

A Touch of Talent: The Journey of a Religious Studies Scholar

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WRITER'S COMMENT: *As a peer adviser for the past 3 years, one of the most pressing issues that I have heard students face is how to pick an area to study and defend their interest in light of a societal pressure to study fields more "practical" and "useful." Since I am a Religious Studies major going into the health sciences, I have personally been agonized by this pressure throughout college but was encouraged by mentors such as Mark Elmore to pursue my passions. So, when Dr. Lord gave my UWP 101 class the profile assignment, I was eager to take her opportunity to celebrate the field I have grown to love as well as inspire my peers to pursue their own passions. Dr. Lord's encouragement to develop my own voice and style made this essay a great joy to write and I will remember UWP 101 as one of my favorite classes at UC Davis.*

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: *Rebecca Garza wrote "A Touch of Talent: The Journey of a Religious Studies Scholar" in response to a UWP 101 assignment to use her interviewing skills to "find" and shape insider information about a topic that matters. This assignment coincided with our explorations of style, and I was delighted to see Rebecca adopt a uniquely cheerful style as she shared insider information about the value of a humanities degree.*

Rebecca's exploration of the "edge of knowing" reminded me that many writers view the crossroads to be a site of imagination. For example, Chinua Achebe talks about the zone of power, that place where the "spirits meet the humans, the water meets the land, the child meets the adult." It is probably no coincidence that we UWP faculty work with many students who are at a crossroads and that many of us view higher education to be at a crossroads.

In fact, July 15, 2012's Davis Enterprise includes an editorial by Bill Maxwell titled "Requiem for a College Life As I Knew It." Maxwell's piece laments the loss of "learning for learning's sake." Maxwell writes, "Today, because of profound changes—including online instruction and other technology-related practices, budget constraints, fast-track graduation requirements and

governing boards primarily composed of businesspeople who meddle and micromanage—campus life in the United States is a shadow of its old self.”

I recognize the logic in Maxwell’s argument. And yet . . . I find Rebecca’s view to be more interesting. In her characteristically cheerful way, she suggests that, outside of the world of logos (and budget cuts), something good endures. I am comforted by the idea that UC Davis students like Rebecca are finding ways to prosper at the crossroads, to seek out and embrace “the edge of knowing,” and, most of all, to appreciate their journeys to the ninth floor of Sproul Hall.

—Elyse Lord, University Writing Program

When asked about their favorite spot in Davis, many people would name places such as the arboretum or Crepeville. I, on the other hand, offer up a favorite spot that many students may not have thought about, let alone ventured to visit. This mystical place I hint at would be the ninth floor of Sproul Hall.

I recently made my ascent to this unique campus destination, to the office of one of the exceptional religious studies faculty members. I wondered how this man and his colleagues have managed to accomplish what every parent of a Religious Studies undergraduate thinks impossible: obtain (and retain) a paying job that is concentrated in the humanities. Most days, concerns about my decision to major in the humanities do not give me much pause. In fact, I have already polished my defense speech for friends in the hard sciences and also for my concerned parents: “You know, all scholars can major in anything and succeed as long as they enjoy the subject and work hard.” This speech would be punctuated with brief examples of people who majored in something unexpected. (For example, Michael Eisner, former CEO of the Walt Disney Company, majored in English.)

As a senior, however, the question of how to actually succeed once I left the nurturing embraces of UC Davis seemed to be a constant weight at the back of my mind, especially when most people in the general public do not see the value of a religious studies or humanities degree. It turns out, however, that quite a few people on campus who have real, paying jobs are working on subjects that make me excited to actually do my homework. In fact, one of the UC system’s very own religious studies undergraduates came back to California’s prized university system to teach religious studies and inspire a new generation of worthy humanities

students. And he is the man I would be interviewing in Sproul Hall today.

When I arrived at Professor Mark Elmore's office, he cheerily welcomed me and began his usual questions about how I was doing with my research and graduate school applications. The first thing I always notice in Elmore's and any other RST professor's office is the wall-length window that accentuates their special location above Davis. Once I saw past the view of the treetops, however, I noticed that more wall space in the offices is covered by bookshelves (that is, *mini libraries*, which make any avid reader's heart sing) than not, which hinted at the amount of research work that it takes to be a UC Davis RST professor. After taking in the setting, however, I realized that professors who remember which graduate program you are applying to and voluntarily bring up the subject are a treasure to any undergraduate and one of my many attractions to this sometimes underappreciated department.

After releasing my frustration over deciding which graduate programs to apply to and the pains of writing a personal statement, we got down to business, which for me, was creating a formula for how to "make it" in religious studies by studying Elmore's success.

