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Organizational Performance: Playing the Field

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EPILOGUE

TO begin with an epilogue is to say that experience is prologue to explanation. It is to allow oneself the luxury of privileging the living moment, the situated individual who is constantly in the ongoing process of constructing meaning. It is to recognize that the life of a community exceeds, in its richness and complexity, the sense-making activity of any one of its participants. It is to claim that an imaginative evocation of voices from that community life, spoken from within the heart of the playing field, yields as compelling an explanation of culture as any distanced description offered from the sidelines. It is to insist that all members of a community are contributing members of a cultural team, that all members are players worth watching. And it is to trust that explanation may find its fullest articulation in the literary.

We are two actors in a scholarly community, performing in an organizational culture that has many spectators, commentators, and critics. We hear the ever present chatter from within. We struggle to make sense of what we hear, to understand the rules that govern our actions, the play-by-play strategies that guide our movements, and the titles that mark our successes. We seek a language we can trust, one that catches the experience. We gain authenticity by virtue of our location within the organization; we resist any claim to representative authority on the same basis. We seek a new press. We believe, following H. L. Goodall and many others, that the "mysteries" of organizational life are essentially poetic; they often elude categorization, defy definition, and evaporate under the cold scrutinizing gaze of traditional scholarly discourse. To revel in the mysteries of the academic game, we search for the evocative. We embrace the poetic to discover a truth, to present a reality of living and working within the academy.

LEARNING WHICH WAY TO RUN

How to cover the bases? Assume everyone can play. Believe that the rules could change. Trust that dialogue has worth. Let there be voices. Let those who can be heard begin the game, open the field. Let us cheer the start of a new season.

Such an idea is a player's folly. But begin anyway.

I tried to look it up in the rule book but someone must have misplaced that chapter. I tried to ask the old timers, but they told me that having to ask meant I was already falling behind. I tried to listen but no one ever spoke about it. I tried to watch, but they all made it seem so invisible. I knew it was there. I just couldn't put my finger on what "it" was.

Someone is always in, someone out. Learn to speak the talk, learn to smile when needed, learn to quote those on top. With some, you can't go wrong. Some you pretend to know, some you pretend to read, some you pretend to believe. When you're in the know, you know.

Wait. Not fair. Surely some play for real, some make it count.

Some do it better than others. Some have a knack for it. Everything depends on how you play.

Surely this couldn't be it.

ON BEING A ROOKIE

Standing in the halls of your first convention, you cannot imagine why everyone is rushing. You connect a face with a name and are surprised that the person looks, well, quite like everyone else. You eat alone, watch a little television and go to sleep. You have selected five programs you want to attend tomorrow. At the second session, you meet someone who seems as lost as you. It is calming to talk with someone; it is the simple pleasure of sharing impressions. Tomorrow, you will give your first presentation. You have rehearsed, even more than you planned. You don't remember much, except faces. A few people say nice things. You are pleased but not sure what to trust. You will return, one vitae line and one friend richer. Next year you will rush off to meet her.

There is a fine line between idealism and naiveté, passion and arrogance, creativity and thin ice, between espousing the idea of dialogue and engaging in it publicly, between advocating alternative styles of discourse and daring to enact one before your peers. Part of being a rookie means not always knowing which side of the line you are standing on. It also means that missteps are forgiven.

Perhaps.

HANGING WITH THE "BOYS"

Steps toward becoming a member of the team:

- (1) You see who is going to dinner with whom. You watch.*
- (2) You decide you want to go. You wait your turn.*
- (3) You go. You learn the rules. You figure out what it takes to play well.*
- (4) You laugh freely around the table. Deep rich laughs that claim the space as yours.*

Whose is the biggest? Be careful how you put it on the table. It is an ugly game.

Claim the space as mine? And what space would that be? I'm not a boy. I don't hang.
And tables are for eating.

Care to become a member of my team?

- (1) You invite your friends to dinner. We share the cab.
- (2) We order the family combo, taking turns tasting each others' dishes.
- (3) We shake off the rules. Just playing is good enough.
- (4) We laugh freely around the table. Deep, rich laughs that open up the space that's ours.

Whose is the biggest? What a stupid question.

To hang does not require anatomy.

UMPIRES, REFEREES AND OTHER LEGISLATORS

There are umpires, referees and legislators in this game. They write the rules, set all the markers. They stand in the middle of the field watching the boundaries. Often, they tell you how well they can play. Some are insecure, "has-beens" from another time, always looking over their shoulders. Some are sure they have it right. Their time will come.

Insiders believe they can write your article better than you can. They enjoy telling you this at regular intervals. Outsiders do not understand what you have written. They also enjoy telling you this. You listen. Sometimes it is very helpful. You do not enjoy it.

SPECTATORS AND HECKLERS

This is a game, like most, of watching and being watched.

You feel their gaze heavy on you as you take your mark. You gauge the distance, test the wind, take a firm grip.

Thumbs up, thumbs down.

