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# Protecting the Passion of Scholars in Times of Change

BY ANNA NEUMANN

**A**s society experiences massive change, so too do higher education institutions and, inevitably, their faculties. Information about upheavals yet to come is as plentiful as the shifts already occurring on American campuses: increasing numbers of non-tenure track faculty; increasingly diverse students and faculty; revised teaching and learning technologies; and entrepreneurship, accountability, and cost-cutting as responses to growing financial stress. Bombarded by change in life and in the news, faculty and institutional leaders may come to believe in its power alone to determine the future of higher education, including what it means to be a faculty member.

But faculty, administrators, and policymakers have some control over that future. One question is crucial for them to ponder: What is it about the academic career as a continuing profession that is worth maintaining? And what does the professoriate offer that no other profession can provide as fully and richly, something of public value and human worth, something unique and authentic that we must preserve?

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I think that the answer is to be found in how academics decide on the topics, ideas, and domains of knowledge that they will study and teach—their unique subject-matter expertise—and the spirit in which they pursue them. Professors are of course intellectually able, and most could have gone into fields other than those they chose when they entered graduate school. But early in life, many opt to forego the pursuit of high-paying careers outside academe for the freedom to engage in work with ideas that, they say, stirred up in them deep feelings of beauty and excitement, as well as the desire to share their knowledge and passion with their students, colleagues, and non-academic audiences.

I explored questions about personal meaning in professors' careers and in their scholarly subjects through a three-year study of 40 recently tenured university professors at four U.S. universities—faculty who spanned a wide diversity of fields: arts and humanities, sciences, social sciences, and applied and professional fields. I probed how these professors chose the topics they came to call their own, what those topics meant to them, and how they struggled to find room to pursue them in post-tenure lives and careers that left little room for the work they loved.

Jumping ahead to my conclusions: The scholars I interviewed, all one to five years post-tenure, chose the academic career out of a deep desire to understand the subjects of study that beckoned to them through the rigors of graduate training, the challenges and insecurities of the pre-tenure years, the “big test” of the tenure review, and often post-tenure workloads and campus cultures that did not support the scholarly learning that meant a great deal to them intellectually and personally.

Because the early post-tenure career offers professors unprecedented freedoms and privileges but also new responsibilities and duties, I honed in on professors' work and explored what they learned during this career period. A number spoke of feeling compelled to give up personal time and time spent with spouses or partners, families, or communities in order to keep up with growing professional obligations. Nearly all spent this phase of life rethinking their priorities, identities, or commitments to their scholarly learning and beyond, forming new concepts of what it means to be a professor.

But the passion for their work has continued to be the core of their careers. In order to provide a nuanced sense of what defines scholarly commitment, I offer an extended set of comments from an interview with Richard Marin (pseudonym), a newly tenured associate professor of physics at Hope State University (pseudonym), an urban public research university. (Note: all the quotations that follow are redactions without ellipses or brackets).

Like many tenured scientists, Marin conducts research, teaches undergraduate and graduate students, serves on numerous committees, and carries out other campus work. Although Marin tells a story that is uniquely his, as a person

and as an academic physicist, the texture of his scholarly experiences—the emotion and insight that have grown out of his interaction with his subject of study—was shared by virtually all the recently tenured professors I interviewed in my study.

As Marin and I talked about his post-tenure work, I asked him what it was like for him to work on a topic that has long intrigued him: “individuality and identity in the subatomic world” of quantum mechanics and microphysics.

“I’m not so sure how common this is, but when things are going well, what happens is first of all, it affects me physically, not just intellectually. My body kicks into a higher gear. I shake, and I can’t stop moving. I barely sleep as it is, and I sleep even less.

“Although it might sound like it’s distracting, it’s not. It’s wonderful, it really is. My students say that I’m talking to the muses. I start channeling things. I start spewing forth conjectures or mathematical ideas without really knowing where they’re coming from. Obviously your subconscious is doing the information-processing when you’re in this agitated state, giving you the results of it while hiding the reasoning. And so then you have to go back and reconstruct where it came from and then try to use it. It’s like you’re not creating it—it’s being revealed to you.

“That’s part of the reason I’m so interested in scripture—the notion of revelation in my work. I just love when I get these feelings that I’m not creating physics or mathematics, but it’s being revealed to me. And so this revelatory experience is certainly a part of the great times. That’s something I really, really, really enjoy.”

