

# Tennis University

by [Kirby Olson](#) (January 2020)



Portrait of Journalist Sylvia von Harden, Otto Dix, 1926

I applied for other jobs that might pay better and obviate our willingness to sell out to a baby snatcher. I found one at Tennis University. Their brochure said, "Tennis, Anyone?"

Tennis was better known than Calcutta State, and the pay would start at 20 thousand more. The job ad asked for a postmodernist. They also wanted someone to discuss modernism. I was supposed to discuss a short story by Stephen Crane called *The Open Boat*.

I was ferried around by a Brazilian woman who had Lyme Disease. Her partner had Lou Gehrig's. At lunch they talked about which disease was worse.

"Lyme has almost no funding, so you're going to pay for lunch, Betty," said the gal with Lyme.

"Lou Gehrig's is lethal, so you should pay," her partner squeaked. Neither laughed.

I met the president of the college. He said most of the students were legacy who didn't have the grades for Princeton or Harvard. It was an expensive college so the students demanded service, and would I be available at 3 AM if a student wanted help on a paper?

"Naturally," I replied, trying to keep a straight face.

“What we want,” the president intoned, “Is someone who will give worse grades than the other instructors, and yet get better evaluations.”

“Questions?” The president asked.

“No.”

I was sequestered to await the encounter with faculty and students. On the table in front of me was a list of the other candidates. Their portfolios gleaned from the internet were in a stack. One was a woman of color in a wheelchair with an academic interest in the postcard literature of tourists passing through Belize. Before I could read through the other two, my turn to speak came.

Everyone was asleep as I walked into the lecture room.

“What are you most proud of as a professor?” The moderator asked.

I reflected, and invented an episode with a Yanomamo Indian. It had often seemed to me that within academia, the idea was to turn American culture over to the Third World, and to destroy any remnant of Locke and Smith and Wesson, which had won the west for classical liberalism. I decided to act as if I were a turncoat, in order to garner favor. After winning

the position, I would use the position to muster support for the Christian West.

“I hired a Yanomamo Indian to teach Introduction to Other Cultures,” I said.

The moderator nodded, and urged me to continue. I had to invent something fast.

“As the chair of the hiring committee, I kept sneaking the application to the top of the pile, until we had a live interview. I confess that I was startled when he stepped off the plane. He was in warrior dress, with a bone through the nose, carrying a spear, with some kind of grass skirt to hide his privates. He was three feet tall!” I laughed. “Driving my capture home through the Catskills, I didn’t think this guy was much on conversation. Still, he looked authentic, you know?”

She nodded.

I continued. “After the hiring was formalized, I realized that writing was not the gentleman’s forte. In fact, his people didn’t have writing. He couldn’t even sign his name. This didn’t bother me. He seemed to adapt quickly to his job, and if he did attend his classes, figuring out the times by the slant of the sun, his students would clue him in. No one learns anything in Introduction to Other Cultures anyway, you know? I dropped in to see how it was going. He sat on his desk with bare feet, as he demonstrated to students the songs of

the jaguar, and waved over his head, while demonstrating his blow dart on a girl in the front row. I had to evaluate the class. I gave him the highest marks.”

I paused. Everyone was now awake.

“A honeymoon ensued. Problems loomed that spring when the dean of humanities suggested that Igibawawawa might adapt better to Calcutta Village’s ways by not running around in his skivvies, or whatever the grass skirt was called. The police were scandalized by the powerful buttocks. Church ladies gossiped as he walked down the street. No one wanted a house in his neighborhood. These attitudes toward the foreign body made me sick of my neighbors. I bought him several suits, and he wore them although he used the pants as a scarf and the jacket as a skirt.”

The moderator was tapping a pencil.

“I had no doubts that we had hired the right man,” I said, but I admitted to some difficulties so that I didn’t sound too utopian.

