

In his own words: "For me, this is the best job in the country. I get paid to have fascinating conversations with some of Canada's biggest risk-takers."

Ali Velshi knows bad career advice when he hears it. The worst bit he ever received ran along the lines of, "Don't give up the job you've got. Others are waiting in line." His response? "Let them have it!"

Clinging is not Ali's style, which explains how he has carved out an incredibly diverse career in journalism in the mere eight years since he graduated from Queen's. Now an anchor and correspondent for *CNN Money*, he packs a résumé bulging with coveted abbreviations — CBS, CTV, CityTV, ROBTV. But in real life, that string of letters translates into a combination of hard work, flexibility and pure serendipity.

"Some jobs came about through timing, but I probably sent out about 4,000 résumés!" laughs Ali, who was born in Nairobi and who came to Canada at the age of one. "I'm glad I took — and still take — many left turns. I'm glad I wasn't afraid to leave things behind."

A major left turn occurred at Queen's, where he veered from a planned Commerce degree into studying religion. Bent on getting a liberal arts education, he was drawn both to the subject and to the inter-disciplinary nature of the Religious Studies degree, which allowed him to follow up interests in history and

politics. "That degree is a real source of pride for me. It stops people cold when I tell them about it, given the business I'm in now. It goes to show that you can follow the road less travelled and still end up where you intended to be."

Ali credits Queen's with giving him a good fix on contemporary social issues. Work in student government — he took a year out of his degree to work as the AMS Campus Activities Commissioner — and for *The Journal* opened his eyes to the world beyond campus. "There was lots of student activism and debate around issues of political correctness and events such as the 'NO means NO' campaign. It was an exciting time. Working as a reporter for *The Journal*, which was a serious newspaper, was the seed for my becoming a journalist."

Fired up by his work on the newspaper, Ali hunted for a job in print journalism upon graduation, but when nothing materialized he applied for — and was accepted into — the Master's degree program in journalism at Columbia. Around that time, CNN suddenly called him to Washington for a summer internship on the television program *Crossfire*. "CNN feels like a fluke. They were looking for Canadian interns and somehow got my name — I guess from one of the thousands of résumés I sent out. I was junior staff so I did everything — writing, research, phone calls, mail. It was a small bureau and I actually had a lot of input." Unbelievably, CBS came knocking next, offering him similar work in the Paris

bureau of *Sixty Minutes*. He deferred his graduate degree for the yearlong job. (He deferred again when he returned to Canada; eventually, he opted not to take the degree.) It was a “terrific experience,” but he never felt he had entered “the strong editorial loop” that comes with covering stories in depth. When a CBS hiring freeze forced him back to Canada in 1994, the cachet of the CNN and CBS jobs landed him work with CTV’s *Canada AM*.

“Then I finally felt like a journalist,” he recalls. “We were doing stories about Rwanda, Haiti, Northern Ireland, Bosnia. The public’s appetite for foreign news was hot back then.” Then, CBS beckoned him to New York, but a colleague persuaded him to sign on as a reporter for CFTO News, the largest local TV station in Canada. “It’s ironic. After struggling to get back to CBS I turned it down. But I saw a chance to be on-air — that was the main driver for me.”

The next few years brought more left turns, including a yearlong fellowship to the U.S. Congress (aiming at political journalism), a stint at CTV as a senior field producer, and in 1997/98, a self-imposed sabbatical in South Africa, where he worked in property development with his family. “I needed a new vantage point, but I discovered that journalism was, in fact, what I really wanted to do with my life.”

Returning to Toronto, he signed on as business news anchor for CityTV. “To some people it looked like a step backwards,” he admits. “I was doing local news at a less-watched TV station

with a younger demographic. But you have to think outside the box. I ended up honing my on-air skills and vastly improving my business knowledge. I realized that I enjoyed covering business. You’re telling stories of the human spirit, of people putting money where their dreams are.”

Ali jumped to ROBTV when it was launched in 1999, winding up as host of Canada’s only prime-time business news hour. In September 2001, he headed to New York to join *CNN Money* as an anchor and correspondent, and as the host of prime-time show focusing on retail investing and consumer finance. He believes unorthodox thinking — navigating all those left turns — helped him land these plum jobs in business journalism.

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“When I left university I wasn’t thinking, ‘This is my training, so where can I apply it?’ Instead I asked myself, ‘What do I want to do?’ You need to think broadly about career possibilities. If you don’t

have a professional degree, you’re probably going to bounce around in the work world, so you’d better be flexible. Which leads me to the best piece of advice I ever got — that which doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.”

His only regret is not pushing ahead academically, but he plans to chip away at an on-line law degree over the next few years. And he plans to master one skill that has persistently eluded him — pacing his life. “I’ve moved very quickly in my career. Now I want to slow down and find time for my family and friends.” ❖