“What about the other times, when things go less well?” I asked.

“The bad times,” he said, “sometimes you just don’t know why they’re occurring. You’re not completely focused. But other times, you’re feeling sharp, you’re thinking clearly, you’re focusing and you’re not distracted, and you still can’t get anything done. It’s a very frustrating feeling. I think physics is about ninety-five percent failure, but you learn to live with that. But when that ninety-five goes to ninety-nine, you really do start saying, ‘What’s going on?’ And it really is banging your head against the wall. But you just can’t give up. And it’ll come, it’ll come.”

“What’s physics to you?” I asked, “And what do you do in the name of the physics?” His initial response—“That’s a real tough question”—unfolded into more:

“Physics is part of such a large fabric to me. When I was deciding what field to choose over twenty years ago, I had a dilemma between philosophy and mathematics and physics. Those are the things I was drawn to. And I never separate

them in my mind, even though I've chosen to be a physicist.

"Physics is something that addresses what it means to be human. I think physics, like any truly analytical discipline, is a study of the human mind. It's the study of what it means to be who you are. It's a study of your own person. And so by looking out there, I'm looking *in here*. And physics, to me, is an unbelievably precise and efficient and beautiful—incredibly beautiful—way of studying myself. And of studying other humans. To me, that's what it's all about.

"And it's similar with mathematics and philosophy. With philosophy, it's very explicit—you're asking questions about the human condition and about the whole range of human emotions. With mathematics, you're studying conceptual structures. Though you're not studying the full range of human emotion, you're at least studying things that are in your head.

"In studying the things out there, you're led to mathematical and philosophical ideas that, again, address the human condition. And truthfully, any focused thought will address the human condition—any rigorous, focused thought. And the one that speaks to me the most is this combination of physics, mathematics, and philosophy."

*"... My relationship with my work—philosophy, mathematics, and physics—informs everything."*

For Richard Marin, physics is a link to insight, in part about the world out there, and through that world, into himself. The stuff of physics leads outward and then, circuitously, back to himself, much as philosophy does.

But how did he find that path, again and again, in his life amid the boundless possibilities for study in physics?

"So, where do you find the problems on which you work?" I asked.

"Sometimes I feel that I'm not even choosing them," he replied. "They're chosen for me. I often feel that I'm naturally drawn to things in the process of observing and thinking—not with any eye to research, just my brain latching onto something. And then I can't do anything unless I study it. I think physics is much more of an addiction than a choice of career.

"I really think that problems choose me more than I choose problems. And so from that point of view, it's very difficult to describe the process, but certainly the problems that I like to work on have a certain smell and taste. And since I'm not really actively looking for them, it's hard to say what criterion I'm using. But it's really hard to say why broccoli tastes good to you, if you like broccoli, right? It's an immediate experience of tasting goodness. Right? It's like I've got an extra sense. What is hotness? I don't know. It's just this thing I feel. What is a good project? This thing I feel when something gets me."

As I heard Richard Marin speak of the meaning, feeling, and power of his relationship with physics, I had to wonder how his work with physics related to other aspects of his existence.

"How do you think about the place of your scholarly work in your life?" I asked.

"There are external things in my life which mean an awful lot, whether they be relationships or athleticism. But my relationship with my work—philosophy, mathematics, and physics—informs everything. Everything is very much connected, some things more than others, obviously.

"You just said that right now, that they have a similar ..."

"Source, exactly. That's right."

"... Which is a different way to conceive of connection."

He picked up my thread. "When I look at something and I see something in it that I like, it has the exact same flavor to me as when I look at a problem in physics and see something. The source of me liking a person, or liking a sport, or liking a physics problem, or liking a philosophy question, is the same thing. And I don't separate them very much."

"And is there any more you can say about that source?" I asked.

"It's a really tough one. In some sense, I think all my work and all my studies have to do with finding out what that source is. And so I really think that I would love to know more about it."

Marin's feelings register emotionally and physically as much as intellectually. But what more can he say about that "source," and where and how it exists in his life? He addressed that question as I asked him to elaborate on what it means to him to teach and mentor in physics:

"So what's your personal ideal of what it means to be a professor?" I asked.

Marin hardly paused, "It means doing high-level scholarly work and training the next generation of scholars. And providing for those people who you're teaching, who are not in your disci-

pline, a clear idea of what your discipline is, and the reason why you're excited about it."

