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Even Administrators Have Souls

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Cover Page Footnote

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SPECIAL SECTION: Administration, Ethics, and Spirituality

Even Administrators Have Souls

Paul Puccio

Thursday afternoon. 2:00. You arrive at the monthly faculty meeting. You have just finished a class in which none of the students bothered to look up the meaning of a key word in the title of the text—and so none of them had a clue about what the text was actually about. Over the past few days and into the nights you have read and commented on dozens of student essays, many of which suffered from careless reading practices and rushed writing practices. A few students did not even hand in essays; one bluntly told you that he had too much other work to do. You still have one more class to teach this week, and you're not feeling particularly buoyant. From the looks on the faces of your colleagues arriving at the faculty meeting, their weeks haven't been much better.

You decide to be a good faculty member: you turn off your mobile phone; you resist the temptation to read student work or review a class plan; you give your full attention to the committee and administrative reports and even to the discussions that, in a whimsical moment, you visualize as mobius strips. When the academic dean approaches the podium, you sit up straight—a reflex from grammar school training and a means of sharpening your attentiveness. It's a good thing you do, because the dean announces that the faculty need to begin a discussion regarding a major change in academic policy. The discussion will begin at this faculty meeting, continue in department meetings, and come to a vote at the next faculty meeting. Some of your colleagues launch into the discussion immediately, but you are troubled by the sudden urgency of the policy change. The conversation taking place at the meeting is lively, but you are unconvinced of its depth.

Given that you are already at mid-term and that advising for registration begins soon, you wonder how careful the deliberations of the next month can be. With what thoroughness and with what range of information will faculty consider the context and implications of the policy? How many faculty will be able to devote the time they want to the conversation, in the midst of their other commitments? You feel as if you are being asked to rush an important decision, to work less carefully than you know is right. You fear that you will do no better than your students: skimming the relevant literature on the subject, rushing through the formulation of your own ideas, not having the time to research or consider important elements in the policy under discussion.

This is, sadly enough, not an unfamiliar experience for most faculty—and for many faculty it is a very disquieting one. Faculty who understand our work in higher education to have deeply spiritual and moral dimensions are particularly impatient with the exigencies with which administrators will frame decision-making processes. True, administrators sometimes impose such short-term deliberations on faculty because they themselves must answer to another administrator, an institutional board, or a state agency responsible for the exigency in the first place. In any case, faculty who regard contemplation as integral to decision-making often feel thwarted by abbreviated discussions, just-in-time management,

abrupt deadlines, and the product-orientation of many governance tasks.

If we are in the business (and I use that word ironically and unhappily) of helping our students change their lives, we may well insist on recognizing a spiritual dimension not only in teaching and advising, but in all aspects of how our institutions work. And spiritual work cannot be rushed. As theorists of spirituality in the workplace remind us, traditional change models may debate whether change should be bottom-up or top-down, but “a spiritual perspective would suggest that change should be inside-out” (Mohamed 102). Such change takes time; however you understand the soul, yours is not on Twitter, and 140 characters will not suffice when you need to listen to it. Our spiritual occupation is, as Sherry Hoppe sees it, “the search for depth and meaning in our entire being” (84). This is not an assignment to begin the night before it’s due.

As Mary Rose O’Reilley reminds us, “all great spiritual traditions advise us, one way and another, to *screw up*”; they involve inner journeys that are not strictly linear and that are rarely tidy (11). While many administrators acknowledge and even appreciate such journeys, the “decisiveness imperative” often trumps the habit of deliberation so fundamental to higher education and the humanities, especially. Patience and forgiveness are crucial elements of spiritual practice, but in the market-driven university or college they can be radical concepts. The dean who needs a policy change ratified in a month’s time will have limited patience, and while that dean may invite debate on such an issue, reflection is another matter entirely. Indeed, even other faculty members will welcome a lively discussion, but, for the most part, they want to see that discussion brought to a satisfying and unequivocal conclusion—to stamp “mission accomplished” on the subject and to move on. Those who wish to pursue all of the implications and contexts of an issue are frequently criticized as “belaboring the point.” Perhaps such conversations *are* wearying, and they are inevitably time-consuming, but the alternative is deeply troubling.

So, what’s a contemplative faculty member to do? My experience suggests that faculty who have leadership positions in a shared governance structure often work closely with administrators and can help them better understand the faculty desire for more deliberate decision-making. Moreover, faculty leaders who gain the trust of administrators can help those administrators better represent their own *ethos* to the faculty at large, resulting in a clarity of purpose under pressing circumstances that is not only sincere but also strategically effective. Faculty trained in rhetoric and writing have precisely those skills that enable effective communication, and communication challenges are responsible for many of the disconnections between faculty and administrators. If your faculty is anything like the faculty at my college, the call for transparency is practically a mantra. While, of course, there are times when administration and faculty have priorities that are unaligned and perhaps resistant to alignment, very often the source of contention is the absence of context—a context that might have been articulated by one or more administrators.

