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The Prairie Home Companion Honors Program

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PAUL STRONG

The Prairie Home Companion Honors Program

PAUL STRONG

ALFRED UNIVERSITY

“Ah, hear that old piano, from down the avenue.” Every Saturday at 6:00pm, at home in Alfred or on the coast of Maine or in Chapel Hill, I can count on hearing those words, “coming to you live from the Fitzgerald Theatre.” It’s time to settle in for another edition of *A Prairie Home Companion*. The show’s familiarity is comforting. I know just what to expect: The Adventures of Guy Noir (Private Eye), Dusty and Lefty, The Guys’ All-Star Shoe Band, faux ads for Powdermilk Biscuits and The Duct Tape Council, lots of music and singing, and, finally, The News From Lake Wobegon. In a way that would warm Aristotle’s heart, the show has a beginning, middle, and end. For many years it concluded with credits for its writers and producers: Oliver Closoff, Hedda Lettuce, Marian Haste, Mahatma Koat, Ivana Huginkis, Natalie Dressed, Warren Peace, and Anna Conda, among others. In short, Garrison Keillor has created a little world, and much of its pleasure comes from anticipating a favorite part. For me that means hearing from the Ketchup Advisory Council.

Some years ago I realized I was doing something like that with the Alfred University Honors Program, at first unconsciously, but then on purpose. Like *A Prairie Home Companion*, our program has its predictable rhythm, events students look forward to. The year begins with “Death by Chocolate” where freshmen meet the upperclassmen and get a head start on gaining their freshman fifteen. There’s a make-your-own-cookie party at Christmas, then dinner for seniors at the president’s house, and finally a year-end banquet, featuring student and faculty entertainment and another cascade of chocolate desserts. Like *A Prairie Home Companion*’s world, which trades heavily on parody of radio culture with its mock ads and retro sound effects, Alfred’s “honors culture” works in part by gently making fun of some of the more pretentious aspects of university life.

SIGGY, THE SEAL OF THE HONORS PROGRAM

The existence of Siggie (or maybe Siggie), the Seal of our honors program, was certainly not part of any plan. He (or perhaps she) entered the

picture twenty years ago as I was looking for an image to grace the front of our brochure. When I was an undergraduate at Colby, the images our college designer produced for posters advertising campus events were so stunning that my friends and I would appropriate them to decorate our rooms. When it came time to choose an image to represent the Alfred Honors Program, I wanted something so classy that, I hoped, a high school student might put it up over his desk, and, just maybe, remember which honors program it came from. My first idea was to use Dürer's engraving of St. Jerome in His Study, which struck me as both scholarly and beautiful, but that didn't work out. Another Dürer image caught my eye: a pen and ink drawing, "Head of a Walrus," a rather fierce looking walrus at that. When printed on 8½" by 11" heavy stock it was striking, precisely what I had hoped for. I would have put it up on *my* wall if it had come my way in the mail, and, besides, it had the frisson of an inside joke: a paid consultant and a design faculty member in our art school had each proposed a logo for the university—a rather abstract pine tree and a "crown of King Alfred"—and both were universally derided. Because I wasn't directly involved, this seemed quite amusing. My university didn't have a logo, but the honors program had a seal (a walrus). As a trustee confided somewhat wistfully, unlike the university, the honors program was "branded." It was a hoot.

We'd had a long tradition of contests in our honors newsletter, *Sublunary Life*: why chocolate is better than sex (good chocolate is easy to find; you don't have to feel guilty for imagining your Eskimo Pie is a Dove Bar) and excuses for late papers (my girlfriend thought it was just a draft, so she scalloped the edges and used it for cupcake liners; my paper, "A Critique of the Mullahs," was all done, but I heard that you sometimes read papers aloud in class the day they're due, so I decided to wait for a few days). Why not a contest to name our seal? Two names that seemed worthy were "Claude" and "Finnbar," but the winning submission came from an honors mom, Caroline Mossip, who suggested either Celia or Siggie (short for the Latin *sigillum* or "seal"; AU stationery features *Sigillum Universitatis Alfrediensis*). This "anti-*sigillum*" struck me as appropriately silly, a wonderful play on one of the more pompous academic traditions, and so Siggie was born.

THE GREAT SIGGY VS. SIGGIE DEBATE

Siggie became an integral part of our program. He (or she) appeared on a mouse pad we gave freshmen. Students living in the Honors House embraced him (or her), and stuffed seals began to appear all over the place, even crowning a Christmas tree one year. A faculty member's mother painted a rock to look like a seal. An engineer used a jigsaw to create a lovely filigreed Siggie. An art student carved a two-foot-round version of Siggie to

grace the front of the Honors House. All was well until that same art student created a series of designs for a pewter medallion seniors could wear at graduation. Her sketches had names like “Siggy the Fat” and “Siggy the Proud.” This, of course, led to another contest: first, was our walrus Siggie or Siggy? and, second, was our seal/walrus male or female? Everyone had an opinion; one Siggie defender thought Siggy was just an ugly spelling, a “perversion of the adjectives slimy, sloppy, and soggy [which] is not particularly conducive to comfort, nor is it very sophisticated, an important quality to have in an Honors Walrus.” His view was countered by Gabrielle Gaustad who wrote, “I would hate to think about my name being shortened to Gabbie. Yuck. Gabby is so much better. I hate vowels. They make things so much more formal (thus having to pay for them on Wheel of Fortune—not only are consonants free—but you get paid for them!) and nicknames aren’t formal or traditional, just like our Honors Program. Siggy all the way.” And so Siggy it is, at least in my imagination.

Please see the Appendix for images of our Seal.

