

What I Learned In College
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When I turned 60, I quit my job and went back to college. Like many college students, I went to figure out what I wanted to be when I grew up. But this time, I needed to get on with it. This time, I would Figure Things Out Once and For All.

I'm now more than halfway through my "college" year as a Fellow at Stanford's Distinguished Careers Institute (DCI). DCI is a program for people who have had one career and want to have another, but need some time to think about what comes next. DCI Fellows spend a year taking classes at Stanford and exploring options with a peer group of 25 others doing the same. The idea is that participants will find personal transformation and meaningful roles for their next phase. And the program itself is a model for other universities seeking to help the baby boom generation make their third chapters about more than golf, bridge and bucket lists.¹

Exploration and transformation sounded good to me. I had already tried finding my purpose once. On my 55th birthday, I "retired" from the practice of law and started the search for a meaningful way to spend the next few decades. I drank a lot of coffee, read every section of the *NY Times*, volunteered at a museum, took language classes, re-learned piano, got in shape, volunteered at a food bank, attended a Peace Corps webinar, and took educational trips. But I didn't figure it out. So I resigned from retirement and went back to work.

¹I actually want to spend time doing all of those things. But the research shows that people who immerse themselves in service and community lead happier and healthier lives than those who just "pursue happiness." Robb Willer, "Finding Meaning in an Unjust World" (Stanford Saturday University, Stanford, CA, 11 February 2017). And the 10,000 baby boomers turning 65 every day for 12 years will continue to need paid employment and/or something productive to do. See "Baby Boomers Retire," *Pew Research Center*, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2010/12/29/baby-boomers-retire/> (accessed August 19, 2017).

A few years later, DCI started its program. The DCI application requires an essay on your proposed “Purpose Pathway” (read: possible “Major”) and another on what you hope to give to/get from the program. There is a chicken-or-egg problem in writing about a purpose you haven’t found yet, but I wrote about my desire to study the medieval origins of some of our legal procedures and how excited I was to be part of this new venture. The DCI administrators seemed to find all of this perfectly sensible and let me in. I would have a year at DCI and all would become clear. This time, I would get it right.

I resigned my law firm partnership a few months before DCI started to give myself time to get ready. There was much to do. I would watch all of the Medieval History lectures I’d purchased from the Great Courses, finish reading a biography of King John, read the book on Buddhism that had been sitting on my shelf, clean out the storage closets in the basement, re-memorize the Presidents, learn how to locate Sierra Leone on a map, and get the vacuum cleaner serviced. With my house in order and my brain tuned up, I would be ready to go.

I spent a few days in Palo Alto, attending DCI orientation and looking for housing. Then-Secretary of Commerce Penny Pritzker spoke at our orientation dinner, telling us that when she insisted on a place in her family’s business, “all the women were secretaries, and not secretaries of commerce.” I felt my dormant feminist self re-awaken and cheer. Are these the kind of speakers we can expect to just drop by? Is it too late for me to become a Cabinet member?²

I had high expectations for orientation, thinking that I would come away with a path forward to the Big Change. Instead, I left wondering if I would even succeed in

² This was in October of 2016. A few short weeks later, I lost any desire to join the new Cabinet.

registering for a class. How would I get online at midnight along with 16,000 other Stanford students? How many classes should I sign up for? How should I decide? How do you pick a path that you can't see?

I finally opened the Buddhism book. On the inside cover, the author had written me a note: "You make a path by walking."

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Just after New Year's, I drove up Highway 5 to my new life. I brought only what I could fit in my car for the year ahead. The landscape stretched on. Where had all of the angry political signs come from? California's Central Valley is red, not blue. The trees seemed to be dripping oranges. Everything that day was in Technicolor.

I was in a state of high anxiety when I finally opened the door to my apartment, rented sight unseen with a promise that it would be like the model I'd visited a couple of months earlier. But the rented furniture had been delivered and the unit was light and airy. I tried to banish the thought that the reason people go to college and study hard is to get jobs that will enable them to live in places without cottage cheese ceilings and squeaky floors.

At the grocery store I couldn't find the bananas or the half-and-half. I considered getting in the car and driving back to Los Angeles.

I am one of those right-handed/left-brained people who can barely hold a pen in my non-dominant hand. But that day, my left hand flew up and signed the credit card pad. It is hard to overstate how strange this experience was. Later, I took a class on how the brain works, and wondered if my brain had already started re-wiring itself on my first day here.

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Eight months into my DCI experience, the apartment is homey. I still like the light. I like that it feels safe. There are free yoga classes and occasionally free soup, possibly because the rent is so high. I don't miss having a closetful of clothes or a full set of dishes or all the other stuff that fills the cabinets back home. I have a good desk and a big kitchen table and working Internet. I walk or bike to class every day. I no longer wear a fitness tracker because I know that I'll hit 10,000 steps by about 3:00.

