

# Taking the Road Less Traveled: A Professor's Path to Becoming Educated

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To learn or not to learn: that is the question. And it is not an uncommon question for women who find themselves in the position of choosing between life responsibilities and pursuing an education. What makes some women choose to continue their education beyond high school, while others follow another road? There are likely as many reasons as there are women. Some choose marriage. Some choose work. Some choose vocational school. Some can't afford tuition. Some are single parents and the sole support for their children. And still others lack the self-confidence regarding their ability to learn . . . which is exactly where I found myself some twenty-five years ago. This is the story of my journey . . . my road to becoming educated.

Eight years after graduating from high school, I managed to summon the courage to attempt college. I still had no idea what I wanted to be when I grew up, although most would agree that at twenty-six, I already was grown up! With a failed marriage behind me and a four year-old son to support, I decided to consider the option of returning to school. When I looked at the college catalog with the vaguely familiar new book smell, I saw many things I'd like to become, but they all required me to take real courses. Unable to make a decision about a major, I decided to take a career development test. The results were shocking: Educator.

Knowing that there must be some mistake, I took the test again. I answered the questions differently this time and anxiously awaited the results from the test. What was I going to be? A noble social worker? A nurse? I must admit, the thought of comforting the uncomfortable patient or putting a smile on the face

of a sick child made me feel warm inside. I had always been interested in a medical career, and the more I thought about my future as a nurse, the more excited I was about what was quickly becoming my career choice.

Then the results from my second career development test arrived. I anxiously opened the envelope, certain that the results would confirm what I had already decided would be my future career. Educator . . . What?

Familiar with the saying "the third time's the charm," I was certain that this time the assessment would reveal what I knew was the truth... that I should indeed become a nurse. After all, in the words of Julia Roberts in *My Best Friend's Wedding*, "Jell-o can never be crème brûlée," and in my mind, if I followed the advice of the first two career tests and majored in education, I would be settling for Jell-O! Besides, I had heard about how little pay and respect teachers received; now that I had decided to get a degree, I felt that I was entitled to my fair share of earnings and respect. I did consider the positive points, however, and realized that an educator's work schedule from 8:00 to 3:00 daily and with seemingly endless summer vacations could be good for a single parent.

The results of the last assessment arrived. With outcomes of all three tests pointing to the field of education in hand, I adjusted my taste buds to Jell-O and registered to begin working on an elementary education degree.

As I looked over the required courses, I found one that absolutely terrified me. It was a speech course . . . the course that would most likely be a stumbling block for a person who lacked confidence as a learner

and suffered from painful shyness when it came to speaking in public. Because I couldn't bear the thought of taking this course, I decided I had better develop a strategy . . . possibly the first in my life. In an effort to waste as little money as possible, I would take all of the potential stumbling blocks first. If truly wasn't cut out for college, it would be better to know as early as possible. Developing a strategy proved to be one of the smartest decisions I've ever made, for it was through this strategy that I would soon learn something important about myself: I was teachable!

On the first night of class, the syllabus was passed out. As I read it, I was hit with a wave of nausea and sweating palms. I began to wonder if I would ever have an opportunity to taste the Jell-O, as there were several seemingly impossible assignments and course requirements on the syllabus, not the least of which was a ten-minute speech on the last night of class. Now, ten minutes sounded like an eternity to me and all the other students, but, as the oldest in the class, I decided to press forward and volunteer to go first. I was operating under the belief that because of my bravery I quite possibly wouldn't be graded as stringently as the others. As I began to get into the material, prepare, and deliver the dreaded speeches, I discovered something that would serve me throughout my education: I was not supposed to know how to speak in public at the beginning of the semester. None of us were. The question, rather, was, "Would I be an able speaker by the end of the semester?"

Suddenly I had an insatiable appetite for Jell-O as I had stumbled upon a revelation . . . a revelation that would bring down the many walls that I had built around my life in an effort to not get an education. I suddenly understood that there wasn't a professor on campus who would have a job if students came to class already having mastered the course material. I approached each semester's registration silently repeating this new-found philosophy to myself. "You don't know this material now, but you will in sixteen weeks."

