

THE VIEW FROM THE PODIUM

*Thomas C. Galligan, Jr.**

“SO, how do you like being a dean?” he asked while scooping a handful of snack mix from the bowl in front of him.

“Fine, but I do get tired of eating that stuff in your hand out of little bags on air planes.” They both smiled.

“Traveling to raise millions of dollars for the future of your great school.”

“Something like that,” she said, sipping her beer.

They were quiet for a moment, looking around the room at the groups of people chattering away at tables or sitting alone at the bar. Most of those chattering were people who obviously knew each other and were catching up. The quiet and alone were younger, less secure. One man continued to fuss with a leather attache, moving the case from one arm to the other as he shifted a glass of red wine to the hand that had just transferred the case.

“Have you talked to any good folks?” he asked her.

“A few. You?”

“Some. Do you remember when you were in their shoes, looking for work as a law professor?”

“I do. It was not the most pleasant experience of my life.” She remembered the indelicately phrased questions trying to dig out information about her husband and children without coming right out and asking. She sighed.

“So, Amanda,” he asked, “what’s the best thing you’ve done as a dean?” Tony had always had a way of playing law professor with everyone, asking broad questions and then picking away. Some people couldn’t stand to spend time with him because of that trait. She was the daughter of a lawyer, however, so she had learned the game at the dinner table. Tony didn’t bother her; she liked him.

“That’s an impossible question.” Amanda knew how to buy herself time to answer.

“No question is impossible.”

“Look what all those questions did to Socrates?”

“Made him forever famous?” Tony parried.

“Drove him to drink,” Amanda responded.

“Drink?” Tony gulped his Scotch.

“Hemlock,” Amanda smiled over the lip of her beer mug.

“Very funny.”

“How’s your son?”

“Fine, he’s fine. On his way to the Amazon to be a tour guide; wants nothing to do with graduate school. But let’s get back to the questions. What’s the best thing you’ve done as dean in the last two years?”

“You are exasperating,” she said.

“So is your answer. You’ve apparently become somewhat more assertive in the last two years? What, is that the best thing you’ve done?”

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The prospective law professor shifted his *attache*. Out of the side of her eye, Amanda saw red wine rock from side to side in the glass—little waves of it.

“Raised millions of dollars?” he asked.

“You flatter me. You know every law school dean doesn’t raise millions every year.”

“Pity,” he said. “Excuse me, can I have another Scotch?”

“Another beer?” the bartender asked as he grabbed Tony’s empty glass.

“No thanks, water please.”

“Reorganized the who-knows-what office? Development? Business? Alumni affairs? Aren’t you deans always reorganizing things?”

“You know, things were actually in great shape when I arrived,” she said. “The dean before me worked very hard to make things and people work together and appreciate one another. I’ve been the beneficiary of his success and hard work.”

“So you haven’t reorganized anything?”

“Only when necessary; I mean a little bit, yeah.”

“Okay, then the best thing must be involvement in some national organization or other?”

“I’ve been involved but I can’t claim to have done too much.”

“Geez, what have you been doing? Have you done a best thing?” Tony put the emphasis on done.

“You are pushy.”

The young man again shifted the *attache*, squirming, and this time, the crests of the little waves of red wine spilled out over the top of the glass, hitting his hand and the carpet below. Amanda looked away so she wouldn’t embarrass him.

“Empower students? Educate the central administration about the importance of law school? Increase summer research grants? Create a CLE program? Fund new centers? Sit on panels? Serve on commissions? Revise all your school’s publications? Learn all about technology?”

“Maybe you should be a dean, you have all sorts of ideas.”

“Not me; I’d be too darned impatient to listen to all those complaints and suggestions and ideas. Hey, Amanda, you are a good listener. Is that the best thing you’ve done as a dean?”

She laughed. “Maybe I will have another beer,” she said. “It might make you easier to listen to.”

“Definitely more assertive.”

She smiled and looked over at a group of people talking at a table.