“Problems emerged when two married men were attacked and killed with poisoned blow darts. I had an inkling, but as soon as I heard about it I wanted to immediately get home and make sure that my wife Mari was safe. When I got back to the house, Mari wasn’t there. There were signs of a struggle. Curtains had been ripped down as she had apparently sought an anchor as she was pulled screaming from the living room. I heard moaning

in the garage. I found her half nude and sprawled downstairs in the basement garage, bleeding and gibbering, holding a screw driver."

"Norm!" she said, "I fought him off!" I picked her up and she fell into my arms.

Mari then told me, "He said he would make me the queen of the Amazon, but I told him I was married and belonged with you! He didn't care. He said finder's keepers!"

"Interesting," the moderator said. "So what did you conclude?"

"Igibawawawa had done this! I called the police and they swept down on his house. There were about a hundred other local women collected and placed in the basement of his house. They were kept nude and chained to the walls and were wailing in sorrow when the police burst into the room. He had attacked the men, corralled their wives into his basement, assumed that they were now his, since might makes right in the Amazon basin. Different rules applied. I was proud of my wife, and reasonably certain she could fight him off if it were to happen again. I thought he should be released, and given his job back. The issue went to trial, and to my astonishment, he spoke perfect English."

"It is my culture to kill men and steal their wives," Igibawawawa said.

"This is what I'm most proud of," I said. "Because you know what? He had a point."

"He did?" The moderator asked, her pencil coming to a rest, as if it were a gavel.

"Yes, you will see by the end of the story."

"Who hired this gentleman?" The judge demanded of me.

"I informed the judge that it was a group decision, but I left out that I had been the chair. Perhaps hiring someone just for their utterly alien culture had issues on others' scorecards. I thought he would just teach his culture, not reenact it."

"You don't want me any more." Igibawawawa shouted. "Because I'm totally different!"

"Igibiwawawa languished in prisons for years before finally being released back into the wilds. He was killed within a couple weeks in northeastern Brazil. Some 30% of men die violently in Yanamamo culture. About 70% have killed someone. He died raiding a village to capture a new wife."

I noticed that no one was bored. I wasn't sure if the

story I had invented wasn't perhaps too comical in terms of defending multiculturalism. Did it slyly attack multiculturalism? Had I gone too far in terms of leaving my wife vulnerable to the predations of a muscular third-world Sadean thug, and would the chair of the of the hiring committee put gender before race?

"And why are you proud of this episode?" The woman who had asked me the initial question asked.

"I gave someone from the third world a chance to bring their culture into the most imperialistic nation in the world," I answered triumphantly.

She nodded, and tapped her pencil rapidly against her head. She looked around and asked if there were any other questions. There were none. Perhaps I had already answered enough of their questions. America is great, but there is plenty of room for weirdness. I had done what I could to combine the two, even if my story was hardly credible. How could a Yanomamo, who had no writing, even apply for such a job in the first place?

As I walked out and went toward the president's office for further discussion, I went over my coordinates. Greatness was a Catholic concept based on St. Thomas Aquinas. Thomas argued that coherence and variety composed beauty. The greatness canon of St. Thomas had been filtered through the Episcopalians at Oxford and Cambridge, and later at Harvard. Did greatness still matter? Perhaps I had said the wrong thing. I was part of a small sect (3% of American Christians



are Lutheran, but my conservative branch was less than 1%) that was not understood. Postmodernists were reprobate silver, in Lutheran terms, but perhaps some of the hiring group at Tennis were postmodernists. They wanted eccentricity. I wanted norms, but my norms, which were flexible, and personal. I thought of myself as the final Norm. I wanted two kingdoms, and the reminder that complete depravity would always vie with common grace. I could get a corner of postmodernism through humor without relinquishing my faith entirely.

There was polite applause as the 50-minute session ended.

I arrived at the faculty seminar room. The text was "Open Boat," a short story by Stephen Crane, with an application of theoretical issues. I would discuss the story in a forum with faculty in a few minutes.

Every professor had a claim to a handicap at Tennis. There were cerebral palsy, people of color, two blind women, one deaf, all milling about in political self-consciousness. Two profs were Native American activists. They looked like suburbanites from Cleveland. Had anybody checked the tribal rolls?

