

THE IMAGINATION OF JAMES BOYD WHITE

Lee C. Bollinger*

For several decades, James Boyd White has been a unique voice in the law. It is a voice of extraordinary intellectual range, of erudition, and of deep commitment to a life of self-understanding and of humane values. His point of access is language—all language, in every context. Armed by a lifetime of thought about words, he justifiably has regarded no field or discipline or communicative activity as foreign and outside his ken. Whoever reads him must feel his sense of intellectual empowerment that our world, sectioned as it is by expertise, would deny us.

I remember vividly when Jim's teaching book, *The Legal Imagination* appeared and was followed by *When Words Lose their Meaning*. They were remarkable achievements. In the prior decade of the 1960s, the view that law could benefit by integrating the knowledge and perspectives of other fields had gained a solid hold, especially within the legal academy. Economics, psychology, sociology, political science, anthropology, and several other disciplines were quickly joined with legal study, and with enormous consequences, mostly beneficial. But Jim's early books transcended disciplines altogether and singularly opened up a way of approaching any text, whether a poem or a judicial opinion. While disciplines had fractured understanding while, to be sure, deepening it, Jim's focus on language, intention, and meaning created opportunities to live in an a-disciplinary world, where we could approach all efforts to grasp at understanding life and to relate to others.

Prolific and seminal are the right—one might say, meaningful—words to characterize Jim's scholarly career. Books and essays have emerged from his pen with enviable regularity. His fundamental framework has provided him with a fountain of material to explore, and he has not wasted any of it.

Jim's readiness to hurdle the intellectual barriers of specialization has also led him to teach an unusual array of courses. Countless students have, therefore, benefited from his restless and fearless imagination, and over the years I have heard from many of them how Jim's courses gave them a treasured, life-long belief in the potential intellectual riches that always lie beneath the grist of daily life.

Forever the student himself, he has done the hard work throughout his career of learning new languages in order to better grasp the beauty and insight of masterpieces of thought. In doing so, he has set an example for all of us in how to live the life of the mind.

For all of these reasons, and for the many who have lived better lives because of Jim's distinctive voice, as he retires from a formal position at the University of Michigan Law School, we can hope that he finds still more

* President, Columbia University

time in which to write. Certainly, though, this is an appropriate moment in which to give him a standing ovation.