

Found out

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [October 18, 2000](#) issue

Rats! I've been found out. We squeakers-by hope to slide through life without ever having our fallibilities and failings found out. When I became a graduate student at the University of Chicago I knew at once I was in over my head. I arrived with an inferiority complex, having been educated at a not-yet-accredited college and theological school, and I had not the faintest idea what was going on. I wanted to be *nur ein gewoehnlicher Historiker*, just an ordinary historian. Meanwhile, fellow students were discoursing on what was to me the arcane subject of process theology, and Thomas Altizer was suspecting, in obscure language, that God was comatose. I felt lost, but the university let me slip by.

After seven years in the pastorate, where I don't think I was found out, the University of Chicago named me to its faculty. The first day in class a young student asked a question that led me blushing my way back to the library to search for an answer. I've guarded my tail, as they say, ever after, and the university let me skid by unexposed, through 35 years of teaching.

Meanwhile, administratively I hovered safely in the "associate" realm, having been an associate dean for a while. But now St. Olaf College has asked me to serve as interim president. Mark Edwards, a Stanford and Harvard pedigreed Reformation scholar and reader of medieval Latin, is moving on, and new president Christopher Thomforde, alumnus of Princeton and Yale, is moving in in January. Someone on the search committee said of Thomforde, "This guy was reading Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in Greek just for fun when he was at Princeton." Or was it in high school or in kindergarten?—achievements quickly become legends.

St. Olaf has a nationally admired classics department, with professors Anne Gorton, James May, Gwen Compton-Engle and Steve Reece, a couple of whom have won laurels as "classicist of the year" and so forth. I'd like to show that like St. Olaf's other presidents, I can be a liberal art-ist, which means I should be able to show off my Latin and Greek to them and their colleagues.

Could I squeak by intellectually unexposed while being, at last, president of something, if only briefly? Not a chance. Friends have recently taunted me with clips of the letters column of *Lutheran Partners*. One friendly pastor therein mentioned that years ago in his presence I had used the term “pastor locus,” referring to the pastor of the place, who was hosting me. Though *Partners* had long had a column named “Pastor Loci,” Marty’s “pastor locus (=‘pastor place’)”, wrote one correspondent, is nonsense.

Then Mark Boorsma weighed in, citing his teacher, the above-mentioned James May of St. Olaf, to expose me further. “Though Dr. Marty knows that *loci* is the nominative plural of *locus* (‘place’), it is also the genitive and locative singular, and thus the pastor on site at any given place is indeed the *pastor loci*.”

So I did have my endings mixed up, no doubt having been subliminally influenced by the ending of the adjectival second word in the 1870 Vatican document *Pastor Aeternus*, which announced papal infallibility. Now *pastor loci* people announce my fallibility. I’d comfort myself with our old prep school saying, *Quandoque bonus dormitat Homerus*, “even the worthy Homer sometimes nods.” But May and Thomforde have read Homer and they can say, “I know Homer, Marty, and you’re no Homer.” Exposed, for sure, at last.