

Percy's part-time PhD

'..through the unknown remembered door..'

Episode 1

February 2014

I don't know; sometimes I wonder whether I am by nature a polymath or whether it is simply that I have a prosaic mind...

My academic career has been somewhat interdisciplinary and somewhat wider ranging than that which would earn me the accolade of expert. There is in my own understanding a link and a progression to it all but whether there is method in my madness or madness in my methods I know not and care less. As an undergraduate I studied theology then I moved into the area of education specifically adult education and lifelong learning. Next I found myself in a law faculty studying corporate governance and now I am a student in a school of history and anthropology.

T.S. Eliot's words 'through the unknown remembered door...' resonated with me as I began as a part-time PhD research student last September. I applied quite late on before the autumn commencement and so I hit the ground running.

Getting through the application process and finding a supervisor to take me on was a real sense of relief because I have a guilty secret: I have been here before. On my bookcase albeit never opened by me, or by anyone else for that matter, is a PhD thesis, which was written on another subject, submitted at another time and failed in another place.

I have got to this point with a sense of relief; because I have applied for a number of research opportunities since my first failed PhD. The initial responses to my enquiries were always positive and welcoming and then, when I went through the formal application process, the initial enthusiasm had dissipated. I was under no obligation to do so but I felt that I was morally bound to declare the fact that my PhD was not awarded and I suspect that this was the determining factor in the decision taken not to supervise my research. I have no proof for this but I speculate that perhaps a phone call was made or perhaps an assumption, and nothing more, was made that I did not have what it takes to be a research student. If anything I hoped that the tenacity I have demonstrated in seeking to return to doctoral level research would demonstrate or indicate my worth to those who make the decisions.

There is a sense of unfinished business combined with a dogged determination that has brought me full circle. At one level I have the benefit of hindsight and I know the value of keeping a detailed account of references and developing a good working

relationship with my supervisor, and, in the fifteen years since I last became a research student I recognised that as a paying customer in a university system where money matters I have certain rights. At another level the crushing weight of a failed PhD weighs heavily and I am still finding my feet and recovering my voice in an environment where I felt very much at home.

There is also a sense in which I need to 'get back on the horse'. For any academic this sort of failure is devastating and with the added complication that a PhD is always essential these days when it comes to finding an academic position. To go into a viva having put the best part of a decade into the research only to have it all go horribly wrong is utterly devastating and it *is* failure (and avoiding the f-word does not make it feel any less so).

Unfortunately, the university system leaves no room from the natural processes of grief and anger and self-reproach and doubting one's own abilities. In this situation I was expected to be level headed and dispassionately clinical in the internal appeals process and equally so with the OIA (Office of the Independent Adjudicator) and all within a very tight window of opportunity. In terms of what makes me, what matters to me and where I want to be career-wise the only conclusion I could come to that it was worth the risk and the sacrifice to have another go at a PhD.

I hope I am older and wiser, I hope I have been able to take what was good from my previous doctoral research experience. As I reflect on my research area now - and the not wholly related research in the past - I recognise that I am no longer passionate about some of the things that fired me up then. Equally, I have developed new passions, which need to be checked and focused. In essence I am the same person with more experience under my belt and a student because I cannot not be. I have taken on a research project that will demand time, commitment and sacrifices from me because I cannot do otherwise...

Before turning to episode 2 discuss the issues raised so far

Episode 2

I am off to a more promising start having had two meetings with my main and second supervisor. The latter is responsible in the department for post-graduate research students, and both supervisors are proactive and very approachable. I can't help wondering too why these guys took me on when others did not. Maybe my research proposal fitted in with the development of their own research fields or maybe they were simply prepared to give me a second chance. Either way I am grateful.

There is I think something to be said for post-graduate students working through the local university but whilst I recognise that this is not always possible it is good to be easily accessible to the department and for face to face meetings with supervisors and even meeting other post-grads in the street or for a coffee makes what can be a lonely and intense journey a little less so.

