The bitter groves of academe - why many college faculty members feel bitter - Column

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One of the puzzles (and great pleasures) of a lifetime of reading books manifests itself at those points when a long-forgotten encounter with a work of literature surfaces in one’s mind. Suddenly, and with surprising vividness, a line echoes from the past, bringing with it not just the work’s language and rhythms but something of its original force and meaning. A comic scene may re-appear, accompanied by a sense of pace and gesture powerful enough to summon a kinetic response: one lives through that moment again. Like dreams, these recaptured literary experiences no doubt answer to some need in ourselves that we articulate, if at all, only partially. Like dreams too they powerfully enrich even as they puzzle us. They can, of course, suggest anxieties that, even when uncovered, may continue to have a disturbing presence.

Recently I have found myself recalling a story I read long ago, a story that seemed (even when I first read it) crudely obvious and lacking in literary distinction. Written by Robert Penn Warren, "The Life and Work of Professor Roy Millen" unfolds in under 10 pages the heavy ironies of its title. Roy Millen, a child of rural poverty, struggles for an education and, eventually, a PhD. Now in his fifties, he looks back on a life dominated by his late wife, the daughter of his first department chairman. He looks back too on work interrupted, frustrated plans for a sabbatical in England, and an existence whose tranquil pleasures have largely enabled him to suppress the memory of his early years of struggle. But the simplest event, one of those routine matters of academic life, precipitates a moral crisis that Professor Millen must confront. His bitterness causes him to fail this simple test.

A student named Thomas Howell comes to Millen to request a recommendation for a scholarship that will allow him a year in France. Full of himself, utterly un-self-conscious, he tells of his plans but only after inquiring of Millen’s own. He has heard, he says, that the professor plans a sabbatical, adding dutifully, “To work on your book.” Millen’s response to this politeness is painfully evasive. No great experience in academe is required to recognize the unspoken truth in his talk of settling a few points, retouching, and attending to matters of style: the book will never be finished. For Tom Howell, on the other hand, the world is opening up. He plans to study in Paris, a city he has visited earlier thanks to the generosity of his parents, and Paris represents for him both meaningful work and abundant life. “You know how Paris is,” he says, “it sort of knocks you off your feet. You’ve been there?” Millen has never been to Paris, but he looks away and lies, “Yes, yes,” his averted gaze bringing into focus a patch of lawn outside his window and, walking across it, “two boys and a girl, who moved across the sunny, open space.”

Howell leaves, assured by Professor Millen’s promise of support: “I’ve never had a better student than you are. Possibly never one as good. I’ll say that in my recommendation. I’ll write a strong one.” But the view out the window of those students in a “bright, open space of green where the sun was,” the easy acceptance of privilege that marks both the talk and the bearing of young Howell, even the shame of his own lie—an these come together to shape Roy Millen’s ultimate action. Interrupting himself in the midst of dictating the recommendation he promised, Professor Nullen dismisses his secretary and then, as the shadows of late afternoon gather around him, scratches out the letter that will damn Tom Howell’s chances.

BITTERNESS IN ACADEME

Why would such a story return so insistently? I think I know. While the specifics of the story have to do with a betrayal born out of class envy and a sense of having been somehow cheated of life, its more general point concerns a bitterness that seems almost endemic to academic life. I believe it is this bitterness—my sense of its corrosive power and its ubiquity—that has
brought an apparently negligible story back to my awareness.

Before I describe this phenomenon and its causes, I should enter two disclaimers. First, I am not describing a condition that affects everyone in academic life, nor am I arguing that even those who are most vocal in expressing their discontent are constantly unhappy. Second, I would not claim that the faculty attitudes I describe here are equally present in all disciplines. Engineering, business, and other fields that have continuing and practical engagements with the world beyond academe are less likely to be subject to the distress that I report on here. Still, everyone I have spoken to agrees with this article's central premise, even though they may not share a single explanation of its validity. That premise, simply stated, is that many faculty members in our colleges and universities are embittered to a quite surprising degree and that the very real losses caused by their feelings of regret, envy, frustration, betrayal, and isolation constitute one of the continuing unresolved problems in higher education.

