

1. Colmes

The relationships among humans and the institutions in which they reside are mysterious and ephemeral, so insists Professor Thomas Colmes. They are fraught with unexpected events, unpredictable consequences of actions, yet driven by the hard choices people make every day of their lives. How humans act and react to each other remains the greatest question of life, according to the professor. If you can foresee, indeed, “understand” how others respond to each and every person they meet, you will know how to arrange their social and physical environment and thus solve the problems of human action that present themselves.

In the matter of “criminal action,” most often the mistakes made in commission of a criminal act, combined with the mistakes made in uncovering and detecting such an act, if understood, will lead to a solution of the problem. I have never quite grasped this approach to human problems, but it is what Professor Colmes preaches to me and applies to the treatment of his clients daily.

His great skill, however, is the professor’s ability to size up a quarry (that is, someone who comes to him for help) and to draw conclusions as to what they really think and plan to do. That is what he means by “truth” something that he insists is fleeting, exists only temporarily in time. All one can do is to make a calculated guess about any statement that a person makes, as to what it means, or more importantly, what it intends.

If this sounds rather academic, maybe full of fluff, indeed that is so. We inhabit, after all, academia. Any academic institution resides in a thick cerebral fog within the bricks and mortar of its building, filling its offices, oozing under the cracks of closed doors into hallways, classrooms, even wafting in the breeze of courtyards and sports grounds (though the latter exist warily on the fringe of academic bounds as our later case of *The Student Body* suggests). It’s a fog of words. I give you here only a small taste of Colmes’s magic. His “method” if one may call it that, is far more complex, as becomes apparent when you see it at work in his cases.

I might say that Professor Colmes remains a mystery to me, even though I have known him, and have been his research assistant—the polite name of one who serves his master in academia—for almost all of my many years here in the land of the (almost) mighty dollar. I am quite sure that he was instrumental in my admission to the university, for I cannot understand how I would have qualified for admission otherwise. After all, my English was, and is, only passable, having come from Australia in 1975. He has always referred to me by my last name, Hobson, as he does to everyone else, student or faculty, which maybe belies his British origin, though his accent is very faint. Rather his American accent is more Bostonian if anything. In any event, his overall presentation is one of Victorian intellectual superiority and refined upbringing. But the scuttlebutt among the students is that his accent is put on, and that he really grew up in the slums of Chicago. Whatever!

Yet his role as a problem solver is embedded in the university administration. Whenever a particular problem arises, large or small, he is called in. I should say that this is not quite correct. I am never sure how he communicates or gets a case referred to him. But I always know that something is up when I hear the bang on the wall of my office that separates mine from his, “Hobson!” And sometimes if he is in a jolly mood “Hobs!” And off I trot, out of my office and into is.

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We reside in Schumaker University just seven miles east of Albany, New York’s capital city, across the other side of the Hudson as if to avoid interference from the New York State legislature. It is a magnificent edifice, laid out in rectangular pattern, four high rise dormitories at each corner of a huge square, built during the golden years in the 1960s during the reign of Governor Nelson Rockefeller. Our offices are located on a part of the campus that few would even know exists, with the exceptions of those who attend the submerged heating, cooling and other mechanical systems essential to keep the physical structures of the university up and running. That is, our offices are in a basement. Mine is a long narrow office, more like the end of a tunnel or narrow hallway, one side of it covered with cupboards and closets that house what is probably the communications system of the building, because it lets out a constant low hum. What building it

resides under one can only guess, what with the high rise towers of some sixteen floors at each corner, connected to a quadrangle, not unlike the early design of an American penitentiary. All of this hovering over wide tunnels that form a basement, one of which houses our offices.

The professor's square-shaped office, is lined with books on all four of its walls, though strangely as I noticed the first time I entered, there were no filing cabinets, at least nothing to speak of. The exceptions are the drawers that make up the sides of his desk. Though I know that they too are almost empty. One would think that during the course of thirty years and counting, he would have accumulated many documents concerning his past cases. I almost said "problems that he has solved," but that would be an exaggeration, for Professor Colmes insists that no matter what the problem, it can rarely be completely solved. All one can do is to reach an agreeable conclusion with a decisive action that will solve the problem for that moment to the satisfaction of all parties, but in truth, the relationships between people are so complex and their desires so irascible, that relationships are constantly on the edge of dissolution. Thus he considers it a gross exaggeration to claim that one has completely solved a problem.

But back to the filing cabinets, or lack thereof. They instead line my office, along one wall, bookshelves above them, which means I have very little room to spare for anything else except my narrow desk and a small square stool that I stand on to reach the top shelves. The cabinets only exist because I started long ago to write up the cases we dealt with, collected the relevant documents, and stored them away in the filing cabinets. Colmes was amused at this, and I detected a kind of resentment that I took it on myself to do it. The reason I did so will become apparent as I describe his many fascinating cases, drawing on the notes I kept along the way in my time as his willing and dotting assistant.

