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Dreaming Dreams, Living Life

Liz Smith
Furman University

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Liz Smith's husband, David Sanford, holds 5-year-old Smith Sanford, with Jack (7) beside his mom. Photos by Jeremy Fleming.



Dreaming Dreams, Living Life

ONE FURMAN PROFESSOR'S
TAKE ON VOCATION,
CALLING
AND
PURPOSE.

BY LIZ SMITH

Usually around the middle of their junior year, my advisees and the students I am close to stop by for a casual chat that turns into a longer discussion of what they are going to do with their lives.

They have reached a precipice that I remember from college. For the first time, these students are facing an unpredictable future. It is impossible for me to give them the definite answer they are looking for — what job they should take, whether they should go to graduate school — but I do try to share with them some of the lessons I have learned in my own struggle to try answering for myself the questions that are facing them:

What in the world am I going to do with my life? What is my purpose in the world?

First, I ask them, “What is your passion? What do you think is fun? When you have some free time on your hands, what do you gravitate toward? What is the class whose reading and homework you do first or save for last because it is your favorite?” What I am really asking them is, “What is your calling?”

The day I decided to become a political science professor was in the fall of my junior year at the University of North Carolina. I was walking through the arboretum, a green oasis among the dormitories and academic buildings. I was thinking about Dr. Pam Conover’s course in women and politics and about what I had learned about the difficulties women faced in the political world.

At that time, only 29 women served in the House of Representatives, and only two women (Barbara Mikulski and Nancy Kassebaum) served in the Senate. Today 72 women serve in the House and 17 in the Senate.

I was also thinking about the discrimination women face in employment. At that point, women made about 69 cents for every dollar a man made. Today, women have crept up to making about 76 cents for every dollar a man makes.

I was also thinking about how much fun it was to study politics — how much I loved talking about politics with my new boyfriend, how energizing and exciting and important it had felt to be part of something as I marched down Franklin Street chanting “No Blood for Oil” in opposition to the first Iraq War.

Especially, I was thinking about the obvious fact that Dr. Conover was a female — like me. She was the only female political scientist I had had for a class. She was smart and confident and an expert on something that really interested me.

I also knew that she was more than that. She had a family. She was married to another political science scholar at Chapel Hill, and they had two sons she had told us about, boasting about how at ages 8 and 10 they were actually making money playing their violins on Franklin Street.

It was a cliché, but I had found a role model. If she can be a Ph.D. and teach and study political science and have two children, I asked myself, why could I not do the same?

Politics was what I did when I had free time. I loved to follow the news. I started a study group on nuclear issues in high school. I had always loved school. Now, I thought, I could just stay in school forever. I could become an expert in an area that I really loved. It was the perfect decision.

Perfect, except for one thing. Graduate school was absolutely awful. I went to the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis — apparently the coldest place in the contiguous United States. I went there because that was where Dr. Conover had gone. After visiting nine other graduate programs, and meeting the man who had been her advisor there, I knew it was where I needed to go. And by all indications, I was right.

At the time, the U, as it is known, had a political science program ranked in the top seven. In political psychology — the area I thought I was most interested in — it was probably ranked first or second. I had been advised, by the way, not to pigeonhole myself as a scholar of women in politics — an interesting reflection in hindsight on women's status in the discipline itself.

So it was the right decision, except that I cried nearly every day from homesickness and loneliness. The boyfriend I loved to talk politics with was in Miami, starting his new job as a special agent with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. Sometimes, there would be a 100-degree difference in the temperature between our two locales.

Neither my boyfriend nor my mother thought I would survive, given how miserable I was. But I did. I was able to do the one thing that is really what getting a Ph.D. is all about: stick to it. Really, we should call it the sticktoitiveness degree. I saw a lot of people who were a lot smarter than I fail to get a Ph.D., just because they were not willing to stick to it.

In the end, the torture of graduate school was worth it. I had my eyes on the prize.

I tell my students this story because I think that it is important for them to understand that what is worthwhile is not easy. But when I got out of graduate school, I got the first job I applied for, and I have since had a fulfilling and meaningful career at a school that values strong scholarship, excellence in teaching and strong teacher-student relationships.

And that leads me to a second piece of advice that I give my students. I tell them to surround themselves with friends and colleagues who share the same morals, values and priorities that they have or, in their ideal vision of themselves, that they would like to have.

This does not mean that they should just hang out with people who come from the same narrow range of experiences. It means to choose friends, acquaintances and workplaces that exemplify those things they think are most important in life. For me, those things are wisdom, humility, tolerance, justice, equality, empathy and respect for others.

I am truly fortunate to be surrounded by people who model every day what I should strive to be, what really matters, what true courage and wisdom really are. I am a better person because I am surrounded by people who for the most part really have their priorities straight, who honestly and truly



are not impressed by the kind of car I drive, the kind of purse I carry or how big my house is. I am thankful that I have found a vocation that allows me to learn something new every day, to tell others what I have learned, and that challenges me through example to be a better person than I am.

