

Professor STORIES

by *Burton Blatt, EdD*

PROFESSOR EROS

Gordon Solomon was a professor of human development at the Community College, a school distinguished by its utter mediocrity and conventionality. But Gordon was, if anything, uncommon and, most certainly, not mediocre. Hence, he was at once the most famous among an unfamous bunch, the most despised, the most accomplished, and the most dangerous. What he was doing there is anybody's guess, but it's probable that he was too flamboyant for the university crowd and too academic for the community college crowd. Hence, he was an academic misanthrope. Gordon was an expert—self-professed and nationally recognized—on sex education, a topic which in recent years “infected” higher education but one which may have even deserved attention in the academy during the days before co-educational dormitories and the American Civil Liberties Union.

Gordon Solomon professed to know nothing about mental retardation, but as an expert in matters concerning human urges he soon became a valued consultant to beleaguered institutional administrators who were, on the one hand, confronted by the libertarians to free the inmates (and if not, to free their urges) and, on the other hand, by society who worried about unwanted babies, unnecessary sex, and unseemly problems.

Gordon's first dilemma in the mental retardation field was connected with the now-famous “Tree Incident.” He was asked to consult on that proverbial problem connected with all closed communities. Specifically: “What, Mr. Sex Education Expert, do you advise us to do about homosexuality in our institutions for the mentally retarded? Gordon gave a flip response. “The only thing that institutions ever cure is heterosexuality.” So they desegregated the institution. That is, men and women comingled—and more. That was the problem! Not long after Professor Solomon's wise counsel, the administrators came back with another problem. Of course, one

doesn't need to be an alumnus of “The Quiz Kids” to figure out what happened; the institution became more a maternity ward than a school for the retarded (but it had never been a “school,” and there were some who felt that its new designation was a leap forward on behalf of mankind). And so the institutional administrators decided that they must take action—which is another way of saying that they decided to examine the problem in depth—for there was a necessity to find out where all the “hanky panky” was going on. After exhaustive deliberation and a look around, it was concluded that the sexual activity was taking place behind the institution's many 200-year-old oak trees. Once that was determined, the decision was easy: cut down the oak trees. The trees were saved by one of the “small fry,” a therapy aide at the institution who brought suit against the institution for desecrating the environment. And thus, Gordon Solomon learned that sex education is not all that sexual, and he was hard pressed to prove that anything educational occurs.

Gordon Solomon enjoyed his work and wasn't above bringing enjoyment to the sometimes vast audiences who came to hear him talk about his field. Once, for example, after a long banquet and an even longer succession of windy speakers, Gordon was finally introduced to give the keynote address on sexuality. Because he suspected that the audience had already heard far too much on the subject that evening, but mainly because if he didn't soon get out of the hall he would miss the last airplane home, he responded to the introductory cue, “Professor Solomon, will you speak on human sexuality?” with “Ladies and gentlemen, it's a great pleasure.” And with that initial and final remark, he left the dais, grabbed his hat and coat, and fled to the airport.

Another time, Gordon Solomon engaged in hilarious repartee with state mental health officials, pointing out to them that it's possible to cast suspicion on their therapies when one remembers that, while 100 years ago masturbation was thought

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- No. 02274. The authors are grateful to the following individuals who made contributions to this project: Debra Brady, Paula Carman, Lynn Chandler, Janet Down, Irvin Emanuel, Brenda Moore, Janet Petri, Constance Pious, Emily Placentia, Cary Siegner, and Barbara Wilcox.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research was supported in part by National Institute of Child Health and Development Grant

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to be a mental illness, today the former disease is a cure. What was once such sick behavior as to require institutionalization by psychiatrists is presently a prescribed treatment for a sickness of that same mind. Solomon also pointed out during an ugly rebuttal scene that the American Psychiatric Association voted a few years ago to reclassify homosexuality as a sexual orientation disorder rather than a mental illness, by their vote thus "curing" more mentally ill people than the combined efforts of psychotherapists since the beginning of time. He also pointed out that, by its action to ever so slightly modify the definition of mental retardation, the American Association on Mental Deficiency reduced the theoretical incidence of psychometric mental retardation from 16% to 2%, also effectively "curing" more mental retardation than all of the clinicians and all of the scientists since the beginning of time. The point of Solomon's last commentary was to illustrate that "crazy bureaucracy" isn't so much indigenous to the field of human sexuality as much as it is to bureaucracy itself, especially those bureaucracies created by state governments and professional societies.

