Mister Legal Education: Experience, Integrity, and Storytelling Behind the Clown's Mask

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MISTER LEGAL EDUCATION: EXPERIENCE, INTEGRITY, AND STORYTELLING BEHIND THE CLOWN’S MASK

RENNARD STRICKLAND*

For more than three decades, Frank T. Read has been a major thinker and doer in legal education. For much of that time I have been Tom’s friend, co-conspirator and—upon occasion—his chronicler. More than twenty years ago when Dean Read was leaving his first deanship, I was asked to write a similar appreciative essay for The University of Tulsa Law Journal. At that time, I turned to Mark Twain and The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. For Tom, despite the same given middle name, could never be mistaken for Tom Sawyer. Our friend Tom Read is without question Huck Finn—that brash, bold, quintessentially peripatetic westerner. The quote I selected has even more relevance today. In describing his book, Huck introduces himself saying, “You don’t know about me, without you have read a book... made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly. There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth.”¹

And that is my picture of Tom Read—he may stretch the story but he tells the truth. I know no individual whose persona is more involved with, or revealed in, the telling of stories and the retelling of jokes. And these are often—even friends acknowledge—very long shaggy dog stories and very bad old jokes. Like Milton Berle, Tom Read never discards material, keeping it for recycling purposes. Some who have not worked with Tom may see only the clown’s mask of this colorful teller of tales. The rest of us know better. Those with whom Tom has served in every key organization of law and legal education have seen behind the clown mask. And what we have seen is the remarkable integrity and experience of a gifted leader. Tom might appropriately be called “Mister Legal Education” as well as the one and only original law school serial dean.

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Once when I was trying to describe our friend Tom’s style to a fellow dean, a mutual colleague observed that “Tom Read is an acquired taste.” I asked, “Like Caviar?” He responded, “No, more like Haggis.” Fortunately, Tom knows and has worked with virtually everyone in legal education, having served as dean of five law schools, associate dean at a sixth, president of the Law School Admission Council (“LSAC”), deputy consultant to the America Bar Association (“ABA”) on Legal Education and Admission to the Bar, chair of numerous ABA site visits, not to mention dozens of ABA, Association of American Law Schools (“AALS”), LSAC, and state bar committees, conferences, and commissions, chair of Law Access, and the Board of Directors of Council on Legal Educational Opportunity (“CLEO”). As a result, his colleagues have come to respect and admire Dean Read’s unwavering personal and professional integrity. We admire his encyclopedic knowledge of legal education and envy his broad based legal experiences. Some of us have even acquired a grudging appreciation of (if not taste for) Tom’s parables, anecdotes, and jokes.

To study Tom’s résumé is indeed daunting. There is almost nothing associated with contemporary legal education with which Tom’s leadership has not been associated—whether affirmative action, globalization, or curricular planning and testing. Tom has a propensity to stand up in the crowded conference or on the isolated panel and shout “the academy has no clothes!” He says what he thinks—and often what he thinks is aimed at the sacred cows and their keepers. The one thing that makes Dean Read’s apparent irreverence tolerable is that he cares—and cares deeply—about people, the legal profession, and especially law students. He loves the law and lawyers specifically, lawyers down in the trenches, out in the “real world” fighting society’s battles.

In a real sense, Dean Read has always been a lawyer’s legal educator. I think it is not accidental that his field of academic expertise and teaching is Evidence, and that he has written plain language guides and explanations of state rules and their application. Even when he turned to historical and philosophical scholarship in his co-authored *Let Them Be Judged*, it was a book about judging and lawyering in the judicial integration of the deep South. An important and unique work, *Let Them Be Judged* is based on his interviews with the leading judges, the key district and appeals judges, who made

Brown v. Board of Education\(^3\) a living document in the then segregated South.

Whenever I think of Tom at a state bar convention, the ABA annual meeting or a local county law day, I remember Harrison Tweed’s toast to the legal profession. "I have a high opinion of lawyers. With all their faults, they stack up well against those in every other occupation or profession. They are better to work with or play with or fight with or drink with than most other varieties of mankind."\(^4\)

While Tom himself does not drink, he is always intoxicated on the possibilities of law and the contributions of law students, law professors, and law schools. He is the ultimate of what in South Pacific Rogers and Hammerstein called "a cockeyed optimist." He does not, in the standard test, see the glass as either half-full or half-empty. Tom Read sees the glass—indeed, all of life—as potentially full and overflowing. The fact that the glass may be close to empty now does not mean that a great rain storm or a benevolent waiter (or donor) will not fill it to the top. His time at STCL provides a wonderful illustration of this. Who but Tom and a handful of local zealots would have thought that STCL was ready for membership in the AALS? Who else would have had the vision to tackle a failed library building campaign and help create the glorious Fred Parks Law Library of South Texas College of Law? And he has not given up yet on an affiliation of STCL with a great university.

In the final analysis, our friend Tom Read is a person who understands himself and follows an internal moral compass which is often at odds with the easy or expected thing to do. Before his church took a new stand on racial questions, Tom became a leader in bringing minority lawyers and women into the profession, in promoting Native American law and legal programs, and in assuring fairness for all especially non-teaching law school workers. When he was at the University of Tulsa, he chaired the Oklahomans for the Equal Rights Amendment and has frequently been honored for his strong stands on unpopular issues.

Hidden behind Tom’s clown mask is a deep and powerful intellect which, for whatever reason, he mostly likes to disguise. When he speaks up, he does not do so rashly but has thought through his arguments and the artful presentation of his position even his stories.

\(^3\) 347 U.S. 483 (1954).
There remains a bit of the aggressive collegiate championship debater, but he has matured into a thoughtful, stylish, and inspiring speaker exemplifying the classic “good man, speaking well.”

I think there is no better example of the integrity behind the clown’s mask than Tom’s record on tenure. In order for the system of tenure to work, a dean must be willing to take on the almost impossible task of dismissing that rare colleague who no longer fulfills the duties and obligations of the teacher/scholar and rests on what he or she sees as a lifetime job guarantee. Because students and the quality of their education and the quality of legal service for the public are at stake in these abuse of tenure cases, Dean Read has taken this obligation seriously. In doing so he has found himself at the center of a number of serious conflicts, but his courageous stand has helped insure the integrity of law and lawyering. But Tom is equally compassionate, not a leveler or destroyer. Dave Frohnmayer, Dean and now President of the University of Oregon, tells the story of a frustration with the ABA, offset by Tom’s fairness and willingness to work with the law school, to put together a plan that ultimately produced the stunning state-of-the art building that is the Knight Law Center. For Tom understood that the law school had a greater interest in a new facility than did a bureaucratic regulator off in Chicago.

In conclusion, when I was chair of the LSAC, I invited Tom to serve as corporate secretary and an ex officio participant with the board of trustees. He did a splendid job, knowing the history and experience of the organization from his more than three decades of work with LSAC. But I must confess that there were moments when I wanted to send the clown masked joke teller to bed without supper. Perhaps with his year of sabbatical leave we can encourage Tom to enroll in a twelve step program for jokesters and storytellers. However, I am sure that there is no twelve step program for recovering serial deans; and if a new, exciting, and challenging deanship opportunity should open, the Huck in Tom will take to the river again, knowing that the rains will fill not only the glass but the pitcher to overflowing.