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Changing Plans: A Professional Development Reflection

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Changing Plans

We all want to know what is next. Predictions are just that: predictions. Nonetheless, we still check the weather forecast daily, and dress accordingly. There are no guarantees in life, but we still plan—sometimes, for things years down the road. Society encourages us to proactively check our health, secure a preschool placement for Junior (before she’s even born), meal prep on Sundays, have a professional 4-year-plan, and start training for that big race next summer. We live in a world of planners. Perhaps, those plans are a coping mechanism for the true “unknown” that sits just a few seconds ahead of us.

On March 10th, I was halfway into my hour-long commute from campus when I received an email from the President of my university. The email said that we would be going “remote” for three weeks. Although I knew this was a possibility, I was still stunned. I wondered how long this virus would stick around. I thought back to when I was a kid: answers were easier to come by then. All we had to do was trust in our Magic 8-Ball, and ask the question on our minds. Looking back, I suspect that 8-Ball might have answered my question regarding the longevity of the (future) pandemic with a staunch *Better Not Tell You Now*.

We “threw” our courses online overnight. Fortunately, my department has a great record of successful online programming; however, moving in-person classes online was foreign to everyone. We weighed the importance of mandatory “cameras on” for synchronous meetings with the thought that doing so could be an invasion of privacy, an invitation for criticism from peers, and a disincentive to attend for at-risk students. I returned to my mental 8-Ball, “Could we provide a safe learning environment for all students without making thoughtful modifications?” *Outlook Not So Good*. Take transgender students, for example. Perhaps there were some who used a different name or different pronouns at school, but were now sharing a computer with a parent at home. Was this likely to end unfavorably without manually modifying the grade book, emails, and other course correspondence? *Signs Point(ed) to Yes*. How could we quickly switch instructional delivery methods for courses planned—broadly—years in advance (and specifically months in advance)? Was this possible without compromising the integrity of the promised college education and the licensure requirements dangling over our heads? *Concentrate and Ask Again*. And, so we did.

Unlike when I asked the 8-Ball for guidance about less consequential problems in middle school, the implications of these questions were much heavier for this 8-Ball. It surely did not stop the tiny icosahedron figure from rolling in my head and offering an ambiguous commentary along the way.

Ohio’s “Safe at Home” campaign eventually left us with distant learning for the remainder of the semester. Like others, I balanced work and “mom” life. My wife (an elementary music teacher) and I tried to provide our kids with opportunities for growth, while simultaneously balancing our work from home. As a former elementary art teacher, and as someone who has more recently taught education and human development courses at the college level, was I more equipped than most to offer a top-notch education to my 4, 2, and twin 1-year-old children? *Yes—Definitely*. Was that evident in our day-to-day educational activities in accordance with what was sent home by the kids’ preschool? *Don’t Count on It*.

Things changed at the end of March, as the university announced a “careful assessment about the necessity of renewing [Visiting Assistant Professors] (VAPs).” My heart sank with the

announcement, because I knew the implications for me and for those in my position. Although my department fought hard to keep me, by the beginning of April, I knew my position was being eliminated along with nearly every other VAP with an annual contract. Like some sort of wise guru, the words of the Magic 8-Ball popped into my head, leaving little hope for my professional life: *It is Decidedly So*. And, so it was. I quickly learned that nearly all universities had “hiring freezes” in effect, and out of necessity, I started to think about what life outside of academia might look like. I awkwardly navigated the remainder of my teaching responsibilities (which continued through the end of July) in addition to helping with other departmental endeavors. Was it worth trying anymore? *Without a Doubt*.

In the 2 years I spent at my institution, I taught hundreds of students—many of whom were graduating that year—and they deserved more than a mailed diploma. When my department asked for volunteers to help make their virtual graduation more meaningful, I offered to make a recognition video for our graduates to celebrate their accomplishments. The students deserved this honor, and although this was a stressful time for me (and my colleagues), I felt as though it was more important than ever to exceed the expectations of my employer. Although my job prospects had been dashed, I was clinging to the hope that if I worked hard enough, maybe there could still be a place for me at my university. Maybe, there could still be a reason to keep me. I suspect that this is a thought that runs through many VAPs’ heads as they navigate their temporary (albeit full-time) employment at any given university. This was not a new strategy for me. Although I know it is highly unlikely for a VAP to be kept in any capacity past the five-year employment limit at my university, I have always worked hard in hopes of being the exception. This was no different.

