

57. Circle of Truth

You may have noticed in your own working lives that some people are driven by whatever it is, to rise to the top, or at least to move “up” in the perceived hierarchy of one’s employment line. Or, if you have not yet entered the work place and are still a student somewhere, that there are always those in the class who are, as counsellors and teachers observe, “motivated.” This is a view of work as some kind of race to the “top” though usually those who are ambitious enough to persist in such a race, are often surprised to find that when they get there, somehow, it is not enough. And along the way, such ambitious persons, most likely, and unavoidably, may have purposely, or even rashly, and with little regard or even knowledge of, how they may have affected those perceived to be the competition, whether or not such persons saw themselves as in the same race. This is, as experts call it, a zero-sum game. My promotion means that someone else did not get a promotion. And of course, in a given organization there can only be a certain number of persons at the “top of the ladder.” Otherwise we can’t all be at the top, because if we were, what would be the point of struggling to rise above another?

I have thought about this a good deal because as I have already demonstrated in my descriptions of my mentor’s cases, I have been quite comfortable staying where I am, still an adult who is essentially a permanent student. My critics might call this immature, lazy or something like it, or some would put it bluntly as a lack of ambition. And it’s true that with Colmes, I am in a kind of servitude, serving my master happily (for the most part), with no wish to take his place or become his boss by some other devious means (e.g., become president of this university, which of course is a ridiculous thought). And it is true, as some of my older relatives in Australia tell my other relatives, that I am probably immature, that I should get married and “settle down” and have kids, all of which they are certain would hasten my maturity. Actually, what they are saying is that it’s time I grew up.

These are all vague generalizations that apply to any workplace, not just academia, a mysterious place to those who have never been to one — about two-thirds of Americans and a greater number of Australians, the latter referring to Australian born, not the eager and industrious immigrants from various parts of Asia.

That said, the case that I will shortly describe reveals some of the special attributes of the academic workplace that affect how one who is ambitious enough (that is driven) to claw one's way up the professorial ladder. I must also point out that this story occurs in an American university academic setting. The hierarchies of other university systems may be structured quite differently. For example, I was told when I once applied for an academic job in Australia (it was in a moment of weakness on my part) that there was not much difference in salary between senior lecturers (roughly equivalent to an American associate professor level) and a full professor, so why bother to go up for promotion to full professor? In fact, the salary differences from the most junior up to associate levels were also not all that different. So why join the rat race of "publish or perish."

And again, for those not familiar with the academic world, "publish or perish" is a popular phrase used to sum up academic culture, especially the American variety. Actually, that is not quite the right word, more like a kind of Hobbesian tribe, a "dog-eat-dog" mindset, though this is a bit insulting to dogs who generally are satisfied to play, and would only set to on each other if there were only one bone to eat. For humans, it is likely the opposite. The more they have the more they are likely to fight over a crust of bread. Perhaps I exaggerate, as is my self-confessed fault.

But in this instance I don't think so. This case concerns a seminar intended for "senior" graduate students—that is, we had finished all our coursework and other requirements and were now writing our dissertations. Our most conscientious and caring Dean arranged this seminar to be given by the most prominent sociologist (some would rate him as number one in the field) to advise us on what we should do once we are done with our dissertations and put ourselves on the job market. The dominance of commerce language is no mistake, but rather an essential part of the academic "culture." Tread carefully here. The language is

seductive. It was used when masters put their slaves on the market in the town square as late as the 19th century — not just in the West, but in every known country of the world. In the twentieth century academic market setting, graduate students who had slaved away either for very little money working for their professors who conducted their research using research grants that also paid a pittance, or paid their own way and as a result graduated with an enormous debt. To graduate, therefore, was to put oneself in a precarious position.

Go on then. You may think what you like. But yes, probably this had something to do with my never actually graduating. There's still time though. There was a *cause célèbre* when a university administrator discovered a criminal justice Ph.D. student who took 25 years to finish her dissertation, and that the School of Criminal Justice apparently approved the dissertation, giving it an exemplary pass with distinction— to the shock of the administrator, who later became the provost, that's right, Dr. Dolittle, most likely because of her exposé of the School's mismanagement of Ph.D. students.

The illustrious professor opened the seminar with the challenging statement:

“Good morning all. I am professor Godfrey Gardner and I am the most published sociologist in America, probably the world, though you should understand that publications anywhere outside of the USA don't count.”