The symptoms of this unhealthy condition in academe are quite varied, but they almost always include disaffection and cynicism. Their more virulent forms involve mean-spiritedness toward colleagues, contempt for students, and a strong condemnation of the whole academic enterprise. Some years ago, at a conference on ethics in the university, one of my retired colleagues rose to address a question to the guest speaker. Asked to identify himself, he gave his name and then said, "I have no affiliation with this university." Here was a distinguished man who had devoted his entire career to an institution, a man whose emeritus title was no mere formal designation but a deserved honor, and yet he was unwilling to claim membership in a community that had nourished and in part enabled his life's work. More recently, a colleague who has served as a program chair and a college administrator wrote to the local newspaper condemning the university for what he saw as its ethical bankruptcy and attacking on a wide front both its programs and its policies. In these cases, disavowal of the institution takes public form and raises for others serious questions about the university. If those who have worked for its purposes and enjoyed its benefits can so roundly denounce the institution, how has it changed and what are the causes of its alleged corruption?

Other symptoms of the bitterness I have in mind manifest themselves in less public ways. They appear in the language colleagues use to describe the achievements of others, in their descriptions of those who gain appointments to administrative posts, and in their attitudes toward the work required to keep the local enterprise (on the department or college level) going. In each of these cases, a kind of easy cynicism gives a veneer of sophistication and knowingness to the attitude. But cynicism cannot disguise a fundamental mean-spiritedness underlying these symptoms and their expression.

Certainly it's true that every scholar of worth expects appreciation and praise for his or her published work, but it all too often turns out that for every voice of support there is a chorus of disapproval. Moreover, the public chorus (in reviews, citations, and other public notices) is a faint echo of the assembly of private voices that minimize, discount, or denigrate the work. More disturbing still, the acerbity of the criticism seems more extreme as it issues from sources closer to its subject.

Like those whose published scholarship opens them to (often malicious) criticism, those faculty members who accept appointment to administrative posts often find themselves the target of ill-tempered sniping. Ambition and leadership skills, key values in other areas of our society, are suspect qualities in academe. Thus, by virtue of their appointment different from the colleagues with whom only a while ago they shared office space, students, and commitment to a discipline, administrators are widely regarded as having abandoned the intellectual enterprise they are supposed to conduct.

FACULTY WORK UNDER FIRE

Even teaching, arguably the most communal of our institutional activities, is subject to the corrosive hostility engendered by faculty alienation. To those alert only to weaknesses, every teaching style has its major flaw and every syllabus its methodological or ideological failing. The colleague who attracts large numbers of students is seen as a shameless popularizer, while the colleague who teaches a select few is deservedly unpopular.
Perhaps the most deleterious manifestation of this bitterness masked as cynicism appears in the attitude of many faculty members toward the daily work of the institution that supports them. Committee tasks, service, counseling, even faculty meetings—those activities in which countless small decisions are made that define the unit’s identity—all are hindered or subverted by such disaffection. One principle emerges from the cynicism directed at these activities: get the job done with the fewest possible faculty resources. If that criterion can be met, other issues—the quality of the result or informed agreement by the whole group—seem distinctly secondary.

Over this whole range of activities, then, the cynicism of disgruntled and disaffected faculty members casts a pall of negation. In practical terms, this means that a significant array of highly important issues can be discussed only under conditions that cloud the focus and limit the utility of the resulting discourse. Discussions of the reward system are rendered nearly useless when a sizable number of those involved not only refuse to agree on criteria for judgment but assert that nearly all criteria can be, and frequently are, juggled or rigged. Talk about administrative roles can only seem otiose when administrators as a class are dismissed as ineffectual and remote from the central academic enterprise.