The summer (and the pandemic) continued, and I could no longer put off gathering my things from my soon-to-be former employer. As I started my hour-long drive to clean out my office in mid-July, I remembered this trek from years prior. I was teaching at my alma mater, so the commute was like an old friend. The rain fell that day, and I asked my mental 8-Ball whether Mother Nature was serving up an easy metaphor for my feelings about this conclusion. *As I See It, Yes*. Would literal tears be raining as well? *You May Rely on It*. The office cleaning was anticlimactic in a silent building. I was grateful our departmental administrative assistant met me in the parking lot to see me off. My time at my university (seven years that spanned decades) was through. I brought everything home and left it all in the garage—both physically and mentally. At the end of the month, I finished teaching my last class and replied to a few farewell emails. Did I know what I would do next? *My Reply [was] No*.

I tried to plan my next professional move, but the long days of being an activities coordinator for four young children left me tired during my nightly “working hours” when the house was quiet. I pondered what could financially help us stay afloat. Could my coloring sheets be lucrative? *Yes*. Do I have the business background to create a successful small business during an economically difficult time and a pandemic? *Very Doubtful*. I tried to let my mind rest. There was a lot of build up to this moment, and I was exhausted.

At times, it felt like my greatest asset in surviving the pandemic was caffeine. When my mind did rest, I was able to reflect and see how lucky I was to be in the field of Family Science. Throughout the months of uncertainty, I used theories, skills, and techniques from my own education and the classes I taught on a daily basis. My mind was constantly reeling with questions I often posed to my students, but they were reframed in the context of a pandemic.

“How much screen time is too much during a pandemic when you spend every waking moment with your children? How do you provide emotional support for someone you cannot be physically close to? What supports need to be put in place for families to become closer during this time of isolation? How do I share my opinions with family members who may not share the same perspective regarding the seriousness of COVID-19?” There were so many theories, so many strategies, and so much research that informed my decisions and conversations. Without ever knowing what the “right” step was, I recognized the privilege I had when it came to making informed decisions and plans for my family. This provided me comfort even when the answers were not clear.

On August 4th, I received a message from our department chair that she wanted to touch base over the phone. My mental 8-Ball told me it was *Most Likely* that she needed help transitioning a course. This prediction was wrong, however, and I was informed that barring any pushback from the university, she would like to rehire me. A tenure-track faculty member had to resign, and the department was in a bind. I had no hesitation in accepting, and yet, as the year had gone, there was pushback. My job was left in the hanging for 24 hours as the paperwork made its way through the ranks of approval. Would I be “burned” once more? *Reply Hazy, Try Again*. Unlike the usual 8-Ball strategy of my youth, I could not continue to flip the ball over until I saw the future I wanted. The 8-Ball was clever anyway, and I am certain I would have only ended up with an *Ask Again Later*. “Patience is a virtue,” I reminded myself. One that had been the lynchpin of the past six months.

The following day, I received the news that thanks to a very persuasive and dedicated department chair, my position was approved. I received my annual contract via email, and I could not help but pinch myself. Could this truly be happening? My mental 8-Ball would not argue: *It Is Certain*. After four months of skepticism, I was back in the game, and I was immensely relieved. Does that offer any guarantee beyond the end of the school year? *My Sources Say No*. An annual contract is both the benefit and the consequence of being a visiting faculty member. However, if the pandemic has taught me anything, it is that planning is not always the guarantee we hope it will be.

Why do we plan anyway? As humans, predictability and routines often make us more comfortable. Many people have a fear of the unknown, and planning gives a feeling of control. From a very young age, we are encouraged to do so: it is ingrained in our elementary school planners and scheduled after-school programming. With our friends, we make “fortune tellers” out of loose leaf paper and get Magic 8-Balls as gifts in our formative years. Of course, planning is not a negative skill set. We are rewarded for setting goals and accomplishing them, as well as having fallback plans if those goals are unattained. With so many variables and an inability to thoughtfully plan during a pandemic, what do we have in our toolboxes to help us cope with this ambiguous future? We ask, “How long will this last? When will the other shoe drop?” Unfortunately, my old Magic 8-Ball *Cannot Predict Now*. But, upon shaking it up and checking again (the “old school” method), I saw *Outlook Good*. Because of the trust I have in that Magic 8-Ball, I am going to put it back on my shelf knowing this must be true. I suppose optimism is my plan now.