

Days and Work (Part Two)

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

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



Night Shift Union Square, Joseph Peller, 2014

My romance with rhetoric would shape my intellect and my career: thank you Forbes Hill, whom I met in grad school. But the penny first dropped when I was an upper junior in a class called Forms of Public Address, taught by the formidable Wilbur Gilman. What mystified me then and does now is how long it took for Rhetoric to arrive. My first Master's degree would be in it and serve as the paradigm that I would apply to any verbal object of interest. My ambition (and the basis of many

a grad school colleague's joke) became to "re-unite" the disciplines of literary criticism and rhetorical theory. How? Well, I would re-unite the departments of English and Speech (one banner under which rhetoric has marched).

It took a few years before Speech 101 became the course I had always envisioned, as well as a requirement for graduation. Both it and I were demanding, I alone in designing the course, hiring (and sometimes firing) the teaching faculty, maintaining course uniformity and integrity, writing the final examination, and for two decades delivering that mass lecture that both prepared students for their speeches and, I hoped, made them "larger on the inside than on the outside." It was Heaven.

The professional effects of this enterprise were oxymoronic: intellectually phenomenal, professionally neutral. Surely this good and widely-useful work (among other achievements) ought to lead to some advance? Soon enough I realized that a president (I'll call him "Fish") devoid of academic vision, along with his tough-guy-lazy provost ("Rendor," who just followed orders) were in Appreciation Deficit. It did not help that I had openly opposed the president in a senate vote, being the one faculty member who did so, or that I also had opposed him in reforming the academic calendar. (When the reform passed the senate, Fish told me that I, not the registrar, had to devise the schedule; in fact he forbade the registrar from helping me. He did anyway: good man. [\[1\]](#))

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Clueless, I undertook both actions with innocent intent, voting my conscience and working on behalf of the faculty and student will (and in accord with the myth of "faculty governance"). I had no idea that either act was seen as brave, but the president would consistently deny me promotion, in spite of overwhelming support from the Personnel and Budget Committee, costing me more than fifty thousand dollars. This was the same president who had asked me to chair a Charter Revision Committee, a revision which, though unanimously supported by my committee, was voted down by a preposterously rumor-mongering senate. (It would be three decades before the charter was revised.) I was that guest who joins an ongoing conversation late and must play catch-up, thinking that the others guests will welcome him.

Eventually the college became the center of gravity of my professional life; I was drawn away from scholarship and found fulfillment in teaching. Then, as chairman of the Department of Performing and Fine Arts (Speech, Theatre, Music, Fine Arts), I found I could do much good for individual students: a chairman's signature is a powerful tool.[\[2\]](#) Over the years students would elect me Chief Marshall at commencement five times (a record), the Alumni Association would give me their Distinguished Faculty award, and The Black Male Initiative would recognize me (along with former New York City mayor David Dinkins) for my contributions to their program and to the surrounding community.

York College, now just over fifty years old, began in the parking lot of a sister college; in 1971, when Open Admissions hit CUNY, we moved to rented buildings in Jamaica, Queens (a move engineered by local civic groups: we would re-vitalize a

poverty-stricken, minority neighborhood). So of a sudden we went from “the Ivy League college of CUNY” to a social action instrument. Oddly, it meant nothing to me. One colleague, recruited into the English Department from England, bemoaned what surely would be the lowering of standards: how would she teach *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*? (I answered, snidely I admit, “in translation?”) I was already teaching mostly minority students (the greatest beneficiaries of Open Admissions) because I was teaching in the SEEK program – Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge. My students would remain preponderantly people of color throughout my career, though the colors would change.

In 1976 disaster almost struck. New York City had a mayor who campaigned on the slogan “Beame knows the buck” but who didn’t, and the city went bankrupt. (Beame’s predecessor, the craven John Lindsay, was complicit in the catastrophe.) CUNY closed, and for the only time in my life I filed for unemployment insurance (along with every other employee in the university). Before the first unemployment check arrived the university opened; eventually we were “made whole” on the two weeks of pay we had been docked. But York’s very existence had been threatened. I was among the many who made a lobbying trip to Albany, and here I must avow that Fish rose to the occasion; the college was saved. Although the inner workings of the university remain ever a mystery to me, of this I am certain: that big machine did not favor our little one.

