

Tales from Sabbatical III: Coming home

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Abstract

This *Matter of Opinion* article is the third of three in a “Tales from Sabbatical” series focusing on sabbaticals in academia with perspectives before you go, during the sabbatical, and once you return. This contribution discusses the latter half of the sabbatical, the return home, and three key takeaways from the experience: being intentional, incorporating great ideas, and pruning your life.

“It’s a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. You step onto the road, and if you don’t keep your feet, there’s no knowing where you might be swept off to.”

These words of caution from Gandalf in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* encapsulate the exhilarating uncertainty of any adventure. For academics, this sentiment finds its perfect embodiment in the sabbatical year. Throughout the 2022-2023 academic year, I embarked on a sabbatical to the United Kingdom, chronicling my journey in a three-part ‘Tales from Sabbatical’ series. My intent has been to help fellow faculty members prepare for (Part I [1]), navigate through (Part II [2]), and now, in this final chapter, I reflect on the experience of returning home with some personal takeaways going forward.

1. Here Comes the Sun

I penned the previous installment of this series, “Tales from Sabbatical Part II: During Your Stay,” in January of 2023 at the halfway point of my sabbatical. With the sun rising around 9am and setting by 4pm, we could appreciate the opening lyrics from a famous Liverpool band “It’s been a long, cold, lonely winter.” We were a bit homesick missing family over the Christmas and New Year holidays. Thankfully, from then onward things only got better. The days got longer and brighter and our flexible schedule meant we took advantage of any rare sunny day that came our way. Over the next six months, we made the most of our remaining time abroad with

travel, seminars, conferences, and friendships across the UK and in Germany, Switzerland, Spain, and Ireland.

But all good things come to an end and far too soon we found ourselves selling or giving away our possessions and packing our bags. It was so much harder to say goodbye than I expected.

The jolt of returning to reality was immediate. Stepping off the plane, we traded the cool, damp embrace of Liverpool for the searing heat of a Utah July. Swiftly, we transitioned back into our home and re-enrolled our children in school. We unraveled the intricate logistics and plans we had carefully woven in reverse.

Back at the University, I was quickly immersed again in committee assignments, teaching duties, office hours, group meetings, and an onslaught of requests for one-on-one discussions. I also arrived just in time for the gauntlet of going up for full professor.

However, amidst the logistical considerations, there was an undeniable sense of joy in returning to familiar spaces. It reinforced the age-old adage that distance truly makes the heart grow fonder. Reuniting with colleagues and friends was a heartwarming experience, and it provided an opportunity to share stories and rekindle connections. My whole family found renewed joy in old favorites - from Mexican food to rock climbing.

I’ve now been back nearly three months and I’ve found time to not only reconnect, but also reflect on my experience. I came away with three clear takeaways that I’d like to share.



Figure 1: (a) Google map showing planned trips (green flags) and sites visited (pink hearts), (b) trying my best to ‘run out’ my son in cricket, (c) the turquoise waters of Cornwall, (d) wild swimming in Wales, (e) the iconic Sycamore Gap tree, and (f) hiking in the highlands of Cairngorms national park.

2. Takeaway #1: Be intentional

While a year may seem like a substantial stretch of time, the months swiftly dance by! Recognizing this, my astute wife insisted on crafting a meticulous plan for each of our 52 weeks in the UK before our departure. “Don’t waste a single weekend” became our guiding principle! The key to this was planning in advance and getting things on the calendar. It was a joy to pin destinations on our Google maps, and the eager anticipation lent a sweeter flavor to every visit. Seminars, speaking engagements, flights, Airbnbs, event tickets, and more were booked well in advance. There were weeks when Thursday would arrive, and my wife and I would turn to each other and ask, “What adventures have we charted for ourselves this weekend?” Truth be told, there were moments when sheer exhaustion from the daily grind almost led us to consider canceling our plans, were it not for our steadfast commitment to the “Don’t waste a single weekend” creed and the fact that we had everything pre-arranged.

