

## *Family Values* Literacy, Technology, and Uncle Sam

Joe Amato

**M**Y UNCLE SAM ALWAYS SAID CHICAGO IS A “FAST TOWN.” HE’S AN EX-CON, my uncle. Three-time loser who did a twenty-one year stretch in Attica and Auburn. Picked up on armed burglary, shot in the leg (it was entrapment actually, but who’s taking notes?). The day he got out I spotted him walking down the street. It was the year I graduated from high school. He was wearing a toupee. My father didn’t recognize him.

When I was a kid, nobody told me I had an uncle named Sam. But I can recall my grandma putting together care packages of food and such, and my father occasionally talking about driving to Auburn. And here and there dropping into Italian, capisce? I didn’t get the connection till years later.

My grandpa and grandma were both poor people from Sicily. My grandpa, Rosario (or Roy as he was generally known), had been a fisherman in a small village, Spadafora. I’m not certain, but it seems he participated in the Italy-Ethiopia conflict during the early part of this century. When he came to this country, he worked with the railroad, and then construction-concrete. He helped pour the foundation for a major sewage treatment plant on the north side of the city. His English was what we used to call “broken,” but he was nonetheless proud to be a naturalized United States citizen. After a meal cooked by my grandma—usually macaroni and assorted meats—my grandpa would tell stories and my father would translate. Or try to.

Sometimes my grandpa would ask me how many congresspeople were in the House of Representatives, how many senators were in the Senate. I could never remember, and he’d smile as told me the correct numbers. In his early eighties, he worked for the Onondaga County Park Service, taking care of the flower beds at different points along the lake. He smoked unfiltered Camels for sixty-five years. He died in 1975 of a stroke. He was eighty-seven.

My grandma, Antoinette, was always a difficult woman. For no apparent reason, she kicked her son Joe, my father, out of her house shortly after he returned from Europe with his French war bride Suzette, my mother. My grandpa found them another place to stay on the west side, on Belden Ave., with a not-so-distant relative. This was where I spent the first year of my life.

My grandma, who had been married since her early teens—that woman could cook. Never had a meatball like hers, or a red sauce. She was religious in a superstitious way, and could neither read nor write. She'd given birth to a child who died as an infant. He's buried in St. Agnes cemetery, up on Onondaga Hill, south of the city. And rumor has it she'd had a miscarriage at some point in the distant past. Rumor also has it my grandpa punched her in the mouth once and knocked her teeth out, also in the distant past. My grandma died last year. She was one hundred and one.

My uncle Sam had a stroke a decade ago, leaving him with a severe speech impediment. When I talk to him now, I read his sad, rehabilitated eyes. When I mention Chicago, he says "fast town." Sometimes he stutters a bit.

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When Sam first got out of the can (my father's term), he'd steal packs of cigarettes. He'd also go after phony insurance claims, slipping and falling, carefully, in grocery stores and the like. No more stealing these days, no more phony claims.

And he's a hard worker, too, no fat on his frame. In fact he's been working odd jobs—junking, construction flagman, house painting—ever since he got out. No shit—even while slipping and falling, he's been hard at work making a buck.

He lives in Tampa now, with his partner Marietta. They live in a trailer park. Another of my uncles, Dominick, a former insurance salesman who lives in Cheyenne, paid for the trailer. Sam's in his late seventies now, earns a few bucks picking up and delivering for a charity organization in the Florida heat. Which for him is easier than delivering pizzas in Central New York cold.

There was always a war being waged between my father and his brothers. Four in all: Sam, Frank, Joe and Dominick. Sam is the oldest, but he was rarely around. Frank had met Clark Gable during the war, and had picked up some shrapnel in his right elbow. My father always insisted it was Frank's fault—he didn't phone my father, as they'd evidently planned, when he landed in France. My father was a corporal in the Signal Corps, and had somehow arranged, in between official duties and black marketeering, to get his older brother out of combat duty. Didn't work out.

My uncle Frank has always run hot and cold. It's his relationship with my aunt Mary, his wife. Or so I've been led to believe. Something about my aunt having had an affair with an African-American man while Frank was in Europe. More rumors. Not that Frank didn't screw around himself. Who knows? But you know how Italians of that generation can be, especially about black-white mixing. Mary—my mother always said Mary was a "sweet girl." My mother could relate to Mary's having been ostracized. To me as a kid, my aunt Mary seemed friendly, and a little loony. These days I know better—I can see the damage.

Frank himself has had a mistress since the war. He likes to play the horses. And shrapnel or no, Frank used to be a helluva bowler, as my father would say. My brother Mike and I used to see him at Syracuse Bowling Center after

leagues on Friday nights, around eleven. He'd give us a few tips. Mike and I would bowl maybe a dozen games till well after midnight. First game thirty-five cents, second game a penny.

