

Q&A With Theresa MacPhail '94

Wednesday, April 8, 2015

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[Q+A]

'Everyone hears the clock ticking, but I heard it sooner and it's louder.'

Given your sheltered childhood, did college feel like capital-F Freedom? Oh yeah, I went nuts! I was on Young Drive a little too much. But then I got it together and did well. I was part of New England Model's Group, so worked. One year I was the NASCAR girl at Loudon, wearing these ridiculous short shorts and loading people into the race car simulator. I helped pay tuition.

After college I was working at a New York model-scouting agency, and modeling and acting. I'd interview for publishing jobs and come close, but then they'd hear I was a model and I'd see this curtain come down.

For your return to school, you chose a very broad master's program in "humanities and social thought." How did you find your path? I randomly took this class comparing literary representations of disease with their actual history. One week we'd discuss the history of plague, and the next we'd read Camus' *The Plague*. It was fascinating. I realized that disease was a way to think about bigger questions—fear and mortality and the unknown.

I took a class on Nietzsche, on looking into the abyss, and it struck me that the two were related. My thesis was on viruses in our genome—there's a lot of evidence now that our entire immune system is former viruses, so viruses are protecting us from other viruses—and how that blurs the line between what we think of as alive and not alive.

How does an English major make peace with science? For my thesis I had to understand how viruses worked, so I started studying genetics. My Nietzsche professor is the reason I had the courage. When I went to talk to him about my paper topic, I was nervous, so I started, "Listen, I don't know anything about philosophy." And he said something that changed my life. He said, "Oh good. If you don't know what you're supposed to think, you might actually see something new in Nietzsche." He was giving me permission. I didn't have to be an expert in order to say something interesting.

Through the years whenever I've felt inadequate—and starting a doctoral program is all about feeling inadequate—I've remembered that, and it's emboldened me. I don't think there's anything you can't know if you're willing to spend some time on it.

When someone at a party hears you're a medical anthropologist, what's the response? If they have an idea of anthropology, they think Margaret Mead, out there in the bush with the tribe. So I say I study doctors and public health workers as my tribe. The CDC is my tribe. They have their own rituals, language, way of dressing, their own politics and social hierarchies, and those are what I study.

A teacher at NYU told me I'd like anthropology because "we get to do whatever we want; our topic is mankind." Most medical anthropologists focus on the patient. I thought I'd do that with influenza, but in a weird sense I got lucky because there was a

pandemic when I started doing my research. Using my journalism skills, I finagled my way into the CDC and I got to watch them cope with this pandemic. So the book is basically what's a pandemic and how do we know. And the answer is it's way messier than you think.

Given what you've observed at the CDC, do you trust the system to keep us safe from outbreaks like Ebola? I will worry when someone like you at the CDC worries. I am that confident in them. Becoming more familiar with the way microbes work and the things epidemiologists do has made me worry less, not more. We'll always have outbreaks of infectious diseases; that's just the way the world works. But knowing these people are on the frontlines? Yeah, I sleep soundly. They don't, by the way.

You took time building a career—after you got your master's, you moved to Hong Kong for four years and didn't start your Ph.D. until you were 34. What advice do you give students trying to figure things out? What I most wish someone had told me: You have time to turn around, you have time to change. You graduate from college and feel so much pressure, like you're choosing forever. But in fact you have no idea where you're headed, so you might as well let yourself off the hook.

After college I was offered a job at a newspaper and I accepted. Then I went out to my car, burst into tears, and called the editor and turned it down. Whenever I make a decision now, I think about that moment. I had convinced myself I was saying no because journalism wasn't "right" for me, but the truth is I was terrified. I thought I was making my last choice. I'd have to be a journalist forever, and I'd never get better at it than I was at 22.

So we're back to fear. Do you connect your childhood experiences to what you do now?

It took me a long time to see that my whole life has been figuring out why people die and how that affects others and how people think about death. It's definitely made me braver because I feel like there's a clock ticking. Everyone hears the clock, but I heard it sooner and it's louder. When I'm dawdling, I hear it, and it forces me to move.



Which connects to the tattoo on your arm? Qu'as tu fait? Qu'as tu fait de ta vie? It's from the poem "Capri" by Czeslaw Milosz. "Voices call in various languages, gathered in your wanderings through two continents. What did you do with your life? What did you do?"



Originally published in *UNH Magazine*—[Winter 2015 Issue](#)

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UNH MAGAZINE WINTER 2015

SERIES:

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