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Confronting the Myths and Norms of Academic Engagement

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The strawberry grows underneath the nettle,
And wholesome berries thrive and ripen best
Neighboured by fruit of baser quality
— Ely (*King Henry V*, Act 1, Scene 1, lines 59–61)

The focus in this article is on the myths that individuals in our study brought with them into their academic lives, influencing their initial and prolonged engagement in their departments and universities. It is interesting to note that in *The Canadian Oxford Dictionary* (2004), the word “engagement” can mean both “a betrothal” and “an encounter between hostile forces.” Well-known characters from fiction, plays, and film immediately spring to mind that have moved from the first definition to the second in that all-too-common shift from love to estrangement and separation of various kinds that can creep into relationships. Consider for example, Shakespeare’s (1987 version) *Romeo and Juliet* where a betrothal becomes a battle for survival that ends in death, or Tolstoy’s (1877/1993) *Anna Karenina*, where a woman leaves her husband for a lover only to battle continuously with her own doubts and

choices. And, who can forget Elizabeth Taylor battling with her husband, Richard Burton, in the film, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (Lehman & Nichols, 1966). In contemporary culture, perhaps now more than ever, interest in the theme of relationships is apparent in popular books, films, television shows, and celebrity magazines. As a populous, North Americans seem to pine to know who is becoming disenchanted with a partner and who has left the scene altogether.

In the academy, while academics may be attuned to similar gossip on one level, on a more urgent level the texts that hinge academics’ relationships with one another, their departments, and their universities are multiple and varied and can represent a minefield that the original contract did not cover. Becoming an academic involves connecting to many partners at once. Not only do academics have to learn all the

formal texts that surround their situation, but just as in personal relationships, the unwritten texts or subtexts of each relationship must also be learned as they are revealed through interactions with peers and colleagues. And subtexts can often be changeable. If one does not anticipate the “encounter between hostile forces” sense of engagement alongside the “betrothal” before becoming associated with the professoriate, given all these intricacies, the personal stakes can be very high. The original desire for engagement, as it turns out, may come at a very high price.

Assumptions around Texts of Engagement: Complexities Abound

In our study, several participants described their own naïveté about the textual agreements surrounding their initial appointment to their respective universities, and subsequently, around the texts leading (or not) to tenure and promotion. In an earlier piece from this project (Shields, 2004), Carmen wrote about herself as a repeat “naïve newcomer,” joining her first two universities with the general expectation that being hired alone was enough to assure her fair treatment. Considering this attitude now, at the completion of this study and knowing that others have thought in a similar way, this mindset can be likened to Brookfield’s (1995) notion of “teaching innocently” (p. 1), where one assumes that the self-defined meanings and significance of actions and choices will be the same meanings and significance that others take from those actions and choices. A new academic says “yes” to an offer of engagement and, expecting that the institution will assign the same meaning to that agreement, plans a future based on answers to initial questions that led to

the belief that the arrangement was understood with some clarity. Just as with those who accept engagement without discussing any of the mutual desires for a future together, it seems simplistic and potentially disastrous to assume that one’s personal interpretation of the texts of engagement will be the same as the interpretations from the university where one is employed. As Smith (2005) notes,

A text may be read differently at different times and by different people and in different sequences of action. Indeed, the very possibility of different interpretations... of a single text pre-supposes the constancy of the text—that is, that it is the same text interpreted differently. (p. 107)

As Schick (1994) articulates, texts are a central feature of universities. It is really important then, for academics to develop some awareness of institutional texts and the interpretations thereof as a first step of engagement. With respect to the larger picture of institutional texts, Smith (2005) notes:

Institutions exist in that strange magical realm in which social relations based on texts transform the local particularities of people, place and time into standardized, generalized, and, especially, trans local forms.... Texts perform at that key juncture between the local settings of people’s everyday worlds and the ruling relations. (p. 101)

It is apparent in our study that newcomer academics did not understand initially how dense and layered the textual dimension of joining a department really was. While the various

texts are there to be read (e.g., the terms and initial rank of hiring, the collective agreement of the day, the departmental handbook, the rules and regulations surrounding tenure and promotion), the applicability of what these texts mean in each particular case is, as Smith (2005) notes above, open to interpretation by others at those junctures where standard text meets the individual. Aside from reading the formal texts that standardize and guide academic life, newcomer academics need to learn about other informal texts and the subtexts of relationships within and amongst colleagues in the department and across the university, and they need to contend with all the tensions that can reside in those inter-textual accounts. The “local particularities” of individuals turn out to have a history that is not decipherable by newcomers, yet can affect their engagement in the department or the university just as much as a longtime girlfriend or boyfriend from a partner’s past can: it’s not your history, but that experience lives on in them and guides their interpretation of present-day events. And, on top of all the potential to misread and misinterpret all these texts, issues of voice and power between and among individuals and groups within departments and across the university add another layer of complexity that surrounds an academic newcomer in all these formal and informal relationships that rule institutional life. Carmen offers one example from her experience as a newly appointed academic to illustrate a dialogue of misunderstood assumptions around office and teaching placement at the time she was hired at her second institution.

