

THE SEAMS THAT STOOD ALL THE CHANGES:
KEEPING IT TOGETHER IN ACADEMIA

By Diane Kendig

Robert Hayden's Winter Sundays and the Kendigs'

I have always loved the Robert Hayden poem, "Those Winter Sundays." When I first came across it in a college textbook, I felt galvanized right at that pair of lines describing the father as the one "who had driven out the cold /and polished my good shoes as well," I saw again six pairs of polished shoes lined up on my father's basement workbench on Sunday mornings. There is too that distinctive phrase I no longer use, "my good shoes," the shoes to save for church and other "good" and not go galloping off wearing to school or play.

The poem holds other shocks of recognition for me as well. My father, who made his living for our family as a welder, took on a second job putting in furnaces and air-conditioning to put his four children through college, so Hayden's intricate descriptions of heat and cold struck me like that blast of heat and cold that Emily Dickinson says a true poem delivers. My father was the man who made his welding torch "blaze" in our garage one whole summer week during his vacation in order to build the biggest swing set in the world (which is to say, in Canton, Ohio) for all the neighborhood kids to use. He also had often "driven out the cold," as the father in the poem does, not so often from our house, where the furnace worked on its own like a perfectly balanced clock, but certainly from the homes of friends and relatives who called for his help at all extremely late or early hours from their frigid kitchens. And if the father in the poem has hands "that ached from labor in the weekday," I saw my father's whole body ache some summer days when he walked in our back door from the exhaustion of welding in 100 degree heat in a shop with no air-conditioning nor windows, having lifted, as he would report proudly, as much as a ton of steel in the course of doing his work that day.

More recently, I have been considering the discords the Hayden poem strikes against my own experience. How could it not, given the generational, racial, gender, and other differences between the poet and me? Still, I had always loved and repeated the last two lines, too: "What did I know, what did I know/of love's austere and lonely offices?" And yet lately, looking at the poem and thinking about those lines, I have been thinking, what was I thinking? If ever there

were a word that does not fit the way Russ Kendig worked and does not fit the campus offices of his two academic daughters, it is the word “lonely.”

Now, he did work alone sometimes, and in fact, Dad did polish those shoes alone in the basement on Saturday nights after we went to bed. When a friend mentioned that her dad did the shoe polishing in the living room during *Gunsmoke*, I wondered: in my galvanized state of poem-reading, had I perhaps romanticized Dad’s polishing? It would be more like Dad to do that chore upstairs with the family. So I called my sister Beth. “Definitely in the basement,” she said, “because that’s where the shoe brace was.” Of course: screwed to the workbench was his aluminum frame for holding the shoe brace. He is hell on the need for the *right* tool for the job, my dad, and that brace was no doubt the determining factor in where that chore was done.

However, his preference has always been to work in the company of and with others. Today, in our work as academics and artists, we call it “collaboration.” I am hard pressed to recall what he called it. Maybe this: when we were children, one of the assigned chores was “keeping-Dad-company-while-he-works-in-the-garage,” and it was assigned this way: “Who wants to keep Dad company while he works in the garage?” (“Me!” “I do!” “Me!” “Me!”)

In some working class critiques of academia, much is made of the solitude of the academic life that may be reflected in Hayden’s last couplet. Mike Rose, for one, in *Lives on the Boundary*, describes his own antipathy for the removed, agonistic tradition of graduate school in literary studies that revolved around a lot of isolated time in the library, none of it to be frittered away on writing poetry. Yes, the old academic agonistic tradition. You can have it. I was rendered nearly incapable of competition by my father. The man actually taught us to play scrabble collaboratively. We would all help each other out in forming the highest-scoring words possible. And if it left us appalled by the nastiness of competition, we had great vocabularies.

A colleague of mine recently noted that Hayden perhaps had a very lonely office if not an austere one at the University of Michigan. The last two lines of the poem reverberate with sadness for me, “What did I know, what did I know/” (as I tell my students, when the poet says it twice, you need to pay attention) “of love’s austere and lonely offices.” Hayden in his poem finds that solitude to be a connecting point with his father, but the lines reverberate with sadness and loneliness.

I found academia’s loneliness to be pretty disjuncting, especially since it didn’t connect me to my father, and my working class roots, to which I definitely wanted to stay connected.

Fortunately, in writing poetry, I was able to make the connections and throw open my office and classroom doors to the principles of co-operation and collaboration that I learned from my dad.