I registered for classes and in winter quarter I took a geography course. I can now locate not only Sierra Leone but also Moldova on a map. In a class on human trafficking, we learned that Moldova, the poorest country in Europe, is a source country for sex trafficking. Aid organizations came to speak to our class about the overflowing and understaffed orphanages and the need for volunteers to go over and just hold the babies. I cannot get these thoughts out of my head.

I spent a lot of time doing the assigned readings in a graduate class on the English Reformation. This was challenging, as people in graduate history seminars do not think like lawyers. The first week, after we read nearly 400 pages on the state of Catholicism before Henry VIII started destroying the monasteries, I came to class ready to give a succinct summary of what the author had said. In the legal world, if you can't say what you mean in three sentences, the judge will shut you down. Here, we spent three hours every week dissecting the conflicting scholarship over events that occurred 500 years ago. The professor and my classmates taught me a new language – words like reductionist, construct, reconstruct, deconstruct, reify, teleological, revisionism, post-revisionism, and reformed revisionism. The other day I found myself using

“historiography” in casual conversation.

That quarter I learned how to ride my bike around campus without showing my fear of collisions. I figured out the tram schedule for rainy days. I signed up for Stanford event notices and departmental mailing lists and went to as many events as I could manage.³ I wrote papers using the *Chicago Manual of Style* instead of the *Bluebook*.⁴

Here are a few of the other things I learned:

From a day-long seminar on Longevity. Two thousand years ago the average human life span was 22 years. The majority of babies born since 2000 will live to be 100 years old. We need a new model of what “retirement” looks like.⁵

From my class on The Romans. Being a Roman emperor was not a guarantee of job security. The third century was a particularly rough time to have that role, as 89% of

³ This is a partial list of events and lectures I attended in February and March: a presentation on the art of storytelling; a Hoover institute presentation on challenges to the Trans-Atlantic partnership; a law school lecture on how to structure deals involving earnouts; a talk by one of my DCI colleagues on museum management; a talk on Diane Arbus by her nephew, a Stanford Art History professor; a chorale/SF symphony performance of Ode to Joy; a presentation on new ways to teach math; a day-long “Stanford Saturday University” on topics ranging from “Young Blood for Old Brains” to “Tipping Point for Planet Earth”; a Continuing Studies class on the Origins of Democracy; a lecture/discussion with a Religious Studies professor on “Nothing”; a day-long “Designing Your Life” seminar; the Chicago concert in San Jose; a series by the Graduate School of Business on “Moving Forward After Political Confrontation”; a day-long class on the Craft of Fiction; a law school lecture on “Women and Leadership” (I felt like I’d heard this one before); Rahm Emanuel and Ruth Bader Ginsburg (on the same day); the Stanford president speaking on What Matters to Him and Why; Congresswoman Jackie Speier; Trevor Noah; a Peace Corps recruiter (I still think about this option); my former law professor, Barbara Babcock, talking about her new book, *Fish Raincoats: A Woman Lawyer’s Life* (Louisiana: Quid Pro Books, 2016); Anne-Marie Slaughter; a lecture on the Politics of Philanthropy; the U.S. Ambassador to Poland; the St. Lawrence String Quartet; the Berlin Philharmonic wind quartet; Justice Sandra Sotomayor; a documentary on the destruction of antiquities; a performance of the music of Jelly Roll Morton & George Gershwin; a Stanford Saturday University on How to Survive the Trump Presidency; dinner with a Stanford Cultural Scientist; and the Salisbury Cathedral Choir. I was sorry to have to miss the Australian Choir performance and the Hungarian Folk Music concert.

⁴ Not everyone may be aware of the pain associated with learning two completely different citation systems. Compare “Chicago Style Quick Citation Guide,” *The Chicago Manual of Style*, accessed August 5, 2017, http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html, with Harvard Law Review, *The Bluebook: A Uniform System of Citation*, 20th ed. (Cambridge: Harvard Law Review Association, 2015).