“Tony,” she said. “Look at them. I bet they’re discussing something like the importance of critical legal theory and economic analysis in any corrective justice analysis of health care and its relation to e-commerce and globalization.”

“Tres cynical,” he said, beginning serious work on his fresh drink.

“You drink too much,” she said.

“Bet you wouldn’t say that to anyone on your faculty? Okay, so I drink too much. Best thing? Come on Amanda?”

“You won’t give up will you?”

“Never.”

“Okay. If I answer, will you lay off?”

“Sure. I’ll drink quietly and alone while you go off and eat a wonderful dinner with your new colleagues and forget all about the people who made you great.”

“I’ll always love my parents,” she said.

“Ha ha, best thing?”

“Teaching.”

The young man with the attache case shifted it again, and this time when the wine spilled he tried to move out and away from it. The only problem was that the glass was still at the end of his hand. It was at the end of the hand at the end of the arm to which he had just transferred the attache case. The case cart-wheeled down his arm, hit his hand, hit the glass, and case and glass and wine flew up. The man reached out for the case to catch it, but the falling wine glass hit his forearm and what was left in the glass spilled all over the front of his suit jacket and white shirt. The attache hit the floor; the glass hit the floor and shattered; the law professor hopeful stared down at both of them forlornly and without hope.

When he looked up, everyone who had been watching the event looked away.

“I hope he has another shirt for tomorrow,” Amanda said, stifling the trace of a giggle.

“Won’t matter,” said Tony.

“Why?”

“He’s a Supreme Court clerk. We talked to him today. But let’s get back to the matter at hand. Teaching?”

“I think so.”

“But you did that before. How can that be the best thing you did as a dean? What did you teach, *A Seminar in the Dynamics of Deans Who Used to Teach Contracts*?”

“I did teach a seminar my first year and I loved it. But last year I taught *Contracts*.”

“Fall or Spring?”

“Both.”

“How did you find the time?”

“It was hard and I had to miss some classes, but I made them up.”

“So you taught both semesters of a first year class that you had taught, what, ten times before? And that was the best thing you did as a dean?”

“Yes.”

“Please expound on your point counselor.”

“Now Tony, you know I try not to be judgmental or preachy.”

“Granted.”

“And so I don’t claim that what I did would be best for everyone or maybe even advisable for everyone.”

“Okay, okay, enough with the disclaimers. On with it. Why?”

“Well, when I first arrived in town it was like a whirlwind. Everyone wanted to meet me and say hello and size me up so I met lots of people but mostly I met people outside the law school, folks from the main campus, alumni, judges, lawyers, other folks in town. And it was great. But it occurred to me that I was not meeting a whole lot of law students.”

“And you were sad about that?”

“Now who’s being cynical? I was meeting students but I was meeting three classes of students. I was meeting student leaders and they were great folks but they

were only representative in the 'elected to represent' sense of the word. Then I also met students who had some sort of problem or complaint. In that way I saw a negative side of the student experience. And, I only met students with complaints or problems who felt comfortable or compelled to come to a brand new dean they did not know with those problems. And, third, I met students who stopped by or made an appointment just to welcome and say hello to the new dean. Some of that third group were really interested in getting to know me; others, I think, wanted me to get to know them, if you get my sense."

"So you didn't get a sense of the real ambiance of the place."

"You can be perceptive Tony. And, I didn't teach that first fall at all, which was a very good decision. When I did teach in the spring, I had a wonderful time but I was teaching a seminar and I only had about eight students in the class. And, because it was an advanced class, they were second and third year students."

"Now, we are up to your second year?"

"Exactly. And I decided I wanted to teach Contracts. I mean obviously I decided that during my first year when we planned the schedule but I am really glad I did."

"Because?"

"Because it gave me a great sense of what the school was about. It gave me a better idea of the ability and challenges our students face when they enter law school in the first year. Try as we might, the first year experience has a lot to do with the atmosphere of a law school and it creates a lot of the memories our graduates take away with them."

"It's true; most of my clearest memories of law school are from my first year. That feeling I got when I thought I would be called on and that sound of my heart pounding in my ears when I was called on."

