Confessions of an academic failure

I failed graduate school in 2006. I failed after 6 months. I had personal problems, and wasn't ready. I wasn't even that interested in that particular program, but applied because I wanted to be a professor one day. It was the first time I had to leave school. I made it further than I had hoped, but not nearly as far as I thought I'd be. 17 years ago, I took my last final exam. The grades were Cs. Not enough to pass. I was given the option to withdraw before I would be dropped. It took me years to recover from the failure, and I still get wistful. I had tried to reapply several times, once for a Masters program around 2008, and another for a PhD program in 2010. I was once given an interview for the former (at a prestigious university, to study study Ribosome evolution by writing a meticulously crafted essay expressing interest on subject), but persuaded by a sibling, that the M.S. degree would be a waste of money, even if it were just 2 more years. I could see the reasoning behind that view, and I didn't entirely disagree. I still have my regrets, though. I should admit, that my parents were extremely kind to pay for my undergraduate tuition, and while they were willing to help with a graduate program, I realized, for the first time, more maturely, the weight of money after I had obtained my bachelors, than any time during my undergraduate.

An acquaintance from my undergraduate years described life after college with a term I had not heard anywhere else. Referring to knowledge acquired during those formative years, he called it "academic mortality." Specifically, when a student completes a prerequisite that they have little interest in, and can quickly or willfully forget, that information/knowledge "dies" as soon as the student progresses to the next year/phase of their life. At least, that is my interpretation of the meaning. Certainly there are other definitions that could be used- when students drop out prior to graduation, whether it is secondary school, or even graduate school. But I prefer to interpret this phrase specifically in reference to the knowledge itself, rather than the act of "dropping" or "failing (out)." The reason is, that academic mortality is not entirely an involuntary act. Sure, one might technically "fail" school or not be able to afford it without much thought, but there are many opportunities to re-join the academia. And if not, one could always found a decent enough institute with a serious study, whether it is a think tank, an independent research organization, or some organization worthy of mention, somewhere. That isn't to say that many independent ventures are successful, but it shows that one has alternatives that are almost, if not better, than the original career goal.

On that note, I recall only three career pursuits prior to declaring a major in my freshman year. In the seventh grade, Pixar released their first movie, Toy Story, and my art class had the each of us construct a time capsule with artifacts from 1996 with things that we liked, along with a list of responses to pre-written questions. One of the questions was, what did I want to be when I grew up? Admittedly, I never said before that what I wanted to be, because I did not ever think of the idea. My parents never nudged me to be any profession, and if they did, I never heard them.

The first time I was prompted with a career question was when I was 12. So I wrote in my time capsule, that I wanted to be a computer animator, to make movies like Toy Story. In elementary school, I visited my family dentist, and, upon seeing that he drove a Nissan Altima/or Sentra, somehow elicited a curiosity in the profession of dentistry to acquire the means to a Nissan. A couple years later, a friend from school had a Nissan, and, being a passenger in the backseat of one, I became carsick (possibly due to the different transmission system), and fell out of love with the vehicle, postponing or striking out the profession of dentistry early on. You can blame me for having an early interest in the wealth-building careers for the purpose of transactional acquisitions of such foreign cars that my parents did not buy. At 13, I was fortunate to not know the difference between luxury cars and basic cars like Nissan, and I have

been fortunate to view the world this way. If say, I had affluent parents, who, thinking it "pragmatic" to teach their children not to settle less than an Acura or a Lexus, then, perhaps I might have looked at Nissans with less rosy glasses. But the positive aspect of not being born into a family that expected brand name acquisitions that meant little to me is that it prolongs the number of years of an upbringing that naturally doubts the meaning of wealth in an abundant society, one that is not so amnesiac to forget a generation ago, when cars did not even have seat belts and air bags.

My parents did not drive foreign cars in the 90s, because they did purchase foreign cars in the 70s and 80s, but, and one of my parents experienced vandalism and/or theft on one of their vehicles components in their employee parking lot, due to it being foreign made. They shared this with me, perhaps to explain why they purchased American-brand cars in the 1990s." Today, foreign brand cars are made in the U.S.

