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Dissertation Interruptus: 7 Cautionary Tales

By Dr. Noelle Sterne

From my longtime academic coaching and editing practice guiding doctoral candidates through the peaks and gulches of completing their dissertations, I have noticed that women in doctoral programs can easily become diverted by compassion for others in trouble. Well-meaning decisions and actions may result in calamitous consequences to a dissertation.



Dr. Noelle Sterne

Here I'll share seven stories of doctoral candidates (names and identifying details changed for their protection) whose tender-hearted consideration at the wrong times dangerously waylaid their dissertation progress. If you are pursuing an advanced degree, perhaps these tales will help you stick to your decisions to let no major interruptions complete your dreamed-of doctorate.

Marcy's house

Marcy had just reached a major milestone: approval of her dissertation proposal. Her husband found a piece of land at a bargain price and wanted to build a house together. Marcy's next dissertation step should have been to collect her data. Instead she took a leave to collect designs and architectural plans and interview contractors for their house.

When they finally hired a builder, Marcy thought she could get back to her dissertation as her husband held down his office job. But she became the general contractor of the general contractor. Her days and nights were filled with supervising every square inch of the building process. I don't know if Marcy ever reentered the university, finished her dissertation or got her degree.

Tina's clock

Tina entered a doctoral program "late," as she called it. She and her husband wanted a baby and she feared her biological clock was ticking faster than the doctoral statute of limitations. Tina became pregnant and with great motivation worked on her dissertation until the eighth month. Then she withdrew from the university for "only a year," she promised me, "until I can get the kid into pre-pre-school."

She sent me the birth announcement of their beautiful baby boy but underestimated the demands of motherhood and pursuing her doctorate at the same time. Finally, when Matthew was seven, Tina reenrolled at the university. Her statute had run out and she was forced to start from the beginning, spending more time and money to retake the required courses before resuming her dissertation. She rehired me specifically, she said, to help her regain motivation and momentum and get back to writing.

Elizabeth's son

Grown children can also pull. Elizabeth's son had been let go from his firm and needed financial help while he looked for another job. Elizabeth had been making steady progress in her dissertation and we both anticipated the finish line in a few months. However, she gave her son a credit card to "get over the hump," she told me. Unfortunately, the hump lasted

for two years and Elizabeth paid his bills with the money she'd set aside for tuition. She finally put her foot down and cut the card up. But her dissertation had been delayed and she had great trouble getting back into the scholarly mindset.

Brenda's granddaughter

After years as a high school principal and close to retirement, Brenda finally took the doctoral plunge, a lifelong dream. She enthusiastically completed the coursework and did preliminary research on her dissertation topic. Then her married daughter had a baby girl, who in her early weeks developed breathing difficulties. With the first of several operations scheduled, the baby's life seemed in danger.

Brenda raced out to the Midwest to comfort her daughter and care for the baby. She stayed for three years, and when the child finally regained health, Brenda returned. But her former degree fervor had dissipated and instead of putting "PhD" after her name, the only letters she can use are ABD (All But Dissertation).

Jenny's parents

Jenny lived on the West Coast. With elderly parents on the East Coast, Jenny gave up a six-figure job and moved back to her family home to take care of them. She also took a clerical job, the first thing she could find. Her doctoral program was stalled, but to her credit, she continued slowly.

How she fit in her work between her 9-to-5 job, ferrying her parents to incessant doctors' visits and policing their medications I don't know. The last I knew, Jenny was still in the early stages of her dissertation proposal and her parents were thriving.

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Anne's romance

The excitement of a new romance has waylaid more than one dissertation writer. When Anne moved to a suburban development, one of her neighbors was a helpful and attractive man who became a friend. As he introduced her to the mysteries of crabgrass and weed killers, they became more than friends.

Anne felt elated and young. Between dinners on each other's verandas and forays together to the home supplies store, she doggedly kept chipping away at her dissertation. Soon, though, Anne and her lover combined their homes and lives.

She applied for and got two extensions. As the second came to an end, Anne started assembling her dissertation materials. Her lover, who had a master's, became more distant. She told me in tears that he finally admitted feeling threatened by her getting the advanced degree. Anne was shocked but wasn't willing to give up her goal. They broke up.

Anne was too depressed to think about school. She applied for another extension, her third. As this one drew to a close, she tried to resume her dissertation work but she had great trouble concentrating. Anne withdrew, sold her suburban house and moved to another state.

