

“Life can only be understood backwards; but must be lived forwards”

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“Life can only be understood backwards; but must be lived forwards”, wrote Søren Kirkegaard, the father of existentialism. My parents have the book at the bookshelf in their living room, and the title has provoked me ever since I learned how to read. Probably because the quote constantly reminds me on how I will always be unaware of how I later on in my life will reflect on the current stage of my life. Will I look back at this moment and conclude that I made a wrong decision? Will I be happier or more successful in the future or look back at this very moment thinking of it as the peak of my happiness or success?

When I studied Global Refugee Studies, I had all sorts of dreams about the future. Most of them included working abroad. I could see myself at embassies or at NGOs in Latin America or Africa. Whenever we got courses from guest lecturers, I always felt inspired and hoped to end up somewhere very interesting and meaningful like them. I was impatient but also ensured that I was heading somewhere big, when I got my dream internship in Madrid on third semester and when Danish Demining Group in South Sudan agreed to cooperate on my thesis. My expectations and ambitions were high.

However, my thesis did not end the way I expected. I finished, of course, but with much lower ambitions and grade than I had hoped and prepared for. Getting married and pregnant along the way, had changed my perspective. I gave birth to my daughter a month after I defended my thesis. A few months after, I started feeling stressed about my insecure future. All my former classmates, including my husband, were struggling to find jobs. It was not as easy as we had expected. The world did not seem as ready for us, as we thought we were ready for the world. Some ended up taking jobs outside the field of studies, just to make ends meet. Others entered the humanitarian field, but mostly as interns or volunteers, hoping to get to know the right people and the right experience on their CVs.

When my daughter was 4 months old, my contact person from Danish Demining Group during my thesis wrote to me about their project in South Sudan. I had visited the project during my

thesis. There was a junior position opening and he recommended me to apply for it. I was so excited. It was not a direct job offer and I was not at all sure to get it, but just for the fact that he had me in mind, despite it had been a couple of months since I had concluded my work with them, I was so happy and grateful. I called the HR department to hear more about the position. Their message was clear. They offered no family postings in South Sudan. My husband was supportive and said he would manage everything at home with our daughter, if I wanted to apply for the position and if I actually ended up getting the job. We even talked about how he could stay in a more stable neighbour country with our daughter, just so we could be closer to each other. Nevertheless, I just could not get myself to apply for the job. My expectations for my career were sincere and high, but I just could not bear the thought of not seeing my daughter in real life every day.

To keep my brain going and not getting depressed during my maternity leave, I started volunteering at Refugees Welcome – a very small NGO that offers legal counselling to asylum seekers in Denmark. Shortly afterwards, my previous student job at Falck Global Assistance offered me a fulltime position. Though it was not an academic position, in my field of studies or my dream job, I was happy not having to apply for jobs. Besides, this was a job that I already knew and loved, though the working conditions and hours were hard. Meanwhile, at Refugees Welcome, I made an appeal to the Office of the United Nation High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) concerning an asylum seeker who had been rejected asylum in Denmark. OHCHR accepted to investigate the case, which meant that the deportation got suspended for the time being, and I was officially representing him in his case against Denmark. This was huge. I used all my knowledge and notes from GRS's International Law course, recalled many of Claus Haagen Jensen's small anecdotes and spent many hours on studying OHCHR cases and how to process a legal case. I read so much about the legal processes and systems; I almost regretted not to have studied law. My interest for legal counselling and case working definitively began at Refugees Welcome.

It was also through Refugees Welcome I got to know the Palestinian Mission in Denmark, who ended up offering me a part-time job as Communication Officer. My fulltime job at Falck Global Assistance got converted into a part-time job, so I could manage both jobs, volunteering and also being there for my family. I loved being at the Mission of Palestine. I learned so much about the

diplomatic world and my colleagues were great. However, juggling between two part-time jobs was hard. I had to work both weekdays and weekends, which I did for five months. Then, a former classmate from GRS convinced me to apply for a job opening at the Turkish Embassy in Copenhagen as secretary for the Turkish Ambassador. My classmate knew one of the secretaries at the Embassy whom she put me in contact with, and after an interview and some tests, I got the job.

