

Days and Work (Part One)

Part [two](#), part [three](#).

by [James Como](#) (March 2019)



How odd, upon laying down the same plow on the same little acre after fifty years (1967-2017 at the City University of New York, forty-nine of those at York College, as inner urban as it gets)—how odd that the road well-traveled sometimes seems so short and straight and at others so absurdly long and tortuous.

Anyone unfamiliar with the City University of New York could not possibly understand the CUNY culture; and anyone within that culture who does not know York College would not understand *it*. Space is curved, we know, but CUNY bends time, and York wrinkles it. I'd grown up there, and, upon reflection, I find much of the place, and my career in it, unfathomable, not least because everything—admin bullying on the one hand, its insouciance on the other; student waywardness on the one hand, near-desperation (including parental and spousal abuse) on the other; overt faculty politicking, with friendship as a fungible commodity; my own emerging roles as teacher, counselor, friend, and cop (as a student I had needed only the first)—all were new to me. Moreover, I was something of a Candide who became a type of Ralph from *Lord of the Flies*, and too frequently a Lone Ranger (but without the wit to wear a mask).

In short, I was archetypally clueless. How clueless? 1/ Shortly after the start of my first semester, I noticed an outgoing mail tray. None of the envelopes was stamped, and I thought, "this must be a faculty perk." So I brought in some bills ready-to-go and dropped them in the basket. They were returned to me (I had put my name and return address on all of them) with a mild, and amused, admonition. 2/ I had hired

(that authority, at my age and stage, was itself preposterous, but York was in only its second year and CUNY as such in its third: the Wild West)—I had hired a bright friend from grad school who in the classroom was a star, but only in the classroom; e.g. instead of answering mail (including grade sheets) he had thrown it all into the back seat of his car. The then-dean instructed me to observe him and slam him in my report. The problem, of course, was that *only* in the classroom did he excel. Genuinely stunned, I demurred. Another, quite awful, colleague was recruited and happily wielded the axe.

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I recall crises (in the sense of personal turning points) often if not best. My behavior during three of these seemed brave to others but not to me, because I saw no risk and simply assumed that honest action was respected as such. A fourth did require spine, and I remain proud to have been part of (at first) a small cohort who managed to rid the college of a president who was evil, venal, and quite possibly deranged. I remember many honest people who were difficult and many more who were congenial but dishonest: I came to lose a considerable amount of respect for a plurality of my colleagues: not only jellyfish—too many sit-down guys and girls, the sort who would have joined the French Resistance in April of '45—but counter-intuitively narrow-minded outside their fields, especially politically: they would abandon method and reason only to become the bigots they deride. I became cranky and perhaps I allow that to coarsen my memory, as life tends to coarsen certain aspects of any sensibility. So little was at stake, as Henry Kissinger has acutely said of business at the Harvard faculty senate.

On the other hand, I had the joys of teaching: I mean the act—the transformative action itself—in all its venues, as well as most of my students (some twenty thousand, counting those in the mass lecture that I delivered, twice a week, for twenty years). Can anything compare with owning the classroom, the seminar table, or the lecture hall? With knowing your stuff and how to handle it? With all the adjustments one must make, often on the fly, as you read your students? I've done some boxing: "ring generalship" is not very different from classroom management. (Except for the being hit part—and even there were some close calls.) With preparing a new class, reformulating an old one, or preparing and introducing a whole new curriculum? Students, of course, come in all styles, and although the student-teacher interaction could be a challenge, even alarmingly so, it was rarely dull—

—except for the grading process, about which I do not intend any systematic discussion: it was no fun. One semester I decided to get rid of that funlessness. In order to address the pressure that comes from "going for the grade," for one special seminar I hand-picked (so to speak) six students: the reading would be tough, conversation a requirement, and everyone would be guaranteed an A from the beginning. No questions. All went well—until the final essay was due. *Not one* of these fine, specially invited students— all of whom had visited my home as a class, for dinner—submitted a paper. Lesson learned.

With all their innate inabilities, lack of maturity, skewed expectations, and pot-holed preparation, students abide over and especially within the semesters. And the good a professor who goes all in with them can do—including good spread over

thousands of hours outside the classroom—is literally its own reward. I've rarely been more myself than when I've been among students, in or out of the teaching theatre, and few feelings compare with the one stirred by a student, perhaps from many years earlier, thanking me.

It happened that my father died suddenly while I was away in Oxford on sabbatical in 1974 researching my doctoral dissertation on C. S. Lewis. Besides normal parental monitoring (very discrete), my father never questioned or in any way intruded upon my decisions respecting education or choice of profession. He simply was not a factor. That was not the case, however, with his death: my internal landscape changed so dramatically and pervasively that for a while even my teaching changed (though without my knowing it), and not for the better. Withal, teaching remained an exciting performing art, with all the gratifications "thereunto appertaining," as most diplomas say. Alas, the real toll is taken by the encumbrances that attach to teaching—clerical hindrances, administrative uncertainties, meetings, committee chairmanships, collegial pettiness and assumed privileges, logistical debilities.