Needless to say, some administrators are lost causes. Several years ago, at a CCCC session entitled “When Bad Things Happen to Good Programs,” a presenter quoted a pronouncement made at her large Midwestern university: “The Dean’s Office does not think; it decides.” That is the kind of statement that makes many faculty lose any hope in a cooperative, let alone collaborative, form of governance. I would like to think that most administrators, however, are eager or at least willing, to reassert the collective mission, if not identity, that they share with faculty. The problem is that not all have the

skills to make those assertions very convincing. Faculty with rhetorical training can help administrators frame a discourse that establishes a communitarian vision, and one that might also articulate an *ethos* of caring and a culture of deliberation.

As you might have already gathered, I am not writing as an administrator myself. The closest I've come to administration at my college is coordinating the English literature program, a task that surely qualifies as "participatory leadership"—a position of influence without any claim to power (Milburn 94). Instead, I am speaking as a full-time faculty member who has had opportunities to work with college administrators. My experience has shown me that these conversations and collaborations between faculty and administrators have the potential to close the gap between them and to transform relationships, both individual and collective.

When I was the chair of my college's Faculty Council, I met regularly with our Vice-President of Academic Affairs (who is also our Dean of Faculty and an *ex officio* member of Faculty Council). Either one of us might have initiated these meetings, and they were for the most part cordial if not downright friendly. We discussed subjects such as how to move our new General Education proposal forward, how to motivate faculty to become engaged in college governance, and how to strengthen overall faculty morale. I was careful to describe our efforts as collaborative—the two of us sharing a goal but approaching it from different perspectives. Much of my advice focused on how she might present her own position.

Often I learned that some statement or request of hers (which had troubled or angered some of the faculty) arose from a situation out of her control. As Lee Bolman and Joan Gallos explain, "administrators . . . often find themselves in a turbulent and contested in-between zone, chronically buffeted by the conflicting concerns, viewpoints, and agendas of faculty, students, other administrators, governing boards, and a variety of important external constituents" (7). In those instances, the best suggestion I could offer was, "Why don't you just explain your predicament to the faculty? Why don't you let the faculty know that we're in this together and that you're as troubled as we are?"

Bolman and Gallos claim that academic leaders fumble for two reasons: (1) They see a limited or inaccurate picture—they miss important cues and clues in their environment—and as a result take the wrong course; and (2) they fail to take people along with them; they move too fast, too unilaterally, or without full appreciation of the power of cultural norms and traditions that enable others to buy into their plans (9-10).

Both of these are failings in connection; they result from an incapacity or an unwillingness to recognize the limits and risks of militant individualism. Administrators build their reputations by branding their initiatives, articulating a distinctive and personal vision for forward movement. While they do facilitate and enable the work of those units for which they are responsible, many parties (boards of trustees, presidents, other administrators at their own institutions, administrators at other institutions) understand their roles within the institutional structure as creative leaders. The individualism that feeds (and feeds off) such leadership can obstruct spiritual development, however. Hoppe reminds us that "the inner journey leads one first to a sense of self and meaning and then to an acknowledgement that connectedness is essential for wholeness in our lives" (87). Administrators disregard connectedness at their own peril—and arguably, at the peril of their institutions. Acting and talking as if one had a direct link with the Omnipotent does not make for true leadership.

On the other hand, recognizing one's links with other members of the community can result in the most authentic and effective kinds of administration.

The "wholeness" that follows from such deep connectedness is not uncomplicated or neat, and we as faculty need to admit to that as much as administrators need to. Recognizing the spiritual dimensions of our work does not simplify that work or our lives. If anything, the spiritual (or the "depth dimension," as Paul Tillich calls it) often brings an immeasurable mess into our lives. The poet Mark Doty identifies three habits of mind necessary for a spiritual outlook, and all three are not apt to make our lives easy: "pay acute attention . . . inhabit paradox . . . resist certainty" (O'Reilly 47).²⁰ These are not habits of mind to which most administrators will quickly warm, and so it is up to us to bring them around. We might ask our administrators, as Rilke asks, "Why do you want to shut out of your life any agitation, any pain, any melancholy, since you really do not know what these states are working upon you?" (70). Great wisdom comes that question, but perhaps you shouldn't ask it of an administrator until after you have tenure.

On the other hand, by modeling a spiritual outlook in all that we do, by encouraging this outlook in others, we introduce it into the cultures of our colleges and universities. Those of us who do work closely with administrators and who have established comparatively trusting relationships with them should use all of our own rhetorical skills to urge our leaders to "*Live* the questions," in Rilke's words. Am I being a cock-eyed optimist? Very likely, but a belief in the forward momentum of ideas and a confidence in the human potential for growth are themselves aspects of a spiritual outlook. We may as well turn to Rilke one last time and remind ourselves, as we remind our administrators that among the tasks that we take on, there "are difficult things with which we have been charged; almost everything serious is difficult, and everything is serious" (35). Despite rumors to the contrary, even administrators have souls—when we forget that, we sacrifice some of our own spirit.



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²⁰ The citation comes from a public address that Doty gave at O'Reilly's institution.