Beginning profs tossed grades like sardines to porpoises. In return the students jibber-jabbered happily. Only later were they bitter to have learned nothing. At tenure, reversion to stricter standards was the norm. The president of the college pulled me aside.

“First,” the president asked. “What questions do you have about Tennis?”

“Are there any Christians here?” I asked. “The college is still nominally Christian.”

“Next week we dynamite the Christian wording off the front gate. We will replace it with a Native American adage. “When a fox walks lame, the old rabbit jumps. – Oklahoma.” One of our regents objected to this explosive act. But we are taking federal dollars, and cannot afford to be partisan. We must side with neo-paganism, as it’s the new consensus.”

I nodded.

“What does the adage about the fox and the old rabbit mean?”

“Nobody knows. We are working on that.”

The faculty seminar convened, and the president gestured to me to talk.

“There are three schools of discourse,” I began. “In postmodernism, we should not think about a solitary school, but how it competes with its two rivals. Humanities is a three-ring circus, in which victim studies under Marxism

cracks the whip. They've replaced classical liberalism, which is in reality a dying civilization's attempts to revive its own merits. Postmodernism is a leftist heresy. Postmodernism and classical liberalism try to push the other one forward to get hit by the Marxist whip, and to shield themselves. Ultimately, their only chance of winning is to team up against Marxism, but they are too fractious to achieve this. Postmodernism began in France – 1960s – when it became obvious that the Marxist party would not critique western values after the collapse of colonialist regimes in North Africa and South Asia. Postmodernism is the tertium quid. Marxists supported the freedom of formerly French states, but during the riots of 1968 they supported the French state. Postmodernists were academics from wealthy families who didn't care what meager income they were receiving and so could afford to stand on a lack of principle. At Nanterre University, where postmodernism began, you won't even find toilet paper today. Nanterre has been stripped of funding since 1968. It looks like a city in Syria after being wrecked by ISIS, the Syrian Army, and Kurds, along with twenty other local militias."

I raised my eyebrow as I drew large circles on the blackboard. Lacan had held generations in thrall with large circles. The chalk squeaked, and twice it broke off. Should I bring up the new empiricism and the new universalism under Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, stemming from pragmatism? I tripped on my own feet, and caught myself. I went back to the diagram, and drew in some details that were yet unclear. The diagram represented the three groups that represented centers of power. Classical liberals stood for greatness, and the chief example was Shakespeare. I knew this went back to St. Thomas, but I wasn't about to say as much. Much of the canon prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century was still composed around greatness. Greatness meant superior form, superior content, aesthetics as meritocracy. It had been revived by the agrarian poets in the

1940s, but poetry itself was on the blink now. I asked the faculty for questions.

“What do you think a Marxist would ask of the story, *The Open Boat*?” A long lean woman with pinkish hair asked.

“Well, the largest group of professors today are Marxists,” I asseverated. “These people are not interested in merit. They are only interested in grievances. Advocates of tiny political groups, advocates for women, people of color, cripples, creeps who study the post-card literature of Belize make up this huge army mobilized by the collapse of post-colonial regimes after World War II. Their standard bearer is Toni Morrison. She not only represents their concerns, but embodies them.”

I took a breath. I had taken a whack at another candidate. I had already given up the job and was in attack mode. I felt like an enraged Yanomamo Indian.

“To me, the classical liberal group that you mentioned are more or less Nazis,” the woman with pink hair sneered. “They are an extension of the Nazis in Charlottesville who fought to defend the statue of Robert E. Lee in the teeth of the black community. Is there any way to defend such an atrocious statue, or the legacy of Hitler and the Nazis?”

“Hitler is the only agreed-upon criterion of evil. Classical liberals try to claim he was an eruption of the poor, and their will to power. They claim that Hitler was a

poor artist, and that his art was poor. The artist of the Charlottesville sculpture is Shrady, the same man who made the General Grant sculpture on the Washington Mall. They are twins.”

