

Roundtable Observer Reflections

Burt Howell

The author surveys several academics who describe the ways that academic culture takes a toll on the personal lives of professors, and suggests that the Roundtable model offers an opportunity for professors to recover a sense of the good that they seek to accomplish in their profession.

The Roundtable has many virtues. It asks participants to write about and discuss topics critical to the mission of Catholic higher education. The papers are published in the *Integritas* journal and the public nature of this discussion confronts the academic norm of faith being a private matter that should only be written about by theologians. Participants prove that scholars from a variety of disciplines can connect faith and reason. This is cause for celebration and praise.

Another strength is its collegiality. The Roundtable is an engaging weekend with excellent colleagues and wonderful meals. Yet it is more than a retreat from routine. James Keenan, S.J., argues that a lack of collegiality leads to an unethical culture in university life. The Roundtable promotes ethics by allowing professors to interact across disciplines, institutions, and different expressions of what it means to be in Catholic higher education. Knowing each other better builds respect and understanding of how we might live out the ethical standards of religiously affiliated universities and colleges.

While there are many more to list, an important virtue of this program is unstated during the weekends at the Connors Center in Dover, Massachusetts. It implies a challenge to our institutions: how might Catholic higher education nurture and multiply the number of faculty ready for this type of experience? Most campuses have scholars who are prepared to participate in programs like this. However, many professors are not ready, willing, or able to make a public statement as the Roundtable requires. Two obstacles come in the form of questions professors often ask when pressed: first, why should I care about the Catholic mission? *It is not my job and I have no training or expertise in this area. My involvement would be an embarrassment to me and "amateur hour" for my*

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students. Second, why should I trust this tradition? *Catholicism—at least as it appears in the media—troubles me. I don't mind that this is a Catholic university, but I prefer to stay away from it so it does not damage my work.*

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I will say more about this last challenge and argue that Catholic higher education should invest—even when budgets are tight—in increasing the number of faculty prepared to join a program like the Roundtable. While my argument draws on faculty essays from academic newspapers and magazines, it is also informed by my experience working with professors for the past 16 years at Boston College. My office sponsors seminars, lunches, teas, retreats, immersion trips, and pilgrimages for faculty members. I am not a professor and I probably misread parts of faculty life. But I also have the advantage of being an outsider. I observe and listen to a number of faculty members from different departments and schools in a mid-sized Catholic research university.

To make the case, I will start with my perception of the needs of professors. And I will examine faculty perspectives from across American higher education, not just colleagues working in Catholic universities and colleges. I take this wider view because a large number of our faculty are formed in non-Catholic graduate programs. What I am describing may not be new to professors but I hope it might shed light on the accomplishments of the Roundtable.

On the surface, academic life seems ideal. Faculty members have a professional role that gives them status in society, the responsibility and authority to advance knowledge and influence students, and freedom to set their research agenda and structure their time.

But when you listen to professors talk about their lives, they sometimes tell another side of the story. They also describe a current of bitterness, fear, shame, and rejection that runs through the role despite the appealing compensations; and this current of toxicity threatens the promise that attracted them to academia in the first place. Three essays by professors address these problems.

First, Ejner Jensen, an English professor from the University of Michigan, describes the possibility of bitterness. He writes: “The 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.”¹ According to Jensen, it is common to be judged a relative failure because

¹ Ejner Jensen, “The Bitter Groves of Academe – Why Many College Faculty Members Feel Bitter,” *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 27(1) (January-February, 1995), 2.

few achieve “scholarly eminence.”² Even those that move up the ranks may feel their accomplishments are not enough to reach the status they desire and feel they deserve. And they may also sense that the rewards are not frequent enough given their effort and talent.³ Jensen notes this bitterness is a cultural and “even spiritual” problem.⁴

Second, Jennifer Webb, an associate professor of art history at the University of Minnesota at Duluth, writes about fear and shame. Her essay grew from her experience of the frustration of falling short of her summer research goals. It caused her to reflect on what drives academic life. She says, “What I most wish I had known when I graduated from college is that the academic world—through graduate school to tenure and beyond—is fueled by fear and shame: fear that we aren’t smart enough, shame that we don’t do enough.”⁵ Even after earning tenure, she worries she should be reading, writing, and accomplishing more. She calls the tenure process “one of the most horrible experiences I’ve ever endured” and hopes she does not pass anxiety to her students.⁶

