

Days and Work (Part Three)

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

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



East River Nocturne, Joseph Peller, 2003

During the spring of 1968, in sight of the completion of my first master's degree at Queens College, I began writing letters of application to colleges close by. I wrote thirty-eight, received over thirty negative answers (including one from the brand-new York College), and one invitation to visit, from Yeshiva University. I did visit, but the five thousand dollar salary and absurdly long commute were disincentives. Wedding plans were afoot. When I told my father I might

enlist, he—this man to whom I was closer and of whom more admiring than any, ever—threatened to break both my legs. “I know you’re a patriot, son, but not this war [he had been a medic in WWII], not this president [LBJ].” I agreed to stay put but told him that, if called, I would serve. Then a call did come—from York College. Would I come in for an interview? Go figure.

I dressed up, carried a brief case, and (finally having a driver’s license, after much insistence by Alexandra, who could not believe I had no interest in cars) drove to York College; that is, to Queensboro Community College, actually its huge parking lot with the York trailers. I met with Ed Willis and Venis Marsh, the Director and Associate Director, respectively, of the SEEK program. (Ed was an historian, Venis a reading specialist.) Venis told me that he had been to a Speech Communication conference scouting for someone to teach a speech course; there a former professor of mine had recommended me. (Years later I would offer that professor a job.) They contacted one reference, Forbes Hill, who told them that I was 1/ conservative, 2/ a superb teacher, 3/ committed to both teaching and to my students, and 4/ altogether a fair man.

They asked about my conception of a speech course; I answered that argument would be at the center, along with performance skills. Did I have any questions? Yes, I said, is there a syllabus and to whom would I report? Oh, they answered: you must write the syllabus and, since you’re the only speech teacher here, you really don’t report to anyone. Later I would learn that a second candidate, a man I’d known as an undergrad and who was a very bright, posturing and arrogant snob, had made a terrible impression. (He would go on to a distinguished career, but not in the academy.)

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My students were (and would remain) preponderantly of color, and we got along famously, for the most part. I remember particularly Lorraine Roach, who couldn't follow instructions but was a brilliant—and I mean brilliant—speaker. I asked her where she learned her skill. “From the Spirit, Professor Como,” and in truth every speech she delivered was a splendid sermon. Lorraine and I became mutual favorites; I lament that over the years we'd fallen out of touch.

Ahead would be unsettled and unsettling times, but when I moved from SEEK to the Humanities Division I was appointed to committees, invited to team-teach, and spoke up (always calmly, rationally, even deferentially, though never obsequiously) at faculty meetings, and without my knowledge or intent became known as a Young Turk, albeit one you would want in your foxhole. When we moved from the parking lot to rented buildings in Jamaica in 1971, I was (though still very much a work-in-progress) known, even though many misconceptions about me (e.g. where I was born, how I was raised, that I was a champion debater, which I've never been) would prove inconvenient.

Earning two master's degrees (no regrets), working towards a doctorate, owning a home (the purchase of which had been a mistake for many reasons as I could barely afford the oil bill), while all the while working at York (not merely

teaching a heavy load but administering Speech as well)—these together had me on the ropes. The tunnel was at its darkest when, in 1974, with my wife and son in Oxford, I got the call from my brother that our father had died—a devastating blow. Seven years later, one year after being awarded the Ph.D., we sold the house; soon we would be off for that sabbatical year in Peru. The tunnel was behind me; alas, so was my father, who would know nothing of my career except its very beginning.

I do recall when the light at the end of the dark passage was first visible; it came in 1979 right after the successful defense of my dissertation, a defense that began with considerable anxiety. My dissertation *advisor* (who had replaced the original advisor when the latter suffered a massive heart attack) announced that I was the most selfish candidate he had ever known. The defense committee chairman agreed. My knuckles were white, of course, but I held my tongue. There followed the easiest questions imaginable, owing largely to how embarrassed the committee had been by their own colleagues.

When I was summoned back into the room as “Dr. Como” I asked if I could say something. Across the table sat a woman with whom I shared high regard. Very discretely she mouthed “no.” I smiled and said, “for two such distinguished professors to say what they did, under such circumstances, in such a venue, indicates to me some deplorable behavior on my part. I cannot *imagine* what that was, but for whatever it was I earnestly apologize.” My friend virtually leapt across the table to shake my hand. Later I was able to place a collect call to my wife as “Dr. Como.” My four-year-old daughter would ask, “is daddy a doctor of knowledge now?”

