

## Notes from Ivory Flats

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### *The last taboo*

In academic life – ideally – there should be few if any taboos. If academic freedom means anything, it is a licence to think out loud. Sometimes that may of course bring down unhappy consequences on the person doing the thinking out loud, so in practice academic freedom is hemmed in on one side by the sensitivity of the receiver and the courage – or stupidity – of the thinker. As issues to do with race and other aspects of diversity have come to the fore, these fences have perhaps shifted. There is, though, one taboo that a lecturer breaks at their own peril.

Imagine (well, start by imagining it is not lockdown, Covid-country, or strike time) that you go into the staff-room, post-room, lunch, or a colleague's office, and he or she asks you how you are.

*"Absolutely fantastic", you reply. "I can't wait to charge through my emails – always educational and informative – and then I have a couple of lectures – my favourite subject and such great students – before I look over the latest REF submissions (such clever colleagues we have). Pigs in clover fails to catch the perfection of my day".*

Wrong, wrong, wrong! You have just made an error, a cultural gaffe of enormous magnitude. You have broken the ultimate tribal taboo of academia – do not be uncomplaining about your lot. In the less benign days of Druids and woad you would have ended up as a set of choice cuts on the altar at Stonehenge. You would now, though, be first in line when volunteers for redundancy are being tracked down.

As every reader of this will know, the correct answer to anyone asking how you are is:

*"Oh God, you have no idea. My inbox is swamped with illiterate instructions from on high, all wanting a response by yesterday. My eleven o'clock lecture isn't ready, the Powerpoint froze and ate 10 slides, I haven't read the masters' students' coursework, and this afternoon I have to listen to Bloggs droning on about how awful the REF submission is."*

Unlike the earlier answer, this one is the perfect prompt for a full and fascinating conversation, and the beginning of that key but untutored academic skill – the competitive moan.

*"Yes, that does sound bad, but you don't know the half of it. My inbox was so full my email shut down, I haven't a clue what I am supposed to be lecturing about at ten, and there's an endless stream of students waiting to see me. Not to mention my paper has come back with major revisions, and Reviewer 2 is clearly moronic."*

Once started, this exchange becomes its own renewable energy source.

Among the indigenous communities of the Pacific coast of the US and Canada there is a custom known as potlatch.

This is a competitive gift-giving feast, where the winner is the one who gives the most away – even at the cost of complete penury. In the Ivory Flats, we have competitive moaning. The winner is the person who has the most to complain about. Actually, that is not quite true. The winner is person who complains best. This will occasionally reflect genuine hardship, overwork and deprivation, but to be honest, there is a skill in the game that only bears a loose relationship to the pecking order of suffering. Some people are just good at it. Indeed, as we get trained for everything else these days, we should probably have courses devoted to it.

There are two puzzles about this local cultural tradition. One is that I am not sure when it began. I don't recall it being a big thing in the 1970s when I started lecturing, just the odd minor moan, although no doubt there were early specialists. I did have one colleague who could sigh for England. His timing was perfect – if somebody entered the Departmental office, he could ensure that his soft, long, low sigh was not drowned by the door closing. If you walked past his office, the sigh came exactly as you passed the open door. Many a neophyte made the mistake of stopping and asking what was wrong.

But he was an outlier, an evolutionarily precocious animal, a mammal-like reptile lurking in the Palaeozoic. For the most part we seemed as cheerful as could be expected. More precisely, moans were specific, targeted, not generic. A particular lecture, not the whole livelihood of teaching; a particular student, not the entire student body in this and any other university, at this time or any other time, a singularly unhelpful reviewer, not the entire peer review system. It is hard to pinpoint when the transition took place, and it is probably not so much a point in time as a response to the changing conditions in which we work – as we moved out of the Ivory Tower and into the Ivory Flats. If I was to pick on one thing, it would be the growth of email, removing the camouflage that allowed us to shelter safely from institutional predators, and get on with our work, but it is difficult to disentangle this from the relentless growth of a central administration with few inhibitions and less accountability.

The other puzzle is why this has become the central cultural tradition, as much a part of being an academic as speaking French is to being French. That it has become so pervasive is probably easily understandable, an outcome of the normal processes of cultural evolution. In learning the skills of the culture, to do well and rise up, one is well-advised to imitate the behaviours that are most common, or failing that, the behaviours of those with the highest status. Either way, once moaning becomes common, only a fool will not moan. To use one of my favourite evolutionary models, John Maynard Smith's 'evolutionarily stable strategy', it is unavoidable by a strategy with a higher payoff. In a universe of complainers, the happy rat is a loser.