Sam could bowl too. Story goes he once rolled a couple of back-to-back perfect games in New York City.

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After my folks got divorced, my father, Mike and I moved out of our three bedroom ranch house in the suburbs and into a dilapidated two-story house in a poor cul-de-sac just outside the city limits. About a quarter mile from the New York State Thruway. Very noisy. We lived in that house, 501 Raphael Ave., for a dozen years. Never managed to put up any curtains.

The place was owned by a gas station and heating equipment supply company, Clemmett Plumbing and Heating (I think I have the spelling right). The expansion and contraction of empty fuel storage tanks in the lots around the house would irregularly rumble up into my second-story bedroom window.

On two occasions (once during Hurricane Agnes), the polluted, rat-infested creek out back overflowed, flooding the area around our house for a week or better. Our basement was underwater, and we'd have no electricity, no gas for our stove, and no potable water. That creek fed into the same sewage treatment plant that my grandpa had helped lay the foundation for decades earlier.

Our downstairs neighbor, Gerry (who drove a school bus), would have his father and step-mother up from Florida during summers. Sometimes they'd live for months alongside the house in their RV.

Winter 1976-77, my final year as an undergrad, we were behind so far in our light and gas bill that the power company (Niagara Mohawk) shut off the electricity to our flat. My father gave Gerry twenty bucks a month and ran an extension cord downstairs, with which we powered the refrigerator, a lamp, a clock, a fan, and the TV. We used the gas stove to heat the place, and blew heat around with the fan.

My father and I were forced to find another place to live in 1981, when the water line broke and the county health department officially condemned the place.

During the early seventies, my father, Mike and I would occasionally be invited over to my aunt Mary and uncle Frank's flat. We'd show up, knock, but sometimes they wouldn't answer the door. We could hear their little Chihuahua, Mickey, barking. Mickey would tremble all over when you entered their apartment, his feet ticking and sliding across the wood floors. He lived to be nearly twenty human years.

During my grandpa's wake, my uncle Frank mouthed-off to my father, as he was prone to. My father, a southpaw who'd boxed in the army, ended up throwing Frank on the floor. That was the last time they spoke, far as I can recollect. Frank spent some time praying at my father's casket, right after the burial services. It was a cold January morning.

These days, my uncle Frank lives with my aunt Mary in a small house they bought in Eastwood, not far from the apartment complex my mother had lived in right after the divorce. When my mother moved back to Syracuse in 1988, she took another apartment in that same complex (coincidentally, the same owner as her apartment complex in Schenectady). I saw my uncle Frank and my aunt Mary when my mother died, and when my father died a year and a day later. I couldn't make it back east for my grandma's funeral, so I haven't seen them since.

My uncle Dominick—originally Domenico, but he goes by “Doc”—is the youngest, and also the most successful, moneywise. My mother always said that he was smart to get out of Syracuse early on. I would see him, my aunt Dorothy, and my two younger cousins, their sons Russ and Frank, whenever they visited us in Syracuse. Usually they'd stay with my uncle Frank and aunt Mary.

Russ is a chemical engineer, lives in Washington state with his wife Alison and their two kids, Amanda and Dominick. And Frank is a chiropractor in L.A. My father was never much for traveling, maybe because he'd traveled so much during the war. Anyway, my family never made it out to Cheyenne to visit. I've been to Cheyenne once on my own, three years ago, and twice with my wife, Kass. My aunt Dorothy was also of Italian heritage, born and raised in Cheyenne. My aunt died of cancer a few years after my uncle Sam had his stroke.

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I live in Chicago now, work as an assistant professor of English at a technical institute here in town. I teach professional writing courses—technical writing, business writing and the like—and literature.

I'm the first in my family to hold a four-year college degree or better. I went to Syracuse University on a mathematics scholarship. I studied math and engineering, and went into engineering after graduation thinking I could at least make some money, help my father out. My father had been in and out of work, and the three of us had been on and off welfare for a long spell. We were in debt something like \$7000 when I graduated from college in 1977—rent, light and gas, and so forth. I left engineering in 1984 to enter grad. school, thinking that I'd pretty much accomplished what I'd set out to. I had some passion for technology, and still do. But no passion at all for bureaucracies. Still don't.

