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BANISHMENT IN ACADEME

Introduction

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Mine has been a career where, at once, I have been associated with the most and the least privileged in our culture. As a professor, I enjoy a life of freedom and fulfillment. As a professor of mental retardation, I have suffered with those who are enchained and without hope. And of course, my experiences in academe have influenced how I think about the abused and the unwanted, while my experiences with the mentally retarded and other modern pariahs inform me how to think about my life as a professor. If there is an optimistic side to my work in the field of mental retardation, it may obtain from my work in the University. But there is a dark side to one's life, and mine is not mitigated by the suffering that my work forces me to notice. That's probably one reason why I can now write about retirement as prelude to death rather than to a new life, as banishment rather than as reward.

While today, capital punishment is defined as punishment by death, and while today it is literally defined as decapitation, the highest punishment meted out in ancient Greece was not death but banishment. Of course, if one had baggage packed and was planning to leave the community on his own volition, what would have been the capital - the top - offense to another is a free chariot ride out of town to the expatriate. And in this time there are people who want to retire from the factory, or the school, or the business, or whatever, or wherever. This paper does not

speak to their interests or needs. Here, I address only the problems faced by academics who suffer retirement as most of us would suffer banishment from family, church, or country. I will also try to make a case for the professor as someone who deserves special status with regard to retirement.

A Case for Special Status

Every individual and virtually every group, not only believes that he or she or the group deserves special status, but everyone is able to make a case for such treatment. This claim shouldn't surprise anyone. Our religious and humanistic traditions have taught us about the value of each human life and, thus, we are conditioned to regard ourselves, our loved ones, and our identities as deserving as something more than what the Constitution guarantees and even more than what "the good life" promises. In fact, few individuals and even fewer groups enjoy both legal and cultural special status. However, while not even the President of the United States is above the law, he enjoys privileges which other people are denied. And while not lengthy, the special status list does not stop at the White House, or the Supreme Court, or the millionaire's mansion. Priests and Rabbis enjoy special status. Not only do they receive complimentary memberships to the local Catholic or Jewish country clubs, but ordinary restrictions such as might be imposed by Affirmative Action regulations do not apply when considering an appointment to the clergy. Indeed, a Rabbi must be Jewish and a Priest must be Catholic, and it is perfectly legal to hang out a sign when advertising for such positions reminding applicants that no Presbyterians need apply.

Professors deserve special status. Affirmative Action regulations can't be ignored relative to race or religion when recruiting a professor, but the employment sign loudly implies, if not directly says, that people

with ordinary mentalities need not apply. Furthermore, the anomalous and special status of the professor is accounted for in the very manner in which the professor is appointed and by the nature of the conditions of such an appointment. For example, to preserve the self-interests of the university, the professor is hired not from among the most distinguished graduates of that university, but from among those individuals who have been trained elsewhere. And also to enhance and preserve the importance of a particular university, its professors are appointed not merely to serve that university, not merely to serve the nation, not even to serve the general culture, but mainly to devote themselves to their scholarly fields. And thus, professors are less important to any particular university or country than they are to this world and the future society. We must remember that the ancient Greek scholars knew more about mathematics than chariot races, and ancient Egyptian scholars knew more about architecture than about camels, so we must expect modern American professors to know more about the consequences of a leaking glacier than a leaking faucet.

And so, as for everyone else, a case can be made for the special status of professors, but a case can be made for professors by people who aren't professors. Indeed, the case can be made by society in general that, where the world used to be ruled by kings and princes, today it may be ruled by the inheritors of our wisdom and the creators of new knowledge, the professors. However, where once the kings and princes ruled absolutely and unconditionally over their people, professors only rule themselves and their scholarship. And where kings and princes ruled with weapons which killed, professors rule with tools which transcribe and transmit understanding. And where kings and princes once played adult war games which now children play, professors engage themselves

in what still are the major activities of children during much of their early and adolescent years: reading, writing, talking, arguing, and unraveling puzzles for credit as well as for their own sake. And so, while the ancient kings and princes constituted themselves to do mischief, equally autonomous and universally as powerful professors have organized themselves to do good. Certainly, mine can be viewed as a romantic, naive and over-optimistic view of the professor. Be that as it may, the argument may still hold that this "king-professor" who, in a most serious and dedicated manner engages in childlike activities, has a special purpose and an unusual influence on society. Of course, the case can also be made that today's professors serve the special role not of kings but of court fools, individuals whose duty is to speak the truth. So long as "fools" and professors continue to speak the truth they will be supported, protected and valued, but they must not expect to be taken seriously. And if they ever lie, it is a capital offense - banishment. And the analogy can be further strengthened when the retirement issue is examined. Whoever heard of a court fool retiring; court foolery, like professorship, is a way of life. So is being a king, unless he is a liar or a fool, and then he would be dealt with. But on age alone, he's safe. And so should be the professor.

