

Just Another Piece of Quit Lit

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ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

Most "quit lit" articles I've read focus on the dismal tenure-track job market, the particulars of the student-adviser relationship, and the support that a doctoral program can (but often doesn't) provide. All of my training up to that point had made me exceptionally proficient at being a student, so jumping through the hoops required to get into a Ph.D. program was right in my wheelhouse. [...]it romanticizes alcoholism, isolation, and poor health choices, as graduate students convince themselves that loneliness and excessive drinking somehow make them an intellectual.

FULL TEXT

Leaving my Ph.D. program turned out to be a smarter decision than applying.

A few years ago I quit my Ph.D. program. It was the second best decision I've ever made. They don't write novels or make movies about us quitters. That honor is reserved for people who never gave up, believed in themselves, didn't listen to all the naysayers, and persevered. However, with graduate-school attrition rates at around 50 percent, half of us never reach the Ph.D. promised land. I'm a quitter. And, honestly, I think some of you should be, too.

It is hard to tell people that you've quit something. I remember feeling a powerful terror, expecting people I told to cut ties with me. I know that sounds terribly hyperbolic, but since my parents had said they were proud of me for pursuing a doctorate, I assumed they would be ashamed of me for quitting. Over the years, my friends had overshot me in life markers, but that was easy to justify based on my "higher pursuits." With that ego-crutch removed, I was forced to face what I hadn't accomplished.

As it turned out, (almost) no one abandoned me because of my loss of faith in graduate study. Instead, my relational terror was replaced by an existential terror as I realized that all of those specialized topics we study so deeply for so long in graduate school are —for the most part —of zero interest to anyone else.

I wish I could tell you that, at least professionally, it was easy to make the transition into the "real" world. But that would be a lie. I spent my first post-academic summer and fall working at a marina in Maine. I had, in my heart, given up on academe but had not yet done so on paper. The marina was a romantic, cliched, self-imposed exile, and if I hadn't been so depressed I would have been happy.

From there, I got work as a hospital security guard. I was punched, kicked, bit, scratched, and hit with every substance the human body can produce. I liked it more than my doctoral program, and so I officially severed ties.

Remember when I said that most people have no interest in our research? They also don't see it as viable work experience. And as much as I tried to tout my soft skills, application after application went unanswered —or so it seemed in those early months. The whole process sucked. But it (and therapy) gave me plenty of opportunity to reflect on graduate school and why I left.

Most "quit lit" articles I've read focus on the dismal tenure-track job market, the particulars of the student-adviser

relationship, and the support that a doctoral program can (but often doesn't) provide. To be sure, all of those were factors in my decision to leave graduate school. But at the end of the day, and after much soul searching, I've concluded that I never should have been there in the first place.

I entered college bright-eyed and bushy-tailed but directionless. I had a vague idea that maybe I would become a lawyer but no real commitment to it. What I did have a commitment to was pleasing the adults around me. And that meant mirroring their career choices. It just so happened I was surrounded by professors.

All of my training up to that point had made me exceptionally proficient at being a student, so jumping through the hoops required to get into a Ph.D. program was right in my wheelhouse. I had heard the warning: "Only pursue a Ph.D. if there is literally nothing else you can imagine yourself doing." Every time I heard it, I nodded in agreement, confident that that was me.

But I knew nothing. I had assumed that the entire business world consisted of salespeople and paper pushers. I could either: (a) be a professor or (b) endure the soul-crushing monotony of corporate life. I didn't choose the professoriate so much as I thought it was the only appealing choice.

And it was great —for a while. I loved my master's program and looked up to the doctoral students, eager to join their ranks. It wasn't until I started the Ph.D. program that a cynicism began to creep in.

The work I was doing became increasingly less inspiring. Time in the library, once an adventure, became a chore. Conference presentations seemed like nothing more than an attempt to get an additional line on my CV, with no one on the panels particularly interested in what anyone else had to say. Some presenters showed up on stage with nothing more than a few hastily scribbled notes, indicating that even *they* didn't care what they had to say. I got an article in a peer-reviewed journal; only the reviewers ever read it.

As the voices of existential dread grew louder in my head, I did more to drown them out. I started drinking more. Soon I forgot what it was like to wake up without a headache. Lacking funds, I survived on coffee and cheap whiskey —and not always in the expected order. I even started smoking.

My one real complaint against academe is that it doesn't problematize that sort of behavior. In fact, it romanticizes alcoholism, isolation, and poor health choices, as graduate students convince themselves that loneliness and excessive drinking somehow make them an intellectual.

But there is nothing heroic about that lifestyle, and if life choices are driving you to self-destructive behavior, it is time for new life choices. It is time to quit. Unfortunately, I didn't figure that out right away. So instead, I became a cynical, misanthropic drunk who terrified my parents and torpedoed a relationship with a great girl who deserved better. Don't do that. Don't be that person. You, and the people in your life, deserve better.

So I quit. And ...life is pretty great now. As I've noted, it took some time to reach this point. It also took some crappy jobs and some therapy. But life on the other side is so much better. My job (they actually pay me to do this) is to teach technical and fund-raising skills to nonprofit professionals. Most months I'll train about 200 people, all of whom will immediately use the skills they've learned to make the world a better place. How cool is that?

I earn enough to pay my bills (including student loans), put money away in savings, and still have some left over to go out to dinner with my wife on date night.

To be honest, I've found the for-profit world to be far more supportive of me as a person than academe ever was. Rather than being soul-crushing, working for "the man" has been liberating and allowed me to be who I want to be in the world. Plus, my parents aren't terrified anymore, which is a nice perk.

Maybe none of what I've said resonates with you. Maybe for you, graduate school has been wonderful and supportive, and achieves all the ideals that it promised. Maybe you are thrilled to be a doctoral student. Maybe you are even angry that I would threaten your beloved institution. Well, this article isn't for you, and, anyway, shouldn't you be writing?

Perhaps you completed your Ph.D., and are languishing in adjunct purgatory. Does what I've said apply to you? I don't know. I didn't make it far enough to earn the right to answer that question.

This essay is for people who, reading along, thought, "Yeah, that sounds like me." You don't have to finish your Ph.D. Even if you did, you don't have to stay in academe. You aren't stuck. You aren't trapped. This isn't your only option. If working on your Ph.D. and pursuing a faculty career are making you someone you don't like, then stop being that person. I promise, no one cares about your research topic anyway, and people will still be your friend.

There are amazing, fulfilling, supportive, and meaningful jobs outside of higher education. So just quit. Or, rather, realize that deciding you are stuck doing something that is destroying you because of a decision you made when you were 21 is the real quitting.

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