

## **Living on the Edge of Time: A Fictional Account about the Drive To Publish**

**By J. Gary Knowles**

The fictional account which follows is an excerpt from a much larger work about the experiences of a professor of environmental studies and education. The story is set in a large North American university where Thomas, the professor, is grappling with the subtle and not so subtle pressures of socialization. The pressure to publish is powerful and so too are realities of perishing amid the competing demands of the Institution. The story continues:

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*J. Gary Knowles is an associate professor of teaching and learning in the Department of Adult Education, Community Development, and Counselling Psychology at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.*

...Over the course of his time at the Institution there became, quite naturally (although it was anything but "natural" or healthy for that matter) cycles to his scholarship activities. These cycles twirled in identical spirals of events, ones that began and ended in the conference circuit: public announcements of conferences; published calls for papers; hasty preparation of work and materials for proposal writing; completion of proposals, usually in the light of burning midnight oil; mailing, or special courier delivery, of proposals to conference committees; peer reviews of proposals; acceptances or rejections (and, if accepted, connected research activity); writing; writing; writing; editing of papers; final drafts of papers; printing

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of papers; conference preparation and travel; conference presentations; peer interaction and response (if lucky); conversations with publishers (sometimes); revisions of papers (submission of manuscripts, peer reviews, acceptance or rejection, publication); public announcements of conferences; published calls for papers; hasty preparation of work and materials for proposal writing;...and the process continued without clearly defined endings or beginnings given that one research project blended into the next. The cycles of the different conferences (associated with various professional and research organizations) replicated the actions of others, each revolving in its own time, like the planetary action of bodies revolving around the Sun and like the actions of myriad other bodies in other galaxies.

As time passed, his daily life, it seemed on reflection, revolved in decreasing circles. Thomas became highly aware of how his life had become narrow in its focus and in the matters which had become very important to him. (This realization, though, came quite slowly, much to his chagrin.) It was no fluke, it was no matter of chance, that things had turned out that way. Increasingly these frenetic behaviors took time away from personal interests and recreational activities (not to mention family responsibilities) that had so much defined much of his life as a younger man.

...In a very subtle way, the weight of responsibility and commitment which Thomas had accepted at the Institution increased imperceptibly over the course of the first two years of his seven-year contract (the latter being the standard arrangement for new, assistant professors). The pressure to be productive and to publish was very much in the foreground of his experience. His conference participation evidenced his desire to prove himself to peers, some of whom had been critical of his appointment in the first place, and to himself. He was suicidal in his drive to succeed at the Institution and spent long hours in his office.

Most weeknight evenings found him in his office, lights blazing, the door sometimes closed in isolation or barely ajar in token acknowledgement of others doing the very same thing. Weekends were similarly spent so that, at the height of his driven state (essentially to become socialized to the scholarly output norms of the Institution), he spent upwards of 80 or more hours huddled in the office. This "was sheer madness and suicidal," he later admitted, but he didn't do so until some time after the fact. In the interim, he faced the glaring glow of the computer and the towering shelves of books in his office night after night. Face to face, word to word, in his office he struggled to publish in fear of perishing.<sup>1</sup> This was his choice. Yet, even as he engaged in these life-thwarting and cloistered activities he intuitively knew he was establishing patterns that would be very difficult to break. And they were.

The expectations of the University were never clearly asserted, at least in writing. To be "scholarly productive" in his field and to teach courses were the essential elements of his mandate. The service component of qualifying for tenure was an "add-on" and something that was deemed, at least at the Institution, to be only "mildly important." "We're a Category One Research Institution [according to the Carnegie Foundation classification], remember..., not some Podunk State

College like the one up the road." He was constantly reminded of the status of the place and its connection with peer institutions. "We need to be judged alongside our peers—Harvard, Stanford, and the like...."

Like the situation at many universities, the long or short road to tenure was not portrayed clearly, or even sign posted, and perhaps rightly so. This was the knowledge that was so frustratingly out of reach for Thomas. There was no guiding light like a lighthouse on the island point, or like a brilliant light at the end of a road tunnel in Boston, or like a flood light on a massive public building, or even like the simple sodium street lights on the pedestrian mall just beyond the window of his office. This lack of light, this lack of a defined path, is the mystery of tenure, especially at institutions like Thomas'. The darkness of silence or lack of confirmation only veils the mystery. The mystery cannot be seen. To uncover the mystery is the motivation that propels professors to exceed, Thomas included. The unveiling of the mystery is the motivation.

So, too, it is the mystery which fosters the publish or perish mentality. This is the mystery which promotes a mentality centered on excessive and questionable publishing. The mystery that induces insane behavior and inane activities and misguided priorities. This is the mystery that mysteriously never caused Thomas to question his behaviors, and the imminent contradictions in them—over the first couple of years at the Institution. Even so, his behaviors—and even the contradictions were difficult, near impossible, to nail down given that so much of professorial work is indeed indefinable itself.

Around about the beginning of his second year Thomas first realized something was up. His pants were, suddenly, far too tight. And it showed. And he felt it, the cloth cutting deep into his groin on sitting, or his belt as a tourniquet on bending, or his cuffs somehow alternately creeping up in the morning, on dressing, and then lowering, with his waistband, as the day progressed. His belly protruded. His cheeks puffed. As his clothes fitted ever-more tautly into and around his bulging body he began to notice a shortness of breath. But there were so many sumptuous receptions to attend and occasions to eat, and drink, and be sedentary that the act of becoming overweight and physically sluggish was hardly perceived in the day-to-day events in his life.

Over the Winter break he thought about losing weight. He tried some, but was unsuccessful. That holiday season, spent alone, he'd worked on completing a research report. The weather was bitterly cold, with outside temperatures in the minus 20s. He had all the excuses for not exercising. And he didn't.

