

Tribute to Jack Myers by Brian Clements at Jack's Memorial, January 30, 2010

Like Gillian [Conoley] and like so many of you here today, I was Jack's student here at SMU. Earlier today, I was tallying up some numbers, wondering how many poets and would-be poets Jack actually taught during his lifetime. I think between SMU, Vermont, The Writers Garret, and all of the other places where he taught as a visiting writer, Jack had to have taught at least 5,000 poets.

The first time I met Jack was in his office in the basement of Dallas Hall. I had an appointment with him to get into his poetry workshop--as a transfer student, I had to have his permission. As Prof. Wheeler said, that was back when smoking was still allowed in buildings. So I went into Jack's office, and he offered me one of his, which I took, and we sat there smoking while he looked over the poems. Finally he finished, not looking particularly impressed. He said, "Well, you seem to have an idea about what you're doing, you have a decent ear, some sense of line; maybe cut back a bit on the AHTSY-FAHTSY--but you're in. OK? Attaboy."

It was all about that "Attaboy" from Jack. So I cut back on the artsy-fartsy, a bit . Maybe.

At least three times since then, at various institutions where I've studied or taught, a peer or colleague has said to me, "You know, you're pretty normal." "What?" I would say. ""All the other poets I know are weird, but you're pretty normal."

I attribute to Jack my ability to function "normally" in the "normal" world while being at heart an artsy-fartsy commie pinko weirdo misfit poet, a denizen of what Jack would occasionally call "Lala Land." I find comfort in the fact that while Jack is gone, he will always be present in everything I do, because virtually every friend I have, including many here today, and including my wife and my children, and every success I have had (what little success I have had), have come at least indirectly and quite frequently directly as a result of my relationship with Jack.

I don't know how it was with you all, but with me Jack didn't really like to talk shop that much. By "talk shop" I mean talking about the actual writing of poems. But he never really could totally succeed, try as he may, to get out of the shop, because he was always working--there was no separation between his writing life and his living life. Even in the middle of shooting a game of pool--and Seth, you probably saw this many times--a stray comment would get its hooks into him and he'd stop in the middle of a shot, blink a couple times, look at the ceiling, file it away, then hit the shot with just the right angle and just the right touch, sink it. "Just like poetry," he'd say. Talking pool, talking boxing, talking football, talking the day-to-day troubles of the world, WAS talking shop. And if you didn't know Jack, if you didn't know, as Seamus Heaney recognized in Jack's work that Jack was "wise in the pretense of just fooling around," then you might not get that in talking pool, he was also talking Zen, in talking boxing, he was also talking archetypes, talking shop.

So we didn't explicitly talk much about writing poems, but we told stories. Jack liked to tell stories about Donald Justice and Richard Hugo, his teachers, whom he loved very much. And he told another story that you've all probably heard; I know I heard it at least 3 or 4 times. But I'm going to share it with you in case you haven't heard it.

When Jack was a young poet in Massachusetts, he sold all or most of his belongings and trekked across the country to San Francisco. He found a place to stay near City Lights Books and kept an eye out for a certain poet affiliated with that bookstore. Finding that poet, Jack approached him with manuscript and hand and asked if the poet might find a few minutes to take a look and see if Jack had any talent, whether or not he should keep writing. The poet said "Sure." Weeks later, having heard nothing back, Jack waited around for the poet, found him, and asked if the elder poet might have anything to say about the poems. "Look kid," said the elder poet. "I'm not really interested in poetry. I just want to get drunk."

Every time Jack told this story, you could see in his eyes the pity he felt for this man, and you could see the pain he felt at the rejection, and the disillusionment. But you could also see something else in Jack's eyes. It was determination. Determination that no matter what, he wouldn't end up like that, that he wouldn't think that way about poetry, wouldn't think that way about people, and, especially, he would never speak that way to a would-be poet.

And he didn't. Over 5,000 times.