There are those hurdles that every researcher faces quite early on which continue to worry me. The term 'Literature Search' and the word 'Methodology' still have the ability to make me feel anxious – terrified really – and there is that temptation to get completely carried away in downloading stuff from search engines (I love JSTOR!) information that cannot alas be taken on board by osmosis. What has been downloaded has to be read, evaluated and then engaged with.

I am also finding that my body clock has changed and I can no longer work late into the evening. I can however work early mornings and rather than fall asleep in front of the television I make a point of going to bed earlier and getting up earlier. I have found that I need to discipline myself to invest my sleep and rest periods with the same importance as those periods when I study. The bedroom is a 'no go' area for the computer now as I find it all too easy to wake up and switch the computer on then doze off and I can do this several times during the night which is not helpful as I need sleep otherwise I find that tiredness intrudes into the study periods.

I am a part-time student and therefore my employers have a call on my time therefore I have to be focussed and disciplined when it comes to study. I will not give way to those temptations to go off at a tangent. In one sense that is all part of the learning experience but the reality is that my PhD is one commitment amongst many and it is not simply a matter of deciding what is important in my life and what is not important.

The reality is that I have to make decisions and sacrifices in relation to things that are of equal importance and worth and therefore I have to focus my research and get on with it. My PhD is a project to which I can allot a certain amount of time and commitment for a fixed period. I have found this realisation to be quite liberating - and no, I don't feel that I am selling myself short or giving less than 100% to my research by setting down these conditions in relation to my research.

I am enjoying being a student again, albeit aged 46, when I thought about registering for another PhD there was perhaps a sense that I felt I had something to prove but that sense is evaporating. I have a project that interests me, a project that will inform my current sphere of employment and perhaps open doors to other forms of service.

Before turning to episode 3 discuss the issues raised so far

Episode 3

Study in Shorts & Polo Shirt

I find myself sitting in shorts and polo shirt in the April sun working at my research on my laptop. My highly polished black shoes and suits have been cast aside: the reason for this is that my job contract was not renewed when it came to an end last week. My inner optimist thinks 'oh good more time to study' but my inner pessimist reminds me that the job paid the bills and just as my inner optimist is about to counter with a comment about savings and so on the pessimist inside me bowls a googly reminding me that the focus of my research is the corporation which has recently decided not to renew my contract.

I suspect I am not the first person this has happened to and I will not be the last. The whole thing is potentially disastrous but at this stage I am continuing with business as usual. Thankfully I started my research more than a year before I registered for the degree and so I had been working through the archives, documentation and publications in relation to my research focus and I had photocopies and extensive and detailed notes made by the time I decided that there was enough to be the focus of a PhD and a subject to hold my interest to the end.

Before turning to the next episode discuss the issues now raised

Episode 4

Research Worth Fighting For...

I made a point of introducing the question of my research at the formal interview prior to the board terminating my contract and made the case that it is in their best interest that the research continues and is completed, and a protocol was put in place in relation to my on-going access to the archives for the duration of my research.

At one level I was grateful for anything but I also determined that, given that minutes were taken during the meeting, I owed it to myself and to my research to get the best deal possible in relation to on-going access. I no longer have direct and unrestricted access to the archives in that I no longer have my own key to the strong room and my concern was not that I would be denied access but how I would gain access.

When I was appointed to my role I was given a research brief and at the outset it was agreed that if I undertook a research degree that I would be afforded the time and some financial support to that end and I would also have full and unrestricted access to the archives which were, in any case, in my care. This was documented in my contract and my employers had made certain commitments to me at the outset of the research.

In the context of the meeting it was suggested to me that the archivists (three retired people who spend one morning a week working with the archives on a voluntary basis: they have no archival or research training) would respond to my requests for information in writing and would copy the relevant information. I said this was not satisfactory not least as the archivists have demonstrated themselves to be territorial and at best unhelpful but more often than not completely obstructive. They saw my work as a threat and therefore as I was coming to the stage where I will have to justify every penny I spend and this sort of hurdle is the sort of thing which would make me think twice about continuing my research, not least because of the many sacrifices that research demands of the part-time researcher.

