

Mike Altman: Welcome to Study Religion, the podcast of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama. My name is Mike Altman. I am an associate professor and undergraduate director here in the department, and I am here with another episode in a series we're doing on making a jump. When do you take a new road? When do you experiment with a new idea? When do you try something new along the way of your academic career? So I have an interview today with Dr. Shayna Sheinfeld who has built a really interesting place for herself as an academic coach. So I talked a little bit about what is an academic coach, what kind of things does she do, how did she get there, and it's just a really interesting conversation about somebody who saw a space for change in the Academy, a space for change and decided to just try something new, and it seems to be working very well for her. So let's hear from Dr. Shayna Sheinfeld.

Mike Altman: Dr. Sheinfeld, thanks for taking time to talk with us about this. I was looking at your academic coaching website and one of the other websites about sort of your academic work, and it's just really interesting to have someone doing what you're doing right now, to talk to you about this sort of question of agency, both of the decisions you've made and the way that you coach other people. So thank you for being here.

S. Sheinfeld: Thank you for having me.

Mike Altman: So my first question is just for folks who don't know what you're up to. Can you tell us sort of what you're doing as an academic coach and sort of how did you get to where you are right now in doing what you're doing?

S. Sheinfeld: Sure. So as an academic coach, what I do is I work with academics at any number of stages including administration and staff members in the academy as well as advanced graduate students. And you can kind of think of it as a life coach in the sense that I'm present to help people work through any kind of life changes, crises, areas where they find things particularly difficult or stumped, where they're stumped with something, and I help them work through those things. So some examples might be an advanced graduate student or an early career tenure track professor keeps getting asked to do things. They're junior. They feel obligated to say yes to almost everything. And because of that, then they're overwhelmed, don't have time to work on their own research and writing, and one of the things that I can do is work with them to help develop boundaries and help them uncover their voice and use their voice in order to know when to say no and also then how and when to make the decision to say yes when they're offered opportunities.

S. Sheinfeld: So that's just one example of the kind of thing that I do for them. As to how I got here, I'm an academic myself. I teach, I write and research. I enjoy doing those things, but I've been in both jobs that have been wonderful and jobs that have been toxic. And as I've worked through those myself and listened to my friends and colleagues work through their own situations, whether they can't find a job, they're still in a PhD program after 12 years there, they have the job, everything

looks beautiful and wonderful on the outside, and of course they've curated their social media to come across that way, but in all reality, they're miserable because, let's say, they have it all in academia, but they don't have their own personal life. They don't have a family that they always wanted or they have a great job, but they're really in a toxic environment and they would like to get out but don't know how since they're, according to academia's definition of success, living the dream.

S. Sheinfeld: And so I've watched this talk with colleagues and friends and finally decided that there's really something here. There are things that are not being talked about that really need to be talked about in academia as a whole to make us holistic individuals, to be able to integrate our ourselves as beings that have lives outside of academia, to address crises including job market or writing crises. And I finally just decided that this is something that I felt, I guess, a calling to do. I like to help people, I am experienced in academia, and it made sense to me then to take that next step and combine those two things.

Mike Altman: Did it feel like a risk at the time? Did it feel like, "I'm trying something that is a ..." Did it feel like kind of a career risk when you decided to try to jump into this academic coaching thing? I mean you still have ... You're in a position at University of Kentucky, but did it feel risky?

S. Sheinfeld: Oh yes, and it still does quite honestly. We're trained to believe that the tenure track is the end all, be all and that if you're not reaching for that, then somehow you have failed. And so yes, it felt risky. It felt risky to say, "You know what? That's not my definition of success. That's not how I am going to define what success is." And it's really a problem actually that we're training graduate students to think that that's what success is because the majority of PhDs don't end up on that track. That means there's a whole bunch of really smart people walking around feeling like they're failures. It doesn't benefit the academy. It doesn't benefit individuals. It doesn't benefit scholarship. It doesn't benefit students. It's just not a productive way of approaching things. So yeah, I mean it felt risky, but it feels like the kind of risk that needs to be taken and needs to be talked about.

Mike Altman: Yeah. I think it's interesting when you talk about all of the ... I mean the bare facts that there's way more people graduating with PhDs from various programs in various fields than there are tenure track jobs for them. And I'm curious how do you think that should shape the way early career folks think about their decision-making, both as they're finishing up their PhD or starting a career? I mean how should ... Because what I'm hearing you say, and I think is right, is that there's a set of expectations that are kind of, that we are sort of handed.

S. Sheinfeld: Yes.

Mike Altman: And I'm curious what you think. How do you think that early career scholars should be approaching their decision-making when they're handed this set of

expectations and beginning to try to navigate some sort of career, whatever that's going to look like?