Economics is the real issue behind academic retirement policies, but it is too embarrassing to discuss publicly. It is also dangerous, because unrequited economic affairs lead to unionization, votes of no confidence, and other punishments which faculty and administration inflict upon each other. Consequently, at retirement professors are given a party, sometimes an honorary degree, virtually always the title, "Emeritus", and are enjoined to enjoy the Golden Years. And once the party is over and the advice given, those of us who remain in the academy convince ourselves that the

retiree will be happier in retirement. And indeed, some professors are happier once retired. But that is not the point. The slaves weren't freed in order to make them happier, but because we believe that Man should be free. And of course, freeing slaves is not the same kind of a problem as retiring professors. In the one case, the chains were cut to let the people go, and in the other case free people are banished.

The word "retirement" has generated so much confusion that we now suffer with foolish disagreements and, indeed, we hold national debates about when a person must be stopped from working. This environment we love to dream about, this community of scholars, can't make up its mind what the word, "retirement", means and what we should want it to mean. The university is, of course, a business. But in another sense, it is a community, the opposite of a business. Hence, the equivocation is apparent anywhere retirement is discussed or dealt with. There has been an attempt to fashion retirement policy on the basis of this sense of community. It's spoken of as a "benefit", and professors are "elevated" to the rank of Emeritus. However, the realities of retirement are determined by the business end of the university. It's not an accident that at the university, as elsewhere, retirement age is set approximately at a few years beyond the life expectancy limit. The recent debate over changing the mandatory retirement age was carried out primarily in terms of cost and secondarily in terms of the job market for young Ph.D.s. Indeed, there is much to be learned from The University of Chicago Provost's recent comment that Congress's decision to defer the mandatory retirement age to 70 is "...going to turn every school into more of a geriatric ward, and that is not good for higher education." (Time, Jan. 15, 1979, p. 39) Provost Johnson said this in the context of a general report decrying the fiscal plight of universities or, as he also said, "Our costs go up, and

our endowment goes down. It's a vicious crossfire, and I don't see an end to it." (p. 38) One notices that during discussions today concerning the relative merits of the nation's new retirement policies, the value of old professors, what they deserve, what may be owed them out of respect or responsibility are, at best, minor considerations. The idea of a university community and the "benefit" of "Emeritus" rank is not what is being debated.

But it isn't enough just to notice this actuarial preoccupation as an estrangement from better thinking. It is not merely a verbal equivocation that constitutes this problem, but a real contradiction between the values of community and the realities of business. That is, we can't think and act purely on the basis of the human values and collegial traditions of the university community without putting the university business out of business. There simply isn't enough money around to both provide freedom and generous support to the professors we have as well as opportunities for young scholars to join the community on attractive salaries. For example, in the same Time article mentioned above, Johnson worries that new retirement policies will prevent his university from hiring one hundred new assistant professors during the next 5 years. His observation brings to light one of the myths that has been important to us lately, but which is crumbling alarmingly in many areas of our society: the myth of unlimited resources. If we try to base our community on providing everything to everybody, we will fail. On the other hand, one hopes that we don't act purely on the logic of business realities and cut off people from their lives in order to save money. However difficult we sometimes think the times are, they simply aren't difficult enough to justify leaving our old people on the ice to freeze. Neither do the old deserve such maltreatment nor are our young Ph.D.s in such bad straits that we should resort to a brutal triage for their sake.

One would like to think that the reason our retirement practices aren't more humane and more practical than they are is that we haven't articulated the essential conflict between business and community, and because we haven't yet become used to living with finite resources. Perhaps, if we keep these things in mind, we can design a better way to live our whole lives together without exceeding our means.

Overload and Mortality

Like consumption, being on retirement or being on overload have different meanings. Like consumption, the concepts of retirement and overload can mean life or death. The disease causes wasting from within. The antidote is fuel from without. Any way we examine it, the idea of consumption can have at least two meanings: energizing or depleting, taking in or wasting away, using to maintain health or using up and destroying health. The ideas of retirement and overload can also have at least two meanings: opportunity or ending, searching for new ways to live or waiting for death, contributing more or taking more.

