

Being a Role Model

The main issue in the Bhagavad Gita is easy enough to discuss: Arjuna does not wish to fight and Krishna exhorts him to do his duty and fight. While this idea of duty might sound foreign, we can just as easily appreciate the issue if we think of our roles. It is this that has been bothering me for a while, especially with spending the semester thinking about professionalism.

I define professional as behaving in role appropriate ways at work and not letting personal relationships interfere with work decisions. Since I am a professor, what this means is that I devote time to preparing my lectures, writing, and all students get the grades they earn.

In my private life, however, I don't introduce myself as a doctor and don't insist people call me one. I see that as part of my professional life. In my private life, I have many facets, as I am sure we all do. There's the reader of classic fiction, the person who reads and watches many documentaries on science, history, and other areas of knowledge. There's also the person who's co-gm of a drinking/running club that's more than a little rowdy at times, and the organizer of a bookclub described as a modern day symposium. There's the hiker and camper who just wants to be out in the woods.

Usually, I'm able to negotiate all the roles. Sometimes, they conflict and it's not clear which set of rules are being used to evaluate me. Someone sees a picture online and assumes some context. Someone overhears a conversation and makes a judgment. The lines blur in places where some want bright markers.

Since I am a professor by occupation, often that's where I get the most flack. People often assume that I must be a professor all the time, and act only in professor appropriate ways. Since he just finished his doctorate and passed his licensing exam, I'll use my friend Misha to illustrate what I actually do and what causes conflict. A decade ago, Misha was one of my students. Over time, we talked after class, and then we would run into each other at a bar we used to frequent. These chance meetings turned into planned events and over time we became friends. Eventually, he moved on to graduate school and we stayed in touch through calls, texts, and visits. For years, we traveled to conferences together all over the US, and I encouraged him to start presenting his ideas as well. I could not be more proud of him. Here's my dilemma, and one that I am not sure I can answer. My relationship with him has not always been what one would call professional, but has it been better or worse because of that? Misha is just one example of how I get to know my students, I talk with them, hang out with them, share music with them, friend them, learn from them. Are these conversations always professional--well, as professional as midnight conversations over drinks and pool usually are.

I have long felt that the models I had growing up were either saints or sinners, and knew of no middle ground. I have tried to present a model, to live a life of someone who works hard, who pursues their values, and who also enjoys those values. I'd lie if I said I don't sometimes enjoy them too much. Honestly, this is often why I write these posts, to hopefully start conversations with other fellow travelers who are trying to discover their path.

But, I worry that every late night dart playing conversation is only filtered through some lens of "professor-student", and in every conversation I am only seen as an Abelard searching for an unsuspecting Heloise. It's frustrating, for it feels the hours spent helping student-friends with their classes, talking about careers, mentoring, answering a random text and helping with a question, being a friend, is easy to ignore and replace with "oh, he must be trying to get with them." It's as if the only reason for two people to talk is if one wants to mate with the other. It's frustrating, and quite frankly, insulting.

After 40 years, I have no resolution to these issues. Perhaps there isn't one. Perhaps what matters most is that I do wrestle with them, that I am far more critical of my own behavior than any other could be, that I do try to discover my values and live an authentic life. To my fellow travelers, I ask that you come walk with me in the mud. Perhaps together, we can keep each other from sinking.

July 2013