In discussing these matters, one needs to keep a salient fact in mind. Complaints about academic life, expressions of what I am describing here, are apt to seem unusually powerful because so many critics are so articulate. The very rhetorical skills that lead individuals to the academy enable them to attack it with often extraordinary verbal power. In addition, the protection afforded by tenure allows for criticism of a kind that might not be tolerated in other kinds of large institutions. This does not mean, however, that such expressions of aggrievement are more show than substance or that the frustration and alienation they reflect are less authentic in academic life than in other professions. The bitterness is real, and it has, I believe, real causes.

REWARD SYSTEM

One of those causes is well known. The course of training for a college- or university-level teaching position assumes a set of goals and activities that are irrelevant for all but a few of those going through the course. We know that only a small fraction of those granted the PhD ever publish even a single work of scholarship. At the next level (i.e., among those who do publish), very few achieve anything like scholarly eminence. After what constitutes a very long apprenticeship—four years (usually more) of graduate study, six years working toward tenure (during which time promising junior colleagues at many universities are often "protected" by being excused from significant service or committee assignments)—anything less than a significant scholarly achievement is likely to be judged a failure. The argument that such an assessment ignores teaching, which, after all, is a faculty member’s chief responsibility, simply fails to recognize a basic truth about today’s university culture. To say, for example, that teaching for a faculty member is the equivalent of a doctor’s caring for his or her patients and that being granted such a responsibility is a mark of full membership in the profession is naive or patently disingenuous. The emptiness of such an assertion is evident in a system in which distinguished teaching awards even for teaching assistants are routinely bestowed only on those who have already established a publication record.

At every level, the reward system of academic life provides a fertile breeding ground for frustration and alienation and for the bitterness they in turn generate. Apart from those institutions with a unionized faculty and perhaps the California public institutions that base remuneration on a well-defined step system, most universities base salary increases on merit. Whatever merit is, by definition, some have more of it than others; and in practice, some will be judged to have very little, for only in such a way can those in charge justify the very large gaps between salaries of individuals with similar years in service who perform essentially the same work for the department. In my own department, for example, salaries for full professors with 25 or more years in rank range from a low of $47,800 to a high of $97,020 (for the academic year 1993-94).

What such a discrepancy makes apparent, of course, is the very great weight attached to publication as a measure of merit. But those at the low end of the scale have published, have earned tenure and promotion to full professor, and have taken on their share (and perhaps more) of the teaching and service work in a prestigious department. They may, with some justification,
think of themselves as among academe's elite. Yet within that group they may well be accounted relative failures—and this by measures that matter to their sense of self-worth and indeed to their financial well-being. Moreover, when they look at colleagues elsewhere—at lesser institutions or very different ones—they may find that competing at the very highest level has been costly. Ranked low among the very best in the field, they may deeply regret a choice that has made them major league bench players rather than local heroes.

Over the past few years, discussions of the reward system have moved out of the complaint stage and on to a point at which reforms are being discussed seriously and even being implemented in some institutions. A great many individuals and groups deserve credit for agitating the winds of change in this area, notable among them the American Association for Higher Education, the Syracuse seminar on teaching, and Ernest Lynton. Now it is fair to say that the national debate on this matter has led to policy changes in some of our leading universities. But rewards for teaching excellence often continue to be given as add-ons that do little to change salaries significantly. What is the granting of a few hundred dollars against the larger rewards given for published research and the accumulated effects of a system whose focus is on scholarly achievement? Moreover, the reward system includes far more than salary. In most large and prestigious universities in the United States, the annual salary is but one element among many that may set one apart from his or her colleagues. Those additional and often invidious perquisites constitute yet another source of academic bitterness. Such benefits may include research assistance, travel funds, graduate assistants, money for equipment and supplies, and desirable office and laboratory space. Those who get such resources may have bargained for them or had them freely extended. Others may or may not know of their existence but are not encouraged (perhaps not permitted) to apply for them. Reduced course loads or periodic time off beyond the canonical sabbatical leave often define the responsibilities of the meritorious differently from those of their colleagues. In a system that allows considerable latitude for deal-making and in which dollar benefits are thought to be capped at a certain level, inventive minds find other ways to reward the most highly valued. Thus in assigning part-time teaching or in lobbying for extra-departmental jobs, chairs may be guided by the principle that some spouses or significant others are more equal than others. In a decentralized system whose rewards can be so varied, there is no end to the making of deals.