There is something fishy going on in the university. There is one group of people who are running around more than is good for them or their students. There is another group of people who may also be running around more than is good for them, but who will soon be forced to not only slow down but stop altogether. For 30 or 40 years, professors are encouraged to be on a treadmill, to do more and more and, if that is not enough, to do more than what is one's full time load, to be as they say on "overload." Then suddenly, at age 65, or 70, or whatever age, but at some fixed date, the university (or the insurance company, or the union, or someone, or some group) demands that all the official work stop. It is time to retire. So, at the end of that academic year, goodbyes are said to colleagues and

students, belongings are cleared out, maybe a luncheon is held, the person leaves, and the desk is dusted for its next occupant. That is it!

The retirement process is too abrupt. However, because the abruptness is expected, there is the long waiting period for the separation date. But it is more a dreaded wait than a time of eager anticipation. The last year or so can be for some people more of a wait for death than for freedom. In the university -- in the place where logic presumably rules and humanism is sometimes remembered -- we must formulate a different sense of retirement. But to do that, we must also formulate a different understanding of overload. The idea of overload is inconsistent with the idea of a tenured full time professor. And in exactly the same manner, the idea of retirement is also inconsistent.

When the professor is awarded tenure, the agreement is not only that he or she may remain at the university until retirement, but that the person's full professional life is wedded to the university. Of course, one leaves the community at various times and for various reasons: for extended periods such as when on sabbatical, to give a lecture, to examine some aspect of the field, to share one's knowledge with those outside of the community, perhaps to take a vacation. But the unwritten rule has always been, or at least should have always been that all of one's time spent in the community and all of one's efforts on behalf of the community comprise the best one can do as a professor and, thus, by definition represents a full load. That is exactly why there is a rather substantial range of efforts and contributions that professors make to their university, those differences not in any way explained by the fact that one is part time, another is full time, and the third is full time on overload.

The idea of overload for tenured full time professors is inimical to the very idea of professor. The idea of conventional retirement is inimical

to the concept of professor. That is why, when professors stop working on a regular basis, we award them the title, "Emeritus." Professors don't stop being professors simply because their paychecks are different and their teaching loads are different and, consequently, we should stop thinking about professors the way virtually all other industries in the United States think about their employees. Professors are not employees of the university. Of course they are employees, but the fact that they are officers of instruction and responsible not only to the university but to their professions and to their scholarship puts them in a situation where they should never "retire", where they should be encouraged to continue to work for as long as they want to work, which should be forever.

One is tempted to either recommend that the retirement age be increased or that it be decreased in some gradual manner, thus permitting a natural movement from full time to less time. I resist those and other suggestions to deal with the inadequacy of the current system. If we want to relieve ourselves of the most horrible aspect of retirement, waiting for death, then we should not only tamper with the retirement age; we must also deal with the years before. A faculty member is responsible to his university, his discipline or profession, his community, and to himself. But all people are responsible to various constituencies! What makes the faculty member different, is that, after "retirement", he continues responsibility not only to family, community, and self but also to his scholarship. Retiring should not change what the professor stands for. That is how a professor's retirement is different from someone who works at the factory or someone who sells automobiles. A professor is a professor from the initial appointment until the final decree. Hence, a proposal.

Zero-based Ranking and Other Radical Notions

The way the economy is going, most people do not want to retire from university faculty positions, and the rest can't afford to retire. There are some very good reasons for their reluctance:

1. For most of us, retirement means a severe cut in income. After a lifetime of steadily increasing salary, a cut is very hard to accept, especially because a cut is so abrupt. Such activities as expensive travel, which becomes possible with the freedom of retirement, may become impossible because of the penuriousness of the individual's new status.

2. People want to work. While for some part-time teaching may continue to be available, it is thin gruel to a person who once carried a full load. And of course, teaching is only a part of a professor's work. The other part -- the collegueship, the involvement -- is inaccessible to most retired professors.

3. One's sense of mission is mitigated if not cancelled entirely upon retirement. Professors who feel that their work is important must be reluctant to submit to a change of status which means, in clear effect, that it is not important for their work to be continued. And this can lead one to a further inference that, maybe, it never was important, thus questioning not only the meaning of the retired part of one's life but also the meaning of one's whole life.

4. People who have been professors their whole working lives may have great difficulty in contemplating or assuming new roles. Even if retirement were attractive in every other way, the sheer magnitude of its effect on self-concept is apt to be unattractive, to say the least. This may not sound very different from the walls of mechanics and board chairmen, but it is; professors have been taught to spend their lives at professing -- at least most good ones have. For many academics, there is no other life, no

inviting alternative to the academy.