Gordon Solomon's most recent encounter with bureaucracy occurred but a few days ago, when he was called to the local developmental center for the mentally retarded to advise its administration on a recent incident. Involved here were two residents, Ms. Smith and Mr. Jones, each not possessing "sufficient verbal skills to explain the circumstances of the situation in which they were involved, but each know to have engaged in mutually consented sexual contact in the past." Ms. Smith and Mr. Jones had been fornicating. Neither was capable of speaking, the official report also indicating that "sex education consisting of verbal counseling is not possible with either client." That is, each was severely mentally retarded. When Solomon advised the superintendent and his

staff to exert greater supervision of their clients, he was reprimanded for "infringing on their human rights." When Solomon suggested that if the clients were to be permitted to continue with their sexual activity it would seem to be a good idea to have them sterilized, he was told that such a procedure could only take place if Ms. Smith and Mr. Jones gave their informed consent. When Solomon reminded the group that these were people who could neither talk nor appear to understand very much, he was nevertheless told that they were capable of giving informed consent. Who could blame the professor if he found it difficult to follow the logic of a system which admits that sex education is not possible with those particular clients because they neither speak nor understand enough, yet in spite of the absence of any method for educating them about their sexuality, they are competent to determine whether they should or shouldn't be sterilized, should or shouldn't engage in sexual intercourse, and should or shouldn't participate in procreation? And that any interference with their freedoms in these matters was a denial of their human rights?

Maybe Gordon did understand all of that. Maybe he understands state and professional bureaucracies. After all, he's Solomon.

RETIREMENT DINNER

"You, dear friend, have never deviated from the belief that, before one tries to change the world, he must change himself. Like Moses, you have led us by following us. And also like Moses, your behavior is our greatest teacher."

He's saying these things about me and, at least for tonight, why shouldn't I believe those words? That sea of faces out there, so happy, so glad for us! What can I say to them when

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my turns comes? How can I tell them that they have made too much of me?

"Your reputation for modesty, dear friend, is only exceeded by your reputation as teacher and scholar, which is only exceeded by your reputation for generosity. Indeed, this is the first time that I've been a meal with you when you didn't pick up the check." Laughter!

He should know that nothing could make us happier than to pay the check for tonight's dinner. That book of mine has been bringing in the dollars for 22 years, and what better way to get rid of some of that money than to spend it on our friends? But how do I tell these good people that picking up the check at the Faculty Club is not an act of generosity but a confession of love? How could I tell my friends that what I can't say with words I have tried to express symbolically? How can I make them understand that, beyond what we need to get along, the only regard I have for money is in how it can be used to help people and in how it can be substituted for the words which I can't deal out easily?

"My colleague and dearest friend, how happy we are that, even in retirement, you have chosen not to leave but to continue your teaching and scholarship. For without you, how would we be so constantly reminded of the biblical adage that, 'Whoever teaches his son teaches not alone his son but also his son's son, and so on to the end of generations.'? For while we are not your son's and daughters in a biological sense, we are your academic children. We are your intellectual descendants."

How can he say that? I've learned so much from him. And he's so arrogant otherwise. How could he say that? It is merely the occasion, or does he believe what he says? This can't be happening to me, to us. All of these people here, and each of them telling me that I have captured their lives, while I've wanted for many years to tell them that they have captured mine. What can I say to them?

"My colleague, without your optimism and zest for life, how could we keep our optimism? How would we believe that the world is good and the future for all people holds nothing but good? Without your faith, how would we keep faith in the belief that, while one can blame a cruel world or a stupid system for the injustices which surround us, if blaming others permits us to do nothing about the evil, then we contribute to it?"

And during those years, it was their encouragement, their optimism, their courage, their faith which gave me strength to join them in battle. They're giving my speech. I'll have nothing to say.

"Of course, we reserve this time to honor you. But in so doing, by your admitting our claim to your collegueship and friendship, you honor each of us. Accept these gifts with our love, our gratitude, our friendship, and with an admiration that has no end and a friendship which was present before we realized there was a beginning."

"Chancellor, colleagues, other friends, my family and I thank you for this memorable evening. I have a story to tell. Once upon a time, a young man graduated with a PhD from Harvard University. And although that first teaching position paid him but \$1,200 a year, and although even then such a salary was below subsistence level, and although he was neither certain about his capability to teach nor cognizant about any other possible occupation, he considered himself to be the luckiest person alive. . . ."

THE POET

Almost everything about Bernard Roberts was wrong for a poet, except that he was a poet. Bernard didn't look like a poet, didn't behave the way poets are said to behave, and was neither trained nor earned his living as a poet. Indeed, what saved Bernard for poetry was the fact that he wrote poetry and the more important fact that he saw himself as a poet; like atheists, poets are self-declared.

As professor of mechanical engineering, Bernard Roberts proved to be a trial to colleagues if not to students. To be sure, he published in the traditional engineering journals, and his engineering work looked little different than the work of other professional engineers. And to be sure, his classes dealt with gears and levers and other aspects of life's mechanics. In all respects, Bernard Roberts gave his due to the College of Engineering, but that wasn't enough because it was well known that his heart lay with the poets. So the College didn't give its due to Bernard.

Poets are at odds with the world, and that's a condition that almost inevitably leads to poverty, even if the poet is an engineer, and even if the engineer is a professor in an otherwise affluent university community.