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An Accidental Academic

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Academics is not my first, second, or even third profession. Actually, it is my sixth, and given my history, it is very likely not my last.¹ To be honest, academics is not even the job I was best at, nor anywhere near the one I enjoyed the most. I say this because I think it is all too common for junior scholars to think that academics is the only path they can follow to have a rewarding or successful career, but that belief betrays a much narrower view of the possibilities in life than actually exist. Indeed, never in my wildest dreams would I have ever imagined ending up in academics, nor would I have ever thought of it as a career goal. Academics has been both a fulfilling as well as a challenging career, and it has required a lot of persistence. I say this because it is too easy to fall into the trap of believing that it takes genius to achieve victory; perhaps a few possess that gift, but in my experience, continual hard work offers the more common and reliable road to success.

I grew up in Hawaii in a house overlooking Pearl Harbor built by my father. It was two houses above the one used by the Japanese spy who drew the harbor for Japanese intelligence prior to the attack on December 7, 1941, and one valley over from the person I knew in high school as Barry Obama (he was a year ahead of me in high school, not that he would remember me; he would not). My father was in the Navy and was stationed on a ship called the *USS Sunnadin* during the attack on Pearl Harbor. He fought for four years in the Pacific during the Second World War, and I lived with the nightmares he had from those experiences the rest of his life. By the time I was 5, he taught me how to build a defensive perimeter around the living room with the rattan furniture from the Philippines that was standard issue in the barracks during the war; it sits in my living room to this day. Furthermore, he constantly instructed me on how loyalty was the most important value, you had to cover for your true friends even if you were bleeding, and you should never, ever trust replacement friends or acquaintances of convenience. Once or twice a year, they would call him from the harbor because some ship would get stuck in its very shallow waters, and he was one of the few who knew, from memory, where every ship was sunk and blocked access, and was thus able to help navigate the captains around the obstacles without maps or radar. As a child, I assumed the preoccupation with war was completely normal. So, in some ways, my future as a political scientist concentrating in security in international relations was pre-determined.

But my father, who was almost 60 when I was born, died when I was 15. So, my first career, begun in high school, was as a cosmetologist. I got my license quickly, and became quite skilled at decorating nails. I was pretty good at cutting men's hair but could never really master women's hair, not least because they tended to be a lot more demanding. Fairly quickly, I entered my second career as I expanded my painting canvasses from nails to walls, and spent my summers painting houses, both inside and out. The only college I ever wanted to go to was Stanford, where my mother went. She was in one of the first

¹ In fact, I had an offer from a high-end restaurant in San Francisco to be a sommelier after completing my WSET Level 3 wine certification, which I did at Johnson & Wales in Rhode Island on nights and weekends over the course of the previous four years, when the pandemic hit, so I decided to stay put at Brown.

classes that allowed women. Indeed, my father would always say he was saving money for me to go to “Stanford,” not to go to college. It was assumed that that is where I would go.

But I was rejected. I was absolutely devastated. Not knowing what else to do, I planned to attend the University of Hawaii. When I went to take the English placement exam, there was a dictionary at the head of the room, and the line went to the back of the room throughout the whole exam. I finished third but was one of only half a dozen people who placed out of freshman English. So I decided to take a year off. But my mother would have none of it. I had applied to the University of Santa Clara as my “safety” school but had deferred admission waiting to hear from Stanford. One early Saturday morning, without telling me, my mother called and asked them if I could come that year after all. They agreed. And so, I went to Santa Clara for my freshman year. I hated it. My first quarter, my two roommates kicked me out of the room and I had to move to the other side of campus. Every morning, members of the Catholic group would assault me at breakfast, asking me if I had found God yet. High school had been very, very hard for me, not least because my father was dying, but also because Punahou was just plain hard. But the benefit of that early education was that I never had to work as hard again. The downside was that everyone at Santa Clara hated me because I would get high enough grades to prevent curves from being implemented and the teachers were evil enough to tell everyone that was the case.

