Berkeley, California

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Jeff:

I [redacted] lost my job for taking a public stand, at the University of California, Davis, though frankly I would have lost it anyway in a year or two, so I didn't have much to lose. I'm better off now as union staff, I think. The perks of working at UC as non-tenure faculty (teaching in an advanced composition program) were more illusory than real.

In any case, as a UC lecturer and then as union staff, I've been caught up in many battles that illustrate your thesis dramatically. The timorousness and tunnel vision of so many tenured faculty in the humanities in the face of the imminent apocalyptic destruction of their profession (does that seem too melodramatic?) is profoundly disturbing to me. It's amazing how people with such highly trained analytical minds can lose their analytical faculties entirely when certain topics come up. Unlike faculty with tenure, lecturers at least have an excuse, as they can actually lose their jobs. Your book gives a nuanced account of the indoctrination process that really explains why academic freedom, by the time it comes, if it ever comes, is meaningless. I've witnessed the way the selection and indoctrination works.

Of course, not all academics are cowards or stooges. A few have considerable courage and vision. But those qualities are far too rare. It took some time for me to realize that's no accident.

I'm constantly thinking there's a book in the stories I witness and live through daily -- but how to find the time and the courage to write it? I mean the courage to take on a project of that scale. I'm not afraid of taking controversial positions, but I'm very torn about how to write a book and continue doing my job -- the very conflict that [redacted] for acknowledging, of course. And yet writing a dissertation was one of the most rewarding experiences of my life, and I did it while doing a completely different (non-academic) job nearly full-time. I stopped teaching and after a year and a half doing office work, got a job as a private investigator -- not an exciting or academic job but somehow what I needed to free me to finish that dissertation on sonnets.

I'm one of those who went into graduate school without much of a sense of the career (other than a conviction that I wouldn't fit in) -- just an attraction to the subject. I never had any idea how to work the system or do what it takes to get ahead -- didn't get that kind of advice and only realized that I probably needed such advice at a very late stage. Don't know if I would have taken it if I got it. Your account of what happens to such people is extremely comforting to me -- this kind of experience is so isolating that it's wonderful to read a structural analysis and think about that experience as one I've really shared with others.

I had terrible writing blocks for a lot of the time I was in grad school -- your book sheds light on that too. A writing block is a kind of ambivalence and resistance, though at a level that isn't understood. The confusion is part of the syndrome. One is horribly ashamed of that struggle, but perhaps it's not really something to be ashamed of.

The last time I went to the annual Modern Language Association convention (a huge meat market for language and literature faculty hiring committees and applicants), I attended a workshop for grad students newly on the academic job market. Four or five faculty members gave talks about how to sell yourself, etc. It was pathetic. In what is really a job lottery rather than a job market, these speakers gave the most absurdly individualistic, commonplace, and largely useless advice to people about how to present themselves professionally to hiring committees. Their talks usually started off with some wryly humorous acknowledgement of the near hopelessness of the rapidly rising odds against finding a tenure-track job in the field, and then proceeded as if that had not been said, as if most of these people could actually hope to land a decent job if they just presented themselves in the right way.

I stood up, introduced myself as a former University of California lecturer with three degrees in English from UC Berkeley who now works for a UC lecturers' union. I said I had come to hear what they were telling these new graduates, and I found it depressing though not surprising that they were so entirely focused on telling people how to get ahead individually in a race that most of them couldn't win. I said it would be refreshing if, just once, one of these speakers would actually address the entirely dismal prospects most of these new grads -- the younger generation of academics -- now

face, and would invite them to think about their situation collectively -- as a shared problem, a structural problem. I suggested that as tenured faculty, they might actually want to make some effort to analyze and work on this crisis in the profession. I think I suggested that they might have a responsibility to do so (and implied that they might be shirking it). I'm not sure I was quite that coherent (if this is coherent), but I made my point well enough that I think there was a brief, painful silence. It was gratifying to say these things publicly in a place where such things are never said. Three or four of the people in the audience thanked me later.

Your book gives the kind of help I was trying to suggest we all need -- an honest effort to recognize that there's a systemic problem, and to imagine -- or at least imagine the possibility of -- solutions.

I'm temporarily doing some grievance work, mostly by phone, at your alma mater, UC Irvine, since the staff person who formerly covered that campus is leaving. Normally, my work is at the Berkeley campus -- which is where I'm located.

That's probably more sharing than you have time for. But it was good for me to write it, so thanks for writing a book that inspired it. Again, best wishes. I hope you get [redacted]. Let me know if there's any other support I can offer.

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