The outcome was nothing short of astonishing! As depicted in Figure 1, while we didn’t manage to explore every flagged location (green markers), we did cover an impressive expanse (pink hearts)! One personal achievement that filled me with pride was the goal of visiting, hiking, and swimming in all 15 National Parks in the UK. Save for one, we achieved this feat (I’ll

certainly make it to The Broads soon enough!). Whether it was an English Heritage or National Trust site 15 minutes away or the mesmerizing turquoise waters of Cornwall at the opposite end of the country, these aspirations propelled us across the entire breadth of the UK. They led us to sights we might have otherwise overlooked or even missed forever, such as the Sycamore Gap tree which was tragically felled recently.[3]

In fact, a recurring phrase I heard over and over as I met with fellow UK academics was “Wow, I’ve lived here in the UK my whole life and I’ve never been there.”

I think we can all relate to that phrase. I know that I lived in Utah nearly my whole life but I was 35 when I finally made the relatively short trip down to the Grand Canyon for the first time. I suppose when things are nearby and we have no time constraints we just assume that we’ll eventually get around to visiting them, but we feel no rush to put them on the calendar. My takeaway from the sabbatical was to be much more intentional about my plans. If something holds significance, it deserves a spot on the calendar. Establish a goal with a clear roadmap of how to achieve it. These principles extend beyond travel destinations, encompassing aspirations related to career, family, health, hobbies, and beyond. The key is to be intentional.

3. Takeaway #2: Incorporate great ideas

In the previous installment of this series[2], I highlighted the common challenges shared by academia in both the UK and the USA, including long working hours, wage discrepancies compared to industry standards, problematic incentive systems, limited funding opportunities, time-consuming administrative tasks, subjective ranking systems, and the perennial struggle to attract top talent. However, despite these common challenges, there are, nonetheless, plenty of valuable practices we can emulate and adopt from our British academic colleagues.

I previously noted the excellent format of meetings like the Solid State Christmas meeting, or the unique practice of tutoring students for several hours per week in small groups as excellent ideas worth adopting. Indeed, I've already committed to more engaged office hours by putting it on my weekly calendar.

I came to value the safety culture prevalent in the UK. It was a rare occurrence for any event to commence without someone reassuring us that no fire drills were scheduled for the day and providing clear instructions on the nearest safe exit. Beyond this, I was captivated by the modest and even self-effacing demeanor of my British colleagues, in stark contrast to the sometimes overly confident approach I tend to bring to science. This contrast was both enlightening and endearing.

Another example that struck me was the presence of tea rooms and the inclusion of dedicated staff, often affectionately referred to as 'tea ladies' who facilitated the provision of tea, coffee, and light refreshments. These communal spaces served as hubs for informal meetings and gatherings, creating an atmosphere of camaraderie and idea exchange. It was evident that regular interactions were integral to the academic culture, fostering collaboration and a sense of community among faculty and students alike. This practice struck me as particularly commendable and merits serious consideration, especially in contrast to the American system where academics can often find themselves isolated, with less opportunity for community and engagement within their department.

There were other cultural events that I found myself wishing we had back home. Whether it was the awe-inspiring atmosphere of the Tattoo in Edinburgh or the vibrant celebrations of Eurovision in Liverpool, these occasions truly brought cities to life. Even learning to play new sports like rounders and cricket with my children and friends was a delightful experience. I distinctly recall my initial perplexity at witnessing a burly individual deftly wielding a bat one-handed, prompting me

to muse, "What have the Brits done to baseball?" Only later did I realize, given the history of both sports, a more fitting inquiry might have been, "What have the Yanks done to rounders?"

There were valuable takeaways from the sabbatical experience itself. I actively sought out connections with colleagues with whom I had not engaged in years. Being in close proximity, I prioritized rekindling these professional relationships. For instance, Professor Nicola Spaldin, who taught me about magnetism in graduate school and who served on my M.S. committee, graciously set aside time for a memorable cross-country skiing adventure in the Swiss Alps (see Figure 2). It underscored the importance of not waiting for sabbaticals to reconnect with colleagues.

As a family, we spent a great amount of time traveling together as a family to cultural and historical sites. We learned a ton together and took charge of a much more personalized education since we were homeschooling our kids. We listened to dozens and dozens of audio-books together. I even found a love tolerance of jogging for exercise as a replacement for my usual mountain biking and backcountry skiing back home in Salt Lake City. There were many habits like this that we are trying to retain and even expand going forward post-sabbatical.

