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ADVICE

The Bold Sabbatical



Pat Kinsella for The Chronicle

By Kevin O. Sauter | MAY 09, 2017

My wife, our three children, and I arrived in Durban, South Africa, in August 2001 with 16 pieces of luggage and a letter of invitation from the University of KwaZulu-Natal — ready for a year's stay while I studied the cultures and media systems in the newly democratic country.

We found a house to rent, enrolled our children in wonderful local schools, purchased a used car, and had the experience of a lifetime.

Seven years later, the kids were grown, and my wife and I had another yearlong sabbatical adventure, this time traveling the world to study the intercultural dimensions of the Roman Catholic mass in Croatia, Uganda, South Africa, India, Thailand, and China. At the time, a colleague called our trip "bold." I've come to believe that taking a bold sabbatical is something every academic should do at least once.

As institutions across the country seek to internationalize, it is vital that academics find ways to influence how that trend affects our classrooms, our research, and our campuses. Students come and go, but the constancy of faculty members who have had sojourns abroad is essential in internationalizing a campus.

I know, I know, it is asking a lot to expect every faculty member to move abroad for a year. After all, there may be financial limitations, a house and a mortgage, a partner's job, children, health-care issues, safety concerns. And who can afford a year abroad?

Certainly not everyone can work it out. But plenty of academics rule it out too soon.

Especially if you are tenured or on the tenure track — and have access to a sabbatical with some portion of your salary attached — I would urge you to consider taking it somewhere else, outside your U.S. comfort zone. As encouragement, I'd like to offer some suggestions on how you can move toward your own Bold Sabbatical.

Yes, you can. With apologies to Barack Obama, that phrase comes into play when considering a sabbatical. In some cases, professors are bound to a physical space for their sabbatical research project — a

lab, a studio, or an archive. However, the internet has made it possible for many of us to conduct our research and writing as easily from Ecuador as we can from our home office.

Perhaps a line of inquiry you are developing can veer toward the international, supporting your sabbatical application and enlivening your interests in wider distribution. My interest in U.S. media systems was easily diverted to an exploration of the South African media during the year we spent in Durban. My Roman Catholic background and developing expertise in intercultural communication led to the year of studying the unifying nature of liturgy around the world.

My advice: Look for reasons to do your research and writing elsewhere. You don't have to complete that book at home — go to Argentina. It is natural for us to find reasons not to do something when it seems overwhelming. If you work as hard to overcome the obstacles as you do in discovering them, however, a year overseas become feasible.

A common objection is that your partner may feel that he or she can't leave a job or get that much time away. Maybe so, but it's worth asking anyway. A year's leave of absence for such an adventure might, in fact, intrigue and energize your partner's supervisors,

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who may well help rather than stand in your way. That was our experience. When my wife, Susan, an intensive-care nurse, asked for a year's leave from her hospital bosses, they saw added value in the increased cultural sensitivity she would bring back from her travels, and they granted her request. She started work again as soon as we returned.

Other personal concerns arise as well: What about a family pet who is near life's end? We found a friend with an older dog who happily took care of our pet so the two old dogs had company in their last few months. Cars, schools, living arrangements can all be resolved with attention and perseverance.

The kids are all right. Our three children were nervous when my wife and I raised the prospect of leaving the country for a year, nervous about what they would miss. On our return, they were surprised to find that not much really had changed, but they certainly had.

Today our time in South Africa still comes up at most family gatherings. It was probably the most significant experience of their childhood. Our daughter, now a Ph.D. in communication, is focusing much of her research on South African culture and politics.

Schools in far-flung locales are not only "fine" but in many ways can be superior to local education here in the States. For those students without necessary language skills, there are most likely international schools available in the country you're visiting where instruction is in English. Yes, your kids may miss their friends or the football team or the school play, but, trust me, their education will be enormously enhanced by their time abroad.

We can't afford it. No doubt the most pressing issue facing those considering an overseas sabbatical is financial. The biggest obstacle for us was how to manage traveling abroad on my sabbatical-adjusted salary and still pay our mortgage.

We ended up renting out our home. Yes, you have to be careful to whom you rent your house, but it can and does work. Lock away your precious things, buy some serviceable plates and flatware, enlist a family member or friend to collect rent and oversee things, and it will be fine. As we discovered, you can solve a lot of problems from India or China with a phone and an internet connection. We called from South Africa to have a new

garage door installed, to hire a lawn service, and to find a plumber to fix a toilet.

The second part of the economics issue is the cost of living abroad. In our trip around the world, my wife and I (occasionally joined by our by-then-adult children) traveled for a year, renting a home or apartment in each country we visited. In every case, the cost of rental housing was less than what we spent on our mortgage, and in general, our expenses were lower than in the United States. We lived rather easily on a significantly reduced income. You may not be able to afford a sabbatical year in central London, but a year in Bangkok is definitely doable.

Some obstacles simply can't be overcome — aging parents for whom you are sole caregiver, for example. Give it some thought anyway. My father-in-law suffered from Parkinson's. While we were abroad, we kept in regular contact through phone, email, and Skype, and my wife returned for a month to help care for him. There are solutions, if imperfect, to some of those challenges.

I hope you consider taking your own bold sabbatical. A year abroad will invigorate you, your research, and your family. Your research could take on a new direction, you may gain the confidence and savvy to lead a study-abroad trip, or you may meet people you could invite to your home campus. None of that will happen if you stay home. Perhaps it's time to be bold.

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