The big change came in 1986, when York finally opened its own campus. The change in college life was remarkable, in a direction not favored by an admin who were largely contemptuous of the faculty. Suddenly colleagues who had rarely seen each other were having lunch together in the faculty dining room. New friendships sprang up, ideas were

exchanged, and the concept of a university came to life; for example, over lunch I learned a great deal about cosmology, geology, dance, the fine arts, and particle physics. Moreover, allegiances were formed, and the administration stayed away, making sneering comments to boot.

The point here, though, is this: there have been many different York Colleges, not only owing to its venues (from makeshift, to drab, to neo-drab) but also to changing populations of faculty, of staff (pronouncedly) and of students. (We lost a large coterie of Greek Cypriot students in a cheating scandal; their defense was that their culture required sharing.) Today our African-American cohort is a plurality but not far ahead of Asians (varied), Caribbeans (of all flavors), West Africans, Hispanics and Guyanese. There are very many more Muslim students than ever. It is a commonplace of faculty thinking that American students are less prepared and more insouciant than their counterparts, but this is generally not true of older students or, especially, of military veterans (of whom we have many, almost evenly divided between women and men).

Some students formed coterie and became friends themselves. One man I introduced to his wife, only to learn later of his preposterous inclination to hucksterism (leading to a federal prison term). He would die prematurely, still married to the same woman. A dear friend who saw through the first man's treachery would take his own life. A third young man ("Finn") knew the first two and liked neither. He was a tough kid whose father had been abusive. (That was the case with the other two, the good friend having been struck by his father simply for wanting to go college: "you're too good to be a cab driver like your old man?")

Finn became a real protégé. A recovering alcoholic, he couldn't find a job, so I hired him as an assistant. He stayed sober, earned an MSW, and seemed on his way. Still he hung around, assisting me variously. Eventually I hired him to teach one course—Heaven knows he had “taken” it enough times—and after a long while he became a full-time instructor (though not as my hire: I would not have). He spread his wings. After a couple of years (having become, in his words, “the next Como”) he became arrogant, even rude, then treacherous. Suddenly he died. I was shocked, but, in spite of the many Thanksgivings and Christmases he had spent in my home, I was not sad. I should have seen it coming. I did miss him; that is, I missed the man he had been.

Many other York people populate my memory and my life. One, a man much senior to me, expressed some hesitation to debate me, “a debate champion” (false), then later would ask if I knew any gangsters—this from a man whose own group had suffered horribly, not least from stereotyping. Three other people merit special mention. A young woman spent hours speaking with me out of class. When she first took Speech 101 I asked the class to complete this sentence: “communication is like _____.” She answered “garbage.” She is now, thirty-five years later, a professor of communication and chairperson of that department in a small liberal arts college. She has written books and publicly has acknowledged my influence upon her. Another student, a West African, has done the same, and a third, a chap who never graduated, sometimes calls to wish me a happy Father's Day.

Two hugely unpleasant and destructive events marked me. I do not mean mere mischief, such as anonymous letters or

subversive secretaries—though one of the latter deserves mention. I had called her boss, Rendor, who was not in. I suggested that he might call me back at home, though my business was nothing that could not wait. He called, livid: “so you leave *instructions* that I *must* call you at *home*?” Of course, this bore no resemblance to what I actually had said to the secretary, and I remembered that all sorts of pettiness were not beyond our high-minded college folk. Rendor and I got into it—rough talk in both directions. My young daughter, overhearing the exchange, later asked if I had been fired. To Rendor’s credit, he would tell me that, with blood risen, men will say things they don’t mean and that he bore no ill will and had no doghouse. To my surprise he meant it. [\[3\]](#)

But nothing compares to the key incidents, The Affair of the Mad President and the Election of the Radical Union Leadership. This president would throw plates at a secretary who had not cleaned up quickly enough after an affair, would eat alone at a table served by a man in livery, would hold her own “enstoolment” in the tradition of African chiefs, and (one step too far) embezzle. Some colleagues were, as my Polish grandmother would have said, “snakes in the grass,” Quislings poisoning the well and working both sides of the street—some had met secretly with this president before she took office—to the point of revealing to the president the content of confidential meetings. That was when she gave a bull horn to an interloper who came on campus to denounce The Six (so-called) in the cafeteria. Twenty-odd years after the act I remain proud of the fact that I composed the bill of No Confidence that led to her removal. (This resistance, by the way, would cost me another twenty thousand dollars, again in delayed promotion.)

