

Tom Clancy & Me (Or How I Became Poor and Unknown)

By Philip Brady

My brother is one cool dude. Six foot two with shoulders to thrill doorways and a Cheshire cat smile, he's a salesman who clears well over a hundred grand.

Look up the word *Luck*, you'll find his name: He married his beautiful college sweetheart and lives in a mansion in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. He has a blond, beautiful daughter (my god daughter) and a son who, at six, seems to have inherited his father's gifts for a charmed life.

And yet, though I am forty and single with a past that only a chessmaster could outmaneuver, though I make a sliver of his salary and live in an apartment in a ghost-town in the Midwest, somehow our life-long competition hasn't spluttered out. I'm still the elder, and the sledgehammers I held over him in childhood still have weight.

His catch phrase for my life in academe: "You have too much time on your hands."

He both respects and dismisses the life. He accepts that my work as a poet will never sell—still, he has quite credible schemes—but it irks him that I spend so much time and labor on writing poems which, if they ever bobbed up into the mainstream, would merely befuddle or bore, when I could be putting my skills to more practical uses—like writing thrillers, or mysteries, or even greeting cards.

When my brother reads my poems, he is usually silent, since many of them are about our lives together and our parents. But he's upset when I lie: "Uncle Ed didn't shoot himself," he says, "You can't write that."

And what can I say? Never will I have so intense a reader, one who inhabits the world I write about. He reads with the truth as his compass. How can I tell my brother that these things aren't just about him, that I change facts to make truth? How can I tell him that I don't care how many readers I

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have, only how deep? That I want the full attention of the one reader I have, and I want to be worthy of that attention?

I often drive to see him and his family. It's seven hours on the Pennsylvania Turnpike, which seems like an age of bumpers, close shoulders, and McDonald's. Lately, I've taken to listening to books on tape, bought at a truckstop at the first exit. It helps: For the next seven hours, I'm enthralled in some mystery, the life line so complex and appealing that sometimes I actually drive around some more before I get to my brother's house.

And while the world of pop fiction seems completely sealed from mine, the odd thing is that it provides one of the few connections to the outside world, one of the occasions we iconoclasts have of appearing good-natured and democratic: "Hey, did you read Dennis Rodman's book?" "Oh yeah, it was great."

Once, over the Brady family recipe for quarrels—prime rib after drinking rusty nails—I forgot the egalitarian purpose of listening to these tapes and began squeezing a Tom Clancy novel in ways it wasn't meant to be squeeze: Style, language, etc.

My brother sneered, "Yeah, well Tom Clancy could have your job in a New York minute."

That put a stop to my gallop.

And, you know, he's right. But of course I'm in no danger of losing a gig as associate professor at a Midwestern state school to a multi-millionaire who just bid to buy the Minnesota Vikings.

But the thought still galls. Is it true Tom Clancy could do my job, even if he'd want it? Is it true that market forces dictate to academia? Would the quality of higher education be enhanced if we quadrupled faculty salaries to entice phenoms ambitious to make a killing to compete for professorships?

Are we enmeshed in the same web as other professionals—and a lot closer to the spider, considering our pay? In other words, are the people who work in business, medicine, and law better than academicians in the same way our culture believes they're better than anyone else who makes a slice of their salary?

Of course, it's difficult to compare academic training and selection to competition in other sectors of the economy. Education, especially in the liberal arts, traditionally has been a magnet for the feckless and wayward. Hence the belief that "non-professional" graduate school is "soft." My mother, who worked as a school secretary in Brooklyn, used to call the Ph.D. "piled high and deep" and claim she could tell a school psychologist just

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by the shuffling gait. Law school, Medical school, Business administration—these are the “hard” degrees, and those who grind those mills deserve, the thinking goes, more money.

Yet while I haven’t been to law school or med school, I’m not sure that the training they offer is more challenging than liberal arts graduate education, though it may be more grueling.

It’s true that these professional schools tend to cull candidates more rigorously than liberal arts graduate schools do, and probably true also that they grade more strictly. I’m reminded of one English professor who told me he never failed anyone. “Let life fail ’em,” he used to say.

But to compare grading curves and success rates is to fall into the trap of judging one kind of education by another’s standards. In the liberal arts, real achievement is rare. It can’t be graded; sometimes it can’t even be recognized.

Embarking on this liberal arts voyage means taking enormous risk, inviting, even expecting, failure. After all, what kind of fool would put themselves through five to ten years of graduate work knowing that at the end there’s only a small chance of getting a job in their field? And real success takes a lifetime, not a term. As Dante says, entering Paradise, be

sure you have a sturdy boat if you want to follow any further.

Yes, Tom Clancy could have my job. The students would be pleased. For one thing, they’ve heard of him; and, for another, they wouldn’t need even to listen to the books—they could see the movies. And what, besides the fact that he would never take a job teaching at my salary, would keep Tom Clancy from being the best candidate?

What is it exactly that we offer—we, the tenured, the unread, who don’t—as much as we may want to—work on market value? Well, the rusty nails weren’t conducive to an articulate response, but since then I’ve thought soberly about that conversation with my brother.