I have a basic curiosity about technology—about how things may be made, methodically, to work—that helped propel me through my engineering studies (I always found math more interesting than engineering simply because its internal logic seemed to obviate any messy, external conditions). Technological thinking was and is, for me, a powerful way of apprehending so much of our constructed world. To think technically about things is to put a certain faith in the human capacity for building: engineers assume that the application of tried & true principle to concrete form results in structures or structured processes whose working details will somehow add up. Very much like writing,

in fact, to the extent that each successive letter I write and you read makes words, which in turn make strings of words, perhaps sentences. Sense is another matter, affect another still.

From this point of view, it's remarkable that one often encounters resistance to technology from those whose livelihoods depend upon a highly technical understanding of their various materials—artists. Yet from another point of view, this is hardly surprising. So much of what we are accustomed to calling technology—software, automotive engines, toys—is predicated on the capacity to manufacture marketplace demand. And those who value the circumstantial, the temporal, the tentative as a means of nurturing the creative process may justifiably view marketplace motives with suspicion.

It's obvious that my success at landing tech. writing teaching jobs is owing to my engineering background. Seven years in project and process engineering. Two-and-a-half years in Syracuse, with Bristol-Myers Company (now Bristol-Myers Squibb). And before that, four-and-a-half years with Miller Brewing Company (owned by Philip Morris), twenty-five miles north of Syracuse, in Fulton. Real lake-effect snow country. When I drove up there to interview in 1977, I asked the standard question I'd been told to ask about upward mobility. They told me "the sky's the limit."

The brewery just shut down last year.

When I worked there, I had to deal with two corrupt trade unions in Oswego County, the painters and the laborers. The painters were the worst. They were run by a bunch of brothers, a couple of whom were pretty mean. Anyway, a New Jersey firm brought in a foreman reputed to have Mafia connections, and he brought in painters from the Utica-Rome local. His name was Sal, and he'd take me out to lunch once in a while. The brothers didn't bother him. Eventually the FBI was brought in, and I spent a couple of hours telling them exactly what I thought of Sal after I found out he'd threatened a competing contractor's life.

The brewery itself had its own internal management traumas. I was threatened with physical harm on three occasions by management personnel. It always left me feeling at a bit of a loss for words, but I'd developed an unfortunate tendency to smile when insulted, and to grow exceedingly calm. The last time it happened, I asked my combatant to meet me out in the parking lot. He balked.

Because things were so hectic at the brewery—we were always either in a start-up mode or in the midst of expanding operations—there was rarely anybody looking over my shoulder. So favors from contractors were relatively easy to come by. Once—only once—my frustration with the corporate turmoil led me to argue a contract estimate up instead of down. Three of my friends ended up with brand spanking new driveways. I felt like Robin Hood for a couple of weeks.

My brother Mike, a year-and-a-half younger than me, became an engineer too, also attended S.U. A brief stint with Xerox in Rochester, and then nearly a dozen years with General Electric in Syracuse (they like to call themselves GE

these days), shock and vibration testing. He's self-employed now, buying and selling government surplus. He's doing well, has just relocated to Boulder, Colorado, with his partner Linda. He loves the outdoors, especially climbing.

At one point, my brother worked in the same building as my uncle Frank. And my father had worked at General Electric, too, doing cabinet finishing on the line, till the cutbacks of the late sixties. They offered him a buck less an hour or a move down to Virginia. He quit, took his severance pay, and bounced around from small business to small business for fifteen years.

I worked with him one summer, in 1976, refinishing the dorm furniture of Ithaca College. The pay was under the table, no benefits (though I managed to swipe a Binks 7 spray gun). The guy who owned the shop was an Arab, and in addition to my father and me, he had a Greek, a Sardinian, and a Jewish kid working for him. The shop-talk was animated and confusing, a circus of hand signals. In the corner of the shop where my father and I worked, you couldn't see ten feet, the spray fumes were that thick. I ended up with pneumonia.

My mother also worked at General Electric. Crimp and solder assembly line work—piece work—in the fifties, and then receptionist work after Mike and I had grown some. Following the divorce, my mother landed a job as main receptionist at General Electric Corporate Research & Development (CR & D) in Schenectady. Edison's and Steinmetz's company, where they once built a mechanical horse. Edison's desk was just across the lobby from my mother's desk, where she sat for twenty years. Atop it was displayed a perpetually-lit incandescent bulb. My mother, a former French citizen fluent in French, German and English (naturalized in 1949), never finished college because of the war. She and my father were married in Le Havre on 7 September 1945.

My aunt Ilse, my mother's only sibling, lives in Toronto. Her husband, my uncle Eric, died two years ago. He was French, had reentered France with de Gaulle. His father had been an artist in Paris, and three of my uncle's paintings, along with an oil-on-velvet by my mother's father, decorate our apartment.