"Why is that important to you?"

"I guess what I've come to realize over the years in being a student myself and looking at students who are around me, as well as being the professor and understanding how students react to things you say, is that inside of everybody, there are buttons. And certain buttons—everybody has these buttons—if you push them, are no doubt almost one hundred percent pleasurable. Some of the buttons we know from everyday life: There's the food pleasure button, the sex button, or whatever you want.

"There's also a mathematical button in everybody. A lot of people don't know they've got it, and the excitement it can bring. Maybe I should not call it a mathematical button but an analytical button. Just seeing that button pushed for the first time in somebody is such an exciting thing—to see somebody for the first time realize that this thing that either they didn't know about or thought was so dull could actually be unbelievably exciting is sometimes life-changing. Even if they never decide to do that work, it's an incredible experience.

"I think that there's a bunch of buttons like that, and at some point in my life, somebody pushed that history button in me, that religion button in me. And to be able to return the favor, and to do that for somebody else with respect to my discipline ..."

Marin said that what he feels in scholarly learning—its high points and insights revealed to him primarily in physics yet connected also to what he feels in philosophy and mathematics, in friendship and athleticism—is primarily for himself. But in teaching, those feelings extend to what he wants for his students. They drive his teaching, which he represents as "buttons" that, by way of his physics teaching, he hopes to "push" in his students. To activate the unique excitement of analysis requires Marin to tap into such excitement in himself, which he is able to do because a mentor, years back, had "pushed a button" that galvanized in him a lifetime of thought. Marin teaches by activating in students experiences of physics they did not know they could have.

As unique as Richard Marin's experience of scholarly passion sounds, virtually all the other professors I interviewed shared in their widely varied scholarship a fusion of passion and intellect as each extended what they knew. Some said that their scholarly learning had, quite literally, filled in gaps in what was known in a field. Others said that in bringing together bits of long-established knowledge, they induced new meanings. Another group spoke of moving an idea developed in one environment into another, thereby revising its "knowledge identity"—the understanding of the idea against a background of different knowledge. A final group described changes in meaning as they came up with new images through which they could teach their subject to others, usually outside their field.

Like Marin, virtually all described a peak emotional experience in doing this intensely "pleasurable" work. Marin's "wonderful feeling" of "revelation" in physics reappeared in a finance expert's "exhilaration," an engineer's dawning sense of "completeness" as "anxieties and tension melt away," and a chemist's "sense of fulfillment." A musician similarly spoke of awakening to a "feeling" for her instrument as the music that she and it created moved her profoundly. The sensation for some is so intense as to be bodily: Marin's comments about his "addiction" to physics, being drawn in physically and intellectually until his body kicks "into a higher gear" and leaves him "shaking," is echoed in a gerontologist's description of her "runner's high."

Professors in the study also said that amid such highs in knowing and feeling, they became fully absorbed, experiencing what Mihály Csíkszentmihályi calls "flow." A philosopher described his own "all-consuming" immersion in scholarly thought, a psychologist portrayed himself as "lost in what I'm doing," and a landscape architect said that her "focus" let her "shut out everything else and just really zoom in."

To activate the unique excitement of analysis requires Marin to tap into such excitement in himself ...

Study participants experienced passionate thought through a variety of senses in a synesthesia-like experience. The "problems" Marin likes to work on "have a certain smell and taste." A professor of writing spoke of "creating a scene that suddenly is alive" as she hears it "sing on the page."

Deeply creative, scholarly passion shares attributes with the arts, which draw not just on the intellect but on the subconscious. Like novelists who feel that their characters take over the plot, scholars feel that their subject chooses them as much as they choose it. Marin—captured by his "subconscious, talking to the muses, spewing forth conjectures"—compared this experience to "channeling." "It's the only possible experience where you can surprise yourself," said a scholar of comparative literature, "where suddenly you come across a thought that you didn't know you had"—"a really startling experience." And a scientist added, "A light goes on or something clicks. Something happens that you go to the next level of understanding. That's where it becomes exciting."

Professors experienced these moments of what I call passionate thought as brief but memorable high points punctuat-

ing larger and much longer scholarly labors suffused with diverse emotions (Marin: “I think physics is about ninety-five percent failure”). Getting to those high points of thought and emotion was anything but easy or assured—it took effort and perseverance, dedication and strategic thought, support, and plain good luck. Getting there took deep and abiding desire.

