

What Do You Care About? Studying What I Love

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I was playing my “cello more. And I had felt – to my surprise – moved to tears at times during my daughters” music classes. Music, which has always mattered to me, suddenly seemed fundamental to life, and I increasingly felt there was not enough of it in mine.

I had recently been awarded tenure, but was feeling quite empty. For several years, I had been writing papers from my dissertation and gathering new data that did not excite me. I had not abandoned my interests, but still the tenure process had left me quite depleted. Now I had tenure, I could – what? More of the same? A grand new project that would be quicker to publish? It all felt utterly flat.

Sitting talking with Richard Hackman at the Academy of Management conference, I admitted that I was trying to work out what to do next. Richard is always good with questions. “What do you care about?” he asked. This is not – in my experience – a common question in business schools. Yet I knew he was not asking, “Where can you make your mark?” or, “What’s hot and publishable?”. Richard gets very excited about his research – in a way that goes beyond pure intellectual fervor and ambition. And he is someone who has produced extremely original, high quality work over many decades and *still* finds it exciting. So his question was meaningful to me.

In response, I tried to articulate the feelings I had been having about music. He understood easily, since music is also a passion of his. But, while I care about music, it wasn’t obvious to me how I could bring it back into my research. My dissertation had been on sensemaking in symphony orchestras, but it seemed implausible to spend my career studying music ensembles. “What do you read about that’s not work stuff?” Richard asked. Again, a question I rarely discuss with colleagues. I wondered if I should tell him. “Psychotherapy”, I ventured. He appeared unfazed.

I explained a growing interest I had in posttraumatic growth, the experience of positive change that comes through the struggle with life crises. The idea had intrigued me for some time. I have been a member of the Positive Organizational Scholarship movement from its inception, but had not immediately found the specific connection that fitted the dark European skeptic in me. Posttraumatic growth allowed me to sit in my ambivalence: yes, the world is full of pain – but that is not the only story.

Richard and I strolled through downtown Philadelphia, exchanging ideas about musicians, trauma, and psychotherapy. Nothing quite fitted, but I enjoyed playing with the combination. A couple of weeks later, I sent him an e-mail:

“I have, on and off, been thinking about our conversation and my need to create an energizing research direction. I was wondering if it might be interesting to talk to musicians who have been forced to take a new path because of an injury... What do you think?”

“Great idea”, he replied. Enough to help me feel that my passion-led thought was not necessarily academic suicide. Since then, I have conducted intensive narrative interviews with over 30 musicians and dancers, in research supported by two grants, to study posttraumatic growth in artistic performers who have experienced an injury preventing them from doing their work as they once did. I am still in the middle of my data collection, and feel more excited by it than any I have done for over a decade. I love meeting the artists, and connecting to their professional and personal worlds. I feel honored to be trusted with their stories, in which passion and pain are deeply entwined. I care about the work they were called to do, and I feel their anguish in no longer being able to do it. They talk at length of lost hopes, broken dreams, and journeys terminated despite ceaseless efforts. But that is not the only story. Many of them also tell tales of previously undiscovered talents and passions, of new doors opening, of fresh realizations about what is most important.

Through this work, I am constantly learning. I have never researched anything so intensely personal, something so intimately tied to people’s identities. I am discovering that posttraumatic growth is not a clear-cut state that one achieves or doesn’t, or even that one attains to a greater or lesser degree. Growth lies in the doing; it is dynamic and does not have a clear end point. I am learning more about life in the performing arts. My interviewees convey the overwhelming pull they felt towards music or dance as a form of work, the huge demands it has placed on them throughout their lives, and the incomparable pleasure and fulfillment it has brought. And then the intense pain, often extending over many years. And then, for some, the movement towards new selves, new callings, and, with these, also new struggles. I feel joy for these interviewees; but even talking with those whose lives are less enriched still enriches mine. I am alive in my research again. I am study-

ing what I care about, having authentic conversations with people working to make new meanings of their lives and of themselves, and engaging in a world where music and art matter.

I often hear colleagues counsel doctoral students and junior faculty to save what they care about until later – until they have a job or job security, and can afford to take the risk. To me, the greatest risk is spending time today on things that don't matter to you. The theory of path dependence suggests that future decisions are greatly limited by previous ones; this must be especially true of academic research streams, which take so long to establish and from which, if successful, it can be hard to break away. Moreover, as the artists I study can attest, it is dangerous to assume that tomorrow, or next year, or post-tenure will be as we imagine. It has been my good fortune, evidenced in the generative conversation with Richard Hackman, and before that in generative exchanges with my PhD advisor Chris Clegg, to receive encouragement and support to study – *now*, rather than at some safer future time – what I care about. How wonderful to cautiously reveal a passion to respected colleagues, and to hear them say, “Follow it!” I don't know if, in the long run of an academic career, it is easier to sell others your passion or to develop a passion for something that others tell you is important. But I do know that, in pursuing my passion, I feel alive, and that is something I'd prefer not to put off until tomorrow.