

If you are experiencing issues by special concern to L&D members of the State of Utah, please contact the L&D Research Center at askthediva@utah.gov.

Dear Diva:

I feel as I am on the edge of declaring when I will graduate. I've only turned in a draft of one chapter of my dissertation and I have four more chapters to go, but my momentum is really on target. I just suppose I need to trust myself a little more.

The thing is that I'm about at my wit's end.

Because I do not yet have my PhD and I have no spouse to depend on, in order to be self-sufficient and live on my own, I would have to adjunct in English (I have an MA), which means teaching about six composition classes at two universities just to make \$20,000 for the year in my state (I know because I have done this before); thus leaving little time to work on my dissertation. So I have opted to live with my parents in my

hometown, states away from my university.

My parents are wonderful in many respects, but they are also fundamentalist Evangelistic Protestants who have never been to college. Therefore, they do not understand the amount of time that my schooling takes and my mother is especially disappointed in the fact that I study rather than date and that I am in women's studies in religion — a field she finds is taking me away from "God." I am not out of the closet about my agnosticism nor my panromanticism, but my mother's subtle and suggestive questions along with various accusations cause me much stress. Yesterday, I found a book on the table that was about a "former women's studies lesbian professor who converted to Christianity." The author now lives in the Midwest with her husband

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I suppose the article states feminist theories and loving women are sinful. I do not know

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I have not had time to read it.

I am quite sure that I am just whining, should be a great deal more mature, and not let these things distract me; or even just own up to who I am no matter how much more uncomfortable it makes my living situation. I am so close to the end and then perhaps I can have the freedom to explore my spirituality, sexuality, and gender the way I would like. It is just that is is so difficult to put my existence on hold for so long. And it is so embarrassing to be in the closet with my family at my age of thirty. I suppose my question is this: Should I opt for working full time so that I can move out, even if it takes me a little longer to finish my PhD? If not, where then can I find support so that I do not continue my destructive habits of emotional eating into the early morning and eating until it hurts, for instance? I am not sure I even know what I would ask from those who might give me support. As odd as it sounds, I am not quite sure what I need.

**Signed,
Questioning in the South**

Dear Questioning in the South:

Thank you for trusting the community with this portion of your story and for your willingness to ask questions in this forum. The process of reflecting on and sharing difficult experiences can be simultaneously challenging and informative, so I appreciate the openness of your letter. You mention a variety of important issues – coming out, family relations and living arrangements, health habits, employment choices, and dissertation completion – and without dismissing the importance of any of them, I'd like to focus on your central query about the seeming conflict between personal viability/survivability and professional sustainability/support.

You seem to have given yourself two options: move out of your parents' house and possibly delay the writing process (which may grant you personal freedom and comfort) or live at home and complete the degree as soon as possible (which impedes your ability to live an authentic life). I think it's important to note that there's no shame in choosing not to disclose all of oneself in every context. Sometimes LGBTIQIA-identified folk feel compelled to jump out of a series of closets, because doing so indicates that we are honest people who are living lives of integrity. However, I have come to recognize that the closet might be a safe place of self-exploration and discernment for people who need/want the chance to figure some things out before making identity-based declarations in less-than-affirming spaces. I also imagine that the closet may be an important means of survival for folks who do not have a support network into which they can move as they emerge from the closet. At the same time, I believe that being free, open, and honest about who we are allows people to do the same. That is, sometimes when we disclose, we give others the opportunity to disclose things about themselves. More importantly, disclosing may allow you to really know what your options are within your family. Your actual choices for how/where you can live may become clearer (for better or worse).

If you decide to move out of your parents' house, I suggest that you try to form a writing group or obtain accountability partners for your dissertation completion process. Some writing groups are comprised of folks who work together on a regular basis, ensuring that the members of the group have consistent times dedicated to scholarship. This kind of group may meet in person or even online (via Skype or Google hangouts, for example). Other groups consist of folks who periodically share/review work. This kind of group is good for scholars who wish to engage in conversations about their material, but for whom group writing is less than desirable. Accountability partners can also be helpful for goal setting in terms of what you produce and/or the time you spend writing. I know of a pair of colleagues who e-mailed each other on Sundays

with a tally of what they accomplished and a pdf version of their calendar for the next week.