I am happy to say that our union, the Professional Staff

Congress, would play a large part in that removal, its president especially exercising leadership (and suffering abuse in the form of anonymously sent pornography). But that man and his ticket would lose the next election, bringing to power a caucus that would start meetings by singing the *Internationale*.

For the election following their first victory I was prevailed upon to run for CUNY-wide union office on the opposition ticket. Twice I debated the union president who, I am delighted to say, came to loathe me. My caucus won the senior colleges and full-time faculty and swept my own, but we lost the junior colleges and the adjuncts. What I learned at first hand was the malice of the Left. Colleagues I had known for decades would speak to me secretly, confessing that they had been instructed to have *no* contact. An old friend compared me to Goebbels. But I also found that these two events—that of the college president and that of the union election—raised my stock without my knowing it. Sure, in these cases those of us who participated did show real spine, but every one of us acted on behalf of “the republic of York.” A footnote: later this union leadership would let its membership work for *seven years* without a contract, finally “winning” one that would be laughed out of any union hall in the country.

At the very beginning I had one godfather, Dean Daniel Coogan. He had no hand in hiring me but did support early efforts on my part to enhance Speech and myself. He sponsored my first colloquium (on James’s *The Turn of the Screw*) and would write a highly complimentary letter telling me that I had more than vindicated his judgment; later he would appoint me in the Humanities Division, rather than in SEEK. He would be the only York person who would write a note of condolence when my father died while I was away on my first sabbatical.

And he would give me a telling piece of advice. Once, when in the men's room, I saw the dean three or four urinals away *reading* as he urinated. I'd never seen that, nor had the possibility ever occurred to me, so I chuckled. "So, James, you think it's funny, eh?" "I'm sorry Dean Coogan, but, yes, it looks strange." "Well," he said, "remember this moment. One day you'll thank me—especially after you turn fifty." I do remember, and I have gotten very much more reading done than otherwise, *especially* since turning fifty. Not long after his retirement he would die.

Oddly, of the six students from that first coterie, four—the unfaithful friend, the good friend, the protégé, and the one girl—would die young. (On the girl I draw a curtain, saying only that I dodged a bullet.) The fifth, as bright, insecure, morose and passive as any student I've ever had, would become (and remain) a successful stand-up comedian. Go figure.

I was extraordinarily young, and by now it's occurred to you that, beginning that young and staying at the same place for so long, is itself . . . absurd: for example, except for the woman who compared me to Goebbels, I would be younger than everyone for at least a dozen years. My fastest and first college friend is Sam Hux. Our initial exchange also came in the men's room, this time while washing up. "You sound like William Buckley," I said. I forget his response, but I recall him being amused. In fact it was Sam who ran for union office when I did. Of some relevance is that Sam was a person of the Left, a Socialist in fact, though otherwise he remains among the sanest people I've ever known.[\[4\]](#)

Once the college had that glorious faculty dining room, I would often lunch with English profs. Their vibe could be supercilious. On more than one occasion, while chairing my own department, I floated the idea of changing departments and taking my discipline with me. Neither English nor History & Philosophy were receptive; the latter would regret the rejection, at least until my retirement from full-time teaching. At that point a second dear friend, the chairman of that department, invited me to teach a course for him. I am enduringly grateful to the philosopher Howard Ruttenberg, not merely for his long friendship and rich conversation but for the part-time academic home he would provide me.

