

## Nobody in This Lifeboat Looks like Leonardo DiCaprio

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# Nobody in This Lifeboat Looks like Leonardo DiCaprio

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MARY ROSE O'REILLEY

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WHEN I got tenure at a small liberal arts college fifteen years ago, the wife of one of my colleagues said to me, “We’re each other’s community now until we die.” At the time I thought this a tender welcome. “Community,” for those of us coming of age in the sixties, was a warm and fuzzy word. Many of us had graduated from small colleges that unself-consciously used phrases like “Saint Mary’s family,” which we undergraduates had been pre-ironic about, except for those of us who were gay or people of color, blue collar, suffering emotional illness, or in some other way subject to the Guess-Who’s-Coming-to-the-Saint-Mary’s-Family-Dinner-Table? syndrome. None of *us* were pre-ironic.

Knowing what I know about dorm life, why did I not realize that my colleague’s wife was warning me, that she was saying, “Turn back, it’s a trap”? Teaching English in a small liberal arts college can be like hauling yourself into a lifeboat with twenty-odd other freezing people, none of them looking like Leonardo DiCaprio. You are going to be there a long time, because nobody will be hiring you away to a dream job at, say, Bennington. You will spend your collegial days hitting other desperate swimmers over the head with oars lest they try to rock your boat and occasionally throwing other rowers back into the icy water: these are the ritual actions of hiring committees and tenure-review committees. In your middle years, look around: you will have made hiring and promotion decisions about most of your colleagues. None of these decisions will be secret, because after every tense, confidential meeting your colleagues will have likely debriefed themselves at the bar nearest to campus. And you will be with these people until they figure out how to kill you.

If we were to stand back and observe the data like anthropologists from the Planet Mongo, we might find it strange that we inhabit this hive of offices together (actually the style makers at our institution have renamed

our new arrangement “pods”), all of us at different and mostly incompatible places in the life cycle, with many good reasons to dislike one another and with investment portfolios overweighted in TIAA-Traditional.

I can think of few analogous situations in the modern world, outside of a monastery or perhaps death row, where we are one another’s community until we die. We survive this situation, where I come from, with the invocation of “civility.” Civility may mask years of brooding anger, fear, and hatred—or maybe lust and love. It has to be this way, I think, or there would be more lawsuits. This is America.

Mike Heller got me focused on the peculiar nature of the English department in his ADE article inviting us to think about the profession in terms of Dante’s words, “Midway on our life’s journey, I found myself / In dark woods, the right road lost. To tell about these woods is hard, so tangled and rough.” It was as I tried to do Heller’s assignment that I began to think about this incarceration with my tenure and tenure-track colleagues—a graceful company, in my particular case, given the rigors of our journey together, but circumscribed and confined by the odd circumstances of our profession. I talked to Heller, when we met later, about what I was writing. We chatted about the dangers of this peculiar world: how there are people you can come to write off, how we can foreclose the possibilities for the growth and epiphany we hope to see in our students and admire delineated in our texts, at least those texts written before 1950.

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But I have to admit, as I wrote on and on about the lifeboat and the dark woods and the monastery and death row and the hive and the pods, that I was not making myself happy, and it was not only because I was mixing metaphors. Which is it, I demand of myself, a monastery or a prison? Some who have done time in monasteries might say, “Some choice.” But I am thinking of Saint Benedict’s famous comment that the monastery is a school for love. It is not a school for civility, which is different and good (and pagan—in Dante’s scheme it would not even get us into purgatory).

I am wary of adopting the monastic metaphor to my experience of departmental community, because it may seem (to nonmonastics) idealistic. We need to remember that, according to Benedict and his discourse community, a monastery is not a place where virtuous people go but a place where people go who need, for some karmic reason, to be in school, people like us. Isn’t it funny, most of us were the kids who were good at school, but we never get to pass. What happens in a monastery, really (to borrow an image from Schopenhauer), is a lot of hedgehogs get thrown together in a gunny sack, with their prickles at the ready.

I would like to quote here from the chapter “Impasse and Dark Night,” in Constance Fitzgerald’s book *Living with Apocalypse*. Fitzgerald writes out of the Carmelite monastic tradition, predominantly about the ascetic philosophy of Saint John of the Cross.