Finally, the journalist Rebecca Schuman talks about rejection. Schuman has a doctorate in German and wrote *Kafka and Wittgenstein: The Case for Analytic Modernism*. But her search for an academic job ended in rejection. This experience led her to ask why academic rejection is so painful. She says she was not actively suicidal, yet she writes: “I kept thinking: If only I could just, you know, find myself in a quick but violent accident. Academic failure felt like the death of a substantial part of my identity—and I sincerely believed the best possible outcome was for the rest of me to die along with it.”⁷ She interviewed others rejected for tenure or full professor or that had an article turned down by a journal or a manuscript proposal denied by a university press and found academic rejection “crushing” for many. Because professors often identify with their roles completely, the hurt of rejection is intense and she believes the need for redemption is great.⁸

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Jensen, Webb, and Schuman describe a culture of scarcity in their view of university life. In this perspective on institutions, there is not enough good for everyone. The

2 Jensen, 3.

3 Jensen, 5.

4 Jensen, 6.

5 Jennifer Webb, “My Imposter Syndrome,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (December 9, 2013), 2.

6 Webb, 3.

7 Rebecca Schuman, “Why Is Academic Rejection So Very Crushing?” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, (June 2, 2014), 1.

8 Schuman, 2-3.

strongest take the available good and the others are left with the scraps or sometimes with nothing. This culture leaves faculty feeling vaguely dissatisfied and unfulfilled even as they acknowledge the benefits of their positions.

Of course this catalogue of hurt does not represent all of faculty life. Many are not in pain or any significant trouble despite some complaints. And feeling bitterness and anxiety is not a dire life-threatening condition. However, the chance of being ensnared by a deepening sense of bitterness, fear, shame, or loss seems likely to waste the potential of talented people and contribute to a stagnant work environment. If there is suffering and maybe lost promise caused by these troubles, then there is reason for a pastoral response. Jensen calls it a spiritual problem and Schuman hopes for redemption, both using language familiar to religious practice. In fact, Schuman argues for compassion. She calls for: “Compassion for the rejected self, and compassion for those we feel have rejected us—people who are, of course, rarely acting out of personal malice, but instead simply doing their own jobs to the best of their ability. We must evoke compassion, that is, for a system full of people who are, in one way or another, hurting, in both failure and success.”⁹

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Catholic institutions should listen to Schuman’s call. The hurt among faculty is an opportunity to serve our neighbors and to share the riches of the Christian tradition with our colleagues. We know something about compassion. As a tradition that tells the story of the Good Samaritan, our institutions should practice binding up wounds and paying for a place to heal instead of walking past the scene of the crime. Catholic universities need to exercise this expertise and focus the necessary leadership, political will, creativity, and funding support.

This already happens in some corners of Catholic higher education. A Spanish and Portuguese department professor from Georgetown University named Barbara Mujica wrote about her engagement with the mission for the magazine *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*. Mujica came to Georgetown as an idealistic atheist brimming with enthusiasm for her research and teaching. But department politics, including lawsuits between colleagues and shouting matches during faculty meetings, soured her love of the classroom and turned her writing into empty exercises. During the height of the backbiting and meltdowns, she was invited to a silent Ignatian retreat. She threw the brochure in the wastepaper basket. After all, atheists don’t go on retreats. But one

9 Schuman, 3.

day she found herself in tears while preparing for class. She went through her trash, found the discarded invitation, and applied for the program, finally attracted by the promise of quiet.¹⁰ She was surprised by the influence of those five days. At first she was uncomfortable and resistant to the idea of a spiritual director. But as time passed she gradually felt an awareness dawning in her—a pull toward goodness and wholeness—and she came home renewed. She could not shake the power of her memory of peace.¹¹ Not content to end her discoveries after the retreat, she began to study Teresa of Avila and Julian of Norwich. She joined a book group, took a graduate course, and then taught a class on the Spanish mystics. Later she published papers and two books on Teresa.¹² After her son fought in Iraq and came back to his studies to face the struggle of integration into civilian life, she started a support group on campus for veterans and served as a mentor to veterans enrolled at Georgetown.¹³

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When Mujica first arrived at her Catholic university, she would not have been ready for the Roundtable. Then the institution invested in her growth and she was in a better position to answer why she should care and trust. Her answer to these questions comes in the last sentence of her essay: “My mature years at Georgetown have been filled with joy.”¹⁴ Moved by a Catholic ritual, she found a source of unlimited good and it changed her professional and personal life. Strife still existed in her department but she was untouched by it because she was busy publishing books and connecting her students with texts, ideas, problems, and questions she believed were life giving.

We have much work to do—as leaders and especially fundraisers—to increase the opportunities for this kind of discovery and subsequent achievement. But I cannot imagine a better remedy than joy to begin to treat the toxin of discontent and to promote a greater possibility for flourishing.

10 Barabara Mujica, “A Committed Life,” *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education* 46/5 (September 2014), 2.

11 Mujica, 2.

12 Mujica, 4.

13 Mujica, 5.

14 Mujica, 6.