A NATION OF DOERS

I believe that there is yet another cause of the bitterness so rife in academe. In the great expansion of higher education since World War II, the demand for scholars and teachers at the college and university level was met by the expansion of established graduate programs and the creation of new ones. This solution bore its unwelcome fruit in less than a decade after its adoption and continued for more than a decade after that. A diminished market had no place for hundreds of the Phds who had been recruited for this national effort. But many of those who were denied entrance into the groves of academe, or even a place on the tenure ladder, found satisfying, remunerative jobs. For them, living well has become if not the best, then a relatively satisfying revenge. Paradoxically, though, many of those who gained academic employment have gone on to discover that the career they so prized has become far less rewarding than they had hoped.

Why should this be so? I think it has to do with something deeply ingrained in our national character. We are a nation of "doers." One of the strongest appeals to our country's people is to their spirit of activism. But this characteristic, while it may be an element in the makeup of many individual scholars, is not a major trait of those marked for the scholarly life, especially in the humanities and social sciences. Those who find a comfortable home in these fields are far more likely to value isolation and the leisure required for patient contemplation. The world of scholarship, the often revered "life of the mind," is a life that is wholly available to only a very few, and in the United States it is a life that runs counter to the culture and to both the needs and the talents of the vast majority of our citizens. I would not like to be misunderstood here. A great many people can do intellectual work and do it successfully. But very few are fitted by temperament and talent to derive full and lasting satisfaction from the scholar's life. Our system, however, requires far more than those few to power the vast enterprise that is American higher education. Bitterness is the inevitable product of a situation in which many are called but few are chosen.
This difference—and by this I mean the acute consciousness among many academics of being outside the national mainstream—may lead to negative self-appraisal because the dominant culture is so powerful or because the basis for choosing the road less traveled by is less solid than it ideally might be. Even for the most successful of those who have chosen the academic life, strong feelings of disenchantment about the career they have chosen may arise. Successful early and promoted to tenure with only one major hurdle before them—a full professorship—they may find that rewards are small and infrequent when compared to their considerable achievements or contrasted with the recognition accorded their peers and acquaintances in other professions. For older academics, discontent with their lot often grows out of a sense of powerlessness. The desire to run an enterprise, to exert leadership, to make decisions that can reshape a life or redirect an organization is shut off, frustrated, and in its stead one finds only the familiar round. But for many others, more in touch with mainstream values (or less committed to the scholar’s role) than they would like to admit, the result is a cynical negativity directed at some aspect of the enterprise they serve but ultimately turning back on themselves. It is a malaise that can be destructive of their own energies, harmful to their students, and (in some cases) poisonous to the morale of those around them.

OVERCOMING BITTERNESS

If this analysis is correct, and the bitterness in the academy is so widespread and so destructive a phenomenon, what can be done to limit it and its consequences? One answer, born out of an idealistic nostalgia, would be to work in a concentrated, institutionwide fashion to foster community. Jane Tompkins wrote some time ago in Change about her individual efforts in this direction at Duke University (November/December 1992). I applaud her efforts and would welcome institutional support for other such efforts at my own university and elsewhere.