THE HONORS RIDDLES AND “OUR MOTTO”

Honors also has its own riddles (how do you get down off a horse? why do cows wear bells?). They’re our version of a secret handshake, a way of initiating freshmen into our program. At the honors banquet, when I ask these questions, students seem to get pleasure from being first to respond “you don’t; you get down off a goose” and “because their horns don’t work.” When I began to realize the power of these traditions, I decided a motto would serve us well. After all, Harvard has *Veritas*, Alfred has *Fiat Lux*, and even Faber College in *Animal House* has *Knowledge is Good*. We needed one, too. I settled on *Time Flies Like an Arrow; Fruit Flies Like a Banana*. Some years later we had a contest to replace “our motto.” One student proffered *Sigillum Honoreaum: Tempus Fugit Qu Projectium, Fruitius Fugut Qu Bananaeum*. A few days after I interviewed a high school senior, she emailed *moths like a light and ticks like a clock*. (I let her in). Someone else suggested *bananas lack appeal*. The rest is history, that is, we stayed with what we had. And what a battle I had with *Peterson’s Guide to Honors Programs!* They didn’t want any part of our motto, but after more than a little back and forth they finally agreed to print it.

THE POOHBAH

Although I always put “Dr. Strong” on my syllabus and expected students to address me that way, I didn’t want that level of formality for honors, especially for honors email. But I certainly wasn’t about to become “Paul,” either. I finally settled on “The Poohbah,” and that is how I sign most of my

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on-campus correspondence. Sometimes I allow myself to be addressed as “grand high exalted mystic ruler” (in *The Honeymooners* that’s Ralph Kramden’s title as president of the Order of Raccoons). Students like to play along; one of them treated me with the respect I know I deserve when she wrote, “Greetings, Poohbah. [If you do such and such] I, your humble advisee and Honors chickie would be eternally indebted to you (I am already your devoted servant, but everyone could use a little more abject devotion every now and again). Many thanks, oh splendiferous one, oh font of wisdom. I remain, Your Extravagantly Devoted Servant.” Needless to say, she got what she wanted. Another wrote: “Heh, heh, heh. Grand High Walla Walla Oompah Zing-Zing Poo Bag. The plan is working. First we make them change their names. Then, we befuddle them. Then we tell Hugh and he brings the message to Big Moe. Big Moe is on the Wharf! The Blue Pansy snorts at 4:00 a.m. Curtains don’t have shoes. Beware the Four Orange Pencils.” Sometimes I sign off as Serene Highness, Sovereign Lord of Bipeds, His Beatitude, Grand Fuzzy Wuzzy, The Big Kahuna, The Bashaw of Tripoli or Hizzoner. But never Poo Bag.

SUBLUNARY LIFE

Sublunary Life, our newsletter, is the honors version of The News From Lake Wobegon, the glue that holds things together. For starters, it’s how high schoolers are initiated into our lighthearted culture; Admissions mails it to juniors and seniors long before they get application materials. Every year I include excerpts of the previous year’s essays in *Sub Life*, and, as the snippets below suggest, many kids get it, that is, recognize that honors on our campus isn’t stuffy or elitist and that what’s *not* wanted is an application essay written by a Jason Compson clone listing the clubs he belongs to and the awards he’s won:

I was relieved to find that where I see myself in five years doesn’t appear to concern you. Five years from now I’ll let everyone know, but right now it doesn’t interest me much. Five years ago I never saw myself headed to Alfred. In fact, five years ago would have been right in the middle of my missionary phase. Ethiopia is a far cry from western New York.

Here I am, on the edge of my childhood, writing an application for the Honors Program at Alfred University, desperately trying to avoid creating a swollen, narcissistic personals ad. Compressed, such an essay might read like this: **SWM w great personality seeks sexy fun-loving Honors Program for long nights in the Library.**

PAUL STRONG

Quite frankly I'm worried. I've been reading over the issue of *Sublunary Life* with some of last year's essays. I'm not even in the Honors Program yet (or I wouldn't be writing this), but I already have one suggestion to make: Don't send out any more former essays! We essay-writers-to-be have enough trouble making sense without having some epitome of essay perfection with which to compare our work.

Once they hit campus, our honors kids know irreverence is the norm, and it shows up in the most unexpected places. There was the senior thesis description a student slipped past his advisor: "The Effects of Group III Oxides on Glass-Ceramic Processing of BSCCO Superconductors, in a White Wine Sauce." There was a seminar evaluation responding to the question "Generally speaking, did the course fit your notion of what an Honors seminar should be?" that read, "I try not to have notions of what things should be like, because preconceptions lead to disappointment and prejudice." When they graduate and write updates to *Sub Life*, the results are occasionally something like this (I hope the writer wasn't thinking of Siggy):

After graduating I pursued my lifelong dream of clubbing baby harpseals in the Yukon. Of course, I had to file for moral bankruptcy first, but I had all the applications for that sent in while still at Alfred. There's nothing like being out in the vast wilderness of the north and burning the few hours of daylight in picking up defenseless sea mammals and breaking their skulls with a blunt instrument (of course you get the same urge while teaching). Well, just dropping a little note for the Sublunatic Life.

Alfred isn't on the edge of the prairie or out in the vast wilderness of the Yukon, but our tiny village in the Southern Tier of western New York might as well be. It's snowy here much of the year, and the nearest city, Rochester, is more than an hour away, so we make our own fun. In this small, informal environment, a playful honors culture seems just the thing.

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APPENDIX

Images of Siggie the Seal



1 straight ahead siggy



2 ART NUOVO SIGGY (sleep siggy)



3 DURER'S siggy



4 siggy swimming



5 SIGGY THE PROUD SCHOLAR



6 SIGGY'S PORTRAIT



7 SITTING SIGGY



8 SIGGY The fat

(Seal Maker: Felix Eddy)