The crowd freezes you with their stare. What do you expect to read in their faces?

You make the call.

HEROES AND ROLE MODELS

You know who they are. Their mere entrance onto the playing field can sweep an audience to its feet. Their names on the roster sell tickets, pack the stands. Their autographs grace book jackets, journals, recommendations. We line our bookshelves with mementos of their careers. Their endorsements attract consumers, ensures program success. Every young hotshot wants a crack at breaking their records. Once elected to the Hall of Fame, they move into management, coaching, and commentary. Eventually, their numbers are retired and they pass away into legend.

We are a nostalgic people.

STUDENTS OF THE GAME

They want to play so badly. You tell them to wait their turn, to learn the ropes, their time will come. You give them what you got. You show them your best pitch. But you know that some will never make it.

Clichés for the uninitiated:

“You’ve got to really want it.”

“You’ve got to keep reading.”

“You’ve got to love the classroom.”

“You’ve got to network with your colleagues.”

“You’ve got to write everyday.”

“You’ve got to publish.”

“You’ve got to publish.”

“You’ve got to publish.”

“You’ve got to publish.”

“You’ve got to publish.”

“You’ve got to publish.”

“You’ve got to publish.”

Seven pieces should do it.

What all-important border did I cross to become one of “us” instead of one of “them?” Do they know that it doesn’t get any easier? The hours are just as long, the papers more complex, the critiques more cutting.

Seven pieces? And would you count this piece?

COACHES, MENTORS AND BOSSES

“I can take you where you want to go.”

How do I know I want to go there?

“Trust me.”

Well, I’m here.

“That’s not where I meant.”

It doesn’t matter. It’s where I am.

I was a kid, golf club in one hand and a beer in the other. “Come on, boy, put those down. You’ve got what it takes,” he said. I gave them up.

“Listen,” she said, “listen.” I did.

“Relax, go play some golf, have a beer,” he said.

FEELING THE PRESSURE

The pressure of the top is displaying the right to be there. The pressure of the bottom is displaying the right to not be there. The pressure of the middle is displaying which way you want to go.

You're only as good as your last season.

MAKING THE TEAM

They approve me. They approve me not. They approve me. . . . Going up for tenure signifies that you've paid your dues, moved through the ranks, documented consecutive successful seasons, impressed management with your earned run average, fostered team morale, become a role model, inspired a fan club, made the final cut. Sometimes it just feels like you're out in left field plucking petals.

THE GRAND SLAM, THE SLAM DUNK

It is in their eyes, when they call your name. You know you matter at least at this point in time, at this moment, for one person. You allow yourself to believe the fictions you teach. You may, of course, be fooling yourself.

I believe those fictions. Foolish me.

Your most promising program is scheduled for nine o'clock on Saturday night. Dropping your most significant paragraph, your article appears. Your book comes out with a misspelling on the binding.

Still, your name is on the program, the article has appeared and the book is in print.

You are named to an important position. It's a clerk's job.

But they knew your name.

FREE AGENT

Before becoming a free agent, you should answer all of the following questions positively:

- (1) Do you have impressive stats?
- (2) Are you a team leader?
- (3) Can you play all positions with equal skill?
- (4) Is there a need for your talent?
- (5) Are you a dispensable commodity?

Who will make the team? Who goes to the majors? Who goes to the minors? Who gets the highest bid? Who do you want around? Who do you need to win the College Bowl?

Box scores don't lie.

TICKET PRICES

It will cost you to get in.

How do you reckon the cost?

And, of course, the cost is much more than money. Give us your time.

In evenings and weekends lost to the computer? Vacations squeezed between convention panels?

Give us your mind.

The luxury of time spent on ideas rather than basic survival? The privilege of thinking, reading, speaking, writing, performing?

Give us your family. Give us your life.

Life decisions on hold until tenure?

Now, let's see, have you given enough?

You get what you pay for.

You can sit in the bleachers but you really can't see the whole game from there.

With this game, it's enough to just break even.

HEARING THE "FAT LADY" SING

*You know you're at the end of your career when:
no one wants to hear about your plays that have always worked
everyone knows exactly what play you'll call next
your yellowed playbook crumbles like clichés
you can't even put your playbook on the latest equipment
your plays have become part of the history of the game
you think you can get away with using "Hearing the Fat Lady Sing" as a subheading*

IT'S ONLY A GAME

As a young boy, I would punch holes in my wall when I didn't win. My mother thought this was quite serious, not only for the wall but for me. She believed it was an index of my psychic health. I thought it was perfectly reasonable for not performing up to expectations.

Early morning on the first day of the conference. Your paper is on social movements and political resistance. Anxiety. Last minute re-write. Scribbled outline. More anxiety. The headline reads: Student Activists Massacred in Tiananmen Square. Silence You present your paper to polite applause.

Older now, I'm not sure what it means to win or lose. The rules of the game are less clear. As this game ends, who else wants to play? Good. Now, where are boundaries? Who plays first?

REFERENCES AND NOTES

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