These events were before high school- before college track coursework was official at the public schools I attended. Before 8th grade, all students were pooled in the same class, whether they were "gifted" or not. I was not yet under any pressure to score well, as long as I passed. I was great at math... in the 3rd grade. I recall then, that I was one of the top 3 students. In my senior year of high school, somehow, I had two majors in mind- accounting, and architecture. I am not sure why, but I think it was because the map was mostly the territory. Architecture involved clearly defined dimensions, and accounting involved pre-existing figures. These fields appeared to be well-paying, I thought; I imagined having a office like Miranda in *Ms. Doubtfire* (an interior designer, not an architect, but with a view in an office like that, I thought, something, that architecture seemed l33t). By my senior year of high school, our family had acquired several VHS movies, one of which was *Ms. Doubtfire*, one of the strangest movies of the nineties, yet openly embraced- the decade was unlike the 80s in so many ways, that one didn't think much of each and every event with much thought-meaning not easy to trace how or where early career interests originated.

Fun fact: the time capsule that I sealed in the 7th grade was, after project completion and graded, sat in my basement, under the stairs, for years (instead of in a backyard), and this capsule was, soon carved open, first for a peek, after a few years, then completely opened, before the home was sold and lost completely to municipal waste pickup. Due to this, I retained, for better or worse, a preview of my time capsule far sooner than the pre-defined open date- I don't remember if it was 10, 15, or 20 years later. In any case, the time capsule lives on only in memory- no pictures or records were taken, if I recall correctly.

The second issue, is whether I should reflect on my career aspirations based on my earliest dreams- that of computer animator, or that of my first declared major. I entered college undeclared- a safe choice, I was told, as the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences often accepted an ACT score of 25, which I had at the time (Condolences to Gen Z and Gen Alpha if your ACT/SAT exceeds that and you were not admitted). My first declared major was English, for less than a semester. Not many people change their major multiple times, but officially changed my major twice. I interviewed with a theater department counselor, when I was undeclared, in my freshman year before I switched to English in the Spring of 2003. By the Fall of 2003, I was a Biology major, and I stayed with that til I graduated. This is an oft-repeated fact, because it reflects on my values. Changing a major isn't a value. Education before college, though, is implicitly generalist. The phrase academic mortality begins as early as specialization begins- usually in the freshman year of college. Because, while most universities encourage/require general electives in the first year, the under-realized fact is, all students are generalists until they declare a major, and that requires down-emphasizing learning of every subject other than one's "major". So much emphasis/assumption was placed on this, that at the time, I assumed that I needed to "unlearn" or downplay all of my generalist knowledge to sound more expertly. And in retrospect, if you are still

reading, you would know that this is all an act. Because while one may ostensibly believe they are an expert in one field, still walk with knowledge in other fields, that, while they may no longer be an "expert" in a subject they spent equal time studying for in high school 6-7 classes an hour each), suddenly become carriers of rote information that other students now specialize in. If you're like me, you know this creates a situation like Jeopardy! Because, trivia is a petty form of competition. Why should anyone, who's paying tens of thousands of dollars so they or their child can earn a degree professing knowledge in a field, attempt to compete with an expert in another field that, statistically, is more adept to profess? They shouldn't.

But spending so much effort to be an official expert, can be an inefficiency for some- the already trained. How so? The value of a college degree is not the major, but the trained appetite for knowledge. What other schools nourish this value better than universities? Trade schools are limited, because they gravitate towards vocations, whereas academic thinking is, in one sense of the word, an aspiration towards making the theoretical conscious- turning ideas into words, even if it cannot be universally acknowledged/known.

Becoming an expert, without any official title, is one of the more personal paths one can take. There is so much variability in the amount of time one may choose to study a topic, that, while one may not be a full-time expert, may still amass a large body of knowledge to be a near expert, and in many ways, that alone is an important goal, regardless if one has the title of official scholar. Some hobbies, though, are best left to hobbies, and not careers. Several months ago, I wrote about this idea, similar to "wordcel," that I thought quite funny for commiserating ex-academics: those who wish they could be pros, but, for one reason or another, just can't. I submitted the neologism to urbandictionary; within days, got it accepted:

It almost sounds like "indignant", and that is intentional. The greatest quality an indidact can exhibit is awareness. The first step to getting out of indidactness is overcoming the denial of being indignant.