Ilse's and Eric's only son, my cousin Dan, also has the artist in him. He's in business for himself in Toronto, does conceptual design and layout and the like, and is an accomplished pilot. His Quebecoise wife Thérèse and he have two children, Serge and Michelle, both nearing thirty. My father knew Dan during the war, when Dan was just a kid.

My oma is buried in Toronto. I remember her only faintly, a stern but kind German woman. She lived her final years with her daughter and son-in-law in Toronto. I remember visiting them when I was very small. My mother took me by herself, on the train. I can remember the scenery whizzing by. And I think I can recall crawling around under a table with my uncle Eric's terrier, Yorick.

I never knew my mother's father. He was Parisian, like my uncle Eric. He died in France in 1950, from complications stemming from an injury he suffered when his jeep rolled over and crushed him.

Like I say, I live and teach in Chicago. I'm forty-one years old. I make about \$37,000 on a nine-month contract. I teach six courses a year, have just been denied tenure (long story, for another time). The highest paid (non-admin) person on my faculty, fully tenured with twenty-five years experience, makes around \$45,000 annually.

Summers I write, and travel if we have available credit. I don't teach summers because I need to publish (presumably) in order to get tenure. For better and for worse, publications are the only aspect of academic résumés likely to travel with you. To emphasize the importance of publishing tends to reinforce a research mentality over and against a teaching orientation, I know. But to make teaching the sole criteria in hiring or promoting faculty, especially on a tech campus such as mine, can have the effect of reducing teaching itself to a form of indoctrination—manufacturing the best student-widget. The best student-consumer.

What our various publics rarely understand is that, even if faculty define their primary obligation in terms of their work with students (I do), we need formal encouragement for our intellectual work, work that feeds into our thinking about what we teach and how we teach. Promoting research is one way of maintaining both a connection between teaching and publishing and a faculty interested in pushing the learning envelope.

In any case, I love to write, and there's not much time to do so during the semester. There are meetings, and committees, and a lot of one-on-one student work. I estimate a minimum of sixty hours per week if you're teaching three courses per semester (with approx. twenty students per course). This includes time spent at home grading papers and the like, and the requisite hours one puts into publishing. Much of my writing has to do with the Internet, and I spend hours upon hours dealing with students online, as well as exploring these newer media.

I bought my computer, an aging Mac IIci, with the retirement fund from my previous visiting appointment with the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. About a half-hour's drive north of the adjacent towns of Urbana and Champaign is Chanute Air Force Base in Rantoul, and every now and then my uncle Dominick likes to recite for me how he taught liquid oxygen plant design there for a spell following his military service in the early fifties. This was before he made the move into insurance.

The average annual household income of the students I teach is around \$40,000 per year. Down at Urbana-Champaign it was closer to \$80,000 per year.

U of I at Urbana-Champaign is a land grant institution, located in the middle of the central Illinois growing region. The campus itself is a small city, spread across the central portion of Urbana and Champaign. The campus boasts the third largest academic library in the US. And it's also a National Center for Supercomputing Applications site. Lots of information passing back and forth across the former prairie.

I teach now on an urban campus, located right across the street from the largest public housing project in the US, which is really a series of projects

strung together for twenty or so blocks—Robert Taylor Homes, Stateway Gardens, etc. Something like sixty percent of the almost exclusively African-American folks in these projects are on welfare. Money may be tight on both sides of the street, but it's clear who has and who really has not.

My car, a 1986 Ford Escort, has 140,000 miles on it. My wife's vehicle, a 1987 Nissan pickup, has 110,000 miles on it. My wife, Kass Fleisher, is 39 years old. She holds a doctorate in English too. Together we're in debt around \$50,000 on credit cards. Our total "savings," consists of \$28,000 in a Mutual of America retirement account. (Kass has an additional \$12,000 that we can't get at till retirement). I figure we own, at most, \$15,000 worth of stuff—books, furniture, stereo, clothes, appliances, etc.

After my mother's death due to heart failure, which was sudden and unexpected, my brother and I each received around \$34,000. You don't think about such things, but there they are. I tend to believe that people with money and property in their families, with a real estate in their futures, derive a sense of security from same. But they may not think about such things, either. Anyway, the year my mother died, I earned \$8,000 from teaching. I paid off my debts, moved to Illinois, and used up most of the remaining money purchasing furniture. Mike was able to put a portion of his inheritance toward getting his business off the ground.

My brother and I had supported my father since 1981, though I could do very little myself while in grad. school. My father died penniless. He would lie on the couch, with cancer, watching TV. Occasionally he'd ask me about the low-cost life insurance Ed McMahon was hawking.

