

Finding My Voice: An Accidental Journey Into Teaching

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ABSTRACT. This essay chronicles an unintended journey into university teaching by a scholar who planned to engage in every kind of professional activity except teaching. I begin by locating myself within my professional and private domains and describe my early professional career including my first awkward attempts at university teaching. The hard-earned lesson that teaching is not performance but is being fully present to students while opening myself to them is shared.

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“Graduate school doesn’t really prepare students for teaching responsibilities. The whole process is geared toward compiling a research record...this is the basis on which elite universities hire assistant professors. In those days, no one even asked whether the job candidate could teach. Frankly they still don’t. First year teaching is hell.”

*-Dr. Condoleezza Rice, on her first year as an assistant professor at Stanford University
excerpted from, Extraordinary, Ordinary People, a Memoir of Family*

I.

As I begin the 30th year of my professional career, and the 26th year of my career as a research scientist and educator at Louisiana State University (LSU) in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, no one is more surprised than I at the path my career has taken. I am planful, organized, and task-oriented, and this career has defied my plans at several key turns. From a very early age I devoured the written word and loved going to school. I was always most happy with a book in my hand or sitting in a classroom, so the pursuit of education was as natural as breathing, an easy decision. At every level of education I devised a plan as to what I would be and what I would do with this education I was attaining. And at every level, the plan blew up so that by the time I completed a given phase of my education I was facing an uncertain future. The one thing I was certain that I would not do, that I would not be, was a teacher. Now, a professional lifetime later, teacher is a role that I embrace as fully as I embrace the other roles in my life that I hold sacred: wife, mother, family member, and friend. It was in discovering not the *what* I am but the *who* I am that allowed me finally to be at ease as a teacher and to flourish in the classroom in ways I never imagined. This essay will describe that journey into the classroom and more importantly, into a fully human relationship with my students. I will discuss both the barriers against which I was dashed and the key formative experiences that shaped the educator I am today.

To begin, I must make plain the various ways in which I think about myself as a professional and as a person. I am a family scientist, so I view the world through a lens that focuses on the family as a unit that takes on a wide variety of forms and is more than the sum of its parts, and a lens that seeks to gather objective, meaningful information to understand and support that unit. My career began with an emphasis on the idea that what matters is data and empirical, verifiable information, but through the experience of exploring family life in difficult settings, I came to see that stories matter, too. I respect and appreciate data and science, and I have learned to be still in the presence of a person who is willing to share her or his story so that I might gain a deeper understanding of family life. I learned that despite my training, I am not the expert in someone else’s life.

I am a public policy practitioner. Of all the domains in which family scientists practice, my chosen domain is the policy arena. I am both a student of policy science and public policy, and have served or currently serve in the professional roles of policy analyst, program evaluator, and board member to public and nonprofit community organizations. In each case, what I bring to the table is the lens of family and the powerful impact that a given policy or program may have on families in their varied forms. Again, I emphasize the dual nature of objective data and

lived experiences as I work in policy and community organizational settings to improve opportunities and outcomes for children and families.

Finally, I care deeply about poverty and how it affects children and families. I have no problem identifying both the individual and structural roots of poverty and their complex intersections. I am open to exploring as many positive solutions to poverty from as many ideological perspectives as possible as long as children and families are not vilified or patronized. The harsh reality is that no matter its cause, poverty has the potential to choke human potential and my life and work are committed to unleashing human potential. I believe one of the best ways to unleash human potential is through education.

II.

My early forays in school and the context of my family life created opportunities that set my career in motion, but they also created some of the barriers I ultimately faced along the way. My family of origin was a traditional working class family and my parents encouraged my siblings and me to see education as a path to financial security. I chafed against the limited educational opportunities in our small town and persuaded my parents to buy into the rather wild idea that I would leave high school at the age of 16 without completing the requirements for a diploma and enroll in a small private college that had the ability to make such individualized admissions decisions. I am forever grateful that my parents took such an enormous risk with me. A year later, I secretly arranged to go to a nearby town and take the GED exam. I think they breathed a little sigh of relief when I proudly presented that certificate to them a few weeks later. If all my grand plans fell through, I would at least have a high school equivalency certificate. I moved on to a larger public college and finished an undergraduate degree in psychology in just a little more than three years, graduating at age 19 and headed to graduate school. I could not mow through school fast enough and was a voracious consumer of education. I had goals and plans and was on my way to achieving the *what*. Without realizing it or consciously avoiding it however, I was minimizing the importance of also achieving the *who*. This is not to say that I gave no thought to personal or spiritual development, or that I never took a break to have fun, only that my focus was on achieving the career role that I thought would also define me.

