

“NOW I WORK IN THAT FACTORY YOU LIVE IN”

By Diane Kendig

A few years ago, when I was asked to share my memories of how my working class background had affected my writing, one editor was doubtful that my childhood could have been so happy as my essay suggested. She seemed to be operating with the underlying assumption that anyone from a working class background would necessarily have her earliest days marked by feelings of unease, difference, and sadness. She went after one detail. “Did you and your siblings *really* dance on the counters while you did the dishes?” she asked doubtfully.

When I told my siblings about her question, they hooted and said, “Well you should have told her about the butt-bumping competitions we held then, too.” Whatever we weren’t given materially as children, there was a great deal of joy and an egalitarian spirit in our home and community in the suburbs of 1950’s Canton, Ohio, that left me a bit oblivious to class and gender issues.

However, once I entered college, I was forced to confront those issues in ways that I hadn’t before, and my siblings, all younger, did too. As a matter of fact, I am struck by realizing that most if not all of my uncomfortable memories of my working class background involved the issue of going to college. Actually, thinking back, I can recall one time before college, in junior high, when the issue of being a working class kid came up at home, and it is an uncomfortable memory.

My parents’ dining room table was the heart of our house, big enough for all four of us kids to work at the same time on Valentine’s Day boxes and science fair projects. It was where we argued everything from hairdos to inter-racial dating to Vietnam, first just the six of us and later, a larger circle of schoolmates who gathered there because our parents welcomed everyone. But this was 1962, supper time, and as during many meals that year, I was reporting on the antics of my favorite seventh grade teacher, my English teacher, the first male teacher I ever had and a dynamic, creative one who filled the blackboard with huge cartoons punning on our spelling words. (Two potatoes wearing crowns. One not. The caption: “Oh, he’s just a _____. “ The word for the week was “commentator.”) He had us write a composition every week. And he was the first person in the world (other than me) to believe that I would become a writer.

“Mr. Dale talked today about how dumb baseball players are. He pretended to be a baseball player talking on TV, going ‘Uh, duh.’ It was really funny. He says they are so dumb because they don’t go to college. He says if you hear football players on TV, they talk a lot smarter because football players go to college.”

And then a huge crack divided the supper table, a fault, my fault that left me standing on the opposite side of my parents, neither of whom had gone to college.

Normally, my father would have asked me what I thought of Mr. Dale's idea, but this time, he could not trust his usual Socratic method. It was clear that out of this awful silence, where he was gathering his anger to put it aside before he spoke, my father was going to pronounce a truth.

"You tell Mr. Dale," he said, "that in our home, we do not judge people by whether or not they have been to college." My father really did not expect me to carry the message to Mr. Dale, but I think now that I should have.

"What is the source of our first suffering?" writes Gaston Bachelard, "That we hesitated to speak."

Between then and 1968 when I entered college, it seemed like my whole generation of factory-workers' kids were being too suddenly groomed for college by the school and our parents. Looking back now, I see we were a generation that needed to be warehoused outside of the job market awhile, the Vietnam War notwithstanding for the males in my class. Not even the guidance counselors seemed to understand the fine points of how to go about preparation for college, and my parents were the first to admit they did not understand, but they dutifully drove me to the exam for the PSAT, then the SAT, then the ACT, drove me to college campuses, and filled out the Parents' Confidential Statement (PCS) for financial aid

I felt all the ambivalence my parents must have felt in grooming me to go to college. On the one hand, I was getting credit (both literally and figuratively) for reading books and writing papers. I loved that part. I hated the horrible pettiness and unnaturalness of dorm life in a small church-related school where women were locked in a 10:00 p.m. each night. I hated the overwhelming sexism of the classroom and campus and the huge, impersonal lecture halls. But I loved the conversation that went on in my small Speech, Spanish, English, and Sociology classes. For the first time I even loved Phys Ed where I elected dance rather than sports my first quarter. I loved the plays and concerts we could get into free with our student I.D. I hated my homesickness that intensified rather than abated as my freshman year ground on, though I followed the college's recommendation that the way to overcome homesickness was to not go home.

My sophomore year, still enamored of academics but alienated from campus life, I surrendered to the homesickness and took the 3-hour bus ride home most weekends, right after my Spanish class. I was heading home the first weekend in May in 1970, right after the Kent State student slayings had occurred. When I entered the classroom that day, the bright, talented, nervous instructor was shouting about the Kent State events, his voice dripping with haughtiness, "You know if they had been truck drivers or union workers, the government would have never touched them."