Claudia's "husband"

One of the most dramatic examples I've encountered of misguided judgment and compassion was the actions of Claudia. A bright single woman with a bright future, she went

back to school to complete her master's when she was 32 and came to me feeling shaky about the academic requirements. Claudia's goal was to leave the deadening administrative job she'd held for years so she could teach in college.

With no family responsibilities and great excitement, Claudia whipped through the master's coursework and thesis. We rejoiced on her acceptance to the doctoral program, and she was able to arrange her work schedule to take the required courses during the day. She finished the courses quickly and began the dissertation. I helped her organize her first two chapters and her committee feedback was positive and encouraging. She promised to get back her draft to me for editing in two weeks.

Two weeks came. No draft. I emailed her with a gentle reminder. No response. At three weeks, I called. Getting her answering machine, I left a slightly less gentle reminder. I then phoned her office, got her voicemail and left an even less gentle reminder.

Finally, in the fourth week, Claudia called. She didn't mention her dissertation at all. Instead, she reeled out a complicated story about having to help a friend. The friend's brother was living in their home country, a warring African nation, and his life was in great danger. They needed to bring him out and couldn't get the appropriate visa, so the only way he could enter the U.S. was by marriage. Claudia explained to me she felt she "owed" it to her friend to help.

She married the brother—I know this sounds like a supermarket novel, but it's true. He came here and they worked out some way of looking like they lived together. But additional legal problems surfaced. Now there was the possibility that he would be deported and they feared for his life. Claudia too was legally vulnerable.

She told me, "I'll be embroiled in this for a long time. I've got three lawyers working on it." She took a deep breath. "My friend is devastated and I can't desert her now."

When I last I heard from Claudia she was plodding along in her dead-end job, collecting retirement credits and frustrations and probably seeing her dream career recede like low tide. Several years after beginning the program she was still ABD and seemed to have lost heart.

If and when Claudia reenters the doctoral program, I believe she won't finish for at least another five years. If she does return, she'll be looking at 10 to 15 years between her master's and doctorate degrees.

Selfish?

No one can argue with a wife's, mother's, grandmother's, daughter's, partner's or friend's love and concern. But, there's a time and place to say yes and a time and place to say no.

You've likely made sacrifices of many kinds to get to the point of going after your doctorate. You've deprived yourself of vacations, time off, activities with your kids. You've weathered friends' and families' unhelpful questions and opinions ("What do you need a degree for? You've got a great job." "Aren't you a little old?") And maybe you've gratefully accepted their emotional and financial support ("I'll shepherd the kids while you hole up with your laptop." "This savings

account isn't doing much. Take it for your tuition.").

As so many women's and self-help publications trumpet, it's your time. You've earned it and you deserve it. You are not being selfish.

Alternatives

If you face a situation, or are tempted by one like these I've described, think again. Learn from them (yes, it can happen to you) and talk to someone you trust. What may seem at first like a harmless little pause in your doctoral program or dissertation or a short-term favor to a loved one can stretch to a permanent break that will never get you your degree.

So, if an apparently dire situation entices you, stop and think. Think about your own goals and desires and the life-altering consequences of helping others at this crucial time for you. Think about how you'll feel quitting the dissertation—that's what helping them means.

Think about other options than your total involvement for your significant others in need. Get help if you need to. Talking with a neutral other person can open up possibilities and resources you may not have thought of.

Explore many resources, including other family members and agencies. Claudia, for example, might have been persuaded to help her friend without making such a radical move that bred more entangled problems than propagating octopuses.

Granted, saying "no" may be very hard. You can explain why you're saying no (although often any explanation doesn't convince). Practice gently refusing, especially when you can offer alternatives. Sometimes saying no is the kindest thing you can do. Elizabeth may have fed her son's weakness

by giving him a credit card rather than, in AA terms, practicing "tough love."

You can also make promises for the future, A.D. (After Degree)—a vacation together, an extended visit, special dates, offers of help that are particularly meaningful to the other person.

Take yourself seriously

If you really want to complete your dissertation, take it seriously, like any large, important project. It needs time, concentration and focus. You're an athlete in training: no excessive booze, no late nights, no DIY massive projects, no offering to host a 30-guest Thanksgiving, no whirlwind romances or impulsive marriage proposals or acceptances.

When you're tempted to anything that will take you away from the dissertation for more than an hour, or at most an afternoon, reconsider. If you're drawn to put well-meaning help ahead of your long-dreamed-of-and-finally-revved-up doctoral program, please heed these cautionary tales.

Think about the extent of your involvement, the probable consequences of your actions and the costs to you in time, effort, energy, emotional investment, emotional and physical depletion and money.

