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Professor STORIES

by **Burton Blatt, EdD**

ON BEING TOO SMART

When are rules of the academy set aside? Of course, there is widespread agreement that one shouldn't be appointed any sort of professor without having earned the highest degree in his or her discipline—usually the PhD, or the EdD, or some D. But what's the principal behind the rule? Probably the compelling argument—the principle—which gives permanence to the "highest degree rule" is the belief that a professor must strive to eventually know more than anyone else about his discipline. And the assumption is that the highest degree offered in a field should be the minimal requirement for entrance to a lifetime of privileged study. And though people from time to time will argue about such and such a degree requirement, or what the major and minor indicators are that the professor is making progress in his or her scholarship, most everyone in the academy not only lives with the requirement but also endorses it. But should the rules always be applied? Can there be an individual whose presence would not only violate the rules but at the same time enhance the principle?

There was once a young man who exhibited such unusual capability in high school that he was awarded a full scholarship to a good university. The award was very important to him and his family because he was a poor boy; although his parents revered learning and had indeed themselves been well-educated in the old country, there would have been no possibility for him to attend a good school without such aid. The four years passed quickly, and our friend graduated with high honors and a degree in mathematics and physics. By this time he was keenly interested in going on in philosophy, and professors in the department who had him for various courses endorsed his application for a graduate fellowship. Indeed, the professors were overjoyed that this young man had decided to concentrate in *their* area.

I don't know all that happened during the subsequent year or two, but I did learn that while our friend demonstrated great potential in philosophy, he didn't complete his degree. Eventually he drifted away from the university to work at one type of job or another that would give him some time to think and read and be with the people whose company he enjoyed. The years passed by even more swiftly than his college years, so swiftly that, by the time he felt he was now ready to devote himself fully to philosophy, he was nearing middle age.

He went to see his former professors at the university, and to his surprise he found most of them still there. Even more surprisingly, he found that each of them had little difficulty recalling his presence among them years earlier. What they didn't know was that during the decade he had been away, he had read so much in philosophy that possibly no professor in the department had read more, even the old-timers who would soon be retiring. And what they didn't know was that during the years he'd been away, he had thought through some of the most interesting problems that confront philosophers. What they also didn't know was that, while he was not a student of philosophy at the university, he was indeed a student of philosophy, and that he was now in every respect a philosopher. After a good deal of talk, thought, and reacquaintance-ship, members of the department offered this man a doctoral fellowship, one that would lead to a PhD if he toed the mark and didn't stray again. Our friend accepted the fellowship, principally because he had nothing better to accept. He went to classes; in some he shone brilliantly and in others he withdrew, either by failing to show up or by refusing to turn in work that was child's play to him.

In spite of his uneven record, the fellowship was renewed for a second year because everyone—even those professors from whose classes he escaped—recognized his extraordinary mind and knowledge. In fact, each morning he would enter his tiny cubicle, which the department euphemistically called a student office, make some coffee, and sit down at his desk to read or write something. But he never got very far because there would soon appear a professor or a student wanting him

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to help figure out an idea, or solve a problem, or read a paper. Sometimes there would be a line, a genuine line of people, waiting to see and talk to this man. He was respected everywhere in the department and outside of it too by those who knew him.

But the combination of this man's disdain for the trivial and the constant intrusions on his time (which he enjoyed) left him little room for the big job, the dissertation. The combination of incomplete courses and indecisive dissertation plans made for a negative student picture. Our friend was not making progress toward the PhD.

In spite of what so many people knew about this man, people who surely knew better drummed him out of the department. In spite of their knowledge that he was more capable than they, everyone who mattered finally had to agree that, even in a great university, someone could be too smart for his own good. ●

THE SCHOLARLY VOCATION

Having lived much of her life in the past, Barbara Swords was a person born before her time. She had strange ideas, stranger habits, and the strangest reasons for them. She refused to attend any of the College's athletic events because, as she put it, "I have much too much loyalty to the idea on which this college was founded." She insisted on taking attendance at each of her classes because she wanted to know *her* grade for the course. However, she was as equally insistent that neither attendance nor familiarity with the professor would have anything to do with student grades.

When Professor Swords was elected to the Colleges' Promotion Committee, she vowed that service to society would count for something in rewarding professors. However, she made it clear to all concerned that membership on one or

many of the college's various committees counted for nothing. This notion of "service," which she would lecture people about and hector them about if they didn't want to listen to her lectures, was the idea that puzzled her colleagues most, because it was the one idea that she had so firmly embedded in her every thought and act.

Barbara Swords figured out what the Scholarly Vocation was all about—so completely and so clearly that forever after she was never ambiguous about what she needed to do and be. Simply, Professor Swords figured out that the idea of the scholar spending his or her life in unraveling puzzles, with the purpose being to solve them for the sake of the exercise, is all wrong. To be sure, she concluded, scholars engage themselves in uncovering problems and solving them. But their purpose must be to make the world a better place for people. The goal of the scholar is *not* to pursue truth. That's his activity. The goal must be to make the world a better place, and the scholar contributes to that goal best as he does the work he's fitted for, pursuing truth.

Barbara Swords figured out the difference between what the scholar does and why he does it. She will never be forgiven for her brilliant deduction.

ONLY HUMAN BEINGS TELL LIES

Fritz Ritchie, professor of veterinary medicine at the land grant university, would tell his first-year students that veterinarians will never need lie detectors or miracle serums to get the truth from their patients. Animals can't bark or chirp or growl lies. After 42 years in veterinarian medicine, Fritz Ritchie's only unshakable conclusion about the cosmos was that no animal *ever* lies, and every human being sometime or another lies.

The proof: we can't take a picture of a lie. That is, lies require words. Man's great gift, his language, is also his great moral flaw.