It was a gamble but I determined that my research was of such importance to me that I was not going to accept the crumbs from the table; also, I have to stand over my own research and be able to defend it at a viva and therefore to make my research a hostage to fortune to people whose scholarship I neither respect nor trust is a demand too far. The easy option was certainly not the right option in this situation and thankfully I was able to demonstrate the value of my research and get a more

workable solution whereby I have access to the archives as and when I need them and a contact in a former colleague who is respected and trustworthy and wants to see my research succeed and he will give me access to the strong room.

Before turning to the next episode discuss the issues now raised

Episode 5

Divide and Conquer

I have decided to take a couple of weeks as a mini sabbatical in order to establish what I have achieved to date in terms of my research. I have established chapter breakdowns to give shape to my thesis and in relation to that I have created individual folders on my desktop beginning with 'Chapter One' and so on; into which the relevant information is deposited as this creates a useful way of dealing with the information.

I have opted for this divide and conquer approach for a number of reasons. First, I do not have the luxury of a study in which to work and the cramped multi-functional space which I do have needs to be accessible for other things and therefore I do not have the luxury of piles of paper everywhere. Second, I cannot afford to print vast amounts of documentation and so it needs to be filed online and in doing so I need easy access in a system which works. I suppose not everybody will be at the stage of deciding what shape their thesis will take in terms of chapter title, content and sequence but from early on major themes should be identifiable and they will probably shape chapters later on. Given that most PhDs tend to be failed because of structural problems it is useful to think about structure as well as content from day one. Third, being able to go to a file and open a document to check on a quotation or citation is vastly preferable to rummaging through vast piles of papers: I am not suggesting that we pursue the ideological (mythical even) ideal of paperless research because I need to read what I produce in a printed copy. What I have found is that where I can easily access something it leaves me feeling that I am in command of my research and I hope I can take this affirming sense of being in command of my work into the viva too when that day comes.

Ruthless in Reviewing

Because I can only allow a certain amount of time to my research I have to be highly disciplined. In establishing this system of filing and retaining and retrieving information I have also become somewhat ruthless in reading and reviewing information and if it is not relevant or if it takes me off at an unhelpful tangent then it is not kept or filed. In my past research project I spent too much time chasing up blind alleys and reading around other areas of interest. It may be that in the final chapter I will need to reflect

on some areas in which the research could be built on but that is not a project for now and only really something which can be done when the thesis is ready to submit.

Put it to bed but leave the light on...

My approach is to try to complete each chapter and have it put to bed before moving on to the next although in doing so I will 'leave the light on' in order to review as the thesis develops not least because I want to avoid repetition and at the same time I want to build in trajectories from earlier chapters which will connect them with later chapters. The chapters will not be finished until the thesis is finished and so nothing is final until it is all finalised and therefore it is conceivable that sections or indeed full chapters may yet be sacrificed to the greater good. But that does not unduly concern me at this stage. If anything, it serves to underline the fact that my research is under control and still holding my interest and enthusiasm.

Before turning to the next episode discuss the issues now raised

Episode 6

Jobseeker's allowance?

The termination of my contract came as something of a shock not least because I had made a significant contribution to the organisation I worked for but at the final analysis they chose to prioritise something else over their educational vocation and therefore I was collateral damage.

I have been unemployed for several days now and that has included making a fresh claim for Jobseekers Allowance. I was amazed that in the context of my fresh claim interview I was asked about whether or not I would be prepared to abandon my degree if I found full-time employment. I said no. No because even in a full-time job commitment I have certain rights and can determine how best to spend my free and leisure time. I also made the point that the PhD will make a difference in my job search making all the difference between a career or vocation which I enjoy and a job which just pays the bills. Having worked for a time in the Social Security Agency in the past I am aware of the legislation and that I must demonstrate that I am actively seeking employment, so, when I produce my job search for my fortnightly sign-on visits I make a point of including a section called 'on-going training for employment' under which I record my PhD research. At the outset this was questioned but I clearly demonstrated that I was aware of and compliant with not only the spirit of the legislation but the letter of it and therefore there was no case to answer. If it is raised again I will simply make a point of quoting the relevant legislation and highlighting the fact that my ability to pursue part-time research whilst actively seeking employment has been acceptable so far with the Social Security Agency. I know that no civil servant likes to challenge something which will generate more work and much more form filling. I am safe enough for now...

