

48. The Sit-In

The Vietnam War and its aftermath seeded a revolution in universities across America. Students, largely the product of the baby boom that followed World War 2, spurned by adults as spoiled brats, suddenly saw through the hypocrisies of their adult forebears and refused to go to war. They instead began demonstrating in the streets against the injustices they claimed lay hidden behind the facade of suburban life, the “little boxes” as Pete Seeger sang, and most pressing, racial discrimination. In response, politicians were moved to create the “great society” (probably a failure, but that is another story and one that not even Colmes could tackle), and students suddenly came to life *en masse*, especially after the great march on Washington demonstrating against the Vietnam War. Universities were exciting places, alive with all kinds of movements and demonstrations, though by the time of Richard Nixon’s exit, the violence of student protests had died down.

An important part of that process was the “sit-in.” Students copied the well-established non-violent form of protest pioneered by the African American students known as the “Greensboro Four” who in 1960 occupied “whites only” seats at the counter of an F.W. Woolworths store in North Carolina. When they were denied service they refused to leave. Gradually they were joined by many more students until the number reached over a thousand. Eventually, the civil rights act mandated desegregation in public accommodations.

These many protests had one thing in common, which was a list of demands. This case is about one such list. Well, I suppose I should admit that the case was not so much about the list of demands itself, but the ripple effect it had on some of its voluntary and involuntary participants. The case was more or less “solved” by Colmes, but that might depend on one’s point of view.

One more caveat about universities. They are popularly looked upon by many, especially the media, as crucibles of change. This is probably false, at least a misleading

generalization. Universities everywhere are and always have been places where the hierarchy of knowledge is religiously defended. I use that word intentionally, since most if not all modern universities had their beginnings as religious institutions of some kind or other. And the idea that universities add to the repository of knowledge is unshakeable. Dissertations are born and defended upon such a principle.

The hierarchy of knowledge is the foundation on which the classroom sits, solidly, though in subtle ways always vulnerable to attack. Questioning and doubt are rigidly controlled, allowed only as long as they do not undermine the tree of knowledge. The formal lectures are its colorful blossoms, in which the professor stands before the class in an auditorium of some kind, delivers a lecture, the gospel, students take notes and then are examined on their comprehension (that is, memory) of that knowledge.

This is the backbone of all education that begins in kindergarten. I provide you with this somewhat cynical view of education because it is that colossal structure that student sit-ins fight against. They are destined to lose. Or are they?

In the case of *No Exit*, I related how Akira Tanaka's suicide threat and the bomb scare set the stage for successful protest by students, taking advantage of the nervousness of the university administration, assuming that the administration would give in easily to a set of student demands. In the current case, the graduate student association called a meeting to discuss their grievances. Undergraduates were excluded from this meeting. They probably had their own grievances, and besides they were, and are, rather low on the maturity scale. Why these grievances became so severe that they demanded an organized student protest I still do not quite understand. The matter seems to be full of contradictions.

The insistence by university administrators and the academics who despise them, on one shared and profound belief in the hierarchy of knowledge, (sometimes called the cumulative theory of knowledge), is these days expressed by the popular caveat: "follow the science," for that field most clearly promotes the cumulative theory and practice of knowledge. Indeed it would die without it. And of course, it is the scientific method (the practice) that expresses most clearly the advantages of assuming

this fortress of an organized and slowly built body of knowledge, the pieces of which we commonly refer to as facts.

My apologies as usual. I am here wandering off the path, unable to hide my preference for philosophical musings. At the time of this case I was, in fact, trying to write my dissertation for my criminal justice Ph.D., unable to shake off the fluff of thinking without boundaries, an admitted defect of mine, a symptom of my ADD, I insist.

But I do think that these ill-defined thoughts are surely related to explaining how the sit-in arose, or at least what started the demand for change. There are probably few acclaimed “liberal arts” universities in the USA and elsewhere where sit-ins of one kind or another have not taken place.

The sit-in and its resolution by Colmes had its start, I think, with what happened with Akira Tanaka, and the apparent solution that the faculty reached once the bomb was removed from the classroom and the issue of the grades for all students whose exam was interrupted by the bomb scare was resolved.

Note. I called it an “issue.” The solution that was reached by a unanimous vote of the faculty student performance committee of the School of Criminal Justice, to accede to the demand of the bomber to pass all students who took the exam at that time. This was a momentous decision which, when it was taken before the full faculty, created much debate, not so much about issuing a pass for all students, but that Professor Garcia complained (an understatement) that his rights as a professor, his academic freedom, were recklessly disregarded. After a three hour faculty meeting, Ted the Red finally gave in and rather than vote against, was pressured by the Dean to simply abstain. It was essential that they have a unanimous faculty vote on such an important breaking of the rules of student grading. This decision would not become part of the University rules and procedures until it was approved by the faculty senate subcommittee on student grading, and then finally by a vote of the full faculty senate. And only after all that to be approved by the Provost then taken to the President for his signature.