More difficult to understand than the spread is the origin. It is unlikely to be the result of one particularly

charismatic complainer, the ‘moaner zero’ in modern panademic terminology. More probable is that the conditions in which we work have changed. I have already referred to emails, usually at the top of most people’s list of curses of modern academic life. Emails destroy planning. They are the great disruptor. No matter what one sets out to do, only the most focused of us (not me) is not side-tracked by the ping, and so the day unravels like a badly knitted jumper. But emails – there is so much more to say on those – are not unique to universities, so cannot be more than the collateral damager.

Another possible culprit is the sheer increase in workload. What better reason is there to complain than that we are working too hard, too many hours. That is certainly true – I look back at my younger years as if they were leisurely Edwardian summers, compared to the frantic pace today. But while academics work hard and long hours most do more than 50 hours a week, and Mary Beard recently said she worked 100 hours – something I can well believe. But young bankers and city folk are regularly doing 120 or more (mind you, their burn out rate is phenomenal), and they probably complain less, either because they are too busy counting the money, or because it would be seen as a sign of weakness, not being able to cut it in the fat cat race.

I think we have to look at the tensions that lie within academic life these days. Those tensions are what makes us unable either to rise up in full blown strikes and revolt, nor happily accept our lot. Moaning is the resolution to those tensions.

Two ways in which we are pulled in different directions come to mind. The first is teaching and research. I think, back in the days when we lived in Ivory Towers, there was a general acceptance that teaching, lecturing, was a central part of the role, rewarding in itself, and not that overwhelming. Research was equally important, and usually why people entered the career. But everyone found their own balance, with some enjoying and focusing more on teaching, others research, and the balance could shift back and forwards across a career. But there has been a change in this balance. Leaving aside that teaching has become time-consuming (finding the perfect picture of a baby gorilla for one Powerpoint can take hours!), the relative status of the two has changed. The REF, and Universities’ obsession with grant income, has elevated research as ‘the activity’, the basis for respect, reputation and promotion. This may have been inevitable, and indeed what most of us who are ‘research active’ would like, but the unintended consequence is the resentment of time spent teaching. Lecturing, tutoring, and student support become, in our heads, the things that are keeping us from that Nobel prize. Given the increasing amount of work time now devoted to all of these, and the way in which research becomes squeezed into the margins of the working day and year, what was previously a more balanced situation has become a major stressor. Moaning – “I have another ten lectures this week and that grant deadline is approaching faster than a speeding bullet” – is the only solution, as, in practice, not much else can be done. We work in this extraordinary environment where the only thing that counts – research – is not scheduled. Imagine being a surgeon where no theatre time is scheduled, just meetings and training. Finding time to make a few incisions would just have to be squeezed into evenings and weekends. That is modern university life.

The second tension lies in the ambiguity of academic employment. In Flann O’Brien’s *The Third Policeman*, the people of the village spend so long riding their bicycles that they exchange molecules with them, so that the bicycle takes on human characteristics, and the humans bike ones. A person can have a slow puncture, and a bike can have a personality. Working in a university for a long time also results in an exchange of molecules, so that where you stop and the university starts become horrendously blurred. We are not really simple employees earning a wage as we are so invested in our institutions, and our lives and egos are locked into those institutions. At the sadder end there are those, despite the complete change in the nature of the institution, who have stayed in love with the process of research and teaching. To change would be like accepting the end of the affair. The solution, of course, is to moan.

*“It’s ridiculous, they’ve put me on the Working After Hours Safety Committee, but what can I do.... That’s another late nighter I shall have finishing my grant application”.*

So moaning is the adaptive solution, the academic safety valve, where we cannot rise up and revolt against our lot, because we think it would be revolting against ourselves, hurting our colleagues and friends and students. As I said in my last piece, the growing distinction between ‘The University’ and the academics will erode that sense of community, and perhaps moaning will be replaced by a different adaptive solution. Until then, it is much easier just to ratchet up the potlatch of complaints.

*“I’ll see your 50 hours of lectures and three committees and raise you ....”*

Moaning is, paradoxically, the offspring of impotence.