And what I’ve come up with is the idea that what academia offers is another way of judging value—not necessarily a better way, but one which balances against the market system. We may be flawed, but, if so, our flaws must be judged in terms of a different value system than the one by which we judge “the noisy set/ Of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen/ The martyrs call the world.”

The Sumerians invented two number systems, I’m told: the decimal system, which they used to count how much grain was stored and how many soldiers were on

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call; and another system based on numbers which corresponded to their sense of human faculties and infinity: numbers which didn't count, but which had value nevertheless.

In academia, our value system is based not on money, but time. We're paid less than accountants, bankers, toll collectors, less than others who've gone through equivalent, or fewer, years of schooling are paid.

But, though our pay is low, when I talk to my friends—bankers, no schoolmasters or clergymen I'm afraid—about my schedule of three classes each quarter (minus reassigned time), my quarter off for a research professorship, and my upcoming sabbatical, they are envious and appalled. Quickly forgetting the discrepancies in our salaries—one friend, a major league stock broker, figured he makes my yearly gross in three days—they feel I'm cheating the system.

Even our own administrators seem to feel this way. A dean rolled her eyes at me the other day, complaining about how much time we professors get off. And despite the discrepancies in our salaries, I half agree. I do think it's better, at least for me, to have free time, to make my own schedule, than to have a hefty salary.

I've watched my friends over the past 20 years struggle in New York's business world; I've seen the compromises, the burden of being at someone else's service, of being one of the commodities they sell, of being a human resource (horrible term), and I think, at this mid-way point—if it is a mid-way point—when I take stock, I have fared if not better, at least differently. And I say willingly, "Show *them* the money."

Perhaps my friends are right, and in exchange for higher pay we ought to spend more time in the classroom, ought to teach eight hours a day, or at least be accountable for eight hours a day.

Perhaps the articles in journals no one reads and the presentations to sparse audiences of colleagues are boondoggles. Certainly this is how most people feel about it, even—no, especially—those who've gone to college themselves.

Maybe, if we can account for our hours, and show that our education is worth a dollar amount, we can "cut the fat" from education and even get raises, basing our salaries on some scale that includes professionals in other fields.

What's disturbing to me is not that such an argument has merit, but that it would gain so much credit within our own profession. I hear a lot about being underpaid, very little about the fact that we

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have been granted what no other secular group in American society has: equal amounts of freedom and responsibility.

What's disturbing is what we do with it. I have nothing against the arcane essays, I applaud them.

When someone says that no one cares about such things as Medieval quilting or anagrams from Villon to Dr. Seuss, I remember Yeats' old curmudgeon standing in front of the crowd complaining that there might be more than 50 people in an audience, or Yeats himself, declaiming before the Abbey theatre mob who screamed down O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars*, "You have disgraced yourselves again."

I think of Maxine Kumin saying that she always writes for that "perfect audience of one." I think of Blake, seeing "an immense world of delight" in "every bird that cuts the airy way." I think of a thousand moments when, without any outward sign, my internal landscape has been transformed by the "arcane" wisdom I've read and heard."

What disturbs me is that sometimes when I sit in a committee meeting, I see more of the crowd Yeats cowed than the players who ducked vegetables behind him.

Sometimes English Department meetings sound a whole lot

like business meetings, with a whole lot less at stake: We gabble about requirements, grade distribution, meeting community needs. If we are going to run our universities this way, then we ought to be treated like bureaucrats, and we ought to earn bureaucratic salaries.

I'm not suggesting that we not meet the needs of the community or that we not run our shop efficiently. I'm not suggesting that we abandon attempts to redefine ourselves as our culture redefines itself. Our occupation is entwined with all others. As Donne says of separated lovers, "If they are two, they are two so/ as stiff twin compasses are two."

I'm suggesting that we bring to bear on these redefinitions the unique perspectives and resources we are blessed with. I'm saying that it's important that we don't place salaries above independence, that we see ourselves as a faculty before we see ourselves as a bargaining unit.

I would argue that our paltry pay is a linchpin, keeping our identities and lives different from the lives of doctors, lawyers, businessmen. What drives graduate students to immerse themselves in some little known field of study is not expectation of reward—though we may hope for it.

The driving force is passion. And passion cannot be judged,

graded, or put on a salary scale.

I remember Galway Kinnell saying that Whitman and Melville shared two typical characteristics of American writers—stubbornness and stupidity, lighted with genius. I remember W. D. Snodgrass saying that when students show him poems and ask if they should devote their lives to poetry, he replies, without even looking at the poems, “Not if you can be happy doing anything else.”

A system that rewards professional school graduates with high salaries and makes itinerant workers of many Ph.D.s in liberal arts may be highly unfair, but changing it to fit a professional paradigm might very well sap the liberal arts of some essential vitality, and so deprive our culture of an entire

means of perception.

Faculty. Think about the word: an ability, a source, a way of perceiving. Our responsibility is not merely to produce a product—students, useful research. We have a responsibility to follow, with passion, our quirky obsessions, to live untrammelled intellectual lives, which validate our time, not our salaries.

David Quammen says he refuses to watch the Super Bowl because one day our culture may need someone who’s never witnessed it. It may seem unlikely, but maybe our culture needs a secular institution which embodies a value system where passion, fancy, and even failure, if aspirations have soared, have an honored place. ■