I was shocked about his lack of historical knowledge. I may not have known anything about football or baseball players with which to challenge Mr. Dale in seventh grade, but from my parents, grandparents, and high school history teacher, Mr. Hiegl, I

knew about union strikes and the National Guard. I said nothing, but this time stood on the opposite side of the divide from my teacher, stunned that he would use the occasion to attack working class people. Looking back now, I wonder if he was attacking working class people, or I perceived his remarks that way because I had come to expect disparaging remarks about blue collar workers from my teachers.

I did not say anything on the long bus ride home either when I heard someone say, “We need to shoot a whole lot more college students,” a very chilling reminder that it can be ugly on both sides of this divide, that resentment of the college-educated runs deep and nasty, too. Then the bus stopped to pick up the three burly students from Kenyon College, at that point still an all-male college, and there was silence all around for the rest of the trip home to Canton, just half an hour from Kent, Ohio.

Perhaps because I was the oldest and the first in my family to go to college, perhaps because I was always-- as my mother said-- too self-conscious, perhaps because I did not verbalize the conflict, did not in fact “get it,” I spent my whole four undergraduate years wondering if I belonged, believing I should drop out, recognizing the financial drain my education was for my parents and three siblings still at home and yet knowing that studying and writing were the two activities that most gave my life meaning. My father took a second job and encouraged me to stay in school, and the personal attention of several teachers helped me enormously. My sister Daun entered college two years after me, and being more confident than I, she nailed and discounted some of this misplaced snobbery of academia early on, and she and I began a lifetime of sisterly dialogue on the topic.

I wanted to go to graduate school, but few if any students from my college ever went to graduate school, and the chair of the department commented at an evening event that “Girls do not belong in graduate school”—a joke, I think now, but another one I didn’t get and thought he actually believed. I felt as though I was not finished with formal study, but I felt guilty for wanting more, having had so much already.

I happened to land up near Cleveland, which was a terrific place to be a working class writer in the mid-70’s, and eventually fell into graduate work at Cleveland State. There, in Alberta Turner’s contemporary poetry course, for the first time, I was reading poetry and prose by living writers, including women writers, for the first time. I was thoroughly galvanized by the directness with which James Wright addressed his working class roots--not to mention love, family, pain, nature. As I read him and other contemporary writers, I saw that many had struggled like me to make sense of the divide between what we do and what our parents do. In preparation for a reading by Irish poet Seamus Heaney, I came across his poem, “Digging” which seemed like the ultimate statement of the conflict and resolution, the metaphor I needed to live by. The poem begins with the poet at the window, holding “the squat pen...snug as a gun,” while below his father is digging, reminding him of his grandfather, a first-rate turf-cutter.

Heaney's reverie leads him to think what it means to dig, to go deeper for the good stuff, but knows he is not his father or grandfather, has "no spade to follow men like them," and he returns to where he began, the pen he is holding, ends with "I'll dig with it." So it was not a matter after all of betraying our families by choosing less physical labor; it was a matter of honoring them by working as hard and as well as them at whatever we did.

At the same time, I was working at the Cleveland State Poetry Center, and I actually got to meet some of these writers, including Seamus Heaney and also, Tillie Olsen, who seemed to use every waking moment of her two days in town to inform everyone around her about working class issues. In our spare time, I took her to places she wanted to visit, to the oldest cemetery in the city, to the WPA murals at the Cleveland Public Library. "Excuse me," she said to the woman in the Cleveland Public Library's office on special displays, "This is a very attractive exhibit on the Great Depression, but I am concerned that you only depict passive bread lines. You know, people fought back, too, and even went to jail for their protests." During those two days, Olsen recognized that I was an adjunct and spoke to me about the politics of part-time employment in universities, the first person who ever did.

In 1984 I began full-time teaching in a tenure-track position at a small college in Ohio. One day, walking across campus with one of the most senior members of the faculty, I was discussing with him some classroom difficulty we were both having. He shook his head in resignation and said something I have heard faculty all over the world say so often, as though it explains everything, "Well, you know, most of our students come from working class backgrounds."

This time, for the first time, I did not stand there in shamed silence. Although it was not my most articulate moment, I said, "So what, Richard? So do I!"

He stopped walking as he threw back his head and laughed. Then threw his arm around me and said, "So do I, Diane. So do I." I don't know what that moment meant to Richard, but for me, that moment meant that I was able to say that being working class is not an excuse or a sorrow or a shame. It happens to be where I come from.

