

The UKZN Griot

...of Retirement and Gotchacology



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One of the benefits of science is the law-making process. Scientists have laws and principles for everything: Boyle's Law, the Law of Averages, the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, etc. These laws account for the behaviour of chemical, physical and measurable phenomena. This column regularly invokes different kinds of laws to explain why things keep going wrong (kludgemanship, e.g., Murphy's Laws). Some laws explain irrationality while others identify why organisations that claim to be efficient and that institute endless performance management (PM) exercises, are, in fact, so chaotic. My monthly study of academia pays homage to all these laws and my column describes the experiences of the subjects of these laws.

Last year I was hosted by an Australian university. This was a truly liminal experience – i.e., like with an Abakwetha initiation, a quality of ambiguity or disorientation occurred during a ritual, in this case a retirement event. An internationally influential Professor, a scourge of neoliberalism and institutional stupidity, was retiring. Not only was an entire afternoon devoted to discussions and critique of his life's work, its impacts and its significance for Australians, but a celebratory evening rounded off the day's events.

Compare this to many South African universities where retirees slink away in the dark of night to a deafening institutional silence. At the University of Oz, as I'll call it, luminaries came in from all over the world to debate, celebrate and pay homage. The seminar symbolised both tangible and intangible academic value, rather than only crude quantifiable productivity units. The deliberations highlighted academic integrity rather than sychophantic posturing. Indeed, this university itself took the man, his work and his retirement very seriously indeed.

The cocktail party after the seminar offered an eye-opening performance in academic politics. The *acting* Vice-Chancellor got a huge cheer when she stepped up to the podium; the *acting* DVC (Research), was noisily applauded when he followed; and the *acting* dean was met with thundering applause when he was introduced. The reverse signifier, of course, related to the *absence* (because they were on suspension) of the previous (permanent) incumbents of these high management positions. Democracy does still somehow exist in some institutions in some places some of the time. This is what I mean by liminal. Liminality enables the reversal or temporary suspension of hierarchies, while taken-for-granted future outcomes are cast into doubt.

The discussions were grounded on this Professor of Cultural Studies' extensive influence on national policy and global debate. His often mentioned "F*ck that" attitude towards despotism, regression

and institutional and individual idiocy became the metaphor that was often mentioned in jest by his peers, but uttered with deadly theoretical intent. He put it more subtly when, in defeating counter-democratic tendencies in academic decision-making, he simply said “Gotcha”.

“The F*ck that Factor” is what increasingly comes to mind as everything unravels around us, even as more and more PM systems are put in place, and more and more auditors are employed, and more and more rules are enacted in every institution everywhere. Stress wrought by autocracy is shovelled downwards and academic workers everywhere have been restricted from the spaces in which they can play the Gotcha game. But they are not yet fully counter-Gotchered. Consider this response to my columns from someone in a UKZN support division: ‘I cannot thank you enough for the sensational, intuitive humour you bring every time I read your UKZN Griot. Your ability to capture the feelings of both staff and students is almost supernatural. Your courage to put them in words gives me optimism and hope that things will improve. I am sure that the change starts with us rather than the fear of what might be done to us.

Gotcha.

This comment encodes exactly what my colleague from Oz stands for. But he’s not really retiring. His new playing field is the national one, one on which he intends to play Gotcha on a much larger scale. So do most of us. In the South African context, only Jonathan Jansen works in the National “F*ck that” liminal space. But can he really play Gotcha?

UKZN once had its own Gotcha exponent, most regrettably, now deceased. This was the irrepressible, hugely articulate, really fearsome, thundering mathematics Professor, John Swart, the only man in Senate who could stare down Vice-Chancellors, any Vice-Chancellor. His mission was to always take an opposing view, and to force the linear thinkers to think dialectically when trying to make policy that actually worked in the implementation. He taught Senate to think, to debate, and to act with integrity, and to consider and weigh up the consequences of its decisions.

Hierarchicology explains why there are so few John Swarts in top management anywhere now in the world of academentia. Gresham’s Law explains that ‘Trivial matters are handled promptly’, with the corollary that ‘important matters are never solved’. This law, operative in commitology corresponds with a chemistry law, the Berthelot Principle: ‘Of all possible reactions, the one that does occur will liberate the greatest amount of heat.’ Translated into academentia, heat means “hot air”, that is, there is nothing to be done but we can talk lots about it. Committees and meetings simply recirculate the heat and the meeting becomes more important than does the problem the meeting was constituted to solve. This is Hendrickson’s Law; Hendrickson, an environmental engineer, must know something.

The Oz retirement seminar was not hot air. It achieved something. It placed human value on a human by his fellow humans. While some HR boxes might have been ticked, the symbolic quality of this send-off could not be quantified. I feel the same way about the passing of John Swart. Like the University of Oz, UKZN has lost an extraordinary democrat, though the Man from Oz is also now working in and on a higher plane.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed in this column are the author’s own.

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