"Exactly. Anyway, teaching a large first year class gave me a better sense of what my school was all about. We have three sections of each first year class with a class size between 55 and 65. I taught two different sections of the class in the fall and spring. So that meant I got to know, or at least teach, two thirds of the first year class."

"That's pretty good."

"I thought so."

"Okay, so you got to know people, what else was good about it?"

"As I got to know my class more I understood more about the dynamics in the group and in the school. I got to know more about how competitive the student body was; I got to understand more about underlying moods, hopes, and fears. I got a better sense or *feel* for how the students dealt with issues of race, gender, and sexual orientation. I sensed how they felt my colleagues felt about and dealt with the same issues."

"Pretty heavy stuff."

"Drink your Scotch; you asked."

"Okay, but you're really talking about the benefits and perceptions all of us get from teaching, aren't you? Knowing our students; understanding institutional culture; getting a sense of our students' impressions of our colleagues?"

"Yes. But, somehow as a dean I felt my antennae were out more than they ever had been as a teacher. Things I used to think I could avoid, or say weren't my responsibility, were mine to deal with and understand. I couldn't dodge them; even

if I hadn't caused them, they were now part of my responsibility and I couldn't help thinking about them—even if I couldn't fix them—without lying to myself.”

“Let me give you an example,” she continued. “We had to make a decision about access to some second year courses; the details aren't important. I looked at the problem, and it was serious, and I made a decision. I made the wrong decision but I made a decision. I only understood why the decision I made wasn't right because my students communicated with me and made me understand why I had been wrong. They made me see what I had not understood. Of course, some of my colleagues helped too. But I was really convinced by the students. If I had not taught so many of them, I really doubt that they would have felt so free to talk to me, e-mail me, and call me. I also think that if I had not gotten to know them in the classroom, I would not have understood them as well as I did. Teaching built a relationship of trust that helped us communicate better about issues facing the school. And I think when other issues arise I will have a better time communicating with those students. One of the hardest things about being a dean sometimes is gathering information. You have to rely upon hearsay and you hear a lot about what a lot of people feel or what most people are saying. What you have to do is gauge how many is 'a lot' and just what 'most' means. In situations like that, relationships with the people who are talking helps you sift through a lot of stuff and get at something as close to truth as you can sometimes get.”

“I see.”

“Another good thing about teaching is that because I understand our students better, I am in a better position to talk to alumni about them and their experience, and it's easier for me to champion their cause when I have to with the central administration. I once heard a story about Bill Hawkland, who was a dean in a couple of places. He always taught.”

“So?”

“So, once when there was a legislative hearing about the law school at which he was dean and some budget matter was under consideration, he was not at the hearing when the matter was called. The then-chief financial officer of the law school sat down at the microphone to answer questions. A legislator, who was not particularly disposed to fund the item, boomed out: 'why isn't Dean Hawkland here?' And the CFO answered meekly, but in a voice that everyone in the room could hear: 'he's teaching class, sir. He says it's the most important thing he does.' The legislature funded the item.”

“Tactical teaching then?”

“I prefer to think of it as his truth.”

“Touche.” Tony finished his second Scotch. “Amanda, it's good to see you.”

“You too Tony.”

“But I think there's another reason you teach.”

“What?”

“You like it.”

“Yes, I do. It's why I got into this legal education thing to begin with. It's why we're all here this weekend, isn't it?”

The conversation at the adjoining table about whatever key legal theory of the day had died down.

“I hope so,” said Tony.

"It's why I'm here." Amanda smiled and patted him on the arm.

"So some of why you teach is self-interest?"

"You mean selfish?"

"Your word, not mine."

"I suppose it is, yes. But it seems to work for me. Can't a dean be a little bit selfish?"

"I suppose," he said, smiling. "Whatever works for you."

"Now," Amanda said, grinning broadly, "what's the best thing you've done as a professor in the last two years?"

"I resent being asked that question by a dean," Tony said, as he ordered a third drink.