

## The Academic Sabbatical: A Voyage of Discovery

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## *Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage*

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### **The Academic Sabbatical: A Voyage of Discovery**

Edited by Timothy Sibbald and Victoria Handford

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The edited collection *The Academic Sabbatical: A Voyage of Discovery* has been published at a moment when many are thinking about the nature of academic work. The COVID-19 pandemic, of course, radically changed the way many academics work. Even before that, however, books like Weeks' (2011) *The Problem with Work* and Frayne's (2015) *The Refusal of Work*, which critique the ways people are encouraged to work without concern for physical, emotional, or spiritual rest, were in wide circulation. Alongside texts critiquing the precarious position of part-time academics and their poor treatment by neoliberal institutions (e.g., Abawi, 2018), these books highlight the intensity and relentless pace of academic work today. *The Academic Sabbatical*, then, comes as an opportunity to consider a scarce space of rest in academic work: the sabbatical.

A sabbatical is an extended period of rest and study, sometimes etymologically linked to the religious practice of keeping a sabbath, or a day of rest. In the modern academic context, a sabbatical is usually a six- or twelve-month period where a professor, generally tenured or on the tenure track, is released from teaching and administrative

duties to focus on their research. The origins of the modern sabbatical are often traced to Harvard University in the 1960s, where it was added to contracts to attract top tier faculty.

Today, most universities have a sabbatical of some sort. Despite the ubiquity of the sabbatical, however, research on the topic is limited. The current volume ventures into that gap by offering first-hand accounts of sabbaticals—a rare inside look at the sabbatical from the eyes of those who have lived it.

The book is divided into three sections. The first collects accounts of first sabbaticals where travel was not the defining event. The second highlights sabbaticals where extensive travel was undertaken. The third shares insights based on multiple sabbaticals. Each section has three or four chapters, and while a full accounting of each exceeds the scope of this review, below I will highlight one from each section.

Before the first section, a literature review is presented by Shelleyanne Scott and Donald Scott. This chapter elucidates the dearth of research around academic sabbaticals, but it also surveys the limited research available to highlight how productive and refreshing sabbaticals can be. The authors also list several common problems around sabbaticals: Gender inequities, financial implications, and gaps in graduate supervision, among others. This literature review helps ground the subsequent personal accounts in the existing scholarship, however scant it may be.

The first section begins with Maria del Carmen Rodriguez de France, whose sabbatical provided an opportunity to work actively with the then recently released Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. Her chapter highlights the way a sabbatical can be used for service to community as much as for study and rest. As the saying goes, “sometimes a change is as good as a rest.”

The second section contains several accounts of international travel. Anahit Armenakyan’s chapter, for example, characterizes the author’s journey to be near family in Armenia, where she worked for the duration of her sabbatical. There is a serendipitous moment in the chapter that stays with me: A medical procedure undertaken while abroad results in a research collaboration with the physician performing the procedure. To paraphrase John Lennon: Sometimes research is what happens when you’re busy making other plans.

Near the end of Armenakyan’s chapter, she realized she was “comparing [herself] to her peers, using their sabbatical accomplishments as a reference point” (p. 122). She responds to herself thus: “The more appropriate approach would be to compare my

activities against the [university's] definition of a sabbatical" (p. 122). This insight is counter cultural in the hyper-competitive world of academia: we need not measure ourselves against one another, only against the task itself.

The third and final section offers "perspectives based on more than one sabbatical" (p. 153), which, again, "represent a small portion of the academy" (p. 153). According to the editors, few professors take one sabbatical, let alone multiple. Of the four chapters in this section, only one is authored by a scholar who has had multiple sabbaticals, while two are written by multiple authors comparing their sabbaticals, and another is written by a teacher-turned-professor who compares the sabbatical to the study leave sometimes afforded to teachers.

Merridee Bujaki's chapter compares the author's three sabbaticals but focuses on the most recent from 2018-2019. Here, as in other entries in the volume, the author's planned sabbatical is not the same as the sabbatical that happened; life got in the way. In reflecting on this gap, Bujaki describes the sabbatical activities that really matter: "the joy-filled celebrations of our thirty-fifth wedding anniversary and two children's weddings, and the emotional and physical demands of medical interactions and advocating on behalf of one's loved ones" (p. 199). In this, Bujaki resists the institution's pull toward quantifying academic production by asserting her own value structure rather than accepting those imposed by the system.

I find only one limitation with the text. While I am sure the editors endeavoured to solicit chapters from academics in a variety of fields, Education is well over-represented in the book. There are only two chapters authored by academics outside of Education, and both those are in schools of business. This leaves the reader wondering if those in the humanities or the natural sciences experience their sabbaticals differently than we do in the so called "professional" disciplines.

To conclude, *The Academic Sabbatical: A Voyage of Discovery* offers a wide-ranging series of firsthand experiences with the academic sabbatical. The book will be of interest to any reader who wants to think more about that topic—early career scholars looking forward to their first sabbatical, administrators tasked with approving faculty sabbaticals, or senior academics preparing for what may be their last sabbatical and reflecting on what it all means. Overall, the book represents an opportunity to reflect on what academic work *could* be, and that is always an opportunity worth seizing.

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