⁵ Laura Carstenson, “The New Longevity: Crisis or Opportunity” (Stanford DCI Colloquium on Longevity, Stanford, CA, 1 February 2017).

the emperors died from unnatural causes, usually at the hands of their senior military officers. But during this same period, Rome thrived, despite its rulers.⁶

From a lecture on Energy Systems. The U.S. has less than 5% of the world's population but uses 20% of its energy. Africa has 15% of the people but uses only 3% of the energy.⁷

From my class on the English Reformation: Witnesses who swore an oath to tell the truth in medieval England believed that violating it would result in the wrath of God, perhaps across all eternity. This explains why perjury prosecutions were so rare; in the eyes of the Church, no additional deterrence was necessary.⁸

The first Sunday I was here, I went to a service at Stanford's Memorial Church, mostly because I liked the building. Now this is just what I do on Sunday mornings. I've heard sermons by an Anglican, a rabbi, a Catholic, a Presbyterian and a visiting priest from Exeter. I like looking at the stained glass portraits of saints and trying to figure out each one's area of responsibility. I like seeing medieval history in action, as when the choir came in bearing large palm fronds on Palm Sunday. Most of the Bible readings are new to me, but I am all over the historical context of the New Testament after that class on Roman history.

One day I tried meditating at Windhover.⁹ As with my earlier attempts at

⁶ Walter Scheidel, "Governing the Roman Empire" (History 102A, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, 26 April 2017).

⁷ Diana Ginnebaugh, "The Unfolding Energy Revolution" (Stanford DCI Faculty Fellow Dialogue, Stanford, CA, 26 January 2017).

⁸ Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London: Penguin Books, 1971), 49.

⁹ Windhover is a contemplative center at Stanford named after a bird, also known as a kestrel, which can hover in the air and is the subject of a poem by Gerald Manley Hopkins. The proper pronunciation of this center is "wind-hover," not "wind-over." I learned this from the Stanford Dean of Religious Life, so it must be true.

meditation, I spent the first 10 minutes meditating on how much longer I had to meditate and trying to keep my eyes closed while other people shuffled in and out. But then I lost track of time. When I opened my eyes, a bunch more people were seated around me; I had not heard them come in.

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One quarter ended and another began. Spring brought a brand new schedule. Living life on the quarter system is a surefire way not to get into a rut.

I took a class on Traders & Crusaders in the Medieval Mediterranean. We passed around a small coin, a copper/silver alloy, that had been taken by a crusader in 1096 from somewhere in northern France to what is now Syria. Then we held a larger silver/gold coin from Constantinople made around the same time. The difference in size, weight and material made it clear why the early Crusaders had so much trouble buying food on their journey: their flimsy coinage was worth only the value of the metal content.¹⁰ How have I gone so many years without knowing these things? Is another 30 years enough time to learn all the other things I do not know?

At a dinner with our DCI group, former Secretary of State George Schultz said that the two things that scare him the most in this world are nuclear weapons and global warming. The next day, a professor of Earth, Energy and Environmental Systems presented a graphic picture of the planet our grandchildren will inherit. It is almost certainly too late to stop the temperature from going up two degrees; the only question is whether we can prevent a 4-degree rise, as that will really wreak some havoc.

¹⁰ Rowan Dorin, "On the March: Massacres and Mistrust" (History 16. Stanford University, Stanford, CA, 13 April 2017).

All of this came just as I was pondering what to do about my car situation, as I had been living without one since my lease expired over Spring break. Grocery shopping by bicycle was proving hazardous but after these talks, I couldn't stomach the thought of buying another fossil fuel-powered car. Around this time an event popped up on the Stanford calendar entitled: "Is An Electric Vehicle Right For You?" I went. Now I own a Chevy Bolt.

This connection between seemingly unrelated events and classes has happened repeatedly. One week, it was the *Mona Lisa*. It started with Walter Isaacson speaking at an event hosted by one of my DCI colleagues. Talking about his new book on Leonardo da Vinci, Isaacson pointed out that Leonardo was a scientist first, and that if you just know how to look at the *Mona Lisa*, you can get see the depth of Leonardo's scientific knowledge. Then, we read an essay in writing class about looking at art, in which the author opined that "[t]here are very few people who could manage an hour alone with the *Mona Lisa*"¹¹ (except, perhaps, Walter Isaacson). The next day in art history class, we read an essay asking the question, "if the 'Mona Lisa' is in the Louvre, where is *King Lear*?"¹² Honestly, you can't make this stuff up.

One day in May, three professors in three different classes each discussed Jerusalem – the fall to the Romans in 70 CE, the bloody conquest by the First Crusaders in 1099, and the capture of the Eastern part of the city by the Israelis in 1967. At a high level, all of my courses are asking the same question – how did we get here? What have

¹¹ Jeanette Winterson, *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995), 6.

¹² George Bornstein, *Material Modernism* (Cambridge: University Press, 2001), 5. The author was making the point that a work of art can, perhaps, be evaluated where it sits but a work on a page must be considered at every stage of its existence, from the first manuscript through all later revisions and publications. Reasonable people can differ on these points.

we, the human race, learned? On that day the answer seemed to be: not much.¹³

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I have made new friends. In fact, pretty much everyone in the program is a new friend. My main contribution to this bonding was to arrange an Unhappy Hour on Inauguration Day; when almost everyone came, I knew I had found a good group. By the end of winter quarter people were sending “Save the Date” notices two months in advance. The East Coasters have accepted that Palo Alto is not New York.

