

# A Sabbatical Tale

Henry B.

Dear Reid:

This is certainly an interesting place to spend a sabbatical, but I wouldn't want to work here permanently. The people I have met are pleasant enough, and friendly, and even stimulating, but business is transacted in some strange ways. I don't believe I could get used to it.

It may in part be that at home we are simply spoiled because we are so amply financed; here, there is a prevailing parsimony. For instance, it seems that the University can hardly manage to pay the costs of postage and telephone usage. I know about this because, although I have an honorary faculty title only, I do get all the memoranda that are distributed to the faculty; and recently I received one that urged us to be more economical as far as postage costs are concerned. I was invited to attend a faculty meeting at which this problem was discussed: should they no longer correspond with colleagues at other places about their work? Should they no longer respond to requests for references about former students? Should they refuse to accept delivery of manuscripts to be reviewed? Should they declare a moratorium on sending manuscripts for publication? I was not surprised that no decisions were reached.

At one point, I made a suggestion. The high cost of air mail to foreign countries had been cited, and I pointed out that this could be lessened if the University were to provide aerograms, as we do at home. It seems, however, that this had been suggested some years ago, and rejected on the grounds that some people would use these for personal, rather than professional, correspondence. As a matter of fact, everyone is required to use letterhead envelopes and address labels for official mail. So, when one has a manuscript to review, one cannot use the return-addressed envelope that comes with it (or the pre-addressed label); and so more labels and envelopes are used, but that is apparently a small price to pay for keeping the faculty honest.

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I would love to introduce here some of our American attitudes—the idea of cost-effectiveness, for instance. On the one hand, there is continual talk here of attaining "national visibility," by which they mean that activities and achievements of faculty should become widely known to people at other universities in this country. On the other hand, they want to do this at no monetary cost: faculty are asked to be careful about using the mails and the telephone (one cannot dial long-distance from most of the telephones); they are encouraged to travel and to attend meetings, but the money for such travel averages less than \$100 per faculty member per year (one cannot even be reimbursed for parking charges levied at the local airport). There is a decent computer on campus, but it stands idle for much of the time—not because there is no work waiting to be done, but because they cannot afford to use it around the clock; that would cost too much in salaries of computer staff, cards, paper, etc. Just now, a search is going on for a new faculty member in this department; whoever is appointed will likely be here for at least five or six years, during which time he will be paid \$60,000 or so, but they are not permitted to spend more than a few hundred dollars in interviewing candidates to make sure that they get the best one.

I am really quite surprised at how well the faculty manage in the face of these little idiocies. What impresses me more, though, is how they preserve some self-respect despite regulations that seem designed to make them feel like hacks, and worse. There is an extraordinary system here called "the annual merit evaluation." I shall have to describe it in detail, because I've never heard of anything like it, and I wager that you haven't either. Each year, one's merit is assessed, objectively and quantitatively, and his salary raise is determined by his "merit rating." The rating is a weighted composite of activities in teaching, research, and service (I can't explain precisely what the last category means, since I haven't found anyone who could explain it to me). For instance, if you are worth 4/7 (four on a seven-point scale) in

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teaching, 5/7 in research, and 4/7 in service; and if your time was spent 45 percent on teaching, 45 percent in research, and 10 percent on service activities, your rating would be  $0.45 \times 4/7 + 0.45 \times 5/7 + 0.1 \times 4/7 = 4.45/7$  (which would be rounded off to 4 plus). The numbers in the individual categories are easily assigned. Teaching is assessed by the students, who complete a questionnaire about each teacher (anonymously, so the students do not need to feel responsible for what they say) and assign a numerical grade. The average of these grades reflects objectively the value of one's teaching efforts (one sees faculty ranked, for instance, in the manner of "your teaching rating by students is 3.12/4; this places you 17/22 in the department"). Research, of course, is assessed by monitoring publications; you must publish occasionally, but not so frequently as to show that the work is of necessity trivial; the ideal is one or two publications a year, each and every year. Not four in one year and none the next, because merit is assessed annually. Service activities are assessed in as well-defined a manner as that activity itself is defined.

This system has certain subtleties that are worth noting. For instance, it is a means of getting *up-to-date* information. At home, we have a tendency to slip into the belief that a competent teacher and effective scholar maintains his competence and effectiveness over appreciable periods of time. The system here, however, makes it possible to detect short-term fluctuations, and this can be used as desired—e.g., to cut people down to size. It would be nice to have this system at home, and use it on old B\_\_\_\_\_ for instance; he is so arrogant about his three books and eighty-five papers, it would be nice to give him a 3/7 in research in a year where no paper appears under his name. . . . We might even be able to persuade him to find a job somewhere else.