Taken separately, dissertation completion, teaching, and navigating subjectivity in the context of family are each very trying processes. Put together, they may feel quite overwhelming. I suggest reaching out to your communities of support (friends, family, close colleagues) in person, on the phone, and perhaps online. Staying in touch with people who understand a bit about your vocation and interests might help you to feel visible and may even keep you accountable to your own goals and values. I also urge you to seek connection with health and wellness resources in your area so that you can develop (or enhance) your own strategies to survive/thrive as you continue on the path toward the PhD. I am not sure about what is available in your area, but you might consider taking advantage of the counseling services at one of the schools at which you plan to teach. And, rest assured, health and wellness resources are important for all graduate students, not just the ones who say they are struggling. Writing a dissertation is stressful for all who do it. Sometimes conversations with counselors and/or groups will help us figure out what we need. And, self-care is certainly a necessary part of the process.

Sincerely,
Diva

Dear Diva:

I'll be graduating in May with a ThD and I am struggling to find a job in the academic world. I grew up as a Roman Catholic but I left the Roman Catholic Church recently because I'm a lesbian and I was tired of the hypocrisy of the Church, and also for fear of losing my job working in a Roman Catholic Church. I was worried if they found out I was gay they would fire me. I was later received as an Episcopalian and now work in an Episcopal Church that accepts me for who I am. On the academic side of things, I feel like I don't fit in anywhere. I inquired about applying for academic positions at Roman Catholic schools, but was told it probably wasn't worth my applying because I had "rejected the faith" by becoming an Episcopalian, but also because I was an out lesbian and I refused to be in the closet. This hasn't left me with many options. I would love to

hear some advice on how to find a job. I'm in a tough position because I refuse to go back in the closet. I've made the choice to live my life honestly and with integrity, but I feel like I'll have great difficulty finding an academic position. I love to teach, but I'm very frustrated with the whole situation and wonder if I shouldn't look for work in another field, like nonprofit work.

**Sincerely,
Losing Hope**

Dear Losing Hope:

Thank you for your letter — for the candor and anger in it. It has so many important questions rolled up in it — questions of faith, of vocation, of career — and they are all seared by experiences of rejection in your original religious community. Without denying the pain, or the importance of the other questions, let me see whether I can say a few things just about career.

First, it will be important to be as candid as you can about what personal price you are willing to pay for a faculty appointment at a college or university. Some religious schools will welcome (or at least tolerate) nonheterosexual faculty members so long as they are willing to be "discreet." The interpretation of discretion will vary. Any interpretation will be temporary, since a change of academic administration or denominational policy may result in an unpleasant change of your circumstances — even after tenure. But you do need to ask yourself once again how much you would be willing to censor yourself in order to get a job at a religious school for which your sexuality would be an issue.

It sounds to me as if you've already come down against this sort of life. So let me describe some other possibilities — after registering a strong caution. The present distress of academic structures in the humanities (broadly conceived) makes it almost impossible to offer generalized job advice. Hiring decisions are always local decisions — subject to all sorts of acknowledged and unacknowledged influences even at the best of times. There is no general method for getting a job, and any successful hire always involves elements of chance or luck. Still, I would suggest that you split your academic searching into different segments, presenting different

combinations of your strengths. (This might be considered another sort of self-censorship. I prefer to think of it as an act of translation.) Apply to positions in worship or liturgy (perhaps especially at interdenominational or university-based divinity schools), but also learn to describe yourself as a teacher of Christian lived religion who would be perfect for the “Christian studies” position in a liberal arts department of religious studies.

At the same time, I would urge you to consider applying to secondary schools. A good secondary school will offer opportunities for teaching and (if I may say so) for intellectual collegiality that are more congenial than the opportunities at many colleges. In present circumstances, we simply have to override the distinctly American prejudice against pursuing lives of scholarship in secondary schools.

Finally, I would indeed encourage you to think about nonprofit work. There are, as you know, a growing number of organizations working for progress in sexuality and religion. Since I believe that our scholarly work should speak to the world, I don't think you give up anything by carrying your scholarship forward into these new settings. On the contrary, I think that you fulfill your scholarship — and so one part of your vocation.

Sincerely,
Diva