



At my commencement in 1997, Edward Albee described us graduates as "wounded" by knowledge. Thanks to our higher education, we were more sensitive, less oblivious, more mindful, less boastful.

For me, the weapon most responsible for these wounds was "The Human Situation." In ordinary faculty hands, this course could have been an informative Great Books tour whose worth is measured in mere credit-hours. Led by the Honors College team, however, it was a metamorphosis, whose lessons still linger and reward me professionally and personally.

The catalyst for this transformation was the faculty. Their enthusiasm for the texts was virulent. They took mischievous delight in exposing me, a cocksure Irish Catholic kid and Yankees fan, to the ambiguity of the moral universe - that is, this human situation. Sister Mary Catherine never let on about the "cauldron of illicit loves" that scorched even the Church Fathers.

The faculty awakened me not just to new thoughts, but to new ways of thinking; to knowing, but also and importantly, to knowing not. (I still cannot bring myself to split an infinitive.) I remember asking a probing question during a lecture. The professor gave a pregnant pause, then replied, unapologetically and emphatically, "I don't know." It was an unexpected, uncomfortable sensation to realize that the faculty weren't going to give me the answers (if answers even existed). Ultimately, I

would be responsible for my own sense-making. The faculty of the Human Situation taught me how to ask better questions.

In my four years at UH, I had seen many inspiring faculty come, and some of them go, some for preventable reasons. The toughest blow to me was the gradual disenchantment and ultimate departure of the Human Situation professor who had become my advisor and mentor. More than anyone, he had dealt the "wounds" that changed me. Graduate school had seemed my inevitable next step, but seeing this tenured faculty member quit the academy unsettled my view of faculty life, and I turned away.

I went on to enjoy good work in the private sector. At an academic book publisher, I saw lively scholarship engaged with the world around us, and at LEGO - yes, that LEGO! - keen imaginations bridged cultures and invigorated generations. Still, I struggled to find a unifying theme to my work and my life's goals.

My "moment of meaning" came at the twenty-fifth anniversary celebration of the Human Situation, where scores convened to celebrate what the course had bequeathed to students and to the professors who taught them. In their numbers and in their lives, students and faculty stood together as testaments to the vitality of liberal education and to the impact one person - former Dean Ted Estess, who founded the program - can have on so many. On my flight home I wondered: can the academy beyond the Honors College's walls become more fulfilling to good faculty and more supportive of leaders like Estess who provide them with a place like the Human Situation to thrive? My answer then was a resounding, "I don't know." Again, I would have to find out for myself.

Since that revelation - one Honors College professor would call it my peripety - my calling has been to advocate for liberal education and the improvement of the academic workplace. I went to graduate school to study organizational behavior-a messy, ambiguous field if ever there was one-in the context of higher education. There, I brought my "Human Sit" experiences to bear as a contributor to Harvard's curriculum review and to its president's book on Our Underachieving Colleges. Now, I direct a nationwide research consortium dedicated to helping academic institutions attract the best and brightest scholars and teachers, and to improving the recruitment, retention, status, satisfaction, and success of their faculty, and particularly women and faculty of color.

In 2009, the University of Houston joined this Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education (COACHE). Together, we are using data and the voice of the faculty to make the University - and the Honors College - a great place to learn, to work, and to ask questions. Just how exquisite a circle the Human Situation has drawn around my life is, well, a bit unsettling.

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