A quiet sense of outrage simmered among the students that the faculty could simply decide who passed a particular exam,

regardless of their performance. It seemed to suggest that examinations were not important any more if all students regardless of preparation, performance or whatever, were going to pass anyway. And this was worsened when a rumor circulated that the entire cause of this outrage was the threat by a student that he would kill himself if he did not receive a passing grade. On the other hand, many were pleased that his happened in the Constitutional law class, the professor of which, Ted the Red was a widely disliked individual by students, seen as a dictatorial bully, rigid and uncompromising. There was even the story that he had once failed a student because his writing was illegible, and would not budge from this decision, even though the student had it typed under careful supervision, so that no cheating would be possible. Still Ted the Red did not budge. An exam is an exam, he insisted. You either do it properly or not at all. This and other stories of arbitrariness, especially of closed book timed exams, brought the students to formulate a bold statement demanding that all examination procedures and grading be reviewed and be changed to meet student needs, rather than those of the professors.

A meeting of the graduate student association was called. It had not met for some months, having apparently considered that there was no business to attend to. In fact, the main purpose that the graduate student association served was to organize the end of semester party. The position of president of the graduate student association was not elected, but simply fell on the student or students who took it upon themselves to organize the booze and goodies for the party. But now, with these rumors of protests and awful injustices being done to the students by their professor, there was cause for concern, and when serious issues arise, there must always be a committee established and chair of the committee elected.

Thus it was that a chain of events occurred to bring Colmes into a situation that would change his life—well, that's my look on it, I doubt he would agree and insist he was in control of all events into which he inserted himself. He proclaimed (boasted) that events never controlled him, he controlled them.

Professor Colmes had just been designated the university's Interdisciplinary Professor, and there was only one of them in the entire university. So just that was enough to strike awe and envy

in other faculty, and wonder by students who bothered to find out who he was and what he did (a challenging task in itself). I was in my early stages with Colmes at this point. He had called me in on a few cases, the most recent the case I have just recounted of the threatened suicide. I now took it upon myself to attend the first student association meeting that was called by a lovely first year graduate student, Ruth Cardigan, a jolly, persistently happy person, whose constant big smile relaxed all in her presence. I took the unusual step for me, to propose Ruth for chair of the Graduate Student Association. As you may have already concluded I prefer on most occasions and certainly in social occasions, to remain in the background, observing, and speaking only when asked to do so. At the time I thought I did this on a whim, but later I realized that I did it because I thought that this might be an occasion where Colmes should be involved, but if I suggested it, I would end up having to take on being president of the association. Ruth was by far the most attractive person for that position, and I do not mean by her looks which were pleasant, but I would not say stunning or even beautiful. It was her happy and radiant smile coupled with what was obviously as soon as she spoke, someone who was very smart, or more accurately, sharp. I could see her sizing up those students present, eyeing them off one by one, smiling and joking.

Only four students showed up for the initial meeting, but I was sure that many more would join in once it got around that change was afoot, especially if it involved exams and grading. It would not be long before the students became very active, perceiving injustices in every corner and under every cushion.

I was about to recommend that we ask Professor Colmes to help us make our case, draw up a list of demands, when Rose the elder came into our meeting room, a small room buried in the catacombs of the library basement. I had met Rose a few times at various meetings, but did not really know much about her, except of course, her never ending knitting. Ruth's countenance lit up even more than ever when Rose entered.

"Oh Rose!" she smiled, "Come join us! We need your experience and no nonsense ways if we are to negotiate our demands with the faculty."

Rose plopped her rather weighty bottom on to the nearest chair and kept knitting. "Do not let them bully you," she said

calmly looking at her knitting.

“Rose, I knew you would say that! It’s why we need you to be our spokeswoman. I can’t do it, I’m too nice, so they say,” said Ruth, giggling in an attractive self-effacing manner.

“No problem,” answered Rose now furiously knitting, “is what you say?”

“Right on, Rose” I blurted with more enthusiasm than was called for.

Rose looked up from her knitting and directly at me, which made me cringe. “Him,” she said pointing at me with a knitting needle, “go out. You should not be here.”

Her Russian accent was solemn and deep, spoken with such harsh authority, I imagined being ordered around by a guard in the Gulag. Instead of speaking up for myself, I just sat staring at Ruth expecting her to ask why. But she just looked at me expecting me to answer, and when I did not, Rose continued.

