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# The Trickster as a Communicator: Neither Shepherd, Sheep, nor Wolf

Raymie E. McKerrow & Kathleen J. Turner<sup>1</sup>

Frentz, T. S. (2008). *Trickster in Tweed: My Quest for Quality in Faculty Life*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press. 192 pp. ISBN: 978598743180. \$29.95 (paperback).

Let us begin in perhaps an odd way—*do not read this book* if you dichotomize your professional and personal lives and do not wish to confront your own demons. Frentz's story focuses on the process of reclaiming a sense of self, and you may define your experience as an academic as far removed from Frentz's explorations and confrontations in that process. Reading this book, your heart as well as your head will react uncomfortably, for you will begin to see yourself in new ways that are at times frightening and less than positive. This is not a book that can be read with dispassionate disinterest—as if one were only an academic and not, at the same time, a person.

Further, *do not read this book* if you are quite comfortable in your acceptance of a traditional mode of scholarship. If you believe that the personal has no place within the scholarly tradition, that it should be kept strictly apart from the task of writing a conventional, argumentatively sound, methodologically pure analysis of some artifact or event, then this is not a book you would enjoy. You will reject the very premises from which Frentz proceeds, and learn little in the process.

On the other hand, *do read this book* if you have ever despaired of being the “forever academic” while life outside the “tower of babble” went on its merry way without you, wondered how your personal and professional lives became so estranged, or lamented the recalcitrance of some academics to ever change. The author, a respected rhetorical critic and eminent stylist, has written a compelling narrative of life in and outside the academy, focusing on how to discover Quality in one's academic life—a quality that admits the personal and the private into the “mix” of the professional and public self. Not all will have experienced his journey in the same way, but all who have an acute awareness of the rigidity that infects tradition-bound perspectives, and the arrogance

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of some in maintaining those perspectives in the face of a need to expand our horizons, will profit from his story.

Frentz frames his search with a well-known text that combines journey and rhetoric in the context of travel and soul-searching. Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* serves as a critical backdrop for the creation of the personas that inhabit the discussion from start to finish: wolf, sheep, shepherd, and coyote/trickster. While the terms seem fairly self-explanatory in ordinary usage, their employment here provides key insights into patterns and options in personal and professional relationships. The wolf's destructive tendencies find voice in full-on, no-holds-barred attacks. The sheep's quiet, conflict-avoidance soul depends on others for direction. The shepherd leads others (although not always in productive ways). Most intriguing is the trickster of the title, also known as the coyote: the wily one who challenges the conventions of normalcy through misdirection rather than rage, who is "a rule-bending, humor-laced outsider who contests rigid organizational rules without threatening the people who hold them" (p. 13). This is the person who, as an "outlaw," challenges conventions but does so with an eye toward saving the face of the other. To paraphrase Frentz, the outlaw savages the structure while saving the person (p. 150).

Frentz employs these personas to analyze his life, not chronologically but circularly, with themes revisited time and again. Thus, for example, we learn and revisit Frentz's coming to terms with his personal relationship with his mother and father. His feelings of remorse at not "being there" in his mother's last days and his reaction to his father's suicide are moments so eloquently expressed that they bring back personal memories of our own families. We also follow his experience with cancer from the initial diagnosis through treatment, as he struggles to find the right persona with which to deal with his hope and fear, as well as to interact more as trickster than as sheep with those in positions of authority.

We also travel with him on his professional journey, such as his reaction to being denied tenure, not once but twice—even though outside observers would suggest that his fine service as a scholar and teacher would have made both cases "no-brainers." What we learn in these episodes is, in part, the treachery of colleagues who do not always have your best interests at heart, as in the story of a colleague who trashed his reputation in a conversation with a potential employer and in consequence killed any interest the caller had in considering Frentz as a potential colleague. We also learn of "secret" tenure letters that were commissioned and added to a file to bolster a negative decision—reflecting the insidious nature of a system that bends to the will of the decision maker, rather than protecting the dignity of the applicant. We learn of the reluctance to try new strategies for dealing with graduate students—strategies that permit their humanity to come to the fore, rather than seeing them simply as indentured servants fulfilling a necessary function. Thanks to Frentz's unflinching—and sometimes flinching—introspection, we also learn of his unproductive employment of the roles of sheep and wolf, both leading up to and following such episodes.

