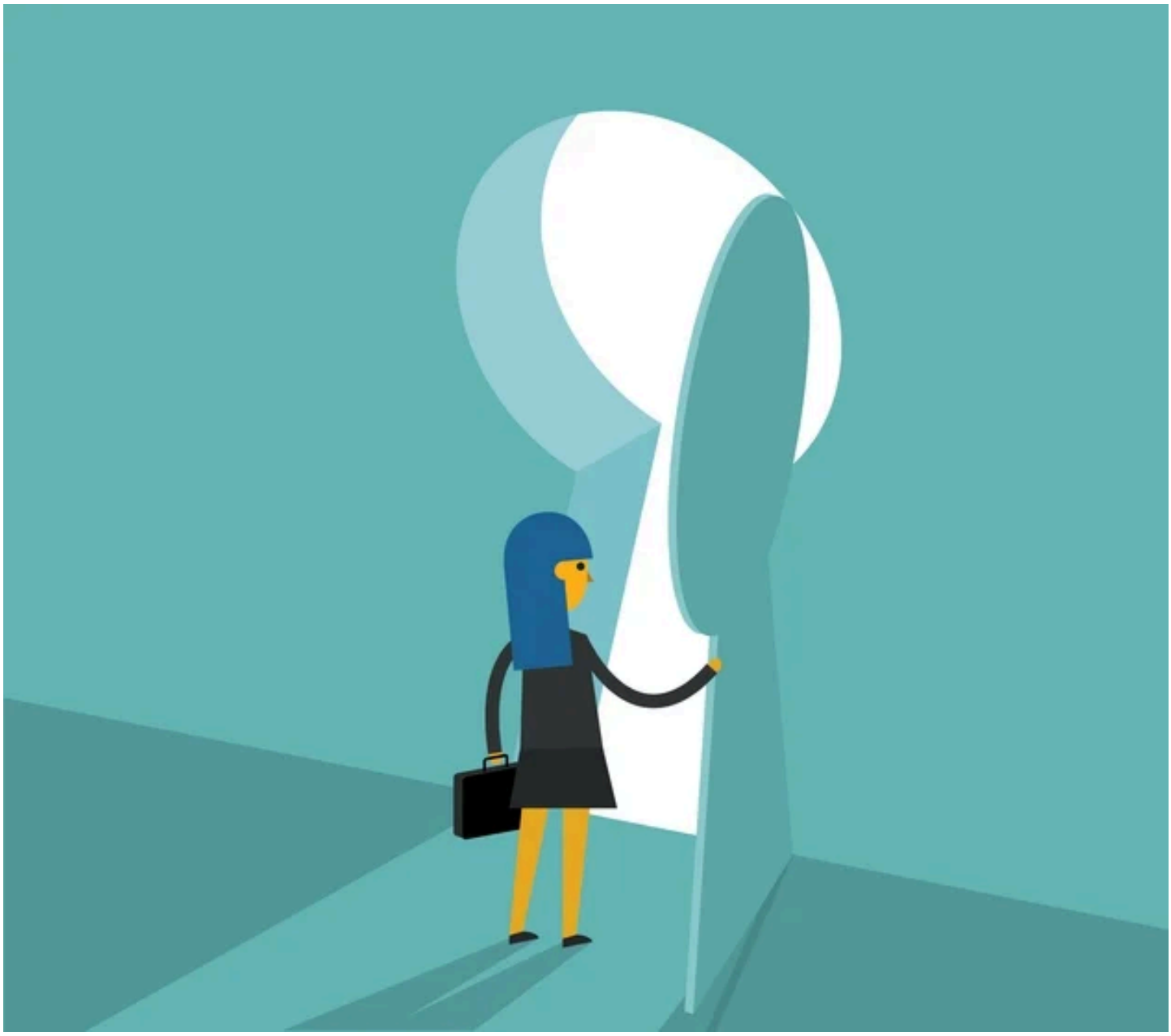
October 09, 2018

7 Steps for Discerning Whether to Leave Higher Ed

Beth Godbee gives guidance for how to keep asking what's next, evolving your career plans and considering options not only inside but also outside higher education.

By Beth Godbee



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What does career discernment involve when one's already within their chosen career? What does such decision making look like? Especially for those of us who've put years (sometimes decades) into achieving a career in higher education, how do we keep asking what's next, evolving our career plans and considering options not only inside but also outside higher education?

In a previous article, I shared the origins of my decision to leave higher education -- a decision that involved recognizing pushes away from academe and pulls toward public writing, community education and entrepreneurship. Only through a long process of career discernment did I come to recognize these multiple origin stories and their influence on my present experiences and future expectations.

Recognizing the stories we tell to and about ourselves is part of career discernment, as is consideration of personal, familial, social and structural conditioning that limits or affords a range of possibilities. At its best, career discernment invites attention to the personal and political, to the self within larger systems. This process involves ongoing exploration, careful consideration and reflexive decision making about one's direction in life and when, how and why we follow particular pathways. It offers us support in taking next steps along paths that wander, branch, get tough and stretch on, just as careers do. And it helps with determining which forks to take, as there are always more choices along the way.

Considering careers as circuitous journeys, it's not surprising that my origin stories for leaving higher education stretch across many years. So do the career questions I've considered and the reflective practices that I've used to answer them. It's not possible, therefore, to share everything my process has involved, but I'd like to suggest seven practices that may be helpful to others engaged in discerning the next steps in their careers.