The sun the shorts and the opportunity to study help me at the moment but I recognise that this initial enthusiasm will be short lived. I will need to step up my job application production: applying for jobs can be a full-time job in itself, but for now I am focusing on the research because it is paid for in this academic year and it will in all likelihood impact upon what I do in the future. That said, in the first instance I am doing the research for me because I need to have a project on-going and in unemployment it will give me a focus and a sense of purpose too.

Before turning to the next episode discuss the issues now raised

Episode 7

Paying the fees

It has come home to me in recent days – I am unemployed for over a month now – that I need to be thinking now about how I will meet next year's fees. If I can't raise the money then I will have to withdraw. I have applied to a number of local charitable trusts one of which has turned down my request for assistance. I decided that I need to develop a systematic approach to securing funding so I decided that I would purchase the up-to-date *Directory of Grant-making Trusts* only to discover that it would cost somewhere in the region of £200! I then turned to ebay and discovered that I could purchase last year's edition for £20, so on the basis that there would probably be very few changes in terms of the trusts I will be applying to I took the cheaper option and I have been going through the book looking for trusts which possibly will make some sort of financial contribution to my ongoing research. In is time consuming and painstaking but it will be worthwhile if I manage to secure funding towards my ongoing research.

I have discovered that it is important to read the information carefully and applying for funding is an art all of its own. Some trusts have their own application forms whereas others simply require a letter and associated information; either way it is important to follow very carefully the requirement which they set out – the one who pays the piper and all that...

For now back to the thesis...

Episode 8

February 2015: 9 months later

Sometimes I feel guilty, sometimes relieved, that my second attempt at a PhD has stalled. Guilty because I have invested time, effort and what disposable income I have in a project I believe in and relieved because for now the pressure is off. I've not had to worry how I eat or how I juggle applying for jobs with research and how I go about funding it.

There is something else too, yes I believe in the project: I am passionate about it but it was not the second chance – the opportunity to get back on the horse – which I had hoped it to be. I find myself being drawn more and more to my last FAILED PhD thesis and that sense of burning injustice and the nagging, drawing irritation that there is unfinished business. I still grieve and I have not moved on. Maybe I am not ready to attempt another research project. Maybe I never will be ready. Maybe I have not what it takes in terms of self-discipline or academic ability. I don't know. In off moments I still feel incredibly angry with the stitch up and cover up attitude of the university department; hurt and abused at the way I was treated and my stomach churns with a sense of past failure and the fear of failing again.

I think in all honesty I am grieving for this lost work and lost opportunities and hopes invested in it and I have no doubt that a PhD in 2008 would have opened a number of doors which, for now, must remain firmly shut. I did not pretend to myself that my research was going to set the world alight but it was original and for me it was part of a process. It was a marker of my coming of age as a scholar and a down payment on my commitment to facilitating lifelong learning within my academic discipline.

The ghosts of research past has meant that, to borrow the observation of the late Princess of Wales: 'there is three of us in this marriage'! I am not so much looking forward as Janus-like looking back and forward at the same time all the time. I am trying to reconcile the irreconcilable and the unfinished business of my former research has been the spectre at the feast where my new project is concerned. It is probably no bad thing that I have had to defer for a year – and at the moment I doubt I will have the funds to register in the autumn – I do need to decide if I can move on and leave the past project behind me or discover how I can salvage and redeem something from that time and effort.

I am impatient too. I can't help feeling that I've made the early morning- late night and study instead of holiday sacrifices and really do not want to repeat that lonely journey. I've put my life on hold for long enough! Don't get me wrong, I will be a scholar and a student to my final breath but a PhD in my CV would be nice. It would open doors and maybe help my legions of job applications make the shortlist.

Students, whether full-time or part-time, invest a hell of a lot in their PhD journey and I think that where a PhD is not awarded with minor corrections the default position should be a year to rewrite before the consolation prize of a master's degree or a fail is considered. The option of failure or pensioning off with a master's degree is the easy and unimaginative option and it turns research students into cash cows in the market-driven university – certainly the question of whether or not a student has had value for money should come into play.

