Chapter 5. Closing of My College Department and Swingline Factory

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It's over.

In 2014, my adjunct college teaching assignment ended after 17 years. I taught for-credit classes on choosing a career at LaGuardia Community College's cooperative education department, and oversight of students' internships was reassigned to other programs. College teaching was a meaningful addition to my life, but I was never compensated for much of my time.

My trip to the college took over 45 minutes from my Upper West Side, Manhattan home. Across the street from my school was the Swingline factory: massive, dusty, red. Once, this place was home to 450 jobs where workers produced staples and staplers. The brand name Swingline is still well known. Years ago, a factory job meant steady work, a set paycheck, and a chance for the workers' children to do better. Then these factory jobs went to Mexico.

American workers were stranded without employment. My college provided training for these workers. I felt empathy for their lives. The Swingline building continued to be empty. It could be a disco with flamboyant nights or affordable housing. The closed doors served as a symbol of the need for education. The present and future are clear; worker security is an illusion in the disposable employee economy.

Adjuncts' status seems similar to the "Uberization" of the gig economy. Car drivers and part-timer academics share a similar lack of stability about wages. We serve at the pleasure of those on top. Part-time faculty members see their careers as limited rather than idealistic; many scramble to teach at various campuses with no certainty of future assignments.

Unions are a viable solution. The Professional Staff Congress (PSC) is a local union affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers that has over 30,000 members, and PSC includes part-time and full-time academics, librarians, and higher education officers. Union members are usually advocates for both part-timers and full-timers ("About Us").

Remembering the Neighborhood/Hearing about the Job

My college job meant a commute to the new destination of Long Island City, once a hub of factories, now eat and run territory. Queens, where Long Island City is located, is the most diverse community in the United States, and all eth-

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nicities are found in one ever-changing borough, yet the stores and restaurants in Long Island City felt generic.

In 1997, I got this job the old-fashioned way: through the switchboard. I was looking for an in-service educational program being offered to the organization where I worked. I called LaGuardia Community College. The anonymous switchboard operator transferred my call to Paula in the cooperative education department.[1] It was the wrong number but the right time! She shared recollections of the many new immigrants who enrolled at this college. Paula was enthusiastic about those enrolled in the varied programs.

She lived right near where I worked, and we met for dinner a week later. We discovered we were both social workers. Paula told me told me that when the college opened in 1971, most students were from Queens. Later, students came from Poland, Argentina, India, Greece, the Dominican Republic, China, or Nigeria. Paula gave me the dean of the department's name and number to contact about classes for the spring.

The following week I met Cathy, the department's administrator, to discuss part-time teaching. I was hired for the next semester to teach Fundamentals of Career Advancement. A department professor wrote an excellent text that I would use.

Exploring Class Content

My students interviewed each other during the first session. To decline to answer was acceptable. After 9/11, I was concerned about how Muslim students, who made up a significant portion of the student body, would be identifiable based on their clothing, but I did not need to put on the brakes. Classmates were kind. My school produced the play *The Vagina Monologues*. I saw the production on HBO, and I wondered if this was the right choice when most Muslim students valued modesty, which meant most students came to class casually dressed in jeans and lively shirts.

Class content included the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator assessment, which highlights traits such as extroversion versus introversion, sensing as contrasted to intuition, and thinking compared to feeling. The Holland Code profile, which we also covered in class, details qualities such as artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional. I used TV characters to illustrate these themes, and I also defined emotional values—my examples of different people who display differing values included a cloistered nun and a corporate leader.

I also used the text *Gateway to the Workplace*, which details the initiation into the world of work. We examined the ideas of John Dewey and other philosophers, and we discussed the new workforce and the necessary skills for success.

1. Pseudonyms are used for students; all other names are unchanged.

Discovering Career Autobiographies

Many students worked at LaGuardia Airport. Two African American students shared their airport stories. Pamela, a flight attendant, dreamed of becoming a psychologist. "I want to handle bigger problems," was her remark. For a class assignment, she interviewed a member of the Black Panthers. Would others believe "Black Panther" was the name of a car or a movie? Jack, a former football player, checked all the dead bodies when they arrived at the airport in the special boxes. He wanted a new job. Other students in my classes who were home health aides reported they had limited money and limited time to seek out new alternatives.

The college was perceived as a post-high school vocational choice. A few students began attending four-year colleges, then changed directions. Some were over 40. Suzanne worked at Aqueduct Racetrack and "had been everything but the jockey." She wanted to become a public interest lawyer. Julia from Nigeria, now a home health aide, was unsure about her future. Neal wanted to open a tattoo parlor. Based on TV shows, forensic psychology became a career of interest for some.

