Welcome to Inspire the Students

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I’d like to thank Zach, Stanley, Felipe and Frenkchriss for putting this together.

I’d like to say a few words about academic careers, to inspire you (?)

But first...

1 What’s the meaning of life?

A: Kids. Then enjoy yourself. So how do you enjoy yourself?

2 My story

• I’m a fifth year at LUC. It took awhile before I got here.

• Got my BA in Economics @ UCLA at 21 years. Didn’t do a masters then (math) but also happy to avoid academic incest. (Think about that before you study masters at Leiden!)

• I worked for a failed start up, then did database programming, then traveled for 5 years. After that, I had a dotcom job for 2 months (fired) before working as a secretary at a math institute. That’s where I decided to do a PhD.

• I began at 32 years old and immediately hit walls (math). In my first year, I divorced my wife and worked far too hard (12 hrs per day, 7 days per week). Eventually I found my footing (yay life experience) and graduated in 2008 at 37 years old.

• Then I did postdocs in DC, Berkeley, Wageningen, Simon Fraser and Riyadh. The academic world was not easy.

• Got this job in Aug 2014 (45 years old) and I love it – even if I need to do grading...

• I don’t regret any of the choices I’ve made on the way. They all contributed to my current success and happiness.

3 What do Academics Do?

• It’s publish or perish for 90 percent of jobs at top schools. LUC’s teaching priority is rare. “Teaching schools” can kill you with overwork. Most PhDs don’t work in the academic world.

• How do publications work?

  – Bene was the bright guy, I was the wise guy.
We began in Fall 2015, submitted June 2017 and published in July 2018. The paper went thru 22 revisions, including 2 sets of responses to referees.

As of now, the paper has been cited 0 times and downloaded 6 times. Low ROI :( 

His research into data on water metering led to a new hypothesis. His research into the history falsified my assumption and led us closer to the truth.

- In these days of liars, fake news and disruption from climate change, technology and chauvinist nationalism means that critical thinking is crucial to protecting yourself.

- For society, academics often play this role – at least when they are making their ideas public. It’s a thankless job with very few material or social rewards, but it’s attractive for some people.

- For the rest (i.e., 95 percent of you), the effort and process of critical thinking is still extremely valuable! Richard Feynman: “The first principle is that you must not fool yourself and you are the easiest person to fool.”

4 Bottom Line

My advice on how to enjoy yourself:

Be independent: Get paid. A friend trained as an artist told me she’s now working as a consultant. Yes, she’s compromised, but she can now also afford to buy herself dinner.

Keep learning: In classes of 2013 and 2014, 80 percent of students had enrolled in 1 (or more) masters programs. In the classes of 2015 and 2016, the ratio is 65 percent. I attribute this to the improving job market. Learning on the job is also valuable (and you’re getting paid!). Those with job experience – not just intern experience – can also choose a better masters (in terms of matching interests) and get more out of it (in terms of asking more of their professors; I wrote a blog post on this for LinkedIn).

Do what you love: Sometimes it takes effort to get there, but keep asking yourself what you want and work towards those work, personal and social goals.

Embrace change: The world is changing, sometimes in ways that we dislike or that harm us. Plan on change and surprises to reduce your risks.

Priorities: The essentials are friends and family, your health, and then your work and financial security.

Work smart: Use your networks: The weak network of LUC alumni (600+ strong) and the strong network of the people who kept you going when times were tough.

That’s why we’re here today: to be inspired, but also to appreciate the value that we can bring to each other: friendship, knowledge, connections.

Let’s practice by saying hi to someone you do NOT know.