There are serious times, of course. We are all adults, and things happen in our lives. One woman missed much of Winter Quarter because her daughter had an unexpected surgery. Another missed Spring events to fly around the country attending her teenage son’s baseball tournaments. An elderly father died. I watched as my friends read the news of a terrorist rampage in London within blocks of their daughter’s apartment and frantically reached for their cell phones (she was safe).

We are each other’s cheerleaders in the quest to find out what comes next. “Try this,” we say. “I can connect you to that person,” we offer. The other day, at an event on social impact investing (it had a Silicon Valley-speak title, something like “Innovation and Scale”), I decided I wanted to “connect” with one of the speakers and ask for an “informational interview.”

¹³The stream of inspiration and information is constant. Nicola Sturgeon, First Minister of Scotland and Damien Collins, British MP, spoke about Brexit. Dr. Dean Winslow told us about his experiences with battlefield surgery in Baghdad and Afghanistan. Chris Ategeka, a Ugandan orphan featured in Forbes “30 Under 30,” spoke about the company he started to provide bike ambulance services to remote Ugandan villages. Professor Eamonn Callan gave a talk on “safe and unsafe places” for education, urging people to interpret each other’s remarks “with charity.” Christopher Gray, founder of Scholly, described the app he invented that connects college students needing funding with millions of dollars in scholarships. I went to a Stanford “volunteer day” with the International Justice Mission, a lecture on the Seven Deadly Sins, Stanford TEDx, the Spring Musical, and Stanford’s annual Company of Authors presentation by professors who published books this year. I heard a “Medieval Matters” lecture on King Alfred (r. 871-899), to whom many attribute early words of inspiration: “I desired to live worthily as long as I lived, and to leave after my life, to the men who should come after me, the memory of me in good works.”

“What do I say to him?” I asked my colleagues. “How do I get him to agree to talk to me?”

“Start with, ‘my name is Susan,’” one of them advised.

“Then just ask if you can call him.”

This is what friends are for.

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I am seriously considering moving here. That is an outcome I did not anticipate. In Los Angeles I live in Paradise – a condo near funky restaurants, boats and the beach. But it’s not a Community. Beach people are not my people; the last time I went home, there were people drinking Banana Mojitos at the café where I stopped after yoga. I think it would be hard to find anyone in Palo Alto drinking a large green rum beverage at 10 a.m. on a Tuesday (although the capacity of people on campus to propose, be invited for, and drink coffee is apparently endless). And there is no place to charge an electric car in my L.A. condo.

When I’ve gone “home” on quarter breaks, it feels like vacation. Home is here, in my tiny apartment with cottage-cheese ceilings.

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Along the way I have been given a large dose of humility. Think you are the smartest person in the room? Take an accelerated first-year French class with 20-year-olds and see how you do. We for sure are not the college students we once were: I lasted exactly one day in a group exercise class. Think you can give some life advice? You probably can, but you’ll have to earn their trust. We are guests on this campus; no one here has to listen to us. When younger students ask me if I can talk to them about

whether they should go to law school or have time to kick around ideas for a project, I always say yes.

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I came here seeking the Answer. I have not found it. I found something better. I'm learning a new way to think about the world and my place in it; I'm working on following my nose and making new connections and trying new things. I think this may be what transformation is all about.

The Thesaurus says that a "change" can be "an about-face, an addition, an adjustment, an advance, a break, a compression a contraction, a conversion, a correction, a development, a difference, a distortion, a diversification, an innovation, a metamorphosis, a modification, a modulation, a mutation, a novelty, a permutation, a reconstruction, a refinement, a remodeling, a reversal, a revision, a revolution, a shift, a surrogate, a switch, a tempering, a transition, a transmutation, a turn, a turnover, a variance, a variation, a variety, a vicissitude." All of these things have happened since the day I moved here.

I am not sure what comes next. Maybe I'll work on some kind of international volunteer effort or advocate for immigrants' rights. Or help research the effects on society of baby-boomers getting older. I'd like to work with a nonprofit whose mission I believe in. Getting a Ph.D. in medieval history is still on the table. Maybe I will write a book to help young women lawyers. Maybe I will do all of those things.

In the meantime, as my DCI year enters its final quarter, I've signed up for a class on Democracy and the Rule of Law, and another on the Middle Ages. I'm working on memorizing the British line of succession. I just attended a symposium on longevity and

will be taking a tour of a biological reserve later this quarter. I have a bunch of new books on my shelf, waiting to be read.