The Desire to Learn and the Desire to Serve

Late last year, I left my tenure-track position to work as a professional data scientist. When someone asked me how it feels to move to the "other side" and what led me to make that decision, I realized that even though I've left academia in some sense, I haven't left research. I still conduct research, design surveys and experiments, check data quality, analyze various kinds of data, and disseminate findings. My data science team also collaborates with academics from time to time. In addition, Code for America is a policy-focused organization. Basically, I am doing (social) data science for disadvantaged people in the US. I also maintain my academic affiliation and have a group of researchers with whom I have collaborated for many years. We continue to work on shared projects.

Therefore, I see this chapter in my life not so much as a transition, but as an expansion or fusion of the two worlds: the academic and applied fields. I have inhabited both for a long time, and I have simply changed the composition of my portfolio. My research has become more applied-oriented, and I have replaced teaching with meetings with stakeholders and team members. If I used to play solo ping-pong, I now play full-team soccer. To use another analogy, I used to dream of running a Michelin-starred restaurant, but now I think of building a healthy fast food franchise (thanks to Nathan Matias for suggesting the latter metaphor). Outside academia, we need to do good (or good enough) work that is effective (correct) but also cost-effective (doable).

After graduating from college, my first job was as a strategy manager at a startup. I reported to CxOs, analyzed market opportunities and risks, and did a variety of other tasks because the firm was still small. Although the fast-paced and high-pressure environment was challenging, I enjoyed organizing chaotic situations and finding direction in uncertain circumstances. However, I felt dissatisfied. Occasionally, I needed to analyze internal and external data to create a market strategy, but I wasn't sure if my analytical approach was correct. I lacked the necessary skills and perspectives. I wanted to be a researcher who could distinguish fact from fiction. That's why I decided to go to graduate school.

To make a long story short, I was incredibly lucky to attend Berkeley for my Ph.D. training in political science with an external fellowship. It was a fantastic experience. Berkeley was the place I had always dreamed of, and the Bay Area provided educational and career opportunities for my wife, who happened to be an engineer.

After nearly completing my dissertation, I began working as a researcher at the SNF Agora Institute and P3 Lab at Johns Hopkins University. Although my job title has changed slightly, my role has remained consistent. I collaborate with team members and organizations in the field to develop data and tools that promote effective civic engagement.

My decision to pursue this line of work stems from two desires: the desire to learn and the desire to serve. In graduate school, I learned invaluable skills—from social science theories to statistical, computational, and mixed methods. But I also learned from my advisors, peers, and people from all walks of life that I can use those skills to make an impact by being useful to others. These two desires define my work and identity.

Before joining the Code for America, I was a tenure-track professor at a policy school in South Korea for about a year. This decision was complicated by my mother's debilitating health during the COVID-19 pandemic. The strict quarantine policies in Korea made finding a job there the only viable option for me to stay with my mom in the long term. Last year I traveled back and forth between the US and South Korea many times. As my mom's health improved, I began to consider moving back to the US, where my wife, child, close friends, and long-time colleagues are located. I was born in Korea but made in the US.

Reflecting on my career paths, I am grateful for their non-linear nature and for all the people I met along the way. I grew up in a semi-rural area in Korea where there was no library, and the only place to find books was a small bookstore. Despite reading almost all the available books, my hunger for knowledge only grew. My graduate school years were some of the best years of my life, as I was happy to learn from experts and develop my own intellectual identity. Nevertheless, I have never forgotten my roots. Both my wife and I come from working-class families, lost a parent early, and fought countless uphill battles. A stroke of incredible luck and the generosity of many people put me on the path I am on today. Therefore, I have been thinking about how to best use my time and energy to serve people, even while writing my dissertation.

From this perspective, the transition I made last year was not a transition but rather the continuation of my life journey.

I understand that in life, paths are often beyond our control. Even something as simple as sending my 4-year-old to daycare in the morning can be a struggle. However, I know that I am guided by two desires: the desire to learn and the desire to serve. These desires are my North Star, and I am committed to following them no matter what paths lie ahead of me in the future.