While in Peru my daughter attended an Anglo-Peruvian school, my son an American one. I attended conferences, conducted interviews, did some academic consulting, and met the president of the republic (Fernando Belaunde Terry—one of the most genial people I've ever met and truly a hero of Peruvian democracy—who gave me an hour of his time). I made valuable friends. And I began to write. When I visited in 1990 it was to cover the landmark election of 1990 as a fully-credentialed foreign correspondent for *National Review*. My first [book](#) on C. S. Lewis had already been published (1979), so in that niche I was known as more than an essayist, lecturer and a founding member of the New York C. S. Lewis Society. That reputation would grow.

Now, with some articles on Peru on my resume, I was an academic with a second arrow in his quiver. Later, when I began to publish on rhetoric, there would be a third. In the event, as we were about to return to the States I thought I needed an arena larger than the one I had occupied before the sabbatical. I had no idea I would be invited to chair my department. As I hope I've made clear, accepting that invitation was a good decision, remaining at the college as long as I did maybe not so good, or so it would sometimes seem.

Moreover, the intellectual gears were meshing. Considerable nourishment came from the courses I was teaching: Ethics and the Freedom of Speech (a review of First Amendment rulings and the ethical limits that should accompany the freedom: unique in CUNY at the time), American Public Address, Rhetorical Theory and Criticism, Small Group Communication, Forms of Public Address, and every now and then a special seminar, all always in the company of Speech 101 (unusual for a veteran member of the faculty, let alone a chairman) that sated my

appetite for the large performance.

Disgusted with the price of textbooks, I had edited my own for my Speech 101 students, adding some fresh matter: this would be the first “customized text” at the college, just as podcasts of my mass lecture for Speech 101 would be the first podcasted lectures: since they were on iTunes I would, to my astonishment, hear feedback from people abroad. (A good deal of the substance of the course is described in the first few chapters of [*The Tongue is Also a Fire*](#), from the NER press.)

Owing to the recommendation of a friend whom I had hired, I became a featured lecturer at the Institute for Christian Studies at the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church. Over the course of some seven years I would deliver several dozen lectures, half on C. S. Lewis and half on . . . well, just about any literary subject I chose. My time at FAP was most satisfying, and I met two important people. One of them (who would prove himself a megastar of the classroom and the lecture hall) I hired to teach at York, the other is a lifelong friend, a globally famous soprano who would sing at my daughter’s wedding—which wedding would not have happened if Allie’s poppa had not been boring. She would discretely leave the room one evening and go down to the homeless shelter. There she met its director, Peter Saghir, a fine and good man who would become her husband. You see? God wastes nothing, not even poppa’s off-night.

I have been hedonistically autodidactic: theology, cosmology, history and biography, physics, language, the history of ideas. Popular writing in these and other fields is an underrated art. My son has educated me in some aspects of popular culture: music, movies I might not otherwise have seen, the

best of the thriller writers: any ground of interest to him Jim will scour, and he forgets virtually nothing. Since my retirement I have written more than I ever had (including short stories, children's tales, essays and poetry), and for a few years teaching one course per semester (usually Western Civilization, from Genesis to Einstein) was enjoyable: I did my homework happily, encountered an array of students (who learn, for example, that Antigone is in many ways like many another teenage brat), and I visited with those colleagues I'm fondest of.

Not long ago I heard the finest compliment of my professional life. When I retired from full-time teaching I was replaced by three people. When a colleague from Fine Arts retired, he was replaced by one. The Arts coordinator complained about this inequity to the president, who answered (according to the coordinator), "that was Como. No *one* is Como." Nice to know. And not so by-the-way, this president, Marcia Keizs, is by far the finest we've ever had. She and W. Hubert Keen, a former provost and an authentic gentleman with a spine of steel (he had stood against the madwoman president), are the two finest administrators in the history of the college.

Two colleagues had served at York longer than I, both by a single year. [Sam Hux](#) is one of them, Bob Parmet (historian, Yankee fan, and friend) another. But as was the case with all my colleagues at the beginning of my career, so it is with Sam and Bob. Both are some dozen years older than I, which I mention for this reason: by the time they arrived at York they were seasoned, whereas I had to grow up *in situ*—learn not only the ropes but that there *were* ropes.

I was insulted but didn't know it, and so I held no grudges

(with two exceptions) and thereby won people over; I was bold (without knowing it), so I won some respect; I had misconceptions about the intellectual rigor and honesty of academics, and so fought useless battles and earned a reputation for contrariness; for thirty years I often worked on behalf of the college *in spite of* college resistance, until I learned better; I assumed candor and goodwill in colleagues, until I learned to present myself with greater guardedness, less enthusiasm, more restrained engagement, and sometimes with coolness. From many incidents not recorded here I also learned impatience, peremptoriness, to some degree callousness, and, alas, the usefulness of an iron fist (not always inside a velvet glove).

