

LIVING THE FIG TREE PARABLE

She was, arguably, one of the most influential, oft-quoted and most sought-after speakers among the major admissions directors in the college and university world. Marilee Jones had risen to be the Director of Undergraduate Admissions at MIT, and through the years she had authored books, given hundreds of talks to anxious teenagers and their parents, and counseled countless families on the pitfalls and perils of the high-stakes, college admissions process. There was one problem, a problem she had kept cordoned off from the rest of her life – when she had initially applied for a job as an administrative assistant in the MIT admissions office, she had indicated on her application that she was a graduate of Union College and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, and she had graduated from neither institution.

Why did she do this? “It was probably a lot of different things,” she explained. “It was a top of the head decision, like, OK, I am going to try this on. I just could not be myself,” she continued, “I (thought) I wasn’t good enough to be myself.”

Ms. Jones did her job well, progressing up the various rungs of the ladder of success. Ultimately she found herself applying for the position she would get, Director of Admissions. However, by then, things had gone too far. “There was this monster behind the door, and I knew if I turned around and looked at (it), I would have hit the wall. I had the monster barricaded in, I thought, I’m not going to let you out.”

Besides, by now the stakes were too high to come clean. She would no doubt lose her job, ruin her career, as well as hurt her husband’s job at MIT. Then there was her daughter – how would the truth affect her?

Once she was MIT’s admissions director, and the requests for speaking engagements came pouring in, Ms. Jones began having arrhythmias and waking up at night with chest pains. As she put it, “the worry grew worse as my name became more familiar.”

She wrote a best-selling book about the college admissions process, entitled, *Less Stress, More Success*. In that book she spoke of the importance of being honest on a college application. She wrote: “Holding integrity is sometimes very hard to do because the temptation may be to cheat or to cut corners....” Those words might just have served as what Dante once called the screen to hide the truth. Then Jones continued, perhaps in a prophetic way, “But just remember that what goes around comes around, meaning that life has a funny way of giving back what you put out.”

Well, what went around came around for Marilee Jones. The day came, one observer put it, when, “Her past opened up and her future closed.” She announced her resignation in April of 2007, the same day she admitted that the degrees she claimed to possess were bogus. Someone had received information questioning her credentials and brought it to the attention of the MIT administration.

Yes, she was found out, but for Ms. Jones it was like a prayer had been answered. For years, she revealed, she had prayed that something would happen, that some way would open (as the Quakers are fond of saying) that would bring this unbearable compartmentalization of her life to a close.

On the same day she had announced her resignation, Marilee Jones left MIT for the last time, driving her car home. As she pulled into the driveway, she noticed that her heart had stopped racing and her chest pains were gone. “I was free,” she said.

Note: The information about and quotes included in the narrative on Marilee Jones come from the article, “Truth and Admissions: Former MIT Dean Seeks to Reclaim Her Name,” The Chronicle of Higher Education, January 8, 2010, pp. A17-20.

Of course, life did not magically stop being complicated at that point. Newspaper reporters descended upon her house, and finally she decided to escape to a friend's apartment in Manhattan, where she did not go outside for weeks. When she returned to Boston, however, she had hundreds of supportive letters awaiting her, and she reported a frequent experience: when people who knew her or knew about her encountered her, on the street or in the supermarket, they would volunteer their own secrets to her. Her truth had released other truths. She heard accounts of people who attempted suicide, cheated on their spouses, lied about credentials, or stole things. She discovered how human it was to compartmentalize our lives in such a way that a lot remains barricaded. Perhaps, in some way, the truth finally coming out was a redemptive experience not only for her but for many who read about her.

To be sure, Marilee Jones now faces two types of reaction from people: those who are willing to forgive, and those who remain suspicious of her, particularly as she attempts to reconstruct a career. It was a pretty insidious thing to do, when you think about it: in a world where the credential, the diploma, is sacred, Marilee Jones had committed the ultimate sin.

However, the whole event to her now feels like a blessing. "I finally became myself," she concludes.