Think about the action that lures you to an unfortunate turn in your life and whether anyone will be really harmed by your declining.

Most importantly, remember that you haven't lost your compassion for others. You've channeled it toward yourself

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Care

The listening part is important, but it's not enough on its own.

Despite his 50-plus years at Southeast Missouri State University, Dr. Hogan, my supervisor during my first teaching assistantship, never stopped listening and caring. When someone was overwhelmed, juggling the rigors of graduate school, when someone's student was disrespectful, when there was a new policy to contend with, or when someone's loved one passed, he was there to help and provide support in any way he could.

Sometimes university policy or funding would get in the way, and sometimes there wasn't a *fair* solution, but we knew that he cared enough to listen to the issue and do his best to remedy it. We appreciated him for it. Unlike the listening, the caring can't be faked.

It can be difficult to hold on to that compassion and remember what it's like to take three classes and teach two, or teach six classes at three different schools. We have blocked out what it's like to write a dissertation and provide meals for a family. Now that we're on the management side, sometimes it can be difficult to remember that those policies and protocols that change on us consistently, constantly and sometimes without much warning affect them too.

While helping students, faculty, and staff through these issues may seem like old hat to us, it doesn't feel that way to them. Dr. Hogan never forgot this, and we shouldn't either.

Try

Administrators listen and care, and yet, sometimes, that is all we really can do. It can be easy to think that we let our colleagues and our students down if we are unable to solve the problem or make them happy, but that is typically not the case.

Oftentimes, those who come to us know that there is no simple solution, but they appreciate our willingness to try.

In my last year as a sales associate at F.Y.E., the music store in my college town of Cape Girardeau MO, my schedule had become rather difficult to work around. Between college classes, volunteering, extracurricular clubs and applying to grad schools, I had very little schedulable availability.

My boss at the time, Tom, shared with me what I already knew— that my schedule was pretty intense and difficult to work around, but that he would try. And he did. This meant that I got scheduled for mostly weekends, which is not happy news for college students, but I understood and appreciated his effort (and his not letting me go even though I believed there was some pressure from corporate to do so given my few hours each week).

For my last couple of months at F.Y.E., I worked only about two days a week, but those two days a week helped me pay for my PhD program application fees. When I left F.Y.E., I appreciated Tom and all he did for me, and I didn't begrudge him for what he couldn't do for me.

As an administrator, we can't pretend that we will be able to solve every problem, and certainly we can't promise to do so perfectly, but we can promise that we will try.

Reflecting on the trifecta

Since I have revised and simplified my administrative philosophy, I find that a load has been lifted off my shoulders. Despite the multitude of emails sitting in my inbox

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and the tasks in my daily planner, my job is simple. Through listening, trying and caring, I can support my colleagues, my students, and my university without selling anyone, most notably myself, short.

In case you were wondering, in the end, I am really pleased with what I have managed to do as an administrator, even including the scheduling of classes. Of course, a teaching assistant decided to change her course schedule at the last minute, and another misread her schedule and freaked out before realizing that it was fine, but I made it through: When they came to me, I listened to their problems, I cared that they were distressed and I tried to make it better. It worked, and I think I made a difference. And I didn't even have to step on my desk to do it. 📖

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working alongside them and just as hard to get a vision achieved. I strive to be a visionary leader and see diversity as part of the university's fabric.

What are some goals you have for this year?

Telling the story and innovation of the University of Minnesota's office of diversity, one of the top five offices in the country in terms of staff, budget, and number of offices. We're a model to mimic!

This year, we'll be focused on men of color and the tenets of the My Brother's Keeper initiative. We have a large East African and Hmong population and are working to change the undergraduate experience for them. We're also looking toward a U of M National Advisory Board to develop philanthropic giving in the Twin Cities — home to the most Fortune 500 companies in the country — wherein we align the university's strategic vision with these companies' need for a diverse workforce. 📖

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and you'll come out stronger for it. For all you know, when those who don't receive your help seek other solutions, they may come out stronger too. Equally significant, you will honor your desire to complete your dissertation and achieve your precious and hard-won doctorate. 📖

Dissertation editor, coach, author and spiritual counselor, Noelle Sterne, Ph.D. (Columbia University), for over 28 years has helped doctoral candidates complete their dissertations (finally). Her forthcoming handbook addresses their often overlooked but crucial nonacademic difficulties: *Challenges in Writing Your Dissertation: Coping with the Emotional, Interpersonal, and Spiritual Struggles* (Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2015). Website: www.trustyourlifefornow.com