Anyway, enough of this rant...

Episode 10

Two months later: April 2015

I am not sure how it happened or why I did it, I had not consciously cleared my mind and some space in my daily routine to return to my thesis. If anything I had all but consciously consigned it to that great metaphysical existence of failed and failed-to-complete PhD theses. Anyway, I opened the laptop, the research file and the document and now I'm back with a vengeance. My funding problems have not been resolved and I remain for the next few months a part-time research student temporarily withdrawn and it is likely that in September I will formally withdraw as a student. I am however caught up in the research again, and doing it for me; I had most of the primary material gathered and examined before I left, in 2014, the employment of the cathedral which is the focus of my research and I had started to draw it together and had reached the differentiation process stage by the end of my first year part-time.

I am gripped by the fact that the research seems to have chosen me rather than me choosing it: it is a project which I could not not commence and it has come back to remind me of that – my life and the research are inextricably linked. By nature I am not a quitter and I do not like unfinished business so having withdrawn and regrouped I am back to it. Now the pressure is off! The research is being taken forward because the subject still grips me and because the work done to date is worth it.

I am at this moment in time enjoying it as a welcome distraction to things which are happening or not happening in my life and it is fulfilling and surprisingly rewarding in that respect. I am still using the university research guide as the standard to which I aspire and I follow that in terms of format, structure and content simply because that is the approach to writing with which I am most familiar and most comfortable and it enables me to build in certain checks and balances without necessarily feeling the need to satisfy a supervisor at this point.

I hope that the standard of work I am achieving is no less that what I offered previously, what the university expects from research students, and does not compromise or undermine what was done previously with supervision. If anything I am

in the position in which many authors find themselves in terms of having proper confidence in their research and their own abilities and, more than that, I am writing a thesis in the truest and earliest understanding of the concept within the university before it became a supervised or part-supervised work: in essence a long guided essay which is a hostage to fortune in terms of the supervisors' interests, enthusiasms and expertise.

Before turning to the next episode discuss the issues now raised

Episode 11

When employment disappears and with it the simple certainties of a disposable income and being credited with a level of expertise that has a knock-on effect on other aspects of life where confidence, expertise and ability are essential albeit without a salary. The bereavement which comes with loss of employment, or status, or professional or academic failure has to be worked through and recognised for what it is.

Every bereavement is both an ending and a new beginning and within that understanding I have come back to research which left me feeling a failure and simply reminded me that I feel an acute sense of loss because a job which I loved came to an end when I felt I had so much more to give. This is a new beginning, a chance to start again; and there is no reason to believe that there should not be a third or fourth chance as well as a second chance. Letting go of guilt, realizing that the pressure is off and the desire to study is a good incentive to come back to something.

Before turning to the next episode discuss the issues now raised

Episode 12

I have also discovered, perhaps because this level of focused activity serves to lift my mood and boosts my confidence: when it comes to applying for jobs since I have returned to the research I have not felt such a fraud as I set out my experience and expertise in application forms. I am reminded again that I cope better with structure and with being busy than I do with having a lot of free time and no structure, commitments or demands on my time and talents.

What a pity that, for those who find themselves in unemployment, there isn't a determination on the part of government to train and harness their potential by encouraging and enabling those capable to study to do so or those with specific skills to gain accreditation therein. All that is offered is basic guidance on interview technique and how to write a CV. This is not an investment in people or their economic potential. Government policy is not joined up to the extent that the rich resources, or the latent potential at least, of those unemployed merits anything more than crumbs from the table response. What a pity!

Before turning to the next episode discuss the issues now raised

Episode 13

Crowdfunding?

A friend told me about crowdfunding. I had not heard of this before and I thought, given my somewhat straightened financial situation and the desire to progress my research, that I would give it a go. to see if I can raise the fees for my PhD for 2015-2016 by this method.

It is a relatively simple process – and the crowdfunding part of the *Just Giving* website is easy to follow. It outlines what projects can attract crowdfunding and what cannot. I put together the required crowdfunding page with very concise (the word limits are very small) details of the project and why I needed to secure funding, the amount I hoped to secure and posted a link on facebook and on email and one or two other social media formats.

