diary
Untenured
By Untenured
Updated Sunday, Feb. 21, 1999, at 12:30 AM ET

The first thing you need to know about the average assistant professor is that she or he spends the year before the Day of Judgment—in which it is decided whether or not she or he gets tenure—in a state of anxiety and paranoia. As a former professor once observed, "Never forget that every paranoid's discourse contains more than a small grain of truth." Whether justified or not (and you never know until it is too late to matter but you always know once it is too late to matter), this paranoia is a breeding ground for more paranoia. The assistant professor about to undergo a tenure hearing seems to attract horror stories from well-wishers and sadists alike eager to commiserate or to tell sordid tales of brethren who got the ax.

Just last weekend, as I was innocently trying to choose between Gruyère and cheddar at the local grocery store, I bumped into the shiny face of a tenured colleague from a related department who raced across the aisles to ask me "how I was holding up" and "whether I knew who would vote for or against me" on the Big Day. I replied that I was "holding up" quite well, thank you, and then ran home to lie down for several hours.

And in the past few weeks I have heard about: one tenure decision that ended in litigation; another one that seems likely to; an assistant professor whose tenure case was scuttled by his closest "friend" and "mentor"; and a healthy number of tenure-related narratives detailing the hilarious or catastrophic consequences of misdirected e-mail. (Misdirected e-mail has become its own subgenre of academic nightmare; the nefarious possibilities are infinite. In particular, graduate students are carrier pigeons from hell. They are known to forward anything sent to them to the worst possible recipients. They are particularly adept in the art of making your "helpful advice" seem like an attack on a colleague.)

Let me assure you that I love my job. This is no mean feat given some of the drawbacks of academic life. Academic survival requires that you endure a Darwinian test that selects for a peculiar cocktail of masochism, sadism, perversity, and the ability to withstand large quantities of institutionalized torture over long periods of time with few measurable rewards. Masochism? You spend years and years and years writing a book that will be read by ten people and then remaindered. Sadism? You are on the board of a university press that publishes those sorts of books and have to decide whether to publish one that some other poor professor has spent years and years writing. Perversity? You have to give a glowing introduction to a guest speaker who, you just learned, single-handedly made sure you weren't hired at his institution. Torture? At some point during the tenure process, a damning letter suddenly appears in your file from a student you thought you treated well--and you don't find out until it is much...
too late.

For all this, the pay is lousy and academics get no respect. Being populists, Americans tend to treat higher learning with distrust, disdain, and/or uncomfortable awe. I have a philosopher friend who learned long ago that mentioning his profession was a sure-fire way to stop conversation at a social gathering. And within the university, while there is no fool-proof standard of success, there are many forms of failure--some of which are so baroque that they take years to become, as a doctor might say, "emergent." At the end of the day, when and if the tenure battle is won, one faces the even more frightening prospect that one could join the ranks of "deadwood," "dinosaurs," or any of the other species of Tenured Undead who end their days pickled in the brine of their unwritten books and unfulfilled aspirations.

Posted Tuesday, Feb. 16, 1999, at 6:30 PM ET

Today I bumped into a former student, the incomparable young B. I met B. last year, when he was just a nubile freshman. B. had liked to let it be known that he had already read everything we were going to read in class "for fun." He spoke in aphorisms, quoted Pynchon and Nietzsche, and wrote me daily e-mails requesting that I answer his arcane questions about the finer points of deconstruction. I would awaken to find his daily missives addressed to "yo, professor." He stalked my office hours on a regular basis to seek my advice about philosophy, literature, life and, of course, his glorious future. In short, for a good 15-week span of time, we developed a relationship of sorts.

But that was last year. Today, I catch my first glimpse of his sophomore self. When he sees me, he saunters over and says, "Hey, professor." I say, "Hey, B., what's new?" He says, "You know, I'm taking this grad course with Professor N. (He lingers over the word grad). I say, "Wow, that's great!" (Professor N. is, in fact, a friend of mine, so I actually am quite pleased.) But does he stop there? No. He says, "Professor N. is really cool." I'm still fine with that. Does he stop there? No. "Professor N.," he says, looking at me intently, "is who I want to be when I grow up." That's just fine, I think. Professor N. is smart, hip, sexy, and gay. I wonder if B. has any idea. Then he narrows his eyes and delivers the zinger: "I took an undergrad class with him, too. He really knows how to handle a class." Okay, okay. So now I want to turn around and shriek, "So what am I, chopped liver?"