For some time Jones has been retired and anonymous. Now, however, she has decided that she wants her name back. She is committed to returning to the speaking circuit, to use her considerable talents and experience – including that of learning from the personal experiences she has endured – to help young people and their parents with the college admissions process. She hired a public relations consultant, whose first advice was for her to own up to her past. She has also begun a consulting service in Manhattan for families who want help with the application process. The question now is whether or not she will be able to turn her own story into a lesson for others. But this re-entry process has not been easy. A recent speaking engagement at a high school had been scheduled, then at the last minute was cancelled. Perhaps the officials felt her appearance there would be simply too risky. Many, after all, might question the wisdom in giving her time before a group of young people and their parents, given her past. Ms. Jones seems ready; the question is whether or not others are ready, either to accept or to forget.

The situation of Ms. Jones is, I believe, a telling example of what I would call the fig tree dilemma, drawing upon the gospel for this morning. In the parable, a man is calling his fig tree to task: for three years it has not born fruit. That is more than enough time to give it whatever benefit of the doubt it may need, he thinks. It is time to draw the line. Cut it down. We are wasting the soil where a tree that can bear fruit could stand.

But the gardener sees the situation differently. "Let it alone for one more year, so that I can dig around it and put some manure on it. I say we give it one more chance; if there is no fruit by next year, then we cut it down."

The farmer seems to be saying, we define ourselves so often by the lines we draw, the times when we come to conclude, "This is what has to be done." We have to make the difficult decisions, expecting others to be accountable just as we are accountable. After all, God has expectations to which we must answer.

The gardener's response might be this: we define ourselves by the degree to which we give a second chance. Starting over, beginning anew, giving the benefit of the doubt, forgiving, best defines who we are. It is there that Jesus wishes us to be.

Note: The information about and quotes included in the narrative on Marilee Jones come from the article, "Truth and Admissions: Former MIT Dean Seeks to Reclaim Her Name," The Chronicle of Higher Education, January 8, 2010, pp. A17-20.

Many times heads of Episcopal schools are taken to tasks by parents over the decisions they make, and often times these heads hear from parents, “I thought this was a Christian school.” Often it has to do with the reluctance of a school to draw a line; at other points it has to do with the parental wish that the school be more forgiving, more compassionate and merciful, less quick to judge. A savvy school head gets it from both directions – sometimes because of the standards to which the school holds, sometimes because of giving the benefit of the doubt.

So, too, with all of us. I believe it is not an either/or proposition as we live out our Christian lives. There are times when we have to play the role of the farmer: we just have to draw the line, call it where it is, establish the boundaries, make it clear what the expectations are and hold others and ourselves to those. At other times, we need to think about the second chance, giving someone a break, and drawing the line must give way to our concern for the individual. It is not so simple. Perhaps if we spend some time tending to the situation, it will bear fruit.

Robert Coles once said that character is about where we draw that line; Elie Wiesel once said that the greatest gift God gave us was not that God created us, but that God gives us the opportunity to begin again. So which one is it?

I suspect that some of us would react to the situation of Marilee Jones by saying she should not be back in the college admissions business. What she did was clearly beyond the lines of decency. Others would say it is time to give her another year, like the fig tree. Still others might see the struggle of trying to figure it all out, reminding me of what Scott Peck once told an audience of parents that were asking him about how best to raise their children – to be liberal or conservative in that upbringing. He told them it matters less where you end up on the spectrum than the degree of struggle we put into making such decisions. The struggle, he reminded them, is the best sign of doing the serious work that needs to be done, of making a good decision be it strict or lenient.

Whether it be in our parish, in our home, in our workplace, or within our very selves, there can be competing voices – one for forgiveness and a second chance, one for the maintenance of standards. Perhaps it is more important in our relationship with God and others that we keep those seeming contrary voices alive.

It is instructive that the parable of the fig tree, as Luke recounts it, does not have a resolution. We do not hear if the farmer’s view wins out, or if the decision favors the gardener’s view. The dilemma remains, and rather than foreclose on one and live just with the other, we live with the tension that comes when two voices with substance and good faith are kept at the table. We may not solve everything so quickly, indeed we may have to live with some discomfort, but there is no doubt that we are doing something important: we are living the parable of the fig tree.