

# Professor STORIES

by Burton Blatt, EdD

## THE PRINCE WHO WOULD BE MAN

Among the royalty, the prince becomes king and the princess becomes queen. In the academy, the assistant professor becomes associate professor, then full professor. So it goes. There is a place for each person. There is a rhythm to all events, a time for modesty and a time for ego. Glen Templeton would, if he could, upset the ecology of the university, that precise balance of things and people that keeps it alive and, some dare say, regenerative. Glen Templeton was a permanent associate professor, by choice.

Those outside academe might guess that the greatest insult to the professor is his low salary, mundane responsibilities, and low status in contrast with the orthopedist and the oil millionaire. The uninformed might dredge up any number of invidious comparisons between the academic and people in saner if less civilized occupations. But of all the insults, probably what looms largest is the label and psychological state of "permanent associate professor." Everyone knows that it is the niche of the dishonored, the category that identifies academic demise.

But Glen Templeton *selected* his station in life. Time and

time again he was invited to present his credentials for promotion to professor, and time and time again he declined the invitations with suitable gratitude but even more pronounced modesty. Simple, Glen Templeton did not believe he deserved full professorship. And thus his colleagues would not—could not—argue against that decision. Probably it's the only decision that colleagues are loath to argue about. After all, while a man may not know how bad he is, so the wise man says, he surely knows how good he is—to the last decimal.

It wasn't that Glen Templeton stopped teaching well; he remained a conscientious and well-regarded teacher among his colleagues and a popular one with his students. It wasn't that Glen Templeton stopped writing and publishing; his work appeared regularly in the better refereed journals in his field. But as the saying goes, Glen Templeton didn't devote his energies to teach well or engage his scholarship simply to be promoted. On the contrary, he was one of the few professors, maybe the only one on his campus, who actually lived by the conviction that one didn't do his work to be promoted but was promoted because he did his work. Glen Templeton not only lived by that principle but went one step better. He would be the one to determine whenever, if ever, he was worthy of the designation "full professor."

Professor Templeton retired as associate professor of the classics at age 62. He took what is euphemistically called "early retirement." Why did he do it? At age 62 Glen

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Templeton reluctantly concluded that he wasn't worth the salary he was being paid and that he was standing in the way of another, probably much more deserving, younger professor who, given the opportunity, might bring the classics back to their proper status at the college. Professor Templeton retired early despite what he knew it to mean, going back to the ancient city-state of Athens. He knew that, according to the Athenians, banishment—and what else is retirement?—is psychological death, is much worse than corporal execution. Notwithstanding, this good man knew what he needed to do and went ahead with his self-inflicted banishment.

There are stories and stories written about the prince who would be king, the soldier who would be general, the man who would be God. But we also need stories about the prince who would be man. We need stories about the man who seeks a mortal station, a modest place, a place where one does good because he advertises so little, a place where one does good because he does it for the sake of doing good.

### A HARD SELL

Harold Collier was always selling himself, never willingly short. In another business, even the automobile business, his would have been the hard sell. Being in the academic business, his approach to people and life bordered on the bizarre. For example, if a colleague casually ran into him at the Faculty Club—and most people on campus were more apt to casually run into Harold than to meet him by design—and if the two men hadn't seen each other for months, the first words out of Harold's mouth might well have been about the speech he had just given, the book contract he had just missed being offered, or the consultancy he had just come from or was about to embark on immediately after lunch. There was never a letup in the selling of Harold Collier.

To be sure, there were people on campus who had a certain fascination, if not admiration, for Harold. After all, he was reputed to be one of the wealthier entrepreneurs around. After

all, there weren't many professors (there weren't many businessmen either!) who could clear \$500 a day plus expenses for coordinating a "circus" titled something like "The Collier Educational Supermarket." And while to everyone who knew about Harold's business it was surely a market, and while to most there was an "extravaganza" quality to it, few people took it seriously, except, of course, Harold and those who depended on him for the better things in life.