Half of the faculty were now beginning to pay attention. They had thought that I would parrot the same truths that had come to seem self-evident to the professoriat. I was blowing everything up. Some of the students who had been invited, also paid attention. They had heard Hitler. Students who were fiddling with their Blackberries, sexting, suddenly stared at me. I felt a sting in my armpits, and moisture, drops of nervous sweat inside of my shirt.

“What do postmodernists think of Hitler?” An actual student actually asked.

“Postmodernists claim that Hitler represented a last attempt at norming. He wanted to wipe out cripples and gypsies, with whites as the Norm. They base their thinking on Nietzsche. Postmodernists like circus freaks. They are represented by poets like Edward Lear. Their case has no funding from Cyclops, the state. However, the truth is that Nietzsche also hated the norms, and would have been against the aggressive norm of a German-only state.”

I put my pointer down. I was losing my mind.

“Other questions? Comments?” I asked.

The extra twenty thousand per year was slipping away. I wanted to be back in Calcutta. Everyone was looking at their Blackberries, sexting one another, and probably making fun of me. I hoped I didn't end up on Fox News.

"Are you going to relate Hitler to the Open Boat?" One professor asked.

I had forgotten part of the assignment. The professor had wavy hair. I thanked him for the question.

"The Open Boat is in the Greatness canon," I said. "It's based on an incident about four men on a gunboat that sinks taking an arms shipment to Cuba during the Spanish American War. It's tightly written. However, there are many problems within the text. The Hispanic culture represents to Americans the horror of the Counterreformation, and its attack on the Lutheran Reformation. Getting even close to the island of Cuba, or any of the Caribbean Islands, means that we are losing our contact with America, and with its Reformation ideals. Was it fair to America to attack the Hispanic confederation, and take over so much of its territory? The Philippines, and Mexico, and South America, were largely Catholic. America is mostly Protestant. Is the Lighthouse Lutheran, or at least Protestant, or is it just another aspect of a blind and uncaring universe? The gunboat and Cuba are not mentioned in the story. Had it been, the Marxists would like it better. The story's based on a newspaper columnist's attempt to get to land. Stephen Crane was a reporter. When the boat sank, it was reported in the press that Crane died. In fact, he was one of four white men in the boat. In the

newspaper article he says they kept blacks from getting on the boat. As the gunboat sank beneath the waves, the many blacks on board sought to get on the rowboat. The four white men in the boat fought them off with oars. None got in. Crane was one of three white men who made it to shore. How did he make it? What did he do that was different from what the Oiler did?" I asked. "Why was he a survivor?"

A red-headed student said, "He went with the current. The Oiler tried to swim against it, and drowned."

I knew that the faculty at Tennis University were Marxists, but I said, "The Oiler represents Marxism. They go against the current of capitalism, which is the natural profit motive. That's why Marxism always goes under."

Marxists were loud secularists but they retained the notion that sweat was God. They had been an odd current at the beginning of the twentieth century, but they were now dominant within the American academy. They wanted full employment, but didn't want work and money to be equivalent. Postmodernists were goofy grapes. I was part of a small sect (3% of American Christians are Lutheran, as previously stated) that was not understood. Like the Oiler, I would never get to land. I had taken an even-handed account of postmodernism, and applied it against the Marxist paradigm, and given legitimacy to the classical liberals. I didn't belong to any of these groups. The undertow would get me. I couldn't figure out how to translate my Lutheran thought into Marxism, and now I could only keep swimming, although I felt myself pulled further and further from the lighthouse, out into the murky deep, beyond the Continental Shelf, and down into the channels where only the blind sharks lurked for blood. I still had to fill the

airwaves, but I got nuttier and nuttier.

“The Spanish-American War is the last salvo in the exploded feudalism of a great colonial nation. America divested Spain of its colonies in Puerto Rico, the Philippines, as well as Cuba. Some of these countries came under American domination. Cuba until 1950. It’s as if the story is apolitical. The narration doesn’t give a sense of Crane’s politics. Crane himself may not have been aware of the bigger picture.”

