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Is sabbatical a dirty word?

Sabbatical is a privilege and a challenge and too often becomes a "staybatical" to finally tackle the demanding projects

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It is 8:00 in the morning and my father-in-law, who sits across from me at my kitchen table, is wondering why I am not at work. I explain to him, for what feels like the fifth time this month, that I'm on sabbatical. "I've been released from my teaching and service duties", I say, "in order to focus on research". "Let me get this straight", he says. "You don't teach at all this year?" "That's right", I say. The blank stare that greets this reply shows me he's not impressed. "Well, aren't you lucky". A paid reprieve from crowded lecture halls and stuffy committee meetings is undoubtedly a privilege. But a holiday it is not. Upon negotiating a strategic handover of my 2-year-old son with his grandparents, I will devote the day to my research program, which focuses on genome evolution in algae.

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The first sabbatical

This is my first sabbatical, 6 years after I started a tenure-track position. In many ways, having 12 months to dedicate solely to research seems as foreign to me as it does to my father-in-law, but it shouldn't. The practice of giving scholars extended, uninterrupted time for a special project, be it fieldwork, writing a book, or learning new skills, is as old as universities themselves. The earliest definitive system of sabbatical leave was established 130 years ago at Harvard, in 1880, and quickly spread to other Ivy League schools [1]. Today, sabbaticals are offered at most universities, in one form or another, typically to faculty on the tenure track. They are one of the greatest perks to professorial life, but as a recent essay in *Inside Higher Ed* put it, "one of the most questioned academic practices in the eyes of the mainstream public" [2]. Given my experiences over the past year, I would argue that sabbatical leave can be misunderstood by the public and sometimes by academics themselves.

Perhaps one of the biggest misconceptions about sabbaticals is that they need to occur in exotic or exciting places, or at least at prestigious institutes. The complications and nuances of family life, including children, working partners, and aging parents, are only a few of the many challenges that can get in the way of a prolonged departure—not to mention the prohibitive costs of travel and stay abroad. For me, with a toddler at home and a wife who is working hard at her nursing career, a sabbatical abroad is out of the question. In fact, having a tried-and-true system in place for childcare, loved ones close by, and meaningful employment for my partner means it is more efficient and fulfilling to do research close to home. I have experienced firsthand the pros and cons that a major sabbatical move can have on a household. In the mid-1980s, my father, a chemistry professor, relocated the family from Canada to Africa for his sabbatical. I can still recall the amazing game parks and diverse cultures we experienced, but more than anything I remember the severe anxiety and depression that ensnared my mother, who so badly wanted to go home.

The expectations of sabbatical leave can be particularly challenging for women. For example, one study found that female academics within STEM can "perceive professional travel as synonymous with sabbatical leave" but admitted that family was a prominent reason for choosing a "staybatical" [3]. It also showed that many women saw sabbaticals as "more than a time for academic productivity, expressing a desire for rebirth—as academics and, for many, as mothers—using sabbatical leave as a time to seek scholarly purpose, re/connect to family, achieve balance, and rejuvenate" [3]. But, sadly, the stigma of the "staybatical" persists.

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I admit that it can get tedious explaining to colleagues and friends why I have opted for a "staybatical". But any apprehension that they may feel toward my choice quickly fades when they hear about the key goals of my leave, one of which is sequencing the genome of an Antarctic green alga, which lives 17 m below the surface of a permanently ice-covered lake. This large, collaborative genome project is one that I would

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not have otherwise been able to lead if it were not for my sabbatical. And, no, I will not be visiting the Antarctic anytime soon.

Some are more equal

Despite being on leave, my workday routine carries on as usual. I spend most days in my office, which allows me to stay on top of my graduate students' progress and manage the day-to-day laboratory activities—and it provides me access to high-powered computers for genomics. I usually keep the office door propped open, which in academia is the universal symbol for "please pop in to chat or ask a favor". I do this because sabbatical leave can be isolating, and nothings beat loneliness like listening to other people's problems—or regaling someone else with your own. Toward the end of the day, my office neighbor, Anne, often stops by to check in on me. We normally chat for a while about our research but I'm reluctant to discuss my sabbatical because even though Anne and I started as assistant professors at the same time, she has a non-tenure-track position and, therefore, is not eligible for sabbatical leave. However, if anyone in our department deserves a sabbatical, it is Anne. Even with a higher teaching load than her tenure-track counterparts, she has secured a major grant, runs a vibrant research program with graduate students, publishes regularly, and is the Undergraduate Chair for Biology.

