What to do with your Sustainability Studies Degree: 
Graduate School? Or Search for a Job?

Don’t let the title fool you. This little story is really about something else, and it’s only one small part of what you might be doing while you are trying to decide on further education or job hunting. Everyone knows that sometimes fate steps in and you are lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time. But that “right place” is really not just anywhere, and that “right time” is not really just happenstance. In fact it is circumstance you can make for yourself.

I was not really thinking about job prospects when my being at the right place in the right time occurred. I was just being involved in my community. I was a student and one of the things I was studying at the time was solid waste management. I was reading books and articles about trash disposal. I had started with a term paper and it later turned into a dissertation. The burn and bury strategies were clashing in the marketplace with recover, re-use and recycle strategies. The former was needlessly expensive and environmentally destructive (it also appeared to have a corrupting influence on politics as large amounts of money were involved). The latter was smart because it reduced environmental impact while creating more jobs and ultimately costing less.

It always caught my eye when I found something going on in my community that had a bearing on the subject. I’m addicted to the news media. I read a newspaper every day. I watch the news broadcasts and I tune in to local radio stations (I must have inherited this from my father). I was doing all this long before the internet and the “world wide web” came along (although now you can easily get almost every major newspaper in the world right on your screen). I was living in Philadelphia and attending Penn when I learned of the Delaware Valley Toxics Coalition, a “grass-roots” environmentalist group in my community. They were very active in opposing a plan for a large trash incinerator in Philadelphia to be cited at the old Navy Yard. What they were proposing instead was a new recycling and composting system for managing Philadelphia’s trash.

I gave the Coalition a call. They said I ought to come to the public hearing taking place at City Hall. All members of the public would be given 3 minutes each to address the hearing. I had been writing letters to the editor. One of them was published in the Inquirer, Philadelphia’s largest daily newspaper. I was also writing a regular bi-weekly opinion column, “In Our Own Backyards,” in the U of Penn’s student newspaper, The Daily Pennsylvanian. Three minutes at a microphone at City Hall on a subject I cared about would be a slam dunk. But I wrote out my script and nervously rehearsed it until I had it right. I didn’t want the chairperson bursting my balloon of hot air and stopping me short with a “time’s-up” rebuke. I got my delivery to 2 minutes and 55 seconds.

It was 1987. The hearing room was crowded. The news media had turned out. It was standing room only. The main attraction was a speech before the assembly by one of the environmental movement’s founding fathers, the ecologist Dr. Barry Commoner. I knew who he was. I had read one of his books. I had seen him on the TV as he had been a candidate for the presidency in 1980. Barry was to get 30 minutes because he was invited by one of the Council members as an expert witness. Barry’s Center for the Biology of Natural Systems at Queens College in New York City was engaged in concerted research on the trash crisis (this was during the time of the
infamous “garbage barge” that became a national laughing stock due to the late-night comedians who ridiculed the barge’s absurd journey up and down the East Coast as it was turned away time after time—who wanted NYC trash, especially when Greenpeace alerted every community along the way that they were next on the list of ports-of-call?). Barry was one of my heroes, and there he was in Philadelphia’s historic City Hall. There was electricity in the room as he assailed the logic of trash incineration for its production of deadly pollutants and indefensible economics. He built a brilliant case for the cause in which so many gathered there that day believed. “In nature,” he explained, “there is no such thing as ‘waste.’ Recycling is a fundamental component of natural systems.” We were on the edge of our seats. You could have heard a pin drop in the room. The room erupted into cheers and a thunderous ovation when he concluded.

When Barry made his exit he was followed out the door by media cameramen and reporters. By then I was just a face in the crowd waiting for my 3 minutes. Finally, I got my turn. I hardly remember what I said that day. What I do remember is this guy who came up to me afterwards and said he really liked my statement. He handed me his business card. He was on Barry Commoner’s staff and urged me to call him the following day. I did. He was back in Queens and I was in Philly. We exchanged stories and then he asked me to hold. Barry Commoner got on the phone and chatted with me. He said I should send him my resume. I almost fell out of my chair. I polished up my resume as best I could and sent it ASAP. Shortly thereafter I got a call. It was Barry. “We would like you to come and meet with us,” he told me. “Wonderful,” I replied, “when?” With a fresh haircut, shiny shoes, jacket and tie I made my way to the Center for the Biology of Natural Systems at Queens College, City University of New York.

I must have made a good impression on Barry and his staff. After some critical and soul-searching conversations with each of them, including his “secretary” (never, never underestimate the importance of such people—they are the gate-keepers, the administrators, the confidants of the people who make the decisions but are always asked for their opinions—which matter—and as I found out later his “secretary” really was the person who ran things—they almost always do), I was offered a job, a real good-paying job doing some of the most interesting and challenging work I had ever done. I stayed at the Center for seven years, managing to complete my Ph.D. dissertation in the process and learn more science, math, economics and political science than I ever had in all my years of schooling. CBNS had changed my life and it all started with a business card. Or was it the hearing? Or was it that I got involved with the Coalition? Or was it the newspaper article? Or was it being in the right place at the right time because I was heading in the right general direction first of all, and that allowed me through circumstance (or dumb luck?) to end up where I did?

Anyway, I guess the moral of my little story is that we sometimes make our own luck. Being involved in one’s community makes a difference whether it leads to personal gain or not. In the end, it’s about the things for which you care. You never know what doors will close or open. But you’ve got to keep knocking on them.

Dr. H. James Quigley, Jr.