He leaned back in his chair and puffed at a cigar, that's right, a cigar, totally obnoxious, but in those days allowed, actually had just been banned on campus, but this professor simply believed that his top rated status meant that the rules did not apply to him. One student, whether by protest or genuine medical reasons, got up, tried to wave the smoke from her face, and left.

Professor Gardner watched the student leave then continued.

“If you don't want to rise to the top, you may as well leave now. My talk is only for those who have the guts to go for it.”

You are almost right if you think that I got up and walked out. I nearly did, but curiosity got the better of me. And there were no cats in the room.

He then opened a thick folder and began to read out a list of his most recent publications. And as he did so he held up the thick

folder, shook it and said, “these are only for this past year.” He then passed out a few reprints of his articles. “Notice,” he said, “that there are not a lot of different journals that I have published in. That is because I choose only to publish my papers in the top ten rated journals. The rest are a waste of time. In fact, most of my publications are in the top 5 and I average about 4 to 5 publications a year in that category. Any questions?”

There were seven of us; cowed, overwhelmed, scared out of our wits. One student got up the courage to ask, raising her hand just a little.

“Yes?” asked Professor Gardner, almost a yell it seemed to me. Talk about being full of himself!

“So how do you know what are the top rated journals?” she asked timidly.

“We do,” answered the professor with a smugness that made me want to get up and slap him. And he continued. “All of us, your peers,” and he grandly waved his arm around the table to illustrate his point.

But the timid student complained, “but you’re way above me, how could you be my peer?”

“We are all in the same discipline. And those of us who are at the top of the discipline are surely those who know the difference between great journal articles and average journal articles. Otherwise we would not be at the top of our profession.”

The timid student now looked even more perplexed. The great professor seemed to be expounding a circular argument. But I could see that she dare not suggest such a thing. There was a good chance that one day he might be reviewing one of her papers for one of the top journals.

Another student sensibly tried to change the subject. His demeanor, though, was not unlike the professor’s. Perhaps he was an ambitious student who was unconsciously aping the professor. “So what do you look for in a paper when you review it for publication?” he asked.

“Now that is an excellent question. As you all know, papers that are submitted to top journals are sent out by the editor for peer review. I receive many such requests every week. And once you enter the profession you will also. I have but one crucial rule in doing such review, which is...”

He waited for effect. Nobody dared fill in the blank.

“Always reject the paper. All submissions, in my view are competing with me. If that author gets published, it is one more publication that I must compete with. Additionally, I never say anything positive. Always, always provide extensive criticisms. To me, there is no such thing as a good paper....except mine, that is.”

He finished off that remark with a very large, proud grin. And he cast his busy darting eyes around the class of students looking at each face in turn, except for me because I habitually look away and most often down, if I were in any way expecting to be called upon. We were petrified or maybe more accurately, mortified.

What my fellow students learned from this encounter with the grand wolf of scholarship, who knows. I have subjected you to this—as usual—excursion into the lower side of academic publishing because it forms the very spine of those two sacred goals sitting on the horizon, just beyond one’s reach, tenure and promotion. Individuals undergoing applications for tenure and or promotion must subject themselves to peer review. Their colleagues (a vague and twisted term) must sit in judgment of you and decide as your “peers” (never mind that those without tenure are rarely allowed to vote on such actions) whether or not your academic record reaches the level of tenure, whether you are good enough to join the club.

And this brings me to the case that Colmes and I both relished and hated, because it revealed the impossible contradictions of the entire system of promotion and tenure, and worse, turned nice people into obnoxious people, friends into enemies.

But before we get to the case, there is one more issue that I should examine, well not really an issue, just a philosophical, or maybe political problem in the abstract sense, about who gets to be on top and who ends up on the bottom. I casually mentioned Hobbes earlier in this story. It was he, I suppose, who popularized the Western idea that no society could survive unless it was divided into the rulers and the ruled. This issue was, of course, obvious to our forebears of western thought, political and philosophical, though, the ancients (the Greeks and the Romans) probably did not draw a clear distinction between the two as we

do today. Probably the modern term “ideology” achieves the same mixture.

In any event, the history of Western universities (and probably their ancient equivalents in Eastern and African civilizations) were founded on the rock of hierarchy. Their very definition requires it. They were and are institutions inhabited by those who at first sought after knowledge, and once gained, passed it on to their successors. And in universities, at least, the possessors of knowledge were inevitably those persons of authority, otherwise how else could one learn? Particularly as universities probably preceded books as we know them today. In the West, to make a very long story very short, universities had their early beginnings as repositories of knowledge in monasteries whose inhabitants studied the history of god in this world and transmitted various interpretations of it to the masses. Thus, was the hierarchy of the western world structured, probably of necessity, unless the modern repositories of knowledge (computers) overrun universities. But that is another story for another day.

