may lead.

The game Hot Rod and I are waiting on is almost over, and despite our conversation, we both slowly turn our attention to it. It's a unique sport, basketball. There is no hiding who you are on the court. Trash talk all you want, but within a few minutes your "game" reveals your real self to all present. Over the years, I've learned that to teach about race effectively I have to be just as "real" (just as transparent) in the classroom.

I stand in front, watching the students file in on the first day of class. I'm a little nervous, much less so than when I first started teaching about race, but nervous enough to need a distraction. I start counting faces. There are 72 of them, almost all completely unfamiliar. The bell sounds. I introduce myself, then quickly launch into a series of stories about some of my personal experiences around race. Some of the stories are embarrassing – like the one about my enthusiastic editorial in high school supporting my school's use of offensive Indian symbols and imagery, which included the "Savage of the week" award given to the week's top football performer (The high school has since chosen a new symbol and "retired" all Indian imagery, unlike the university where I currently teach, which maintains an Indian "Chief" as its symbol despite both internal demands by faculty and external pressures by the National Collegiate Athletic Association to eliminate its use). Other stories, including some of the ones in this essay, reveal a similar past naïveté that I am usually not eager for others to know about. Yet, there are good reasons for sharing these stories.

Unlike most other courses where the instructor is generally assumed to be a legitimate authority on the topic by virtue of his or her position, legitimacy in race relations, in the eyes of many, is often at least partially dependent on lived experience. As a person who is usually perceived as White, I know that I need to demonstrate my legitimacy to teach about race before some students are psychologically able to learn from me. Some instructors deal with this by adopting a veneer of neutrality or objectivity, especially concerning the disclosure of their own political beliefs. They pride themselves on keeping their own ideological positions regarding race hidden from their students. This type of “neutrality” is often advocated, but I deliberately adopt the exact opposite way of being – not just on the first day of class but on every day and with every (relevant) issue. I didn’t come to this mindset lightly. I believe that by sharing my personal experiences and beliefs (and labeling them as such), I allow students to see me as a real person who has struggled and continues to struggle with different racial issues. This helps us connect and relate to each other. In addition, I believe that this kind of self-disclosure models a way of having honest and transparent conversations about race, which I think are important not only for my class, but for our society. I tell the stories with the hope that hearing about my experiences and opinions will motivate students to examine their own thinking. Ideally, the stories will also help students develop the skills and motivation to articulate their beliefs in a way that maintains an openness to the beliefs of others, even if, especially if, the beliefs don’t match their own. I also hope the stories facilitate the expectation of change and growth – both in the self and in others. If my thinking has changed over time (and it has!), then why shouldn’t theirs or their friends’? That said, in the interest of transparency, I have to admit to one other reason: I share my personal experiences and my racial ideology because I believe, as many

have pointed out, that a refusal to take a political stance or express a political opinion is itself a political statement endorsing the status quo.

And that's one ideological statement about race I am unwilling to make – either in the classroom or in my writing.