

BEING A POET CAME FIRST

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I was a poet long before I was a lawyer. My grandfather was a poet, so I've always thought it was his quiet influence that set me on my way. I remember a poem, perhaps my first, that I wrote in third grade:

The rain falls in silence
as it falls
onto treetops,
onto walls.

The rain falls on trees
and onto grass,
and soon
the storm will pass.

By the eighth grade I had a collection of poems, I called "Death in Poetry." These poems about death then morphed into poems of frustrated love, poems which I carried around in my pocket until the ink blurred. I was too nervous to give them to the objects of my desire.

Even though I started writing poems early, I was never especially serious about what I was doing. The poems came to me; I wrote them down. I didn't realize that the poems might be shaping me or having some effect on me. Yet, poetry, when we think about what we're doing, demands that we be true to ourselves. In an odd way, I think it was this calling to poetry that caused me to drop out of law school the first time around.

I had enrolled at the University of Oregon College of Law in 1984. I was 23, had a one year old daughter, and a two year old marriage. I went through the motions that first six weeks of law school, reading everything dutifully, outlining cases, putting in the usual anxious 1L days that stretch into the night. Sometime early in that first semester, a fellow classmate, who lived on the McKenzie River, decided that we needed a break. We fished for trout that afternoon, and my classmate told me that he was quitting law school and was going back to his old work as a glass blower. We caught six trout on crickets as the sun set. We ate freezer burned trout for dinner, likely caught the month before.

The next day I didn't go to school. I don't recall sitting down to try to think through what I wanted to do. I simply realized that law school wasn't where I wanted to be, not that I had a plan for something else.

After I quit law school, I went back to cooking for a living, which I ended up doing for something like nine years.

It was after the birth of our second child, that I began to write poetry again. The poems were pared down. I was then reading Gary Snyder, the beat poets, and the Chinese and Japanese poets I'd found in Kenneth Rexroth's translations, and it was the influence of all this work that made me want to write down to the bones. I didn't write the poems with the idea of publishing them. They were simply markers or reminders of where I'd been, where I might be going.

About the time I was 30, I realized I didn't want to keep cooking for a living. I thought about going back to school, looked into psychology, anthropology, English, and social work. Then, oddly, on a whim, I applied to law school again.

Before I got started my first semester at the University of Illinois College of Law, I painted myself an ID card. I was anxious about the possibility that I might somehow lose myself in law school, that in becoming a lawyer my soul would take flight. I continued to write poetry in law school, poems about my children and my wife, fleshing out the lines that came to me in the morning when I first woke up, or when I'd be walking around. At times, some of these fragments and images arrived with urgency, with the demand that they be taken seriously, written down, and worried into poems.

I've been practicing law for ten years now. I sometimes wonder if I'm a lawyer, a poet, or something that I'd call a poet lawyer. Poetry and law are callings that inform each other; it's clear that both shape the way I live. As a poet, I try to see the heart of things, and then to write about what moves me in the clearest way I can muster. As a lawyer, I'm engaged with people and their troubles, engaged with them in a way that throws us together in great intimacy. My clients' demands are insistent and real; they have the kind of urgency that I associate with the thoughts that prompt me to write a poem. I think my work as a poet lends compassion and perspective—a calmness—to what I do as a lawyer. My work as a lawyer provides a world of experience that enriches my work as a writer. Its both my poetry and my work as a lawyer that connect me so deeply to the place in central Illinois where I've made my home for the past 20 years.

On a recent trip to Ireland we stayed for three weeks near the tip of Sheep's Head Peninsula, within a half mile of the ruins of a medieval bardic school that had been built of stone, high on a hill above Dunmanus Bay. The school provided an education in poetry, literature, the Irish language, Irish history, and law. The young bards were taught to write poems in the dark, and they were required to commit the poems

to memory before they wrote them down. That Irish bardic school seems to me a model for what a legal education might be. Lawyers have tremendous power in our society, and with that power comes responsibility. An education in the humanities, that encouraged a love of literature, the native language and soil, that taught the value of sitting in the dark and finding one's own peculiar truth, might produce happier, more thoughtful and caring lawyers, than does a legal education based on intimidation, competition, and conformity. Poetry might be the essential part of such a curriculum, a means of helping the law and the lawyer find their songs.