We don't really know if Kass will inherit anything (it's difficult to write this without appearing as though we're asking). Kass's parents are both college graduates, in their sixties. Kass's father is now upper-middleclass, owns a nice home in West Chester, outside of Philly, where he lives with his partner Gail; he tells Kass not to expect an inheritance, partly because of the logistics of merging stepfamilies.

Her mother owns a small condo in North Palm Beach, is also remarried, but that part of the family is fractured. Kass has a brother in Florida, but they don't speak. Her mother hasn't spoken to her brother in 17 years. One of her uncles, like my uncle Sam, has been in and out of jail. Kass and her mother had another falling-out recently and it's hard to say whether they'll speak again. Kass has a total of six step-siblings she rarely sees.

Kass has just finished what will probably be her first published novel. She's looking now to do freelance writing (like me), and currently teaches adjunct. We're both opposed to adjunct work because of its low pay (\$2000 per course on my campus) but we need the money—we're thinking of having a kid. Maybe two. Soon.

We have no additional source of income, other than gifts. People have been generous to us, but we still gross approximately my paycheck every year. And from here on out, whatever else Kass can make.



Kass and I met online. After we got married, she worked a final semester in Idaho. She resigned her visiting position there so that we wouldn't have to live apart, with all of our money going to MCI and American Airlines. Crazy life, living apart, but coming together crippled Kass's sense of community. And leaving Chicago, a likely eventuality given my paycheck, will put us both, like so many others, in the position of building a local network from scratch. Again.

We live in Kenwood, which is customarily viewed by its residents as the northernmost portion of Hyde Park. Hyde Park is one of the few desegregated, if not integrated, neighborhoods in the city, a middle—and upperclass enclave with Lake Michigan as its eastern border and the widespread African-American poverty of Chicago's south side to its north, west and south. The severe effects of joblessness and discrimination have persisted for decades now. But there's a heroic effort underway to salvage and restore various sections of the south side, including what is known affectionately as Bronzeville, an area that used to be the home of numerous jazz and blues hot-spots.

Seven blocks down the street from us looms the wealthy institutional presence of the University of Chicago. Two blocks up the street, in Elijah Muhammad's former house, lives Louis Farrakhan.

We pay a very reasonable \$675 per month rent (heat included) for our two bedroom apartment. We live on the third floor of a three-floor walk-up. Security in our building has been a problem, especially on the first and third floors. I've been burglarized once, nine months after moving in.

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I talk about my family, my family's history, my line of work, my earnings, my wife's earnings, my inheritance—the choices I've made, and the choices that have been made for me—I talk about these personal, if not private, realities because these things figure mightily into my social circumstances, my economic circumstances. These experiences and memories, these histories and associations, these material comforts and discomforts in many ways constitute, though they do not cause, my values. And my values have all to do with my sense of language, of what's possible with words, or should be possible. That is, my values have all to do with what needs saying.

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( COMMERCIAL DIPLOMACY )

across la table  
hoping to make the season  
let go  
no never mind of  
making eyes  
of others from around the globe

we came to exchange  
places with our hands above  
and beneath an image  
of a village with children

being white is not a color  
as among others can be  
and we met at la table  
women and men alike  
dressing carefully  
each word to measuring glance  
that there would be no poverty  
in the trade  
no talk of hamburgers  
news or processing of any lives

jockeying for quotation  
in neighborhoods not already assigned  
no match for cues or clues  
for solace is a thing of season and  
hoping to make the season  
let go  
we served only our polemic  
with little talk of homes  
returning callous and unnerved  
to linger in the supermarket

as they do at times  
in places  
made to order  
in the americas

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I teach writing, and I write poetry. My students, eighty percent of whom are male, are primarily engineering and science majors, and I often see my younger self in them—young and enthusiastic, eager to make a buck. Maybe too eager. Most, when asked, will tell you that they plan on three or four years in engineering, and then a move into management. When asked why, they pause. They don't quite understand why such "career paths" are in place. Most haven't studied the history of engineering as a profession. Most aren't aware of early efforts in this country to unionize engineers, and how corporations conspired to halt such efforts. Most aren't familiar first-hand with how the move from engineering into management requires a different set of loyalties, even in these enlightened times. And the rhetoric of success and technical leadership,

rife on my campus, all but obscures the economic factors that suck such students into the corporate system wearing systemic blinders.

A number of my students are ROTC. More blinders.

As my earlier remarks would suggest, it's not that I have a thing against technology per se. Technology can be a good thing. Take my uncle Sam's artificial hips. Or my uncle Dominick's prosthetic knees. Or Kass and I meeting online.

Of course, there are a number of things I might mention on the downside. Take my tap water—please.

