

SHEILA B—A Promotion and Tenure Story

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Sheila B is a colleague who recently applied for promotion to the rank of full professor. An integrated scholar, Sheila has demonstrated excellence in teaching, research and service, and has impressive evaluation of teaching scores, numerous publications, millions of dollars in grants, and a visible, reputational presence in her disciplinary and lifeworld community. At the time of her application, she was Chair of a large department in a discipline with high expectations of placements, supervision, liaison and consultation. This latter point is important because when Sheila was notified by the University Promotion and Tenure Committee that her application was problematic. Her first impulse was to resign as Chair because she clearly was in no position to lead and mentor others.

Every year faculty members like Sheila receive letters which, if not functionally, at least effectively strip them of their dignity and unsettle their identities. As an advisor and advocate for Promotion and Tenure applications, hearings and appeals, I have witnessed this first hand and have begun to use narrative strategies in both the preparation of dossiers and the follow up hearings related to “clarifying” these dossiers.

Back to Sheila. Once we had walked through the hurt and betrayal, we began to write a different story. We are both Newfoundlanders, landlocked and yearning for something clean and definite. We decide to tell a story about boats; how when you build a boat you need a whole lot of people to do well what they do best and trust in that commitment from each other. The painters can't tell that welding has happened unless the errors are bumpy and ugly; the welders can't tell that carpentry has happened unless things start falling apart under heat and pressure; the crew neither need nor want a lot of back story... they have faith that the boat will float, ultimately, on its own bottom.

Sheila and I tell the story and we realize that it's not about Chemistry or Economics or Music. It's about leaning into my task and trusting others to lean into theirs—undistracted by stealth and surveillance; undaunted by error or forgiveness.

Storying a dossier—a poetic of craft and guile. Onward through the fog.

Postscript—My narrative strategies are infirmed by the prescient analysis of the modern political myth by Ernst Cassirer, (1946). Cassirer proposes a "formula" of sorts, for a totalitarian state which has eerie cogency for contemporary academic culture(s). If time permits, I will provide the "formula" and how I subvert it.