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The Erosion of Academic Troth: Disengaging from the Ties that Bind

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You just slip out the back, Jack
Make a new plan, Stan
You don't need to be coy, Roy
Just get yourself free
Hop on the bus, Gus
You don't need to discuss much
Just drop off the key, Lee
And get yourself free.
—Simon, 1975, track 4

Any experience is mis-educative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience. An experience may be such as to engender callousness; it may produce lack of sensitivity and of responsiveness. (Dewey, 1938/1997, pp. 25–26)

This article is about confronting the myths of troth academics hold as they enter and attempt to maintain contractual agreements with academic institutions.¹ There is an assumption that an academic position implies a certain level of allegiance between the individual and

the institution. Whether evident from the initial job offer and acceptance or a gradual realization over the pre-tenure contract years, these Education scholars assumed a pledge of loyalty was involved, and that they were betrothed. Generally, they expected this betrothal to

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be reciprocal: they had offered a pledge of loyalty to the institution where they had been employed, and they believed the institution had done the same in return. The academics we interviewed over the years of our research seem to have believed in their early years with an institution that if they worked hard, complied with the rules of regulation (D. E. Smith, 2005) to which they had agreed, and carried out their assigned duties, that the institution would readily embrace them and duly reward them. From the stories told in this study though, it is clear that this was not always the case.

Analogies and images associated with a marriage agreement or a long-term relationship seem apt to describe stages of relationship experienced by participants in this study with their university employer. This connection seems applicable because in a serious way, the contractual agreement literally binds academics to their institution for the duration of the signed agreement. It is apparent from our data that when a sense of loyalty ostensibly promised by both partners in the original agreement is not returned by one partner, doubts begin to creep in, self-reflection about the worth of the relationship begins to occur, and the potential for distancing or disengaging from the situation becomes necessary for self-preservation on the part of individuals who either want to keep themselves intact, or who want to uphold an institutional stance that they feel might be in jeopardy.

The analogy between separation in a failed marriage or relationship and that of the academic stepping away or distancing herself or himself from the university in some way continues in the various forms of disengagement that those in our study spoke of choosing in

order to maintain their sense of self. For example, disengagement can mean staying in a position but working as a shadow of the self, going about work without real interest or enthusiasm. It can mean choosing to stay at an institution but not taking part in faculty workload beyond what is minimally required. It can mean revising a sense of loyalty and respect when none is given in return. It can mean sharing new perceptions outside the walls of the university. And it can mean severing contractual ties altogether and seeking employment and life, elsewhere.

The act of distancing works in a similar manner from a university standpoint. The once happily appointed academic who becomes perceived as not loyal or worthy of trust finds herself or himself on the margins of faculty activity: the academics' opinions are not sought, prestigious committee seats are filled by others, and questions at the point of tenure or promotion arise where they might not have otherwise. In extreme cases, a form of academic mobbing may be realized through concerted efforts to push the individual out (Westhues, 2004). The university itself though, is of course not going anywhere. In all these scenarios, as in a former full and rich marriage, both partners stand to lose a great deal when disengagement becomes the solution to broken trust.

“There Must be Fifty Ways to Leave Your [Institution]”

Although songwriter Paul Simon (1975) wrote humorously about exiting a marriage relationship in his song *Fifty Ways to Leave Your Lover* (track 4), the options presented in his chorus seem to apply to the ways some individuals in our study disengaged themselves from

situations that no longer held truth for them. In this section, we relate Simon's lyrics to descriptions from our transcripts of the ways some interviewees did "slip out the back" while others focused on the need to "make a new plan" or chose to "hop on the bus" to a different destination. Some did not even bother to "drop off the key." However, it is important to state that whatever ways individuals chose to disengage from the situations in which they found themselves as academics, none of the ways were painless or easy to enact, and all seemed to have had life-altering emotional and personal consequences.