Rarely have I heard that a student is changing his or her major from the sciences because it is "easy and boring." However, this is one of the reasons that Elmore cited for his initial interest in religious studies. Many universities, especially those valued for their research, such as those in the UC system, use introductory chemistry courses as a way to "weed out" the students who will not cut it in a hard science major. For Elmore, taking chemistry classes at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB) as a freshman was neither challenging nor motivating—which is why he changed his major to environmental studies. While he was deciding to change majors, Elmore took religious studies courses, but the idea of actually majoring in religious studies was, as he put it, "the most preposterous thing ever." Elmore, like many freshman, did not understand that he could major in religious studies (or perhaps that it would be worthwhile to choose this major) until he actually met someone who was a declared religious studies major. That meeting, which he described as an "epiphany," persuaded him to become a double major in environmental studies and religious studies.

Nearing the end of his junior year, Elmore realized that he was almost done with his majors but was not ready to graduate; naturally,

the best solution was to pick up another major! Geography, his newest major, was and is a very promising field, especially at UCSB. At that time, UCSB's geography department was ranked number four in the nation by the National Research Council and was working with the burgeoning Geography Information System (GIS) technology (UC Santa Barbara Department of Geography). GIS has grown into an incredibly important tool that is used to store and analyze all sorts of geographic data, which can be used for anything from urban planning to mapping the spread of an infectious disease. Elmore, hinting at the irony, says that "he would have been rich" if he had pursued GIS. (Luckily for UC Davis, Elmore's road would not lead to the glory and riches of the GIS field.)

At this point in our talk, Elmore pointed out that having three majors did not exactly give him a clear path to what he wanted to do after college. So, when he graduated in 1995, rather than apply to graduate school, he worked as a line cook in Santa Barbara for the year and saved money to fund his dream trip to India. As he began to talk about this trip to India, I was expecting to hear that it was amazing and that the beauty of the culture was what hooked him into studying South Asian religions (his specialty). The conversation took a slightly different turn when Elmore described his travels to India with one of his friends, as being "absolutely horrible." It seems that going to India with no guidebook and nothing planned out was not the best way to experience India for the first time. (He would definitely not suggest it.) But even though he cannot remember a lot of good things from that trip, this was an important turning point in his life. Elmore indicated that his bad experiences in India "got under [his] skin," and, even though he wasn't aware of it at the time, this was the first of many trips to India. The bad experiences that Elmore described had to do with the type of poverty that he witnessed. Up to that point in his life, he had experienced what he had called "American poverty." In India, he saw true devastating poverty, which he described as "real poverty." Seeing this harsh condition made India a place that was "raw and real" for him in a way that made America seem sheltered from.

For those who do not understand the type of poverty that bothered Professor Elmore, a quick look at one of the health inequities between America and India paints a vivid picture. Health inequities are those inequalities in health between groups of people that are avoidable. This is a useful tool to see the difference between two countries because experiences of illness are often affected by social and economic conditions, especially

in relation to infant mortality (World Health Organization). Figure 1 shows that, currently, most of the United States has infant mortality rates of nine or fewer per 10,000 live births, while India currently has as high as 60 to more than 100 deaths per 10,000 live births. This means that newborns are much more likely to live past infancy in the United States than in India. Clearly, there is a disparity in resources and experience between these two populations. This experience of disparity and “real” poverty influenced Elmore’s decision in graduate school applications.

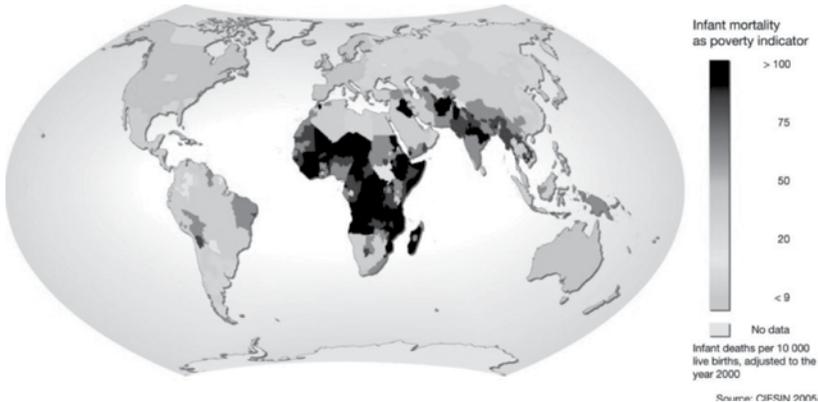


Fig. 1 – Using Infant Mortality as an indicator for poverty, it is clear that the United States has significantly less poverty than India (UNEP/GRID).