But Harold Collier wasn't happy, truly and significantly happy. Yes, to the public he appeared to want for nothing except more of the good things in life (and people who want more of the good things in life are either very poor, and will thus never have enough, or very rich, and will thus never have enough). But to his family and few intimates, Harold suffered from low academic self-esteem. Here was a man who could sell himself everywhere except where it mattered most to him, the academy. Here was a man who was considered quite promising 20 years ago, was promoted to associate professor 15 years ago, and if the university now had its way, he would be terminated immediately. Nobody said such nasty things, but everyone knew Harold Collier was not wanted anywhere on campus. And Harold was aware of that fact like none of the others were, because they merely thought it while he felt it.

How do you explain this man's fix? He wasn't evil. He was pleasant enough, if a trifle aggressive and more than a trifle boorish. He wasn't a bad teacher. He published from time to time, and from time to time that which he published was reasonably interesting. His wife and he threw parties where the food was good and the drink in full supply. And while he was on the road much of the time, he wasn't known for missing his classes or neglecting his citizenship responsibilities on campus. He talked too much about money and not enough about learning, but lots and lots of professors don't talk enough about learning, and while they speak differently about it, an awful lot of the time they worry aloud about money.

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How was it that here was a man who could do most things right, but most everything turned out to be wrong? It must be that, like the proverbial bull in the china shop, we in the academy have conjured up the loathsome image of the bull who wants to have one foot in heaven and one foot on earth, who wants one hand for carrying the torch of learning and the other for ringing up the shop's register, who has the intellectual integrity of a press agent and the academic wisdom of an accountant. If that's what is meant by a bull in the academy, Harold Collier was one. And unfortunately, being one is an incurable and terminal academic disease.

## **BUSINESSMEN**

The university does a lot of business. It sells courses, football tickets, food, and books. And if it could, it would admit to the public that, while it gives honorary degrees to the famous, it sells them to the merely rich. But while the university does business, it isn't a business. Of course, not most professors and hardly any administrators remember this distinction. And who could blame us: we speak glibly about cost-benefits; we speak about our deans as middle managers; the admissions director issues optimistic bulletins about predicted "yield"; and indeed, from time to time we even show the public what's up our academic sleeves when we issue some of those honorary degrees. Although no one connected with the university, not even the bursar or the treasurer, actually believes that the university is a business just like General Motors, virtually everyone has a bad memory about our true if not truthful purpose. Is it any wonder that the following story is not merely a story?

Michael Irons was one of the most brilliant people I've ever met. He graduated at the top of his class at Dartmouth, then again at the top of his class at Harvard, finishing his PhD in record time. Mike knew exactly what he wanted to do: he

would accept an appointment at a great university, discover what the best brains in his field couldn't find, invent what no one else ever knew was needed, write great books, and sweep all of the scientific and scholarly prizes in his field. And no one who knew Michael doubted that he was capable of achieving every one of those goals and, indeed, that he would achieve most of them.

Things came very easily for Michael at the university. He was promoted to associate professor one year early and to full professor two years early, thus being the youngest full professor in the memory of anyone there. He wrote good books, so good that they did, in fact, win prizes. And he so liked to teach that it was said that he was one of the few great scholars at the university and was also a superb teacher. So, of course, the combination of his renown as a scholar and his capability as a lecturer drew him enormous popularity on the professional lecture circuit. But the more he traveled about the country telling this group this and that group that, and the more he was invited to present his ideas, and the higher and higher he raised his honoraria for such presentations, the more time he devoted to such diversions and the less time he spent in his laboratory and in the library. And when Mike Irons had conquered virtually every professional organization in his and related fields, he branched out to the popular market, to national conventions of teachers, manufacturers, politicians, even farmers and legionnaires.

For lots of reasons the popular road was more exciting and rewarding to Mike than the high road. His lecture fee was now in four figures, and book royalties earned from popularizations of his scientific works were in five figures and inching towards six figures. With all those figures, Mike needed expert accounting services as well as a literary agent, a lecture agency, a private secretary, and more and more time away from the university. You see, Dr. Michael Irons was now very rich, very famous, and very beloved. He had turned everything he had touched to gold, everything but his purpose in life. ●