Slip Out the Back

Some individuals remained working at their institutions after experiencing events where truth was broken or lost. While physically present, a part of them seemed to have slipped away to safer ground for self-preservation as they considered whether their full and heartfelt participation was something they could continue to give to their colleagues and university. Maintaining a healthy sense of self while remaining in the same workspace where events have transpired that affect one's vision of one's self is no easy task. As John noted, "You can be socialized by an institution and if you hold certain beliefs . . . you have to work hard to hold on to those or they can get eroded." He was acutely aware of the powerful aftermath of broken truth.

The sense of betrayal and devastation after broken truth was particularly palpable for Mary who felt that she had been placed in emotional jeopardy when she was rejected for a permanent position in her department and then asked for her input about the person who was to be hired instead:

It's just devastating what I've lived through in the past couple of weeks. Going through that whole [interview] process and then this offer for this other person comes forward . . . and then as an academic [in the department], you're asked what do you think about offering this person a job.

In a subsequent interview, we learned that there was another posting in her department the next year, but she decided to protect herself from the potential rejection:

I chose not to apply this year again because the subtext always going on is without the finished doctoral degree I'll be in a deficit position and it's tough for the faculty to want me and then have to say no because I don't have the completed doctoral degree.

Mary's story shows both a personal stepping away from those others who held power in the department because of their rank or position and a cocooning or separating of self as protection against the personal distancing felt in the face of such experiences. There is a "chilly climate" within academe (Sandler & Hall, 1986) that is palpable throughout our transcripts, but seems especially evident for those who opt against full-force disengagement and, for a variety of reasons, choose to remain at the same institution. Curry (2002) writes that, "We are pressed to change by abandoning an essential part of ourselves in exchange for affiliation and conditional acceptance" (p. 120). That sentiment especially rings true in the

stories told where individuals “slip out the back” as a survival strategy, moulding and re-moulding themselves to fit in and go forward in their careers.

Make a New Plan

Several participants spoke of spending time in an ongoing process of planning and re-planning their next moves once they understood that perceptions held about them by university colleagues would or could limit their dreams in their institutions. There seems to be a kind of push-pull factor in this often silent but time-consuming planning process between the personal and professional factors of individuals’ lives, and the known and unknown of present and potential universities, whether a move actually occurs or not. For example, John reported:

If I were single I would move . . . but I’m not sure I want to pay the price.... It never seems to go beyond the considering stage.... I think [maybe] the grass is greener on the other side or I need to do something else to prove myself... to prove that yes, I’m a good person, a competent person.

In a later interview, he announced, “I am [definitely] putting an application in for a position at another university,” but later backtracked on this decision, noting “it’s very complex [these decisions] and I keep saying to myself that the longer I stay here, the more likely I am to stay or the less likely I am to move.”

There are many examples of academics ruminating about alternative plans in ongoing and uncertain ways in our transcripts, and indeed, the stories in the transcripts are interwoven with conversations about planning and re-

planning moves across the country to various institutions that might provide a sense of an academic home. In both this scenario and the one above, it is clear that universities and individual departments are losing the full attention of academics who must spend time recovering from incidents of broken troth and find ways forward for themselves in the academy.

Hop on the Bus

When disengagement from a relationship is final, individuals do physically remove themselves; they leave that situation and go elsewhere. While this result seems so common today that many people are almost blithe about it, the uprooting from established roles and routines and community takes a huge toll personally as does the re-situating and re-grounding of one’s self in a new place. As in the breakup of any troth relationship, there is always the anger and sadness that accompanies the feeling of loss or failure left by the breakup itself and, in spite of moving locations, it can take many years to heal.

In an excerpt from an earlier work, Carmen described her own disengagement from her first university as follows:

One exchange I remember clearly from the experience of that request [for a one year leave of absence on personal grounds] was that I was told that the personal had nothing to do with the professional. As a committed narrative researcher who had recently completed a doctoral thesis combining my own personal and professional experience in special education, this statement seemed astonishing. . . . I can still feel my shock and disbelief as I understood for the first time in my years there

that not only did I personally not matter, but that the basis for my teaching and research . . . was not valued either. . . . I packed for a new part time position in another province and left the day following my final B.Ed student supervision that year. Within two weeks I was teaching somewhere else. (Shields, 2004, p. 143)

Frances also chose to move away as a means of disengagement from her first institution. She explained:

I realized [there] how dangerous academia can be.... In fact, abusive.... I felt I was taken advantage of.... You put out your best effort, you make the commitment, you feel the obligation to your students and your colleagues, to the institution . . . all for no recognition.

