

Infinite Hope—and for Us; or, Come on in, the Real World is Fine

Kel Morin-Parsons

I HAVE NEVER BEEN PARTICULARLY ICONOCLASTIC, as unfashionable as it may be to admit it. While in graduate school during the 1990s, however, I found myself more than once speaking in hushed tones with certain professors on a topic in which I found myself increasingly interested: working outside the academy with a doctorate. Doing so is, of course, not that unusual in itself. What was, and is, unusual is choosing to do so—or at least discovering that a road ending outside the academy is not just a consolation prize. I was, as a graduate student, as focused as any of my colleagues on a tenured teaching position. I did conferences, I lined up a publication, and I worked for and was fortunate enough to get scholarships. I had the world's most supportive thesis advisor, who was appropriately exacting, and I loved every minute of it. I tried to do everything right. After a particular teaching experience, however—with, I should emphasize, a number of enthusiastic students and wonderful material—I began to realize that the professor's life was, for various reasons, probably not for me. It had been emphasized to me from the beginning that I had entered a program designed to train scholars for the academy. That, of course, was proper and laudable. But as my own situation changed, I made a number of

KEL MORIN-PARSONS
received her PHD in
Renaissance English
devotional poetry from
the University of Ottawa
in 2001. She is the
manager of the Aid to
Scholarly Publications
Program, part of the
Canadian Federation
for the Humanities and
Social Sciences. She has
taught in the disciplines
of English and Theatre
and works as an actor
and writer alongside her
administrative duties.

discoveries about the abilities and skills nurtured by graduate school and, I would find, valued by the so-called real world—and they were all good.

I wanted to explore other options, but I genuinely wasn't sure what they might be. I had been used to thinking of the skills I was acquiring solely in terms of their application within an academic setting. Then a friend asked me to take on the job of administrator for a small non-profit organization on whose board he sat. He himself held a PHD in political economy and had worked both in and out of the academy for two decades; he told me later that he saw clear abilities and inclinations in me for which I didn't seem to have a context and felt that I just needed a shove to start the process of thinking differently about my training and its application. At the time, however, I was still in graduate school, and while I did take on the job I was slow to think differently—the nature of work meant that I was still dealing largely with people with scholarly backgrounds, and it seemed they just needed someone to sort out certain aspects of communication and organization; it never occurred to me that the ability to do those very things was a skill set in itself and one to which an academic background might have contributed.

After having worked at this non-profit for a while, I applied to a placement agency specializing in administrative positions. It was then that I truly began to realize surprising things about my graduate education. A manager at the placement agency, who had contacted me after having seen my (slightly modified academic) CV, made it clear that I possessed tremendously valuable skills—I was “marketable,” in that language of the commercial at which we're all supposed to win. As I worked with her and considered my CV, I realized that the graduate programs made demands on us that developed tremendously applicable capacities. As most of us not only took seminar courses but taught or assisted with undergraduate courses, we all had experience in organizing teaching material, developing it and presenting it as lectures, managing people, and managing time. Added to this experience were the skills developed by all graduate students as they learn to conduct research—the gathering and analyzing of information and the transformation of that raw data into coherent pieces of writing. On top of all of this is the fact that those of us trained in literature can, as a rule, write well—something not always a given—and tend to understand the basics of good communication. In a world inundated with information and people trying to extract from the pile some genuine knowledge, a graduate degree in English literature can situate a person beautifully.

What I have not yet mentioned is what underpins all of this—the deep and wide understanding of connections, narratives, and the world in gen-

eral that comes with humanities education. This is not some sop to the high-mindedness of higher education in some degraded context; this is the thing that seals the deal for those taking the things they've developed inside the academy and applying them outside. I have grown to cherish more and more warmly a notion which, I think, we have largely lost sight in the early twenty-first century—that which proposes that a liberal arts education, as we once termed it, is to fit people not just for a particular institution but for the world. The long view of history and the insight into human action nurtured by such an education combine with the often-incredible demands for production, organization, and analysis now made upon graduate students as they turn into well-trained scholars. The world needs this, and wants it—not just in the classroom but virtually everywhere else. Simply shift perspective on and presentation of this package, and the rest of the world easily sees—often when those of us “inside” do not—the stuff of which both business and creative leaders are made.

Ten or fifteen years ago, the definite prevailing verdict was that those of us with PHDs who ended up outside the academy were to be seen as a group whose work had come to naught; we'd been betrayed by the academy and would forever be the also-rans. There was no real mitigation of this reaction depending on what kind of job the person got or how he or she ended up liking it. In some cases, of course, it is genuinely the case that someone has desired nothing more than a career as a professor and has had to settle for something else. But the community's default position should not be to view new PHDs as a too-large group in a fight to the death for a too-small number of positions. Much talk now abounds about how to reduce the number of PHDs our universities produce in humanities or social sciences disciplines. I will venture to state flatly that this is wrong; we should be educating more people, not fewer—and sending them out into this country and the world. They should be out there with graduate degrees from programs that have given them the tools, if I may be so quaint, to be better citizens and to make the world better, safer, more peaceful, more long-sighted, more prosperous, more exciting. We should be proud and confident about what our graduate programs can do, both for the academy and for the larger world in which, lest we forget, it exists.

In the years since I left the academy (I have continued to teach periodically and conduct research, thus giving me, I believe, the best of both worlds), I have grown stronger in this conviction and now return annually to my alma mater to speak to English graduate students about what awaits them. I see their weariness when I begin—and every year at least two of them approach me afterward to thank me for giving them hope. It

is my hope that those of us who teach PHD students will think beyond the pointless dichotomy of a PHD put to “proper” use in the academy versus a PHD “wasted” elsewhere. If we can see beyond this limitation that we ourselves have imposed, we will see the place awaiting us and our students.