We also learn of positive aspects of the academy—that it is possible to find one's own voice even after decades of adopting the tone of others; that it is possible to be

berated for “doing the right thing” and still feel good about oneself; that it is possible to be a shepherd, and, without thought of reward, to give students the right to find their own scholarly voices. The trickster/coyote can poke gentle fun at the conventions of academe while retaining the humanity of those who serve, whether confronting the bad-mouthing colleague so that he did not pull the same ploy again, or turning dry minutes of meetings into prose that chronicles events in a style eliciting smiles. The wolf does not disappear, but rather is reserved for those occasions when the only way to preserve one’s sense of self is to bring visceral reactions to the forefront and give self-destructiveness its due. Nevertheless, if given a real choice, the wolf subsides in preference to the wily trickster—the one who captures imaginations with words and lets those caught within structures not of their own making identify ways to nurture the human connection.

If there was Quality in this life, lived in the guises of wolf, sheep, shepherd, it is represented in this narrative by his late wife, Janice Hocker Rushing. At their best, their combination of private and scholarly collaborations embodies the integration of personal and professional life that Frenzt seeks in this volume. Sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly, the book conveys the message that Janice was a saint—a person who made Tom whole without his even knowing it. From their first meeting, at which she introduced herself as one of his new graduate student advisees, nothing served to keep his personas “on center” more than she. A late chapter covering her discovery of brain cancer, their less-than-satisfactory relationship with an oncologist and a nurse during a chemotherapy session, and her passing at far too young an age will soften the hardest of hearts. One cannot read this without feeling the passion and heartache that breathe from the page.

Wolf, sheep, shepherd, coyote—each of these can be seen as the main character in the replaying of our lives, or as a character that sometimes inhabits our self, on occasion to the chagrin of ourselves and others. Conversely, each of us has been haunted by a failure to embrace one or more of these personas at those *kairotic* or fitting times that seem to call for action of one type but not another. Osborn and Goodall are right, in their back-cover comments, to call this a “powerful, compelling book” that constitutes “a tour de force.” It is all that and more, for this gripping text invites you in and brings you along in a dialog with the author. You may or may not feel as he feels; you may or may not wish he had made some of the comments he reports making, especially in his more wolfish moments. Whatever your reaction, it will not be blasé. Without consciously becoming aware of it, you will find yourself wandering through the highways and byways of your own life: incidents with the mothers, fathers, and siblings who helped define who you’ve become; incidents with faculty mentors, and with the anti-mentors who have taught you never to teach as they have or never to treat others as they’ve treated you; incidents with students and colleagues, both good and bad.

For those who have sought to merge their private and public selves, their familial persona with their professional one, the role of the trickster will not be easily assumed. Not all of us are as gifted as the author at turning an otherwise routine visit to the doctor into a teachable moment for the medical expert. Many of us have played

the wolf as well as the sheep role; Frenzt shows us alternative personas to give our selves voice.

Finally, this volume should not only be used as a text in ethnography classes but also as a text for students, faculty, and administrators at all levels. It serves as an example—not as a testament to a life well-lived, but as a testament to the search for that life. Both undergraduate and graduate students will be exposed to an academy of which they are too little aware; and faculty and administrators will be reminded of the need to humanize our institutions. Not all experiences will be like this, but never forget that this experience can be found far more often than one would hope. The hopeful message is that being forewarned leads to one choosing the appropriate persona for the occasion, and can turn it into something that, while it challenges the structure that causes the damage, does so in a manner that leaves one's humanity intact.