It was upon returning from a calendar-year sabbatical in Peru in January of 1982 (we are four years away from our new digs) that I was asked to chair my department; that June I was elected.[\[5\]](#) My first decision was to hire Walter Dixon, a Jamaican, as a College Laboratory Technician. He would become a dear and loyal friend to this day, helpful in too many ways even to list, including helping to maintain my sanity as I was learning that loyalty down does not equal loyalty up—*artistes* really can be difficult—with one capital exception. When I was attacked (along with others) by the president whom we would eventually drive out, every member of my department signed a petition defending me. Some perspective: when I first assumed the chair our faculty was woefully under-promoted, owing largely to the dishonest patrician who preceded me in the chair. Within six years I had won twelve promotions (my own, coming in my third term, would be the thirteenth.) Hirings and firings would happen, some hasty, most deliberate, a few unfriendly. I can say that, when my back was not against the wall, my judgment was sound: there were six all-stars, four of whom lasted quite a while; when desperate (because of last minute walks) things could go . . . very wrong. There were only three of those misfires. But another misfire would prove

to be my worst personnel mistake.

One of our part-time music instructors ("G") was well-known in another world as a first-class performer. When one of our full-time music colleagues died, G was hired. (At the time I was not in the chair.) Soon he fell afoul of the then-chair, a woman with whom I had worked closely and whom my family came to know and who would attempt some treachery against me. A long-time colleague and friend of G sent him to me for advice. I completely re-did his portfolio, and the president reversed the decision of the college personnel and budget committee, re-appointing him with tenure and telling him that his portfolio had gone from worst to best. He expressed deep gratitude. When the department invited me back for that fifth term I did so with an understanding with G that he would succeed me, and he did. The Big Mistake. (Finn would become his closest departmental friend.)

He underwent a complete reversal of personality, even of character. So dramatic was his behavior that quite a number of departmental colleagues urged me to return to the chair. During a particularly acrimonious email exchange with G he died: a cancer had been growing which he had dismissed as a bad back. I remain vexed: he had been a severe man but a good, and good-humored, guy. He had become simply a severe, humorless, arrogant, peremptory egoist far out of his depth. I should have seen it coming. This was one of those many times when race might have, but did not, play any role. (Much later I would intervene on behalf of his son for a full-time appointment.)

During the nine years between my two stints as department chair I realized that I had become the guest already *in*

conversation with whom *other* newcomers must catch up. I chaired the Committee on Academic Standards. I had already chaired the Committee on Instruction (which had charge of recommending those calendar changes) and the Committee on Student Discipline – in the aftermath of a student occupation of our campus. During that spell I was called a racist on a radio broadcast itself racist, cross-examined a racist New York State senator, and finally stepped down at the request of community saboteurs but praised publicly by the committee members when I did so. Frankly, it was more fun than it should have been, and it won me some respect from the administration, especially from our acting president, the late Leo Corby, whom I already liked and respected a good deal (and who happened to be a top-shelf professional bass player, a first-call “session man”).

But it was the Standards Committee that taught me a thing or two about certain colleagues, for example, how they would accept work after grades had been submitted, then, in exchange for a sexual favor or two, try to change that grade. As it happened, I, as chair of that committee, had to sign off on that change, and I would not. And there was the student, a real beauty but with the sort of complexly decorated claw-like nails that I loathe, who promised she would do anything, “anything” (in a whisper) if I would allow her back into the college. “Really,” I asked, “anything?” “Anything,” she smiled. “Very well, then,” I said. “Cut and clean those nails by tomorrow and I’ll think about it.” She did, and I signed her re-admission. My last words to her were, “don’t come back.”

On my mind were two women who together had offered themselves to me *in writing*. I brought that letter to our harassment officer; she gave me a pamphlet with instructions to pass it

along to the two. The approaches stopped, but a year later one of them actually asked that I write a letter of recommendation for her. She was dazed when I refused.

In truth I felt enormous relief upon leaving the chair after the first twelve-year run and being able to tend my own little acre. I withdrew from department business. My successor (“Estelle”) was a condescending woman much older than I who, I am now certain, always felt herself under my thumb. Well, now she would build her domain—in fact, a theater program quite beneficial to the college—as she drained mine. In the end, she hit a wall: one of her people cast a key vote with me and the curriculum was saved.

