

Chapter 1. The Shadow of the Adjunct

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For 15 years, I was a career adjunct, and my constant companion was fear.

Adjuncts working full-time elsewhere, who only want adjunct work, or who continue to work after retirement may be subject to adjunct maltreatment, but because their economic and work situations are different, the maltreatment does not bring the same fear.

I walked hand-in-hand with fear every academic year. There was the fear of not getting enough work—enrollment declines or new full-time faculty (not me) would affect available classes. Because not enough work meant not enough income, I took everything offered—in case a course was cancelled or taken away. (Colleges will hire anybody to have a body in a classroom. If the teacher doesn't do well, tough bananas. Not re-hired!) But too much work could create other problems, such as a double-booked class meeting time at two different colleges or tight travel time between schools. What's worse? A breakneck commute or telling a department chair or dean you can't teach one of their classes?

There was the fear of not being re-hired (fired). The fear of some slight, real or imagined, by some administrator. The fear of getting bad course evaluations in one course after years of good ones. Or the fear of a real or trumped-up complaint from a student. It only took one to end my "tenure" at a college I had successfully worked at for years. Fear, like the overflowing boxes in the back of my car, the whirling numbers on my odometer (I wore out two cars driving in "Adjunct Land"), the fatigue from teaching eight classes a semester at four colleges, constant driving, constant grading, and seeking respect and validation in a profession that had ripped it away, was always there.

Then there were the ever-present existential fears. Another academic year and still traveling on the course contract road, plateaued in adjunct limbo. Still living paycheck to paycheck, worrying about rent, utilities, food. Worrying about health insurance, whether not having it or paying too much for it. Worrying about the future. Will I still be driving to multiple campuses in my 70s because I can't afford to retire? Another year older and still no better off. Another year of life—worrying about what I am doing, where I am going, what is going to become of me.

But fear was not my only constant companion. There was also abuse. Like fear, abuse took many forms. Snubbed by full-time faculty members in the hallway. They were in my department; they knew who I was. If I didn't speak first, they wouldn't speak. If I did speak first, many did not respond, or their response was perfunctory.

Abuse occurred when I accepted the "adjuncts always welcome" invitation to attend department or division meetings. I heard full-time faculty lament about

“the adjuncts” teaching in the department, the implication being that we didn’t know what we were doing and certainly were not achieving precious course objectives. When I shared my thoughts, whatever I said was ignored or dismissed by many of my full-time “colleagues.” Eyes rolled, and snickers occurred. Someone even said, “What do you know? You’re just an adjunct.” Even when laughter and dismissal did not occur, I learned very quickly that I had no say in anything—whatever decisions were made, I was denied a voice.

Abuse came in promises not kept, or never intended to be kept. “Oh, yes, we would love to hire you full time.” Love to, but I can’t. Or, “We’ll never hire you, so don’t bother applying.” Sometimes job openings actually occurred. I worked hard on that cover letter and résumé, feeling it reflected who I am, what I have done, what I can do. I sent it off enthusiastically. Then came the kiss-off letter from human resources. No interview—after working at the college for years and building up an impressive work record.

There were those occasions when I was called in for an interview. I sat and answered questions directed at me from full-time faculty members who knew me and my work. They picked over me like vulture over carrion and decided that my work record just couldn’t compete with the 50-minute interview a sparkling outsider gave. The sparkling outsider(s) got the job(s). Another kiss-off letter from human resources, and another year on the adjunct trail—the wheels of my car rolling down the highway, spinning my fate, adding echoes to the existential chant. Why am I not getting hired full time? Why are fancy strangers so much better than I am? If I’m not good enough, why are they letting me teach in this school? Why am I not good enough? What is wrong with me?

These questions went unanswered, but other truths were crystal clear. As an adjunct, I worked for less than minimum wage. I worked with no safety net provided by my employer. Although I was sometimes called “part-time,” I had more classes, more students, and more schoolwork than any full-time faculty member and very little support from the institutions where I worked. I was a member of the working poor, an academic migrant worker, an intellectual sweatshop factory slave. Yet I had advanced degrees awarded by these colleges, degrees that promise the way to professional and financial success, to the respect of others and to a full and fulfilling life. My college degrees didn’t bring any of the above.

