

Waiting

by Bridget Whearty



I was working in a grocery store the night I found out I'd gotten into my PhD program.

After finishing my degree at a solidly good state school that most of my grad school classmates hadn't heard of, I had followed my then-girlfriend from Montana to Texas, gotten rejected from an MFA program, and worked at a restaurant with so many problems (kittens living in the wall of the bar, leaking roof and floor, possum infestation) that it was simultaneously deeply depressing and hysterically funny.

By the time I started my PhD, I'd been working in restaurants, grocery stores, and coffee shops—off and on—for almost ten years. It wasn't the sort of thing that I bragged about at school. In fact, early on I saw my years waiting tables as something to be ashamed of.

Right off the bat it was clear that the skills I'd learned in that decade in food service *were* quite useful in my graduate program. I got there early to make the coffee before our Introduction to Graduate Studies class, and I could always be counted on at a party to open even the most difficult bottles of wine. But I'd applied to PhD programs to stop being a waitress, and didn't relish making a name for myself as the department's coffee girl.

In my notebooks from that first year, I can find, alongside lecture notes, scrawling self-conscious commands to myself: "*Stop putting yourself in service positions.*" "*You are not here to open the wine or make the coffee.*" I had to learn to resist the urge to leap up, carry the food, to stay late cleaning up. Sometimes, I actually had to sit on my hands or put a chair on my shoelaces so I couldn't stand up.

But over that first year I began to realize just how well my years as a waitress had prepared me. When classmates who had gone straight from famous private high schools to prestigious colleges to competitive graduate programs confessed that they didn't know what they were doing here, I thought, "I do. I don't want to be making coffee and carrying food for a living when I'm fifty."

Then I came to see that my years as a waitress were more than just a whip I could use to keep myself on track. They gave me valuable perspective. Sure, writing my own seminar papers while simultaneously grading my students' papers was hard. But it was no harder than those days in a restaurant when you have to work a 16-hour double shift because your replacement didn't come in. Studying for my Qualifying Exam was daunting, but it wasn't any harder than working at a grocery store on Turkey Tuesday, two days before Thanksgiving when the store opens at 6am,

sells hundreds (maybe thousands) of fresh, organic turkeys, and the pressure to throw the perfect holiday dinner turns customers into raging, angry, chaotic hordes.

Balance

Once I stopped being ashamed of my years in food service, I could see a whole host of other “soft” skills that being waitress had helped me master. Juggling committee work, teaching, research, and taking classes, I realized, was a lot like the balancing game you have to play in a professional kitchen. You have eight tables with different orders, two more waiting to be sat, salads to make, desserts to plate, checks to prepare, split tickets to manage, prep chores to keep up on, and the closing checklist to complete. Give too much of yourself to one thing and the quality of your work on other duties will suffer. To succeed in a kitchen you learn to balance the work, to identify which job is a high-pressure-right-now-or-kiss-your-tips-and-rent-goodbye task and which is a downtime-make-your-life-easier-at-closing task.

When I was training new staff in a kitchen, I would often counsel them “you can work hard or you can work smart.” I explained that they needed to figure out what to do in advance so that when an unexpected twenty-top walked in during the middle of service and wanted to be seated in their section, they’d be able to take the table, manage the work, and charm the group so effectively that they’d get an extra tip on top of the 18% gratuity—all while also managing their other tables smoothly. Roll extra silverware before the start of the dinner rush. Have extra lemons prepped for water. If you notice something is about to get low, have more stocked and on hand. That way, whatever comes, you can rest (or, rather, run) on the solid foundation of good prep work.

This same principle, applied to grad school, helped me draft final papers early and often to avoid being slammed at the end of term. It got me grading papers a few at a time and starting just as soon as I picked up the stack at the end of class. It helped me organize myself when no one was reading over my shoulder, make and then keep strict reading schedules for my Qualifying Exam and my University Orals Exam. I knew that I couldn’t avoid getting overloaded, just like as a waitress you can’t avoid being slammed in an insanely busy shift. But I knew I could—and should—do everything in my power to avoid being overwhelmed.

Tedium

Television shows have glamorized working as a chef, but restaurant work involves a lot of tedious work. Cut 14 quarts of onions. Wash and rewash cutting boards. Perpetually roll silverware and napkins. Not to mention the hours-upon-hours I have spent in the dishtank, soaked in the steam of the industrial dishwasher, my hair plastered to my forehead, up to my elbows in the detritus of someone else’s dinner. One of the hidden truths of life may be that every job has its share of grunt work, the work that could really make you miserable if you let it. In grad school, it might be grading. Or writing code. Building and rebuilding microscopes that refuse to work. Cleaning survey data. Tracking down every work by every author who has ever written on your research topic.