Speaking of Family

While I have chosen to focus on my father's legacy, I want to take a moment to mention the four other members of my family since one of my father's main themes in life, going back to his own parents, is the need for the family to stick together. My mother, Gladys May Young Kendig, the daughter of a Scottish-American coal miner who worked his way out of the mines to become a train engineer, has long been the most outspoken of us in recognizing and appreciating our working class roots. From childhood, aware of the need for unions, she totally supported Dad's hard work and union connections while she stayed at home and made a life for him and us four children, reminding us often that it is not the material things in life that count. All the while, of course, she reminded us we have to take care of the things we have, money is money, your father and I have worked hard.... Line up all her kids up and ask for her most repeated lines, and you are bound to get what we used to call her non-sequiturs and now see as life's little paradoxes.

I am the oldest of four that Dad helped to put through college with furnace work, four that Dad has referred to collectively and affectionately as "Kids," or "The Kids." The youngest, my brother, Russ, is a bankruptcy judge, who has been eloquent in public on how the economy affects average people. Second youngest is Beth, who I used to envy for her technical work in the theater that from the beginning was so very physical and collaborative, at the same time so rooted in her academic studies.

My sister Daun is the one I hope to let speak here as well as myself. Daun died recently at age 49 of Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma while a professor of speech and performance at St. Cloud State in Minnesota. She and I had an ongoing discussion of our place in academia as working class kids, from the time she entered college in 1970, two years after me. That discussion was informed by our upbringing, from our struggles with the strangeness of undergraduate college life—which we both found to be a terrible oxymoron—through the strain of graduate work. A Eudora Welty scholar, she often referred to herself as "the Optimist's daughter," and surely like my father, (and rather unlike my mother and I) she was a born optimist. Like him and like me, she knew what it was to work alone, but she was more sociable than I, and early on, she helped me see the value of constructing a social life to sustain oneself in academia.

Daun's faculty office at St. Cloud State, which she joined in 1983, while it could perhaps be described as "austere," could never be described as "lonely." When I went after she died to pack it up, I found it filled with books and papers, but also with photos of her with her students on trips and in production, photos of her former students' children, her daughter's artwork, and toys—puppets and weird hats and noisemakers. That office was a people magnet, a veritable collaboration machine. Among Daun's papers, I found a 20 page take-home exam she wrote in her junior year of college for one of the courses in her communications major. It is an early record of our father's greatest legacy to us, his encouraging and principled words.

My Sister's InCo 334 Exam

Stapled to the top of the Communications exam were the four final questions and the professor's comments which began, "Daun, your father is a wise man. Never forget what he told you; that's an ego-aphorism to carve on marble."

Reading further, I saw that the first exam question was to list as many approaches to the study of communication as possible and then select the most prominent, justifying "each approach you select." In the next 10 pages discussing montage, frame, syntactics, semantics, pragmatics, and on and on...nothing of Dad yet, but ending with this quote by Watson and Montagu, "The end of communication is not to command but to commune."

I read on. The last question asked the 21-year old, "If you were in charge of the field of communication theory...where would you try to lead it?" At this point, Daun gave up the "conscientious student" role and took up "the role of Mahatma Kendig" presenting "the Gidnek philosophy of communication." If ever she were speaking as a Gidnek (which, by the way, is the old family joke of Kendig spelled backward), it was in this portion of her philosophy:

I see no harm in initial theories being stated in unlanguage. I mean, if researchers honestly feel more comfortable and secure in their own lingo, they should work at that level, but once theories are developed they should and can be translated for comprehension by the average person. Now we're talking!

(I smiled at this. Dad has always harped at us to take into consideration the all-important "average person," which he believes himself to be the archetype of.) Daun concluded this fourth essay with the passage the professor responded to, the quote from Dad :

In essence the Gidnek Philosophy...is merely the bias of an over-idealistic college student—yet I can't discount that either because a long time ago my father gave me an

ego-aphorism that gets me through these tight spots: “Daun, whatever you do, don’t lose your ideals because they are the most beautiful things you have and once you lose them you’ll never get them back.”

That was my sister. She saw all of her life and work informed by the many lessons that Dad taught us, and once she became a professor, she quoted him alongside Kenneth Burke, Erving Goffman, and Eudora Welty.

I should note that this quote from Dad is archetypal Kendig philosophy, and the idea that we must cling to ideals was not a lofty abstract one separate from my father’s life. His parents suffered terrible deprivations and injustices during the Great Depression, and were most proud they stuck to their principles and stuck together as a family (with thirteen children!) while others were disintegrating. The quote is meaningful to me because while my friends’ parents told them that life was not fair, get used to it, my dad told us that while life was unfair, that was no license for me to be, that I was expected to behave fairly no matter what.