And as to my understanding of words, sentences, lines, letters: my sense of alphabet practices in general is that their more literary attributes are rapidly becoming an endangered species in the mainstreams of US public life—even among so-called “literate” groups, even given the enormous alphabetic presence of the Internet and the resurgence of performance-based arts, such as poetry slams. I don't know, maybe I'm wrong. But after years of plying my trade both as an engineer, where I was required to do a good deal of technical writing, and as a poet-prof, I'm convinced that one of the best ways to control groups of workers is to get them to understand letters in particular, and symbols in general, as but means to an end—skills and skills alone. STOP. YIELD. DO NOT PASS GO, DO NOT COLLECT \$200.

The point isn't that I don't teach skills, but that part of my service as a teacher—to my students, to society—consists of teaching some rather fine points about writing and reading, points that have all sorts of practical value. The “literary” as I would like to see the term employed would denote not simply the static (by-)products of cognitive or creative faculties, but an active critical engagement with complex values and feelings. And for me, coming from where I'm coming from, losing this latter literary sensibility requires urgent attention. But not simply because “the future of our children's minds depends upon” etc. It's not only “our children's minds” that are at stake here—it's ours. It's our minds that are jeopardized by encroaching corporate-institutional values.

But the blinders I'm busy fretting over are not just about literary language, either. They have all to do with what's meant by literacy, that powerfully fuzzy word that, though it's been around for only a little more than a century, can connote just about anything these days—cultural literacy, functional literacy, computer literacy, critical literacy.

Disparate, competing, often strangely overlapping literacies: poets wedded to a specific aesthetic becoming literate in terms of that aesthetic; an ethnic group whose members share similar cultural experiences constructing conversation around a tacit knowledge of such experiences; a scientific community at odds over a given controversy, yet sharing assumptions about the nature of their inquiry and publishing their results accordingly. Whether you've found yourself excluded from or proficient in a specific literacy, it should be obvious that not all literacies enjoy equal voice in the mainstreams of American culture. Which is to say that not all folks have equal access to the benefits of their sociocultural

system. And which is to recognize how conflicted communities can be, neighborhoods can be, networks can be. Am I making myself understood?

Let me try another association: I can recall my dad trying to fill out those damned welfare forms. He had only a high school equivalency, sure, but he could speak English and Italian, and was pretty good with French. And he could write well—I have his and my mother's (often passionate) letters to each other from 1948, when she returned to Europe for several months to visit her folks. Nevertheless, my father had a helluva time with those forms.

But not, not because they were difficult. He knew how to read, and he knew how to write—he possessed those skills. But he had a helluva time with understanding his own social predicament. Like so many first generation Americans of his era, he simply could not grasp what had happened “to” him, he could not (as we say in the biz) theorize his own subject position, his place within the social fabric.

Which is understandable, given what he'd been through and where he'd come from. But which is nonetheless as sure a sign of social injustice as of personal failure. He'd take one look at those forms and his hands would begin to shake. He was ashamed. I was only a kid, but I'd have to help him fill them out. And once in a while I'd even speak with the social workers myself.

The point is that my father had never developed the tools—the critical tools—to think about his social circumstances in social terms. Despite having spent a significant portion of his young adulthood on another continent embroiled in a world war, despite having lived through the hard times of a nationwide depression, he could see himself only individualistically, only as a self-made man. And this created a sort of block in his apprehension of who he was, and could be. Which is to say, could do. If he was self-made, he could attribute his struggles and failures—and we all struggle and fail at times—only to his own un-making, his own undoing. So when social times changed, he had a helluva time changing with them.

Who can blame him? I certainly can't. But I can, from my vantage-point these days, blame the establishment culture that fostered in him such complacency about social factors. When I think of literacy, my father comes immediately to mind: excellent speaking skills, solid writing skills, and yet a curious lapse in seeing himself in any but an individualistic context.

So like I say, after things fell apart, it could only be his fault. And once in a while, when he was drinking, steeped in the past, my mother's. Somebody's.

Despite my having observed this structural blindness in my father, I think I sometimes suffer myself from precisely this ailment: I often find myself attributing my successes and failures solely to my own choices, my own efforts, rather than to my social circumstances. I often don't recognize the array of advantages at my disposal or the liabilities inherent to my situation. After all, I am the oldest son—yet another subject position.

But my students—in terms of their individualistic leanings—most are just like my father: younger than me, but older, a lot older.

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Like I say, I love to write. But I don't always love teaching writing. Part of the reason is that it's become difficult to convey why working or playing with words may be an enlightening, if not useful, thing to do. You don't, or shouldn't, teach contemporary literature, or for that matter technical writing, with the assumption that students will understand why manipulating letters, inflecting sentences, or inhabiting paragraphs is a valuable asset, or better, process. The real value of writing may reside less in understanding how-to-succeed-in-business thinking (they couldn't have timed that Broadway revival better) than in understanding why-we-do-what-we-do thinking. And acting accordingly.