If you let yourself, these tasks can be mind-numbingly, dehumanizingly dull. And there certainly were—and are—days when these tasks get to me. But it has always been useful to return to the habits of mind that kept me interested in chopping vats and vats of carrots. Basically, I push

myself to dig into the details that surround me and find what is interesting. As a prep cook, I cataloged every possible detail about the twenty-five pounds of carrots I needed to process: from the pattern and colors on the plastic bags they came in, to the individual shapes of the roots, to the way that the color and texture changed between the outside and what I thought of as the “heart wood,” to the tiny burst of juice that you can’t actually see that erupts each time a peeler slices into the carrot’s flesh. Eight years out of the kitchen my fingers still remember the relative stickiness of ginger and garlic.

This approach is the source of some of my best research ideas. My habit of looking at the smaller, sideways details led me to wonder why two sixteenth-century male poets were writing poems pretending to be women singing lullabies. When I asked, it turned out no one had written about that. After I wrote my seminar paper, I was asked to write the article on it for the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Deliberate, endless curiosity kept me from going mad in food service. And now the same technique is the driving force behind my scholarship.

Connection

Waiting tables also taught me how to interact with people. For many years, my default state with strangers was intense discomfort. And I was even more painfully shy around people whose writing and thinking I admired. But as a waitress, I couldn’t pay my bills by hiding in my innate bookishness. I had to talk to my coworkers, my managers (and sometimes their managers). And, of course, I had to talk to my customers. As a coffee girl and a waitress, the food is only part of what you do. Figuring out how, when, and how much to talk to people are skills that make or break your night. Who will appreciate dumb jokes about Turtle Cheesecake (“why, yes, it *is* made of organic turtles”), and who will be violently offended by the same joke? Who wants extra patter? Who prefers efficiency and speed?

When I first started grad school, I instinctively thought of my professors and classes as customers I needed to figure out. As a waitress, I had learned to adapt my presentation style to different tables’ needs in order to successfully communicate with everyone I met. As an academic, I’ve relied on the same skill for oral exams, classrooms of freshmen, conference panels, and job interview committees. It’s not about lying or pretending to be someone you’re not. (Students and coffee shop customers are equally able to smell fakery and desperation and they don’t like or reward it.) It’s about learning how to actually connect.

Teamwork

Being a waitress, I also learned about collaborative work and the real value of kindness. In the kitchens I worked in, if you treated your co-workers badly, you would be shunned. There were a few servers who were only in it for themselves; they “sharked” tables from other servers and shirked their end-of-shift work. They might get ahead for a day, a week, or even a month or two. But eventually, they’d need help. And no one would come forward. Their profound selfishness would lead them to failure.

I want to be clear: in the academy you should not be the go-to person for all forms of service, anymore than in a restaurant you should neglect your customers to bus tables for everyone else. In both professions, this kind of self-abnegating behavior will make everyone adore you as they benefit from your willingness put yourself last. But success in both worlds requires that you not

hide, that you put yourself forward appropriately and ask for what you need. Nor should you assume that you are the star and that everyone else is there simply to serve you.

You want to seek out a middle ground. Find the place where you can manage your tables, where you can make friends and help them when they need it, and where you can trust those same friends to help you in return. In grad school I organized a writing group: we read each others' chapters and job applications. Generosity and the fact that we were all in this together kept us going through even the hardest moments.

Value

It's easy—in restaurants and in grad school—to fall into valuing people based solely on what they can do for you. There were many days when I judged each table based solely on the size of the tip they left. But that made me miserable.

In food service, if you see your customers solely as tip machines, you undervalue them and lose out on the opportunity to really connect. I only remember the name of one customer: Obatalah. He was a wheelchair-bound jazz musician who ordered water (no ice and half a lime), a salad (half the usual amount of dressing), two loaves of bread, and two bowls of the soup. He sat by the window and hardly tipped at all. But I loved waiting on him. In large part this was because when he asked, "how you doing today?" he actually wanted to know. Customers like him taught me that value doesn't always lie in the obvious: you need money, you need publications, you need positive teaching evaluations and good recommendation letters. You've also got to seek out connections that feed your soul.

In grad school, if you treat your faculty as recommendation machines and your students as evaluation machines, you lose out on everything else they have to offer you. In both places, there is a huge opportunity for human connection, and focusing on how someone is a means to your predetermined end can make you lose sight of that—and all the hidden opportunities that come with it.

I took most of the jobs I had before grad school because I needed the money. It was also work I was pretty good at. It wasn't the path for my life's work, but it wasn't a waste of time. Sure, I figured out why I wanted a PhD. Sure, I vowed never to work for tips again. But even better, I learned life lessons that I use every day. Grad school is a privilege, but it's also hard and often lonely. Finding the people I cared about, finding ways to bring value to all my work (even the work that was hard, or unpleasant, or had no obvious, immediate reward) helped me keep my dignity, sense of humor, and sense of purpose.

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Bridget researches and teaches medieval and early modern literature and culture, the history of the book, and the digital humanities. She is working on her first book, The Digital Resurrection of Medieval Manuscripts. She is the translator behind @Monk_of_Bury, a 7-year Twitter project adapting the medieval English poet John Lydgate's masterwork The Fall of Princes (one of the longest poems English) for modern micro-blogging, accompanied with digital-medieval manuscript images.

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