This realization led her to take action for change:

I fired in an application and they were back to me right away.... They set up an interview within a month's time and within 48 hours of arriving back [at the first institution] they phoned and made me an offer.... I felt there was no question that would be a superior place to be [and I left].

In these scenarios it is clear that moving to a new place and beginning at the beginning again with new and uncertain positions was still a more positive choice than remaining within the ruling relations (D. E. Smith, 2005) of the employing institutions.

Ending this section, we cannot help but remember a colleague from

years gone by who, following several years of difficult experiences, quietly cleared out his office one night and left the university silently, telling no one of his plan for escape. He did not even stop to “drop off the key.”

Loss: the Lasting Consequence of Disengagement

Tierney and Bensimon (1996) describe the story of two academics who each experienced loss as they paid in their own ways for working in the academy (p. 103). A missing piece from their tale seems to be the pall cast over department colleagues who, as witnesses, were also affected by the results of the story. In our interviews, one story from Carmen serves to illustrate the fallout for everyone in a department when, as observers, they became party to colleagues' poor treatment and their demise within the department.

In early spring just over a decade ago, I attended my own farewell dinner party after resigning from my first institution after my leave of absence on personal grounds was denied. I was one of three colleagues leaving that year: there was another woman professor who had also resigned, and our male Director, who was retiring. A female colleague who had asked for a leave of absence on medical grounds and had also been denied, set the tone for the evening. Her quiet sobs were unmistakable as we joined together around the table after dinner to receive our farewell gifts. I cannot remember her words as she spoke to the group to say good-bye, but I do remember her unstoppable tears.

When it was my turn to speak, I looked around the table at my very sad and solemn colleagues and I

spoke from my heart. I told them it was not enough to hire women for equity purposes if there was no parallel commitment to work with and support women in our work in the department, and I shared my disbelief that two women were now leaving—one ill—because the university would rather see us leave than hold our places, without pay, for one year. The retiring Director had the final word and I remember that he began his remarks with the words, “I am not going to apologize for anything.” I do not remember anything else he said. Shortly thereafter, individuals said their good byes and dispersed into the evening away from what I still think of as the saddest dinner party imaginable.

Reflecting back on that event now, it is clear that the troth that was broken that spring was made visible for faculty colleagues that night and in an indelible way, became part of their scripts of the academy too. While the swirl of unhappy news surrounding the fate of two individuals hovered over the department during the winter months, the day-to-day actualities of department life kept everyone going about their business and away from focusing on the actual turmoil that two colleagues were experiencing, until that night at dinner. Loss was at that table: a sense of communal loss surrounded everyone at the table, as the actual loss of colleagues became a reality. Loss of faith in the goodness of those holding power, loss of belief in the benevolence of the institution, loss of a sense that one’s academic contributions were of any long-term value, and loss of trust in department colleagues encircled everyone and opened a door to a new

vision of what an academic life entailed. Troth was broken for some, and hints of unfaithfulness became visible for others. For if newcomer academics were so dispensable to the university in spite of solid teaching evaluations, collegial service on many fronts and research writing undertaken even in the midst of final dissertations being completed, who might be next? And, if those who hold the power don’t step up to offer personal support in a time when it is needed and asked for, then of what value is institutional troth anyway? The sanctity of the academic union was revealed as false that night for newcomers and old timers alike.

Communal Loss

Just as in a large family when one member is separated or divorced from the group and is no longer present, there is a sense that the assemblage is less than it was, and even when replacements arrive, there is that space that remains and is felt by those who were there when the former group was together. In the dialogue in our transcripts for example, there are references to previous times when individuals felt the bond of collegiality in their academic work, but these were juxtaposed with their present-day experience. John noted, “I see much less of working together . . . less of a sense of community than there was before. People are watching out for their own careers now.” He continued as follows:

When I first came here there was a sense of continuity from the past. . . . I wonder what happened to that sense of collaboration. . . . I certainly have that sense that [as time passed] it didn’t matter to anybody if I was here or not.

