

On Being a Modern Day Spinoza

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I'm on the faculty of a college of education in a university. Even the quickest perusal of this web site makes it clear that my outlook doesn't play well at all in my context. I've written extensively about the status of European heritage, white, Americans from a position of respect and concern, and I have sympathies for student-freedom-based and traditional, or classical, schooling approaches. All of that runs head on into the ideologies and strategies of diversity and educational progressivism, which dominate my work environment. From time to time, people ask me how my university--fellow faculty and the administration--deals with me, as well as how I manage both personally and professionally in such a context. They assume I am living with overt hostility, put-downs, and harassment, and that the situation I'm in must be bringing me down and getting in the way of my achieving any measure of professional accomplishment and personal gratification. Neither of those assumptions is valid: for all practical purposes, nobody is coming after me, and, at least by my standards, I'm very productive and happy. This thought discusses what I make of what is going on with me currently. I do so in the hope that what I offer will be of help to people in circumstances comparable to mine.

I'm a tenured faculty member, which means I have job security; it would be very tough to fire me. If I weren't tenured, I'm quite sure I wouldn't be at my university. Someone with my views wouldn't get hired in the first place, and if I somehow managed to get on the faculty, I wouldn't make it through the six-year probationary period to permanent, or tenured, status. Also, I'm a full professor, which means there is no rank above me to achieve, and thus they can't get at me by denying me a promotion. And I'm in a union that negotiates my salary, and there isn't a lot of room for them to play games with me financially. What goes on with me, then, might well not be the case with someone else.

In large measure, this thought pulls together points I've made elsewhere on this web site, and is a tacit invitation to review that material. In a writing earlier this summer--it's September of 2009 as I write this--called "A Message in the Inbox," I offered that it helps to

understand the contemporary university if one views it as a secular church:

When I entered university work four decades ago, the university was, the phrase that was used, “a marketplace of ideas.” The greater the variety of ideas, the higher the caliber of “goods” in the marketplace, the better the university. The university was a setting for free and unfettered inquiry and expression. Open and civil dialogue and debate around all claims and points of view was encouraged. Academic freedom was cherished as an essential element in the continuing search for truth and the good ways to live. When I went into university work I assumed I would be applauded for using my mind and offering alternative conceptions of reality, and for challenging conventionality, and for encouraging my students to do the same, and in the beginning I was.

But no more. Over the course of my career, and with an accelerating pace, the university—or better, particular aspects of it, the humanities, social sciences, education, and social services--has become a secular church that reaffirms, and demands allegiance to, a particular doctrine, a particular faith. To be a faculty member is to be a missionary, to spread the good word and bring people into the fold. Classes are church services, rituals that confirm the creed among the faithful. To teach a class is akin to being a pastor serving a congregation.

And how do churches look upon people who deviate from the creed? As misguided, perhaps even evil, heretics. And what do they do with heretics? Well, anything they can get away with, including burning them at the stake and drawing and quartering them. But given that those punishments most often aren't viable options, usually the best way to deal with nonbelievers is to excommunicate them. Recently I was reading about what happened to the seventeenth century philosopher Baruch Spinoza. In 1658 Spinoza was summoned before the elders of his synagogue on a charge of heresy. Was it true, they asked him, that he had said that God is simply the world of matter? that angels are hallucinations? that the Old Testament does not support a belief in immortality? History has not recorded Spinoza's response to those charges, but it does record that he was excommunicated for his presumed transgressions:

Hereby then are all admonished that none hold converse with him by word of mouth, none hold communication with him by writing; that no one do him any service, no one abide under the same roof with him, no one approach within four cubits length of him, and no one read any document dictated by him, or written by his hand.*

From my own experience, and from what I have picked up from talking to other people in circumstances similar to mine, what happened to Spinoza is how the "church elders" in today's university tend to deal with people who violate the faith. While they may mess with heretics' teaching and committee assignments and merit pay increases, their basic strategy is to excommunicate them, shun them. Don't talk to them about anything, don't read anything they've written, don't encourage or support them, don't give them a forum, advise students not to enroll in their courses and to stay out of their offices. You don't have to try to stop them from doing something; rather, simply never acknowledge them, never ask them to speak at a meeting, and don't respond to anything they say if they take it upon themselves to speak in a group setting, don't put them on any committees or invite them to any meetings. Treat them as if they don't exist.

I don't know what it was like for Spinoza, but the modern excommunication is not harsh, or overtly adversarial. In fact, it is a rather friendly snubbing. People don't look the other way or snarl upon seeing you: the order of the day is "Hello" accompanied by the briefest of smiles and eye contact before quickly looking away. It's never "How are you?" and it is certainly not "What are you doing these days?" In fact, there is never a second sentence. A one-sentence contact limit applies to the excommunicant.

Much more to be said, but that's the general picture. The key point is that you aren't being beaten with a stick, and you still have a job and the wherewithal to make the mortgage payments. Still, though, being excommunicated, shunned, by one's workmates, and to a large extent by students who take their cues from faculty, including their advisors, is no joke; it is tough to deal with. In "Message in the Inbox," I referred to psychologist Abraham Maslow's theory of basic human needs as a way to account for human motivation and behavior. Among Maslow's list of basic needs are social validation and inclusion, and in that light never getting a

word of praise and eating lunch alone for a year or two or three can be a tough row to hoe for someone. What gives me hope, however, is that I think a lot of what Maslow calls needs are more accurately characterized as wants. That is to say, while I might like some affirmation once in a while or a shared lunch, I don't absolutely need either of them in order to live well. If I absolutely needed them, then, for sure, I had best get about doing whatever it takes to get them. But if I only want them, which I believe is actually the case, I really don't have to sell my soul to get a plaque on my wall or someone to talk with over lunch.

