

Lessons from Leave

By Emily O. Gravett

It's me, hi! (I'm tempted to add: "[I'm the problem, it's me.](#)") It's a new year and I'm back from leave!

(The next Teaching Toolbox will be about an actual teaching tool, [ChatGPT](#), which higher ed is collectively losing its mind about, but I just couldn't bear to start our year off this way.)

I'm grateful to all of the people who made my leave possible, especially my colleagues in the CFI and Philosophy & Religion (mostly just for leaving me alone lol). I recognize not everyone in academia gets to go on leave ([universities are, as we know, "deeply unequal workplaces"](#)) and I also recognize what a singularly unusual institution educational leave is in the broader context of Jobs that Most People Have.

It was, on the whole, a productive time, though there is always more I could have done. I made headway on the textbook I'm writing, *Studying Religion and Disability*, though I got nothing done on the other book proposal I wanted to complete. I gave a couple of presentations, wrote a few co-authored articles (including one that is now requiring a second round of revise-and-resubmit and may never see the light of day, *grumble grumble*), and published several teaching-related blog posts (you can access the latest one [here](#)). I continued to write creatively (I'm not usually one to brag, but I am proud of [this placement](#)). And I spent A LOT of time reading, and not just posts from [the AITA subreddit](#), but, like, real books(!), from [Soraya Chemaly's Rage Becomes Her](#)—which I could only read in short spurts because of how, well, angry it made me—to [David Abram's Becoming Animal](#) to [Louise Erdrich's The Round House](#).

I also made some new friends, tried out yummy new restaurants (like [Vision BBQ](#) in Charlottesville nomnomnom), visited a few too many antique malls, got a couple of colds, and went to some lovely musical performances (including [a Three Notch'd Road concert featuring JMU's very own Sam Suggs](#)). Fellow assistant director Andreas Broscheid and I even did [the Harrisonburg 5k Glow Run](#) [link is to a smiling photo of the two of us wearing glow sticks] to welcome in the new year!

Most importantly, this leave gave me space to reflect, deeply and often, on how I want to spend this little flicker of time that we have on earth. It's in my JMU email signature, the famous lines from poet Mary Oliver ("[Tell me, what is it you plan to do / with your one wild and precious life?](#)"), but this question has become more significant to me as I have gotten older; as we continue to personally and collectively experience the loss of loved ones, like JMU Justice Studies professor Tatiana Benjamin; as seasons (literal and metaphorical) change and time inevitably just keeps passing.

Here are some points of realization and reflection for me from my time in the fall:

Activity and movement: Especially when the sun starts setting at 4:30pm, when the days are cloudy and cold and grey, and when all I want to do is swaddle till summer, I need to get up and move. Best is if I can be outside, breathing in fresh air, hanging out with some trees. This is crucial to my mental health and overall well-being. [Exercise, in some cases, is known to work as well as medication for depression. Just a couple of vigorous minutes a day has been correlated with longer lives.](#) For me, exercise means biking and hiking and running and walking and swimming and weight lifting and yoga and—when I can find an indulgent friend willing to suffer through what can only very generously be called a “backhand” these days—tennis. On the days my daughter is with me, I take her along. She doesn't find going to the gym with me very “fun” and, frankly, I don't care. I am a better person, and parent (and daughter and friend and teacher and writer and aspiring skateboarder and all the things I

am), when I have done some kind of physical activity. So, I am committing to keeping this up, even now that I'm not on leave anymore (though, on my first day back, the closest I got to "vigorous" activity was eating an entire lasagna Garfield-style for dinner, so that's cool too). How do you like to move? What do you notice when you go outside? How can you integrate activity with other needs/wants you may have, such as socializing? How can you have some FUN?

