

Life Parallels Art at St. Bonaventure

Lionel S. Lewis

In Philip Roth's seriocomic novel *The Human Stain*, the protagonist Coleman Silk, a classicist at a small New England college, wonders aloud in class about two students yet to make an appearance six weeks into the semester: "Does anyone know these people? Do they exist or are they spooks?" By that afternoon, Silk, a former dean who has been at the school four decades, has been charged with racism. After all, in 1996, "racist . . . at Athena College [is] suddenly the most emotionally charged epithet you could be stuck with." In due course there is an investigation followed by meetings, interviews, and hearings. Enraged after his wife's unexpected death from a stroke, which he blames not only on the surreal situation he finds himself in, but on being abandoned by his colleagues in a time of crisis, Silk resigns, severs all ties to the college, and watches his life completely unravel.

Coleman Silk's story is only fiction; Joseph Greer's is not. Greer is a sociologist with over thirty years of service on the faculty at St. Bonaventure University, a mostly undergraduate Franciscan institution in Western New York known beyond the region primarily for its NCAA Division I basketball program. Not only does St. Bonaventure take its basketball seriously, but it also offers an atmosphere conducive to other leisure pastimes. The 2002 edition of the *Princeton Review* ranked it number seven on a list of the nation's top twenty "party schools."

At the end of the fall 2000 semester, Greer was summoned to the office of university president Robert J. Wickenheiser and asked to resign. When he refused, he was terminated on the spot "for serious cause." To Greer, the dismissal "came out of the blue." After the allegations, which at first he described as "outlandish," became clear, (Coleman Silk was "astonished" when he first heard about his alleged misconduct) Greer told the student newspaper, "I've been accused of essentially being a racist . . . I am denying all charges." Greer, who routinely assigned reading material in his introductory courses sympathetic to the black experience in America, and had, in fact, worked in a 1980s presidential campaign of the civil rights activist Jesse Jackson, was convinced that the president wanted to make an example of him for his very public challenge to the athletic department's efforts to circumvent minimum academic standards.

In an effort to hold on to his job and reputation, Greer asked for a formal hearing and hired an attorney who in recent years had successfully defended

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other embattled St. Bonaventure faculty members. The university detailed first nine and then, three weeks later, eleven charges, of which four made reference to his mistreatment of minority students. The others, more broadly formulated, alleged professional incompetence, neglect of duty, creating a hostile learning environment, and exhibiting unprofessional and improper conduct. As Greer saw it, this latter set of charges was “silly.” However, he added, the claim “that I treated minority students disrespectfully and unequally . . . that is very, very serious.” On the American campus today, to be told one is unfit may be of concern; to be told one is a bigot is a grave matter.

Three of the four students named in the charges were black; the other was a “multiple disabled person.” In this instance it was claimed, “you stated to him while referring to crippled people: ‘Screw ’em. Push them down the stairs. Who cares?’” Greer denied having said this, and no one other than the student making this charge testified to this event. This paper will focus on the charges made by the black students.

Greer was a ready target for student frustration. His teaching style was provocative, and it moved students to complain. One freshman wrote to President Wickenheiser:

I would like to draw attention to the test question on exam #2 for Sociology 101 at Saint Bonaventure University, one that boasts such a strong Franciscan tradition: “13. While we look in amazement at the idea of cannibalism, we can find some Americans who still claim to engage in the practice. Who are they?” The answer provided by Dr. Greer is “Roman Catholics.” As a practicing Roman Catholic, I find this highly offensive. I ask myself how on earth a question like this can be on a sociology test, especially at Saint Bonaventure of all places!

Even Greer recognized that he might at times give offense to students. In answer to a question from the chair of the Faculty Hearing Board as to whether he would characterize his classroom behavior as “gruff,” he responded: “Not gruff, I thought abrasive. Unfortunately, I think sometimes I am abrasive.”

In spite of how far-fetched events surrounding Coleman Silk’s professional disintegration might seem, Joseph Greer’s academic career—with a push from St. Bonaventure’s president prompted by some students and bureaucratic functionaries involved in the athletic program—was beginning to look quite similar. Both had been tripped up by a generational linguistic shift. Silk’s holding fast to “the language of Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Dickens” and Greer’s use of slang to exhort and relate to young adults were simply unacceptable to many on campus.

At the formal hearing before a five-member committee selected by the University Faculty Senate of St. Bonaventure, the president testified that an instructor of theology, a Franciscan, had come to him in 1998 to inform him that he considered Greer “to be a racist”: “he asked me to, quote, get rid of or

fire Dr. Greer, unquote.” As the friar remembered it two years later, it was “racist remarks and unfair evaluation” that convinced him to alert the administration.