The Dean told me that there were no offices available on the main campus,

so my office would be at a secondary campus, a 45-minute drive away. Drawing on my own past experience at my first university where my office building was also generally my teaching site, I made the assumption that I would also be teaching at that secondary campus. The reality though, was that when the teaching assignments were announced, I found I did not teach at the campus that housed my office or at the main campus where all the department meetings were held, but at outreach sites that were one to two hours away from my office building in the opposite direction from the main campus. This situation meant that it made no sense for me to use my assigned office during my entire three years at that institution. It also meant that I had no place to work when I was on the main campus. These logistics had many secondary effects in the realm of power relations for me that I know the Dean did not intend. One consequence was that I found myself placed both inside and outside the institutional texts that members of my department lived by and, as someone with a different script from the same source, found quite quickly that I was not valued by many other department members as a legitimate colleague.

Texts matter and interpretations of text also matter. Given the multiplicity of interpretations of these many texts, the complexities for a newcomer can be overwhelming.

Misunderstanding Institutional Commitment: Where the Myths Begin

Although the academy, like any other large and modern institution, runs on

standardized rules and regulations that form the political structure that academics operate within, our study data indicate that academics respond to events and situations in unique and personal ways. In university terms, academics may be hired to fill a vacant slot or a newly established position in a department, but on their own terms, they bring their hard-earned academic credentials, areas of expertise, a lot of education, and in some cases, years of experience in the work world when they accept a position. What they really bring to the university is themselves and their own sense of identity. Institutional standardization cannot prevent academics from being the complete selves that they are, interpreting events and situation with heart as well as mind. Right from the start a disconnection appears that undergirds the initial engagement and signals potential future trouble: the institution basically offers a standard script of betrothal that binds a newcomer to established rules and regulations while that newcomer arrives with hopes of forming truth that is based on her or his individual identity. As in an arranged betrothal, the newcomer has little understanding that expectations are already set before she or he arrived. If the academic finds a sympathetic partner, life may go smoothly, but if the individual feels subsumed in the new relationship, it may be necessary to step away from the original agreement to remain true to the self. Many myths of institutional engagement seem to spring from this initial misunderstanding between institutional and personal expectations.

Uncovering Myths: Checking Assumptions

In our research interviews, participants spoke of expectations that, although not listed in any department regulations, they assumed would be part and parcel of their work in the academy. Some of those expectations included: a belief that they will be valued as the individuals they are; compliance with the rules will assure them fair treatment; good work will be rewarded; academic freedom will be supported and even assured; colleagues will be respectful of them and their scholarship because they are all at the same table. From the stories shared by participants, it is clear that these expectations were not always born out in actuality; individuals' perceptions of themselves as being of value in academic life changed. Personal identity, personal philosophy, and personal rules and principles for living were all affected when expectations turned out to be myths and, in those cases, the academics began a self-questioning process about their worth in the academy and what they would take forward in their careers. As Curry (2002) explained,

Who we are and what we stand for are moderated by our connection to other people and our experiences make up our identity. That identity is integral to the way we function in our personal lives, the way we interact with friends, family, and strangers alike. With regard to our careers, in particular, it guides our lives within the academy . . . [as we] include the construction of [our] individual identity as researcher, scholar, and teacher. (p. 118)

Facing a loss of innocence around unfulfilled expectations, just as

in a marriage, newcomer academics must decide on a response and new stance given what is being learned about their partner(s).