When I first heard about this system, I wondered how anyone with standards and self-respect could be satisfied with less than a perfect grade. It turns out that 4/7 means "good," and one is told that one should be quite satisfied with that; 5/7 means "very good," and that is a real pat on the back; 6/7, of course, is "excellent," and people are not supposed to aim that high, let alone for 7/7, "outstanding." (Curiously, they don't apply this reasoning to students: the latter are expected to aim for 4/4, "A," and 2/4, "C," is not regarded as any basis for satisfaction.) It seems that this system was not too well understood by the faculty when it was first introduced, but the problems have since been ironed out. For instance, a four-point scale was used at first, and this led to confusion with the system of grading students (everyone wanted an "A"! The seven-point scale avoided that, and also made it possible to achieve greater discrimination (the more so, as this scale is actually not a scale, but—as an administrator described it—a "seven-point merit continuum," and one is not restricted to, e.g., a "5," but can attain, e.g., a "5 minus").

Of course, part of the validity of the rating rests on a valid weighting of one's efforts. This is achieved by means of the "Academic Personnel Report" (APR), on which one shows the time devoted to various tasks, which

are divided into about eight categories, with subcategories to give balance to the form. Computer processing permits unequivocal data to be obtained in this way. These forms are quite easy to complete, since one knows *beforehand* that the total hours will come to forty per week, with a division of eighteen used in teaching, eighteen in research, and four in service activities; this prior knowledge also ensures that faculty cannot be dishonest in reporting their work efforts. At first, the faculty were informed that the APR would not be used in connection with the merit evaluation, but it was found to be so convenient and precise an instrument that it is now used in that connection. One little peculiarity is that one reports teaching and service activities only for one semester, but research for the whole year. This ensures that teaching loads are distributed equally—six contact hours per semester—since there is no way of showing, if one happens to have no contact hours in a given semester, that one has twelve in the other semester. That apparently stopped a lot of hanky-panky by people who were teaching full time during one semester and leaving the other *free* (for research, they claimed).

There is one more point that I must mention. Once when I visited the office of one of the administrators here, I saw a large sign on the wall—"SAYING SO, MAKES IT SO." That puzzled me; I thought of the frequently rewritten Soviet history books, for instance, but couldn't think of instances where I would care to see this motto applied. The administrator must have seen me glancing at the sign from time to time, because after a while he asked me what I thought of his motto. Cautiously, I said it intrigued me and I would like to be able to apply it, because it would surely make me feel quite powerful and effective to do so. He chuckled, and said that it did indeed, and moreover simplified administration a good deal. For instance, on the first occasion that an APR form was used, the faculty had found it difficult to divide their reported effort into fifty-eight independent categories; they had thought that the descriptions of some of these categories overlapped. The administrator solved this very simply by adding to the form the explanation, "These categories are mutually exclusive"; this *ex cathedra* statement was of great help to people who had not realized that this was the case.

Again, some doubt had been expressed as to the validity of assessing merit on a seven-point continuum ("comparing professors in English with those in physics is like comparing apples and [bad] oranges"); that was solved by an essay-memorandum which *said* that this could be done, and thus *made* it possible to do so. Moreover, faculty dissatisfaction with less than the top merit rating was dispelled by *stating* what the ratings really meant (4 = good, 5 = very good, etc.) and further *stating* that anyone would be satisfied to be told that his work was "good" or "very good"; no sooner said than done—the faculty are now satisfied.

Perhaps the most successful coup (*de grâce*) attributable to the application of this motto was the designation, by the university as a whole, of a number of first-rate universities as "bench-mark institutions." This

was taken by the faculty as meaning that the university was to move in directions that would make the quality of its efforts and facilities comparable to those of the benchmark universities. Thus, for instance, they looked forward to lower teaching loads. As the administrator pointed out, however, actually implementing such changes would have been very expensive and would have disrupted administrative practices in an intolerable way. Therefore, *nothing was done*. But now, when some faculty member tells his dean that his colleagues at another university have only half the teaching load that he has, the dean is able to reply "But that's impossible—that is one of our bench-mark institutions." The faculty member then realizes that his information must have been incorrect, and retires (from the dean's presence) in the sure knowledge that his working conditions are as good as those at any university in the land.

I admitted to the administrator that I was impressed by these examples; and asked how he had come to discover the potent motto. He hesitated slightly, and looked at me searchingly—a look I have seen before, of a person who knows that he is rarely believed or taken

seriously. I must have passed the test. He leaned back in his chair, and asked if I was interested in the history of ideas and of knowledge. Did I realize how much truth there is in legends and traditional tales? That archaeology began with a man who believed there was hard fact in the Homeric legends? That the "mythical" sea-monster, the kraken, turned out to be the real giant squid, attested specimens of which had arms some seventy feet long? That a recent photograph of a large flippered shape showed the Loch Ness Monster to be a real living animal? Well, he had pondered such matters, specifically with respect to incantations and magic (for example, Australian aborigines do die when someone has "pointed the bone" at them). The administrator had decided to do some experiments; and, as the examples he had given me demonstrated, had proved that when an administrator says that something is so, as far as the faculty are concerned, it is indeed so.

All best wishes, Reid.

Yours, in Wonderland,  
Henry B.