

A day in the life of Professor Hmnnn

OR

Why the concatenation of circumstances forces us to consider at length the price of furnaces and washing machines

by JOHN ROBSON

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It has recently become apparent that students don't know very much about their professors. To help dispel the mystery, we offer the following factual account of how one professor spends his time.

Professor Hmnnn lectures in one of the Federated Colleges in the University of Toronto. He holds a BA from a maritime university, an MA from a western university and a PhD from an ivy-league university. He is 42 years old, has a wife and five children, lives in the suburbs and is distinguished by a pleasantly vague and disconcerted look in the winters and a pleasantly disconcerted and vague look in the summers. He loves his work, and labours mightily at it.

Here is his story.

5:43-6:30 a.m. Baby cries.

6:30-7:15. Wife cries.

7:16. Doorbell rings and professor rushes down to answer it: garbage collector wants to know if he is supposed to pick up the rubbish that's strewn over the front lawn as a result of the local dogs' long night's work. Professor cheerfully picks it up, pats three dogs on the head, and offers the garbage man a small bribe if he doesn't report him to the authorities.

7:27. Enters house, calls "Good morning" to wife, who begins to cry again.

7:28-45. Blasts, shakes and roars a little haste into his three school-age children, while attends to the pre-schoolers.

7:45-8:30. Chaos again, during which certain ablutions, evacuations, and feedings occur. Professor takes a major part in these operations, cultivating his tranquillity on a little oatmeal.

8:30-35. Keeps up with current events by a careful reading of the morning paper.

8:35-9:20. Takes twenty-minute drive down the expressway to the city. During the trip thinks happy thoughts about metro planners.

9:20-30. Walks from car to office, passing through small groups of students who are waiting for other professors who have twenty-five minute drives; the students quietly applaud the great man who, in concentrating on higher things, has put on his wife's pant suit.

9:30-31. Consults with three students who are camped outside his door, where they've been waiting for four days to see him. Advises them to come back later.

9:31-50. Goes through his mail. The first six envelopes contain publishers' brochures (two of them elegant publishers' brochures), suggesting, among other things, that there's just time for him to adopt as a text Guggle and Wink, Advanced Composition and Decomposition for Freshmen (it won't be published until 1970, but there's a special pre-publication price). Glancing at the first two, he throws the rest without opening them into the waste-paper basket, feeling guilty the while because Guggle is an old friend of his, who has spent six years, including a Sabbatical leave, stealing excerpts from other texts to make up this one.

9:35-36. Picks up envelopes from the floor and puts them safely in the waste-paper basket which has again been moved by the janitor from its logical position.

In a heap of unanswered mail he piles the other letters: two of them are requests for letters of recommendation which must be written within a day to meet deadlines, but since he can't remember who the students are, and since he has a press of other work, they won't be written for two weeks. One is a letter from the Canadian Intelligentsia (a little magazine) asking if the review he promised to write has gone astray — it hasn't gone anywhere. One is a report from his publisher, saying that his book on linguistic habits in Don Mills has sold 27 copies in the last year, and enclosing a royalty cheque for \$3.52. Finally there is a note from one of the students outside the door, asking him to please open it.

During this time, the phone has rung seven times: four wrong numbers, once the Chairman of the Committee on Committees reminding him that there will be a meeting at 2 pm, and once his wife reminding him to buy an electric mixer, a washing machine, a dozen 60 watt bulbs, and two candles in case the power fails. The final call is from one of the students outside the door who has brought along a portable phone, asking him to please open the door.

9:51-55 Looks for notes for lecture at 10:10. Can't find them, so phones wife in panic to see if they're at home. (What good it would do him to find that they are at home, he doesn't know.) Wife, holding baby in one hand and bag of loose garbage in the other, also panics: she locates a pile of academic-looking papers, puts them in the high chair, baby in the garbage can, and sorts through the garbage looking for the notes. Meanwhile, back at the office, the notes have appeared from the place where they were last put two years ago. (Last year, he thinks, somebody else gave the course.) He shouts into the phone: "It's all right, dear!" just as his wife puts it to her ear (the one that isn't full of pabulum from baby's exertions), deafened and garbaged, she says she can't seem to put her hands on anything relevant. Finally he gets the happy message through, and hangs up just as she tells him not to forget to buy a new furnace.

9:56-10:01 Carefully, slowly, perceptively, brilliantly, he goes through the lecture notes, deleting an outmoded comment here, adding a new fact there. Some points seem obscure, but he knows that all will be clear once he begins to talk