It has been submitted and I have just learned that it meets the criteria. Watch this space...

Before turning to the next episode discuss the issues now raised

Episode 14

1 June 2015

The initial response was positive, encouraging and affirming; people pledged funding I suspect for the greater part to affirm and support me rather than a belief in the project but that in itself is no less important for those of us who are on this somewhat lonely journey of research: to have people caring about us in what we care about.

I aimed to raise £2000 the part-time fees for PhD research and within a couple of hours I had over £200 pledged and much more promised; but herein is the catch – with crowdfunding it is all or nothing. Either the amount is raised in full or not at all. Many of those who wanted to support me – from as far away as Canada in a couple of instances – did so but not through the official crowdfunding page. They were naturally reticent about giving banking details on a website – some having had their cards cloned and money withdrawn fraudulently from their account – they also did not want to be bombarded by promotional information for similar projects and causes. So, unfortunately, money pledged but not through the official route (where crowdfunder claim a certain percentage) is money not counted. This meant that I did not make my established target and therefore the project did not end successfully.

I have to say I am not disappointed; curiosity drove me on in terms of setting up the crowdfunding page and it was interesting to see how it would work in relation to academic research. I suppose there are a number of lessons learned from this experience:

- (i) This was a first attempt at crowdfunding: the beginning not the end.
- (ii) I need to discern if my target was realistic and adjust accordingly: perhaps trying to raise fees through crowdfunding is the wrong way to go: crowdfunding will be useful for those researchers who need to attend a conference with a specific brief and commencement and end date whereas doctoral research, of necessity, is much more open ended and not so easy to package to present in the profile.
- (iii) Crowdfunding supporters like goals and achievable targets: they need to be captivated by the enthusiasm of the crowdfunder.

Has it been a beneficial experience? The answer to that is a resounding yes! I have been touched by the generosity of people I do not know and reminded afresh of the affirmation and good will of friends and colleagues.

For those who are contemplating an academic career then crowdfunding will be beneficial in that it is potentially a gentle introduction to something which they will spend the remainder of their working lives concerned with: fundraising for specific research projects. The requirement of the crowdfunder to 'sell' their vision in simple sentences is a useful challenge for would be academics. It is very different to writing an academic abstract or writing a research proposal – here the proposal is pitched primarily at non academics who are willing to consider the proposal as a cause worthwhile supporting. It will be one call amongst many on their finite disposal income and for them it will not simply be a case of deciding what is worth funding and what is not. It will be a case of choosing between projects of equal worth and potential importance.

Would I recommend crowdfunding? Yes, without a doubt! Would I consider crowdfunding again? Yes, in a heartbeat!

Episode 15

5th December 2015

The past year has been one of regrouping and consolidating as I look at what can be taken forward from the past and used to create new openings for the future. At this time of the years I am both haunted by the prospect of repeating the same mistakes and at once excited by the prospect of new beginnings.

Although I have been unable to register for my PhD for a second year now I find myself enthusiastic about continuing with the study and with a view to returning to registration as soon as I can afford to. I find that there is a sense – I'm more and more convinced of it – that the research chose me and I still believe in it. There is a sense of purpose which draws me and keeps me coming back to what I thought at this stage would be something dead in the water.

This has been something of a lifeline too as I am still unemployed, and I struggle with a sense of feeling useless and fearing that I will never get another job. For me, and essentially at this stage it is for me, continuing with my research is affirming the skills and passions I have. It reminds me that my vocation includes a commitment to study and on-going personal development. I am committed to facilitating lifelong learning and if it doesn't effect a change in my own life then it will only be a partial commitment when it comes to offering something life enhancing and life affirming to anyone else.

That said I had a shaky moment about a month ago. I applied for an administrative position in the university where I have been pursuing my doctoral research and where one of my master's degrees (I have three) was awarded in 2010.

