



The Reader of Signs

Most people in the department seemed not to like departmental meetings, but Dr. Jacobs actually did. He not only found it pleasant to be with his colleagues and to puzzle about the problems and issues the Chair put on the agenda, he actually found the political interactions of the senior faculty fascinating. Only an assistant professor himself, he felt he was learning important things about how universities really worked as he watched the tenured faculty jockey to have their points of view win the day. Not a cynic, Jacobs saw departmental politics as a natural part of how intelligent individualists worked through the issues and problems which were part of academic life. He could even imagine himself one day taking his turn as Chair and being responsible for the welfare of the department, along with his colleagues, and making decisions in as democratic and open a way as might be possible. But that would be after he was tenured. And he believed that for the next year or so all he could safely do was to keep his own counsel, teach well, publish, serve dutifully on a couple of committees, and not make any enemies.

Yes, he'd heard the stories. Wasn't there the assistant professor in that other department who crossed the senior faculty and earned their everlasting scorn? That tenure file was doomed before it was even submitted for review. Or so the legend went. Surely that couldn't be the whole story. Why worry about things like that anyway?

Then, on one drab cold February day the realization suddenly struck him like an icicle in the center of his forehead. His senior colleagues did not like him! And his tenure file was due to be submitted in only six months.

The evidence had been there all along, he thought. How could I have missed it? Last year the Chair had said I seemed not to be connected to departmental concerns because I never speak up at department meetings. Then there was Professor Howe, the one person whose scholarship was closest my own. Howe has never once invited me to his office to discuss research. I don't think we've talked about research since my job interview. And there was Professor Lindsey. She left my name off the list of possible faculty who could supervise thesis and student research projects. And Professor Norris had suggested that maybe my tenure file would be stronger if I were to secure some external funding. What was that about? And the real signal was when the Curriculum Committee's proposal to increase the requirements in the major was rejected by the department. The decision had to have been political. I mean the proposal had all been my idea; and it was terrific in every objective respect. What else could it be? Yes, the writing is on the wall. There's no way I'm getting tenure here now.



“Reader of Signs” Discussion Questions:

1. You are Jacob’s friend, a faculty member in a different department. He confides all these things in you. What advice do you give your friend?

2. Questions: You are Jacob’s department chair. He sends you a cryptic e-mail saying he wants to take a leave of absence. You meet with him and, because he trusts you, he tells you all about why he believes he is going to be denied tenure. How should you respond; and what plans, if any, would you help Jacob to develop?

3. How does being a person’s friend differ from being the person’s chair?