1. Talking with confidants. My experience of questioning whether to stay in higher education started in conversations with close friends and family as well as trusted

colleagues and mentors. Before I even allowed myself to acknowledge that I was thinking of leaving, others recognized it and began asking me questions about my goals, priorities, everyday routines, disruptive habits and desired patterns. Through both casual conversations and structured sessions (e.g., acupuncture, Reiki and counseling), I increasingly identified both pushes away from academe and pulls toward something else. Acknowledging others' insight was a vital step in career discernment, and luckily, those "thinking partners" remained with me throughout the process, helping me work through what arose through other practices in this list.

2. Making lists, and writing to learn. As I shared previously in "Making Career Moves by Saying No," I use writing to do self-work, process experiences and make decisions. My career discernment process, therefore, involved personal writing, journaling and list making. These and other forms of writing allowed me to slow down and identify unacknowledged and unspoken beliefs, problems and desires. To illustrate, at one point, I made a chart with two columns: on the left, I listed everything I enjoy about higher education; on the right, I added everything I'd be happy to leave behind. Both sides were long, but the longer right-hand column highlighted why I was feeling frustrated.

At another point, I met with external reviewers visiting my campus and found myself saying that I couldn't imagine working more hours after tenure. For several weeks following that visit, I kept time logs, confirming what I knew to be true: I was working far more than 40 hours a week, and I wasn't yet serving as a writing program administrator, a role I'd be stepping into posttenure. In both of those occasions, as with creating my P&T dossier and through other reflective writing exercises, I noticed what emotions arose (e.g., unease, sadness and anger), which led me to more questions and discernment practices.

3. Pairing downside with upside risks. Many of my emotions were tied to fear and uncertainty about what a life outside higher education might involve. Recognizing my emotions, I made more lists -- this time of fears I had about leaving academe. Fears

are often tied to downside risks, or potential losses. It's easy to focus on such risks without attending to their relational partner: upside risks, or potential gains.

What helped me to work with fear was using the language of risk to track a wider range of uncertain possibilities. Some of my upside risks included a better alignment between my work with my commitments, daily time and attention dedicated to writing, and investment in healing long-term back pain. By imagining not only what could be lost but also what could be gained, I could see more clearly the potential benefits of making change and began investing in the mantra: "Do it scared."

4. Finding my strong yes. Throughout the process of consulting others, writing to learn and tracking fears/risks, I used all five of the contemplative practices I shared in the article "Using Your 'Strong Yes' to Guide Career Decisions." Those include: 1) following the deeper breath, 2) checking in with the heart, head and hands, 3) keeping an emotion journal, 4) looking for signs in everyday life, and (5) looking inward through guided meditation. Each of those strategies allowed me to prioritize embodied knowledge, valuing experiential, emotional and spiritual (not only cognitive) wisdom. For me, career discernment involved internalizing the advice "the absence of a strong yes is actually a no" and learning the difference in my body between a yes and a no.

5. Taking steps toward a new career. To put my toe in the water, try different experiences and see which felt like a strong yes, I began offering community workshops, agreed to facilitate a 40-day educational program for a local church and sought a few freelance writing gigs. In addition to blogging weekly, I wrote a two-page résumé (something I hadn't done in more than a decade) and did several informational interviews with small business owners (women with careers outside academe). I also began studying the careers of entrepreneurs whom I admire, learning about potential revenue streams. And I joined Doyenne, a group that supports women entrepreneurs and offers business coaching. For each of these efforts, I asked myself again, "Does this feel like a strong yes, like the sort of work I'm called to do?" With

each confirmation, I built a clearer sense of what I was being pulled toward, making sure that I wasn't just being pushed away from higher ed. The pulls gave me direction and helped me imagine ways forward.

6. Seeking a reality check. While much of this discernment process involved self-work (work on my own), I increasingly felt the need to consult professionals, wanting more certainty before taking the leap of faith into entrepreneurship. In the fall of my final school year, I met a few times with a counselor who asked me many questions, including where I saw myself next year. I responded with details -- like the fact that I was already giving away my teaching clothes and had moved into an apartment to be mobile -- leading her to ask, "Do you just need someone to tell you that you're not going to be at the university next year?" I laughed and realized she was right: I needed someone to confirm what I already knew to be true. She obliged, repeating back to me all the reasons she could see that I'd already made the decision to leave and all the reasons this decision made sense.

7. Processing grief and other emotions. Meeting with the counselor was key for understanding how to work with the various emotions that arose through career discernment. She recommended I read the book *Trauma Stewardship* and write about trauma exposure responses, which I'd been having in my position as a faculty member -- stretching back to graduate school and continuing through both the demands of the job and regular meetings with students asking me to help them navigate traumas of their own. Through this work of reading and writing, I recognized grief (not only fear) about leaving higher education. Having invested so much, yet experiencing an insurmountable gap between my vision and the reality of higher education, I was experiencing loss. The counselor coached me on how to do less in my final year as a faculty member, making the time and space for grieving and for soaking in last experiences (last times teaching courses, last times attending meetings and so on). Her advice was exactly what I needed to seal my process of career discernment and to begin planning my exit.

Certainly, the longer one stays in academe, the more momentum builds toward continuing to stay. Therefore, career discernment in the midst of an academic career involves willingness to push and pull against that momentum. As I hope my story reveals, such discernment involves the willingness to dig deep into emotional literacies, which include grieving and growing. It involves the willingness to hold paradoxical and contrasting ideas, to work in the space of both/and. And it involves willingness to tread alternative pathways, to find and chart trails not readily taken.

My process of career discernment not only stretched over multiple years. It also overlapped with and led into active planning of when and how to leave -- and when and how to announce this news. I will share in a future article the work involved in planning my exit, including the importance of staying open to an ongoing discernment process.

Written By

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