I was not shortlisted for the post and when I asked for feedback I was informed that I had 'not demonstrated that I met the essential criteria of five GCSEs Grade C or above'. I was amazed and pointed out that surely the master's degree, awarded with distinction and which I could not have registered for without having had qualifications in advance of five GCSEs, should more than demonstrate a level of academic attainment beyond that required 'meeting it better if not meeting it to the letter'.

I felt suitably annoyed about this trenchant keeping to the letter of the law to the extent that the spirit of the law was irreparably compromised that I made the decision to write to the Vice Chancellor. In response he repeated the same spiel that Human Resources had churned out.

Anyway, I learned a valuable lesson from this: I am a scholar a committed researcher and even if the university does not consider its master's degree to equate to five GCSEs I have nothing to prove. PhDs are essentially as much about stickability as they are about the research itself. I have demonstrated to myself, and in the first instance that is what is important, that I am wholly committed and in it for the long run.

Does the award of the PhD, given the highly subjective opinions within the pluriversal worldviews of supervisors and examiners, validate the research? It certainly validates the process, but the jury is out on whether or not it validates the person as a scholar in his or her own right.

I come back again to the sense that the research chose me. It has identified in me a need to study and research and this touches on who in essence I really am. Being a student and a researcher, more so than being a PhD student, matters to me. It is but one facet of a many faceted personality. It both enriches and is enriched by the other facets of my life with which it competes for time and attention – at times like spoilt children – and the neglect of it would leave me somewhat impoverished as a rounded and accomplished human being.

It continues to demand my attention, on good days a bit like an excited puppy but on bad days when I am stressed and tired it is more like a spoilt child, I find though that it continues to inspire me and I find that I can talk about it with enthusiasm and in an infectious way to the extent that people ask me for regular updates.

I am mindful that the author P.D. James said an author should never discuss what they are working on until it is finished but I think with something like a PhD, students need to know that there are people who care about them to the extent that they also care about the things they care about and not least the research. I have found too that it is useful to almost make myself accountable to others – an unwritten and nonverbal contract – that I will stick with it through thick and thin to the bitter end.

I have come a long way since my work on the primary sources of my research but I find inspiration in going back to them and I find that as I read the works of others and related research then I need to go back to those sources. I need to remind myself too that it is my engagement with these primary sources that is the focus of my research – not what other secondary source writers have written in a similar field. I have easy access to the original sources and the things which I want to have access to on a regular basis I have photocopied in order to ease accessibility (during a sleepless night documents in a strong room or library may as well be on another planet) and also to protect the originals from the damage which can come from frequent use.

My sense of identity has changed somewhat from when unemployment meant that I had to withdraw temporarily as a part-time PhD student. The initial sense of failure has left me. Ok, I still get anxious about unemployment and frustrated that I can't get the thesis submitted, but my sense of being a researcher has been strangely affirmed: by adversity, by sheer dogged determination, by making personal sacrifices, by a passion for my research, by an infectious enthusiasm, by hope in the face of adversity...

Episode 16

31st October 2017

The skills which I developed as a PhD student – and it is almost a decade since I submitted my original (failed) thesis – are surprisingly relevant to my work today. The developed skill-set has opened doors which I never thought possible and, at once, not having been awarded the degree there are doors which remain firmly shut.

I am a research fellow and although a doctorate is not a requirement it is more common than not that university fellows have a PhD before being appointed to a post-doctoral post.

If I am honest I still feel the loss of the PhD and the passing years has not eased that pain. I feel a betrayal of trust on the part of the university and the determination to get a PhD is still there. I started a job-related PhD in my last role, but it ended with the end of the job. I was offered the opportunity to have PhD research funded as part of my current post, but I declined essentially because the nature of a PhD is that the candidate narrows the focus of their research whereas the extensive archive with which I am working necessitates that I do not narrow my focus.

I am transcribing the almost illegible hand of someone whose own family could not read his scrawl and that presents challenges, though not for me in deciphering what was written, but in the large volume of papers to work through. I have determined that, given the vast amount of material available that I should work on a biography and establish my expertise in a field which is increasingly relevant not least in terms of some of the worldviews and legal responses today.

