

Save the
World

On Your
Own Time

Stanley Fish

Save the World on Your Own Time

This page intentionally left blank

Save the World
ON YOUR OWN TIME



Stanley Fish

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2008

OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press, Inc., publishes works that further
Oxford University's objective of excellence
in research, scholarship, and education.

Oxford New York
Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in
Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore
South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

Copyright © 2008 by Stanley Fish

Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

www.oup.com

Oxford is a registered trademark of Oxford University Press

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise,
without the prior permission of Oxford University Press.

Previous versions of certain portions of this book appeared in
different form in *Change*, *Harper's Magazine*, the *Chicago Tribune*,
the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and the *New York Times*.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Fish, Stanley Eugene.

Save the world on your own time / Stanley Fish.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-19-536902-1

1. College teachers—United States—Political activity.
2. Education, Higher—Aims and objectives—United States.
3. Education, Higher—Political aspects—United States. I. Title.

LB2331.72.F57 2008

378.1'2—dc22 2008008146

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

*To the memory of my mother,
Ida Fish*

This page intentionally left blank

Acknowledgments

My greatest debt is to Cybele Tom of Oxford University Press, who received a medley of disparate essays—some too long, some too short, all too repetitive—and in a remarkably short time transformed an unformed mass into something that actually had a shape. The work of revising and refining that shape took a bit more time, but it would not have been possible were it not for Cybele's initial creative act. I am grateful to my agent Melissa Flashman for finding Cybele and for believing in a project that others sometimes doubted. Without the help of Mary Olszewska, who organized my life and kept track of all its loose ends, none of this would have been put together in the first place. These three did the work so that I could get the credit. Thank you.

This page intentionally left blank

Contents

Introduction 3

CHAPTER 1

The Task of Higher Education 10

CHAPTER 2

Do Your Job 18

CHAPTER 3

Administrative Interlude 60

CHAPTER 4

Don't Try to Do Someone Else's Job 66

CHAPTER 5

Don't Let Anyone Else Do Your Job 98

CHAPTER 6

Higher Education under Attack 153

CHAPTER 7

A Conclusion and Two Voices from the
Other Side 168

Selected Bibliography 179

Index 183

This page intentionally left blank

Save the World on Your Own Time

This page intentionally left blank

Introduction

Not long ago, there was a time when I was responsible for a college with close to 30 departments and units, a budget of between 50 and 55 million dollars, 400 tenure-track faculty members, 700 staff, 10,000 undergraduate students, 2,000 graduate students, and 17 buildings. On any given day, I had to deal with disciplinary proceedings, tenure and promotion cases, faculty searches, chair searches, enrollment problems, fundraising, community outreach, alumni relations, public relations, curriculum reform, counteroffers, technology failures, space allocation, information systems, chair meetings, advisory committee meetings, deans council meetings, meetings with the provost, student complaints, faculty complaints, parent complaints, and taxpayer complaints. Office hours were 8:30 a.m. to whenever and often extended into the evenings and weekends. Vacations were few and far between. The pressure never relaxed.

When I left the job after slightly more than five years, I felt that I had all the time (well, not quite all) in the world at my

disposal, and for a while, spent it by trying to improve everyone I met, whether or not those I ministered to welcomed my efforts.

I took my opportunities wherever I found them. While I still lived in Chicago, but after I stepped down as dean, the building next door to mine was bought by a developer. For a long time, no development occurred, and the lawn and bushes were allowed to grow wild. The developer, however, had made the mistake of putting his telephone number on an overlarge sign, and as a reward he received a series of dyspeptic phone calls from me accusing him of being a bad neighbor, an irresponsible landlord, and an all-around no-goodnik.

During the same period, I would go into a store or stand in a ticket line and was often greeted by someone who asked, "And how are you today, young man?" That is my least-favorite salutation, and I quickly delivered a lecture and, I trust, a bit of improvement: "When you call someone who is obviously not young 'young man,' what you are doing is calling attention to his age and making him feel even older than he is; don't do it again!"

I delivered an even longer lecture to the blameless fast-food workers who routinely handed me a bagel along with a small container of cream cheese and a plastic knife that couldn't cut butter. I said, "Look, if I wanted to put my own bagel together, I would have bought the ingredients and taken them home; when I go to a restaurant I expect service; I don't expect to be asked to do your job; and besides there's not enough cream cheese here to cover the bagel's surface; what's the matter with you guys?"

But those were just my weekend activities. Although I was no longer a dean, I couldn't shake the habit of being at the office every day, all day. Because I had nothing particular to do, I roamed the halls looking for things that were wrong, and I found them.

Stray pieces of furniture you couldn't give away sat (or sprawled) in front of an office door. I stuck my head in and informed the occupant (why did he or she listen to me?) that the offending items must be removed by the end of the day.

Continuing down the halls, I found the panels separating two elevators festooned with announcements of lectures that took place two years ago. I proceeded to rip the leaflets down. Halfway through I decided that no one should be posting anything there anyway; so I removed every announcement, no matter how current, and, for good measure, I tore away the surface the announcements adhered to and threw all the thumbtacks and push-pins into the trash.

I noticed that someone had left a small carton of books, intended no doubt for impecunious graduate students who might have made good use of them. I didn't care; into the trash they went, too.