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It is now almost sixteen years since I entered grad school. Good grief! You are understandably thinking. What a bludger! (Aussie slang describing one who lives off others and doesn't have a job). Professor Colmes, in his lighter moments, of which there are few, refers to me as the permanent fixture of the university, a little like a piece of furniture, a piece of furniture that evokes Andy Warhol's obsession with such—a wood filing

cabinet with human features squashed into the top drawer its arms crossed in the second drawer, and legs, carved into the bottom.

I entered graduate school for all the wrong reasons, at least with no ambition to become any kind of scholar, or to study a particular subject in depth and eventually emerge as a “doctor” of something. Which is why I chose the new (at the time) criminal justice school, a school that nobody in academia had ever heard of before, a whole school devoted to criminal justice, at a university in the USA, and why, with my doubtful GRE scores—I never opened the envelope that contained my score, so I really do not know to this day what I got—the university chose me, for whatever reason. Actually, I know the reason but I am not telling you. For the purposes of these cases that I will describe, such information is irrelevant.

I am not a bludger! And worse, you probably and rightly do not think of grad school as being anything like work. As an aside, I acknowledge that being a professor in a grad school isn't much like real work either. And even if it were, you may think that sixteen years in grad school is way too long.

But I have my reasons. Simply put, it was, as is the case with the majority of students, a matter of money and with a minority of students, I could remain in the USA on my “F-1” visa, which was valid only while I was a student. This is why I have never graduated with my Ph.D. in criminal justice — that is, I studied criminal justice, wrote my dissertation, but never bothered to graduate. Instead, as soon as I had finished that course, I applied to the Philosophy department to do a doctorate in that field. I reached out to that field at the urging of Professor Colmes. But for the moment, that story can wait.

Criminal justice? At a university? Surely that field belonged at a technical college or community college of some kind, you may well ask. When I applied, I had no idea that there were universities, and there were *universities*. The real ones, you paid for if you had lots of money, the run-of-the-mill ones, were cheaper, almost affordable, and funding was more available. Either way, the School of Criminal Justice to which I applied, not only accepted my application, but also gave me a means of sustenance, a research assistantship funded by the U.S. Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA). Unfortunately, this turned out to be a bit of a fiasco, and my funding only lasted

for my first semester. Someone in the U.S. Department of Justice noticed that I was not a U.S. Citizen, so therefore, the U.S. Government could not use American tax-payers' money to pay a non-citizen. It was the law, and nothing could be done about it.

The good part of this story (though it depends on what one means by "good") is that it was because of this crisis of money that I came to meet Professor Colmes. A slightly older fellow student, who always came to class dressed in collar and tie (ridiculous) and carrying a black briefcase, when he heard of my predicament, suggested that I seek out Professor Colmes, who, he said, was rumored to be a whiz at helping students in trouble. This mysterious professor was not a member of the department, or was it a school? I was confused even about this simple matter of nomenclature, coming from Australia I did not know the differences between a Department and a School. (I still don't).

I found my way to Professor Colmes's office (a challenge in itself), knocked timidly on his door, heard a muffled call, "enter!" I turned the large brass knob and pushed at the really heavy door that opened only just far enough for me to slip into the room. Professor Colmes sat at his desk reading the *New York Times*. (I discovered later that he never read it and got all his news, so it seemed, from the radio broadcasts and TV.) He looked up briefly, I saw a slight twitch at the corner of his tight-lipped mouth, a glimmer of amusement, I thought, dressed as I was in shorts, unshaven, long unkempt hair, scruffy shirt not tucked in.

I almost bowed in his presence, his demeanor was so overpowering, even though he made no attempt at all to stand or even stop what he was doing. In fact, he exclaimed "Ah yes!" picked up a pencil and filled in a word in the *Times* crossword puzzle.

"Sir, er Doctor, Professor Colmes" I mumbled, unsure how to address him.

"Yes, yes, take a seat. I've been expecting you. And for Heaven's sake, don't call me Doctor. I'm not a doctor, you understand?"

"Sorry sir!"

"And no sir either."

"Then what, sir, I mean..."

"Colmes, call me Colmes. Forget the rest."

And I have worked as his assistant ever since. I even had an

office next to his! I had no idea where the money came from, but I received my meagre assistantship allowance every month, and this has been so now for all those many years.

If you have any acquaintance with university life, you may quickly ask, “how can Professor Colmes be your mentor in both departments, even different schools within the university?” You would have to ask him. I could venture a guess. It is because he occupies a unique position in the university, an official title of Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies, which allows him to serve in any department or school of his choosing, for any length of time.

The word “serve” of course does not really describe what he does. No doubt he carefully made sure of that. For, as far as I can remember, I have never seen him enter a classroom, unless he was investigating a particular case that required it. Nor do I know what his doctorate is in. He has always evaded it. In fact, he insists to everyone he meets that he be addressed as “Mister,” his full name being Thomas Colmes, and he signs all his letters (of which there are very few) as simply “Colmes.”

