

Not Everything Has to Be Practical for It to Be Important

R. Scott Smith, professor of classics, humanities and Italian studies, on his career path

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ILLUSTRATION BY RAUL ARIS

I AM AN ACCIDENTAL PROFESSOR. I come from a little place called Mechanicsville, Virginia. My mother was the only daughter of a woman who had 13 brothers and sisters. She raised me as a single mother for part of my life before she remarried. My stepfather — I just call him my father — was an accountant, and my mom worked for the phone company.

My father had attended college at the University of North Carolina but had not completed his degree, and my mom never went to college; however, they were very committed to raising their kids in a way that led to college. I can remember my father suggesting I take courses in business and I think, for my parents, college meant studying something that was marketable. They did not expect I would end up a college professor.

I was always interested in learning things. I loved music, art, sports, science, languages, reading. I wanted to go to Duke University because they had a great basketball program. My mom, on a whim, took me to a presentation at Mary Washington College in Fredericksburg, Virginia, and that's where I ended up studying classics.

My path to classics began in middle school, however. My Latin teacher was Mrs. T. V. Pomfrey, and she was a firebrand. We did not necessarily get along. I didn't care much about the class, and about three weeks in, she told us we were having a test. I didn't know it was coming, and I didn't know the material, so I decided to look at my best friend's test since he was a really good student. And then I heard her voice.

"Mr. Smith? Will you please come here?"

I was caught, and I was scared, approaching her with my test paper in my hands.

But she said nothing about it — I just did not do well on that exam.

In true teenager fashion, I got mad at her for my mistake. I decided I would prove to her that I could do it on my own without cheating. I spent whole weekends just doing Latin and went on to take five years of the subject in middle and high school.

I went to graduate school at the University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana, a typical midwestern school that had a great classics program and one of the largest classical libraries in the country. It's an incredible subject that I want other people to love as much as I do. Not everything has to be practical for it to be important. We need intellectual curiosity and cultural understanding. If we don't value those, we're going to be in trouble.

That mistake I made back in middle school led to a career of great joy and personal satisfaction. I have never once had a day when I dreaded going to work."

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