I remained desperate to go to Stanford, so I volunteered at the Stanford hospital every Monday afternoon, and applied as a transfer student. In a pattern to be repeated in graduate school, I got in as a transfer and completed my degree at Stanford. I majored in political science, and I would have done a double major in psychology but I never could manage to get through the required statistics course. I will never forget Merrill Carlsmith, co-author of cognitive dissonance theory,² throwing chalk at people in class who he did not feel were listening carefully enough; I dropped the class two years running. I settled for the single major, but took all the classes needed for a second major in psychology aside from statistics. It was at that time that I first met Amos Tversky when I took his judgment and decision-making class my sophomore year. I took the class on a whim, mostly because everyone was talking about how smart he was. The class was a revelation; I still remember him walking into the room in math corner for the first time, a tiny figure in a very crowded room, with a force of energy that dominated the entire space. I will remember his opening line for the rest of my life: “What can no one else do for you?” He got a million wrong answers, at which point he burst out laughing and said, “no one else can take a shower for you.” From that moment, I thought he was a genius, although it took me years to realize many women, usually poor, help others take their showers, particularly as they age.

My senior year, I had a job all lined up to paint houses back in Hawaii but my undergraduate adviser, Chip Blacker, intervened by insisting I go to graduate school, threatening to never talk to me again if I didn't. I applied to graduate school and worked for a year on a drug trial at the Palo Alto Veterans Affairs (VA) hospital testing a new schizophrenic medication. The ward was colloquially referred to as the “flight deck.” My favorite story from those days was looking out one day to find a dealer drive up with 23 Winnebagos. One of the patients, who had been allowed outside access, had walked down to the dealership and somehow convinced the salesperson to sell him 23 RVs with no money down. The poor man was very distraught when he realized that he had been duped by a psychiatric patient.

In my typical fashion, I applied to Stanford and was rejected. I did, however, get into Columbia. I went there for my first year of graduate school where I had the enormously good fortune of meeting Robert Jervis, who would go on to be my mentor for the next 36 years, until his death last month.³ There is no question that my association with Bob was the single greatest blessing of my academic life, intellectually, professionally and personally. That first year, I took four classes with him. I also began a pattern of breaking rules to pursue my own intellectual interests, and did my second field in psychology, where

² Leon Festinger and Merrill Carlsmith, “Cognitive Consequences of Forced Compliance,” *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 58:2 (1959): 203-210.

³ Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

I studied with Walter Mischel⁴ and Bob Krauss.⁵ I did my Master's thesis there on sex differences in nonverbal communication. It was clear by that time that I was going to write my dissertation on Prospect Theory, a model of decision making under conditions of risk developed by Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman.⁶ So, I applied to transfer back to Stanford, and, once again, I was accepted as a transfer.

My years in graduate school were not kind to me. The department kicked me out because I did not have a "dissertation topic more closely in line with the research interests of the faculty." They told me to change my topic, which I was too stubborn to do. So, deeply depressed, I took a year off and entered my third career, working as an arts administrator for the New York State Council on the Arts for the Dance Program. That was 1988, the height of the AIDS epidemic in New York. I went to eight dance concerts and at least one funeral a week. I still have the photograph of Lydia Cheng given to me by Robert Mapplethorpe, who got quite frustrated with me always saying I wanted to have a body like this or that dancer. One day, emaciated and weak but still quite forceful, he brought in the large signed photograph of her he had taken and said, with finality: "Now you have a body like that." After about a year, I was offered a full-time job running the Elisa Monte Dance Company, a glorious modern dance troupe run by Elisa's husband, David. I seriously considered it, but living in New York on \$24,000 a year, even in the late 1980s, did not seem viable.

I was not sure what to do when one day my phone rang at work and Bob Jervis was on the other end of the line, asking me for a citation I knew he already had. I admit I was shocked, since Bob never called. At the end of the conversation, just as I was starting to hang up, he said, "remind me, am I your adviser?" I caught my breath and had a profound moment of moral crisis: here was the solution to my problem. I could lie, but I knew this was too important a relationship to begin on a weak foundation. So, I took a breath and said, "no, but it would make all the difference to me if you were willing to do that for me." In a very offhand manner, he said "fine, I will set it up with Steve" referring to Steve Krasner who was chair of the department at Stanford at the time. And so he did. And I proceeded to get my degree in political science from the department at Stanford with only a nominal person on my committee; my intellectual support came from Bob Jervis, Amos Tversky, and Philip Zimbardo, who was also in the psychology department at Stanford at the time. Stanford required me to submit Bob Jervis' C.V. for approval to make sure he was acceptable as an outside reader. When I called up, extremely embarrassed to ask for this, he responded with glee: "Oh, goodie, I'll send the *long* version." This was before email, so two weeks later, I received a 55-page C.V. in the mail. When I brought it into the graduate school office, the administrator looked at me askance, exclaiming, "what is this? We didn't ask for a doorstep!"