So finally, at age 34, I managed to speak up against the classist notion that working class or first generation college students are somehow inferior to others. Just in time, too, because the notion is not going away, although it is couched in different catch phrases, such as "students with financial need." One administrator announced a few years back, "We need more full-tuition paying students," and the university set about to recruit them, even as national programs were cut for the migrant students we had been recruiting previously.

Although it took me a long time to address working class issues as a teacher, as a writer, I did not take so long. However, most of my writing did not come out of a conscious effort to *be* a working class poet --as one writer, who told me he was

“marketing” himself as a “working class poet” was. Instead, I was trying to let my poems go after what has been life-affirming about life as I know it. In retrospect, I hope that my writing about my family and neighborhood reflects the lively and loving community I grew up in and pits at least one counter-example against the reductive stereotype of what working class family life is, putting the lie to the idea that it is something to get out of, that it is sad.

Perhaps the biggest irony of my having faced no working class antagonism except in academia is that academia happens to be where I work. So I have a lot of work to do here. There is the work of letting students know who I am. Just once during each class, usually in introductions on the first day, I mention that I was the first in my family to go to college, and that if they are in the same position and have questions or concerns, they are welcome to come talk to me about it. For several semester, I team-taught a freshman seminar titled “The World of Work,” where we use literature and philosophy to explore what work has meant historically and personally to our culture and our families.

In that course, I first met José Salinas as a student. About a decade ago, teaching “The World of Work,” with my colleague Lu Capra, we assigned the students to write a poem about their parents’ work during Parents’ Weekend. We had read Chris Llewellyn’s whole book, Fragments from the Fire, as well as parents’ poems on their children’s work and children’s poems on their parents’ work by Rita Dove, Richard Wilbur, Sharon Olds, Tess Gallagher, Gary Soto, David Citino, and others.

The responses were good and included the biology professor’s daughter describing her father’s teaching, another student paying tribute to her mother as a single parent, and José Salinas’ poem, which conveyed in five stanzas the heat, poverty, and pain that his father’s life as migrant worker involved. I asked all three students if they would like to read their poem aloud, knowing that it might be difficult for José, who wrote eloquently in his journals about Olsen’s *Yonnonidio* but had not said a word in class discussions.

José chose to read the poem to the class, and his reading provided quite a turning point. Several students approached him afterward to say how much they respected the poem and the difficulties he must be facing, along with their willingness to know more about the migrant situation in America. As the class progressed, José became more verbal, offering one day a summary of the debate going on in the migrant community about wages, another day recalling the fantasies he and his siblings would make up while waiting in the car for his parents who were at labor organizing meetings that ground on for hours. So while he conveyed to the class the negative aspects of the migrant life, he also clearly conveyed the family love, affection, and loyalty he experienced there, too.

José went on to win the creative writing contest with his poem that year-- the first freshman to ever do so-- and to continue writing and publishing poems at the college

and in the local Latino media outlets. He did well in school and graduated the year after he married Alma, a fact we often laugh about because he told the freshman seminar he would never marry until he was very old. Now, he is the main administrator for a high school for migrant students, and I called him there last year for permission to use his first poem with a class where many students were the children of immigrants. After granting permission, he added, “And tell them what I do, and tell them I have the greatest job in the world.”

I am grateful to José and to all of my students who regularly instruct me in their own family’s difficulties and triumphs. It seems important to repeat “all students,” that as teachers we have to be concerned not just with working class students or first-generation students but all our students including those in a medium-security system who have most definitely educated me in my 15 years teaching there and the business college students I am teaching now in Boston. Wherever and whatever we come from, it seems useful to me to consider our the influence of class in our studies. And I can say that grappling with those issues with my students communally seems much less scary than when I ignored them or grappled with them alone. Now, discussing class seems a whole lot like the discussions around my parents’ dining room table.

As for my writing, James Wright’s “Prayer to the Good Poet” suggests where I locate myself these days. The poem is about Wright’s father, who was a factory worker in Martin’s Ferry, Ohio during the Great Depression., but it is addressed to the Latin poet, Horace, who was himself the son of a slave. In the middle of the poem, Wright says to Horace, about his [Wright’s] father:

I worked once in the factory that he worked in.
 Now I work in that factory that you live in.
 Some people think poetry is easy,
 but you two didn’t.

Like Wright, I have always appreciated that poetry can be difficult. And the harder one works at it, the more difficult it can become. Labor hard at poems, and poetry will send you back out into the fields and the offices and streets, into all the hurt still unhealed, the small successes not yet celebrated, the work still to be done.