5. The most depressing aspect of retirement is the prospect of oblivion, excommunication, banishment from the society of a lifetime. To retire is to enter a state of figurative death -- capital punishment -- and it is to do so at a time when the literal thing is already chillingly imminent. In a way, academics reject retirement for the reasons all people have in recoiling from enforced retirement: Loss of money, loss of work, loss of one's sense of importance, loss of one's identity. But under that dark euphemism, "Emeritus", banishing the professor is even more thorough. The retired professor is excluded from company, conversation, consultation -- from what to many were their hobbies and recreation as well as their work, their scholarship. If academic retirement had been described to the ancient Greeks, they would have recognized it as punishment worse than death.

I don't have a Utopia up my sleeve. Some of the signs alerting one to the approaching end are inevitably unhappy. At the least, one's eventual death cannot be worked out of the scheme of any community. Nevertheless, there is too much bitterness in retirement that stems primarily from the selfishness and short-sightedness of those who don't yet face it. Why can't things be worked out so that tenure will not only signify permanent appointment until retirement, but permanent affiliation beyond any fixed date or change of responsibilities? Why can't things be worked out so that the professor will know from the beginning that, at certain mutually agreed upon times, his responsibilities will change and, also, his earnings will change. With such a system, no professor will actually retire but, because of the needs of the institution or personal needs of the individual, responsibilities would be altered and compensation would be adjusted. I would like to see such an idea tried out. It might serve to diminish not only the suddenness but the frequency with which older people are banished from the academic

community. It would also remind us that the academic enterprise is built not only on wisdom but on community, and that banishment destroys a sense of community, not only for those who are banished but for those who remain to be banished later. It might also teach us to revere the old, not only because they made it through the many storms of life, not only because we too might someday be old, but also because the old as well as the young can teach us and serve as models.

Big government has taught the university business experts about the advantages of zero-based budgeting. Why not zero-based academic ranking? It would work something like the way budgets are constructed from the ground up and without any unexamined assumptions, but this system would rank professors rather than assign resources. So when a professor's official time for retirement comes about, he could choose to have his case evaluated objectively, on the wright of his teaching and scholarship. Thus, if he doesn't want to retire, or if he doesn't want to reduce his load, or if he is undecided about these matters and wants objective examination of his credentials, he could elect to present himself to a university committee in the same way a young assistant professor presents his credentials for promotion to associate professor. If in the judgment of that committee the professor should be continued in rank, or at a reduced rank, and on full load, or at a reduced load, or no load, it will make such a recommendation to the proper university authorities. And just as with disappointed assistant professors who are denied promotion or tenure, the older professor should also be allowed to have his case reexamined if he feels he has been unjustly judged. Economics and politics aside, such a system would offer opportunities for still-capable professors to continue on for as long as they are deemed capable, irrespective of their age and irrespective of the urge to clear out the old so that the young could find a place for themselves.

What I have called for is not only a change in the retirement regulations of the university but also a warning that the whole idea of retirement as expressed in 20th Century America leaves a lot to be desired. One reason there are so many of us scrambling and clawing to get ahead and working ourselves to death, is because we don't think about spending our lives any differently. And the reason we don't think about getting off the treadmill is because, to so many of us, the treadmill represents life itself, and getting off is to die. Nobody needs to retire, though it is possible that society will continue to need to reduce a person's income. It is also possible that some people will want to slow down or get off the treadmill or change their ways. Today, retirement is connected to death, and that is its own disease. And today, overload -- doing "too much" -- is connected to life, and that too is its own disease. I don't think there is a cure for these diseases, but there is a prevention. The prevention is in learning how to live one's entire life and in being supported by one's community to plan that life so that there will always be a place for you, a need for your contribution, and time for continuous self-development.

As I said earlier, consumption has two meanings, one related to nourishment and sustenance and the other related to waste and disease. Change implies the possibilities that one's life can be even better, that there are things to do, that one's life can go forward. Too often, retirement not only implies but demands withdrawal, waiting, alienation, and the certain end. Loaded up with a lot of very smart people, the university should be able to figure out a better way to reduce salaries and reassign older professors than by banishing them when they reach the "golden years." Whoever coined that term was either a foolish old man or a young know-it-all. There is nothing golden about a time in your life when you are unwanted and made to feel useless.