My experience in graduate school was so traumatizing that I had no interest in staying in academics. I took a job far outside the field. Telling Bob Jervis I was taking a job outside academics was one of the hardest things I ever had to do, but he accepted it with typical detached acknowledgment, assuring me he was always there if I ever needed him in the future, which of course I did, many, many times. That began was my fourth career and the one I was best at and enjoyed the most, by far. During that time, I did manage to turn my dissertation into a book, working nights and weekends, not because I had any intention of becoming an academic, but simply because I did not want to waste all the work I had put into my dissertation. After five years, I broke my ribs in a car crash and was no longer physically able to do my job. I backpacked around Europe for a few months, hoping I would heal enough to go back and when I returned, I lasted one day and returned home in tears. I was living in the back of the house of a good friend, Lisa Butler, who I knew from the psychology department. I burst into her kitchen, sobbing "I can't work; I am going to be a bag lady." She laughed in my face and said, "Rose, you have a Ph.D."

⁴ Walter Mischel, *Personality and Assessment* (New York: Psychology Press, 2013).

⁵ Robert Krauss and Susan Fussell, "Social Psychological Models of Interpersonal Communication," in Tory Higgins and Arie Kruglanski, eds., *Social Psychology: Handbook of Basic Principles* (New York, Guilford Press, 1996), 655-701.

⁶ Daniel Kahneman, Paul Slovic, and Amos Tversky, *Judgment Under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1974).

from Stanford. You don't have to do manual labor for the rest of your life!" The light bulb went on. I had actually forgotten!⁷

I knew that I could not simply waltz back into academics; the struggle to crawl back would be hard. But I had a friend from psychology, Carolyn Weitz, who had done a post-doc through the UCSF psychiatry department and suggested I apply. I did, and I was fortunate enough to get one running the methadone maintenance clinic at the San Francisco-VA. Thus began my fifth career. It was at the height of the previous opioid epidemic, and it was by far the worst job I have ever had. I spent my life running between the morgue, the courts, jail, and San Francisco general hospital. I had to fire counselors for having sex with patients in return for methadone. I had my life saved by a 300-pound male nurse when a patient tried to strangle me with my own braid. I had another patient throw a trash can through the windows of my car for denying him more methadone. I had a woman tell me, when I called to inform her that her sister had died of an overdose, "I'm glad the f*cker is dead." I wanted to quit but the way that these National Institute on Mental Health postdoctoral fellowships worked is that you have to pay back whatever they have paid you until the time you quit. It is a very clever strategy to indenture those who can't afford to pay back salary. So, while everyone around me quit and left, I had to stay for two years.

During this time, I applied for academic jobs. Here again, Bob Jervis saved me by being willing to write me a letter of recommendation although I had not been in academics for several years. That generosity, and faith in me despite my lack of faith in myself, still overwhelms me. The first year I had one interview at the University of Minnesota and did not get the offer. The second year I had an interview at the State University of New York at Albany, where I was told by a member of the committee that two men in the department had said they "were uncomfortable because you looked like you didn't need a man." That person offered to testify if I wanted to sue but I knew if I did, I would never get a job. I knew the third year on the market would be my last. If I did not get a job, I would have taken one running a research lab at UCSF. But that year, by coincidence, my dissertation had been accepted as a book by the University of Michigan Press. I had interviews at the University of North Carolina and Cornell. Amos had died and was thus not able to provide me a letter of recommendation, but a chance meeting in the lunch room in the basement of the business school at Stanford garnered me a letter from Bruce Bueno de Mesquita.⁸ I had taken classes with Bruce and learned a great deal from him, but he had not been on my committee and my work differs greatly from his. But he was incredibly generous in offering to write me a letter and I believe he made all the difference the following year on the market when I got both offers. I took the one at Cornell. Thus began my sixth career.