Estelle was the person who would ask if I would return to the chair for a fifth term, which was gratifying. Nine years earlier her friend, a woman whom I liked a good deal and respected even more, told me that her buddy would oppose me in the next election. Deciding to have some fun, I assured her, in menacing tones, that her friend *certainly would not*. What I knew was that I wouldn’t run again. In fact, Helen Lockshun (my secretary who could not abide my successor) and I had a deal: if either one decided to leave the other would too. We both left, she into retirement.

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Helen was the ideal secretary. Utterly capable, prescient,

reliable (during my consecutive twelve-year run she made not a single mistake), resourceful, discrete and loyal. She could have run the department and sometimes did. Both business-like and congenial, she was altogether exceptional at the college. Such was her friendship with me that even Alexandra was fond of, and grateful to, her.

When I returned those nine years later I pushed out two long-time members of the department: one had begun to undermine a colleague who, he thought, had gotten "his" job, the other was taking up valuable adjunct oxygen with gimmicky contrivances, like instructing students who could not sing to lip sync in his chorus. I also established a protocol of cooperation between our theater program and our main-stage impresario (spending hundreds of hours: something Estelle should have done). When the then-provost added his voice to those asking for my return, I made it a condition that the department supply budget be tripled; he assented immediately, Estelle never having thought to ask. On my first day back to the Personnel and Budget Committee I was welcomed warmly by people who didn't know me but whose relief was palpable. As for me: I was thrilled to have been *asked* back but not happy to *be* back. There would be no second Helen.

[\[1\]](#) This president would submit us to sensitivity training, lecture us on how "everyone should have a place at the table" (and should stay no matter what, otherwise we had failed *them*), and every now and then quiz us on geography.

[\[2\]](#) For example I was able to invite to class, and having my classes invited to, noteworthy people: the head of standards and practices for ABC TV, the managing editor of *National Review*, and the host of one of the longest-running public

service TV shows in our history, Tony Brown.

[3] Some years later, not long before Rendor and Fish would depart, Rendor was accused of racism. This was getting serious enough for the College Personnel and Budget Committee, which Rendor always chaired in the president's absence, to decide upon a statement in his defense, for the accusation was preposterous, and we knew it. The group selected me to write the statement and to present it to him at our next meeting. He did not know what was coming, so when our senior person (who was once so skeptical of my achievements that she demanded I produce my doctoral diploma) asked for a moment for Professor Como to speak, Rendor's face went stoney. In a nutshell my defense was that a misdiagnosis of cancer can be as dangerous as the disease itself – like a misdiagnosis of racism, which we hereby all rejected. Perhaps only he and I recalled the time – the one and only time – when a student made that accusation to him against me. He had called: "Como, do you know you're a racist?" I was flabbergasted. "What am I supposed to do now?" I asked. "Nothing," he answered. "Everybody here knows it's bullshit. Have a nice day." What goes around . . .

[4] Movies, any Yankee opening day lineup from the 19-teens to the present, philosophy, history, literature . . . all were grist: a detailed memory beyond mortal comprehension, along with fresh insight . "Okay, Sambo (a Southerner, after all), there's a burning building and you can only save one: The Babe or Allen Tate?" He got that one right. On the other hand, he insists on eating pizza with cutlery: precious.

[5] My predecessor, one of the people who had prevailed upon me to assume the chair, was both patrician and mendacious. Having been observed in class by a number of colleagues, I now had to be observed by an outsider (a contractual requirement). In those days the observe could not see the finished observation report. The chairman told me that the observer had hacked me to pieces. How could he know that within the year

rules would change, allowing us to see that the observer had written a report so glowing that my own mother would have been outdone. (Decades later I would hire the woman.) I had many a conflict – some of them real showdowns – with colleagues, almost all owing to their misperception of me or of my motives: too many sneaky, jealous bastards, and, of course, the academic ego is a match for any diva's. One colleague, around whom the very sun revolved, was allowed by Fish to present *himself* for promotion: unprecedented. He was so insufferable that he was not promoted for another seven years.

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