For many new arrivals, their educational orbit was narrow. They made the transition from around the globe to this country's challenges and contradictions. Many wanted security, and several chose business careers. Their dream school was Baruch College, in distant Manhattan. Rare students discovered academic opportunities at Barnard or Vassar. Al showed me with pride his acceptance letter to Morehouse College, where Martin Luther King, Jr., studied.

Most students had fewer choices. Students became curious to see if a career fit and if they wanted to wear it. Fieldwork provided this opportunity. At times, my students found they were regarded as a better source of information about technology than older staff. They also discovered health internships did not include clinical work. Students' work titles were administrative assistant, teacher assistant, and legal assistant at places such as Lenox Hill Hospital, Queens Community House, Black Entertainment Television (BET), MetLife, advocacy groups for immigrants, or local public schools.

This academic life lacked the romance of a rural campus setting; the campus buildings were those of a former candy factory. Work, school, and families were the familiar triad. Babysitting plans seemed to crash once a semester. The overworked parent brought the offspring to class. Youngsters were given crayons to color on paper. Children were respectful in this special place.

Understanding My Family's Story and the Connection to the Present

When I was in college, my responsibility was to be a student. My heroes were Michael Harrington, author of *The Other America* about U.S. poverty, and Cesar Chavez, the farmworker activist in California. I met both leaders. I received my

master's degree in social work at Stony Brook University. A four-year college and graduate school were affordable choices for my parents, who were both teachers. My younger brother went to medical school and became a doctor. My family's financial responsibilities were manageable. I aimed to be a social change agent to create new personal and political realities. Many friends were first-generation college students. Their lives expanded at college. The City University of New York (CUNY) had free tuition until 1976, when the city almost declared bankruptcy. This temporary charge for education became permanent.

My situation was unusual. My ambitious grandfather, Irving, my father's father, arrived as a Russian newcomer at age two and graduated from City College of New York at 19. Even with free tuition, higher education was a financial stretch. He tutored immigrants in English for 25 cents an hour, a high rate of pay. My grandfather's education bumped my father's family into the middle class. City College was a vital lifeline for immigrants, then and now. My grandfather taught at Boys High School in Brooklyn, a top-notch public school. My father and uncle were proud alumni.

My mother's mother, my grandmother Evelyn, completed two years at Adelphi College in Brooklyn, now Adelphi University on Long Island. She taught kindergarten for over 40 years. Under her college yearbook photo was the wonderful saying, "Independence now, independence forever, Evelyn knows what she wants!" I cherished my legacy of three generations of teachers.

My mother's middle school history class interviewed the neighborhood's old-timers and published their work in an elegant booklet. My father loved teaching high school English and told me we never know what Willy Loman sells in *Death of a Salesman.* My family regarded teaching as a noble calling, one that provided security during the Great Depression. Both families owned children's camps: my father and his father owned Camp Berkshire in Winstead, Connecticut, where Ralph Nader's family owned a restaurant. My maternal grandmother's camp was Camp Algonquin in upstate New York, on the Canadian and the United States borders. She taught her campers both national anthems, and I still know the first lines of "Oh Canada!" For all my family, teaching and owning a camp were both necessary for financial stability. They would understand the situation of adjuncts at the university.

Today, the working world is becoming a world of mini-jobs or "jobettes" with little security or benefits. Uncertainty was a familiar factor at my school for students and part-time faculty as well. Many adjuncts have become the new poor as wandering Ph.D.s search the college dust bowl for new opportunities and work. Some part-timers sought full-time opportunities in foundations, research, and publishing. We knew this reality before COVID-19.

I remembered when jobs listings were defined by gender. Engineer and lawyer were male-only. Clerical jobs were for women. Donald, a Black male student of mine, was aware of racism but was surprised to find out about gender-defined roles. *The New York Times* ended this practice in 1967.

Assessing Student Interviews

I gave a classic assignment: interview someone you admire. Students wrote about immigrants on extended visas, supportive supervisors, and respected colleagues. When I was selected as the subject, I declined. It felt too personal. A volunteer for John McCain's first campaign for president interviewed him. Julian interviewed a Legal Aid lawyer and admired her idealism. Suzanne selected an assistant teacher of children with special needs. One male student chose a police officer. This officer would not reveal the name of the officer who had been killed when he was present, and he still felt devastated. My student's brooding essay read like a Raymond Carver story. Another paper detailed a production assistant for the film *Malcolm X*. One subject was the owner of a karate studio. High school and college teachers were recognized.

Tom examined the organizational chart at MetLife, where he was an intern. He saw his dream job: CFO, the chief financial officer. Tom did not know this executive but arranged to interview him. Tom wore a jacket and tie for this meeting while the administrator did not.

Anish from India admired a doctor. The physician shared a quote from Hillel, a Jewish sage: "If I am not for me, who will be? If I am for myself alone, what am I? If not now, when" (Rosen)? My student was moved by this saying.

