

Through the Looking Glass

By Mary Ellen Collins July 30, 1999

"But seriously, how will you be able to capture the gestalt of our programs?" the professor asked earnestly.

I felt a smile creeping across my face until I realized he was serious. How could I, a non-academic, possibly get my feeble mind around what he does for a living?

I had spent 14 years wandering the halls of academe wearing a variety of institutional-advancement hats, from development-event planner to director of major gifts. When the desire for a mid-life adventure became too strong to ignore, I launched a career as a freelance writer, intending to get my start in those ivory towers I knew so well.

That day, the dean of the college was considering hiring me to write its annual report, and this was the initial meeting among the three of us. My assumption that the job would include writing the requisite "Message from the Dean" at the beginning of the report had prompted the gestalt inquiry and brought us to this temporary roadblock.

I tried to reassure them by citing experience from my former life as a college major-gifts director. "I've written hundreds of letters from presidents, vice-presidents, trustees, and deans," I said.

They looked at each other and laughed awkwardly. "You mean we're not original in what we say?" asked the dean.

Oh dear. He meant it. Should I break it to them that I had total confidence in my ability to capture their gestalt with my eyes closed, my ears plugged, and my hands bound? Since the objective of the meeting was to get the assignment, I bit my sarcastic tongue and tried again.

"You're hiring me to do the work, so why not just let me do it? If you're not happy with my first draft, I'll make whatever changes you want me to make."

The dean seemed willing to let me try, but Faculty-Man wasn't finished whining. "But how will you know enough to emphasize our collaborative projects, and our outreach to the community, and the importance of our interdisciplinary efforts?"

"Because I'm not a moron!" I shrieked inwardly.

"Because I've read last year's report, and all of your current brochures and catalogues, and I've listened to your conversation for the past hour," I explained calmly, not to mention the fact that we'd be hard-pressed to find any college on the planet that isn't heading into the 21st century emphasizing collaborative ventures and commitment to community.

When I risked what I thought was a diplomatic inquiry about the length and density of last year's report, the dean explained, "People don't realize that academics will read. And they'll read a lot."

Maybe they will, I argued silently, but is that any reason to let meaningless verbiage clutter up the printed landscape? The liberal use of "indeed," "as such," "thus," and "thusly" in the previous year's report had me itching to reach for my editor's pencil. If I had asked Faculty-Man directly about the purpose of such verbosity, I'm sure he would've answered that "if you can make the point in 10 words or less, it's always preferable to pontificate for 20."

After we struggled to the end of that first conversation, I got the job and went away determined to prove to these two gentlemen that I could put words in their mouths. I produced a letter the dean pronounced "excellent and impressive," and when he handed me Faculty-Man's section to edit, I knew victory was mine.

After my years in higher-education administration, academic pretensions don't surprise me. My fund-raising colleagues and I used to attend monthly faculty meetings where we watched the players engage in mind-numbing displays of disagreement, debate, and the splitting of hairs. Didn't they know that while they argued over the semantics of a faculty policy manual, people were starving in the world? We wondered how some of them fared in "real life." Did they actually manage to leave talk of paradigms and pedagogy behind long enough to raise children, buy groceries, and pay bills?

As I navigate the halls of a new ivory tower wearing a hat that says "freelance writer" rather than "director of major gifts," I still recognize all the players. There are the rational, reasonable souls who are happy to hire and trust me because they have neither the time nor the inclination to write their own reports, brochures and proposals. And there are those who honestly believe they inhabit a rarefied world that mortals can't possibly comprehend or, God forbid, write about.

So far, tact and diplomacy (qualities I possess in limited supply) have enabled me to convince the skeptics to look on me as a partner rather than an adversary. But my patience quotient isn't very high, and there may come a day when brutal honesty seems a more-efficient recourse than gentle persuasion. If so, I'm confident I will have the nerve to meet objections from Faculty-Man and his ilk without mincing any words:

"I'm a wordsmith, professor, with no desire to tarnish your reputation or tamper with your gestalt. My goal is to produce quality writing that reflects well on both of us. If you can't bring yourself to consider me your intellectual equal, just look on me as the hired help. Then, move your ego out of the way and make some room for mine!"

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