Maybe I hadn't exactly been *Candide*, but close enough; and surely the college was not exactly the island of *The Lord of the Flies*, but often enough seemed so. As I've suggested, I might have been better off paying my dues then moving on to a fresh start elsewhere. Now and again I would apply for a deanship, but always half-heartedly—until I made the short list for department chair at Juilliard. Alas, I learned that I was a “beard,” a candidate whose only function is to make the search look legit: all along they had wanted their inside man.

Over the years I did teach a course here and there: at Teachers College of Columbia University, a grad course in conflict resolution that was great fun; a handful of courses at Queens College were . . . well, since my days there students had become somnambulant; Pace University in Pleasantville, New York, was just too vanilla (they didn't know who James Brown was); and students at the Galatin School of New York University were mostly entitled, spoiled Millennials *avant la lettre*. No: at any place other than York I would have had much less fun. I was made for it and put

there, I truly believe, by Providential design: surely *that* is why I stayed.

People: most good, but now so many I cannot remember and never will. Then there is the intensity of hours of talks with students (I can still name nearly sixty), sustained after class over semesters, who now abide as “whatever became of ___?” (though some few have remained abiding friends). Events: theatrical performances (including as Polonius, a great man!), colloquia delivered, traditions (Faculty Forum, Provost’s Lecture Series, the Council of Chairs—*radical*) begun and sustained, visits arranged for distinguished lecturers (Samuel Leibowitz of Scottsboro fame) and historical figures (Pavel Litvinov, grandson of Maxim, he of the Hitler-Stalin pact).

Much lingers on the fringe of memory, pressing, almost out of reach. One event still chills. Late one night, alone in my office, a student confronted me, hands in pockets. He became suggestively menacing. I realized I’d have to apply the old “crazier than thou” move, so I threatened him, not without much imagery. He left. I sat, not without a tremble. Weeks later he threatened a colleague with a knife, only to be disarmed by our former Marine captain head of security, Rick Santiago. He wasn’t expelled—then. Only when he ran stark naked through the secretary pool displaying himself to each secretary was he booted.

Another event amuses. At a meeting of chair people with President Fish presiding, the police entered looking for Como. It seems a student has made a threat against him. Turned out that, though the student *had* threatened me, the police thought she had threatened the governor Mario *Cuomo*, and, since he was in the neighborhood with his security detail, the police

thought to check, since the student was ours. The last words from the police that I remember were, "let's get out of here. It's only a professor."

And a third still rankles. Lem Tucker was the first black network reporter to do "standup" on a national news broadcast. I had met him at a convention and invited him to speak at the college, to our preponderantly black audience. A black student group, calling him an Uncle Tom, went to the director and said they "could not guarantee the peace." The director caved. I fumed. The director offered to call Mr. Tucker, but I insisted on doing that. He was livid, I humiliated; finally he was understanding and the good man let me off the hook: there really is nothing new under the sun. (That was when I decided to design the Free Speech and Ethics course.)

"Art is the signature of mankind," wrote C. K. Chesterton, a line I used when I addressed the curriculum committee and saved Fine Arts as part of the Core Curriculum, thus saving courses and jobs. (What I said then, thirty-plus years ago, remains the mission statement of that discipline on the York website.) Years later, I told the artist who had lied to me about an observation that he would have to teach art history. He was terrified, as I knew he would be, he retired, I was not unhappy.

On the other hand, a second artist, a crony of the first, got a surprise. He was as self-centered as anyone I've ever known and made life very . . . difficult . . . for me. Near the end, when I was not chairing, my successor asked if I thought he should cut the maniac some scheduling slack: his wife was deep into dementia. I said yes, I thought he should. To his credit, the beneficiary of this favor did the unthinkable by thanking

me for what *he* thought would be the impossible. What would that cynical atheist have done if he'd known the truth, that Jesus left me no choice?

Another time a student complained about the unfairness of her drawing teacher: the instructor was not giving her enough consideration for her disability. The student called the director of counseling and the college legal advisor, both of whom called me. I spoke to the teacher then visited with the duo. They were shocked when I took the teacher's side and refused even to rebuke her. She not only had given the student all the time she had asked for but allowed her to approach the still-life as closely as she pleased. I told the duo that I would accompany them to the president if they wished, along with the student and the instructor; they declined. The student received her C. The student, you see, was virtually blind.

The fun I had lecturing to thousands of students in Speech 101 was extravagant; my success owing, in part, to their perception of that extravagance, its edginess a novelty (a swear word here, thrown chalk there, dancing with a woman of a certain age to James Brown, whom I had interviewed and who had sent them a message—that sort of thing). But some classes didn't work; not many, thank Heaven, but a few. At the end of one (a class in Persuasion: Theory and Practice) I said as much to the class, with whom I had bonded, as they had with each other. I simply had not dealt with the social science aspect of persuasion adequately. They chipped in to buy me a plaque, thanking me for having "persuaded" them into believing the class had been a success.