I've always been a person of the Right, or, as I believe, the Center-Right, though in New York City, where I was born, raised and have worked all my life, anyone to the right of Bernie Sanders is usually seen as a right-wing kook. As an undergrad in an advanced public speaking course I had to write and deliver a speech on any topic, in any venue and to any audience of my imagining. If the speech were to have a title mine would have been "America Afflicted"; in any case I (hypothetically) addressed the Queens College faculty, the audience I perforce had to analyze. I was diligent, and I would receive an A from Russ Windes, a man who had been on the

speech-writing staff of Adlai Stevenson, but not without the admonition that I try to stay away from this “far Right Wing thinking.” I was, and remain, flummoxed. All that I discussed—the dangers of our rising national debt, the depredations of China’s Cultural Revolution, the relative silence of our own scribbling class (I ended with a call for our professoriate to take up their pens)—seemed to me nothing more than common sense. (By the way, a year later Windes would hire me, at the age of twenty, as a graduate teaching assistant.)

Thereafter for a period of some twenty-five years I considered myself a Conservative of the Buckley/Reagan ilk but haven’t for quite a while: too much Movement talk, and I don’t like movements. (As a lifelong Catholic, I’ve found the Church quite enough of a movement for me.) Had I lived within the bounds of the city I would have voted for Ed Koch over any Republican; with Scoop Jackson and James Webb (who had been my preferred candidate for president in 2016) he remains on my list of top five Dem public figures. I am a registered Independent.

Now, why bother with this profile? First, although my dispositions became known at my college they did not, to my knowledge, hurt my professional reputation nor hinder my advancement. Other episodes—intra-political, I will call them—did hurt, but none having to do with my religio-political convictions. However, for some reason unknown to me I was thought to have been a spoiled rich kid from a toney section of Queens rather than a child of the James Weldon Johnson Housing Project in East Harlem: this perception, I learned, did hurt my advancement much more than any political views I was thought to hold. In fact I grew up in Astoria, Queens, where I had many menial jobs, including one at a candy store

that was owned and run by a mid-level bookmaker and his two sons. I was paid five dollars a week and all the Chunkys I could eat. Second, a number of friendly colleagues confessed that their friendliness was *in spite of* my political leanings and that they were surprised to find that I was *not* a racist/fringe lunatic/anti-Semite; their own stereotypes had set the bar so low that common decency made me seem exceptional.

When I would travel to lecture here and there at colleges here and there I came to be viewed as something of an expert on fitting in as a conservative Christian: young faculty of more or less my ilk would ask me how I pulled it off. In that light I came up with these few guidelines: 1/ be yourself from the beginning: no closets; 2/ don't be a pain in the ass about it; 3/ be congenial; 4/ when in a position to do so, help colleagues in trouble or who need a favor, without regard to politics; and 5/ when it comes your way to do so and your beliefs so move you, stand on principle (to which I should add, "no matter the pressure of the administration").

An interesting question here is this: What role, if any, does religious conviction play in teaching? Teaching, a performing art and a rhetorical one at that, means the answer depends upon your audience, that is, on one's students. Mine have been preponderantly religious, mostly Christians formed in the Black church (though very few Catholics), but also Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and others. And what these students know is that their professors are commonly downright hostile to religion.

But effective teaching requires authenticity. Over the years it became evident to students that, unlike most of their professors, I was not shy about my belief. Never any

proselytizing, of course, no disrespect of any kind for any religion, but implicit belief in a divine creator. Rarely did any such expression arise in class, though as a teacher of words I would often quote the opening verses of St. John's Gospel in the first week, which I would explore philosophically: our business, after all, was the *Logos*. Out of class students would sometimes approach me to express their appreciation. For example, Muslim students twice invited me to break Ramadan fast with them.

When discussing political rhetoric I would plainly declare that I did not favor Obama's or King's but do strongly prefer Malcolm X's and Frederick Douglass's. Once, when demonstrating an argument, I allowed that the holiday celebrating our African American heritage should not be Martin Luther King Day but Frederic Douglass and Sojourner Truth Day, both of whom, after all, had been slaves, not entitled, richly-educated scions of the middle class. A local reverend who ludicrously called King a 'saint' complained to the administration—which, to its credit, did nothing: I heard of the incident long after the fact. When during any discussion an opinion was appropriate mine might reflect a religious belief or, more likely, invite a religious reference. An authentic, non-intrusive baseline of identity will, in the long run, pay dividends.

