

The resurrection of a failed thesis

One examiner's words were pinned to the wall in front of me for the six months it took to re write my thesis. This is what she wrote before mentioning the limitations:

“This is a solid piece of scholarly work which meets the requirements for award of PhD. In my view the candidate has reached a sound level of scholarly achievement. The presentation of the thesis is very professional. It is clear and succinctly written.”

On the instruction of my new supervisor I burned the comments of the other two examiners who failed the thesis, and said it could not be redeemed through re writing. I do remember once phrase: *superficial fluency*. Those words crucified me until the day I discovered the mistakes made in the selection of examiners in a Google lottery because those working in more appropriate fields were not available.

When the university research office called me in to give me the results of my PhD more than eight months after it was submitted for examination, I went expecting bad news but determined to take full responsibility. The first question they asked me was whether my supervisor had read my PhD. It was a moot question I had asked myself throughout the three years of writing, but my answer was so typical of the kind of thinking that had brought me to such a catastrophic moment: “I have not come here to dish out the dirt on my supervisors,” I said.

Throughout my candidacy I had tried to take responsibility for everything, working by the old evangelical code, never explain, and never complain. The refusal to blame anyone except myself almost cost me a second chance. This account may seem like the floodgates of blame have opened up. However, having experienced good supervision, I also recognise poor supervision.

The possibility that it was a supervisory problem had been raised by my boss, an Associate Professor in higher education, the moment she heard I had failed. When I was approaching the final stages of my thesis, I attended a seminar she ran which propelled me towards completion. She had said that the successful completion of a PhD meant a candidate had to take responsibility for managing their supervisors. She was equally convinced that

good supervisors knew when and what to submit. I had tried to manage my supervisors, but I could not make the quality decisions for them.

I was prepared to suffer the total loss of the thesis and do nothing right up until the evening my closest friend insisted that I speak to her brother, a retired academic whom, she said, had examined a thousand theses in his long career. His words were firm and uncompromising: “It can be totally unpredictable. A hostile examiner. This does not mean the examiners are right and you are stupid. You must appeal. You must demand an explanation. You cannot throw away these years of work.”

The idea of appealing and making accusations against my supervisors seemed appalling. However, it did not come to that. The university offered me a Master of Arts (Honours) and a new supervisor with a good track record, to do a minor re write in time for the next graduation. At my first meeting with the new supervisor she was very blunt. Having read the examiners’ reports she thought I must have been totally illiterate, or stupid, and when told that I was neither, and that at least two people (one supervisor and one examiner) thought it was a viable thesis, she pushed for a re write for PhD, and we got it.

I intended to do a PhD as soon as I finished my honours in theology in 1999¹. I wanted the academic career that my father had refused to let me consider. My honours supervisor warned me against doing a PhD, with good reason. I had been an *adjunct faculty member* to a denominational college for years. Opportunities to teach were sporadic, constrained by the shifting levels of hostility and suspicion towards women. My honours supervisor was a minister in a more inclusive denomination and he said: “A PhD in theology will not get you a job. It will not change attitudes. Only do a PhD if someone else is paying for it and you actually have a teaching job.”

A year later I left the church I had pastored for 13 years, and I began teaching English casually in colleges and scrambling to get appropriate qualifications. While I was taking night classes I heard about a PhD scholarship opportunity in an industry research partnership, close to some of my interests. The scholarship was going begging and they took me with enthusiasm. It was an unpremeditated leap into darkness for me. The mixture of poor motivations included unfulfilled ambition, no life direction, no permanent job, and the seductive security offered by three years regular tax-free income which I could supplement with teaching.

¹ In Australia an honours is often a separate post graduate degree. I had a BA and then did a BTH (Hons).

I enjoyed my PhD years despite the difficulties. It was a period of reflection, learning and personal growth. It gave me credibility as a teacher and a place in the university, and opened up opportunities for further interesting projects. If I had been more cautious, I could have found other more appropriate routes with the same benefits, a better career path, and perhaps a more desirable outcome in the shorter term. I was not young, and did not attract advice.

In theory I was not a good candidate. My Honours was a second, and not the first that is normally required for a PhD. Moreover, an honours in theology does not articulate well with other disciplines. In some ways I was not skilled in social science research simply because my capacity for critical and analytical thinking had been locked up in the church with its absolutes. I did not understand the processes of the PhD, but I at least had people around me as I was teaching in the university.

My supervisor was perhaps not well equipped for the task, either. Although she encouraged me to be independent, I was working on her theories. I found them unconvincing. She said I should follow my interests, but I began to move into areas that were unknown to her. Her background was in education, and she had not heard of Max Weber, did not like computer-based programs, knew nothing about grounded theory, thought values could not be discussed intelligently, and worse, she was becoming disenchanted with the university. She was a very left-field person, who did not share the university's concerns with academic niceties. She had a fluid approach to theoretical and methodological issues, was not concerned with writing style as much as radical ideas, and was a little cynical of the bureaucratic concerns with referencing or plagiarism. We were mismatched, but worse was coming.

My supervisor from industry left his job without a word to me, compromising my access to the research field. When the first supervisor was preparing to go on a sabbatical, she introduced me to a new second supervisor, who, unknown to me at that time, was her partner. During my candidacy these two supervisors were involved in a rupture of their own relationship which ended with the closure of the research centre, and both of them leaving the university. The second supervisor gave me one 30-second session during which she did not sit down but waved a hand dismissively and said she knew nothing about the topic. Emails were answered with a terse sentence, and chapters placed on a purpose-built site as the preferred method of communication, were not read. Everything slowly disintegrated in the research centre as the relationship between the principals collapsed during the three years of my candidature. They left the university within a few months of one another – my supervisor never called me or answered an email after my results came through.

