THE MEANING OF MERIT

Discussion Statement for the IUSB Administrative Mini-Retreat

March 21, 1983

Had I had more time and scholarly persistence, I would have checked the accuracy of my youthful recollection of R. G. Dunn (Dun?) cigar boxes. The lid pictured a brawny but pulchritudinous young woman doing battle with fierce-looking Saracens--or something like that. The legend beneath read "Merit Will Win." Stereotype or not, pious hope or not, there was no question as to whom the meritorious one was.

Things are no longer so clear. In my nineteen years of considering promotion and tenure cases I have discovered that 1) every dossier claims the candidate is a very good, even great, teacher ("unlike nearly all the others at IUSB"); and 2) that no one not gaining promotion or tenure believes the decision was correct. Once there seemed to be an exception: a man denied tenure came to tell me that the institution was right, that he had gotten what he deserved. I thought that here indeed was an exception, until I remembered that he was--if not exactly masochistic--very much like the loveable schmoos in Li'l Abner.

More relevant to the topic, perhaps, is the case of a person denied tenure who conjectured it was because of his religion--which, to the best of my knowledge, no one even knew. He thought his scholarship was "adequate," but that his strong point was teaching. No recommending entity found sufficient evidence to support those claims. My being the

court of last appeal, he asked if I had ever seen him teach. "Not exactly," I answered. "What do you mean, 'not exactly'?" "Never in a class, but I have heard you take part in a panel discussion." "What did you think?" "I wasn't impressed." "Why not?" "I thought your comments lacked bite, precision, pertinence." "What do you mean by 'bite,' 'precision,' 'pertinence'?" "----, this is a counsel of despair. If you don't know, I can't tell you."

Emerson said that character is higher than intellect. He was right in a final reckoning, but intellect is what must be primarily prized in reputable academic communities. How skilled is a faculty member in his or her command of the symbols--verbal, mathematical, artistic--that constitute and shape the respective disciplines in our curriculum? How well does an actual or potential colleague inspire analogous competence in students? What subtlety, what profundity, what powers of analysis or synthesis does he or she characteristically display in professional work?

The proof of intellectual skill is usually held to be established by one's being accepted into the national company of those who know: through publication, exhibition, performance. Journals, galleries, stages have their respective levels of prestige. Prestige and merit are more often than not conjoined. What level of attained prestige can reasonably be expected of IUSB faculty members?

I will leave the answer to that for our ensuing interchange, but in these instigating remarks, let me touch on one more critical aspect of merit--an aspect which names the part played by character, even though

intellect remains the primary thing desired.

Have any of you in your administrative roles ever received a letter of recommendation which did not speak in various ways of the candidate's "cooperativeness," "ability to listen," "congeniality," "considerateness"? Many times, of course, the semantic hints and hedges are there. One learns that "sensitive" often means "troublesome"; "soft-spoken" means "you can't hear him"; "self-assured" means "rigid." But if the virtues nearly always named are accurately named, is it not reasonable to think that they, too, are marks of merit? Since civility and rationality make both the best learning and the highest civilization possible, should not those in academic life be model displayers of such virtues--not only in the relationships of teachers with students, but of colleagues with colleagues?

No one wants, or expects, a vital learning community to resemble a tepid tea party, but one would have to be intellectually very, very prima before he or she should expect to be granted the deference given to prima donnas. How far, do you think, this kind of consideration should enter into decisions as to how much we will value--and commensurately accord due signs of recognition to--our present and prospective colleagues?

In good academic vein, let me end by saying, "But on the other hand...."

Les Wolfson