I loved Cornell, learned a great deal from Peter Katzenstein,⁹ and had two glorious years on fellowships at Harvard during that time as well. I would have stayed there but I met and married my husband and he did not get tenure and so we went to the University of California, Santa Barbara. I loved the place but had a terrible time in that department. But another aspect of UCSB proved to exert a pivotal effect on my intellectual development. I was extremely unhappy and frustrated in the political science department, so my advisor Phil Zimbardo told me to look up Leda Cosmides who is in psychology there. I was initially appalled by the idea because everything she stood for as the mother of evolutionary psychology was completely alien to the way I had been trained by Amos Tversky. But I was desperate. So I agreed to have lunch with her. Our first lunch lasted 5 hours, during which time I met the only other person I have known who was the only child of someone who fought for 4 years in the Pacific during WWII, had been scheduled for the land invasion of Japan before American dropped the atomic bomb, and had learned to build a defensive perimeter around her living room by the time she was 5. Her genuine query to me was: "doesn't everyone?" I immediately signed up to audit her undergraduate class in Evolutionary Psychology.

⁷ Ironically, in 2009, the week I started at Brown, I received an offer to return at the highest level to my previous profession and had basically decided to accept it. But that week I managed to break the same ribs again in another car crash and had to submit to the universe letting me know in no uncertain terms that I had to remain an academic.

⁸ Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, Alastair Smith, Randall Siverson, and James Morrow, *The Logic of Political Survival* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005).

⁹ Peter J. Katzenstein, *Small States in World Markets* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016).

In addition to becoming one of my dearest friends, she completely transformed the way I think about psychology and had a profound effect on the direction of my future work. UCSB offered many opportunities to expand my horizons in psychology through the Sage Center for the Study of the Mind; Mike Gazzaniga's "brain camp" which I took for two weeks in the summer of 2008, similarly affected my understanding of decision making in revelatory ways.

The year my marriage dissolved, I received an offer from Brown and also the first of two transformative fellowships at the Stanford Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences. Just prior to that first fellowship in 2008-2009, I had met Pete Hatemi at a conference in Las Vegas of all places. During that year, he basically taught me the foundations of behavior genetics and how to think about analyzing variables and outcomes from that perspective. I was able to attempt this because of my previous foundation in psychology, but it was not easy and I put an enormous amount of work into it. I would not have been able to do that if I had not had the time to be able to devote to it. Pete and I did a great deal of work together that year and he became my most frequent and important collaborator.¹⁰

While it is true that I have worked unbelievably hard, it is also true that I have been incredibly lucky at many critical points along the way. I would absolutely say I am a great deal more stubborn than I am smart, and that characteristic has served me well, since a lot of publishing has more to do with tenacity than intelligence in my experience. I mention this because for junior folks who might be reading these stories, I think it is all too easy to assume that success and failure reflect merit in some direct way, and although that may be true at the margins, there is a lot of random variance, and we all know amazing people who have failed to secure the positions they deserve, and, more annoyingly, marginal people who receive a kind of christening by the field well beyond their apparent value. My luck has directly resulted from the people I have been fortunate enough to learn from and interact with, and who have supported me, especially, but not exclusively: Bob Jervis, Chip Blacker, Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, Leda Cosmides, Pete Hatemi, Amos Tversky and Phil Zimbardo. I have benefitted enormously from each of them, and their willingness to generously share their brilliance and kindness with me.

There are many things about being an academic that are extremely demanding, hard and exhausting. It is almost never the life it is portrayed to be; there is very little time for the thoughtful work that is supposed to inspire academics to pursue a life of the mind. But, at least for me, the most rewarding aspects have derived from those rare people who have helped make my mind a more interesting place in which to live. And, to invoke my father's original instruction, not one of them can ever be replaced.

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¹⁰ Peter K. Hatemi and Rose McDermott, *Man Is by Nature A Political Animal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).