As a career adjunct, I experienced additional abuse above and beyond the norm. I learned to become hard and cold in order to survive. I was fired from one college because I was assigned a class I could not accept. I requested two Tuesday-Thursday morning classes, what I’d been teaching for years. I was assigned ONE 8:00 a.m. Monday-Wednesday-Friday morning class. MWF mornings were when I taught at other colleges, MWF morning classes I might not get back, work I couldn’t afford to give up. When I told the chair I couldn’t do the MWF class, she went ballistic. Not intellectual, not academic, not even an understanding liberal, she morphed into a howling monster. “Do you know how HARD I WORKED on this schedule?” she yowled. “If you don’t do this class, YOU ARE OUT!” The only

thing missing in this Hollywood producer cliché was an ugly, thick cigar clenched between her teeth.

At another school, I had a disruptive student who periodically threw tantrums and stormed out of class whenever she did not get her way. What she wanted or didn't want was never clear; tantrum time was unpredictable. This student was a 30-year-old woman and mother of a young boy. (Yikes!) Seeking support, I went to the dean who immediately took the student's side. The student's paroxysms were my fault because I had "lost control of the class." What of this student's responsibility for her own behavior? The other students were fine. I was not offered work for the next term. If I had been, I would have turned it down. Ironically, this was the first college that hired me after I sent out my post master's degree résumés.

A dean at a different college, who also offered me one of my first jobs, couldn't praise me enough throughout my first year. "Your students' work is so good!" she gushed at one portfolio grading session. When they hired their next full-time person, she promised it would be me. She even put that in a recommendation letter she wrote for me.

One year later, four jobs opened. I was interviewed twice but not hired. I asked this dean why she had promised me a job and not hired me. After a laundry list of petty grievances, she told me that I was not "smart enough" to teach at her college.

I was angered by this comment. This was her cruel way of backpedaling away from her high-to-Heaven praise and promise of a full-time job, and we both knew it wasn't true. Even though I was not "smart enough," I continued to get two, sometimes three, courses a semester. What bothered me the most was that I was unable to respond. She could have chalked it up to "insubordination," and that could have been it. This college was one of my major jobs, and I couldn't lose it—not with her as a reference. I had to silently swallow it.

I also had to silently swallow it when deans joked about how adjuncts were freeway flyers, gypsy teachers, road scholars, and campus nomads; when I accepted prorated pay for an under enrolled class—though colleges easily recover the money of a full salary from fully enrolled courses; when a full and waitlisted class was taken from me and given to a full-time faculty member whose classes did not fill.

My final account of abuse is the worst and representative of the dumpster fires that are being passed off as colleges in this country. I was offered a journalism class, from which I was to produce a newspaper of student work. The department chair knew I had substantial newspaper experience. The offer included a sweet, albeit hypothetical, promise. If the newspaper succeeded, a journalism department might be created, and I would become its full-time director. Why did I do this? I had been a career adjunct for almost ten years; I was desperate to get a permanent position. This roulette wheel of a chance was worth spinning.

However, I was given no office, no computers, no telephone, no staff, and no budget. In the class, we discussed journalism, journalistic standards and news,

and feature and editorial articles. The students created a considerable body of work, but neither the department chair nor any administrator offered me any resources to do a newspaper. One day, I ran into the college vice president. "How's that newspaper coming?" he demanded expectantly. He did not ask if I had everything to make this miracle happen. He knew there were no resources. Nevertheless, somehow, I was to produce a newspaper. I had become the miller's daughter from *Rumpelstiltskin*. Produce gold from straw; I didn't even get any straw.

I should've told them to give me resources and support or forget it. That would have been the end of it. I would not have been re-hired . . . and the hypothetical full-time director of a journalism program would never happen. So, I typed the articles on my home computer, on my own time, then took that to the school's copy center. It wasn't a newspaper, but it was a publication. The department chair was delighted. The distributed copies were gobbled up by the students. So, we did a second issue. Then I asked the administration for funding. The reply was swift: "The college will not support this publication because it is not of professional quality." But it was not of professional quality because the college hadn't supported it!

The fall semester ended; I was offered the same journalism class in the spring, with the expectation of continuing the publication. Having not learned my lesson, I agreed to teach it. I enjoyed working with the students' writing, enjoyed seeing the pleasure and the pride they experienced in seeing their words in a publication distributed college wide. We did one more photocopy version, and then I went to the administration again to ask for money. This time they said yes.