I guess what I am saying is that I would not want you to come away from my story thinking that I am some kind of anarchist. Authority structures appear to be an inevitable necessity in universities and probably anywhere else where humans interact and exchange knowledge.

Now let’s get on with the story. It is a story that is repeated many times over in most academic institutions that adhere strictly to the demands of tenure and promotion rituals.

One might think that, since the procedures and rules of promotion and tenure are well established, often in many university departments written down like laws, indeed some even “legislated” by faculty senates of various kinds, the process would more or less run itself, saving those who must make the decisions (thumbs up or down) from any personal responsibility for the final decision. And of course, the voting faculty who are on the relevant committee can vote anonymously (except in certain nasty circumstances) so avoid any personal responsibility for a thumbs down decision.

This case involved many highly motivated persons, colleagues of the assistant professor who was coming up for

promotion and tenure. For those uninformed of these terms, “tenure” means that you get to remain in your “line” (position of employment in whatever university you are working) forever — that is until retirement. This is the case in any university that has adopted the American system. The structure of this system has a long history, but let us just say, for the sake of brevity that its detailed history and benefits (especially to union members) are tied to union actions of the past. Most universities in the United States, especially public universities, adhere to this system. An increasing number of private universities do not. Generally speaking one comes up for tenure in the sixth year, and if denied, the candidate has one year to find a position elsewhere. Of course, if it gets out that one has been denied tenure, it is rather like having a felony on one’s record. So finding another job at the same level is rather difficult.

But now to our case. It was one that Colmes relished because of its obvious complexities. The case had gone all the way up to the President, who had promptly sent it back again, directing that Colmes take it up. The various faculty committees that had dealt with the case either had not read the rules of promotion and tenure procedures, or were motivated by personal animosities. Of course, the Provost was in an impossible position, also a situation in which Colmes could hardly hide his glee. She had tried to force the faculty committees to endorse the promotion and tenure, and they had refused, threatening that all hell would break loose if she approved it. Finally she had recommended to the President that the faculty opposition was so deep that he should deny the tenure but approve the promotion. Though “legal” this compromise solution displayed a decision of the worst weakness of any administrator.

How could such a situation arise when all the rules and requirements were written down and stated very clearly? You either had the qualifications or you did not.

Colmes, of course, was most amused, and saw clearly the problem. The fact was that the candidate did not fit the unwritten requirement for promotion and tenure.

“What was that?” I naively asked my mentor.

This case concerned Derick Dempsey, no relation to the famous boxer, though his unremitting pugilistic demeanor would

suggest so. And mindful of my earlier speech on ambition, it would be hard to say that his constant demand that he be tenured and promoted was the sole reason for his belligerence. Rather, his constant peppering of his colleagues, senior or junior to him, was in the form of pointing out their weaknesses, errors in judgement, their performance falling short of the level of scholarship that he considered was acceptable. That is, he considered himself to be the best example or an outstanding scholar in their field, that field being psychology. He constantly reminded his colleagues, usually by placing memos in their mail boxes, of his accomplishments, and these were without any doubt, impressive. It seemed that his papers were routinely accepted for publication in the top ten journals in the field of psychology, his specialty being counseling psychology.

As if that were not enough, he would post notices on the department noticeboard of the names of colleagues who had not published a paper in a leading journal in over a year. How he acquired such information was a matter of wonder, presumably he scrutinized the top ten journals looking for the names of his colleagues. It would be tempting to surmise that he was further acquainted with the journals because he was on the editorial review boards, except that he was not of sufficiently high rank to be invited into that elite group. That is, he was not yet tenured and certainly not a full professor.

A note on terminology is perhaps necessary here for those who are not familiar with the American university system. The word “professor” can mean anyone who is teaching in a university, but if used on its own to describe one’s position in a university, together with the authorship of a journal article, it must not be applied to anyone who was not a “full professor” that signifies the highest rank, of course with tenure. This fact of terminology was one point of severe disapproval by Dempsey’s colleagues who were well aware that he routinely referred to himself as “professor” when his affiliation was required in describing his authorship in any journal article.