Lastly, I try to tell my students to find and give love — in particular, that they find something greater than self-love. For

some, that means finding religion. For others, that means simply finding that one true human love. I try to tell them that, ultimately, success means nothing if it is only about oneself. One must find a way to be about something more than oneself. For me this has happened both through my family and through my vocation.

In terms of family, sharing this advice with my students is always a bit tricky. I find myself always wanting to push back against the trend here at Furman

to get engaged, quite often before graduation. I worry especially about the young women who get engaged so early, knowing what marriage often does to a woman's life by narrowing choices and creating significant responsibilities.

And, yet, at the same time, I hesitate to question or criticize. I often think back to my own experiences and how things have turned out for me and how important love has been to me — love for my husband and children and family most especially.

I was not so different from those female students who yearn for love and a family. I remember my interview, at age 17, for the Morehead Scholarship at UNC. I had made it to the final round at Chapel Hill, and I was feeling pretty confident. The committee was giving me positive vibes — until Doris Betts, a renowned author and award-winning English professor who had held my hand as she walked me into the board room for the interview, asked me, “Where do you see yourself in 10 years?”

I said the first thing that came to my mind: “I see myself married with a family.” As soon as it came out, I knew by their faces and their body language that it was not the answer they were looking for. It was the 1980s. They wanted to hear about my plans to cure cancer or play in the New York Philharmonic. I had just given them a 1950s “Saving Mona Lisa” kind of response. What was I thinking?

I ended up getting the Morehead, but only after being

on the alternate list. To this day, I have always been sure that it was that question and that answer that put me there. I did follow up with the answer I knew they were looking for — engaged in a successful career, contributing positively to society — but I knew that my first focus on family indicated to them a moral failing, a lack of proper priorities for a young woman in the post-feminist era who should be beyond thinking about marriage and family first. I thought of myself as a feminist and still do. How could that have been the first thing that came out of my mouth?

Today, though, I am a mother of two beautiful children, and I am married to the love of my life, the boyfriend from college. And I ask myself: How could that *not* have been the first thing out of my mouth?

Should family and the ones we love not be our top priority in life? Should they not be what comes to mind first, what comes before all else? When I put it that way, it seems to me the obvious answer is yes. And yet, I worry about those young female students in particular who are so eager to get engaged.

I struggle every day with making sure I have my priorities straight, that the things that matter most come first. I am an over-achiever in many ways. I want to do things right. I love my job and my students. I love doing research and interacting with my colleagues. I enjoy almost all of the time I spend at work, and it is hard for me, at the end of the day when I see work still stacked on my desk, to leave.

How do we achieve the right balance in our lives between work and family? As a working mother of two young sons, I am amazed by how hard it all is. My husband and I wonder: Why did no one tell us how hard parenting is? We agree that parenting even not so well is the hardest job we have ever done. Why do children not come with an instructor's manual?

Balancing work and careers is a constant struggle. What does one do when it is the last day of class, when one has to complete that last lecture before the final, when one's husband is in North Carolina because of some explosion in a Wal-Mart, and the school calls to say that one's son thinks he has strep throat, which as a 6-year-old he is probably able to diagnose accurately since he has already had it four times that year?

And yet, despite the challenge and struggles, I am constantly amazed by the beauty of it all. I am amazed by how much love I feel for my children. These are people I would not hesitate to throw my body in front of a bus to save.

I think about the time I canceled class so that I could go to my 6-year-old's school and be the mother who helped the kids put their costumes on for the Halloween parade. I remember how my son held tightly onto my hand as we walked through the school, not because he was scared or shy, but

because he was so happy I was there. I remember how after the parade, during snack, when the children were giving their blessing for the day, my son said, "I pray for my mommy."

I treasure the shrieks of laughter, the huge smiles as we play monster with me chasing my 4-year-old around the Children's Garden at 8:15 in the morning, in the in-between time after I drop the 6-year-old off before the 4-year-old's pre-kindergarten program begins. I relish the sweet-smelling good night kisses, the spontaneous "I love you, Mommy," the daily discoveries of things adults take for granted — lightning bugs, rainbows, pigeons.

But I also am confident that the struggle is worth it. I think I am a better mother because I am a teacher, and I am a better teacher because I am a mother. My patience with my children is greater after a satisfying day at work. My empathy for my students is greater because I could imagine any one of them as my child.

Being a parent is being about more than just oneself. My vocation, too, allows me to be about more than just myself.

The focus of my research has shifted over the course of my career. My dissertation was about creating social capital in American citizens, social capital being those networks and norms that allow people to work together mutually to solve collective problems. More recently, I have worked on issues regarding stereotyping, including sexism and ageism. But no matter the particular focus, I try to make sure that what I research and write about will in fact contribute in some small way to making the world a better place.

My vocation allows me to share with my students the importance of leading a life that is about more than just themselves. In particular, I hold dear a service-learning course in which students work two hours a week teaching adults how to read or use the computer, or teaching new immigrants how to speak English. The course has proven to be a meaningful way for students to step out of the Furman bubble, to interact with people they might never have interacted with, and to understand government and politics in a whole new light.