Considering the expectations noted above and thinking about the powerful voices heard in our study transcripts, it is clear that each individual chooses a path forward after coming to understand that initial perceptions of university life may have been misguided. Newcomers to university life are, by definition, former outsiders and as such, are unfamiliar with the history, mores, and social development of the institution. When asked to give up part of their past social and cultural histories in order to belong institutionally, newcomers begin to understand the politics that surround them in both formal and informal ways. “For the novice,” as Curry (2002) wrote, “survival in the academy has taken the form of disintegration of the self. . . . Externally imposed adaptations, requiring denial or disintegration of aspects of one’s identity... are an assault on the ego. (p. 120). She further asserted,

Politicization of one’s identity at the very least is experienced as unaffirming, requiring responses that explain and rationalize identity, lifestyle and culture. The intent of the requirement is not to gain understanding, rather to legitimize a way of being that favors the privileged [insiders]. It is not surprising that the explanation does not result in [any sense of] entitlement. (p. 119)

The sense of being present but without any sense of the entitlement that those on the inside grant to each other

challenges the expectations noted in the above section. Looking at these expectations or assumptions using excerpts from our transcripts helps to provide some specific examples of the consequences of feeling like an outsider as the early myths are shattered over time.

Myth 1: Academics Will be Valued as the Individuals They Are

Being considered to be of value personally and professionally in the academy is the key concept that appears over and over again in our interviews as seminal for academics’ changes in thinking about their place of work and their future direction. Several individuals shared stories about feeling especially valued as they entered the university, and then, as time passed and changes in that status occurred, especially disillusioned. John described actually being courted for potential positions:

I met some of the faculty and he took me to dinner and we talked about it [a potential position], so I had that courting. I also had courting in a more informal sense from [another institution] and what it looked like was this: if we had a position available would you allow your name to stand?

That same sense was expressed about the place where he eventually chose to work. “Clearly he was seeking to get me when I came for the interview.... I don’t think I was the right person for the job description, but they then changed the job description before I arrived.”

Mary likewise felt valued and desired when she first came to the university in response to an invitation to fill in for someone seconded elsewhere.

“He asked if I could step in and take over. . . . I just kept staying. They kept offering me more courses. There was [one department member] who grabbed me and welcomed me and took care of my understanding of the demands.”

Carmen’s experience was similar to Mary’s in that the Dean of the day invited her to take a one year, full-time position, replacing someone who was seconded elsewhere, delaying her entrance to doctoral study by one year, in order for her to see what faculty life was really like. She accepted and, as a contract individual, felt valued as someone with expertise to share. That sense of being valued followed her into doctoral study years, and subsequently was the reason she decided to pursue an academic career. Like those quoted above, she had the sense from prior experience that the path ahead lay in the academy and that she had been sought out and would be valued there. Dyck (2002) reported a similar sense of being valued: “When I became Dr. Dyck, I expected to be valued as an equal by my peers and by decision-makers. I thought that since they were educated they would be unbiased, fair-minded individuals” (p. 47).

As our research interviews continued over time, the tone of optimism found in these early days was replaced by a much more negative and pessimistic outlook on the part of these individuals as circumstances changed for them in their careers. For example, John noted in a subsequent interview:

I can clearly see a break [from] when I was in a position of what I would call some privilege and by privilege I mean that I enjoyed a certain status... as a valuable member, as a contributing member as a really good

teacher... with research contracts. I’m not seen as a team player now and I feel it very strongly and so coming to work is not enjoyable and it always used to be.... In a small way the marginalization that I am feeling has opened my eyes and I say now I know how a system can conspire against you and make you feel... unwanted.

Mary also described a gradual move away from the sense she felt at the beginning of her career that she was valued at the university:

For many years I was only offered eight- or nine-month contracts... and then I did manage a few year-long contracts. One time they tried to downgrade me to a nine month and I refused.... [Now] I’m interested to see how I do with this latest adventure of applying for a job. I noticed last year I felt demoralized for the first time and wondered if I could apply again.... You know it was sort of like, okay, I still don’t count.

In these brief excerpts, a switch in tone is palpable as individuals come to see their value as individuals in the academy shift and lessen. Many other participants’ stories revealed a similar sense of declining value over time.

Myth 2: Compliance with the Rules Will Assure Fair Treatment

Newcomer academics work in the academy expecting that compliance with the rules and regulations of the university will mean being rewarded with fair treatment. In our study it is clear that while academics want and expect to contribute their share and complete requirements to advance their

careers, like most people, they react negatively when they perceive they are being taken advantage of, especially over time. Mary, who had been employed on contract for over a decade, questioned “over all these years of all this contract work . . . waiting to see am I back or am I not back because personally for me [this] has been, does that mean I am worthwhile, does that mean my work is not worthwhile?” Despite her years of service, an open tenure-track position in her department was given to another individual:

He came and got the position. He had the completed doctoral degree and had been teaching [elsewhere]. I was here, teaching and working on my doctoral degree, but I didn't get the job. For some faculty, it was how dare I apply? I don't have the doctoral degree; who do I think I am? For other faculty, it was she [is] an academic... a good teacher... respected, what's the matter?