Our final publication was a slick, beautiful book. The cover was in the school colors with a comb spine. Once distributed around campus, like its primitive counterpart, the book went like hotcakes. Then the school refused to pay the printing bill. The printer filed a lawsuit against the college and threatened to file one against me. The school sent me a registered letter telling me that I was responsible for the \$2,000 bill. I went to the union; the bill was paid immediately.

The administration did not want a student newspaper. They wanted to toss some bones to the students, and when nothing, or nothing of quality, was produced, they could blame me. And the full-time job as director of a journalism program—a lost fantasy. I left this toxic waste dump.

Semesters rolled on. Soon, I'd been a career adjunct for 15 years. There had been so many interviews, so many "pass overs" for a "real" job, it wasn't worth applying anymore. Nevertheless, I did—applications, interviews, not hired. Adjunct teaching was all I would ever have. I would have to settle for teaching 16 classes a year. I would have to prepare for my own retirement. I would have to find other sources of recognition and fulfillment.

And then . . . I finally landed a full-time job. After a May 15 interview, I expected ye old adjunct backstab. Instead, I was called in for an interview with the vice president on July 3. Producing a paper, he grandly announced, "Your starting salary will be . . ."

I had crossed the great divide. No longer adjunct, now full time. I was thrilled, speechless, incredulous. My name would be in the school catalog, on an office door, and in the course schedule next to my classes. I was real, I existed, I mattered. My full-time job began September 1, 2006, a monumental day in my life.

Because I had given up on this ever happening, this job was one I almost didn't apply for. At this school, I had already been through five other applications and three interviews. Just before the closing date, I applied. I put enough best feet forward into my letter and résumé to be a centipede, and when I got passed over this time, I was going to make sure to let them know they'd passed over one damn good candidate who could have done so much and been so much, someone who could have brought so much to the college and the campus life. Except I wasn't passed over.

Everything was so different after that. Immediately, I was caught up in the swirling world of campus life. I became the advisor of two student clubs. I developed two new courses. I was welcomed in department and division meetings, and I was no longer dismissed as irrelevant or inferior, even when I said the same things I'd said before. Full-time faculty members who formerly snubbed or dismissed me now warmly welcomed me.

Within a year, I was the chair of the academic affairs committee. I was elected to be the speaker at the end of the semester honors ceremony. I was awarded a citation for outstanding performance. In my fourth year, I was invited to join a national research project sponsored by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. I went from assistant professor to associate professor to full professor. I was awarded tenure in 2012. My employment status had changed and my life with it. These were experiences an adjunct would never have.

Something that did not change was adjunct contempt. At statewide union meetings, I saw adjunct faculty derided and dismissed as they put forth inevitably voted down proposals. When I served on search committees, I saw how internal adjunct candidates were treated. In one case, three previously hired sparkling outsiders adamantly opposed the candidacy of an internal adjunct who had worked at the college for ten years. "This person isn't going to know how to work with our students," they all said. How could someone who had worked with our students for ten years not know how to work with our students? At department meetings, there was the familiar lament about "the adjuncts" teaching courses the wrong way, as if they were in classrooms on the moon.

Something else did not change. The fear. I had a six-year climb to tenure. During the first three years, I could be dismissed without cause and dismissed with cause in the second three years. I was terrified of being found wanting and fired. Therefore, I was afraid to say no to anything asked of me. Because I was afraid to say no, I said yes to everything. What would happen if I couldn't manage everything, made mistakes, screwed up, lost control? Sometimes I even feared that, as a former adjunct activist, I had been hired only to silence me, and they were going to dump me after a year or two—after I had abandoned my other adjunct jobs and lost the position I had in those colleges.

After tenure, the fear began to recede, and I comfortably hit cruising altitude until I was appointed director of an academic program at the college. I worked under an unsupportive, know-nothing, hands all-over-the-place dean, which became one of the worst experiences of my working life. The dean WAS the director, and I her administrative assistant. She was unreasonably demanding, condescending, and often outright abusive. She loved to have meetings and talk everything to death, but there was no continuity from one meeting to the next.

