

“I’M LIVING MY BEST LIFE”

on the Joys and Realities of Academic Life

In an age when many educators are disillusioned by the mounting pressures of academia and increasingly lured by the promise of the private sector, Professor Jonathan Jansen offers a refreshingly different perspective. In a wide-ranging conversation on the podcast *BTH with Dr Q*, Jansen, one of South Africa’s most respected scholars spoke with trademark candour and warmth about his career, the enduring value of education, and the deeper purpose that sustains his life’s work.

“I’m very happy in what I do,” he said with a smile. “They pay me too much,” he added, laughing, before quickly clarifying that it’s not the salary that motivates him. “Whether it’s teaching high school in the morning, doing university research in the afternoon, or working with communities at night, I absolutely love it. I’m living my best life.” a worry-free travel experience.

Now in its fourth season, *BTH with Dr Q* continues to offer thoughtful conversations on education, leadership, and public life. This episode dives into the state of South Africa’s education sector, but also explores something more personal and profound: the meaning of academic work, and why so many walk away from it.

“You don’t often hear academics say they love what they do,” observed host Dr. Q, known for his probing yet empathetic interview style. “In fact, many will tell you they’re already planning an exit, three to five years, and they’re off to industry.” But not Jansen.



For him, teaching and research are more than jobs, they are vocations. “The thing about academia is, you must love it,” he explained. “This work asks for more than time; it asks for heart, for purpose, and for a willingness to serve.” When asked why so many of his colleagues are opting out, Jansen acknowledged the challenges but challenged the narrative that academia is inherently toxic. “No, I don’t think it’s toxic,” he said. “But it’s not for everyone. If you’re not passionate about learning, if you’re not driven by the desire to contribute to knowledge or uplift others, it will feel like a grind.”

His words strike a powerful chord in a country where the education system remains fraught with inequities—underfunded schools, overstretched teachers, and stark disparities in access and outcomes. Yet Jansen remains undeterred, animated by the possibilities of change and the power of education to transform lives. A former university vice-chancellor,

prolific author, and widely admired public intellectual, Jansen has long championed reform in South African education. But today, his focus has returned to the essentials: teaching in schools, mentoring students, conducting research, and engaging communities.

“I love working with students at every level,” he said. “There’s something deeply moving about watching someone grasp an idea for the first time. That moment of clarity, that’s what keeps me going.”

His commitment extends beyond the lecture hall. In the evenings, Jansen is often found speaking at community forums, meeting with parents, or addressing education stakeholders in townships and rural areas. This seamless blend of academic rigour and grassroots engagement makes him a rare presence in South African higher education, equally at home behind a university podium or in a crowded community centre.

The conversation also touched on a subject close to Jansen’s heart: the broader social role of academics. “Our responsibility is not just to publish papers,” he said. “Knowledge must serve people. It should empower, challenge, and uplift.”

It’s a philosophy that runs through all his work, a quiet rebellion against the isolation and metric-driven culture creeping into universities worldwide. Where others retreat into silos, chasing

citations and promotions, Jansen models a more human approach: rooted in service, sustained by passion, and propelled by a genuine love of learning.

As the interview drew to a close, Dr. Q thanked him for his time, his insight, and above all, his energy. “It’s rare to hear someone speak so joyfully about their work,” he noted. Jansen’s reply was simple, but revealing: “I’m just grateful I get to do this every day.”

Jansen challenged the increasingly common narrative of academic burnout and institutional dysfunction, suggesting instead that the core of academic life still holds tremendous value if approached with the right mindset.

TEN KEY LESSONS LEARNT FROM THE CONVERSATION:

1. Passion is Non-Negotiable in Academia

“If you’re not passionate about education,” Jansen warned, “the work can feel like a grind.” Teaching and research require emotional investment and genuine curiosity. Without that, burnout is almost inevitable.

2. Money Isn’t the Reward; Impact Is

Jansen, half-jokingly, noted that he gets “paid too much,” but quickly emphasized that financial compensation pales in comparison to the joy of seeing students thrive and communities empowered.

3. Academia Is Not Toxic; It’s Demanding

Pushing back against common critiques, Jansen insisted the environment isn’t inherently toxic. “It’s not for everyone,” he admitted. “But for those who care deeply, it can be deeply fulfilling.”

4. Teaching Is a Form of Public Service

Whether in a high school classroom or a university lecture hall, Jansen views education as a civic duty, a way to build a better society by investing in the next generation.



5. Academics Should Be Public Intellectuals

For Jansen, publishing papers isn’t enough. Scholars have a responsibility to engage with the public, translate complex ideas, and contribute to national conversations.

6. You Can Thrive at Every Career Stage

Far from slowing down, Jansen embraces a dynamic, multi-faceted routine: teaching, mentoring, researching, and speaking. “Every day is different, and every moment matters,” he said.

7. Community Engagement Is Essential

“Knowledge must serve people,” Jansen said, stressing the importance of stepping beyond campus walls to connect with those most affected by educational policy and inequality.

8. Inspiration Is Contagious

Jansen believes one of a teacher’s greatest powers is the ability to inspire. “Seeing someone’s eyes light up when they understand something, that’s what keeps me going.”

9. Longevity in Academia Requires Adaptability

Unlike many who leave the academy after a few years, Jansen’s longevity is built on reinvention, flexibility, and sustained curiosity.

10. You Can Love What You Do and Say It Out Loud

In a time when dissatisfaction can seem fashionable, Jansen’s declaration “I’m living my best life,” is both bold and refreshing. It’s a reminder that fulfillment isn’t naive; it’s possible.