At another point, she had reported “You know they want me because I am a good workhorse,” but being a good workhorse was only good enough for contract positions not the elusive tenure-track position.

Frances spent six years in a tenure-track position at one institution, providing extensive service, along with teaching and publishing educational and arts-based work. Department colleagues voted unanimously in support of her tenure application, but it was turned down at the university level because they deemed that she had too few peer-reviewed publications.

I make films, do photography, draw and paint.... I received no credit for

presentations. I did have a couple of journal articles and chapters in books. I had a film that I produced with a colleague that was shown at an international film festival and at my interview I had to explain in detail what a film jury process is so that it was recognized.

She demonstrated a commitment to teaching, scholarship, and service. As a visual arts educator, her artistic contributions would seem to be particularly apt, and yet it appeared that the university committee had not valued these contributions adequately. She spoke harshly and emotionally about her feelings about not receiving tenure:

I feel such contempt for the people who made that decision. I would say too that all the people on that committee were men, many of them very senior in their departments. I mean they have followed the conventional trail, done everything the way it works, so they are not going to move for me.

Carmen connected with Frances' feelings on a deeply personally level because of a similar response at her first university. After five years in both contract and tenure-track positions and shortly after completing a doctoral degree, she was denied a one-year leave of absence on personal grounds by the male administrators of the day. Utter shock and also an awakening to her own naiveté around expectations of fair treatment in academic life were the result for Carmen. Hayford's (2002) words referring to her own years in the academy speak volumes: “The central problem we face as academic women is surviving the petty but unending and

ultimately corrosive slights of academic life. I am trying hard not to let bitterness overtake me.” (p. 114). She continued: “Be prepared to be an individualist because the chances are that’s what you will have to be if you want to get anywhere” (p. 114). The voices heard above speak personally about the truth of this important lesson.

Myth 3: Good Work Will Be Rewarded

In universities, academics’ work is assessed on the grounds of teaching evaluations, service work on department and university committees, and scholarly contributions and research grants and publications. There are formal milestone texts surrounding tenure and promotion to be observed in regard to all these places of good work that are written into the institutional ruling relations of the university (Smith, 2005). There are also multiple and informal places where judgments are formed by colleagues about others’ work. For example, if a new academic is popular as an instructor for the vision or practice brought to class and engaged with students, insiders not so blessed may judge that individual harshly; if publications rest in boundary-crossing areas or newer journals, insiders may judge such work not to be “academic enough;” if newcomers do not put themselves forward for endless committee work, then insiders may find them not to be following the traditional trail toward acceptance for tenure. Whether formal or informal, academics’ work and the academics themselves can be harshly judged by peers. Rather than speaking about being rewarded for good work, participants reflected on some of the difficulties they experienced around others’ perceptions of their work contributions. For example, Frances reported:

There were expectations for a good 12 hours of work a day, but it became very clear that there should be no expectation that that would be rewarded. . . . The whole commitment to work with students and sort of be around and always be a shoulder to lean on for students—it’s very time consuming and very emotionally connected. So it is particularly hurtful when that is not appreciated.

Min also described her contributions and commitment to teaching, and the ways her colleagues responded:

I always get full [classes] and more, and then there are people who had four or five.... I kept feeling like I was overwhelmed and people around me could see that I was being overwhelmed.... I had to come to the realization that I was not serving anybody, least of which is me... and probably it is not serving the faculty as a whole. I begin to see that if other people are getting credit for teaching five people and I teach 23 [something is wrong].... I know people accuse me of false modesty [because I am popular with students].

At an interview just before her tenure application was to be considered, she reflected, “probably they will acknowledge my service both serving students and [as] a very strong workhorse.” Yet, it was still unclear to her how much value was assigned to this work, an issue that has been raised in countless other publications (e. g., Hall, 1999; Litner, 2002).

Throughout our transcripts, there are many excerpts that speak to the fact that new academics experience a critique

beyond the usual expectations for more experienced academics. As Curry (2002) wrote:

Some faculty [insiders] view their responsibilities as those of gate keepers. For them, the goal of the process is to find reasons not to award tenure [to keep individuals out]. . . . For some [others] the goal is to find reasons to promote and award tenure. Prominence of these roles seems to depend upon the extent to which there is an affinity for the individual. . . . If the individual is different, unless that difference is viewed as value added or trivial, she will be excluded. (p. 122)

This sense of exclusion is noted at many formal and informal junctures in stories in our transcripts. Good work was not always rewarded.