As a chemist said, “It is a brief sense of fulfillment. The following morning it is already old, and ‘Why didn’t I think of it before? How come no one thought about it?’” A musician referred to her brief high points of creative thought as emerging amid a “gamut of emotions”—from beauty to frustration, from unspeakable joy to sadness. Considering the long process of his fieldwork, a social scientist remarked that in contrast to occasional intense flashes of “clarity of thought,” he had “many days when the research just didn’t go well.” Two professors of writing described their intense compulsion to create, yet abruptly switched to images of their writing as “frustrating, overly consuming, solitary” or as suffused with a “sense of loss or sadness or mourning.” An engineer similarly described his research as “fascinating” but as riddled by “whatever pain it’s gonna take to get there.”

A final point: These professors did not keep their scholarly passion to themselves. Many expressed desires to lead their students to passionate insights like their own. In describing his own “incredibly beautiful” learning in physics, Marin brought up the equally “incredible experience” of “pressing buttons” that charge up a comparable experience for his students.

Other professors echoed the point. The musician whose creative thoughts emerge amid a “gamut of emotions” between beauty and frustration urges her undergraduates to perform from musical emotion. “I feel it,” she said of her own scholarly and creative passion, “and then I help someone do it.” Some resist, and she must coax them toward that deep personal connection with their own work; only then, she explained, can they create the “completely different sounds” she seeks. And when they do, she added, it’s “a wonderful feeling ... like all the ions in the air are completely different.”

Asked how they inspire their students to such feeling and thought, the professors painted pictures of intense interaction. This kind of teaching requires “establishing connections,” said a scholar of literary studies, “when you’ve reached the point in a dialogue where a certain energy gets exchanged. It’s not located in oneself or the other self, but it just emerges. When a classroom goes well, that happens—a very satisfying, important moment.”

Asked how they wanted their students’ understanding to be transformed, professors said they wanted them to have a more complex and personally meaningful perspective on the subjects they study. A historian: “I really want students to learn layers in relationships, a sense of the past as complicated and ambiguous, taking multiple developments and trying to think about how they might be related in complicated ways.” A political scientist: “What I hope for: that they get a different perspective, that they inhabit an argument, that they think strategically—not just of the merits of their position, how to pitch an argument.” A professor

of policy studies: “I very much want to make it clear to them why it’s knowledge, why it’s important. Why they should care about it—that they already care. Making it more their story than my story. Once they begin to see that, it really changes their lives. Not in some metaphysical way—but they simply see things they didn’t see before.”

It is this passion and its connection to scholarly learning that, I suggest, we must protect at any cost as we move into a future of inevitable and seismic change in higher education. It is this that marks higher education’s distinctive offering to the larger world. It is this that draws our best students into the profession. It is this that is unique and authentic in the shared effort we call higher education.

So how do we protect and perpetuate it?

My research suggests that given the current state of institutions—which are in deep flux—newly tenured professors can pursue three career strategies, although they will need to orchestrate these with care, choosing when to deploy them and when to wait, pacing their efforts judiciously. They can:

- Create times, relationships, and communities—both formal (such as programs and institutes) and informal (such as lunch with interesting friends)—in which to voice and transmit their scholarly passions.
- Contain their scholarly and professional attention to what matters to them most, even while a vast array of invitations and “obligations” come at them post-tenure.
- Create agendas of teaching, research, and service that capitalize on their scholarly learning and passionate thought. Draw on what is personally meaningful in both their lives and careers as they do their work.

Administrators too can help professors protect the scholarly passion that drew them to academe in the first place. And they can help them cultivate a positive culture of collegiality. How faculty members treat each other, for good or ill, determines whether scholarly passion flourishes or withers. Women in my study were most likely to gain or lose from this feature of campus life.

Administrators can also support opportunities for cross-disciplinary effort, for such intersections can be a significant location for scholarly passion to ignite. They can also create opportunities for professors’ scholarly interests to be put to use in sites of outreach and public service, but without pushing faculty into activities to which they are not fully and personally committed or for which they are not ready.

My strong conviction is that professors need not be compelled, induced, or “incentivized” to indulge their scholarly passions. But they do need time and space to remember what drew them to their scholarly learning in the first place, and to find—again and again—the power of its draw, no doubt in new forms, as the world about them changes, and as they too change. ☐

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