

Barbara Kay: Learn from the best while you can

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Last week — for another publication — I recounted the story of Tomas Hudlicky, a Brock University professor of organic chemistry who has endured an in-house “swarming” by an ad hoc confederacy of administration, graduate students and journal publishers for allegedly incorrect views he expressed in a peer-reviewed article.

Hudlicky was blindsided by the multiple attacks, which included an open letter of denunciation by Brock’s outgoing provost, who alluded to “highly objectionable statements” Hudlicky had made. The relevant one for this column is Hudlicky’s discussion of skills transfer in his field through the traditional relationship between supervisor and graduate student, which in the provost’s opinion, “connote(s) disrespect and subservience (and) could be alarming to students and others who have the reasonable expectation of respectful and supportive mentorship.”

What we know about Kanye West's platform

Hudlicky’s “alarming” statement was that there must be “an unconditional submission of the apprentice to his/her master.” He observed that many students today resist assigned work they consider too demanding, and the university “protects them from any undue hardships that may be demanded by the ‘masters.’ ” It was repeated use of the highly politicized word “masters” — for some time now a shibboleth for racism and white privilege amongst progressives — that triggered the alarm. (A friend informs me his company no longer allows the phrase “master files” for exactly that reason.)

Hudlicky should not be blamed for using the word “master” in one of its correct, neutral applications, having nothing whatsoever to do with race relations. Far from “objectionable,” Hudlicky raises a rational and pertinent question about knowledge transference in his own discipline that can be applied to a myriad other professions, crafts and activities. Hudlicky’s allusion to “masters and apprentices” was a nod to Hungarian-British polymath Michael Polanyi’s theory of tacit knowledge. “We can know more than we can tell,” Polanyi wrote. He meant that optimal knowledge transference involves more than formal instruction. Personal interaction and trust is necessary between passionate masters of knowledge and those who wish to acquire it. It’s mentorship, but of a deeply immersive nature.

Anyone who has read memoirs of the world’s great chefs easily understands Polanyi’s insight. The world of haute cuisine happens to be a particularly brutal version of the master-apprentice paradigm, with more than a touch of apparent sadism involved in forcing the apprentice to learn almost entirely tacitly: through punitive trial and error, and slavish imitation over long stretches of time.

Art, acting, surgery, sports, chess. If you want to achieve something beyond competence in these domains, you must accept subordination to a master (obviously, that master can be a woman). For most of human history in fact, apprenticeship to a master was the only way craftsmanship and scientific knowledge was passed down, and the only way excellence could be preserved.

But the prevailing obsession with equity and inclusion has created mistrust of all power structures, especially when dominated by white males, even when the structure, such as that of master-apprentice, has a demonstrably positive effect on performance excellence. Some students, consumed by social justice in their formative undergraduate years, continue to conduct themselves as equity missionaries in their graduate studies and working lives, to the point of transgressing normative institutional boundaries.

Instead of regarding superiors in their institution with respect and deference, we see young staffers at publishing houses moralizing to their bosses, and instructing them on who they can and cannot publish. We see young staffers at newspapers openly denouncing their bosses for editorial decisions they find offensive, and even agitating — often

successfully as in the recent case of the New York Times, for publishing an op-ed by a Republican senator they disliked — for their removal.

How swiftly this role reversal has come about. When my son, Jonathan Kay, was hired for the National Post's first editorial board in 1998, he and the board's other young turks, who were bright but fairly new to the craft of editorial writing, were treated to the gift of apprenticeship from John O'Sullivan — master journalist, former speechwriter for Margaret Thatcher, friend and colleague of owner Conrad Black — who whipped them into shape before production began, and stayed on to coach them for several more months. It was an intense and demanding experience, but the result was a higher level of performance in editorial writing than mere journalism courses could confer.

Far from an exercise in “disrespect and subservience,” it proved an express lane to Jon's own mastery of his craft. I envy him that experience. I would have liked nothing more than a period of “subservience” to a master journalist when I was new to columnizing. In journalism, as in organic chemistry, you can choose to be a short-order cook or a chef. But the route to mastery of haute cuisine always begins with humility.

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