Myth 4: Academic Freedom is Always Supported

John spoke of being “inside on the edge” in his department after taking the notion of academic freedom as a right that would be supported by his academic colleagues. Following a critique of a university initiative that he published in the popular press, he was contacted by upper-level administration about his stance, and soon found himself labeled as against the initiative.

It has been made clear to me in the time since I wrote that article that I have been identified as anti [that initiative], which is not at all true but now that that label is attached to me it has contributed to my sense of being marginalized so that when I’ve applied for certain things here it has been clear, to me anyway, that there’s been very strong attempts to ensure

that I don’t get them if it means a position of responsibility.

As a result, he now feels “I have to either rethink my dreams at this institution or I have to look at going somewhere else to realize these dreams.”

Curry (2002) reported, “what a faculty [and university] values as research and scholarship... can and does preempt individual interests.” The wrist slapping John received had resounding consequences, which speaks to the importance of attending to the informal subtexts that abound in academic life. The text an individual believes to be a guide may, in fact, not be there at all.

Myth 6: Academics Respect One Another

Academics quickly find that their insider colleagues are not shy with their subtext of disrespect. Carmen provided many examples from her warehouse of experience across three institutions: students told her that a faculty colleague assured them in his class that she did not know what she was talking about; an acting Dean greeted her with surprise when she learned Carmen had exemplary teaching evaluations and had supported 23 graduate students to complete a thesis or research paper over a three-year period; several colleagues had expressed amazement when she received a nationally competitive research grant for what they named a light weight topic. The list could go on.

John expressed his disappointment in what he perceived to be a lack of respect and lack of commitment to supporting each other within his department:

You don’t get letters of support from anyone [when you go for tenure or promotion, even though department

members] are invited to [submit them]. We've become in my opinion a faculty of individuals. We're not a community.... How long does it take to write a letter of support for a faculty member? . . . What I wanted was a sense of community. I wanted people to work with [but] I have people I work alongside of and each person seems to be trying to focus on their own career and do things they need to do to get themselves ahead. We have become a competitive community. . . . We are not openly fighting but we are a collection of individuals who work under one roof.

Mary also spoke about feeling a lack of respect in her department and her resulting inability to trust her Dean:

I know now that I can't trust my Dean to do anything. . . . Of course I've been angry and hurt and have cried. Just like how could somebody mistreat me like that? What is it that I do that they would mistreat me like that? I've had those times but I don't want that to be who I am, that I'm bitter.

The disrespect among department members can even lead to vengeful behaviour, as Frances noted:

If your innovations... are seen as threats to people, if they take them as personal criticism that you are thinking about this and taking a more postmodern approach to things than their very modernist sensibility that they have invested in and worked on... they can get back at you. I mean you find yourself with a ridiculous teaching situation or who knows what in order to sort of keep you in your

place.... Opportunities for vengeance are there.

So many of our interviews included pleas for respect, and yet it seemed to be in short supply in many of the departments in which these individuals worked.

Beyond Myths of Inclusion: Toward Full Engagement

Stalker and Prentice (1998) described respect in terms of inclusion, asking: "What would it take to transform the exclusive academy into an inclusive one in which all participants are judged and treated by the same criteria?" (p. 15). Such inclusion could overturn the exclusion that they saw as prevalent within Canadian universities. As they report,

Canadian universities... are characterized by patterns of exclusion ranging from the most overt and institutional to the most subtle and interpersonal. Women and minorities have sometimes named this the "ton of feathers" syndrome. Taken individually, particular practices, procedures or policies may be almost negligible in their effects, but their collective impact is enormous. (p. 15)

Presently, well over a decade after their quote was written, storied data from our study indicates that these issues are alive and well in the experiences of the participating academics. As Stalker and Prentice noted, "Belief in something that is neither true nor conforms with facts is an illusion, a false hope" (p. 29). Individual academics have described the downward spiral created internally when they found they were living an illusion. Once the myths noted in earlier sections

of this article were uncovered and understood through personal experience, it was clearly difficult and sometimes impossible for them to carry on as before. Contrary to Ely's assertion that opens this article, not everyone can thrive "neighboured by fruit of baser quality" (*King Henry V*, Act 1, Scene 1, line 61).

Over the last number of years, a growing number of studies and books have highlighted myths in academe. Like

the increasing mass of stories emerging in the popular press about abuse in relationships in recent years, the act of voicing the collective story of academics' experiences in the academy may help shatter the myths of inclusion brought forward by Stalker and Prentice (1998) and others, and may lay the groundwork for a different text, one where every feather gets counted and a positive force for change is the result.

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