“Colmes. Your supervisor,” she said, “in this situation can’t be trusted.

Ruth, still radiating goodness, looked at me raising her eyebrows, a pale brown. “Goodness!” she cried, “we can’t have that, can we?” Spoken as though to a class of little children at Sunday school. Rose, though, wasn’t fooling around.

“You stay until we have our list of demands. Then you take them to Colmes,” she ordered, doing me the honor of looking up from her knitting.

I hesitated a little, which caused her to repeat, “otherwise you go now.”

“But why to him?” I asked, “and who elected me as the messenger?” I added with not a little annoyance.

At last Ruth decided to speak up a little as the President elect. “From what I heard I thought Dr. Colmes was more on the side of students. I mean, he helped poor Akira, didn’t he?”

“That’s right,” I added with too much enthusiasm.

“The faculty have already requested him to intercede,” growled Rose.

“Are you sure? How do you know?” I asked, upset that Colmes might have told her something and not me.

Ruth then settled into her role as president elect. “I don’t think those little things matter. Let’s get down to making our list of demands.”

“There are only three of us here, two if you discount Mister Hobson here,” observed Rose.

“Maybe we three could draft a list of demands then put out a call for student input by leaving a note in their mail boxes inviting them to a meeting to discuss the list and any necessary changes,” said Ruth calmly and sweetly. Rose grunted and nodded her assent.

Our problem was that we had to decide what complaint ailed us most. I will not bore you with the many twists and turns of our surprisingly calm discussion. We were, after all, in basic agreement that we were the good guys and the faculty the bad guys. That it would take some forceful action to get their attention in the first place. But we had to have some expression of our discontent made public and made forcefully.

After a few hours we came up with two demands.

1. General Complaint: Faculty should not make rules by fiat without student input. Solution: Students should have representation on all faculty governing committees and have equal voting rights.

2. Specific Complaint: The grading system is vague, rigid and arbitrary, and discriminates against those who for whatever reason are unable to pass them. Solution (a): A committee with equal numbers of faculty and students should meet and draft a new system of grading that is equitable and just, and does not discriminate against any person who is challenged by examinations. Solution (b) Abolish grading completely because of its labelling and stereotypical outcomes, dividing students into winners and losers.

Now it was time for action. Under pressure, I agreed to be the communications person and convey our demands to the faculty. This required the preparation of an additional document announcing our demands and calling for a sit-in. The document I designed looked something like this, only of course in much larger letters:

JOIN OUR SIT-IN
DEMAND EQUITY AND JUSTICE FOR ALL
STUDENTS!
ABOLISH EXAMINATIONS

ABOLISH THE DICTATORSHIP OF THE FACULTY

Before I could finalize this document we had one more issue to decide. What place would we occupy?

This proved to be an especially difficult decision. I started by suggesting the library, since it was exams time and there would be a lot of students there. This was resoundingly rejected for the obvious reason that we were demonstrating against faculty not students. I could see that Ruth was a little hesitant about putting forward an alternative. Rose, of course, the heavyweight among us, said, “go for the jugular, the President’s office.”

Ruth and I looked at each other. There was no option but to agree. It was a bold, and very scary move, but it followed the tactics of other successful sit-ins that had occurred at other universities. We wound up our meeting and agreed to meet again first thing in the morning outside the President’s office. Ruth volunteered to bring as many supporters as she could find and a few sleeping bags. I would bring cups of coffee. Rose sat doing her knitting. She did not exactly say that she would join us. The rest of the time I spent crafting the notices, one listing the demands, the other announcing the sit-in. I gave a bunch to Ruth and we posted them on every noticeboard we could find. Ruth lived off-campus and I still lived in a dorm, a small room on the ground floor where I had the job of dorm supervisor. It was now late at night so I insisted on accompanying Ruth to her apartment off-campus that was maybe a ten minute walk down Eastern Avenue, one of the main roads that passed the university.

I won’t deny it. I was very taken with Ruth. Her happy demeanor was so refreshing. She radiated love—both kinds. And when we reached her apartment we said our goodnights, I wistfully, she brightly, chirping that she would meet me at the President’s office in the morning, “and don’t you be late,” she said laughing and wagging her finger..

Unfortunately, I was late getting to the President’s office because I received an early morning phone call from my new mentor Colmes, requesting that I come by his office as soon as possible. It was urgent, he said. I hurriedly showered, though I was tempted not to, given that I faced the possibility of an all day and maybe night sit-in. I arrived at Colmes’s office around eight-

thirty. The door was ajar so I walked in, knocking lightly. Colmes sat at his desk, doing the NYT crossword.