But doesn’t work have to be harder than this?

In undergraduate school, both Daun and I felt guilt over how easy academic work was, even as it became clear to us that academic work was what we wanted. At one point, Daun had a breakthrough when, registering for classes, her advisor explained, “Your problem is that you think you have to suffer. You think it isn’t work unless it’s difficult.” True. Images of our role model and favorite guy at the end of the day had buried deep in our psyche the idea that work was hard, physical. “You have to get over that idea,” the professor told her. “Take some courses for fun!”

In fact, nearly every course I took seemed fun. I loved writing essays and giving speeches, which other students complained about. Back then, giving speeches, at least in the final stage, was much more collaborative an endeavor than writing papers, so it was no wonder Daun became a communications major.

I recall that in one course my junior year, the professor had small groups to his house in the evening to discuss each student’s final essay, and I thought that was the most exciting thing I had ever done in college. These days, all my writing class use writing groups, and while my students probably don’t think it is the most exciting thing they have ever done in college, they do seem to like sharing their ideas with each other. What I hope they see is that writing can at

various stages be a communal as well as solitary event, and the product more than an elaborate memo passed back and forth between student and professor. It is not to command with the language but to commune with the campus community.

The Welder's Child

It took me a long time, though, to integrate student-writing groups into my composition teaching. Before that, I continued to struggle with the idea that academic work wasn't hard, it wasn't physical. Why did I even struggle with it? I don't know, but I do know it is a struggle that many working class poets face. I think of Hayden's poem, and of James Wright's poem, "Prayer to a Good Poet" where 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.

And though I didn't want to do the work of my dad and his parents—welding, hauling coal, doing extra laundry along with the laundry of 13 children—I did want a connection to their work.

I recall the moment that I was able to make the connection. I was writing a poem about my sister Beth's work in a hot, summer theater, working on the costumes and the set. I imagined her recalling the summer Dad built the swing set, and right then, writing, I recalled this conversation I had had with my father that summer when I was about ten and was asking him about welding. Pretty verbatim, it went into the poem:

What makes the colors, Daddy?
Heat. Different colors come from different temperatures.
Well, what's the hottest?
White.
Is that the color you're supposed to use?
Oh, the color isn't so important as the material you work on.

The material you work on, the material you work on. Material. Material. My parents were pretty insistent on "good materials." It was better to have one dress made of really "good material" than to have three or four (or however many more) cheap ones from the discount store, and my mother could outwait the sales staff at the best department store in town for weeks till the

children's wear was reduced, then buy large enough so it would fit the following year, a talent for shopping my sister Beth perfected in her years as a costumer.

In the poem, my sister "picks up a costume she conceived and built,/ feels the fabric cool in her hands, the seams/that stood all the changes," but in fact, my sister was me, those costumes were poems. That writing was material. It was the material I worked on. It was also the material I produced. It was hard to produce, had me up that night sweating in the dark, the way my sister was sweating that summer, the way my dad sweated.

Okay, not the exact same way. For sure, no bank was going to pay me for a poem what they paid my dad's company for his beautiful steel doors, not even what the company paid Dad. But it was work, I had finally convinced myself, connected myself to. Now, looking back, it is my father's voice that spoke to me, his words that inform the poem and my life.

And I am fortunate that unlike Mike Rose, I found that at Cleveland State, many other English faculty saw poem-making as work, too. Many of the faculty were writing poems, showing up at the Friday night "C.S.U. Poetry Center workshop" with faculty and students from engineering and other areas, along with people employed outside the university and the unemployed, too, including the occasional street person who would wander in and participate.

Sometime in my ensuing years in Cleveland as an adjunct, Irish poet Seamus Heaney came in pre-Nobel prize to give a reading, and when I came across his poem "Digging," where he connects to his father's peat-cutting chores by picking up a pen rather than a gun, and then when he read it aloud, I connected and thought for years after how many people need to find a connection or a distance or make peace with their parents' work in order to get their own done.

If I managed my own connection with the poem "The Welder's Child," I also managed to connect with my sisters' work and they with mine. We were separated by miles and time, and our lack of money, but we began then and in all the years that followed to share descriptions and drafts of scripts, poems, academic essays, productions, plans. I remember once preparing poems to read for a nationally syndicated radio show. I sent Daun a copy of what I prepared, and she wrote me a letter saying, "You can do better than this." She re-ordered the poems and suggested transitions.

