



FROM NUGENT HALL

by President John Garvey

On a Career Path, *Surprises* Can Be Part of the Plan

When I dropped out of graduate school, my plan was to get a job on a whaling ship. I was on a Melville kick at the time, and a whaling job seemed just the thing for a vocationally adrift 22-year-old. But I couldn't get one. Commercial whaling (fortunately) had been on the decline for years in the United States. In retrospect, it was providential. At the time, it seemed just another failed plan.

When I graduated from the University of Notre Dame, I enrolled at Harvard Divinity School. The plan was to get a master's in theological studies and then a Ph.D. in political theory. The trouble was, I had no idea what to study at Harvard. As an undergraduate I was part of a program that waived major requirements. So I took courses with the best teachers I could find in art and math, French and philosophy, and any other discipline that interested me. I didn't know how to narrow my focus when I got to graduate school. I lasted a semester.

I got a job as a cowboy on a small cattle ranch in Montana. Most of the ranch hands were people the rancher had bailed out of jail Monday morning after a weekend of drinking. My advantages were that I was sober and law abiding. My disadvantages were that I didn't know what I was doing and I was afraid of cows.

I learned quickly that I wasn't a good cowboy — and that I wanted an indoor job. I enrolled at Harvard Law School that fall. I did better there than I had as a cowboy, and began to think I might teach. So I followed the path that most law professors do. I got a job clerking for Judge Irving Kaufman, the chief judge for the Second Circuit Court of Appeals in New York. Then I worked for a year in San Francisco at a big firm, Morrison & Foerster.

In 1976 my wife, Jeanne, and I both went to work at the University of Kentucky — she in business affairs, I in the law school. We owned a house in Lexington for 18 years. Four of our five children were born there. We left a few times: once for a few years while I worked as an Assistant to the Solicitor General in Washington, once for a year at the University of Michigan. But Lexington was home.

Then we got a call from Notre Dame. Our oldest children were coming up on college, and we wanted them to be able to go to a Catholic college. So we left Lexington for South Bend. I taught at Notre Dame Law School for five years. Three of our children went to college there. Then Boston College offered me the position as dean at their law school.

That was a hard decision to make. I was happy teaching and had little experience as an administrator. In fact, the only experience I had as a boss happened one summer during college, when I was a garbage truck driver responsible for four men working on my route. But I thought that building a strong Catholic law school would be worth doing. And it was. We were at BC for 11 years. Four of our children got married while we were there. Our two youngest went to college there.

Then in March of 2010 I got a call from Archbishop Vigneron, chairman of the Board of Trustees at The Catholic University of America. He asked if I would meet with the presidential search committee, and I agreed, more as a matter of courtesy than anything else. But when I started reading up on the University I fell in love with it. By the time the board finally made their decision, I really wanted the job. After five years here, CUA feels like home.

Over the course of my career I have learned how to brand a calf and write a legal brief, craft a course syllabus and plan a university budget. And I've learned to never treat an unexpected turn of events as just a failed plan. My wide-ranging studies as an undergraduate did not prepare me for focused graduate studies. But now, it's my job to care about the artists and mathematicians, the scientists and philosophers who are all part of our University community. That broad base of study is really useful to me now.

At the beginning of your career, you can't see this. You set out unsure of where you're going. But when you look back, it all seems to lead to where you are.