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Unfortunately, Anne's situation is not atypical. According to data from the American Association of University Professors, ~70% of all faculty positions are off the tenure track [4]. And this number is likely going to grow because full-time, limited-term positions are on the increase relative to tenure-track ones [4]. The situation is similar in Canada [5], where I work. With fewer tenure-track positions, there will presumably be less sabbatical leaves—although some universities, such as the University of Oregon, have started offering sabbaticals to limited-term instructors. Whatever happens, the current model, whereby some faculty, like me, are awarded sabbatical leave and others, like Anne, are not is unfair and can only lead to divisiveness and resentment among colleagues. Remarkably, there are multiple tenured faculty in my own department who, although eligible, do not take sabbaticals. I have never asked them their reasons for forsaking their leaves, but I assume it has to do with money. At my institute, we are paid 87.5% of our salary for the first sabbatical and 82.5% for all subsequent ones, which is not an insignificant dock in pay, especially for single-income families. However, this is on the generous side of sabbatical pay; at other universities, particularly in the USA, salaries can be reduced by 30% or more.

After work, I retreat to the university gym for a game of squash. Another one of my goals this sabbatical is to focus on my physical and mental health and to generally "recharge" my batteries. This day, on my way to the court, I bump into a former student. "Professor Smith!" he shouts. "Long time, no see. How's second-year genetics going this time around?" "No teaching for me, I'm afraid. This is my sabbatical year". "Congratulations", he says, as if discovering I won the lottery. This kind of reaction has been a recurring theme for me, suggesting that many undergraduates view sabbaticals as drawn-out vacations. "Thank you", I say and then describe what I've actually been working on. He's surprised and impressed to hear about the Antarctic genome project and even asks if he can get involved as an undergraduate research volunteer.

A privilege used for good

A few minutes later, racket in hand, I face my opponent, a gruff and graying computer science prof with a lethal serve. "Look who's decided to get out of bed", he says, smashing the ball against the wall. "Toddlers make for good alarm clocks", I retort, lunging for the corner. "All this time off has slowed you down, Mr. Sabbatical". Again, I swing at empty air. "Don't worry, I'll make this quick", he says. The bantering continues for another sweat-drenched 40 min, after which I decide that the boring monotony of lane swimming does have its merits. I have gotten used to this sort of teasing about sabbatical leave from certain coworkers, most of whom mean no harm. But we are certainly not doing ourselves any favors by lightheartedly denigrating the sabbatical when many students and much of the public view it as a glorified holiday. Instead, we should be emphasizing that the privilege of a sabbatical is overwhelmingly used for good—to do things that benefit the university and society as a whole. For instance, a colleague and close friend of mine recently returned from a sabbatical at the Australian National University in Canberra where she studied the effects of climate change on seed quality and developed an ongoing collaboration between Western University and ANU. Like me, she has a small child and so decided to spend half her leave in Australia and the other half at home.

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After the hostile takeover of my son from the carefree joys of his grandparents, my father-in-law asks: "Hard day?" "A productive one", I say. He is a long-haul truck driver and will always tease me about being a white-collar worker, but I know that he has grown to understand that the life of an academic does not translate to a 9-to-5 job. If all goes well, I'll put in another hour or two on the genome project before bed. Just then, I hear my wife coming through the back door. She's smiling but exhausted. Over dinner, she tells me about the chaos of hospital work. Afterward, we tackle the evening chores, share a glass of wine, and then she settles in for an early night. "Set the alarm for 5:30 am", she says. "I have an early shift tomorrow". "No rest for the wicked", I say and realize how very lucky I am for the opportunity to take a sabbatical—one that I do not take lightly.

I wrote this essay in early February 2020, just past the halfway point of my sabbatical, and at the time, I had no idea of the impending worldwide chaos that would result from the COVID-19 outbreak.

Now, it is late April. My university has closed its doors, the many scientific conferences I had planned on attending in the spring and summer are canceled, and my wife is on the frontlines of fighting the disease. At first, the self-centered part of my personality felt resentful that this pandemic so inconveniently interrupted my sabbatical plans. But as I watch my colleagues work night and day to deliver their courses online and saw firsthand the incredible stresses placed on our healthcare providers, including my wife, I realize how fortunate I am to be somewhat sheltered from the turmoil. As the social distancing measures persist, the mild isolation I experienced earlier in my leave is nothing compared with the intense seclusion I and many others now feel. Working from home with a young child and no babysitter is more challenging than I ever anticipated. A few days ago, my son spilt coffee on my high-end laptop and now it won't turn on. Access to the backup computer comes at great sacrifice, for it is the very device on which the coffee spiller streams Peppa Pig. But when things get back to normal and the productivity meter is once again cranked to max, I know a part of me will be thankful for this concentrated, one-on-one time with my son. At the heart of any worthwhile sabbatical is breaking from the norm and venturing into unexplored territory. Life under COVID-19 certainly meets these criteria.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

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