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More Than a Good Job: A Life in Language

My academic and professional journey, from pursuing a practical degree for job security to rediscovering a love for learning through literature and teaching, has led me to a clear goal: to teach English, literature, and writing at the community college level while also pursuing my writing with the goal of becoming published.

Before understanding where I am in the present and where I go in the future, I must know where I come from and what my motivation has been thus far. As the product of a hard-working Mexican immigrant mother and a first-generation Latino father, my parents overshadowed my childhood with a pragmatic view of the world. This disciplined but simple worldview was that I, as the firstborn of three and the only male sibling, would go to college, get a degree, and get a "good" job. As a child, education was solely for social mobility and financial gain. There was no push for learning for the sake of learning or growth. In their eyes, the school's sole purpose was to earn a degree. More importantly, it did not matter where I got that degree, so long as the degree allowed me to gain a "good" job.

Eventually, in 2002, I settled on attending the University of Notre Dame for my undergraduate work. I began there as an 18-year-old freshman with my parent's ideals engraved into my brain—get a degree and get a good job. It sounded simple enough, so

I enrolled in the Mendoza College of Business, seeking a degree in Accounting. That same first year, I had heard that employers liked "well-rounded" candidates and that it could be beneficial to pair my accounting degree with a liberal arts major as well. While not particularly religious, I found the study of religion especially exciting. The cliché that "more people have died in the name of God than in any war" had always appealed to me. I had noticed across all religions that people were die-hard supporters of their religion. I wanted to know how so many people of such different faiths could be so convinced that they were so right. I began to combine my accounting classes with my theology classes.

It was this introduction to the liberal arts, critical thinking, and deep thoughts that truly ignited a passion that I had never felt. Academia hooked me. I wanted to study for the sake of studying. I wanted to learn because it made my brain feel good. I devoured reading, attended office hours, and asked for constant feedback from my professors. I wanted to grow, learn, and understand my place in this society and learn from all the humanity around me. The money and "good" job be damned, I had found something much more worthwhile and exciting. While my parents and ex-girlfriend's family were aghast that I would not complete the final three classes to gain my accounting degree, I did not care. After studying the human condition, there was no way I could ever go back to wanting to work in corporate America, sitting behind a desk, hoping and waiting for the day to retire officially.

I graduated from the University of Notre Dame with a degree in Theology in 2006. I had interviewed at over thirty companies during my senior year and realized

that I did not want to do what everyone else was doing. I spent some time doing odd jobs and bouncing between Chicago, Austin, and Dallas. Ultimately, after a few years of grand adventures, I settled in Dallas, working at the local 7-Eleven gas station/grocery mart while reading, writing, and trying to discern life's purpose and my connection to this world.

In doing this, I eventually gravitated to teaching and took a job teaching high school English to juniors and seniors. I found a passion for teaching literature, writing, and words. I wanted to harness the power of words to make the world better than I found it, so I opted to go to law school.

I enrolled in and attended Texas A&M University School of Law and graduated in 2014. While most students attended in hopes of fulfilling my parents' goals—job security and a better paycheck—a few of us recognized the power of written and spoken words. I was one of those students who wanted to make a difference and defend the ones who needed the most help, so I became a criminal defense trial attorney in Texas.

While practicing law, I learned a lot about the power of written and oral words. It was truly exciting to be in the courtroom and use my skills as an orator and a lover of literature to defend my clients. But I knew that if there was a day where I no longer had the passion or fire to defend the accused, then I should move on to greener pastures. After my health started declining because of the long hours, high stress, and combative lifestyle, I knew I had to move on. There was no more passion for the right word or the perfect phrase. I came to see the Texas criminal justice system as vast, corrupt, and

deeply prejudiced. I had served nine years fighting the Goliath, lost a full head of hair, earned diabetes, had developed dangerously high blood pressure, and I was no longer up to the test. As such, I resigned my law license and began to explore my next move.

I began to read texts other than law statutes and case law. I realized there was more to life than court deadlines, angry justices, racist attorneys, and biased jurors. It felt good to feel alive and intellectually curious again. The brain fog lifted like a morning dew, and I felt the sun of curiosity warming my mind again.

As I had done previously, I opted to go back into teaching and took a position teaching high school English at a heavily minority demographic school in Dallas. It was great. The students were images of me at that age: Latino and out to conquer the world. My mission in 2023-2024 was to expose kids to books, magazines, and literature to spark their intellectual curiosity, excite them, or let them explore their true passions through literature. We read all kinds of short stories and books that year. Perhaps the most encouraging was a note from my student letting me know I had ignited a love of reading and writing in her that she did not know was within her – that statement made me realize I loved teaching. I love discussing literature and exploring the human condition through books and ideas.

I wanted to keep learning and keep growing. I wanted to learn and become an expert on all literature-related things, including reading and writing. As such, I researched some programs and settled on enrolling for my Master of Arts in English at Arizona State University.

In the summer of 2024, nearly a year after surrendering my law license, I took three classes, including Teaching Young Adult Literature, Technologies of Writing, and Linguistics. I loved how Linguistics showed the evolving nature of language and how Teaching Young Adult Literature opened my eyes to the emotional depth of contemporary fiction. To my surprise and encouragement, my first two professors were Latino men. It was terrific to see men of my culture and background teaching classes that I genuinely enjoyed and had never considered.

I was challenged in my Linguistics class because I had not taken any linguistics classes before. But while I did enjoy learning how to do tree diagrams and other "staples" of linguistics, I appreciated the overall tone of the class, which was that "no language is more or less logical than any other" and that "rules like 'don't split the infinitives' were propagated by people in the eighteenth century who believed that English should be more like Latin." The overall tone was that there are all kinds of ways language allows us to communicate, and while there are a lot of rules to language, there is no one "right" way to communicate and use language.

I felt the same excitement when I was exposed to young adult literature in Teaching Young Adult Literature. Though I had never read those books as a young adult, they immediately resonated with me, and I knew they could also spark a connection for today's students.

In Fall 2024, I was again excited to take three more classes, including Approaches to Research, American Captivities, and Composition Studies. While Approaches to Research did not seem exciting or insightful at first glance, I was wrong. I learned much

about academic research, its standards, and its value. It was an unexpected gift in the form of learning, and I have been using the skills I gained in all my classes since. The most insightful and different course was American Captivities. Like in my other classes, I saw the professor's passion for the topic in the course design, lectures, and assignments. I had expected a run-of-the-mill class on "slavery." Still, this class fueled my imagination and caused me to create new and insightful theories about writings of the time and first-person accounts of early colonialism and slavery. In this final semester of Spring 2025, I just completed my Shakespeare class, and again, I saw the professor's love of the subject in the assignments, materials, and feedback. It was even more inspiring. I had never considered myself a particular lover of Shakespeare, but the class gave me a new appreciation and understanding. This respect for Shakespeare was a direct result of this class.

During this last year's academic journey, ASU and its varied curriculum and passionate professors have stirred and fed my love of teaching and literature. I am inspired to teach at the community college level. I want to continue teaching a subject I love deeply. I also want to take my writing seriously and begin to write earnestly and purposefully in hopes of one day getting published. I now teach and write not just for a "good" job or to make a living but to make meaning for myself, my students, and the world we share.