The work began not at my desk with some well-organised files but in a large damp, mildewed and rat-infested house looking for the papers which had not been seen since 1960. I worked long hours over many months and I sent the record following to the solicitor who was managing the estate which gives some insight into the experience:

Since first having access to the house on Wednesday 8 June 2016 (having a key and free access from Friday 10 June) I have clocked up over 170 hours. It quickly became clear that it was not simply a case of going in and packing boxes; everything would have to be painstakingly searched for. The papers and books removed to the College that employs me were extremely damp and have spent the last number of weeks drying.

It also became abundantly clear that the house posed a serious health risk and for the first week I set about cleaning in order to create a safer working environment. I removed to the dump large amounts of soiled incontinence products which were sitting in bags in the hallway and disposed of the bedding in the downstairs front room which was heavily stained with urine and faeces and had become a breeding ground for maggots: all of this in addition to the mouse urine and faeces which covered everything. I simply wanted all of this out of the house.

Progress has been painstakingly slow and this is due in part to the amount of accumulated rubbish in every room. I discovered that it was necessary to move every item of furniture as I have worked through each room in a systematic fashion.

In addition, I have been the only person sorting through all of this, and it was clear by the settled nature of the rubbish in each room that there had been little, if any, sorting or clearing prior to my arrival on 8 June 2016. There is still food in the kitchen and pantry which has not been dumped. I was told on several occasions by the handyman that a skip would be arriving but it never arrived and then that he would take rubbish to the dump in his van. It is evident that this has not happened and the rubbish clearly identified as such is still sitting at the side of the house and also in the hallway and on the landing and the bathroom. This has been wholly counterproductive and extremely frustrating.

I have tried to clean things as I have gone along in order to make the place accessible to those from the Library, or wherever, who will come to look at books etc. To date I have gone through the front and back rooms (left) on the ground floor and have left the room to the right because the wheelchairs have still not been removed. I have sorted the back bedroom and will have sorted the front right bedroom by the weekend. I had made a start on the kitchen and pantry but there is no working lighting in either place and it was quite difficult to make any progress. Generally, I have disposed of bags of rubbish, soiled clothing, diaries and notebooks belonging to Miss D and volume upon volume of cat photographs. I have disposed of ornaments of no monetary value where they have been broken and repaired and where small items of furniture, of the flat-pack variety, is damaged and worm eaten it too has been dumped. I have tried to gather up items which have been specific bequests and I have tried to consolidate things such as sets of books, toys, cameras etc. which have been scattered throughout the house. It has also been necessary to remove things to clean

them, some items have had to spend a few hours in my freezer to kill off infestation; anything which was removed has been returned.

Regarding the items removed to College, and the items in which there is a declared interest: I have tried to comply with the specific bequest and beyond that to offer a context in which items which tell the story of her father will be preserved. The college will facilitate a number of research projects wherein the original source materials removed from the house will be studied. It is possible that a new biography will be written and, hopefully, a television documentary produced.

This is the most significant bequest which the College has received in over a century. The College has committed itself to restoring any items of furniture where it has declared an interest (the restoration costs are likely to exceed their monetary value but as items which serve to set Prof D in context they are invaluable). The college is deeply grateful to his daughter, her family and executors and the importance of this bequest cannot be overstated and is certainly not taken for granted.

As to my own involvement in all of this I would add the personal footnote. I have had a lifelong academic interest in Prof D and from earliest childhood I have known his son and retain great affection for him. I liked Miss D too but enjoyed her company and was frustrated by her in equal measure. I have been happy to help and in doing so I have been able to spare others from having to deal with some stomach-churning situations and, I hope, I have enabled Union College to secure and conserve the papers of Prof D for generations to come.

The papers, probably the most important bequest in their field in the 20th Century, have international significance and therefore I am seeking funding from university bodies outside the British Isles. In a sense this job found me and as I had the right knowledge base and skills for it I was able to respond.

There are days though when I still feel like a bit of a fraud not having a PhD and other days I think the learning experience – the journey rather than the destination – is of greater potential and, ultimately, of greater worth.

Team exercise:

List the lessons for

1. Part-time research students
2. Their supervisors, and



3. Universities
