

Poets, Tramps and Lawyers

A Look at Avocation

By Jennie Bricker

In Robert Frost's 1934 poem, "Two Tramps in Mud Time," a man splits wood because he loves the task. Two strangers interrupt him, professional lumberjacks who want to take over the wood-splitting for pay. In the poem's final stanza, Frost editorializes:

But yield who will to their separation,
My object in living is to unite
My avocation and my vocation
As two eyes make one in sight.

Frost himself described the poem as "against having hobbies" and, at the age of 78, claimed, "I have never had a hobby in my life." Of course, Robert Frost was a professional poet — not a vocation one thinks of as particularly stressful or arduous. Maybe Frost did not need a hobby; maybe he achieved, in his life of letters, the unification of avocation and vocation.

What of those who practice law? In the 1960s, Ronald Talney was attending night school at the Northwestern College of Law (now Lewis & Clark Law School), working full time during the day and busy with his family. In the midst of those demands on his time, Talney started "playing with words." At first, he didn't identify it as poetry. Working in solitude, in spontaneous, unstructured bursts of activity, he produced snatches and "jottings" of language. It wasn't until he submitted a piece to a *Writer's Digest* poetry contest — and won — that he discovered the poetry community and his voice within it. He began publishing poems, dozens of them.

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Vocations and Avocations

The word “vocation” comes from the Latin verb *vocare*, “to call.” Before the word was diluted to mean “one’s ordinary occupation,” it signified one’s divine calling to fulfill a special role. Adding the prefix “a-” to form “avocation,” the words become etymological mirror images: A vocation is a calling to perform certain work; an avocation is a calling *away from* that work.

“An avocation falls somewhere between a job and a hobby,” writes David Yamada in “Minding the Workplace,” the blog of the New Workplace Institute at Boston’s Suffolk University Law School. “Hobbies are great,” he continues, “But avocations can be even better. Like hobbies, they are satisfying and engaging, but often they also provide a deeper sense of accomplishment and contribution.”

Talney graduated from law school in 1966. He spent about 20 years in private practice, about 10 more working for Legal Aid Services of Oregon in Salem. He retired in 1997, but did pro bono work for another decade. He organized a volunteer lawyer program for retirees, which he coined “ELVIS,” for Emeritus Lawyers Volunteering in Service. Talney enjoyed his law practice, what he refers to as “people law” — domestic relations, criminal defense, political asylum, juvenile and elder law.

Practicing law wasn’t enough, though, and Talney kept writing poems and studying his craft. For Talney, being a poet was not a hobby, but rather a parallel career. “I was always as serious with the writing as I was about the law,” he says, insisting that he never “dabbled” in poetry. He found time in his busy life to attend workshops and writing conferences, where established poets like William Stafford and Richard Hugo encouraged his art and bolstered his confidence. He went on to publish five books of poetry, a young adult mystery novel, a memoir and, most recently, a novel called *Nockers Up!* In 1985, his poem, “Portlandia,” was selected as the dedication poem for the Portland landmark statue of the same name.

And Now For Something Completely Different

Laura Maffei practices environmental and natural resources law at Cable Huston, a downtown Portland law firm. Like Talney, she enjoys what she does, loves working with clients, thrives on the “problem-solving aspect” and the “mental flexing” of her permitting and compliance work.

In the early, predawn hours of a weekend morning, while most of her colleagues are hardly stirring, Maffei and her husband load up Onna, Tai and Kicchou — 240 pounds of Alaskan malamute — and drive into the mountains to meet up with fellow members of the Cascade Sled Dog Club. In fall and spring, they practice on scooters. In the wintertime, they run dog sleds over the snow at Frog Lake. In teams of as many as 12 dogs, the club travels forest roads and snowmobile trails. Maffei’s three malamutes run together as a team. At first, the dogs are excited and “going berserk,” says Maffei. Once on the trail, they quiet, settle into a steady pace. In the cool air, the only sound is the dogs’ running. Maffei pauses, smiles. “It’s lovely.”

Maffei and her husband, Noel, also an attorney, have owned malamutes together for 15 years. Maffei confesses that the dogs are “very time-consuming.” When it’s cool enough for dog-sledding (no warmer than 45 degrees), they take the team out. In the winter, they travel to sled dog races. (“Not the Iditarod,” laughs Maffei. “That’s not a goal of mine.”) In the off-season, they work on obedience training. Onna is a champion show dog. But it’s out on the trail that Maffei feels the richest connection to the dogs. “To me, it’s a passion,” she says.