One morning, faculty came into their offices to find pinned on their office doors a memo from Dempsey. Again this itself indicates that Dempsey had no idea of what it was like to teach in a school or department, since many full professors or anyone with tenure routinely did not show up to their offices every

morning. Many in fact posted a notice on their office doors indicating their office hours, some brazenly informing students that they were available only by appointment.

The memo read:

TO: All faculty

FROM: Professor Dereck Dempsey

SUBJECT: Lack of Courtesy

DATE: 4/12/2010

I have been informed that faculty do not appropriately acknowledge students when meeting them in the hallway or outside of classroom in public space. This conveys a lack of respect for our students who deserve better. At a minimum, I urge that all nod to convey recognition.

As you can imagine, routine faculty meetings were hardly routine. Dempsey almost always arrived late to the meeting, then delivered blistering speeches upbraiding his colleagues for their lack of punctuality, yet another indicator of their disrespect for others. The chair of the faculty was usually chosen by popular vote, show of hands or anonymous vote. However, things got so difficult that nobody wanted to be chair if they had to deal with the likes of Dempsey. This left Dempsey volunteering to chair the faculty, which generally had the result that faculty would not show up to the meetings, (an offense against the department by-laws) thus incurring yet another memo pinned to their doors.

There is much more I could report on Dempsey's character. But I think I have conveyed sufficient information to give you an idea of what was about to happen, and why Colmes was called in to avert the disaster that was destined to occur.

I sat on my wicker chair across from Colmes who looked up from his crossword.

"The trouble," said Colmes, "is that the by-laws governing the tenure and promotion procedures are silent in regards to character traits or physical appearance. Their omission, one reasonably assumes, is an indication that they are considered irrelevant. Is that not the case, Hobson?"

"Looks like it. And that's reasonable, isn't it?" I said, having once met Dempsey and immediately took a distinct disliking of

him. He was truly obnoxious.

“Really, Hobson? Giving this obnoxious person tenure means that the rest of the faculty in the department will have to put up with him for the rest of their working lives. Many will choose to leave.”

I responded with an unsympathetic remark. “Since most of them get a good salary and only show up to their offices when they feel like it, seems to me it’s a small price to pay.”

Colmes smiled and frowned. “Dear! Dear! Hobson. Such resentment is not becoming of you!” He looked at his watch and said, “well, we shall see. Dempsey is due here in ten minutes. What should I ask him, Hobson?”

“You’re teasing me, Colmes. It’s not becoming of you. I’m at the bottom of the ambition ladder, and I don’t need to be constantly reminded of it.”

Colmes ignored me, as was my desert. “As you know Hobson, the holy trinity of promotion and tenure qualifications is Publications, Teaching and Service, in that order of importance. You know that, right?” His twitchy grin appeared.

“Right. And that seems reasonable, doesn’t it? Though I think personally that teaching should always come first, given that I am a perpetual student who occasionally teaches when they are short of faculty.”

“And service?” asked Colmes, frowning and leaning a little across his desk to me.

“I think that’s bull shit,” I said brazenly, even blushing a little that I used such language in front of a most proper Victorian gentleman.

“But you are right, Hobson. And that is where faculty who want to deny someone tenure usually focus their negative energies. If they don’t like a candidate, they will look first at service, and if that fails, teaching, especially student ratings. The latter, by the way, are marvelously adaptable, especially if a professor teaches a very large class. If the teacher ratings allow open descriptive comments by students, instead of the more confining and protective (of the professor) numeric rating scale, one can always find some awful derogatory remarks. It only takes one or two students to do that, and there is fodder to use effectively against the candidate.”

I remained silent in response to this cynical little speech.

Everyone knew this, but one never heard it spoken out loud.

Colmes continued. “So we must create the opportunity for our candidate to contribute to his own demise, right Hobson?”

“I don’t follow. From what I hear, he excels in all three categories. He gets great teacher ratings, funny, engaging, informative, listens to the students. What more could one ask for?”

“Indeed. Indeed, Hobson. And his service is exemplary. He serves on several University committees, Library, Outreach, Student welfare, and the local union, United University Professors, don’t forget that, Hobson. Very important back-up in case he is denied tenure.”

I shot back. “And he will be denied, right Colmes?”