4. Takeaway #3: Prune your life

I am an avid gardener. Our home in Salt Lake City has a dozen or so large fruit trees. When we moved in, these trees were massive and had not been pruned in who knows how long. They were big beautiful trees, but they didn't yield much fruit. When I finally pruned these trees back I cut off a lot of wood. They were a bit less pleasant to look at, but I was shocked at how much fruit they produced in the fall.

Academia, akin to a flourishing orchard, is a landscape where professors navigate a multitude of side projects and responsibilities, much like an untamed fruit tree depicted in Figure 2. It's not merely the side projects; at times, the demands of academia can feel like a relentless barrage of small challenges, akin to a thousand paper cuts to productivity. Two-factor authentication and electronic forms for administrative tasks have made things like purchasing, travel, reimbursement, student applications and the like extremely time-consuming. Email could be the worst of all! A study from 2006 revealed that academics tend to check their email a staggering 30-40 times per hour [4]. Furthermore, astonishingly, 70% of emails receive a response within a mere 6 minutes. [5] One can appreciate why



Figure 2: (left) Cross-country skiing with Nicola Spaldin in Switzerland, (right) a fruit tree before and after pruning. (Picture courtesy of Doug Gucker Ag/Natural Resource Educator & Illinois SARE Coordinator at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.)

Robert J. Oppenheimer adamantly prohibited phones in the offices of the scientists at Los Alamos; the potential threat to secrecy was perhaps dwarfed by the ever-present danger of distractions (Bird, 2021, [6]).

Learning to say “no” in the first place to things is an important and underutilized skill in universities. For those of us who are already overcommitted, perhaps now is the time to prune our lives.

As is evident by the extensive travel shown in figure 1, we were able to thoroughly enjoy our year abroad, but this is not to say that my sabbatical was unproductive by typical scholarly measures. In fact, the year between August 2022 and July 2023 was one of my most productive with 19 publications accepted, 10 new manuscripts submitted, 11 Materialism podcast episodes released,[7] 17 research proposals written (4 accepted!), 37 talks presented, and 6 new research collaborations. Imagine what you could accomplish if you could quiet the small distractions in your life and focus for a time on things that matter most. Indeed, this is the thesis that Donald Braben puts forward in his book on scientific freedom.[8]

Upon our return, we unearthed boxes filled with clothing and possessions that we soon realized had not been missed. This revelation inevitably prompts the question: “Did we truly need these in our lives to begin with?” Moving forward, my aim is to identify those pursuits most worthy of my time and energy and prune away the rest.

5. “There and Back Again”

The full title of J.R.R. Tolkien’s first novel was “The Hobbit, or There and Back Again.” This subtitle encapsulates the journey of the main character, Bilbo Baggins, who leaves his comfortable home in the Shire, embarks on a grand adventure, and eventually returns home.

The phrase symbolizes the journey, personal growth, and the transformative power of adventure. It suggests that while travel and adventure are exciting and full of challenges, there’s a deep satisfaction in returning to one’s familiar surroundings and loved ones, a theme echoed in Tolkien’s later work, “The Lord of the Rings,” especially in the character of Frodo Baggins, who undertakes a similar journey of epic proportions.

In “The Lord of the Rings,” Frodo’s journey is much more arduous, and it highlights the toll that such quests can take on a person. Even though he eventually returns to the Shire after the destruction of the One Ring, he is forever changed by his experiences. This underscores the idea that while returning home is significant, it’s not always a return to the same person or the same life as before.

This message resonates with me. Having returned home to the University of Utah from my sabbatical I now embark on my milestone 10th year as a professor this fall. It feels like a fitting moment to rediscover the essence of what first drew me to this profession. After a year of exploration and growth, I find myself more invigorated and passionate than ever to share the wonders of Materials Science and Engineering with my students.

Looking ahead, my family and I are already dreaming of our next sabbatical, seven years down the road. The prospect of fresh adventures and new perspectives beckons, as we anticipate the enriching experiences that lie ahead.

To quote J.R.R. Tolkien’s “The Hobbit,”

“There is nothing like looking if you want

to find something. You certainly usually find something, if you look, but it is not always quite the something you were after.”

My sabbatical journey has reminded me that sometimes, the most remarkable discoveries are the ones we stumble upon when we weren't even sure what we were seeking. It's about embracing the unexpected, cherishing the present, and, in the grand tradition of Bilbo Baggins, continuing to venture forth on new quests, wherever they may lead. Thank you, reader, for joining me in this journey.

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