When I finally came to the conclusion that I was capable of learning and must become a teacher, I was

a twenty-six-year-old single parent with a four-year-old son. I had resigned myself to the fact that I would likely be a single parent forever. I had no idea that, while I had been busy doing a terrible job as a paralegal, I had already met my husband.

It was a day much like any other. I wandered into the copy room of the law firm and there he stood, stuck to the floor in front of a copy machine that was the size of a minivan, wondering how in the world to make copies on this machine. Just borrowing the conference room for some out-of-town business, he looked a little lost. I offered to make the copies for him, and that was the end of the exchange . . . almost. He held out his hand, introduced himself, and waited to receive my name. "Jan" was my only response. I had no intention of giving him my last name. Many months later, I learned that, after I left, he had taken an office telephone directory from the copy room with the intention of asking me out. And after eight months, he did just that just in the nick of time because it was the last day of my employment with that firm.

As we dated, my motivation for completing a degree increased exponentially since my future husband had a computer science degree and a master's in business administration. I didn't see myself as an intellectual match for the man I decided to marry on our third date. He waited patiently and supportively as I took classes. After more than three years of a long-distance courtship, we married. My son Matthew, then seven years old, and I relocated to a town that was almost one hundred miles from my college, and I had one year of school left.

Actually, I didn't think this plan was so bad. I could commute for two semesters. It would be easy. I would simply schedule my remaining classes on Tuesday and Thursday between ten and three. That would give me time to fly down the interstate and pick up Matthew before the afterschool program ended. It was a perfect plan . . . except for one thing. There were no classes for me to take on Tuesday and Thursday. And so, my Tuesday and Thursday classes from ten until three turned into my Monday through Friday classes at 8:00 a.m. This meant leaving home by 6:00 a.m., with my new husband, previously

childless, responsible for getting our son up, fed, dressed, and dropped off at school.

Like most things, if you take them prayerfully and one day at a time, they pass . . . and often with a happy ending. On May 22 of 1993, I graduated. It was a glorious day. I walked. And through this whole experience, in addition to learning that I was teachable, I learned something else that was very important: The hardest part of school had been making the decision to go! And with this lesson fresh in my mind, I simply made the decision not to stop. On June 6, just a little over two weeks after graduation with the ink hardly dry on my diploma, I began working on my first graduate degree and secured my first job as a fourth grade teacher.

I loved everything about my life that year with my new family, my coursework, and my job. As far as I could tell, the career assessment had been exactly right. My fourth grade class seemed a perfect fit. I fell in love with those children, often at the expense of my own child. I attended their Christmas party but not his. I hosted their Valentine's Day celebration but not his. And I attended their field day but not his. A few days later, I received a pink slip and began the long summer of waiting to find out if I would be called back for the coming school year. I was thankful when I received the call.

A couple of weeks later, I received another call, this one from my doctor. I was going to have a baby in April. In spite of my school situation, I was excited beyond belief as was the rest of my family. How could I not be delighted? I knew this baby. I had been planning on her for years. I had chosen her name right after I began doodling "Mrs. Hogan" on the cover of my college binder, which had actually been a full two years before my husband proposed!

But how was I to break this glorious news to the principal I had begged to bring me back? This dilemma worked itself out, however. She let me keep the job and said that I could have a four-week maternity leave but only if I maintained perfect health for the entire school year and visited the doctor in his last appointment slot of the day. I wasn't the least bit worried about the house of cards I was building. I had my job back, a baby on the way, and I

would be finished with my master's degree at the end of the spring semester. What planning! What timing! A Broadway choreographer couldn't have pulled this off any better.

As the end of the school year approached, so did my due date and my master's comprehensive exam. I will never forget that exam. I had been so nervous studying and preparing. I had barely noticed how many little league games I had missed for my son, who remained a good sport as long as his dad was there. I arrived for my exam a few minutes early to gather my thoughts. During this period of gathering, I noticed a twinge of pain, but it soon subsided. It was somewhere between questions two and three that I realized the recurring pains might be labor, and between questions three and four that my timing of the pains indicated that I should get to the hospital . . . as soon as I finished the exam! I had already had a talk with my daughter about the proper way for a southern lady to enter the room or, in this case, the world. As I gathered my belongings, anxious to make arrangements for my husband to meet me at the hospital, my phone rang. He was already at the hospital, albeit the wrong hospital, with his father, newly minted stroke victim.