The Turkish Embassy in Denmark is a big embassy, but I did my best to integrate and met some incredible people there. It was great not having to juggle between two jobs. However, I never really felt settled or happy there, so after a while, I began to apply for jobs. My union helped me out with my applications. Though I applied for several jobs, I was only called in for one interview. After having applied for jobs for two months, another former classmate suggested that I applied for a job at the Danish Immigration Service, where he was working. I applied and got it.

I have now worked at the Danish Immigration Service for more than three years, and I like it. I feel like I have found a place, where I get to grow professionally and my work is important. It is not abroad or at an NGO as I used to dream about. Nevertheless, it is a stable and very interesting job, and after having our second child, I have completely settled with the thought of not working abroad. At least it will be like this for me until the kids get bigger.

Previously, I worked at the Asylum Center Sandholm for the Danish Immigration Service, where I held asylum interviews. It was very interesting and relevant work for someone with a GRS background. We can learn many things about refugees, their backgrounds and the politics of migration, but interviewing asylum seekers every day is probably the most direct and relevant job for a GRS graduate, from my point of view. Today, I work with identifying and analysing fraud of residence cards. I get to make use of my knowledge from my former workplaces and my knowledge from GRS, while I still learn new things. In my daily work, I approach all my tasks using the Problem Based Learning model. I guess after five years at Aalborg University, it is just part of my DNA. I find it a very applicable method and at times maybe even more functional, in my personal point of view, than the legal method law students learn. Moreover, I use the knowledge from the international law course and the courses on culture, identity and globalisation. I do not use them in the sense that I on a daily basis get to academically debate the

different theories and analyse referring to related theories. But, with GRS as my foundation I have an overall understanding of migration, globalisation and culture, which is useful for my job, and the International Law course has been a good basis for me to learn more about law and practice.

Reflecting on my time at Falck Global Assistance I had a hard time seeing how I used my GRS knowledge when I worked there. But Falck is an international organisation with a very humanitarian mind-set. Like working in an NGO, I had to juggle with vast amounts of tight deadlines and a demand for high communication skills using different languages. Thus, it was a very hands-on experience.

At both the Mission of Palestine and the Turkish Embassy, the courses of international relations and political change and development theories have been useful. There is a vast difference between theories and reality, but on the second semester of GRS, I actually wrote a project work on the obstacles of implementing politics and guidelines in reality, which was interesting to be part of in real life at both diplomatic missions.

With all this in mind, I am not sure I will agree completely with Søren Kierkegaard and conclude that my life only can be understood backwards. I may not be old and wise yet, but I have already learned many things about both my past and future. Though it has been more than six years since I graduated, I still consider myself to be at the beginning of my career. I still have many years left to work and learn. For everything I learn, I get to understand better, how my experiences and my reflections are the crucial keywords for building and developing my career.

To conclude, my current best advice for future GRS graduates, based on my own personal experiences, would be to network wherever possible, lower your expectations about job searching for the first job after graduating and participate as much as possible in the courses at GRS. What you think is relevant or irrelevant for you here and now, may be completely different or even opposite later on in your career.

Networking can happen anywhere, even amongst your classmates who are in the same position like you. However, thinking back at 2012/2013 and my former classmates, I cannot recall that any of them started out with a fulltime and well paid academic position. I do not believe it has anything to do with us being the first class to graduate from GRS. I have met graduates from

various other educations who started out in the same situation. It is very rare to find and get hired at your dream job right after graduating. Finding your way into the labour market and figuring out what you like to do is a long, hard and lonely journey. In my case, it was not until three years after I graduated, I found myself in a real fulltime academic position where I felt comfortable and happy. I had never thought about how hard it could be getting an academic job, even though you have an academic education. Before that, only parts of my job contents could be classified as academic work. With that said, almost no days in my work life has past where I have not used my knowledge from the courses at GRS.

Everything related to Problem Based Learning and the courses on culture, identity, globalisation, international relations and law is relevant and useful in the real world. You just have to crack the code on how to use it outside the university, which will not really be possible before you have graduated and find yourself in the real world. Thus, Søren Kirkegaard is probably right, when he says our lives can only be lived forwards.