



WHAT OAKLAND TAUGHT ME

Gottfried Brieger

I was hired by Oakland University as an assistant professor of chemistry on August 15, 1963. Thus I missed by a few months the opportunity to be part of that august tribe of founding faculty known as the “Old Oaks.” What brought me to Oakland from sunny California were not the blandishments of Loren Pope and other publicity about MSUO. I was in fact a graduate of Harvard College, and, as the saying goes, “You can always tell a Harvard man, but you can’t tell him much.” The proposition of another Harvard anywhere else but in Cambridge seemed patently absurd.

After Harvard I had received my doctorate from the University of Wisconsin, then spent a couple of years as a glorified post-doc at the University of California, Berkeley. I reflected both on the generally acknowledged merits of these venerable institutions as well as on the personal characteristics of the distinguished faculty in my discipline. They were fiercely competitive with each other and often seemed to lack the humanity which would make them agreeable colleagues.

Accordingly I turned down an offer of a tenure-line appointment at a large state university, and decided to cast my lot with an upstart like MSUO. It was my intention from the start to play a useful role in its development, perhaps to prevent the excesses which I saw dominating the large research institutions.

We arrived in Michigan from California via the California Zephyr, replete with our 4-month-old daughter and a Siamese

cat. Arriving around 10 P.M. at the Central Depot in Detroit, we took a cab to Oakland University. Luckily I had pre-negotiated the fare, on being informed that the cabbie did not know exactly where the University was located. At 2 A.M. in the morning we finally arrived in the faculty subdivision, and aroused a surprised Fred Obear, who had the key to the Tomboulion residence, which was kindly offered to us for an initial week.

This provided the first lesson. MSUO was not on everyone's map as yet.

Oakland had about 60 faculty members in all at this time, and I reflected that this was about the number of faculty in the chemistry department at Berkeley alone! Here I felt I could easily get to know most of these and set about the venture. I soon discovered that we had a rather unusual faculty profile; most were in their 30's, most were from out-of-state schools, and a number were what I would have called serial pioneers, that is they seemed to specialize in being present at the birth of new academic institutions. I recall the chair of the philosophy department, Jim Hayden, as an example. He had been at 18 other institutions before Oakland, and would leave, not too many years later, for yet another upstart, Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts.

There was a great deal of excitement, even elation, among this cohort of young faculty. They were being given the opportunity to create their own academic format, teaching within a curriculum that was still evolving, being able to try out new ideas. I plunged into my chemistry specialty, organic chemistry, with an almost unseemly vigor. I had decided to cover the conventional material found in a two-semester text, in one semester, then to chose a more specialized text for the second semester. I delighted in the fact that no one dictated any aspect of the course, which also included laboratory work. I decided to write my own laboratory manual.

Lesson 2. I need to be adaptable.

The students, it soon developed, were not at all what I had experienced in my own educational track. Mostly from

working-class backgrounds, often the first in the family to go to college, commuters, generally needing to work significant hours outside of school (I took surveys for many years and found that 20 hours/week was the average), they were sorely tried but surprisingly willing to undergo the necessary discipline. Colleagues in the social sciences and humanities found other characteristics such as the religious fundamentalism which students brought with them. The rather more worldly faculty, charged with bringing Enlightenment to their students in courses on Western Civilization, vigorously rose to the challenge.

The student-faculty disparity was an unstable state, and would lead to an administrative edict at one point to mend the expectations and make the grading more appropriate to the recipients of our teaching efforts. This seemed *lese majeste* to some faculty, but it must be admitted that the use of the Cal Tech calculus textbook was a bit of a stretch.

Meanwhile, the social interactions among the pioneer faculty were a delight. Under the leadership of Woody Varner, who regularly offered his home as a meeting place, new ideas could be brought out for discussion, and, with Woody's encouragement, brought to fruition.

I learned that good communication among faculty and staff, lubricated by an active social life, produced an almost euphoric state. I also learned that it is important to know more about your students, other than herding them *en masse* through the halls of academe.

It was in fact the pursuit of the latter objective which led to a significant fraternization of the chemistry faculty and our students. Paul Tombouliau, chair of the Department, initially led the way by holding regular parties at his home for faculty and students. This developed further into a series of student-faculty parties, some held at faculty homes, some at student homes. Further manifestations were annual three-day canoe trips for students and faculty. I cannot say that these social amenities led to significant improvements in academic per-

formance, but it certainly lightened the rather intense expectations.

I stated earlier that it was my express intent to improve on what I had found offensive in my previous academic encounters. I was soon to learn some remarkable lessons. While still untenured, I was asked to serve on the tenure and reappointment committee, I believe my first exposure to the invidious mechanism the University employs to carry out administrative tasks, aided and abetted by faculty. I learned two valuable lessons. The Dean chaired the committee.

The Dean had already made up his mind as to who was to be promoted or tenured.