It was clear that Mary spoke from her heart when she said, “I miss the nature of an academy that stands in community or in a world where free thinking is supported [and] people aren’t afraid to risk take.” It is not surprising that she would miss the very things that are seen as the essence of being an intellectual (Collins, 1998).

The sense of loss or absence that our participants spoke of experiencing is also a thread that runs through other literature critiquing the academy (Cooper & Stevens; Hannah, Paul, & Vethamany-Globus, 2002; Stalker & Prentice, 1998). Facey (2002), for example, wrote, “I still yearn sometimes to have a set of academic colleagues close at hand, working together as a team and sharing friendship and intellectual interests. But maybe that’s just a women’s pipe dream” (p. 55). Writing about academics who bring their own, distinct sexual orientation to the academy, Cooper and Stevens (2002) wrote that, “For gay, lesbian and bisexual faculty, the environment has improved over the years but often remains repressive in ways that can easily breed bitterness. Unfortunately, homophobia in the society continues to be echoed in the halls of academe” (p. 8). We believe it is important to add that a similar consensus exists in this literature about academics from racialized minorities and those who are differently-abled.

McNaron (1997) wrote specifically about gay and lesbian academics, but the words speak about all newcomers to the academy:

All gay and lesbian academics are called upon to occupy a difficult place, especially in North American culture. We are asked to inhabit a

middle ground between exhilaration and watchfulness, between the beginnings of ease and the necessity for alertness, between appropriate gratitude to colleagues and administrators who are working to improve our environments and continued pressure on such people to do even more. (p. 213)

Newcomer academics, as we have defined the term in our study, are represented in the professoriate yet are not fully accepted, and so must continually prepare to face the loss of full communal support, while at the same time working to achieve that support. When a collegial space to belong emerges, the loss of it later feels all the worse, because the individuals know from experience what has been lost and feel the separateness created by insider colleagues all the more. One interview conversation highlights this sense of loss:

Carmen: When you were talking about your experiences at [a university], you indicated that if there had been an open, available facilitative mentor as department chair that would have really helped. Have you experienced that elsewhere?

Annabelle: Yes. I know what care and personal learning mean. I know what it looks like, feels like. So I know when I don’t have it. I’ve got that tangibleness. . . . Having had a lot of care from parents, love and care from [school and university] mentors . . . knowing what all that means, I think how sad that institutions don’t really care about that much. It’s more about the institution itself.

The loss is both personal and communal.

Loss of New Ideas, Teaching, and Research Perspectives

Academics bring a diversity of life and work experiences to the academy that are reflected in what they believe is important to raise academically with students and colleagues. For example, issues pertaining to who the academic is as an individual, with race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and thoughts about inclusion in mainstream academia as an instructor and researcher, provide new ideas and perspectives for consideration in a world that is increasingly drawn toward standard and standardized practice. New academics tend to bring a passion for research agendas that encompass multiple views and press former boundaries set by positivism and structuralism where personal voices were largely not present or were considered to be of little importance. Cooper and Stevens (2002) wrote powerfully about the value of such contributions:

A diverse faculty brings us closer to the world we live in. If universities are truly to serve the cities they inhabit and the larger world, if democracy is based on a sense of community and the discourse that community fosters, then we must strive to bring that world into being inside of our universities. If higher education is to help provide solutions to the world's problems then it must know that world in all its diversity. (p. 10)

It is a loss then, when the work of newcomer academics is greeted with skepticism by insider colleagues who still seem to use their power to remain

separate from students and from new boundary-pushing research methodologies that include the personal experiences of those newcomer academics as captured through the use of dialogue, poetry, story, drawings, or photography as data sources. It seems sometimes that as the world grows larger and methods of learning become more diverse, insider academics subtly sideline or disrespect those who come to the academy prepared to offer their truth to students and to the system itself. Since knowledge production is the work of the university, it comes as a shock that ideas and programs of research that contribute to an agenda of social change and inclusion that parallel moves in the wider society beyond university walls are undervalued and even ridiculed rather than greeted with enthusiasm for the additions they might provide. This disparaging of enlarged perspectives and new ideas is a huge loss for those who work in the academy and also for those who look to the academy as a place of higher learning where notions from the past can be challenged and new visions established that are more inclusive of the multiple voices within a culture.

