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Fish on Purpose

*Joshua Youngkin**

One day in the fall of 2008, I arrived at Professor Stanley Fish's seminar in a black jacket and tie, overdressed and underprepared to discuss Ernest Weinrib, Justice Scalia, and Jacques Derrida. When I later excused myself from the seminar table to interview for a law job (that's why I was dressed up), Fish stopped teaching and urged me, as I neared the door, to serve just one master. "What do you want," he asked, "money or enlightenment?" I puzzled a moment at the question before asking, "Can't I have both?" "No," Fish shot back, then staring at me with an unblinking stare. I smiled uncomfortably as I left the room.

Afterward, I wondered. Was that a joke? Why, I asked myself, did Fish set money at odds with enlightenment? Who, outside of Kung Fu movies, talks with a straight face about enlightenment? Was Fish saying I should leave my nets to become a fisher of men, to pursue some goal "higher" than gainful employment? What *am* I doing in law school anyway? I read up on Fish from his critics before I signed up for the class. I expected to encounter a lot of sophistry and postmodern handwringing, not this brazen punch to the gut.

Startled to curiosity, I set out to learn how Fish works. In his writings I discovered that Fish uses just a few types of prompt, like the one above, to produce surprise in the heart of the learner, and to then prod that heart toward just a few big ideas. Of those big ideas the biggest, to me, is purpose. The idea of purpose is not a big idea because it is novel. Rather, it is big because it is so basic that it is easy to overlook. Fish, I found, delights in drawing us back to overlooked basics, basics like the primacy of purpose.

In his *New York Times* column, at talks, and in books, he turns the world into a classroom, asking in the most engaging of ways what we are trying to do when we perform this activity or that. What, he'll ask, is our purpose in trying to educate young people? When we practice law? When we play baseball? What are the distinct purposes of teaching, of lawyering, and of baseball playing? And what distinct practices (content) follow from these distinct purposes (form)? The big ideas of Stanley Fish are at once provocative and basic:

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- Start with the main purpose and other inherent imperatives of the activity, whatever the activity, and plan its performance by working backwards. Content follows form.
- No activity, no discipline, can be truly grasped outside of its performance. Theory is out; practice is in.
- Refuse to allow what you do, and what your fellow practitioners do, to become a means to an outside, foreign end. Have some self-respect.
- Each human endeavor rests on the foundation of itself and is either self-justifying or, ultimately, unjustifiable.
- Interpretation *just is* the search for authorial intent. To look for anything else in a text is to do something other than interpretation.
- Do your job; don't do anyone else's job; and don't let anyone else do your job for you. That's what (true) academic freedom amounts to.

These ideas are provocative because, when Fish applies them to hot topics like the limited applicability of the free speech clause, as he is prone to do, sacred cows get tipped. Because of this tendency, Fish has earned for himself a reputation as a controversialist. But a good teacher is unafraid to use even the hottest of topics to teach the basics of a discipline, which is his ultimate aim. Indeed, a foray into controversy is often the best way to engage the critical faculties of the learner. It perks up the ears. Or, as Disney would put it, a spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down.

The medicine I got from Fish, the master teacher, was what I needed to get, a cure for what ailed me. Not only did I rediscover my reason for law school, but I learned to write. "Say what you're going to say, say it, and say what you've said," Fish taught. "Each sentence you write," he'd say, "must know about every other sentence for that is how a text hangs together." How important is clarity to you, I once asked him. "Clarity is my middle name," he replied. And, my favorite, "Grammar is deep."

Thanks to his most recent book, *How to Write a Sentence: And How to Read One*, Fish's literacy education manual, the lessons I learned in 2008 now travel far beyond the cloister of the law school seminar.¹ In the book, Fish states clearly his own purpose in writing it: "This, then, is my theology: You shall tie yourself to forms and the forms shall set you free."² Fish's theology of form before content, his gospel on the primacy of purpose, indeed has the power to set the (literary) captives free. I know because it liberated me.

¹ STANLEY FISH, *HOW TO WRITE A SENTENCE: AND HOW TO READ ONE* (2012).

² *Id.* at 33.