In writing this essay I realize a parallel to my father's life. Down the road from the Fourth Street plant where he welded those massive doors you see on bank vaults was the Main Plant, where my Uncle Les, Dad's older brother, was the boss of the Polishing Department. He took

those doors, with my dad's finely welded seams, and made them gleam. He polished his brother's work as Daun and Beth and I polished each other's.

On the job

If I were concerned in my undergraduate days that academic work didn't seem hard enough and concerned in my graduate days that it didn't seem physical enough, by the time I obtained a job in academia, I was ready to get on with the job of teaching while I continued to write.

I don't think that I consciously set out to integrate more work that involved socializing into my curriculum, but clearly the impulse was there from the beginning. From my experience with writing workshops as a creative writer, I knew I wanted to integrate student response groups into all of my classes. Writing is such lonely work, and teaching students early on a fair and equal method for responding to each other seemed important to do. Currently, I do this even in my online course, "E-poetics" where students read each other's essays then respond in both asynchronous and synchronous chat about how the Internet is affecting authors. Now we're talking, as Daun would say.

I know that I consciously set out to have first year students think about the relationship of their parent's work to their life as students and beyond. I wanted to teach a class about work in literature, so that students could tackle early on in their studies this topic I had struggled with alone. For my university's First Year Seminar program, I created a course titled, "Love and Work." One of the best experiences I ever had in teaching the course came in the semester I team taught with a friend from what some would consider a privileged background. Using philosophy and literary works we explored the theme of work and family.

One of the assignments for parents' weekend was for students to read a few contemporary poems, then write poems on their parents' work. In our class, we had, among others, a mother on welfare, the daughter of a colleague in biology, and the son of migrant workers who literally walked out of the fields one day and into our class the next, three who wrote very different but very moving poems that I read aloud with their permission the following Monday. Each of them was a bit nervous when I asked, but Jose, the migrant worker, was especially so. The class reaction, though, was so strongly supportive, both of the experience he expressed and his ability to put it into poetry that he soon became comfortable in sharing more of

that experience with the class in discussing works such as *Yonnonidio*, *Death of a Salesman* and *Fragments from the Fire*.

Jose went on to win the college creative writing contest with the poem and to continue writing and publishing poetry. Recently, nearly 15 years later, when I was going into Chelsea High School in Boston where many of the students are newly-arrived immigrants, I called and asked him if I could read his first poem to them and reprint it on my website. When he answered yes, I asked him what I should put for his bio. He said, “Tell them that I am a principal for kids at a school for migrant kids, and tell them that I have the greatest job in the world.”

As this one incident perhaps makes clear, I do think of the teaching part of my job as important work, and I often wonder if Daun and I became teachers because Dad wasn't as good at breaking things down into steps and teaching us as he was leading by example. I have to admit, he was much more skilled with his hands and often took over the making of science fair projects and valentine boxes, for which in my klutziness, I was very grateful for. Still, he did a great job of teaching my Basic Writing class one day.

I teach the class as a thematic one titled “World War Two: A Personal Point of View.” My parents come to my class to speak and be interviewed about their WWII experiences. Dad flew missions over Europe for the Army Air Corps, and he has a million great stories, the vast majority of which are true, including the story of how my parents met during the war through letters, which Mom was first to write. Dad brings along a scrapbook Daun made of his war years, and nothing I will do all semester impresses my students (all of them, but for the equestrians, indelibly) as much as the photo of my father, right before leaving for the war, riding a horse. The photo has captured him just at the moment the horse, barebacked, is rearing while Dad in jeans and a white t-shirt, his long black hair slicked back, sits holding the reins as easily as though he were sitting in a rocker. Pass that photo around, say no more, and the speaker's has established his ethos.

Often, during this father-daughter venture in teaching and talking, my father would reveal a major personal fact to my students that he had never told his own family. The biggest revelation of them all was about *writing*. There, in front of my 20 basic writers, Dad told announced that he did not write the first letter to my mother, that he got a buddy to do it.

“And then what?” my mouth was so wide, my students were chuckling.

“Then when she wrote back again, he said he couldn’t go on doing this and I was going to have to start writing for myself, and I did,” my father answered.

I suppose this would have been a good place for a teachable moment, but I was too surprised to comment, let alone teach. I hope my basic writers got the point all by themselves: “I was going to have to start writing for myself, and I did.”

I think they got the point too that I value that statement on writing from my father along with the ones in our textbooks, that entering the university does not necessarily mean one has to leave the language and lessons of home behind. Like my sister’s final exam, our best work in college often welds the newest school lessons to our family store of knowledge. If we choose good material, if we make the connections clearly and well, what we make can support us for life, maybe even beyond, for another generation.