As for myself, my sixteen years have flown by much too quickly. As Colmes likes to say, and often, time is our worst enemy. One dare not stop to wonder why, or time will pass one by. And if one hurries, tries to cut corners, beat time maybe, time will surely trip you up. Colmes says, “there may be no time like the present, but if you pause to find it, it will already have passed.”

But I digress. In fact I have found a quite comfortable means of living, now a supervisor of some years in the North West Dormitory high rise. No, I do not inhabit the top sixteenth floor. I inhabit a small (by grown-up standards) but comfortable apartment, self-contained, my own kitchen, a bedroom big enough that looks out over the courtyard through several long and narrow sealed windows that stretch up to the sixteenth floor. When I first acquired this space (a result of certain machinations of Colmes) I found it especially comforting, surrounded by what seemed to me then millions of tons of concrete that protected me from the evils of outside life. When I mentioned this to Colmes he looked down at me, his gaunt long face, pale and grey surrounding his penetrating dark greenish-grey eyes, sniffed and wrinkled his nose and said, “physical objects have their uses, but protecting

you from yourself is not one of them.”

“That’s not what I meant,” I countered defensively.

He ignored my remark, and turned back to his *Times* crossword puzzle, which he did every morning, as he feasted on his tea and toast that, until I was displaced by a live-in housekeeper, I dutifully picked up from the campus dining room as I crossed the campus from my dorm to his office.

Those of you who are old enough would already have surmised that the nine-eleven attack destroyed the idea that one could be protected by several million tons of concrete. For a few weeks after the attack, I took myself off to the Adirondacks with all my camping gear and camped in the cold, and even the snow. Colmes thought I was mad. In fact, he rarely at all stepped out of doors. His whitish, gray-lined sallow flesh showed it. The most he went outdoors was to emerge from his office to cross the podium and enter the gym where he worked out for at least one hour every day, and when dealing with a particularly difficult case, he might even stay there for several hours. His favorite workout: the punching bag. Actually, since you may have been wondering, his office also served as his apartment. There were doors, three in fact, that led out of his office, into a spacious apartment, large kitchen-dining room (the “open plan” as they call it in Australia), eating area and large bedroom with attached bathroom. It was several years after I became his assistant that I saw his apartment. And I saw it then only because of an incident that occurred in his office that required a quick exit.

But now you can see how difficult it is for me to remain on point. I started out telling you about my own situation, but inevitably ended up telling you more about my mentor. He is a dominating presence. No, I don’t mean dominate as a tyrant or bully—though I have seen those characteristics, which he uses only as a technique to advance a solution to a case he is working on. I can attest that he is truly a passive person, taciturn to a degree, even shy and quiet, but behind that facade lies a person whose rational, even mathematical mind, causes him to lose touch with those around him, to be entirely enveloped in his own thoughts, driven by reason (his idea of it, to be clear) and an unquenchable thirst to solve problems, whether they be crossword puzzles, or grander puzzles that may affect the life and future of the institutions that comprise this university, or the life

or lives of those whose problems have found their way to his office. Fittingly, in one corner of his office there is a small coffee table, upon which sits his chess set, a game always in play, and always against the same opponent, his Russian friend (Trotsky) who mails his move every few days, to which Colmes responds at about the same rate.

How he solves problems is the envy of all those who have benefited from his successes. And what sorts of problems does he tackle?

That question is impossible to answer. I have pondered on it for some years, in fact I once considered—many years ago when trying to come up with a topic for my criminal justice dissertation—doing one on problem solving. But in the end I gave up, for there seemed to be no clear structure to what Colmes did. In fact, there were many times when he made a spur of the moment decision based on no logic at all as far as I could see.

But now, I see him slowing down quite a bit, age catching up with him at long last, and he has begun to drink heavy amounts of red wine, even though alcohol is forbidden on campus (for the usual reasons). I have even entered his office to find him sitting back in his overstuffed leather chair in the far corner of his office, mumbling to himself, a glass of wine to his thin lips in between puffing a small cigarillo, his slightly graying hair ruffled (it is usually carefully groomed) locks of it creating a rough fringe on his still unlined forehead. Could this be the end of Colmes? I hated myself for asking this of myself. It is why I have embarked on a quest to place in the official record, where all could see, his most memorable cases. And I will let those cases speak for themselves.

One final remark. An admission I suppose. Over the years I have actually written accounts of Colmes's cases, at least the most memorable and fascinating ones and sent them to the *Chronicle of Higher Education* so that the practitioners, administrators and teachers could learn of his accomplishments. But every single case I submitted was politely rejected with a simple form letter saying, "we do not publish memoirs, or other accounts of individuals whose privacy may be infringed by such cases.

And now to those cases.