Loss of Belief in Institutional Benevolence

As Cooper and Stevens (2002) point out, newcomers' experience with the academy "starts well before they obtain their first tenure-track position. It begins in graduate school where Fairweather (1996) asserts that their expectations about teaching, research, and service are initially developed" (p. 11). While we doubt that anyone who has completed graduate studies would say there were not multiple challenges to meet along the way, as in any relationship, the interesting thing is that for many newcomers, experience as students in

graduate study was engaging enough that they wanted to continue graduate work and move into academic positions in what they expected to be a similarly, positive environment. As a research team, we can certainly say we felt that the academy was a benevolent force in our lives for many years as students, and we expected not only to continue to experience that force, but also to bring it to others in our work as academics. However, it seems clear that benevolence for students does not carry over into the professoriate, which is regulated so that every teaching situation, research grant, and promotion rests on the institutional rules that can serve to keep newcomers at bay on many fronts. Hannah, Paul, and Vethamany-Globus (2002) write:

To onlookers, academics seem to lead charmed lives, strolling unhurriedly through landscaped campuses, sitting in book-lined offices removed from worldly concerns, dictating magisterial lectures to eager students, or conversing with like-minded colleagues in a congenial atmosphere. But this romanticized picture does not reflect reality. The academic world is cutthroat and competitive. (p. 6)

Stalker and Prentice (1998) identify a number of strategies that are “fiendishly efficient in perpetuating unequal opportunities for women and other minorities” (p. 20) by denying newcomer academics’ status and authority, devaluing them through “jokes” and comments, hindering their access to information, and undervaluing their achievements (p. 21). These strategies reinforce our assertion that a belief in institutional benevolence is formed on false ground.

As Green (2002) noted,

Many Aboriginal academics (and many female academics, and academics from other minorities) find themselves in the curious position of being marginal and tokenized at the same time as we seek space in the academy for our physical presence, our intellectual freedom, and our political and pedagogical perspectives. (p. 86)

Stalker and Prentice (1998) also wrote about this discrediting of equity for newcomer academics:

Academic freedom is double-edged; for example, overt sexism may be officially frowned upon but anti-feminism or homophobia are protected as freedom of expression. In terms of pedagogy, traditionalists argue that the canon of a discipline is fundamentally fine even if they must grudgingly admit that the contributions of some “others” need to be “added on.” Add-ons however, are permitted only so long as they do not disrupt the main business of teaching and learning. . . . This position reflects the naïve belief that current practices of the academy are neutral and apolitical. (p. 25)

Institutional responses to small and large matters are, of course, political. And individuals’ careers and lives are affected by the benevolence or malevolence of institutional decision making. While some administrators who represent institutions in their position as Chair, Dean, or President see individuals first and lean toward benevolence in their decision making, others who hold power are clearly more interested in the

status quo and use the ruling relations of their institution as weapons that cause a lasting malevolence (D. E. Smith, 2005). One participant in our study noted:

Policy creates a blueprint and institutions do that even though they want to use the language and say we're very flexible [but] the point is that they are institutions. They have certain parameters, and people become comfortable with those parameters. So when someone comes along in a more creative vein and wants to do something in a different way, well . . . there is a whole lot of resistance.

With that resistance, newcomers lose their belief in the benevolence of their institutions.

