

A Loss of Innocence

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Even though I was the first in my family to attend college, my desire to go was never in doubt. Paying for college was another matter. During high school, I participated in a special program that released me at noon to go to a job. I worked at a grocery store until it closed. Then, I walked to a nearby theatre where I was a projectionist through the final show. I saved as much as I could. In addition, I received a scholarship, from my college of choice, to work in the cafeteria. The scholarship and savings paid for my freshman year.

During this year, my parents moved to another state. My father took a position with a private college. One of his perquisites was tuition for his children as day students. So I transferred to this very expensive and prestigious private college. Before my junior year began, my father changed jobs. I didn't want to transfer to another school. My grades were good and I was very involved in

campus activities. I was awarded an achievement scholarship which paid for all tuition and board. The award was contingent upon my maintaining a 10 point grade average and my ongoing contribution to the life of the campus.

I thought I was set for my last two years of school. I was elected editor-in-chief of the campus newspaper and was already an over achiever in clubs, sports and organizations. This school had small classes, personal attention and a focus on classic liberal arts preparation for life. I had never dreamed of being in such an ideal college setting.

Then one day I received a message to go to the office of the Dean of the College. Other than the office of the President, there was no more powerful position on campus. I didn't know of any reason that I'd be in trouble, so I went without expectation of anything in particular. Yet, as the conversation progressed, it was clear that the dean was angry and I was the source. I was genuinely confused as his comments were so circuitous.

When he got around to reminding me of the conditions of my scholarship and how fragile that arrangement was, he had my full attention. I knew that I was being threatened, but I did not know why. He was getting frustrated with my lack of understanding and I was getting frustrated with his threatening metaphors.

Finally, out of exasperation and growing fear I said, “I don’t know what you are talking about. I really don’t. You’ll have to be more direct if you want me to understand.” I was totally unprepared for what was about to happen. It was time for me to get a heavy dose of a reality from which I had been protected.

“The damn Jews,” he said. “We have to have them on the campus, but they don’t have to be prominent on the newspaper.” I was in complete shock. I was without a response. Even with his bluntness, I still wasn’t sure who the Jews were. The end of the conversation was a blur, as I just couldn’t take in everything being said.

The meeting ended. I can only surmise that the shock and confusion on my face led him to back off at the time. Stunned, I walked over to the student union and up to a group of my staffers playing bridge. I said, “You aren’t going to believe what just happened.” I told them the story. Their comment, collectively and in concert, “We believe it.” “We’re not surprised,” they added.

My question to them: “Who’s he talking about?”

“He’s talking about us, among others.”

“You?”

“Tom, think about our names, Cohen, Schoen, Katz. What are you going to do? We’ll resign if you want us to, we’re used to this.”



“No! I don’t want any of you to resign. We’re putting out the best newspaper in years, perhaps ever. He can’t go public. I’ll just lay low for a while and keep my grades up.” I kept my staff intact.

As the first, and perhaps the only, independent (unaffiliated) editor in the history of the paper, I had chosen staff from those I believed to be most competent without regard to sorority, fraternity, sex, religion, etc. That is why the quality of the paper was so markedly improved. Now I was being threatened and told that I have half of all the Jews on campus on my staff.

I’ve been disappointed by many in authority, beginning with my parents, relatives and teachers. But this was my introduction to a new level of abuse of authority and unabashed prejudice. I would have other lessons, even more shocking with other authorities. But this was my first, at this level, and the impression has never lessened.

I’m fond of a Joseph Campbell comment: “The older you get, the more you’ll realize that “authorities” are usually just a bunch of troubled kids.” I was troubled by this event. I did

recognize Jewish names thereafter. As disillusioned as I was, I didn't allow one individual to blacken my education. Yet, this is one lesson I never expected to learn at an institution of "higher" education.