By impasse, I mean that there is no way out of, no way around, no rational escape from, what imprisons one, no possibilities in the situation. [. . .] Every normal manner of acting is brought to a standstill, and ironically, impasse is experienced not only in the problem itself but also in any solution rationally attempted. Every logical solution remains unsatisfying at the very least. The whole life situation suffers a depletion, has the word *limits* written upon it. [. . .] Any movement out, any next step, is canceled, and the most dangerous temptation is to give up, to quit, to surrender to cynicism and despair, in the face of the disappointment, disenchantment, hopelessness, and loss of meaning that encompass one. (94)

I would like to frame our experience of professional impasse in terms of the model defined here. I’ve heard Fitzgerald comment that her mission is to democratize the experience described in *Dark Night of the Soul*—it’s not just for saints and mystics. “We are affected by darkness,” she writes, “[. . .] where we are most involved and committed, and in what we love and care for most. Love makes us vulnerable, and it is love itself and its development that precipitate darkness [. . .]” (97).

Most of us have lived lives of great commitment, loving and caring for a certain vision of academic life that seems to have been kidnapped in recent years by the culture wars, open admissions, and the hegemony of the business department. We have bumper stickers that say, “I’d rather be reading Thomas Hardy” or “I ♥ John Donne.” We have loved and lost, in the best traditions of our discipline, and we have a legitimate right to bellyache. For these passions are more than the fashionable totems of graduate school; they are the structures of meaning and sources of identity most typically assailed by whatever relentless universal processes draw us toward higher levels of integration and wisdom. Call this beneficent assault, for the moment, a dark night of the soul.

It’s typical of a breakdown experience that all our habitual ways of solving problems fail us—planning, organizing, reasoning, developing the five-paragraph grant proposal. Fitzgerald goes on to say that “impasse forces one [. . .] to end one’s habitual ways of acting by a radical breaking out of the conceptual blocks that normally limit one’s thinking” (97).

Now we may not want to hear this, but if we do not hear it, things will get worse. I hope I am not taking the path of the great, if pessimistic, Kurt Vonnegut, who would say at any available graduation ceremony that things are going to get infinitely worse than you can imagine. Things get bad when we deny our suffering and consequently limit our capacity for insight and breakthrough. We get stuck, then, in *breakdown*. At such a time, we need to stop retooling our five-paragraph equipment, reasoning even better, color-coding our file folders, and, in general, rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic, as Maryland’s Senator Barbara Mikulski used to say—which is how we get into that lifeboat without Leonardo DiCaprio. Rather, the task is to realize that “the unexpected, the alternative, the new vision is not given on command but is beyond conscious, rational control. It is the fruit of unconscious processes in which the situation of impasse itself becomes the focus of contemplative reflection” (Fitzgerald 96).

I’m struck by how similar this Christian theoretical framework is to the Buddhist analysis given me by my teacher, the Venerable Thich N’hat Hanh, when I was studying in his monastery in France. In the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, the unsettling questions of personal and professional life would be processed as koans—riddles presented by the cosmic teacher to help the student get out of his or her conceptual ruts.

Thich N'hat Hanh puts it this way: "Mind is like a train on rails and the koan knocks out the rails so that we can find our true path."

My intention here is to suggest a conceptual frame inside of which we can not shut down, not anesthetize ourselves, not despair, not apologize, and not be ashamed. Those, I think, are the traps. That is the recipe for getting stuck in breakdown.

Saint John of the Cross wrote, "If those in whom this occurs know how to remain quiet, without care and solicitude about any interior or exterior work, they will soon in that unconcern and idleness experience interior nourishment" (qtd. in Fitzgerald 103; from *The Dark Night*, bk.1, ch.6, no.2). Similarly, the seventeenth-century Quaker Isaac Penington recommended, "Give over thine own running and sink down to the seed [. . .]" (Penington 17).

What the present situation calls for, I think, is a kind of contemplative waiting. We have to overcome what one of my colleagues called "the struggle model of professional life" that informed our own education: the tendency to make ourselves so busy we can't think. One teacher said, "I have the idea I can make students listen if I just keep *pounding*. But in reality, that makes them shut down. They can't last more than twenty minutes."