Next, I went into the new cafe in the main administration building and saw that the rug on the floor was full of crumbs and looked as if it hadn't been vacuumed in days. No one knew whose job it was, and I took it as my job to find out. I returned to my office and made phone calls until I found someone who answered her phone, although in a short time she wished she hadn't.

But then it was time to go to class (I was still teaching), where, in an enclosed space, my students received the full force of my reforming zeal. I told them that I hadn't the slightest interest in whatever opinions they might have and didn't want to hear any. I told them that while they may have been taught that the purpose of writing is to express oneself, the selves they had were not worth expressing, and that it would be good if they actually learned something. I told them that on the basis of their performance so far they should sue their previous teachers for malpractice. I told

them that anyone who says “I know it, but I can’t explain it” would flunk the course.

After an hour and a half they escaped, except for one of them, who came to my office for further instruction. Although it was the end of the third week, she was still not quite sure about the structure of the basic English sentence. (This, of course, was a reflection on me, not her.) I took her through the subject and predicate slots and she seemed to understand who or what an actor is and the relationship of the actor to the action performed, but she couldn’t quite get the concept of the object of the action.

We were working with a sentence she had composed, “I threw the book into the garbage.” I asked her, “In that sentence what is the relationship between ‘threw’ and ‘book?’” She didn’t know. I tried again: “What is the impact on the object of the action?” She didn’t understand the question.

I decided that an illustration might do the trick; so I picked up a book on my desk and threw it. It hit a shelf of books a few feet away. She said nothing for a few seconds and then asked in a voice calmer than mine would have been, “Can I drop this course?” “Yes,” I answered (hoping to escape prosecution), and she left—the one person in the entire week who managed to get away.



What is this all about? I wondered. What’s driving me to do these things? I got part of the answer by looking up obsessive-compulsive disorder on the Internet and running down the list of symptoms. (Checking to see whether you have OCD is a form of OCD.) I found the following matches: fear of dirt; a need to have things just so; preoccupation with rules and schedules; rigidity; inflexibility; concern with order and symmetry; and saving containers when they are no longer needed. A perfect score.

And then it occurred to me that those are the very characteristics that make a dean effective: an obsessive need “to have things just so,” a need to have things that are not right, put right.

What could I do aside from harassing perfectly innocent people who would have had every right to have me committed? Write this book was the answer. Although I was no longer in charge of a liberal arts college, I could satisfy my need to put the world in order by telling anyone who would listen how it should be done.

The first job, I decided, was to define the task. No serious reflection about an activity can get off the ground until the activity is characterized in a way that distinguishes it from all other activities. It is only when you know what the job is that you can know if you are really doing it, rather than doing some other job you were neither trained nor paid for.

It is when academics either don't know or have forgotten exactly what it is they are supposed to do that trouble begins, and criticisms of the academic enterprise multiply. These days, everyone, whether speaking from the left or the right, says the same thing—colleges and universities are in a sorry state, and ideology is the problem. One group finds ideology in the efforts of activists like David Horowitz, who wishes to monitor and alter the political make-up of the faculty, especially in the humanities and social sciences; while the other group finds ideology in the inability or unwillingness (these are two different arguments) of liberal faculty members to refrain from imposing their political views on students.

There's a lot of huffing and puffing on either side, and while I'm not writing to say, “a plague on both your houses,” I am writing with the intention of carefully parsing the terms central to the controversy. Not because I hope to solve problems, but because I hope to dis-solve them, to suggest

that the problems pretty much go away when you understand and act on a simple imperative—do your job—which comes along with two corollary imperatives—don't do somebody else's job and don't let someone else do your job.

So let us begin with a simple question. What exactly is the job of higher education and what is it that those who teach in colleges and universities are trained and paid to do? The two parts of the question have an obvious logical relationship: before you can speak sensibly about the scope and limits of a task, you have to know exactly what it is, what distinguishes it from other tasks. I put it that way because it is part of my argument that the coherence of tasks depends on their being distinctive. Think of it in consumer terms; you need something to be done, and you look in a phone book or search the Internet until you come upon a description of services that matches your need. What you want is a specialist, someone with the right training and credentials, and you might be suspicious if someone told you that he or she could do just about anything. To be sure, there are jacks of all trades, people who claim that they can do just about anything, and while that claim may prove out occasionally, more often than not you will feel most comfortable when you find a person or a company with a skill set that is reassuringly narrow: “this is what we do; we don't do those other things; but if this particular thing is what you want done, we're the people to turn to.”

This narrow sense of vocation is shunned by many teaching in the academy today, and it was not popular in the 1960s when I was a young faculty member at the University of California at Berkeley. In the wake of the Free Speech Movement a faculty union had been formed and I had declined to join it. Some members of the steering committee asked me why, and I asked them to tell me about the union's agenda. They answered that the union would

(1) work to change America's foreign policy by fighting militarism, (2) demand that automobiles be banned from the campus and that parking structures be torn down, and (3) speak out strongly in favor of student rights. In response I said (1) that if I were interested in influencing government policy I would vote for certain candidates and contribute to their campaigns, (2) that I loved automobiles and wanted even more places to park mine, and (3) that I didn't see the point of paying dues to an organization dedicated to the interests of a group of which I was not a member. How about improvements in faculty salaries, better funding for the library, and a reduction in teaching load?

You, sir, I was admonished, do not belong in a university.

No, they didn't know what a university is and a lot of people still don't.