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ELLIS BROKE GOLDEN RULE OF TEACHING

By David J. Garrow

Pulitzer Prize-winning Mount Holyoke college history professor Joseph J. Ellis's confession that he has larded his classes about the Vietnam war with fraudulent falsehoods about his own utterly spurious military service there ought to preclude Ellis from ever again taking the podium in a college classroom.

If Ellis does not have the personal good judgment to remove himself from teaching, then the administration and trustees of Mount Holyoke owe it to their students to protect the honesty and integrity of the classroom.

Whatever sympathy we may feel for someone who has publicly self-destructed just two months after winning the highest possible professional honor must be counterbalanced and outweighed by a cold-eyed realization that knowingly false teaching is a professional and ethical offense of the highest order.

But Ellis's personal tragedy has been sadly and inexplicably compounded by the reactions that Mount Holyoke's president, Joanne V. Creighton, and some of Ellis's faculty colleagues have voiced to this tragic event. Rather than express outrage at the professional misconduct which Ellis has repeatedly committed before scores and scores of Mount Holyoke students or acknowledge embarrassment at how Ellis in print has also falsely cited "my "military experience during the Vietnam War" as grounds for professional insight, they have instead criticized The Boston Globe for exposing Ellis's fraudulent professional behavior.

Creighton's claim that "We at the college do not know what public interest the Globe is trying to serve through a story of this nature" is in its own way an even greater academic disgrace than Ellis's fictions. Creighton's blissful assertion that Mount Holyoke is "proud" to have Ellis on its faculty represents a willfully blind refusal to acknowledge a horrible scandal that requires remedial action on the part of the college or its trustees, not denial.

But Creighton's inability to appreciate the seriousness of Ellis's offense apparently is shared by at least some Mount Holyoke faculty. "What's the story in this?" sociology professor Richard Moran asked when called by the Springfield Union-News. "If it had to do with his research, and with the Pulitzer and all, it's a real story."

Moran and Creighton appear to be saying that they have a dramatically lower standard for truth-in-teaching at Mount Holyoke College than what is imposed upon professors' published writings. But think about how intellectually offensive that diminution of the importance and obligations of teaching actually is.

When I tell students about comments that were made to me in years past by now-deceased historical figures such as Stokely Carmichael, Bayard Rustin, or Justice Harry Blackmun, it's

because I was there when Carmichael, Rustin, and Blackmun said what they did. And were I to ever start telling students about personal conversations I had with Martin Luther King Jr., J. Edgar Hoover, or Earl Warren (all of whom I encountered to exactly the same extent that Joe Ellis served in Vietnam), I or anyone else who did the same ought to be immediately barred from the classroom.

Declarations that knowingly dishonest teaching merits no critical comment or professional banishment falsely presuppose a nonexistent separation between the import of what a professor says in print and what one says in class. But that's wrong, as any serious academic can tell you.

"For me, the teaching side of my life and the writing side of my life are part of the same collective whole," a now-famous historian told the Globe last November. That's correct, and for at least once in his life, Joe Ellis was telling the truth. One's obligation to be honest and truthful in the classroom is in no way less constant and demanding than one's obligation to be honest and truthful with every sentence or footnote one puts into print.

No academic whom Mount Holyoke or any other college or university is "proud" to have on its faculty ought to disagree, and any college president who fails to understand the importance of the intellectual integrity of the classroom ought to find a different job as quickly as Joe Ellis is barred from ever again teaching history.

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