He advanced a few brief reasons for his recommendations. I was struck by the complete deference-and silence-of my colleagues on the committee. I learned that this was the norm. The chair of the committee holds the best hand, as long as no one calls him or her on it. I decided to do it nevertheless. I requested that we at least see the resumes of the candidates before making our decision. The Dean was surprised. A naïve youngster, I did not contemplate the possible consequences of this act for my academic future at Oakland.

Lesson 3. If you don't like existing circumstances, take the lead.

In later years, as I became a chronic participant on committees, I strove to become the chairman. As chair I could control the flow of business, respecting the time to be spent by others and myself on the onerous but necessary tasks. In time I even developed a technique to limit the impact of a certain Dean, who was a serious windbag. I waited until he took a breath, then quickly called for a move to the next agenda item.

In the early 60's, the first faint signs of the student rebellion, which would manifest themselves so fully later, appeared. Woody approached me with an unusual assignment: Would I chair a committee to determine whether the student literary magazine, *Contuse*, was well-appropriate. Just to make sure that things turned out right, he placed the Dean of Students, then

Tom Dutton, on the committee as well. Now I have some pretensions, but censoring literary efforts of students was not one of them. I took on the task, but asked members of the English Department, as well as resident poet Tom Fitzsimmons, to provide the necessary expertise. The verdict was that the use of selected four-letter words, when placed in a creative context, was permissible. Over the Dean's demurral, we passed the recommendation on to Woody. Ever the affable gentleman, he thanked me and the committee for our work. Then he cancelled University financial support for *Contuse*.

Lesson 4. Principles need to be upheld, even if offensive to some sensibilities.

MSUO early on developed a conventional governance structure. This included a senate, and of course a variety of appended committees. I attended some senate meetings, but soon found out that even normally silent faculty would become quite voluble, when offered a public forum like the senate. I decided never to join, a determination upheld for 20 years, and terminated only when I was elected in absentia, while on a sabbatical leave. Nevertheless, I was willing to serve on committees for reasons previously mentioned. We labored over many mundane tasks that a new university needed done. It was my assumption that our hard-won recommendations would be accepted by the higher powers. Alas this was not so.

Then-provost O'Dowd informed me that all committee recommendations were advisory only. A dark cloud settled in over my committee enthusiasm, which did not dissipate until the faculty unionized in 1969.

Lesson 5. Look out for the power holders.

The last lesson was practiced in an unusual way later. The College of Arts & Sciences had an unusually disagreeable Dean, who informed me, shortly after his arrival, that faculty could not approach him directly but must work their way up to him via the department chair. Under no circumstances was any faculty member to approach anyone in the administrative hierarchy above him directly. I told him that I would abide by this

restriction until such time as it was established that the College was prospering under such a regime. It didn't. When President Champagne abruptly resigned, the Board surprisingly appointed the University Legal Counsel as interim President. I knew that John DeCarlo would need help. At the tumultuous Board meeting where he was appointed, I approached him and asked whether he might like to have a completely informal faculty advisory committee. To my surprise, he said yes, and asked me to recommend the committee members. I chose 11 friends who I knew held the interests of the university as a higher priority than personal advancement. We met weekly with president DeCarlo, for up to three hours, and learned more about the administrative infrastructure than we would ever learn in a lifetime as regular faculty members. In turn we, hopefully fairly, presented the faculty viewpoints, which led to a number of improvements in the administrative procedures.

Finally, I learned some unexpected political lessons. I had made an assumption that those who teach to provide a liberal education, my colleagues at the University, would also be politically progressive at least. I am not speaking of the small coterie of archconservatives of course, which would be found anywhere. They provided a distraction which allowed others to appear more liberal. In fact however the small number of socialist thinkers—Go forbid, even a Marxist—were soon excluded from the faculty social fabric, i.e. let go. Even though we were located right next to a city in terminal postindustrial decline, Pontiac, the University and faculty determinedly turned its attention eastward to Rochester and adjacent suburbs. The fact that the Civil Rights era was upon us seemed largely lost on campus.

Living in Pontiac, and finding little resonance on campus, I became an off-campus radical. I delved deeply into the social issues of the day—housing discrimination, school segregation, gerrymandering of school districts, and of course the firm hold of positions of power—the City Commission, the School Board, and the police—in Caucasian hands. In all fairness, there were of course some colleagues who shared my

views. I think especially of philosopher Hank Rosemont, a student of Noam Chomsky and my university colleague neighbors in Pontiac. We did approach Woody to do something for Pontiac, and he agreed to have an outpost established in Pontiac, which lasted a couple of years. Faculty would offer lectures there. However the momentum of the Movement swept aside the modest efforts of OU faculty, and the operation was taken over by locals, ending the official University connection. I delved ever deeper, becoming a campaign manager for the African-American candidates to the school board. I also served for a number of years on the Race Relations Advisory Committee to the school board. Shades of Oakland, that Advisory title.

Lesson 6. If you cannot assist in improving society at the University, Circumspice!

For these lessons from my early years at OU, and many others in my 40 years at the University, I am grateful. It provided a stable base for my expansive agenda, and now I see that Oakland is evolving into a major-league institution. Meanwhile

I have graduated.