The president said it was at that point he was certain Greer took pleasure in directing his bile at vulnerable or weaker students, specifically those Wickenheiser referred to as “our black minority students of color.” As far as he was concerned, “what we need to be doing as a University [is] to become more conscious of diversity, people of color and others.” This would probably not be readily accomplished: in the 1998–1999 academic year, twenty-five, or less than 1.5 percent, of St. Bonaventure’s approximately 1,900 undergraduates were black, most of whom were involved in the athletic program.

The first charge against Greer involving a minority student alleged that in 1998 Greer referred to a young man, whom we shall only call [K], as a “dumb nigger.” Moreover, “you further demonstrated your disregard for an African-American student by your treatment of [K] in the classroom by singling him out for failure to comply with your directive to subscribe to the *New York Times* newspaper, an expense you knew he had difficulty achieving.”

According to Greer, he had had a friendly relationship with [K], and when counseling him in his office he had asked him if anyone had ever called him such a name, and if he had ever thought of himself in such terms. When [K] replied in the affirmative, Greer responded that he must reject the label. He told [K] that there was no such thing (repeating the pejorative term) as a “dumb nigger,” that [K] was indeed capable of succeeding as a student.

Upon hearing the interpretation [K] had put on the conversation, Greer immediately wrote a letter of apology. He acknowledged that his attempt to provide support had resulted in a “clumsy and boorish calamity,” and took responsibility for not making himself better understood.

In an interview with the university’s advocacy officer charged with investigating the complaint, [K] allowed that Greer had made numerous efforts to help, encourage, and support him through some difficulties. After completing his inquiry, the advocacy officer wrote that he did not think either Greer or [K] was being untruthful: “I believe that you both came away from the encounter with a different interpretation of what happened . . . We have a case of miscommunication and misinterpretation.”

The university’s vice president for academic affairs concurred that Greer had used the phrase in a way that he thought would be instructive, and concluded that, because the term was “offensive,” his effort had badly misfired. The vice president decided to intervene and allowed [K] to withdraw from the course without penalty although he had failed the final examination.

Despite the advocacy officer’s final judgment that Greer had “caring intentions . . . and never intended his remark to be interpreted as a racial slur,” Wickenheiser still insisted that he was guilty of uttering “racial epithets,” that [K’s] poor academic performance was rooted in Greer’s prejudices, not in

[K's] failure as a student. If Greer were not biased, [K] would have earned a higher mark.

Because Greer refused to assign [K] additional work to allow him to pass the course, or to change his grade, the president was left with the task of assuring the basketball coach, concerned about losing one of his players, that he “deplore[d] racism and any conduct that in any way reflects racism.” Since he “regret[ed] any conduct reflecting even a hint of racism,” he and his colleagues would continue “to do everything we can to ensure that racism of any kind is never tolerated on our campus.” The president was committed to rooting out what to him was uncharitable behavior on the part of faculty, particularly that which resulted in athletes’ becoming ineligible to compete.

With some on campus still mindful of the [K] incident, Greer was also asked to defend himself for “revealing the grades of two minority students ([C] and [H]) to the class while embarrassing them in front of the class.” (In effect, he was said to have violated the federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act.) This was only the beginning; there were a number of other cognate complaints: without provocation he accused “one of these minority students of being ‘a lazy son of a bitch.’” In another course, Greer allegedly called [C] a “jackass,” told him to “shut up” in front of other students, and misled him regarding what was to be covered on an exam. During one class period, while looking for missing coins used in an exercise in probability, he was charged with making [C] stand up to be “patted down” as if he were a criminal. Another time, he extended his middle finger in the direction of [C] and [H]. [C] testified: “He put the middle finger up, [and] he gave [H] the finger.”

Granted, such behavior is unusual, ineffective, and hardly defensible; however, after a closer look at the facts, a much different picture emerges. Greer’s public revelation of the grades was not that public since a total of only two, or at most three, students were enrolled in the course. [C] testified that three were present when the grades were announced; [H] remembered that only two were in the room. Greer is sure that a single student was there. [H] testified: “I just didn’t appreciate him like saying my grade even though it was my own teammate and me and [C] is really good friends That just embarrassed me.” For the same reasons, in his testimony [C], too, felt that a public announcement was inappropriate. [H] was the one who wrote in a formal grievance that Greer called him a lazy son of a bitch, although Greer testified that it was [C] who described [H] in those terms. [H] testified that he was most aggrieved when Greer “came into the class and yelled at me, in front of my teammate.”