Within four weeks time, the following events occurred: My father-in-law's stroke was pronounced minor; I brought a beautiful baby girl home from the hospital; and I had taken and passed my comps, was preparing to graduate, and was finishing the year with my fourth grade class . . . all in a state of sleep deprivation and post-partum depression. My husband took his vacation to care for the baby while I returned to work. I received quite the welcome from my students. (The last conversation I'd had with them had been over the classroom intercom from the delivery room. SAT testing began the day Francie was born, and I felt they needed last-minute reminders.) With one week of school remaining, I was called to the office and given an envelope. Another gift certificate, perhaps? Nope. Just a pink slip. And this time, I would not be invited back.

Although I adored being at home with my new daughter, I couldn't shake the pain of losing my teaching position. I pined over my lost job and the

students I might never see again. This went on for months. The holidays came and went, and I decided it was time to resume my role as student, this time in a doctoral program. I knew this wouldn't be easy with a husband and two children, but it had always been my plan, or at least, it had become my plan once I had come to the conclusion that not stopping was easier than starting.

Paperwork in order and grandmothers on call as sitters, I once again returned to school. This felt like home, and somewhere around my third quarter, I was asked to teach an undergraduate course. With more excitement than I had ever felt over a job, I accepted. My part-time workdays were busy but delightful, and my nights were filled with learning of my own. The rest of the time was reserved for my family . . . which actually felt like the majority of time.

Life was flying by. With already three academic quarters of teaching under my belt, I was prepared to enjoy the holidays with a twenty-month-old and a son who was all too happy for Santa's sleigh to make stops at our house once again. He was playing the role of big brother and enjoying the land of make believe, if only for the benefit of his sister. But I knew he was growing up. He was in sixth grade now, and even though he could still play make believe at home, in his other world he had become too big to need me to accompany him on a field trip, bake cookies for a school party, or even attend field day, which he declared was "no big deal." The opportunity to be his mommy had ended, and somewhere along the way, I had become his mother. The holidays had come and gone, but on January 5, 1997, I discovered that I was going to have another baby. And a little simple math revealed that the very month she would leave me for kindergarten, her big brother would leave me for college. I came to an immediate conclusion that day . . . I would not miss another field day as long as I lived.

My "second-chance-to-do-everything right" baby was due on the 18th of September, and she served as a reminder that it wasn't too late to do everything right with her big sister as well. I had yet to miss a field day since there hadn't been one so, currently, I was holding at 100%! It was this rating that led me to

develop a smell test, so to speak. When faced with the choice between school and my family, I would close my eyes and envision my husband walking one of my daughters down the aisle. Then I would ask myself, "How much would you be willing to pay to watch that dance recital you missed?" Realizing that I would never have enough money, even if it was possible, to buy back events that had been important to my children, I knew I had to find a way to finish my degree without paying for it with my children's precious moments. From that day forward, all assignments and all studying took place between the hours of 4:00 and 7:00 a.m. By the time I woke them up for school, I had put my books away.

Smell test in place, I registered for classes that would take me away from my family and home on two nights a week for the spring semester. It was the second-to-last semester in my doctoral coursework. As a grown woman, I felt that I had a good grasp on the importance of attending the classes that I was paying to attend. However, my children were getting older, and although I didn't realize it at the time, there was bound to be an occasional conflict with our schedules. One such conflict occurred during the spring of my last year of my program. Earlier in the semester, my youngest had caught the highly contagious rotavirus. She was only six months old and had to be hospitalized. Of course I stayed with her, which caused me to miss class. Show me a professor who wouldn't understand these circumstances! However, later in the semester, another issue arose. This time, it was with Francie. Her three year-old pre-school was going to sing at a kindergarten graduation. I knew that I already had one absence, but decided to run the dilemma through my smell test. I came to the conclusion that missing my daughter's performance was the thing I would regret when her father was walking her down the aisle. Before I left campus for the day, I called my professor and left her a message so she would know why I wasn't in class. By the time I got home, there was a scathing message on my answering machine, declaring that I was not doctoral material and should rethink my decision. Rethink my decision? Not on

your life. My grade, my decision . . . although I knew I was in for a sleepless night.

