

THE HOTCHKISS SCHOOL  
LAKEVILLE, CONNECTICUT 06039

ALBERT WILLIAM OLSEN, JR.  
HEADMASTER

May 7, 1980

Dear Leif,

As we continue our planning for the next academic year, I am mindful that you have been on a leave of absence for most of this year. I am sensitive to the fact that you must be thinking about next year also. Like you, we are eager to avoid any repetition of the trauma resulting from events of last summer and fall and to defuse the occasional harassment that has continued intermittently since. With this in mind, I am going to set down some guidelines within which I will expect you to operate if you are to return. I present them for your protection as well as for ours.

Let me start by placing these matters in a context set by the special style you have developed over your years as a teacher, a style that evolved through sometimes harsh experience and rough going during your first years at Hotchkiss. It is a style that will require continuing evolution as a result of the perhaps even harsher experience of recent months. Because I have been a supportive witness to most of your experiences at Hotchkiss, I believe I am in a good position to comment.

It is fair to say that no teacher in my acquaintance has invested as much of himself in his students as you have, going way beyond the normally expected call of duty to provide friendship and moral support. In many cases, if not in most cases, you have adopted the "ugly ducklings", the youngsters who have not fitted comfortably into the Hotchkiss mold. Probably the best examples of your unselfish devotion were the many disadvantaged youngsters who were taken under your wing in the middle 60's and early 70's. Most of them would not have survived the culture shock of Hotchkiss without your support. It is no discredit to you that on many occasions they took advantage of your good will. Over the years you have been equally solicitous of economically over-advantaged ugly ducklings. Your special efforts involved long counselling sessions in your classroom and in your office, visits in the dormitories during the afternoons or evenings, occasional overnight weekend stays with you and Sara in Lime Rock, the use of students as baby-sitters when you and Sara were away from home. More often than not the youngsters who were working with you most closely were also part of the Wood Squad and in recent years the cycling team as well. For someone who did not know any better it would be easy to talk of a Thorne-Thomsen clique. It was also easy for the fine line between teacher and student, between adult and adolescent, to become blurred, for you and these youngsters to look on each other primarily as friends. The lines have become even fuzzier where the contacts continued into the vacations and into the periods immediately beyond graduation.

Because you never had anything except the most honorable and most open intentions, it has been difficult for you to believe that others could suspect you of anything else. Your own honesty and naiveté have perhaps blinded you to the importance of appearances, to the fact that what people think may be happening can sometimes be even more damaging than the truth. Too often the truth is impossible to substantiate. A tightly-packed school community is particularly susceptible to suspicion and innuendo.

As you and I have agreed on several occasions in the past, your real troubles began when Hotchkiss ceased to be an all-boys school. Teaching styles that were and are above reproach and beyond suspicion with boys often raise eyebrows when applied to girls. Visiting in dormitories even for the most innocent form of academic special help causes problems. Long counselling sessions behind closed doors cause problems. Using Hotchkiss girls as babysitters, especially during the years since Sara enrolled at Brown and therefore was absent from home, causes problems. Camping out in motel rooms "the way the bikeys do" causes no problem when all the bikeys are boys. When one of those bikeys happens to be a girl and especially when there are no other bikeys on the premises, there is a first-class mess.

In the last analysis, Leif, the central issue throughout this lengthy disquisition is good judgment, the sensitivity to know that for teachers at Hotchkiss we must expect behavior that will keep them above suspicion. No matter how much we may dream that it is otherwise, the special relationship between a teacher and a student always gives the teacher a preponderate advantage.

All the investigations I have pursued since last summer convince me that you have not been guilty of morally improper actions or advances with any Hotchkiss students and that of course includes . . . I have your assurance of that and I have the assurance of all the students I have asked, most of whom are in a position to know. You have substantial support from the parents of those students, even from the parents of one student about whom there were real concerns because of your attentiveness. You also have substantial support from your colleagues here, though many have been critical of what they would agree was bad judgment on your part in placing yourself in compromising positions. There is widespread confidence in your good will, in your integrity, and in the unselfishness of your intentions. There is also agreement that we do not need and cannot afford more grief like the grief we had this fall. I have many questions about the tactics pursued by . . . in trying to bring his daughter to heel, but I have to admit that he would have had no place to start had it not been for your own actions.

So much for the background music. I have gone on at such length because the success of your return to your full range of duties at the school depends on your complete understanding and acceptance of the sensitive relationship between teacher and student to which I have alluded specifically above and about which much of this letter is concerned. Specific restrictions or guidelines are inadequate beyond a very limited scope. Judgment must be learned; it cannot be ordered. I am going to ask that you stop using Hotchkiss girls as babysitters, that you not take Hotchkiss girls to your home in Lime Rock except as part of a group of students, that you not be a part of any co-ed rooming situation for any group that has anything to do with the school. I am also going to remind you that male faculty visiting in a dormitory for girls can be disquieting for residents in that building. Beyond that I must rely on your common sense and on your willingness to seek advice when in doubt. If you do not grasp fully by now the basic reasons for the near disaster of the fall and for some of the questions raised in the past, there is not much more I can say.

This letter is intended as a preamble to any offer to have you return to your full status as a teacher in September. Before making that offer, I believe I owe it to you and to the school to satisfy myself that you understand the conditions of your return, conditions which essentially involve an instinctive understanding of where things have

gone wrong in the past, a willingness to admit that you were the architect of such problems as did develop, and a determination that you wish to avoid the mistakes of the past. I hope this letter can serve as an invitation to address any questions, if they remain. Can we get together soon for a follow-up discussion?

Sincerely yours,



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