S. Sheinfeld: Yeah, it's a hard question because it really begins at the institutional level. I don't remember anyone ever telling me, "This is what you need to do. You need to get a tenure track job. This is what you need to do," but there was this expectation from the time I started my PhD program that that was the end goal. That was what you were aiming for, and there was never any discussion of what it might look like if you didn't go that route and how that can still be a personal success or a career success to choose a different route. So I think that, institutionally, there needs to be some reframing from the beginning, but I also think that, in terms of individually, we need to talk about it more. We need to talk about not just the fact that there aren't as many tenure track jobs out there as there are PhDs, as there are just brilliant, amazing people who have their PhD, but also that there are legitimate ways to participate in the academy without having a job like that.

S. Sheinfeld: So you can be a scholar. Let me rephrase. You are not your job, and I think that that is something that is indoctrinated into us, that we are our research, we are our output, we are how well we teach depending on kind of where we are and what's important, but that's not the case. We are individuals who are worthy and meaningful people. We're intelligent. We're scholars whether or not we have a tenure track job or half a post-doc. We are all these things even without that job, and so there needs to be a level of, I guess, reframing, a paradigm shift to thinking about what makes somebody successful. And ultimately, that's on an individual level, but it needs to happen institutionally. It needs to become more acceptable to not have a university or college attached to your name at the end.

Mike Altman: Yeah. Oh, yeah. I'm nodding and saying yes along, but I had to mute the mic because I don't want to interrupt you in the background. Yeah. So when you're coaching folks, how much of what you're helping them with is navigating their place in the academy and how much of it is seeing the skills that they've honed in the academy at whatever level they happen to be in as being marketable outside of it? Like you said, you're an academic coach. How much of that academic coaching is coaching to stay within the sort of academic sphere and how much is to see what they've gained from the academic sphere and take it elsewhere?

S. Sheinfeld: Yeah. So I would say that, when I coach, it's mixed because usually people come to me when there's some sort of crisis, and so often our coaching work is centered on a crisis. Maybe they've hit middle age, they remain unmarried regardless of all their attempts otherwise, or they're married but childless. They may or may not have the job that they want. They may or may not have the income that they want even if they have the job. So there's usually one or two things that are really a crutch. Maybe they have an interview finally after a couple of years of not getting an interview and/or a campus visit after a couple of years of not getting campus visits and they want to really hone in on those

particular skills. So our work always starts or almost always starts with a crisis point, but my coaching approach is holistic.

S. Sheinfeld: So we start out with what it is they want to work on right now, but from the beginning, I ask them to think about their whole life as they live it now, as they see their work and their personal life tying together or not. And I will point out, we will develop together usually three areas that we'll work on including one of them being kind of the crisis area. But for instance, I've talked to people who are incredibly lonely in their work. They're amazing scholars, they do great things in their teaching, but when I read their intake form and we talked about it, they have absolutely no sense of community or personal life. Ultimately, that doesn't make them a good scholar. That doesn't make them a good teacher. And so one of the things that we work on then is whole life integration.

S. Sheinfeld: For somebody else, they may be in the academy but very unhappy with their current position and wondering if they can exit in some way that doesn't scream failure, and so we'll work on then how to uncover their voice, how to recognize that social media is a curated space. And so most of what we see are only the good things that people like to talk about, and to think about what that means then if there are other people who are feeling the same way because none of us are alone. We all feel like impostors. We're all unhappy at times. We're all ... I should say we all feel like impostors some of the time at least. We're all unhappy in different ways at different times. For some of us, it's more consuming than others, but we don't talk about those things with one another. And so one of the things that I like to do is try to break that down and make sure that my clients understand that they aren't alone in this and there are ways to own your life and own where you want to go and call yourself success. And ultimately, it's only your definition of success that matters.

Mike Altman: Yeah, it's interesting that you talk about that. We can get into the details of why, but it seems that there's a ... I don't know. I don't know. I've only ever done this for a living so I don't know what other careers are like. Maybe lawyers and plumbers and other people have similar tensions or maybe it's unique to the structures of the academy, but this tension between professional success and personal and sort of decisions being driven by the professional versus the personal. Right? When you described the person who has the great job but is incredibly lonely. So I don't know if that's unique to what we do or not because I haven't done it.

S. Sheinfeld: I don't think it is.

Mike Altman: Yeah, probably isn't, but I wonder. So with that tension, right? For someone who is just setting out, Master's student even, PhD student finishing up, what would you say to them about how they should view their own agency? Because those decisions, right? The person who is unhappy when they're an associate professor or full professor or the person who is unhappy two years in to their tenure track job, the person who isn't happy after the one year visiting,

whatever, there are various decisions made along the way to get there. So how would you, what would you say to early, early, early people about how to think about their agency as a scholar in the structure that has so much out of their control? I mean people look at a job listing and there's 20 positions for 300 people.