My career goal at this point had evolved into becoming a family therapist or counselor. Earlier I considered the possibility of clinical psychology and a career working with children with cognitive disabilities, but I was not admitted to any graduate programs in clinical psychology. One of my undergraduate sociology professors, with whom I was enrolled in a “courtship and marriage” course, knew that I was moving from my home in South Carolina to Kentucky after graduation. He listened carefully to what I had to say about my interests, and then asked if I’d ever heard of the discipline of family studies. Of course I had not. He suggested I apply to the family studies program at the University of Kentucky and study family development and counseling. I finished a masters degree in family studies at UK and studied counseling as well, but by the time the degree was done I realized I had neither the interest nor the patience to be a counselor. For the first but not the last time, I was adrift in terms of career goals but also confident that the answer was to be found in continuing my education. Although I never worked as a counselor, the listening skills and perspectives on empathy I developed proved invaluable to me along the way once I decided to open myself up to others.

With a masters degree in hand and newly married, I moved with my husband to Atlanta, GA where he began his first faculty position and I enrolled in the doctoral program in child and family studies at the University of Georgia. At the time, students were required to identify a minor field of study to support what was a typical career trajectory in an academic setting. Once again, I chafed against traditional expectations and - to be perfectly candid - I knew I had to choose something that would distinguish me from the brilliant peers around me. I started to think about domains of practice for family scientists. I knew I would not succeed as a therapist. I knew that the last thing I wanted was to become an educator. I was fascinated by what was then still a very new exploration of the role of family science and child development research in public policy decision making. Armed with enthusiasm for a new adventure, I told my major professor I wanted to minor in UGA's very fine public policy program. Her response was that if that was my desire, I was in the wrong place and needed to rethink my degree program. In her defense and for the reader young enough to be amazed there ever was a time that family scientists did *not* see the policy arena as an appropriate area for practice, the intersection of family science and policy science was still quite new. Only a few brave pioneers were exploring that domain, but I'd read them all and was quite inspired.

My professor did not dismiss me from the program and I eventually found exactly the right mix of faculty to support my interests. One experience at UGA for which I am forever grateful was a brand new policy internship program that allowed me to work for a semester with a Georgia state senator in Atlanta at the state capitol. In fact, the UGA child and family studies program was a leading edge in developing family scientists for the public policy arena and I was so fortunate to arrive in the program at just that moment in time. This experience as a policy intern in the program's second cohort allowed an idea to take shape, which was that I would embark on a nontypical career path as a policy analyst focused on issues of importance to children and families.

During my doctoral training at UGA, I was offered the opportunity to teach an introductory undergraduate course in family life or family studies - I do not recall exactly the title. By "offered the opportunity," I mean I was given a teaching assistantship and assigned a course to teach with at least a few weeks to prepare. I think the course went well enough. I covered family science content; students appeared to learn something and for the most part seemed satisfied. My most profound memory of the experience, however, and the searing lesson I took away was this: *I had nothing to say*. If education had been the secular temple of my life to that point, teachers certainly were the demigods. I could not imagine there was a question they could not answer or could not generate and I was small by comparison. Moreover, for the first time I was struck by the fact that I was teaching child and family development and I had so little (or zero) experience with either. It was important but not enough to be a scientist or a student of the science. There was a wide world to experience as a professional and as a person and until I found my voice, I was determined to stay out of the classroom. So, at the grand age of 25 years and with a newly minted PhD in hand, I entered the world of public policy. I do not know why I did not experience the same trepidation in that arena except that if you look around any policy setting then or now, you find it populated as much by young wonks as seasoned professionals.

III.