Teaching often leaves one feeling a little like chopped liver. It is like some intense romance which retroactively turns into a one-night stand. But weirder still--it is like a one-night stand you keep having over and over. Students come and go but always stay the same age. I sometimes have the feeling that I have had several similar relationships with generations of their slightly older prototypes over the years. I had met B. in his many previous incarnations. In my graduate student days, he might have been what we liked to call the Heidegger boy. The Heidegger boy would always find a way to fit a discussion of Heidegger into any and every conversation. The Heidegger boy is brilliant, aloof, and a bit cold around the edges. The Heidegger boy has some interpersonal limitations.
But emotional attachment to students takes many archetypical forms: These range from grand, unconsummated courtly passion to raging, unconsummated, stuttering lust. There are more complex forms as well. There is the love one feels for the beautiful young woman who doesn't know she is brilliant and the love one feels for her twin--the brilliant young woman who doesn't know she is lovable. There is the earnest frat boy who learns to think. The boy one wanted to date in high school but didn't. I have always had a particular penchant for young men of 20 whose intellectual excitement translates into a steamy sort of vulnerability. Sometimes one falls in love with a class as a whole, like an adorable Borg whose every part is equally adorable. During these semesters, a random absence from any student feels like an amputation.

Sitting on my desk is a stack of this semester's students' first papers. I have promised to read them by tomorrow, but I don't dare to look at them. I have been teaching long enough to know that the minute I look at those papers, I will enter a new phase of relations with my students and that the current honeymoon will be over. Although I was initially quite enamored of them, I am starting to suspect that they're humoring me--they don't really want to be there--but they're too polite and well-groomed to let me know. I'll probably know by the end of the week whether we're headed toward civil cohabitation, guarded distance or, perhaps, some lighter passion.

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Posted Wednesday, Feb. 17, 1999, at 6:30 PM ET

The German philosopher Walter Benjamin reminds us that hell is "the province of those who are not allowed to complete anything they have started." I spent another day in hell. If you read yesterday's diary, you will recall that I had promised to return a set of papers to my students. As of 9:30 a.m., I am just beginning to grade them. My worst fears are confirmed. I read the first one and discover that it is incoherent, badly written, and has no main idea. Worse, all the mangled phrases in the paper sound like someone has taped my voice and played it back in slow motion so that it makes the kind of canned groaning noises one plays in haunted houses to scare small children. The next one is a better-organized version of the first one. Here I am subjected to legible sound bites of my own voice. That is even scarier. The paper is dutiful, superficial, and full of spelling and grammatical errors. Quickly losing faith, I decide to cheat. I flip through the pile to find the one written by the student that I suspect should turn out to be the smartest in the class. The paper is unreadable; I stuff it under the bottom of the pile. Now I am frantically thumbing through the pile to find the paper written by the student who will really turn out to be the smartest in the class. In this paper, I discover the horrible truth. The student had clearly struggled and had honestly put on a good show, but even she could muster no real interest, conviction, or understanding of the book we had been reading over the last three weeks. I take a deep breath.

Just then, there's a loud knock at my door. In walks one of my most respected senior colleagues. I haven't seen him for a year, since he has been away on sabbatical. He is holding a manuscript covered with scrawls. It is a chapter of my book. I had sent it to him and he graciously agreed to read it for me.
After a preliminary compliment or two, he cuts to the chase. My argument is cogent but there are factual errors in my chapter. It seems that I make some claims that are downright wrong. He has generously documented my mistakes and suggested revisions. Oh well, I think. So much for having "finished" the chapter.

Nonetheless, I am relieved by his response. He, at least, is a "friendly" reader. What will happen when some less friendly reader gets his paws on the thing? Some of those less friendly readers live in my department. Others write anonymous reader's reports for university presses. I consider myself lucky, but now it is 11:15 a.m., and I have to run to class without having graded the papers but having graded just enough of them to make me feel both guilty and hostile. I am also quasi-underprepared because I stupidly thought that I would have the time to look over my teaching notes before heading off to class.

As I rush to class, late, I bump into the incomparable B. Today the sight of him fills me with horror--as if he had sprung fully formed out of my own description of him in yesterday's diary. Flustered, I rush into class and do the absolutely worst thing a professor can ever do: I apologize, I confess, and then I share my honest impressions of the papers I have read with the students!

I hear myself asking them whether they want me to grade "honestly" or whether they want me to "inflate their grades" to spare their feelings! I can't believe my own ears! I'm finished! I really must blame the Slate "Diary" for this. It has gotten me into the habit of reflecting on my teaching, and now I am confiding, confessing, and reflecting to my students.