My job is a job: I have been doing a lot of work "right-sizing" the role of work in my life. In some respects, I've had to. After a divorce, I don't have the kind of help around the house that I used to. When my daughter is with me, there is nobody else watching her. I simply have less free time. I can't be as productive. I can't volunteer for as many tasks. I can't say "yes" to everything. So be it. This is good. [My profession isn't my personality](#). As [Roxane Gay recently wrote](#), "who I am and what I do for a living are two very different things." Many of us in higher ed went into our fields because we loved them, because we felt called or compelled, because we wanted to devote our lives to them. So we often spend time at nights, on weekends, over summers off contract, devoted to this work, which has led, not so surprisingly, [to burnout](#) for many of us. If you're lucky enough to enjoy what you do, if you feel like you're making a real impact, this may be the best way for you to live your life. But plenty of people have jobs because—*fist shake* at capitalism—they need paychecks. I know I do. I have a mortgage to pay, the electric bill seems to keep coming every month, and I like food, a lot. (Also I made the mistake of telling my kid she could earn extra money by reading chapter books and now she is bankrupting me.) ["Quiet quitting,"](#) which just means doing what you're paid to do and nothing else, has become all the rage. [Work won't love you back](#), as the book title says. [Rest is resistance](#). So I intend to treat my job as just that—a job—and not the main way I seek validation or value. I'm no longer going to be overextending or diminishing myself to "hustle" for worthiness, as Brené Brown says. I intend to continue at a more reasonable, more placid, more leave-like pace from here on out. (Hold me to it!) There are very few emergencies in higher ed—though we do seem to enjoy working ourselves into frenzies—and those that do occur, [like the tragedy at UVA](#), are not for people like me to handle. I'm not a first-responder or counselor. There is nothing in my job that can't sit for a few days before I attend to it. How can you slow down? What can you let go of? How can you reclaim parts of your identity that work may eclipse, when it is allowed to roam around unchecked?

Forward momentum: I've come to realize that most of (what I imagined when I was younger to be) my major life's goals and accomplishments are now behind me. I earned a PhD, got married, had a kid, landed a job. These were things I had been working toward and looking forward to. Now they're passed (and past). (Reminds me of [Jordan Davis's song "Next Thing You Know."](#)) So what keeps me moving forward? I need something to propel me. Otherwise, I languish (as [many of us did during the pandemic](#)). For me it's finding new things to learn, new goals to set, new accomplishments to track. Publish a nonfiction essay for pay? Check. Ride 50 miles on my bike. Check. Find a new therapist? Check. Get a new mini freezer to store boxes and boxes of delicious Trader Joe's frozen food items? Check check check. I had lofty aspirations of doing something financially responsible with our holiday bonuses (note to self: figure out what a "Roth IRA" is), but instead I bought a used mountain bike, which now sits in my kitchen because I have no other place to put it and which will, once the weather gets better, provide me with hours of (I'm hoping not always painful) education and entertainment. I will not pretend to know what might create excitement and momentum and motivation in your own lives, if you are even feeling stuck and stale the way that I was. But perhaps you might take up a new hobby, go to a new event, forge a new friendship? Maybe there is something you used to love but let atrophy and you could pick it up again? Maybe there is something you've always wanted to try? Now is the time. Now is the only time we have.

Time for teaching: You may have noticed this Toolbox is a little light on the topic of teaching, which I vaguely recall this email series is supposed to focus on. (My brain is a colander these days.) Obviously I didn't teach on leave and I can report that I wasn't able to make sweeping changes to solve all the problems of my spring REL 101: Religions of the World syllabus that I had hoped to. I went on a chilly walk one morning to think it all over and I came up with, as Maui in [one of my favorite scenes from the animated movie Moana](#) says, "bupkis." I can't do everything, it turns out. I no longer want to. Sometimes the best thing for our teaching is to...not focus on our teaching. It's to take a break, [pause](#), recharge, not respond to—or even think about!—those 50 student emails asking you if there is any way you can “round up” an 88.2% to an A-. Sometimes it's making a choice to do what's best for us and our own lives, not our students'. Teaching is an important part of our jobs, true, but it is just one part of our jobs and an even smaller part of who we are, even if we care very much about our students, even if it's our primary role, even if we win awards for it. Leave allowed me to feel like a whole person again. What can you do, to feel the same?

I hope that Winter Break also allowed you all some space to take a rest, to do what brings you joy, to reflect on your last year, and to consider what might be meaningful for you in the year ahead. I'd love to read your thoughts, if you want to send them to me.

About the author: Emily O. Gravett is an assistant director in the [Center for Faculty Innovation](#) and an associate professor in the [Department of Philosophy & Religion](#). She can be reached at [\[graveteo@jmu.edu\]](mailto:graveteo@jmu.edu)graveteo@jmu.edu.

To offer feedback about this Toolbox or any others, feel free to use [this anonymous Google form](#) or contact Emily Gravett (graveteo@jmu.edu). For additional information about the CFI's Teaching Toolboxes, including PDFs of past emails, please visit [our webpage](#).