

It's About Time—A Reluctant Journey From Cab Driver to University Professor

By Clay Parsons

*Motivation is the bottom line behind most major career changes.
When you have it you can achieve anything.*

The gentleman I affectionately call The Cabbie is one of the most interesting individuals I have ever worked with. He also succeeded in making one of the most dramatic career changes, from cab driver to university professor. This is his story.

John came to see me after his wife gave him an ultimatum: either talk with a professional and do something about his stalled career or else. His wife, a public high school teacher, frequently reminded him, usually after a particularly gory story on local TV, of the number of cab drivers injured or murdered. It had caused some major arguments. He would always agree to make a change, but it never went beyond that.

In the 1970s, John worked in the music industry in New York City, managing several up-and-coming hard rock bands and living life in the fast lane. After burning out on 48-hour days and the pervasive drug culture, he moved to San Francisco to "get a little rest" and regain his health and sanity. He got a job as a cabbie, "just for a few months," until he could find something better. More than twenty years later he was still driving a cab. John's lifelong dream was to become a college professor. It seemed a long way off.

Although he never went beyond high school, he had a remarkable intellect. A voracious reader, he consumed several books a day in his cab. He also met and talked with people from all over the world and from all walks of life. He was proficient in several languages, including French and Spanish, and could expound on almost any subject. I remember thinking that if they would only make an exception for John and drop the degree requirements, he would be an exceptional teacher at UC Berkeley, one of the world's premier educational institutions. His dream seemed a perfect fit.

John's process of returning to academia started off slowly. His wife, delighted that he was finally making progress, offered to support him completely during his career transition. She was not about to accept another excuse. John countered by insisting on keeping his cabbie job while he was a student. After several rounds of negotiation they agreed on a contract that would govern finances and family roles.

John also had some very real fears about returning to school, believing that he would feel slow and foolish in comparison with his younger classmates. After talking with students and faculty at several Bay Area colleges and researching several types of programs, his comfort level improved and he signed up for his first class at San Francisco State University. I talked with him after he had completed his first few weeks. He was really excited. It was all he had hoped it would be. He was already planning his next semester's classes.

That was more than four years ago. John completed his undergraduate degree in two years and last year started an accelerated master's program in liberal arts at Stanford University. He is planning to enter a doctoral program in political history next year and is already looking for programs where he can teach. He loves the academic world and his field in particular. He has always loved learning, likes people and is a master storyteller. John still drives his cab occasionally, more out of nostalgia than necessity. His wife has become his biggest fan.