Upon Elmore’s return to the United States, he was still unsure about his future plans, so he applied to graduate schools for both geography and religious studies. In the end, the choice of graduate programs came down to a geography program at UC Berkeley or a religious studies program with an emphasis in South Asian religion at the University of Colorado at Boulder. With an almost guilty look, he mentioned that his method for choosing between these two programs is not something that he would advise any of his students to use. He prefaced this method with the fact that he had grown up in the town of Truckee, California (near Tahoe), and had been snowboarding since he was about ten years old. He reasoned that if he went to Boulder, which was offering to fund his studies, he could try out religious studies and also enjoy opportunities to snowboard. If he didn’t enjoy the program, it wouldn’t put him back that much money and he could go back to geography (a more stable field anyway). Needless to

say, I was a little surprised that one of the most popular professors in my department happened to get his masters degree in religious studies on a bit of a whim due to his love of snowboarding. He continued (in response to my surprised facial expressions) that, once he started the program, he didn't do as much snowboarding as he thought he would, and he really "got into" religious studies. Although one of the few with the ability to dabble in both the humanities and sciences, Elmore chose to take the "riskier" track in most parents' eyes in that he turned down an offer of being one of the prominent and wealthy GIS researchers to pursue something that struck at something a little bit deeper for him.

Elmore graduated with his M.A. in Religious Studies and South Asia studies (with honors) in 1998. From that point on, Elmore described what happened to him as a series of lucky circumstances that led him to grant money and funding to do research in India and eventually get a Ph.D. in religious studies from his alma mater, UCSB.

In Elmore's humble attempt to gloss over his time in between his masters work and teaching at UC Davis, he left out a few details that explain his statement that "people kept giving [him] money." Somewhere along the way from his epiphany of majoring in RST as an undergrad to his job at UC Davis, Elmore had picked up five languages other than English (Hindi, Sanskrit, Pahari, Spanish, and French), more than thirteen grants and fellowships, and had been published at least twelve times. Although his easygoing manner and modest explanations of his life do not begin to allude to his accomplishments, it is clear that this professor took the subject he was truly interested in and turned it into a successful career. After all, one does not just pick up fellowships or grants (or languages for that matter) without some hard work and determination. So, what exactly was he studying through all of this?

When Elmore started his Ph.D. at UC Santa Barbara, his main adviser was working in Europe. Elmore's original research focus with this adviser was Tantric studies. While the adviser was away, however, Elmore began to be interested in actually talking to the people of India. He explained that Tantric studies is basically about translating lists, such as lists of Tantras and lists of names. This was "not as alive" to him as studying and talking to the people who live in India today.

During this time, he received grant money to do a visual anthropology project in India, and so he took pictures and mapped different pilgrimage and religious sites. During this project, he discovered that he loved to

work in mountains (which was not surprising to hear after learning that snowboarding was a major factor in his graduate school decision). His dissertation work and current research is now based in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh (literally meaning “land of snow”) in the North of India. He specifically chose this area to research because Nepal, his first choice, was generating a lot of interest already, while the area of Himachal Pradesh had virtually no other researcher working in the region. When asked what his favorite part about research is, he wistfully began talking about the feeling of “not knowing.” Most scholars who have done research on a subject they truly enjoy, whether it is culture or science, will be able to recognize the feeling that one has when reading and researching all about a subject, and knowing that there is something there that no one has taught or written out yet, which just needs to be discovered. Elmore calls that point in a research project being on the “edge of knowing,” when you “don’t know where you’re going” and there is a lot of possibility. He said that he is addicted to that feeling, which keeps him going back to do more research, even though it eventually has to come to an end for him to actually write out what he has learned.

Finally, after learning about his own journey within the field of religious studies, I asked if he had any advice for religious studies and humanities majors who feel discouraged by the lack of enthusiasm for our fields. He immediately understood the feeling that I was trying to portray about having to defend majoring in the humanities. Unfortunately, he could not give me the exact formula that I would need to “make it” or prove myself. Rather, he said that there is no blanket rule for who makes it and who doesn’t in any major. After all, when he was an undergraduate, he would have never thought he would have ended up as a professor of religious studies at UC Davis. When he advises students, he generally finds out what the student is really like and if he/she has “a spark” and some talent. He said that he does not advise all of his students to specialize in religious studies since the major requires so much work. He reminds those whom he does encourage to continue, that you never know what will happen, and that it really isn’t always fair who gets the job in the end. But, if you really want it, you can do it. Then, he pointed out the reasoning that I had been using to justify my education all along, “No matter what you major in, you are going to have to work hard to get to the place you choose.”

As I left Professor Elmore’s office and descended down the elevator

back to Earth, I had a surprisingly calm attitude. I thought that I would be overwhelmed with advice about things to do to become successful or books to prepare me for my next academic adventure. Instead, I had learned that one of the professors whose class helped to convert me to my major had a long and winding path to his current position. As Professor Elmore illustrated to me, it takes someone who is passionate, smart, and lucky to be successful in religious studies and any field. I felt lucky to belong to a department with professors like Mark Elmore who are accomplished, humble, and willing to help students find their own projects that “[get] under [their] skin.” The parents of religious studies undergraduates will just have to be content with the fact that it takes a special type of student to pursue this major, which means that a religious studies major’s parents have raised a hardworking and courageous intellectual. As for my own worries about my future, I hope to inspire more students to take a risk and study something that truly inspires them. I guess that means I will have to find the graduate program that sounds the most fun, which, for me, looks like a research program, studying religion, which will take me to my own “edge of knowing.”

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