I was moving toward shore. If I had brought up Martha Nussbaum and universal rights, I could talk about the Christian basis for Eleanor Roosevelt’s rights discourse in the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights without mentioning God, plus putting two women in, and thus massaging their conscience, or whatever passed for their conscience. The Spanish-American conflict was a Protestant war against Catholicism. I was with the Protestants, and for individualism, but individualism with Norms. I believed in the ten commandments as the ultimate Norms. I believed that Crane’s lifeboat should not have landed, as there was no prayer for deliverance, and should have said, if I were honest, that complete depravity had taken its toll on the men, as it had in the former Catholic colonies everywhere the Spanish had prevailed. I was tacking about, but couldn’t find a route to the beach. My religion was about to be blown off the college’s front gate, but was coming in again through the back door and Nussbaum, a devoted Jew, and Sen, who was a crypto-Christian, like Dinesh D’Souza. Christianity grew everywhere in the Indian community because Hinduism was aberrant due to its caste system. A few of the professors yawned, tired from their all-nighters helping with student compositions at Tennis University. They were on call 24/7. I



cared about my own advancement. My loyalty was to the early Christians who had died in the Coliseum, and to Jesus Christ. I wanted to get this job for His sake. I wanted to revive His forbidden history, and put Christ back on the front gate. I couldn't say this, but I couldn't shut up, either.

"In the newspaper article, which you've also read, Crane talks about how the lifeboat he got into was one of several. There were hundreds of men on the gunship, and many tried to get into a lifeboat. Can you describe the scene?" I asked.

The pink-haired woman raised her hand.

"Has anybody else read the story?" I asked in general, trying to get the students, rather than the faculty, to speak.

A black professor raised his hand. He was apparently their dean.

"We didn't get the story in time," he said. "We just got back from vacation. I have been in Surinam with my family."

He had a cross around his neck.

"Tell me what happened," I said.

“There were black men and others who tried to get into the boat. Crane mocks them in the newspaper account. He helped others in the boat strike the blacks with the oars to keep them out.”

“Right,” I said. “So if you pull the story back, and open it to a historical reading, you see how this story might play into Marxist understanding. It sees race as an oppressive factor along with class. There is a new current within Marxism that has to do with ecology. This is odd because Marx had an inadequate understanding of nature. He thought nature was determined by our consciousness. One could make the case that going with nature instead of against it could be applied to swimming with the current, but the current is not merely symbolic. The current, if you’ve ever felt a current while swimming in the ocean, is a powerful and realistic natural force.”

There was polite applause as the 50-minute session ended. I liked the black dean. He asked me about my son, and I asked him about his family. Next I was treated to lunch with a poet and two others. At dinner, in an expensive restaurant outside of town, I asked one of the tenured faculty how he liked Tennis.

He replied, “Compared to working at Footlocker, it’s better. But at Footlocker, there are regular hours. Here, students call you at 3 AM, and not to hurl obscenities. They expect you to buckle down and work for them.”

Unlisted phone numbers would make short work of any

student attempts to reach me. My hair itched. The night before I couldn't get the shower in the gingerbread hotel to work, and shampoo stuck to my scalp. It itched, and I scratched. Potential colleagues stared.

I was delivered back to the gingerbread hotel, pulled a chair up to the sink, and vomited.

When my plane landed, Mari got me.

"How did it go?" She asked.

"Piece of cake," I said.

Falstaff was asleep in the booster, and I put my hand into the backseat and squeezed his knee. For the four hundredth time that week, I said the Lord's Prayer. Life had not been cushier for St. Stevens, another martyr for the truth. I had tried to sell out, but like Luther I had no choice but to stand there and try to tell what I really thought. I could do no other. I had followed one current, and then resisted another, and couldn't find any way to get to dry land. I was drowned in my own ideas, and my cowardice had fought with my bravery, until I had gone under.

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