When I work with words, as in this essay, I'm alternately revealing some truths about myself and exposing some truths about others—some happy, some not-so-happy, some vital, some less so. Truth in these parts isn't stable, isn't fixed for all time. (Ask me next year what I think about what I've written here.) And I feel a certain responsibility in saying what I've said. At times, I'm downright unnerved by what I've written.

And I have a tendency in my writing, some would say an annoying tendency, to work the writing process into the writing itself. Pause. Fix that typo on "tendency." Reread. [Sigh.] Who am I talking to? Why? Because I like to talk (write) folks into my own uncertainties. Because I like not simply to question my own authority but occasionally to talk through and write through the conventions in which this authority resides, and through which we must travel if we wish to write or think something a bit different. At least, this is my conviction as a writer.

I find it useful to think of writing as a technology, itself keyed into so many other technologies, human practices. While this allows me to understand my practice in helpfully pragmatic, human terms, it likewise tends to functionalize writing—more means to an end. But it doesn't have to be this way. What's important, as teachers say, is to remember your history.

Writing itself has a long and varied history. And to think of writing both as a technology and as subject to historical contingencies is to consider the various materials of writing—the alphabet, paper, ink, software, hardware, hands—in terms of their participation in material practices. Books didn't always look the way they do now, and won't always look this way. The same may be said about writing instruments. The letters may look similar—the swerves of an S, the zigzags of a Z—but the modes of production, consumption and distribution have altered both the products and processes of writing in significant ways. And the computer and networking technologies will continue to alter these products and processes further. The cultural feedback loop is completed when our processes are understood as themselves creating new product demands. And someplace in this loop, questions arise regarding human agency and social motivation—what sorts of economies and ecologies of communication are

desirable? The sort of public domain we develop in this country depends in large part on how we as a society answer this question. And we as a society comprise disparate groups with differing heritages, aspirations, needs.

Thinking about writing as a technology, as a set of mutable human practices with a long history, has helped me in thinking about my profession, and in thinking about my family. I think of my family now as—yes—trying to communicate, and I see breakdowns in communication as owing in part to all-too-human failures. But despite the fascinating mix of languages and dialects that punctuate my childhood memories, I see more readily now that what at times prevented real communication from taking place was a certain resistance on my father's side of the family to the written word, and a certain reluctance on my mother's side to talking things out. And if this constitutes an indictment, then I'm party to the injured party.

My mother was always the more resilient, intellectually and emotionally, as most women are (I regard this as a predominantly cultural effect). My father—he could deal with violent confrontation, and had a solid sense of right and wrong, even if he wasn't always in the right. But he just couldn't cope very well, as I've indicated, with social changes, and with life-changes. Divorce. Lay-off (the bottom-line consequence of what corporate public relations now euphemistically refers to as downsizing, rightsizing, out-sourcing). Wholesale postindustrial retooling. Again, who can blame him? If my mother needed at times to speak more openly, or more plainly, about her insecurities—with my father, for one—my father could hardly speak at all about his own. But he knew when to raise his voice.

From my father, I learned how to handle conflict. A handy survival skill. From my mother, I learned how to think things through. Also handy. From both, I learned how to treat people fairly, and how to establish intimacy with other human beings. I'm still learning.

\* \* \*

As I mentioned, my wife and sometime collaborator Kass Fleisher and I met online. We're both well-aware of how non-committal such online relationships can be, ASCII pixels underwritten by the absence of flesh-and-blood contact. But as writers, we both understand, too, how important it is at times to be able to enter into a written transaction, to be able to use letters to negotiate differences—at length, with composure. And the digitally-processed world, with its capacity for virtually infinite reproducibility—permanence—and virtually instant alteration—impermanence—helps throw into relief the provisional nature of (pre)recorded truths.

As creative writers, Kass (who writes prose) and I (primarily a poet) find ourselves occasionally at odds with certain of our colleagues. Again, artists in general often hold technology as such at arm's length. My conversion into what some would call an online junkie seems in retrospect inevitable, given my engineering background and fascination with technology, given the fact that,

as a white, currently middle-class man, my migration to virtual regions is not demographically improbable. Yet Kass quickly saw the value of online technologies not in terms of any peculiarly technological attraction or fetish, but simply in terms of their value in communicating with friends near and afar, in getting students in her classes to interact with one another, and in providing access to information—whether political, personal, or culinary (we both haunt the Food Network site). In her case, it was only a matter of a few months between her initial online exposure and her decision to develop online discussion lists for each of her classes.