“Ah, Hobson. There you are! At last,” he said, not looking up.

“My apologies, sir,” I said, “I was...” But Colmes cut me off.

“Never mind. We have a new and quite unusual case, Hobson.”

“We? We’re a team already?” I asked mischievously.

“For the moment, Hobson. Though I should add that it will depend on how this case ends up, given that you have already involved yourself in it.”

“And what case is that?” I asked innocently, an awful feeling gripping my stomach.

“I believe you are involved with a very sweet young lady,” said Colmes, raising his eyes from the crossword, and almost smiling, that twitch at the corner of his mouth.

“Sir, I can explain...” He cut me off again.

“Hobson, I told you when I first took you on that you must not call me ‘sir.’ Now, it’s Colmes, or nothing. Right?”

“If you say so, Colmes,” I said with a strong hint of defiance. It occurred to me right then that this might be the end of a very short relationship.

“Ruth, I think her name is,” he said, and this time he did smile, well almost.

“I’m not really involved,” I began, “I mean...”

“I know what you mean, Hobson. I do. And it’s fine. And you were not to know.”

“Know what?” I asked innocently.

“That I have been asked by the President and Provost to negotiate with the student representatives who have issued a list of demands, and are as we speak occupying the President’s office.”

I gulped, and bit my lip a little. Of course, I should have known. But then I followed up with a kind of recalcitrance that was to become a tendency of mine when working with Colmes. “I am just following your example with Rose,” I said with a silly grin.

Colmes almost smiled again. “You Aussies. You must have your nettling jokes.”

“If you say so, Colmes. And if you think you will be negotiating with me, you are wrong. Rose is our negotiator.” I said this with a good deal of satisfaction. I had got one back at him.

“Yes indeed. Indeed. An interesting situation, don’t you think Hobson?” He stared at me, but I did not flinch.

“Indeed,” I said, “indeed.”

Colmes had advised President O’Brien to get out of town for the day, as students would be taking over his office for a sit-in. It was a crisp day in early spring, so President O’Brien had taken off with Chi-Ling for a day of skiing at Gore Mountain. He especially enjoyed demonstrating to everyone that even with his gammy leg, he could ski and without a walking stick, because he had poles of course. Chi-Ling had never skied before and although she took a lesson, decided it was not for her, so retired to read by the fire in the club house. She had heard of the sit-in and had urged him to be tough. Such lack of respect for their elders and particularly their teachers that these students showed was truly repulsive. If she were president she would punish them severely, suspend them for a semester, and for the most recalcitrant expel them for good. But Finneas was so kind, really too kind. And as she felt the warmth of the fire in her face, she moved away from it a little, and took a deep breath. ‘You are in America’ she reminded herself. ‘Nobody respects authority here.’

I arrived at the President’s office a little flustered. I had stopped by the cafeteria to buy some coffees and goodies to take to the sit-in but could only carry so much. And I was worried that I would be forced into some kind of confrontation with Colmes, and if that happened, I knew I would lose. When I arrived there, though, the place was deserted except for about ten students. All the outer office personnel, the organizers, secretaries, schedulers and the rest were gone. The President must have given them the day off. Many of the students already had drinks and munchies so I was most pleased to be able to offer something to Ruth who sat on the floor beside the President’s desk, at the foot of Rose who sat in his chair, knitting what seemed to be a rather long scarf. I leaned down to offer her my last cup of coffee. She shook

her head and almost smiled, raised her knitting as though to say how can I drink a cup of coffee while I am knitting?

Suddenly there was a blinding flash and I turned to see a photographer accompanied by a reporter approaching me. This was news! “Are you Colmes?” she asked, looking straight at me. Rose gave a big grunt and smiled a little, but kept looking at her knitting.

“Me? Colmes? Ha! That’s a good one,” I replied.

“Indeed it is,” came a distant voice, you can guess whose it was.

“What’s this sit-in all about?” asked the reporter addressing her remarks to no one in particular.

Rose put down her knitting. “Student needs have been ignored too long,” she announced in her thick deep Russian voice. “We demand to be heard!” then she returned to her knitting. I looked at Ruth who sat smiling and filling the room with her happiness.

Colmes approached the president’s desk and leaned over to look very closely into Rose’s face. She seemed a little shocked, dropped her knitting and leaned back as far as she could.

“No need to be frightened,” said Colmes. “I won’t bite you.” His pompous manner was truly repulsive to us all. Murmurs of discontent spread among the students, and a few more students walked in, the President’s office now beginning to feel a little cramped. Colmes did not appear to have noticed any of this. I was most surprised. I had thought that he would be an excellent manipulator of a large group. He seemed only to be interested in Rose.

