

Getting Used to Being Disliked



Brian Taylor

By Robert A. Weisbuch

When friends ask what it's like to be president of a university, I sometimes answer, "Biblical." Here's what I mean.

After my first few years as president of Drew University, I found myself rereading Book 5 of *Paradise Lost*, John Milton's great passage on Abdiel, the one loyalist who walks out of Satan's rebel legislature to the scorn of all—"faithful found/Among the faithless, faithful only he."

Unshaken, unseduced, unterrified ...
Nor number nor example with him wrought
To swerve from truth, or change his constant mind,
Though single. From amidst them forth he passed,
Long way through hostile scorn, which he sustained. ...

I read those lines over and over as I tried to habituate myself to the one aspect of presidential life I had not foreseen, the emotional circumstance that has remained my greatest challenge: It is the fact of being widely disliked.

Most of us who become university leaders get there because, in fact, we were liked very well by our colleagues. They enjoyed working with us. I remember the ecstasy I felt, not too strong a word, when I was named chair of English after my first 15 years at the University of Michigan. An only child, I had experienced that large, 70-member department as my family, and now the dean and my figurative brothers and sisters had asked me to sit at the head of the table.

Now, years later, I'm in a position at a further remove, less a sibling, more an orphan. When I began at Drew, some faculty members saw my every move as a destruction of their version of Eden. Because my hearing is poor—to some, a source for allegory—I believed someone at a particular faculty meeting had gas. In fact, I was later told, she was hissing while I spoke. The serpent in fact!

I don't think a public hissing happens to many people, that or the experience of a fairly large number of people viewing you negatively and expressing that view openly. Worse, it made me aware of something that felt shamefully puerile—how much I always have wanted to be liked.

My initial responses to disapproval veered crazily between the placating and the obdurate, which, of course, confirmed the views of my angriest detractors and baffled my supporters. I taught more and more courses less and less altruistically, as a salve of a reminder of my former capacity to be an admired being. But the classroom offered only a temporary refuge from angst.

There are college presidents who, more perhaps by circumstance than personality, are well liked, even loved, from the start. There are others who depart, hated, after just a few years in office, and here some degree of personal failing has mingled with a larger degree of mismatch between person and place. The selection committee guessed wrong.

Most of us, though, have a less dramatic tenure, moving typically, after the honeymoon abruptly ends, toward a more positive relationship as person and place adjust to one another.

For me, one development and two people have helped me learn to live with less-than-universal approval. The development, relatively predictable, was that some tensions eased. The faculty and I learned, at least sometimes, to dance rather than wrestle. Nearly all academics are thorny but good people. Many of the faculty members at Drew have supported change, and all of us are dedicated to the university. Drew has thrilling possibilities, and once I no longer made this glorious future the alternative to a history of their making that I seemed to be disparaging, at worst, and taking for granted, at best, we did better. While some faculty members still find me imperious or just plain lame, when some ideas we cooked up together succeeded—and they did so at the worst and best possible time, in the economic crisis of the last year—we could celebrate together.

Then, too, I confused some of the faculty members because I wanted excellence in the standard academic sense and I wanted education to serve as a social lever for the underserved. To many professors, I was asking for more scholarship, more civic engagement and experiential learning, more of everything at once. That was actually true—raising standards on both fronts seems to me a basic of Admin 101. But it helped when I could acknowledge the difficulty of getting it all done. And it helped as well when the newer faculty members actually led the way in raising the standards by which they would be evaluated.

And finally there was process, that excessive degree of legislative layering that makes American education either great and permanent or mediocre and habit-bound, depending on your viewpoint. After a decade in the foundation world, I had forgotten about the importance of process. Faculty and staff members reminded me of it, and of the true-enough fact that they collectively, not I individually, constitute Drew. I agreed, while reminding them that we were present on this continuing occasion primarily to teach students, not to practice democracy.

As for the two people I mentioned who have helped me, one is real, and one is a character of my own creation. The real one, Pamela Gunter-Smith, arrived as academic vice president and provost at Drew. Pamela is a biologist from a family of educators and undertakers. She is more capable of withstanding the slings and arrows than I am. She's tough, focused, fair, and unfailingly realistic—able to make unpopular right decisions and stick to them. Through her wisdom and courage, I got some tacitly agreed-upon room to lead and then tried to lead by following, by interpreting the community's wishes and blending them with my own.

The imaginary person I created in my head to deal with this challenge of being disliked has been important because she is, as Dickinson writes, "internal—where the meanings are." I did recall Abdiel and the simple injunction to be true to your inner values. But because I am not Abdiel, not in the least heroic, I needed to create a fiction.

So in my head I created my successor at Drew—a president I work for in 2020, and every decision I make has to please her. I've given her the personality of my great no-bull dean/boss at Michigan, Peter Steiner, the one who first named me to chair the English department. Peter Steiner as a woman is a novel notion to any who know my great mentor, but Drew is due a woman president, and so I work for President Stina, as I have named her. I work ultimately, that is, not for the trustees, the staff, the faculty, or even the students, but for this figure who advocates only for the best future of my university.

Drew 2020, I can tell you right now, is going to be a four-letter word like Yale and Duke, but on our own terms. I am in love with its potential and now, as a veteran, I am also in love with its present. That mostly gets me past the bad times and the potty mouths.

Nevertheless, we do not live in the age of miracles. Differences in perspective make conflicts between faculty and administration inevitable, perhaps even healthy; and I continue to struggle with the desire to be liked. But does that really matter? Unpopularity is not a virtue; but it is usually an irrelevance, and occasionally it is a necessity. If you cannot tolerate it, you have no office at all.

At least that is what President Stina tells me, again and again.

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