Decisions were made about the program by the administration. I was neither consulted nor informed until after the fact. My own ideas and vision for this program were ignored, dismissed, or mocked. The dean presented herself and the upper administrators as a court judging me and finding me wanting. When everything was at its most impossible, I went to the union. The chapter president at that time directed a program that was also under the auspices of this dean—a major, immobilizing conflict of interest. The union president gave me advice but offered no intervention on my behalf.

I didn't handle this well. As a tenured, full professor, I could have stood my ground from the beginning. I am the director; I could have said, "*You* are here to support *me*, not the other way around," and called her out on every act of abuse. But as this nightmare began, a great, dark shadow fell upon me, taking me totally by surprise. The shadow of the adjunct. It was as if I had traveled back in time. Suddenly, I was a powerless, poorly paid faculty member sitting across from an all-powerful, well-paid dean, and I just had to take what was dealt. And if I didn't—the fear of being fired surfaced, from the program, from the school. I have been told how difficult it is, if not impossible, to fire a tenured professor, but I've never tested that—not out of capriciousness and not when there were real things worth fighting for, but because of the adjunct fear. I resigned from the directorship. In 20/20 hindsight, this was a mistake, but staying and fighting would have been a stressful, difficult experience, and as I had been repeatedly told, "This is not *your* program, Mike."

I have never felt the same about my college, the college leadership, my job, or my place in this school after this experience. I'd had gotten a bird's eye look into the soul of my college, and what I saw horrified me. The irony of it all is that when I was an adjunct and had this experience many times, I could stay on the periphery of the school and easily find other jobs. As a full-time faculty member, when the bottom fell out, I was trapped in a hopeless, negative place.

This past year of teaching remotely has been the worst. Isolated, working at home without colleagues or support, being at the mercy of technology with a mind of its own, feeling the distance between me and my students, experiencing the increased rudeness and demands of students, noticing an increase in student complaints and my fear of complaints, and feeling like I just wasn't doing a very good job, the shadow of the adjunct was always there every day. I constantly expected the certified letter telling me I was through.

Do I regret following this path? I graduated from a community college, and because of that, I wanted to teach in a community college. I went to college and to graduate school pursuing this goal. I was thrilled when I was a TA in grad school, then when I was teaching my own class and, finally, being out there, master degreed, teaching. Despite the adjunct status, pay, and abuse, I believed I was doing something of value and something I truly enjoyed. I knew I would have to work as an adjunct for a few years, but I never thought it would be 15 years. I've gotten everything I wanted; I am one of the "lucky" ones. I do wish I had known then what I know now. I would have planned and prepared accordingly. If I had not gone into teaching, who and where would I be today? I could be much better off; I could be much worse off. It is "The Road Not Taken."

The survival of the U.S. higher education system rides on the backs of adjunct faculty, who teach the majority of classes. Yet, adjunct faculty receive the poorest pay, the lowest status, and the worst treatment. These are evils adjuncts share with those in other professions who are paid poorly and treated badly, yet they are the essential workers who keep the system running and the corporate profits coming. This is the nature of greed, economic exploitation, and economic terrorism, the green slime of Christian capitalism.

Many overpaid administrators are out of touch with the work of teaching and the needs of students. Many are only interested in their own careers, their own power, their own perks, and in building up their résumé while hiring more administrators whose six figure salaries drain school budgets. Ultimately, many administrators sail off to another job, leaving behind a smoking ruin that another administrator will have to fix.

While colleges continue to treat adjuncts poorly, administrators on every level continue to spout liberal platitudes about fairness, workers' rights, respect, kindness, decency—you name it. The stream of liberal humanitarian sentiment flows eternally, perpetually hypocritical as the liars and the cruel continue to run the henhouse.

Is the problem funding? If so, then government and academic leaders, who profess how important education and students really are, need to find support for colleges so the majority of classes won't be taught by overworked, underpaid, stressed out, abused adjunct faculty. But it isn't about funding. There is always money for more administrators and administrator raises when there is no money to hire new full-time faculty and when union contract negotiations drag on for years. This is about the lopsided power of the haves vs. the have-nots, the desire to divide the faculty from each other, to create a frightened, powerless underclass, to corrupt higher education, so it lurches farther away from the ideals and values the leaders continue to profess.

Today, I have been full time longer than I have been adjunct. Nevertheless, the insecurities and fears that developed from years of adjunct abuse live on. And I continue to cringe as a tenured, full professor beneath the shadow of the adjunct.