S. Sheinfeld: Right.

Mike Altman: And that's applying to a lot of world religions jobs and aren't really exactly, their-

S. Sheinfeld: Right. That's a good year. That's a good year.

Mike Altman: That's a good year. I don't ... Yeah, I'm imagining. You can see how long it's been since I've had ... I'm showing my own problems here, but yeah. So what would you say that someone's trying to make sense of this idea of how much agency do they have? How should they use it? How should they think about it in the face of the power structure of the academy?

S. Sheinfeld: Yeah. So I would recommend and I would work with a client to think about what their definition of success is, but also then to think about where that definition is coming from. If you define success only as a tenure track job, I would probably call bull on almost everybody, that they can't look at other people and say, "Yes, that person is successful," whether or not they're an academic. And so to get to the root of defining what is success, it's not necessarily having X job, but maybe it's accomplishing these things in my life. And so to always be able to kind of pull back and say, "I thought I was going to take this particular highway to get there, and it doesn't seem to be working out. What are some alternate routes that I could take to still accomplish that level of success?" But still also then say, "Is that still my definition of success?"

S. Sheinfeld: So these things are negotiable and they change and they should as we learn more and get older, dare I say. They change, and so it's okay to redefine what your definition of success is, but if you're going in with other people's definition or the academy, whatever that means, the academy's definition of success, there's a pretty good chance you're going to be unhappy because you're not living your life. You're living your life according to what something else has defined as success.

Mike Altman: Yeah. I think to go back to the thing you said earlier about people who don't have community, I look and think about how privileged I was when I was in grad school to have a lot of friends who weren't in grad school-

S. Sheinfeld: Oh, yes.

Mike Altman: ... who were roughly my age, but they were in their first job or middle management at a firm or something like that. And so it was a chance to see that

like, "Oh, wow. Success looks a lot different from my friend in marketing or my friend who works for a startup." Right? That allows you to see that there are these expectations. For me at least, that was huge to see that the expectations of success are not just the monolithic lens of the academy of-

S. Sheinfeld: Yes.

Mike Altman: ... getting your dissertation published and getting a tenure track job and that-

S. Sheinfeld: Yes.

Mike Altman: Yeah, I think the community thing, not only as a support structure but just as a vision of the world is a lot bigger-

S. Sheinfeld: Yes.

Mike Altman: ... than what you may see around you.

S. Sheinfeld: Yes.

Mike Altman: It's huge.

S. Sheinfeld: It's easy to lose sight of that in the academy, especially in our disciplines. We're on social media. You're around people in a lot of ways that do the same thing, broadly speaking at least, that you do. You go to the conferences where everybody does the same things, broadly speaking, that you do. The debates you're engaged in in general are around your discipline and you forget that there's a whole world out there that thinks that what we do in general is relatively unimportant. That doesn't mean that it is or isn't, but it's important to remember that we are a very small subset of a small subset in a lot of ways.

Mike Altman: Yeah, and I think ... And not to toot our own horn, but it's our podcast so I will. Things we've tried to do with our new Master's program is bring people in from outside the academy early on so that, yes, we have ... Most of our students come in knowing what they're going to do there. "I want to go on and do a PhD or I don't."

S. Sheinfeld: Right.

Mike Altman: And we try to prepare them accordingly, but we also make the people who are dead set on a PhD listen to the local person who works for [al 00:19:04].com, the AL media group and hear what they have to say and listen to the people that we can bring in so that they at least see that yes, go forward with this plan that you have right now that you formulated one year out of undergrad or two years out of undergrad.

S. Sheinfeld: Right.

Mike Altman: But at the same time, no, it's not the only path. And I think that's been, that's something I wish I had had honestly. Yeah.

S. Sheinfeld: Yeah.

Mike Altman: So I don't want to keep you too long, but thank you so much for doing this. Where can people find you? I know I saw you ... I do want to plug the blog on your website, shaynasheinfeld.com.

S. Sheinfeld: That's right.

Mike Altman: The blog, I thought, has some great posts on it-

S. Sheinfeld: Thank you.

Mike Altman: ... that were worth ... I would ... Master's ... I know we have a lot of PhD students who listen to this kind of thing that would come in to you, but where else can people find you?

S. Sheinfeld: Yeah, so I'm on social media. I have my website, shaynasheinfeld.com. I'm on Twitter @ShaynaSheinfeld. I have a couple of Facebook sites, which again you can search for Shayna Sheinfeld and find me there. Academics don't really use LinkedIn, but there is something to be said for learning how, and I'm on LinkedIn as well.

Mike Altman: We had a career workshop yesterday where one of our alumni, undergrad alumni who comes back and does work for ... Alumni and [MA 00:20:32] student, BA's and MA students. And I asked somebody, "Well what did you talk about?" She said, "A lot about LinkedIn."

S. Sheinfeld: Yes, yes, yes.

Mike Altman: So there you go. Thank you so much, Shayna. This is great. I really appreciate it.

S. Sheinfeld: Yeah. Thank you for having me.

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