For the first four full years of my career, I worked as a policy analyst with the Louisiana House of Representatives. Staffed mainly by attorneys, the House professional staff had never included a member with a PhD in Child and Family studies, and I gamely jumped into the ring again to make the case for myself in a policy setting. I was assigned primarily to staff the Health and Welfare committee and the Municipal, Parochial, and Cultural Affairs (i.e., local and county [parish] government) committee. Later I staffed the Highways, Transportation, and Public Works committee. There was no better committee for which to put my child and family studies training to work than House Health and Welfare. We were new to Louisiana and staffing the local governmental affairs committee was a wonderful way to become immersed in the rich culture and traditions of a unique system of public government that is not based in English common law but rather in the traditions of the Napoleonic code. I began to interact with the Human Ecology faculty at LSU as a guest lecturer, supervising student interns working at the Capitol, and I even filled in for a faculty member on sabbatical. Working for the Louisiana Legislature was a post-doc *par excellence* and the experience shapes my work as an educator to this day.

Two life-changing experiences came near the end of this first season of my professional career: I became a mother for the first time, and I was offered a tenure-track assistant professor position in the School of Human Ecology at LSU. I wanted more flexibility in my work schedule and I finally believed I had sufficient experiences that gave me a voice and credibility sufficient to stand before others and teach. I accepted the position and dove into my teaching assignments, welcoming the opportunity to mentor graduate students in our masters program with an unbridled enthusiasm. My faculty colleagues even gave me the opportunity to develop and teach a brand new course in public policy and family law that would be required of all majors. The field of family studies was more fully embracing family policy work and NCFR offered regular sessions on the science and practice of family policy. I was now a well-trained, experienced authority on my subject matter and was eager to mold young minds, whether it was the minds of my students or of my own young children, my little daughter having been joined by a set of twin brothers.

I only hope you can see what an intoxicating and frightening mess I presented! And I hope that if you were my student during those early years, you survived the experience with only a modicum of distress. I was sincere and well-intentioned, but determined to be the expert at the front of the room. Every lecture was perfectly crafted, every possible question anticipated so that I had the correct answer prepared, and every activity perfectly pointed toward the educational objectives listed on the syllabus. It was teaching as performance art, and it was exhausting. My students achieved good grades and I was given strong teaching evaluations and even received teaching awards. But there was very little about this endeavor that did not resemble Greco-Roman wrestling, and we all arrived somewhat depleted at the end of the semester, ready to be done with one another.

Nothing in what I have said thus far should be construed as an indictment of the many fine and caring teachers and professors I encountered along the way. No, they were consummate educators and I am grateful for their example. The difficulty was with me. I thought I had to *do* teaching. I was being the *what*. After a great deal of reflection, the kind born out of disquiet and

struggle, and a couple of unexpected encounters with the vicissitudes of life, I finally figured out what was wrong. I realized that I had to *be*. I had to be, teacher. I realized that being an educator is less about being an expert authority at the front of the room and more about being willing to be open as a human being to other human beings. I allowed myself to be fully human in the classroom, in the presence of my students. I am sometimes, unapologetically, moved to tears when I tell my students how deeply I revere democracy and invite them to fall fiercely in love with democracy as well, or when I play for them an audio clip of the U.S. Supreme Court being called into session with the passionate cry of “*Oyez! Oyez! Oyez!*” I became very comfortable with process and with widely varied outcomes, liberated by no longer needing “to mold” young minds. I learned that you cannot push a river, that students will take from a course what they are able to at the time, and that they often reach back years later for the material we discussed, just at the moment it is needed and with an even greater appreciation for it. I learned that it is about sharing my on-going journey of learning and discovery, and inviting fellow travelers along the way. It is also about joining those travelers on their journey. By revealing to my students that I am, in fact, a student, we can share the process in a way that allows them to learn from my expertise and experience and for me to learn from their expertise and experience. My training does give me knowledge and expertise but it makes me a guide in the journey of learning and discovery. Lest you think my brain and my classroom have become a mushy place, let me hasten to add that I assign very rigorous scholarly content, I have no problem exercising that expertise and, yes, I do record the grades my students earn. But it does not make me an expert in their lives or in the wonderfully varied experiences of families across our communities and nation. Instead, I invite students and equip students with the ability, when they are ready to do so, to use education and knowledge as a way to unleash their human potential and that of the families with which they will work.

IV.

