

NARRATIVE, INTERRUPTED: REFLECTIONS ON A FIRST SEMESTER AS A NEW LAW PROFESSOR LIKE NO OTHER

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The Paper Chase. Legally Blonde. Lady Bird. The *Harry Potter* universe. There is a reason that great works of fiction set in schools, whether law schools or not, frequently track the trajectory of the school year, beginning with the promise of September as summer is ending, travelling through the wintery (literally and figuratively) middle months, before ending with the triumph of graduation in the hope of late spring/early summer. For me, the 2019-2020 academic year was to be a transition year – complete my doctorate at Osgoode Hall Law School before beginning a new position as a faculty member at the University of Manitoba’s Faculty of Law (also known as Robson Hall). It was a major part of the narrative of my life and career. Needless to say, things did not go as planned. The narrative was interrupted as we appear to remain in a “winter” that will not end in short order in higher education. Students – especially those meant to finish or begin their degrees in 2020 – are similarly in an in-between zone. When narratives go awry, the sense of loss is palpable. But like most characters in interesting narratives, there is optimism we can discover what is most valuable, what we did not know we had till it was gone (to quote Joni Mitchell), and hope for as happy an ending as possible.

My first year as a faculty member at the University of Manitoba’s Faculty of Law was always destined to not totally follow the narrative of a year given a start date of January 1. But I still had a narrative, spending the autumn putting final touches on my doctoral dissertation. When my defence was scheduled for January 21, it was clear that my first three weeks of the semester would be incredibly busy. I managed to return to Toronto for a successful defence, returning to Winnipeg the evening of January 21, celebrating with my spouse, and looking forward to the rest of the semester – my first as a tenure-track professor. The next morning, January 22, CBC’s *Frontburner* podcast (which I listened to quasi-religiously) aired its first report on a “new coronavirus” “spreading out of China”.

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The unlikely villain of the semester had made its appearance. But as with many narrative villains, I was initially not concerned. On the contrary, I found myself jumping into university service, looking into getting called to the Manitoba bar, and figuring out how to teach the Supreme Court of Canada's latest incarnation of administrative law, prescribed only a month before in December 2019's *Canada (Minister of Citizenship and Immigration) v Vavilov*. The middle of the narrative had arrived. And I was looking to the end of the narrative, making plans for a summer of research projects, getting my dissertation published, and ordering my York University doctoral gown and hood. I could not wait to wear it, first at Robson Hall's convocation, and then at my own with a Ph.D. from Osgoode Hall Law School.

Then news from Italy and Iran suggested that the story's villain was more deadly than we first suspected. Then Washington State. And then. And then. The rest is history. Our narrative at Robson was thrown off course. With some experience in online teaching, stopping in-person classes was not as shocking for me as it was for some of my colleagues. And I commend my colleagues for supporting each other in this time. I even learned something along the way: in my Legal Profession and Professional Responsibility class, I found that many students' presentations appeared more comfortable one-on-one (even knowing that the presentations were being recorded and their classmates would see/hear them eventually) than live in front of fifty-plus colleagues. I will leave it to the pedagogical experts what to make of that, but it was interesting.

But more profoundly, there descended a sense of "this is not how the narrative is supposed to go". There would be no "last class" farewell. No in-person goodbyes. No pre-exam sitting in office hours waiting to answer questions. On the few occasions I needed to return to my office to get materials, the building felt eerie. The 3Ls were denied their convocation – a celebration that they and their loved ones so richly deserved (read Caitlin Flanagan's piece in *The Atlantic* for a more poetic take than I can give). I wouldn't be wearing my new gown and hood after all.

Just as I could not bade farewell to graduating students, ending the beginning of a new job, I could not finish with a convocation at Osgoode. My terminal degree thus never reached its celebratory conclusion, even if I can feel fortunate that the actual defence allowed a celebration of a

different sort. Again, there were blessings. Leftover travel and expense funds allowed me to hire an additional student as a research assistant. With awe, I watched Peter Sankoff's #100Interns project come to realization. But a feeling that things are on hold remains.

Many academics may be introverts – much of our work is done alone. But that is not synonymous with desiring no human interaction. It is trite to say that we are social creatures. I have come into my office a few times since March 21 to gather materials. It is eerie to see the university so quiet. One indeed does not know what one has until it is gone. A secure job in a lively workplace. Great colleagues. The opportunity to meet with students and colleagues in person. And a story – of one's own career and education (as I realized with my own doctorate) and one's students (as the academic years follow their natural flow). For all of legal education's imperfections, this loss of narrative is a real loss, even if it cannot compare to the lives saved as a result of the lockdown.

Do not get me wrong. I am enormously privileged in the grand scheme of things. Neither my spouse nor I are front-line health care workers. Manitoba never experienced the outbreak of COVID-19 that came to most other provinces. On a personal level, things became slightly scary when the provincial government announced that it was going to reduce university funding (allegedly due to the impending financial crisis). But after significant protest, the extent of the cuts was much less than originally feared. In fact, my spouse actually got a new job (yes, in the midst of a pandemic) beginning in early May. So our greatest preoccupation became taking care of a toddler in the absence of child care – something we are hardly alone in doing. In this sense, we are sharing a narrative with millions of other working parents. And my spouse arranged a lovely Zoom convocation with my parents, siblings, doctoral supervisor, graduate program director, and dear friend from U of T's Architecture School that I will forever treasure.

But the interruption to the narrative is not over. It now appears as though the Fall 2020 term is also going to be taught online. As much as I would love to channel *Dead Poets Society* and teach (partially) outside, this seems the responsible course of action as we continue to learn how to best combat this new disease. And I am looking forward, albeit with trepidation, to the opportunity to experiment pedagogically come the autumn. Undoubtedly, I will learn through a different mix of teaching

methods (such as recording a lecture in advance, and then dividing the class up into smaller groups to have “tutorials” during lecture time) and will learn from my colleagues’ experience. So perhaps the interruption to the narrative is merely an important side journey.

But there are others who cannot begin their narratives, at least not in any traditional sense. 1Ls commencing their law degrees in the Fall will be lacking the orientation and small section comradery that tends to create one’s best friends for three years, if not for life. Graduate programs filled with international students may have years that are very empty. Two new colleagues scheduled to start at Robson Hall as assistant professors on July 1 could not have the typical start to their year. A third was unable to start at all. These narratives are off to starts that are atypical at the very least.

Daniel Kahneman (*Thinking, Fast and Slow*) has noted that human beings wish to tell a story about themselves – this “remembering self” is very important to our identities, and we are willing to endure unpleasant momentary experiences (or forego pleasant ones) in our “experiencing self” in order to be able to tell that story. And we all had visions of how the school years would transition into each other, not only for ourselves but for our students. So it seems as though our narratives – as professors – are on hold, or at the very least on a side journey. In this vein, our stories are intimately tied to our students. The price we are paying may be small to combat a pandemic, but it is a price nonetheless. We can only hope that “Narrative, Interrupted” leads to a better narrative when the interruption ends.