Thich N'hat Hanh said, "You have to let the koan settle into the deep storehouse of the unconscious. Respect it and pay gentle attention. It's a deep, long practice." Meister Eckhardt wrote (and this is my personal favorite), "Seek God in error and forgetfulness and foolishness." I certainly don't know what collection of phenomena each of us might call God, but I do know that God's e-mail address is <www.foolishness.edu>. Paulus Berenson, one of my pottery teachers, used to quote the Chinese proverb, "Art is what remains when the pot is broken."

Forgetfulness, foolishness, and broken pots are not popular topics of conversation in the faculty lunchroom. Most conversations I've heard about crisis in the discipline seem to feature metaphors of "manning the barricades" and "barbarians at the gates," of warlike defense, that is, rather than contemplation and surrender. The human suffering that attends the conditions of our profession is largely ignored. Yet so many professorial stories—though they are rarely told outside of intimate space—circle around perceptions of betrayal or loss of innocence. How we guide and mentor one another through these predictable crises of adult life may determine whether or not our com-

panions emerge with deeper compassion and, in the best sense, sophistication or sink into cynicism and loss of self-worth. True impasse defies our pomps and powers, as departments and individuals, and leaves us weak and shamefast. It's not entirely respectable to talk about this sort of breakdown—"To tell about these woods is hard"—but to remain silent is to risk annihilation in the dark.

There is wisdom in the community on this topic, but you really have to look for it, because it is not fashionable wisdom. We are not educated for darkness, Fitzgerald says over and over (105). We are educated to keep doing what we were taught to do even when the meaning fails, the pot is shattered, the paradigm shifts: educated to keep pounding. We're like those World War II soldiers occasionally found in the jungles of Borneo, still following the last order, keeping up the drill. If instead we can *stop*, cut back to the point where a few things can be accomplished with style and grace, if we can take the easy way (as Goethe advises), take a nap, we will be open to the rewards of the Dark Night: the new critical horizon, the radical relocation—whether that has to happen personally or professionally. The contemporary German theologian Dorothee Soelle calls this contemplative waiting "revolutionary patience," and its rewards are not only personal but societal. Fitzgerald dreams of "a new and integrating spirituality capable of creating a new politics and generating new social structures" (114).

It has to come out of our own peace. We cannot do the work of spirit—which education is—from a place of anxiety and depression. Break with whatever violates your peace. Leave the room. Smile and go to the bathroom. Get out of there.

In these remarks, I have been skipping through a lot of different metaphors for department life. What I think I am trying to do is answer this question for myself: what image of the department can I hold in my mind that will allow us the possibility of forgiving one another? In this venture, it matters what metaphors we use to describe ourselves to ourselves. A lifeboat. A pod. A hive. A monastery. An ecosystem. A minefield. What are your constitutive metaphors about your department, and what are the consequences of them? How do they account for the best things that happen in your department and the worst? How do they make possible certain things that have to go on in a community of people who are going to be together until they die? I would like each of us to think about what metaphors we apply—perhaps

almost unconsciously—to our English departments and to ask ourselves how these metaphors facilitate or obstruct their vital works: fostering the teaching mission; mentoring young professionals; creating a positive, coherent, and communicable department culture; discerning gifts and encouraging the contributions of people of very different talents.

What conception will allow people never to be written off and always to have a chance to change? I think that forgiveness is central to all these actions of the spirit. Sue Miller's novel *While I Was Gone* is about a woman who has to live in a small town alongside a man who killed her friend and got away with it. Maybe that happened in your department. This is what Sue Miller says:

Perhaps it's best to live with the possibility that around any corner, at any time, may come the person who reminds you of your own capacity to surprise yourself, to put at risk everything

that's dear to you. Who reminds you of the distances we have to bridge to begin to know anything about one another. Who reminds you that what seems to be—even about yourself—may not be. That like him, you need to be forgiven. (264)

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Leo's actor stepbrother inspired DiCaprio to take up acting. He began looking for an agent when he was twelve but was unsuccessful. DiCaprio started his career making TV commercials. His break came in 1990 when he appeared in several shows. DiCaprio's big breakthrough came in 1993 when he starred opposite Robert de Niro in "The Boy's Life". That same year he starred alongside Johnny Depp in "What's Eating Gilbert Grape". He was 19 and his performance earned him an Academy Award nomination. 1. Would you like to meet Leonardo DiCaprio? 2. What would you like to know about Leonardo DiCaprio and why? 3. Write five questions about Leonardo DiCaprio in the table. Do this in pairs/groups. Each student must write the questions on his / her own paper.