In my second year I approached the research office for help, and I was told to keep a diary of my supervisory problems. I did this spasmodically, but it proved useful in the end when I was asked for evidence of the supervision I received. I approached the dean for a substitute supervisor, and he suggested I find some candidates. My supervisor thought her absences were irrelevant and was not impressed by anyone I suggested to help me. The dean told me to work on my relationships with the women, and could not offer any further help.

I completed the whole of the research process in my first supervisor's absence. I wrote the entire methodology and literature review during her absences. I had no way of gauging my progress. Confidence was waning as I struggled with my theoretical perspective. In conference presentations I received positive encouragement, but there was one warning note from the head of school who felt the framework was inappropriate. I needed a narrative methodology, he said, rather than struggle with a quasi-scientific method.

I can now see where my drift into "scientific" grounded theory came from. With inconsistent supervision I consulted various academics and attended many seminars along the way, including some in nursing, which favours the method. The method had also grown out of my relationship with a new second supervisor, a psychologist, who agreed to help at the end of my second year. He did not have a fulltime position at the university, but he was supportive and conscientious. What a rupture I caused by insisting on the second supervisor! Supervision now happened, but it was tense and unproductive. The first supervisor hated my themes and felt there was nothing in the data. She did not like my methodology chapter. She did not like personalised or first person academic writing. She also began to pull me back towards her original thesis, emphasising the expectations of the industry partner, the need to complete and submit the thesis on time to avoid fees, the need to produce findings that were relevant to the project. By the time the first supervisor was more available in the third year of my candidacy, it was too late to return to the field or change course. Three months before my candidature was due to end, she announced she could not work to my schedule because of her own commitments. When I applied for a three-month extension on the grounds of my supervisor's absences, she refused to sign the forms. Students were expected to be self-directed and not dependent on supervisors, she said, and if I was late, it was my responsibility.

I was given the three months extension, and remarkably, in what my second supervisor described as "*an unholy scramble*" I completed and submitted. Towards the end of the writing I felt I was trying to put back together a nest of a dozen Russian dolls, their patterns unaligned. There were too many interests, too many ideas, and I was drowning in the

complexity of theories within theories. I kept writing and my second supervisor kept reading, but I was uncertain whether the first supervisor was really with us. She seemed disinterested, bored, cynical, tired, past it. The exhilaration and elation of completion, the congratulation of students and academics, the release, was tempered by a deep suspicion that I had not quite nailed my thesis to the door of the cathedral. Some ideas seemed to be flapping around in the breeze, unsecured.

A month before my two fails came back from the examiners I had a “prophetic” experience. I was reading Karen Armstrong’s *The Spiral Staircase*. Having left the church I was interested in her experience of leaving a convent. Then I came on the story of her failed Oxford PhD. Although it had been regarded as an excellent thesis, she was given a hostile examiner who failed her, with no chance of rewriting, and it meant the immediate loss of her teaching career. I kept waking in the night living Karen Armstrong’s experience: all the wasted time and effort. My PhD examination had been talking months longer than expected, and no one had told me that inside the university there was an enquiry in progress and my supervisors were appearing before academic committees. The terror of that still haunts me....I have rewritten the whole thing, what if, what if...one hostile examiner.

The PhD that I reluctantly returned to 12 months after its submission, did indeed look like a house of cards. It was infected with too many influences, too many absences, too many conflicting interests and pressures. I approached the re writing almost mechanically, unwillingly, reluctantly, without confidence. I re wrote the literature review, shaving out thousands of words, updating, refining it, and wondering whether I really had another PhD in me.

Before I began on the methodology, my new supervisor challenged me at the level of my own commitments, ideas and perspectives, to know what I really thought. The critical, the narrative and the ethical and values base were allowed to emerge. The grounded theory was tossed into the appendix just to show where I had once been. The moment the methodology was clearly in place, I had energy for the task. It made sense. It also made sense that what I had previously completed was only a draft that had been inadequately read and critiqued, and if it had been allowed to lay fallow rather than hastily submitted for irrelevant deadlines, it could easily have been knocked into shape, saving me a delay of almost three years during which time I have reached a critical age that may limit all other life chances.

Within six months I had churned it back out, chapter after chapter, working three days a week of 12 to 16 hours a week, and cramming my work week into four days. The supervisors

complained happily they could not keep up with me – but it was clear in my mind and I knew the way through. Moreover, I ditched most of the original text, and felt liberated rather than trying to cut and paste old sentences and phrases.

My original second supervisor had returned to the task willing to learn from this experienced and successful supervisor, acting mostly as a reader of the detail where he excels.. She assigned monthly supervision times, and we met at the pub with beer and chips and a digital recorder, and talked straight. We had a genuine relationship. She told me her process, her demanding nature, the deadlines. She would read the thesis entirely, every word, three times. She read every chapter individually and gave written feedback that was fearless. She sets aside three days at home, no phone, to read the final draft in its entirety, and then re reads it again after final changes. There would be a six month fissure between the end of my writing and the final submission – the fine tuning months. As I committed to work, she committed the schedule to her inflexible diary.

They are reading the thesis as I write. My supervisor has told the university that she expects me to submit a good thesis in December. I live in fear – afraid of some random wrong choice or an examiner who hates what I write, or someone offended by something I said or wrote in the distant past. I dare not imagine that I have reached the end of this long journey. It was not intended as an end, but as a beginning of a new life. Dare I imagine that at this late moment in my working life, academic tenure is possible?