“Indeed, you are right. Indeed that has already more or less happened. Remember there are several layers of approval needed. It starts at the department level, goes to the chair who writes a letter summarizing the faculty discussions and vote, then to the dean of the school, who also writes a letter and sends on the packet to the college level committee, that sends on its recommendation to the provost who refers it to the senate committee for tenure and promotion, that deliberates and returns its final decision to the Provost who then makes her recommendation to the President. In this case, President O’Brien has sent it to me via our friend Provost Dolittle. O’Brien, faint at heart as he has always been, does not want the responsibility of rejecting this guy because he knows it will lead to an awful mess, law suits and whatever else. Aren’t you glad you’re a nobody, Hobson?” added Colmes unkindly.

I looked at my mentor and did what any sensible student would do. I bit my lip and shut up.

Colmes continued, and I was wishing he would shut up. “With this meeting we will find a solution, Hobson young man. You can depend on it.” I couldn’t help thinking that Colmes was in a mild way a parallel version of Dempsey, in a kind of socially acceptable way.

There was a faint knock at the door. Colmes looked at me, amused. “Enter!” he called and then muttered to me, “one would have expected a loud knock, don’t you think?”

Dempsey, a person small in stature, with broad shoulders and upper body, most likely a result of gym workouts, tapering

down to a narrow waist, to what I guessed to be skinny legs. He carried in his hands several psychology journals and carefully placed them on Colmes's neat desk. I quickly rose from my wicker chair and said, "I'm William Hobson, Colmes's assistant, please take a seat." I quickly retreated to the overstuffed chair in the corner.

"Thank you Sir," beamed Dempsey, as he took his place on my wicker chair, "these are my latest publications." He pointed to the reprints on Colmes's desk, and tossed me a couple of extras.

Colmes coughed a little, clearing his throat. "Your resume is most impressive. Your writing voluminous and all of incredibly high standard," observed Colmes, licking his lips as if to hold back the drool.

"Thank you Doctor Colmes. Doctor, is it? Or professor?" queried Dempsey in a kind of solicitous though aggressive tone.

"Colmes is fine," retorted Colmes. "Now Dr. Dempsey, let's get down to business. You know why you are here?"

"Well as a matter of fact I don't," said Dempsey, "it's most irregular." He leaned forward as if to underline his dissatisfaction.

The bright light of Colmes's desk lamp reflected off Dempsey's balding head that was shaved to a stubble, along with a blonde, carefully clipped beard that had a slight ginger tint.

"The business is that every committee and letter from your promotion and tenure process has recommended that you be denied tenure and promotion. Though one has recommended that you receive promotion without tenure."

"And the reason?" demanded Dempsey, "when it is surely obvious that on the three criteria of publications, teaching and service I am outstanding on all counts."

"I couldn't agree more," responded Colmes, "which is why your case has been referred to me."

"And your standing in this process is...?" queried Dempsey with a heavy dose of sarcasm.

Colmes tried responding to this aggression by pulling rank. "I am the university's distinguished multi-disciplinary professor."

"With what role exactly in my case?" demanded Dempsey his voice rising a decibel or two.

“The President’s, shall we say, Envoy,” said Colmes with a wry smile.

“And what is that?” insisted Dempsey.

“I solve insoluble problems,” replied Colmes not giving an inch.

“And I am an insoluble problem?” asked Dempsey with an additional layer of sarcasm.

“Exactly!” conferred Colmes.

I have to say, that I found all this very entertaining. It was like the Dempsey-Carpenter face-off. Would it end in a knock-out? I stared at Dempsey. He looked nothing like a boxer. He didn’t even have a boastful personality or presence. He was simply an aggressive type with no social skills, who knew no other way to behave. If you simply ignored his aggressive demeanor you were fine. And I would hasten to add that he was not in any way a bully as far as I could see. He didn’t bully people interpersonally to get them to do his want. All his “bullying” was the result of how people interpreted his silly memos. They were not directed at any particular person, the usual way of the bully, but to everyone in general. It is not certain, even possible, for one low on the hierarchy, to bully those above him.

Anyway, if one must use the term bully, it is more like the saying “bull in a china shop.” He has no idea of the effects his mere presence in a room have upon other people. Maybe someone should tell him?

Of course, at Colmes’s direction, I had already researched Dempsey’s previous jobs. Colmes was amused and I amazed that Dempsey displayed the same behavior at his previous place of employment at the University of Chicago department of psychology, where they made it clear to him that there was no way he would get tenure and this was in his first year there. And even more surprising is that the Dean and faculty of our psychology department were also aware of it, in fact had been warned, but they were so enamored with Dempsey’s incredible publishing record that they ignored it when they hired him.