Loss of Trust in the Integrity of Others

Aisenberg and Harrington (1988) note that, "women and minorities are outsiders in the sacred grove. . . . Often feeling unwelcome, unappreciated, and unwanted, faculty [from these groups] face continual pressure to prove that they deserve their positions" (p. 6). As the years go by and newcomers continue to sit at the department table, time and again they are witness to punitive measures taken by colleagues to sideline them in their work. After sitting through meetings where absent individuals are spoken about in negative ways by insider academics, where votes are cast about individuals with little or no knowledge of their contribution to the department or university, and where funded research agendas are belittled, it is almost impossible not to lose faith and trust in colleagues. In our transcripts are stories of individual academics that resound with expressions of a loss of faith in the

integrity of their fellows. They devoted a great deal of personal energy to being on guard for subtle or overt assaults that might undermine a vote or a grant, or interfere with someone's believability in the workplace. Mary noted, "I just know not to trust her [a department member]. . . . So that's what I've done with it. I have a critical distance times a thousand. . . . I just lift out of any trust relationship [with that individual]." Frances reported,

[At one university] our faculty was... manipulated to serve the bigger interests of the institution in a way that was vastly unfair to everyone. . . . Consequently, you couldn't trust [others]. You could not trust them with a confidence, you could not trust them with an off-hand comment, you couldn't trust them with any aspirations because they were not in a position to be loyal.

We are reminded of the powerful poetry of Graveline (2002) who writes as a woman and Métis traditional healer at a Canadian university:

So I will not fight Anymore.
I am relieved
of the oppressive Weight
of this Struggle
to be Me in this Cage,
this Narrow Confined space
called Academic Freedom.
"I can't Believe
they put it in Writing"
Union says
"You Should Stay and Fight."
So I Reapply
They Deny."

Conclusion

What can be said about the fallout for the university community as a whole and

the troubling need for disengagement that newcomers have expressed here? We know that the ruling relations established in universities historically (D. E. Smith, 2005) have not been about the happy acceptance of multiple voices and perspectives that newcomer academics are trying to bring to the academy today. Rather, they have been about perpetuating the unilingual, univocal foundation on which universities were built. Returning to the analogy of the marriage relationship introduced through our use of Simon's (1975) song, we note that just as the recent and changing history of marriage has shown us, rules and regulations, both formal and informal, can be changed as we accommodate new thinking and perspectives brought by those whose voices were not heeded previously. Troth comes in many forms. For example, some undertake engagement according to long-established traditions while others choose to write their own unique script. Some marry individuals of their own sex while others live together as companions and do not formalize their unions in any externally recognizable way.

Similarly, in the academy, university administrations and Senates re-write the rules and contractual agreements formally to keep pace with changing times and reconsider protocols and guidelines frequently to make changes that meet the needs of current employees and students. Inside academic institutions there is a continual re-writing of the scripts that all are asked to abide by. It seems obvious that the power to make the necessary changes in institutions resides within those institutions. The institution is not a disembodied force devoid of human

intent; rather, it is comprised of individuals who collectively keep the institution running. At the present time, on the surface, the professoriate seems collectively to have admitted newcomer academics, understanding that diversity is required, but like the Director in Carmen's story above, often does not understand that the new visions of teaching and research that newcomers want to enact must also be admitted. The formal text of agreement is one thing, but the subtext has been quite another. Entering into a troth agreement requires faithfulness on the textual and subtextual levels. Just as it is impossible to force a partner to be faithful merely because the formal text of a union has been entered into, loyalty cannot be expected from insider colleagues just because a textual agreement of employment has been signed.

From the interview dialogue with participants in our study, the missing piece seems to be acceptance and celebration of diversity in and amongst academics and respect for the work that each individual does. While such words and concepts can be written into formal agreements, it is in the subtexts of the relationships formed with others that acceptance is given, received, and felt.

In "The Spiritual Roots of Quaker Pedagogy," S. Smith (2004) writes that there is a richer unity in diversity that is only possible when all voices are heard. From the data shared in this article, it seems there is a long way to go to build a solid subtext to really welcome newcomer academics and the ideas and perspectives they bring to the academy. Disengagement can only become full engagement when the myth of troth becomes a reality.

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