By February he'd discovered he was 70 pounds overweight (it was no real surprise, given his inactivity) and was well into purchasing another new set of clothes several sizes larger than he'd worn over the span of his entire adult life. Soon after, the alarms sounded. Loudly.

Sitting in his office late one afternoon he became aware of strange pulses within his body. They were within his chest cavity, to be more correct. "It's a kind of palpitation," he first described to himself while sitting stupefied in his office, and

he thought about his aged, distant aunt who always told the world of her condition: "Oh, my! My 'palps,' they're coming again... support me m'dear, ...quickly now." "Oh god, not like her," he bemoaned, given that he'd never really had any sympathy for her public displays of a private condition. At any rate, the feeling persisted, not for a few minutes, but for hours on end. He put the feeling down to the stress that he found himself under—the weight of teaching, of writing, and of a host of mainly self-induced responsibilities—and postponed visiting a physician. Not a smart thing for a sedentary professor to do.

As he lived with this bodily unease he became more perceptive about the exact nature of the condition but, as he did so, it changed in its apparent form. He realized with alarm—a full-scale alarm, that is, with bells ringing and buzzers buzzing—that he had a serious case of arrhythmia. His heart literally stopped beating and, after what seemed like an eternity, started up again, pulsing a wobbly, uneven beat, surging forward in speed and retreating dangerously. Each time it occurred the feeling of this life-threatening event was completely disorienting, throwing him off balance in all but the literal sense.

An emergency visit to a physician and the University hospital confirmed the seriousness of his medical condition and he quickly determined to act positively to rectify his ill-health. Meanwhile, and silently so, his blood pressure had soared to heights quite unacceptable for a man his age. He was in his forty-second year.

The forces of Institutional socialization washed over Thomas as a stream of invisible air, moving in and around and between everything he did at the place. He breathed the air like everyone else. It was like breathing in the dirty air that occasionally swamped the building from the old ventilation system; he filled his lungs with the vortexing invisible molecules of compelling socialization. He became, in part, what he despised, a person without a holistic and balanced view of the world of teaching, researching, and living.

That he didn't see the gradual ways in which he was conforming was as much a result of socialization's subtle nature, given that he loudly advocated resistance to status quo behaviors and practices, as anything else more easily discernible. His opposition to conforming practices and processes were only about those things he identified, such as: the sometimes abusive and hierarchical relationships evidenced between graduate students, researching assistants and their publishing professors; questionable pedagogy associated with particular courses or programs; the oppressive and time squandering processes for gaining ethical reviews of research projects; the tyranny exerted by senior, full professors over more junior faculty members and staff; the promotion of inequality in opportunities and workloads among faculty members; the patriarchal and gendered and other outdated modes of working with graduate students who were more in tune with issues of social justice than most of the professors; the often poor correlation between publicly expressed and verbally espoused philosophies of graduate programs and the actual practices carried out by professors and other instructors; the problematic nature of trying to

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run graduate programs of study based on the work of teaching assistants and contracted faculty; the conflicts arising between scholars with misunderstandings of the researching paradigm of the other and the suppression of grant proposals that were grounded in other than statistical analyses of data; and many more.

While Thomas did not portray himself as some arrogant upholder of virtue or ideology beyond the grasp of his peers, he was prepared to stand and be counted for what he believed. The realization of his weight problem as requiring both a personal and a profession solution was the first part to the recovering of his health; to acknowledge the extent of his own subversion of his fundamental beliefs and of his socialization to the ways of the School of Environmental Studies and Education and the greater Institution beyond was second.

...He sought medical help. He monitored his eating habits and food intake. He exercised regularly, choosing to relocate his place of residence so that he could walk to the office everyday. He refrained from drinking alcohol (especially since it seemed to have a role in his hypertension), and he actively monitored his weight.... As the pounds melted away like butter on a summer's day so too did the symptoms of arrhythmia. Even the hypertension was lowered. Within two or so months his established new habits, engrained into his daily life, had helped him regain control over his health, and had freed him of the heart beat irregularities. Back at his normal adult weight, and feeling younger and more sprightly, he took control of some of the related (socialization) matters that he'd discovered to be quite bothersome.

His subtle conformity to some of the ways of fellow institutional community members was not unlike the power of conformity in a far away indigenous culture he'd once experienced. Much later he was able to see the direct comparisons. For the moment he saw the question of his socialization as being completely in his own power to resolve. Yet, even so, he denied for years to come the fact that there wasn't a good fit between himself and the Institution. He did this despite there being strong elements of discomfort with being there—such was the power of conformity and socialization.

Essentially he'd conformed to the seductive power of the institution.... Essentially he talked himself into there being a good fit because of the wide array of resources that it afforded his professional work. Yet, to admit such a position is to not undermine the ways in which he authentically orchestrated his work to meet his personal and professional goals and to honor his particular philosophies about teaching and learning and researching.

Once he'd recognized elements of experience that were contradictory to his fundamental beliefs, once he'd "learned to be true to himself," Thomas entered into the culture without being overwhelmed by it....

### **Editors' Note**

This excerpt is taken from Chapter 8, "Conforming Culture," of the manuscript so far unnamed but with the working subtitle "A Question of Academics and Environmental Biography."

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**Note**

1. Thomas later wrote in response: "It wasn't so much a fear of perishing in the academy that drove me. (It was more than simply not publishing or not publishing enough). The adage, 'Publish or perish,' didn't have that much currency in my life. My driven state was more about establishing myself in a sense, particularly within my immediate community, as well as within the field. This was a goal—although I never freely expressed it at the time—that, I think, came from my status as an outsider. It was also about proving to myself that I belonged in the academy. After all, what was a small down country boy (living in an upbeat college city and associated with a big time university) to think? So, okay..., it might have been a class issue as well.