

Three (Ancient) Questions for the Academic Psychiatrist

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A few years ago, a resident asked me how I had decided on a career in academic psychiatry. The question surprised me. I wasn't aware that I had made a decision, and I hadn't known I was an academic psychiatrist. I am still not sure if I am.

I work at an academic medical center and have an appointment at a prestigious medical school. I've been fortunate to have had a few articles published, but I do no research. I love teaching and writing but don't consider myself to be a "medical educator." I'm glad for academic promotion but spend little time thinking about it. I tend to feel self-conscious when adding the few talks I've given or awards I've received to my resume. I feel like my impact is much more on the professional development of my students than on the aggregate of psychiatric knowledge. Maybe all of this just adds up to being an academic psychiatrist, not otherwise specified.

It's useful to have a clear idea of what point on the career horizon one is navigating toward and why. I'm familiar with colleagues who labor to write articles that few will read and obtain promotion with dubious practical payoff. The seductions of publishing for publishing's sake and promotion for promotion's sake can be hard to resist. The result can be a relatively unfulfilling pursuit unless one's motives and wishes are at least approximately known.

Three questions that date back 2 millennia might be of help in clarifying these issues. The questions are attributed to Rabbi Hillel the Elder and are quoted in the *Ethics of the Fathers*, which appeared in written form in the first 2 centuries of the Common Era. Rabbi Hillel famously asked:

1. If I am not for myself, who will be for me?
2. If I am only for myself, what am I?
3. And if not now, when?

These questions put into play the complex mix of self-interest, narcissism, and altruism with which all investigators struggle. Whether we call such investigators "academic psychiatrists" is of secondary importance; the essential thing is that each investigator has a reasonably clear idea of his or her motivations and satisfactions—to be a self-investigator, as it were. I would suggest that doing so can help one get a career voyage off to a good start and can provide helpful midcourse corrections after a career's inevitable stormy seasons.

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