The next morning, filled with dread and unsure of what to expect, I returned her call. After ten minutes of very angry ranting about my lack of professionalism and my lack of qualifications as a doctoral candidate, she fell silent. At last it was my turn. I could beg for forgiveness for my lapse in judgment. "I'm so sorry you feel that way, Dr. Doe. But I must be honest with you about this situation. If I had the opportunity to undo yesterday, if I could rethink my decision, I would make exactly the same decision. So with regard to me, do whatever you have to do." Click. I decided at that very moment, that I would never make a student feel as if she had to be inadequate in one area of her life in order to be successful in another.

Finishing up my course work during the summer term, I began the search for my second position as an elementary school teacher. It was my desire to secure a position in an inner city school in order to gather data for my dissertation. The search was easy. I was hired by the first principal to interview me and began working at a school where I was a terrible fit. I was not prepared for the violence that would surround me that year, and everything I had learned in my doctoral coursework seemed to be slipping away. For the first time in six years, I felt as if I was incapable of teaching a single soul. Although I was able to regain my footing after a couple of months, I knew that it wouldn't be possible for this to be a permanent position for me, and I wondered if it was going to be possible for me to squeeze a dissertation from thirty-six weeks that could truly be classified as lemons.

The next three years were spent writing, and the 4:00 a.m. mornings began earlier and earlier, finally landing on 3:30 a.m. My children didn't realize what was taking place in my life, or that I was still working on a degree, although occasionally Christina, now four years old, would ask, "Did you finish your paper, Mommy?" I would answer, "I'm still working on it." She never asked when I was working on it. Although the hours were absolutely crazy, I hadn't missed a single school party, field trip, or field day. My little paper was coming along nicely

. . . at least the latest of my forty or fifty drafts appeared to be coming along nicely.

Life was flying by at the speed of sound, and I often felt as if my worlds were colliding. The worst of the collisions occurred toward the end of my program. Another school year had raced by, and when Francie's second field day arrived, so did Matthew's high school graduation. In addition, the first complete draft of my dissertation was due. I had missed a lot with Matthew. There were many empty places in my mind where memories should have been stored . . . and many empty photo frames. I had done much better with my girls, but that didn't stop the pang of guilt that came from knowing that after thirteen years in this school, thirteen years I thought would last forever, I still didn't have a field day picture of Matthew.

Those were the thoughts that rolled through my head as I trailed Francie from relay to relay. It was an unseasonably cold, dreary May morning, and a heavy coat was necessary. It seemed a perfect fit for my mood. Camera in hand, I patiently followed her, snapping as many pictures as possible, choking on the regret from opportunities lost with Matthew. With the last relay run, Francie crossed the football field to retrieve the long awaited traditional field day Popsicle. She looked so small from where I stood as she sat down on the field and leaned against the fence, another photo opportunity. I raised the camera and located a blurry Francie through the viewfinder, manually adjusting the camera to bring her into focus. One more tiny twist of the lens revealed a cherry-red mouth and blonde ponytail bouncing in the wind. Standing above her, Matthew had arrived to witness one final field day. I pressed the button. An almost silent click captured my prize, a solitary picture of Matthew on field day.

These are just a few of the stories I've collected on my journey. There are many more that I could tell and even more that I've forgotten. It is my hope that what I've lived and learned along my road to becoming educated will serve to encourage every wife, mother, single parent, widow, or empty-nester who ever thought that earning a college degree would be impossible . . . perhaps even wringing her hands

over whether or not she would even be capable of learning, while balancing the responsibilities that life eventually brings to each of us.

When my journey began, I had no idea that I would be a student for the next fourteen years, taking only two semesters off during that time. I had no idea that I would marry a wonderful man, give birth to two more children, attend countless field trips and school parties, teach fourth grade in multiple schools, earn a master's degree, teach on multiple college campuses, and earn a doctorate (graduating the same year my firstborn finished high school).

But all of these things did happen, and they happened while I was becoming educated. The life that occurred during my learning actually made me a better student, deepening my understanding of just about everything, and making me proud to call myself an educator. I wouldn't choose any other road, because no other road could have led me to the realization that sometimes the Jell-O actually *IS* crème brûlée.