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Withal, there was no Madeleine moment. After a couple of decades I learned that I had been viewed as a reliable colleague for quite a while: people whom I had spoken and

voted for (under secrecy) thanked me, surprised, given our past frictions; a new provost called me to his office early in his tenure to seek my advice—it seems a number of colleagues had told him that I was “a beacon of leadership” (which, believe me, I never knew: clueless again); later our president would invite *me* to be provost, but, being near the end of my career and my wife of four decades not wanting me to work “that hard,” I declined. I had walked away from the chairmanship of my department, was called back, and walked again after one term. (I served for a total of fifteen years.) I did the same with other posts, both elected and appointed, of authority. In other words, I was a dutiful citizen of the academic republic, not a driven visionary (the classroom always being the exception).

Just before my eleventh birthday I was obsessed with the idea of writing about a man who visits Hell, Purgatory and Heaven; the next year I was blessedly relieved to learn that it already had been done: the pressure was off. But archaic origins fascinated me most: what came before the before. So there arrived a paleontologist stage, and Hesiod (probably writing before even Homer). By the time I entered Queens College (CUNY) at sixteen in the fall of 1963 serious intellection had already begun.

At the start of my junior year in high school I appropriated the family desk and organized my “library,” which included a diagram of it and a spending spree at the original Barnes and Noble on Fifth Avenue and 18th Street. I bought nearly two dozen books, none of them texts, for the astronomical sum of about \$45! Even in my junior high school days I would buy the *New York Post* three times a week for the sole purpose of reading Max Lerner’s column (From the Left): ideas and argument became my strong brew. Still, I had no notion of

ideology; in fact, I did not know the word—it would have made no difference. That would change, especially in 1964 when I discovered *National Review* and William Buckley (ideas! argument! debate!— oh baby!!).

Classical literature, including philosophy, as well as other Continental literatures, would come for the most part auto-didactically. Homer I return to periodically. I could never forget Richmond Lattimore's rendering of the passage in which Ajax throws a spear through a man's throat, and I've revisited *The Odyssey* enough to hold the settled belief that it was composed by a woman. I've wrestled with Nietzsche and Kierkegaard; Spanish-language literature, both Peninsular and New World, became a lasting pleasure. (Thank you Mr. Glick.) *Quijote* reigns supreme.

The biggest change in me resulted from my discovery (thanks to "The Re-birth of Christ" by Jeffrey Hart in the Christmas issue of *National Review* in 1964) of C. S. Lewis. One of Alexandra's first gifts to me would be *Christian Reflections*, purchased at the Moorehouse-Barlow bookstore on East 41st Street—long gone. It is edited by the great Walter Hooper who, merely six years later, would become a lifelong friend. Who knew? My first Lewis book was *The Great Divorce*, in which I continue to find myself; of equal impact, though, was his slim book of literary theory, *An Experiment in Criticism*. Could *theory* be this pellucid, penetrating, dispositive, useful and *generous*? The reading of that book led to my first Lewis paper, for a course in literary criticism (thank you Prof. Dorothy Jones), and I've never looked back.

A parallel interest had emerged: courtroom argument and the lawyers who practiced it; there, I was sure, lay my groove. I

had discovered *Compulsion*, Meyer Levin's riveting account of the infamous Loeb-Leopold/Bobby Franks abduction, murder and trial. How Clarence Darrow saved them from execution seemed miraculous: with a mind sharper than a scalpel and words and tactics to match, the man did the impossible. (Later I would learn much more about Leopold from his superb *Life Plus Ninety-Nine Years*: by all standards, he was reformed.) An English teacher, Mr. Balish, who saw me reading the book, recommended the riveting *An American Tragedy*. Thereafter came *The Great Mouthpiece*, about William Fallon (a gifted scoundrel), *Final Verdict*, about Earl Rogers (who many believe to have been the greatest trial lawyer in our history), *My Life in Court*, by and about Louis Nizer, and my all-time favorite, *Courtroom*, about the great Samuel Leibowitz.

So I went through my lawyer stage, which lasted into graduate school but ended a month into teaching as a graduate assistant: I knew I would spend my life in the college classroom. I had prepared my first lesson so thoroughly that my notes (which I still have) say, "write on board now" and "tell joke now." Most students were older than I or had been my hang-out friends the previous semester. I was so scared I looked out the window for fifty minutes; I remained seated. Neither would recur until decades later when arthritis would strike my hips. But I left that room determined never to be frightened again. They say one should "fake it till you make it," and by the third week I had. By the way, this has earned me a modest reputation as a "bait and switch" con man, at least according to Alexandra who, when asked by our daughter how a beautiful woman like her could marry "a nerd like dad," said, "I thought he would become a very rich lawyer."[\[1\]](#)

[\[1\]](#)For the record, I wasn't a nerd; not even close. It's just that accordion players who like to read always get a bad rap.

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