“A very nice scarf,” he observed, “the university colors too.”

Rose ignored him. Ruth’s innocent eyes were pleading with Colmes to back off. Instead he leaned further over and whispered to Rose. What he said was inaudible. But it had great effect. She dropped her knitting and leaned forward. I swear their noses were almost touching.

“You leave us, come back when you have something sensible to say,” she growled.

“What did he say?” asked Ruth.

“Yes, what?” cried other students. “Leave us! Leave us!” the students began to chant.

Colmes turned to face the small group. ”I simply said...”

“Stop!” called Rose. “Stop!”

“Then you agree?” asked Colmes.

“Agree what?” asked the students frustrated.

Then Rose shocked us all. She threw down her knitting and stood up behind the desk. “He said that the university agrees to all our demands.”

“Then that ends the sit-in,” I naively muttered.

Loud cheers came from the students, the noise echoing off the walls of the president’s office, a large office, but seeming very small when stuffed full of so many people.

Rose picked up her knitting and held it in one hand. “Is not to be believed. Is lies!”

The flash of the photographer added to the excitement, and the reporter rushed forward to Colmes. “Is that so? Is that what you said? You accede to all demands?” she asked, thrusting a microphone in front of his face.

Colmes raised his body into his very straight and upright position one that I would become most familiar with over the years. It reminded me of the soldiers who exaggerate their posture in the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace. He addressed all those present.

“President O’Brien and the Provost have given me full rights to speak on their behalf. They accede to all the student demands. Of course, the demands are rather broad, and do not address the complexity or implications of what abolishing exams will mean. But in the name of peace on campus, I accept on their behalf and the university. It is for you, the students, to now present us with a detailed plan of what, if anything, will replace the exams. And, of course, it remains to be decided what kind of representation students may have on all university committees, that is what proportion. and how they will be selected. Will you, for example, have a place or places on promotion and tenure committees? On hiring? And so on.”

All of this and more Colmes prattled on, seemingly for a very long time, and the students, their attention spans limited, especially when crammed in a small space, became very restless, and then, rather than start more chanting, began to slip away until there were only myself, Ruth, and Rose left. And Colmes finally stopped.

Rose had returned to her knitting, and it seemed that the

world had returned to its former, recognizable self. Colmes appeared most pleased. It was as if he had won the battle, by losing. He looked down at Ruth and said in his most charming Victorian manner, “and with whom do I have the pleasure of meeting?”

Ruth scrambled to her feet and extended her hand. “I’m Ruth Cardigan,” she said, “president of the graduate student association.”

I stepped forward (I had never sat down) and stammered, “Oh, sorry, I should have introduced you.”

Colmes looked at me with amusement, and then looked back at Rose. “Well Rose,” he said, “I think we have much to talk about. Why don’t we all retire to my office and apartment. This agreement calls for a small celebration, does it not? “

That celebration spawned something quite extraordinary, or at least I thought so. When we returned to his office he led us through what I would come to call Door Two, down to the kitchen. Ruth was all smiles and complimented him on his lovely kitchen while he dithered around making tea and retrieving some scones from a tin. Finally, Rose put down her knitting and elbowed him out of the way. “I will make tea,” she said. “You have jam and cream for scones?”

Indeed he did! And I watched in pleasant amusement as the two of them prepared tea and scones with jam and cream, pretty little floral tea cups, sauces and matching plates. And the tea left to draw in a teapot covered with a tea cozy, that I was sure had been knitted by Rose.

I edged my way across to Ruth and pulled out a chair from the table. “May I?” I asked displaying my excellent (for me) English manners.

As you could guess, the ensuing half-hearted attempts to abolish exams never produced results. The meetings among the students became abusive. They finally gave up on the idea of abolishing or even replacing exams with something else. But there was one small success, which was that one student representative was allowed to attend faculty meetings (little did they know what they were asking for), though, a new rule was introduced by the School of Criminal Justice, where after all, given the subject matter, authoritarian structures were always preferred, the student votes were counted separately, as were the

assistant professors' and those of the untenured.

But from my point of view, the major outcome of this small student uprising was that Rose moved into Colmes's apartment and became his housekeeper, and Colmes offered me the office next to his should I become officially his research assistant. Of course, I could not decline such an offer, even though I was a little nervous about inhabiting an office so close to my supervisor, who I had concluded already was a bit of a bully. But my hesitancy was fueled more by my fantasy that I might move in with Ruth and live off campus.