[C] claimed that he was slandered by Greer on more than one occasion. It went well beyond referring to him as a jackass: “mainly he was just calling me a liar.” As an afterthought, [C] added that Greer abused him in the same manner as he had [K] and [H]: “He’s called me a dumb nigger” and “a lazy son of a bitch.”

There were other putative outbursts of racism, bullying, and misanthropy enumerated in the formal charges against Greer. However, these lacked witnesses beyond the plaintiffs, were contradicted by the testimony of others, could not be corroborated, or were trite and simply evaporated. Four examples:

The first is a statement from [C], beginning with the obvious:

I have to be honest, I basically didn't learn anything in the class. One day he licked his finger and started writing on the board. How are we supposed to take notes from his licking his finger and writing notes? I thought that was disgusting [B]ut I asked him . . . and he asked me did I have any more spit to help him I wasn't trying to be funny, I wasn't trying to be a class clown, but he made it seem like that and the class started laughing.

From a recent St. Bonaventure graduate:

Q. In any of the [five or six] courses that you took from Dr. Greer, have you ever heard him abuse an individual?

A. No.

Q. Has he ever abused any minorities?

A. No.

Q. Was he disrespectful to anyone?

A. No.

From a Native American, who had once served as chair of the sociology department:

[I]f you're asking me [in the complaints that he had heard from students about Greer] if they said the word racist, I've never heard the word racist I do not believe he's a racist And I tried to think of this racist issue because I can't remember ever hearing Joe telling, you know, an ethical foulism. I've never heard a Polish joke out of him; I've never heard an African-American joke out of him, but I can tell you, I've heard a lot of them from other colleagues at this University.

From a student who worked for the University Diversity Committee:

Q. Steve, did you ever hear Dr. Greer make a statement of a racial nature to any minority, whether it's African-American or any minority?

A. No

Q. Did Dr. Greer ever abuse him [C] when you were in there [in class]?

A. No.

Q. Did [C] tell the truth?

A. No, like I hang out—I'm friends with [C]"

After evaluating the testimony of thirty-nine witnesses, the hearing panel expeditiously concluded that, taken point by point, the entire case against Greer was without merit, that the president's decision "was made precipitously." The committee could find no evidence of "racist behavior." The five members

were unanimous in agreeing that confronting students or making them feel uncomfortable is not racism, and insufficient grounds to dismiss a faculty member. (Too late for Coleman Silk, his eulogist asserted: "The alleged misconduct never took place. Never.")

Unlike the fictional Athena College where Silk taught, the faculty at St. Bonaventure University did not seem to have much of an appetite for censuring colleagues as a means of addressing perceived social injustices.

It is clear that there is a preoccupation with racism, real or imagined, on the part of some at St. Bonaventure. What is less clear is a preoccupation with creating educational opportunities for minorities. Some used the Silk imbroglio at Athena to get "more blacks on campus. More black students, more black professors." However, there are no new initiatives to make St. Bonaventure more diverse. Most of the handful of black students remain isolated from the academic community. In fact, so does the president.

Greer survived the degradation ritual that he had been forced to endure. Vindicated, he is back teaching—but, as he told me, "shaken" and "now cautious"; still, a happy ending for him, if not for diversity at St. Bonaventure. The focus of attention for most at St. Bonaventure in the 2001–2002 academic year was once again basketball and beer, the former under a new head coach.

The tension on elite campuses in recent years between those who have overreacted to speech they find offensive and those uncompromisingly committed to unfettered free expression has been a subject of considerable attention. Too much effort has been spent by each side demonizing the other. Philip Roth, a sometime teacher of English, that is, a faculty member, wickedly shows not only how absurd but also how hurtful this divide has become. Hearing about "the spooks business" for the first time after Silk's funeral, his sister reflects: "I don't believe I've ever heard of anything more foolish being perpetrated by an institution of higher learning. It sounds to me more like a hotbed of ignorance. To persecute a college professor, whoever he is, whatever color he might be, to insult him, to dishonor him, to rob him of his authority and his dignity and his prestige for something as stupid and trivial as that."

The very real furor at St. Bonaventure is a cautionary tale. It reminds us that poisonous labels may be thrown around by anyone and from everywhere or any place, from a presidential suite, a friary, or a gymnasium.

The Faculty Hearing Board did not address the president's hardly believable charges of racism on the part of Greer. As we know, claims of racism, when none exist, can actually promote it by setting one side against the other. It is unclear whether the president was acting to please some in the school's athletic program, which would be insidious, or whether he was simply being injudicious. It is clear that his behavior was not only "precipitous," but also irresponsible.