I don't know what it was like in Spinoza's day, but I don't have the sense that those doing the excommunication in modern universities are necessarily hell-bent on making anybody unhappy. While it wouldn't break their hearts if they saw you walking around looking as if your dog had just died, basically they just want you silent and invisible in their world. Regardless of where misery-promotion is on the excommunicators' agenda, however, being defined as *persona non grata* can make someone very unhappy indeed. You can end up hang-dogging it around the office and moping around the house. One of the major challenges of the excommunicant is to fight that state of affairs with all he or she has.

Somewhere in this web site, and frankly I can't remember where, I talk about a book by the late psychologist Albert Ellis I have found useful, *How to Stubbornly Refuse to Make Yourself Miserable About Anything: Yes, Anything!* The book outlines techniques based on rational emotive behavior therapy. Ellis was the major theorist and popularizer of this approach to taking on life's problems. This is not the context to go into the details of this orientation; enough to say here that the book was worth my time and I recommend it highly. I do want to note here, though, that the title of the book alone has been helpful to me: it has inspired me to, well, stubbornly refuse to make myself miserable about anything. The hell with that. Being miserable is no fun. Plus, I'm not giving anybody the satisfaction of seeing me down in the dumps, f--- them. The first thing I do after waking up in the morning is commit myself to being happy that day, and throughout the day I regularly silently--or out loud if nobody is around, which is invariably the case--say to myself, "Cheer up!" All to say, more than we realize, happiness is a choice and not the inevitable outcome of a situation. So if it is a

choice, to a large degree--or to any degree, for that matter--it makes sense to choose happiness.

Probably the first impulse of the excommunicated is to try to get back in the good graces of the excommunicators. At least in my experience, that doesn't work: the shuffling and groveling in their direction just reinforces them in what they are doing; and anyway, the decision has been made, it's over, you're out, nothing you can do about it, your case is closed (unless you totally cave in and kiss their feet--read about poor old Galileo some time--but that is simply not an option for any self-respecting person). And besides all that, regardless of its consequences, it is simply self-demeaning, and thereby unacceptable, to wag your tail and lick the face of anyone, and especially someone who has distain for you. Even if they work, there are some things in life that are so dishonorable it is better to live without whatever it is.

In the web site writing "When They Attack," I put it this way:

Don't assume that explaining and placating will do you any good. When they come after you, there is always the tendency to try to talk your way out of it. "See, I'm not really a racist [or anti-Semite or sexist, whatever they are alleging], and actually, some of my best friends . . ." It is tempting when they get on your case, or as a way to prevent them from giving you trouble, to suck up, placate, soften your edges, smile, come off as a nice guy, a benign guy, a no-threat-to-anybody guy, an I'm-really-on-your-side guy. I suppose those kinds of things can work, but you have to assume that reason and logic and whether you are a good person doesn't cut it for anything; no matter what you say, no matter how much you pander, as soon as they can, they'll slit your throat.

"Slit your throat" doesn't quite fit in this context because "When They Attack" deals with cases where they flat out come after you; say, try to get you fired. With excommunication, it's a "softer" attack: disrespect, negation, rejection, making you disappear, which is not to say they wouldn't feel uplifted if you fell down a manhole or wound up living in a tent. Despite the distinctions between what I was talking about in "When They Attack" and this thought, however, I think the principle applies: stifle the impulse to tap dance and sing a charming song as a way of making it all better.

So what do you do if you don't chase after them? You do just the opposite: *you go the other way*. I call it doing a "Victoria turn," which I derived from the web site thought "On Victoria's Dogs." Victoria is Victoria Stilwell, a dog trainer with a show on PBS. Victoria goes into people's houses and straightens out their unruly dogs.

One of the things Victoria does when a dog is acting out of line is fold her arms and silently turn away, which is both effortless and very powerful. Both dogs and people most often would rather fight with you than have you fold your arms and silently turn away and thus be negated, dismissed. At least when they fight with you they are getting your attention, and, thereby, validation as counting for something. No technique always works, and sometimes it isn't possible—but the silent-turn-away is a good weapon to have in one's arsenal.

Again, the contexts for the Victoria's Dogs thought and this one are different, but you get the picture. And while you are doing a Victoria turn, reject them back; do to them what they are doing to you. Your rejection of them is not gotten across in anything you explicitly say or do but rather in your posture, your attitude, your bearing. Your total being, the way you stand, the way you hold yourself, transmits the tacit message to your excluders, your disconfirmers: *you are off-base; you are less; you don't matter; you aren't worth being around*. I've found that rejecting back empowers me, puts me on offense rather than defense; and it just feels good.

I find that breaking away from my nice-guy persona and connecting with the "Don Logan" in me feels good too. See the web site thought "On Don Logan." Don Logan is a character from the film "Sexy Beast" played by the actor Ben Kingsley. Don Logan is the embodiment of just-barely-held-in rage. They want you to be nice while they crap on you. They don't like it when you wipe the obsequious smile off your face and let the inner smolder come to the surface. "Don Logan" is a good arrow to have in your quiver.

More important than anything, center your life around making good things happen, and do it with all you have in you. In every circumstance, no matter how aversive and limiting it may appear, there are positive possibilities. The challenge is to identify those possibilities and today, not tomorrow, start making them a reality. It appears that Spinoza did that. "I am happy," he said,

"and pass my days not in sighing and sorrow, but in peace, serenity and joy." He sought out congenial and supportive people, he took an interest in the political issues of his time, he pursued adventures, and he wrote philosophical treatises that have had enormous impact to this day. Indeed, there are lessons to be learned from Spinoza's example.

* The source for the Spinoza material: Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy* (New York: Pocket Books, 1961, original publication, 1926), pp. 176-198.