A great disappointment was in falsely believing that, when I

stepped down as chair and as director of the program, and finally retired, that I had left the shop in very competent hands. In fact they were mediocrities. I really should have known, and maybe on some level I did—but I wanted out. Disaster did not ensue: *apres moi* there was nothing like a deluge, but the store foundered—except for Speech 101, which remains substantially as I had built it.

Feelings? To paraphrase C. S. Lewis, they come and go, mostly they go. Withal, nothing comes close to the satisfaction of walking into the classroom or lecture hall, or sitting at the seminar table, on the first day of class. And nothing can compare with having catalyzed a student's epiphany, especially after a long struggle. Early on Rendor (that provost) would allow that I was "a megastar of the classroom." Well, I certainly would not say such a thing about myself, but, sisters and brothers, there's nothing like confidence, and I had my share, and maybe some of yours, too.

I value freedom much more than I do equality. I continue to disapprove of pronouns in the subjective case used in the objective. (If in my course you wrote or said aloud "between she and I" twice you not only failed but I would have your landlord evict you.) Now what continues to engage me most is how something works. Of course, that engagement has applied, almost compulsively, to words and their deployment, and downright compulsively to conversation, without which I would wither.

Those lawyers I so admired would know exactly what I mean. Maybe I did land my wife by the old bait-&-switch; if so I'm . . . grateful . . . that I was called: I wouldn't have exchanged it for anything—not even to be a real Tom Ewell in

The Seven Year Itch visited by Marilyn. Why? Because the ecstasies outweighed the agonies. Old teachers do go gentle into that good night, of course, and most memories are like ice sculptures, eventually melting away. My tale is a wheel within wheels, like any other, and it could be rolled this way—or another. I do know that on some days I should have been paid five times my salary but that on others I would have taught for free. And this (of which my family makes mock, of course): before retiring, the last time I took a sick day was in the fifth grade.

After retirement, and after awards from a few college groups, I was invited to give the homecoming address following a commencement. This I accepted with alacrity: many old colleagues who had routinely misjudged me variously would be present. I worked hard on the speech: only eight minutes. Both my wife and my favorite president were present, sitting side-by-side. I hit it out of the park. Those colleagues embraced me, thanked me, congratulated me, and I was touched, but not as gratified as I was when I learned that the president had turned to Alexandra and said, “what a special man.”

I sometimes reminisce about collegial lunches, especially those with the historian Dan Kelly, who forgot nothing, Sam Hux, who would quiz Dan on the most esoteric inter-war characters (Dan never failed), the critic Bob Ryley, whose congenial judgments, as well as hilarious misdirections in story-telling, were ever reliable and surprising, and the physicist Gene Levin, whose joke-telling had no peer; and about our dinner salon, a twenty-year tradition that, alone, made the worst week worthwhile. (Have you ever heard one Jamaican argue with another about Jamaica?)

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For the record: there are students who regard me as the spawn of satan. No matter. I am continually comforted by the wisdom of this nugget, from Henry Adams: "A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops." A student I barely remember writes asking for permission to use my name as a reference; I assent, but ask her first to remind me of the classes she took with me. She does, and I recall her excellence of character and intellect. I speak with her chairman-to-be and now delight in the knowledge that she will have a full-time position, teaching 'speech', that is, the principles and practice of rhetoric.

Then arrives an email from the last secretary I worked with (not as chairman). This sweet, quiet woman tells me that an older student arrived asking about speech. "Speech 101"? she asked. "Oh no," he responded. "I had that, and with The King." "The King?" "Yes, The King. Dr. James Como, and everybody who took his class knows it. Without him I wouldn't be a preacher." It really cannot get any better than that.

I find that I do not miss the academy, not even the teaching. To put it at its simplest: I had emptied the tank. But now comes a coda. Walter Dixon and I sometimes speak by phone; Sam Hux lives a distance away, so we must be in touch by email, about our writing, or the Yankees, or politics. But Howard Ruttenberg is, like me, a Manhattanite, so we are able to share the occasional lunch.

Recently I showed Howard this memoir, after he had read the first two parts. He commented on this and that, some items he recalled and he wondered about those he didn't. Some of his thoughts were more personal. This is my favorite of those, dispositive, I think:

I have been reflecting on the moral fervor that we share, which is not simply the virtues of honesty and fairness nor simply the ability to understand, I. e., not virtue plus intellect, but the very goodness of thought itself, as invention, assertion, inference, and principle, the concerns of the arts of freedom.

To which I can add only this: That is what, for some fifty years, we have practiced and professed—a benediction, for which I am deeply grateful to Him who bestows all blessings.

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