But "community" is too often a rather desiccated abstraction. To be fully alive, it requires a powerful sense of shared values and purposes, a conviction that one is engaged in a meaningful enterprise to which others are equally committed. In the university context, this feeling seems to arise strongly in response to crises: threats to academic programs, budget cuts, or changes in the conditions of the workplace. Its energies are rarely fully engaged in relation to the ongoing business of teaching, department or collegiate governance, and the work of scholarship. Community seems more compelling, that is, when the question for faculty is "How are we being treated?" rather than "What ought we to do?"

There are, of course, practical means of improving the spirit of community. Let me mention, if only briefly, just a few that have occurred to me. To begin, colleges and universities need to demonstrate flexibility in the area of faculty roles and rewards. Faculty need the assurance that efforts are being undertaken in good faith to make the connection between the performance of faculty (across a wide range of academic activities) and the treatment of faculty more firm than it has been in the past. Our institutions need to be more inventive and more aggressive in the use of faculty exchange problems. It may seem odd to suggest that community and collegiality might be improved by the temporary removal of a long-time colleague or the temporary introduction of a new one, but well-designed exchanges could certainly bring new ideas to campus and dispel some of the parochialism that blinds faculty members to the connections between local problems and the strains on the entire system of higher education and our society as a whole.

Aspects of our current system of faculty ranks, appointments, and tenure might be modified in the effort to diminish other sources of the bitterness I have been describing. A separate title (with distinctive responsibilities and patterns of compensation) might be established for those faculty who are truly distinguished. While this is not a new notion, it might prove—with the proper sort of fine tuning—to be one particularly well suited to the current scene. Similarly, some modification of the established tenure system might produce desirable results. My colleague James Winn has written of this in The Chronicle of Higher Education, and I would add to his observations just this one: tenure often becomes a kind of bondage for those who struggle to achieve it. I’m not sure what reforms might best address the tenure problem, but I am persuaded that at the moment it is a problem.
A CRISIS OF DESTABILIZATION

But even as I put these partial solutions forward, I recognize that they are practical and utilitarian responses to a malaise that is, in its essence, cultural and even spiritual. Nevertheless, it is imperative that we work to eliminate the sources of a discontent whose effects fracture our efforts at collegiality. Our universities share, with our society as a whole, a crisis of destabilization. Perhaps not since the Great Depression have our major institutions been called upon to readjust so radically to a new order, undefined though it may be. In coping with the demands for change that assault us from every side, in shaping the institutions that will serve us well in the coming century, it is absolutely crucial that we talk freely, unhindered by the hostility and bitterness produced by a system that no longer seems adequate to our needs. The period ahead is a time of challenge; it is also a time of opportunity. If we are to seize that opportunity, we need to enlist the efforts of all our colleagues; we can’t afford, nor can our society afford, to have the crucial decisions of the months and years just ahead distorted or delayed by those whose faith in the academic enterprise has been broken.

In closing, I want to say that I recognize the incompleteness of my analysis and the tentativeness of the remedies I suggest. It would be a lengthy and unavailing process to enumerate all the causes of the bitterness I am describing and to suggest possible remedies for each. Some causes are peculiar to certain sorts of institutions, and no doubt my account has been in part directed and limited by my experience at one university. If the attitudes I describe here were merely local, or if the system could go on tolerating them and their effects as part of the cost of life in a complex and competitive environment,

I would be less troubled than I am. But these attitudes are not merely local, and in a time when the institutions of higher education need to move quickly and decisively to discover new paths to serve a changing society they must be able to do so unburdened by the weight of past resentments and disaffection. The condition I describe is widespread and everywhere needs to be understood and (so far as possible) alleviated. I would suggest that our institutions of higher learning, with their great capacity for analysis and for generating change, turn their energies to this problem, that they look to understand the reasons for faculty discontent and find means of healing those in the community whose unhappiness weakens their own efforts and impacts negatively on the efforts of others. Then, perhaps, the "groves of academe" will seem a less ironic phrase than it does today, when it often seems to connote neither leisure not contemplation but rather the bitterness of defeated expectations.

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