One class session was held in a computer lab. At first, a tech support colleague taught the group. This once intimidating session became my favorite. I became the solo driver and led my students to explore computer learning. I knew what it was like to have a beginner's mind and be a new learner.

Recalling Post-9/11 Memories

The classroom experience changed after 9/11. Before that time, many students wanted to use their language skills and work as travel agents or at the front desk at hotels in the future. Maria was disappointed about her hotel experience.

"I'm twenty-three; I've wasted so much time. So many customers are demanding and challenging, and I hate to work all different shifts," she said.

"Now, you are clear about what you don't what to do," I replied.

She looked relieved and began researching other professions.

After 9/11, police and accounting jobs were regarded as steady and secure. The once-friendly skies of airport work seemed frightening and dangerous.

Joe worked in a men's clothing store and was the only employee born in Queens. He stated, "I am the only one who can speak Spanish to the customers, and everyone else is Muslim." The class suggested he read about his colleague's traditions.

Recalling a Special Meeting

One semester, Rosa spoke with me after class. "Professor Connie, I know you worked with cancer patients as a social worker. My mother died of cancer when

I was eight. My dad never told me she was sick, and he just told me to go out and play. Why did he do that? I just wanted to spend more time with her, and I didn't know she was dying."

I said, "Rosa, your dad didn't want to worry you. Now parents are encouraged to share more openly when a family member is sick. Your dad was doing the best he could."

Rosa looked unconvinced. "I'd like to give something back, and maybe I could volunteer for one of those marches against cancer," she said.

"Rosa, that would be a great idea," I replied.

The following week, she told me that joining the march meant asking participants to contribute money and to attend this event. She was too busy with her college classes, and additional expenses were not practical for her tight budget.

Valuing Small Groups

To encourage informal interaction, I sometimes divided the class into three groups, asking them to consider factors in choosing a senior college and determining its suitability as a match for them. I created roles: the leader to keep the conversation on track, the recorder to document the findings, the speaker to summarize the results, and the writer to take notes on the blackboard. The most frequent criteria for choosing a senior college were convenience and cost. With its low tuition and nearby location, CUNY was a contender for both American newcomers and blue-collar participants born in the United States.

One student stated to her small group, "My friend said he wouldn't want to go to Brooklyn College because there were too many Jews there." This remark was accepted by her seven group members. How could I deal with this situation? I had an ethnically neutral name, and I did not discuss my religion in class. I needed to make the student aware and yet not make her uncomfortable.

"That's an interesting perception," I said softly. "What is the percentage of Jews in the United States?"

One class member stated confidently, "Oh, at least twenty to thirty percent." The others nodded their heads in agreement.

"No, the Jews are less than three percent in this country," I replied. "I am Jewish and feel uncomfortable with that remark." At first, the group was quiet, and then the animated discussion continued.

In 15 minutes, sharing ended. For the entire class, I emphasized diversity both at this college and in New York City. I wrote a James Baldwin quote on the blackboard: "The role of the artist is the same as the role of the lover. If I love you, I have to make you conscious of things you don't see" ("Quotable Quote"). The class ended, and students left. I was busy packing up my books and belongings in my backpack.

The student who made this remark about the Jews entered the room. "Professor, I am so sorry I hurt your feelings. My friend said that remark about Brooklyn College. I didn't." I looked her straight in the eye.

"Coming to see me took a lot of gumption. I accept your apology."

I held out my hand, and she offered hers. We shook hands firmly. She felt she was respected as well.

Walking out of class on a spring morning, I saw a group of students who moved their hands like dancers. All the students were deaf, and I saw the joy and exuberance in their communication. My college had a well-known program for deaf individuals where a high school diploma can be earned in a collaborative setting for those who lack hearing.

I felt like an anthropologist studying work. When I got a mammogram, I spoke to the technician about her training. I heard a woman in a hard hat at a deli as she told her friend about her day. I wondered what it was like in the fashion industry or working as an accountant.

Understanding Adjunct Options

Now, my adjunct life is over. As an adjunct, I relished meeting new immigrants. I learned to be a more worldly city resident. Teaching expanded my life but did not determine my future. What recommendations can I offer to others? Explore personal options during your entire career. Develop multiple income streams and ideas. Activate your colleagues to unionize and work for better conditions for all. Realize that even a simple raindrop can enrich the slow growth of a tree, but the power of a storm or a union can be mighty and fierce.

When my time ended at the college, I wondered about my students. Will work be a source of satisfaction or disappointment for them? How will new technology change their world? I assessed how much I had learned and shared in this box-like setting that was once a candy factory. I thought about the Swingline factory, an empty shell; years later, it sold items for theater productions. I remembered the pre-COVID-19 story of LaGuardia Community College and the unknown destinations for us all.

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