Now, since I hadn't returned the papers when I said I was going to, I do what every guilty professor does--I create more work for myself. I propose that they "sign up" for individual meetings with me this week so that we can discuss them as "drafts" and then they will rewrite them for an honest, but improved, grade. So now it is 1 p.m. and my papers are even less graded than they were at 9:30 and I have just lost eight more hours of the rest of my week.

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Posted Thursday, Feb. 18, 1999, at 7:00 PM ET

Today, as I struggled through the dual and mutually exclusive demands of my day job and my gig moonlighting for Slate, I find myself making the following unfortunate comparison:

Writing for Slate is:

1) paid

2) instantly published
3) read by large numbers of indulgent readers

4) finite

5) paid

Academic writing is:

1) unpaid

2) hardly ever published

3) read by small numbers of unforgiving readers

4) infinite

5) unpaid

This provokes a terrible revelation: Not only do I live in hell, but I do the devil's work.

Today, this was quite true. After numerous hours meeting face to face with the undergraduate students to discuss their paper drafts, I entered the infernal realm of the Ph.D. oral exam. To understand what this entails, you must appreciate that graduate students suck up time like vampirous vacuum cleaners. They cannot help it, it's not their fault, but even the slightest contact with them translates into temporal losses of catastrophic magnitude. The typical graduate student Ph.D. exam begins with flirtation and flattery. They spot you in the hall, sidle up to you and, in dulcet tones, they whisper: "Will you be on my exam committee?" Or they call and say, "I need to see you. I can't take my exam without you. Only you can help me."

O vanity of vanities. I am a colossal sucker for this kind of sweet talk. The very minute you sign on to their committee, the notion of "office hours" turns into wispy smoke. They come waving lists of obscure titles one pretends to have read, but hasn't. They want to be examined on these great works. They need to talk about them. But when they roll in to discuss the books, they are timid, they are frightened, they are lost. The more lost they become, the more they need expert advice. I am the expert here, but for the life of me I can't remember anything about the damn book they're working on. Or I've never read it. I try to be brave, and compensate with time and attention. Each meeting usually takes at least an hour or two. We meet for weeks, months, sometimes almost a year as they postpone their exam and change their books. But all this is mere foreplay. As the dreaded date of their exam approaches, they become even more hungry and desperate for time. I catch the crazed look in their eyes. Their panic is contagious, and I start making evening appointments. Weekends. They have no limits.

By the time of the exam, I am a nervous wreck. The titles on their exam list snicker and sneer at me,
contemptuously. Subliminally, I can hear their singsong nya-nyas: "You don't know anything, you are a faker, you are a fraud." "Snuff it," I snarl back. "I am the damn expert." "Yeah, right, whatever," they mumble. And then we walk into the room. Where there are experts.

Dear readers, before I bid you adieu, I want to thank you for your mail. It seems that we, the "Untenured," are legion. But I must admit I am befuddled by responses I've gotten from the rest of you. In the last few days, I have received letters excoriating me for my insensitivity, my cruelty, my emotional selfishness. You have expressed sorrow, sadness, anger, and indignation that one such as I should be charged to touch the tender minds of young people when I am so clearly lacking in a moral center. But have you not perhaps mistaken levity for flippancy, spleen for nihilism, irony for irresponsibility? News Flash: The "Diary" is true fiction. In my defense, I invoke nothing less than my own vocation, literature itself. Listen to the sound of Melville's great song of American naysaying:

... whenever it is a damp and drizzly November in my soul, whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off--then I account it high time to get to the sea as soon as I can.

It is very late. I have had a long, hard day. I have taught classes, met with two graduate students who are preparing Ph.D. exams, written letters of evaluation. I also attended a brilliant lecture by a visiting scholar. Since the lecture was very difficult, I felt duty-bound to ask a question that would clarify it for others.

Incidentally, the incomparable young B. showed up at the lecture. When he saw me, he brightened visibly. I was talking to another professor. He circled around cautiously and then asked, shyly, "Are you going to the lecture?" When I said that I was, he smiled, pleased. The very sight of me there listening while he listens would make him hear better. He knew it and I knew it.

After the lecture, I went out to dinner with the speaker and some colleagues. I ate well. Even untenured professors who bite the hands that feed them are sometimes well fed. And now, at 3:00 a.m., I find myself responding to the few of you who mistake the devil in me for my authentic self. I feel the need to quote Melville. And I have to restrain myself from hauling in, say, Notes From the Underground. Now, why do you think I would feel compelled to explicate? Substantiate? Illustrate?

Maybe it's because I'm a teacher.
Untenured is an assistant professor at a well-known private American university.

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