Kass and I got into the habit of semi-weekly phone calls the semesters we were apart. The telephone can be a wretched device for reaching out to touch someone. It always makes you yearn for more. But it's an absolutely indispensable tool for sensing metabolic status—mood—from a distance.

Online technologies, the telephone and its predecessor, the telegraph—these were no doubt developed in part to meet the communications demands of an increasingly mobile workforce. My mother always said it took eight days to cross the Atlantic. I do it these days at a little less than the speed of light.

Yet the “Information Superhighway” is no more a conduit than the air we breathe—we inhabit such spaces. And even this latter analogy breaks down when viewed in light of the necessity for providing enabling structures for public exchange. It's a mistake to see recent attempts to regulate “decency” in cyberspace as akin to legislating clean air. We would do better to learn to live with the all-too-human noise, however noxious or distasteful we may find it. That is, if we wish to speak freely.

Communications technologies have much to do with teaching, too, as with any human practice. I've always been a strong proponent of using our *son et lumière* machines both in and out of the classroom—how could we avoid doing so?—and of monitoring the ways these technologies seem at times to use us. Once any organization gets their hands on a more efficient means, look out: “distance learning” can quickly devolve from reaching students in remote locations to decreasing faculty-student ratios; and it's becoming difficult not to see the Web, however useful an educational tool, as auguring a ubiquitous virtual marketplace. Whatever our technologies, I'd like to see us keep those warm bodies around, intermingling, learning.

However much I falter online or on the line, it seems to me I have many more opportunities in my life—compared to my family's, that is—for seeking out and communicating my daily anxieties, frustrations, doubts, or elations. Sure, I'm a writer. But to those with access to the newer writing, speaking and imaging technologies, there's a certain emphasis on symbolic contact that may prove useful, especially during these economically insecure times. Provided, that is, folks come to understand such technologies as opportunities for growth, self-construction. And provided folks have access.

Still, these newer technologies probably only offset other social losses—losses of community due to job-based relocation (the middle classes are beginning to

look a whole lot like a wide-scale witness relocation program), losses of grass-roots political commitment due to multinational-government collusion. We *need* these new communications technologies. So I doubt I'll end up further along, in my "enlightened" approach to social interaction, than my folks.

\* \* \*

That's just it: here I am, wallowing in words on a daily, if not hourly, basis, getting *paid* to do so, no less—and no doubt *no* further along than my various family members in securing interpersonal relationships and the like. So why bother, what's the use?

But whether it comes to you dog-eared, in luminous projections, or accompanied by my scratchy intonations, this essay you're reading or listening to is a document, after all, not an article of faith. There is some measure of faith in believing that some of you may be willing to hear me out, even respond to my provocations. But if part of what I'm about hereabouts is finding ways to listen better—to myself—I nonetheless maintain a healthy skepticism as to my ability to do so. Not least because I understand how tricky these letters can be when it comes to mediating proximities from within.

The thing is, whether wedded to another person or to words, there just aren't any guarantees. There may be tried-and-true methods of expression and communication. But you never can tell what might happen when it comes to working with words, publicly or privately. All you can do is continue writing and talking and listening. And know when to stop writing and talking. This latter is something I need help with, and I'll take all the help I can get. After all, Chicago is a fast town, like my uncle Sam says.

And he knows better than most what a waste a life can be. But he doesn't have to say so. In fact these days, he can't say so—since the stroke, he isn't able to relate his life in detail. He can only look the part. But for those who know how to read him, he means business, and means well.

\* \* \*

(FUTURES, BY THE OUNCE)

you wanted to know what i thought  
would happen  
so i told you:

how should i know?  
*We know that Sing-Sing  
can be magical for tourism.*  
how should i know  
how you live  
lived  
with these things  
leaving behind



so much or  
many  
without so much as  
a qualm?

origins may be unknown  
as income  
but until  
    how to stay someplace  
    is to change again

until  
and we know this  
you and i and  
say  
dressed again in nothing  
but our lives  
until  
if we do it  
it won't be by  
ourselves  
(listening is not  
what we are or were  
never were  
too good at  
no  
)

will the process run  
away?  
will it  
not?

there are so many more yet  
to listen  
to  
taxing so many ears  
if two  
to ground

and grounded out i find  
in you or  
you  
just funning or unjust  
fearing to disclose  
incompletely  
whether partial

but a reason a  
reason to till the soil  
at times  
like these  
may be still

taking note  
of the details  
the disciplined wonder  
wondering  
how to  
    (adjust, adjusted  
and it's not about selves—

what  
and who  
on earth  
will prosper  
in the coming years  
and who will not.