

FREEDMAN/ULYSSES

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What madness possesses otherwise sensible, decent scholars to be willing—nay, eager—to be dean or president; even more incredibly, to leave Philadelphia to court such disaster? No one knows better than Jim the bramble thickets of dealing with prima donna professors, the doldrums of faculty meetings, the aimless storms of student fretfulness, the windy caves of alumni relations, the treacherous seas of public relations, the thunder of disappointed parents, the swamps of budgeting sessions, the angry waves of legislative pressures, the parched deserts of corporate philanthropy, the rocky narrows between the Scylla of leadership and the Charybdis of tyranny. Has he forgotten the deadly sequence of official dining (and breakfasts and luncheons, too), the taste of institutional chicken, the feverish searching of the anecdote file for a story he has not told before to this audience, at least not recently?

With what magic belt, then, doth this our Ulysses gird himself against such perils as he voyages forth? What anodynes, spells, potions will save him? Humor. One has seen its healing power in the late afternoons after prolonged debate over curricular trivia. Tolerance, triumphing serenely over the bombast of protest meetings. Patience, visible in the quiet smile of acquiescence and approbation with which he listens for the twentieth time to the same eulogy; the same rhetoric. Steadiness of purpose; nothing steels endurance of transient trials like confidence in long-run aims and accomplishments. Caution, the power to suspend judgment. That most lawyerly of virtues guards him against the catastrophe of casting in with the wrong side before all the evidence (including evidence of the alignment of political forces) is in. Courage. His medals won on the bitter battlefields of faculty appointments and affirmative action were well-earned.

Of intelligence I say nothing, for are we not all intelligent, as well as wise and prudent, here in academia? Yet there is a special manifestation of Jim's intelligence of which I will speak: his talent for trenchant summary of the elements in a tangle of controversy. See the facts as Jim irrefutably and fairly recites them, and you are impelled towards Jim's conclusions.

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Despite magic belts and spells, the lot of dean and president is far from carefree. I have not answered the question what madness drives men to it. In Jim's case, one might make an initial guess that this inheritor of the Puritan ethic may feel that what hurts must be good for him. Long acquaintance with Jim's interest in the arts affords me an alternative theory. It is that Jim finds in these executive posts an outlet for his creativity. He uses the irrationalities of humanity, especially in group behavior, as an artist uses outrageous or subtle colors, with curiosity and respect. The challenge is to create out of this unlikely material an organic unity.

Oh benign madness!