In a political behavior class that I taught a few years ago, after studying the question of America's role in the world, I rented a van and drove my students to Washington, D.C., to a rally on the Mall to raise awareness of the plight of the people in Darfur. This spring I taught a first-year seminar on the politics of good and evil, during which I challenged students to think about why people engage in malevolent acts toward others, how genocide, torture and terrorism occur, and how the good in each of us can be harnessed to prevent these atrocities. I am thankful to have a career that allows me to try to make a difference.

A couple of years ago, I found myself in what felt like

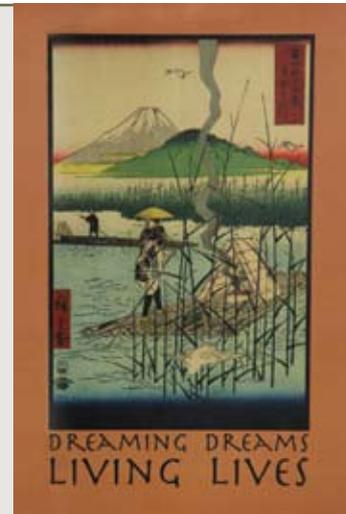
This article comes from the book *Dreaming Dreams, Living Lives*, a volume of essays published this spring by Furman's Lilly Center for Theological Exploration of Vocation. The author, political science professor Liz Smith, has taught at Furman since 1998.

The essays, edited by William Rogers, Bennette E. Geer Professor of Literature, are adapted from presentations delivered by past and present Furman faculty members at Lilly-sponsored alumni retreats in 2006 and 2008. The third such retreat, with the theme "What's Calling You Now," is planned for the summer of 2010.

Each faculty presentation addressed such issues as life aspirations, transitions and transformations. In addition to Smith, others featured in the book are Linda Bartlett (Spanish), Charles Brewer (psychology), Albert Blackwell (religion), Jim Edwards (philosophy) and Bruce Schoonmaker (music).

Cost of the book is \$12. To order, send a check and mailing instructions to Ann Quattlebaum, Lilly Center coordinator, Furman University, 3300 Poinsett Highway, Greenville, S.C. 29613.

To learn more about Lilly Center programs, visit www.furmanlilly.com.



a mild mid-career crisis. I had reviewed my mental list of things to do: finish college, get the Ph.D., marry the love of my life, get a job in the Southeast at a prestigious liberal-arts school, buy a starter home, sell it and build my probably permanent second home, have two beautiful healthy children, and get tenure. And I was asking myself: What's next? What matters to me now?

I again felt very much like those students who come to my office wondering what they are supposed to do. What is my purpose in life? Where is Dr. Conover when I really need her?

And then, I was in Charlotte with my family for the Christmas holidays. My 42-year-old sister, Sara, and I had just returned from a fun-filled afternoon at the children's science museum with my two boys and her three girls ages 11, 7 and 5. We were greeted by my father, who told us that he had spoken to Sara's physician, and that the lump under her armpit was in fact breast cancer. We would discover in the following awful weeks that the tumor was high grade, invasive and in her lymph nodes.

Interestingly, my vocation intersected yet again in unexpected and beneficial ways with my everyday life. Sometime during those early months of this family crisis, a student happened to stop by my office right after I had just gotten off the phone with my sister. The student was an extremely bright young woman who, despite excelling at Furman, had worried about whether she really fit in and whether she should transfer. She and I had become quite close as she struggled with this decision. Ultimately she decided to stay, and the decision was a good one for her.

On this particular day, she found me distracted and worried. She knew something was wrong, asked me, and I told her about my sister. A couple of days later I returned

to my office and found a Ziploc bag of warm chocolate chip cookies on my desk chair, with a kind note. Suddenly, at least for a moment, the tables had turned. Now I was the student and she was the advisor, the supportive mentor.

About the same time, I was involved in a Lilly faculty seminar on religion and science. These interdisciplinary seminars typically begin with a summer of intense reading, followed by a week in August of lectures and discussion, then monthly meetings, and a concluding week in June. It is an incredible opportunity to be a student once again and to interact with colleagues outside of one's own discipline.

I was being forced to think about the connections among our minds, bodies and souls. I was being forced to consider the questions, "Are we more than meat puppets?" "What is the soul?" "What is personhood?" "How do we explain both scientifically and in a religious sense why we are here?"

The seminar came at the right time in my life. The seminar and my sister's illness challenged me to think in ways I had not previously thought about my faith, my relationship with God, my relationships with my students, family and friends. I realized with renewed understanding what incredible gifts I have been given: a career that is so rewarding, as well as loving family, friends, students and colleagues.

While I am still not sure what in fact is the next step for me or in what direction my research or interests will turn, I know that I need to enjoy the journey and to feel thankful for the opportunity to struggle every day with placing the right priorities on the right things. And I know that I am truly blessed to have a profession that is a true vocation — a calling — and that I am loved, and that I love.

I guess in the end that is all anyone can really ask for. |F|