Two experiences opened me up to this deeper human experience. One of them is very personal and so I will not linger over it for long. A deeply satisfying family life and the humbling opportunity to be a parent with a loving husband to three remarkable children was a completely unanticipated gift that helped soften many of my sharp edges and make me more fully human. I gained a heretofore unknown capacity for compassion, patience, vulnerability, acceptance and joy and quite frankly, those things spilled into every aspect of my life including my classroom. As I write this essay, I am at a particularly sweet moment in my life when my students are the same age as my children, and when on more than one occasion my children and their friends have been my students. It is a singular privilege.

The second, professional experience occurred about five years into my faculty career when I was given the opportunity to join a faculty group being offered formal training and peer mentoring. The program offered training in a particular approach to pedagogy but more importantly for me, it was grounded in a philosophical approach to teaching. It almost does not matter what the program was exactly, only that it was organized, evidence-based training and mentoring. The teaching process was deconstructed in a way that challenged me to think about not only what I was doing, but who I was in relation to the classroom, the content, and the students. It challenged me to think beyond a semester time frame about what I wanted the students to take away with them and who I wanted to encourage them to be, how they might

grow personally and professionally. We claim to value education for its impact on the whole person but we are all too often caught up in exactly the 15 weeks and the course objectives stretching before us every semester. I embraced the opportunity to participate in this program because I was at a cross-roads in my faculty experience. It was not enough simply to have scholarly training and experience in my field and to want to do well in the classroom. I needed new strategies and, more importantly, a new approach.

The training and mentoring I received through this initiative gave me new ways to approach my work as an educator. While these things may seem obvious, I had no training in pedagogy, nor did I ever observe my own professors' teaching as pedagogy. Through this program I was invited to see the classroom as a collaborative endeavor. As previously stated, I was still the content expert but now I gave the students more responsibility for their learning by guiding them through the process rather than asking them to show up for a weekly "data dump" of information. For the first time, I was not just mimicking great teachers. I went to class prepared and at the same time, open to what my students and I would accomplish together that day. Alongside this new professional perspective, my husband and I were gaining confidence as parents, establishing expectations and asking our children to take responsibility for their actions and choices. I began to see new ways that I could encourage, coach, and help build developmental capacity in another person.

Once I embarked on this approach, I embraced it completely and never looked back. Today, I continue to build on the experience. This first innovation in my teaching approach so many years ago unleashed my willingness to try other credible innovations along the way, especially when I have had the opportunity to combine my research and practice with my teaching. Two examples will suffice. Since 2006 I have led the Louisiana Family Impact Network and when we are preparing and offering family impact seminars, I engage undergraduate and graduate students in every aspect of this work, both in the classroom and in the state seminars. The students help prepare the briefing report, work with legislators and policy professionals, interact with seminar speakers, and attend the seminar. More recently, in 2013, I was invited to a Kettering Foundation workshop in Dayton, Ohio for training on, among other things, the National Issues Forum process and topics. Immediately I determined to bring this process into my classroom and now incorporate and model civic discourse on a variety of topics germane to our course content. Imagine how far we have come: students are given readings from a variety of perspectives on a topic of critical importance to our nation; I guide them through the establishment of ground rules for their dialogue, and then step out of the way to let them engage. While I will occasionally offer some gentle guidance or help them refocus their discussion, I get out of the way and let them interact with each other in a prepared and thoughtful discussion. What better way to love our democracy than nurture it right there in the classroom!

In short, my life as an educator is still exhausting but in a different way, and it leaves me deeply satisfied and fulfilled instead of drained. I allow my students to decide how hard they will work in my courses and respect their decision. I cannot want more for them than they want for themselves and I cannot work harder for their education than they are willing to work for themselves – I can't push a river. I am quite satisfied knowing that even if their effort – and their grade – reflects what appears to be a modest outcome, they may well reach back for this knowledge when their own professional career demands it. If they do not remember a particular

piece of information, they will leave the classroom equipped with skills that allow them to find and analyze the information. In short, I believe that I have opened the door and helped unleash their own potential to achieve their goals. I hope they would not be surprised to know that every day and with nearly every encounter, they do the same for me in ways that continue to make me more fully human. I am grateful to these students for the opportunity and privilege of meeting them in our classroom.

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