Now, Colmes began to chip away at Dempsey’s brittle persona. I was curious as to what was my mentor’s goal? To find a justification to deny Dempsey’s tenure, or alternatively find a way for him to be granted it, in spite of the overwhelming opposition by the faculty.

“Dr. Dempsey,” began Colmes, leaning back in his chair, “you must surely be aware that you have a, shall we say, negative effect on your colleagues.”

Dempsey quickly shot back. “And what does that have to do with my record of outstanding performance on all three tenure requirements?”

“Everything, Dr. Dempsey, everything,” replied Colmes in his best Victorian English accent.

“But there is nothing in the formal procedures requiring that the candidate be likable,” insisted Dempsey.

“Indeed. You are correct,” said Colmes, leaning further back in his chair, tapping the fingers of his open hands together.

“So why have they voted against my tenure?” asked Dempsey, clearly frustrated.

“Because they don’t like you,” repeated Colmes, almost with an amused grin.

“But they are not allowed to deny me for that reason. I’ll sue them! That’s what I’ll do!”

“You could,” answered Colmes, and you might even win, though it would cost you a lot of money.”

Dempsey fell silent. He squinted a little, I think his eyes were watering up. It was enough for me to feel sorry for him.

Colmes allowed the silence to continue. He was a master at this kind of manipulation. He made a small cough to clear his throat, but other than that he sat still, and quiet. For my part, I was on the edge of my seat on the otherwise comfortable overstuffed chair. Dempsey withdrew a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his eyes. Now Colmes was ready to ask his next question.

“Do you live alone, Dr. Dempsey or are their family for you to go home to?” asked Colmes gently.

“I am alone. My wife and two kids left me some time ago.” He looked down, then up and at Colmes. “I guess they didn’t like me either.”

Now I really felt sorry for him. Colmes leaned back in his chair, me on the edge of mine, wondering what would come next.

Dempsey made as if to leave. “Don’t go,” said Colmes quickly, “we have only just begun, but I do see a solution in the offing.”

Dempsey sat back on the wicker chair and sighed. “Dr.

Colmes, I don't know how I can make people like me. It's not fair. I do my job that is the very best. And yet they still don't like me, not my colleagues, not my bosses."

"Well, let's not get ahead of ourselves. Your bosses, for example, such as the Dean or Provost, neither like for dislike you, though they both regard your excellent resume with considerable appreciation. But they do not have to live with your everyday abuses and criticisms. That is what your fellow faculty do not like."

"So what can I do then? I mean, I am who I am, aren't I? I can't just change myself overnight. Anyway I've tried. And I couldn't. When I see poor or substandard behavior I have to call it out. I don't see what's wrong with that..."

"Well, I can, and obviously your colleagues do too. But I think you are right, it is unreasonable and pointless to expect you to be someone else."

"Then what is the solution, Dr. Colmes? What can I do?"

Colmes sat forward. "Dr. Dempsey. You are not gay by any chance, are you?"

Dempsey, enraged, jumped up and my wicker chair went flying backwards. "How dare you!" he screamed. "How dare you!"

"Then I am right?" asked Colmes quietly.

"I, I..."

"Never mind answering. Here is the solution. You need to give your colleagues a reason not to hate you. It may be a bit much to hope that you get them to like you, but getting them to tolerate you is certainly possible. All you need to do is give them a good reason to do so."

"But I..."

"After all, isn't it rather pathetic on their part to get so upset because you distribute silly memos berating them to do this or that? Why don't they toss them away, shrug, and say, silly Dempsey, there he goes again," added Colmes.

Dempsey sat back in my chair and took a deep breath. "I have HIV," he muttered, and I detected a very faint smile. Then he glanced quickly at me.

"Don't worry," said Colmes, "Hobson is my trusted assistant and will not breathe a word of any of this, unless, of course you want us to."

Then Colmes looked back at Dempsey and said in his most careful and formal Victorian manner: “It may not be possible to get your colleagues to like you, but it certainly is possible to give them a reason to discount your annoyances.”

Some weeks went by. Dempsey sent out an occasional silly memo. His colleagues smiled and nodded hello when they met outside their offices. A couple even came to his office to tell him how much they liked this or that of one of his publications.

The chairs of the relevant committees and the Deans revised their letters to the provost and Dempsey received promotion to Associate Professor and tenure. After two years he received promotion to full professor. And two years after that he died of a brain tumor.

Case closed.

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