“Mushing” is different in almost every way from practicing law. Malamutes are built for endurance rather than speed, so even when Maffei enters a race, she doesn’t necessarily expect to win. That makes for a sharp contrast with the competitive legal profession. Maffei, who spends her work days solving problems and offering advice, relishes the experience of not having to be in charge of anything but the dogs. “I only have to worry about me, the dogs, the sled,” she remarks. Sledding is physically demanding, but there is “not a whole lot of analysis. It’s extremely relaxing.”

During his legal career, Talney found that the practice of law and the work of writing poetry complemented each other. Often, writing poems “drained off some of the tension of law practice.” In turn, he found grist for his poetry within his daily “people law” work. Like Maffei with her sled dogs, Talney appreciates the purity and spontaneity of composing poems. Unlike law, poetry is “not something you analyze or research.”

In “Two Tramps in Mud Time,” the amateur wood chopper seeks *unity* between vocation and avocation. But for Talney and Maffei, it is the *contrast* between the two that completes and balances their lives.

Maffei intends to continue dog sledding as long as she’s physically able. “Right now I have an excellent balance,” she says of her life.



Laura Maffei races with Onna, Tai and Kicchou at Priest Lake, Idaho. Photo by Emily Sharp.

Work and Identity: What Do You Do?

“What do you do?” All of us have asked and answered this as the gateway question on meeting a stranger, a quick identification check to place us in the world of work. “I’m an attorney” is a pretty good answer. For many, though, the question is uncomfortable. Joshua Fields Millburn, part of a group called “The Minimalists,” calls it “life’s most dangerous question.” Heather Long, writing for *The Guardian*, points out that Americans are “obsessed with people’s jobs.” To get to know you, we “insist that you tell us what ‘career tribe’ you’re in” (“Americans Love to Ask People ‘What Do You Do?’”).

Why do we identify ourselves by the work we do for pay? “Industriousness,” writes Derek Thompson, senior editor at *The Atlantic*, is “America’s unofficial religion. ... The sanctity and preeminence of work lie at the heart of the country’s politics, economics, and social interactions” (“A World Without Work”). “[I]n our country,” writes Long, “your career is a major part of who you are.”

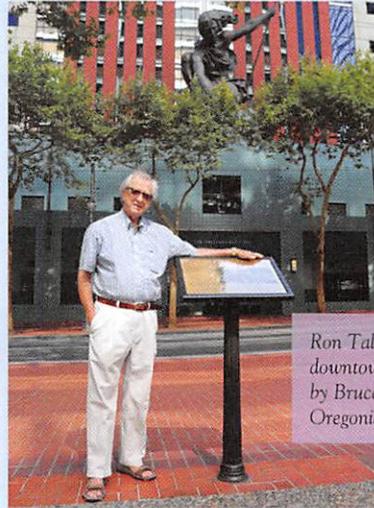
Even as we recover from the Great Recession, however, many Americans remain uncertain about their employment, increasingly pessimistic about personal economic success. An expanding class of working-age adults relies on “contingent gigs” instead of full-time work for wages: There is even a name for them as members of a new social class — the “Precariat.” The Precariat comprises “the growing class of people living with short-term and part-time work with precarious living standards and ‘without a narrative of occupational development’” (David Brooks, “The American Precariat”).

“The economic situation is ... posing a cultural problem for Americans,” writes Heather Long, as we adjust “to a world where people aren’t living for their jobs.” The problem affects both young and old. Long reports: “The younger generation isn’t nearly as fixated on jobs for the obvious reason that they have a much harder time finding stable employment. Instead, they are trying to find a different kind of meaning in their lives.” On the other side of the spectrum of seniority, the Baby Boomer generation — well-steeped in the belief that work equals identity — is reaching retirement age. “They also have to come up with a new identity that isn’t all about a job,” writes Long.

Greg Mowe retired in 2014, concluding a distinguished career as a litigator at the Portland headquarters office of Stoel Rives. He acknowledges that retirement has affected his sense of identity. He misses having a business card and is thinking about making himself a new one. How would it identify him? “Retiree,” “Pensioner” and “Amateur Musician” are all under consideration.

Mowe grew up in Elma, Wash., the son of a logger. In “40 Years (Almost) in the Wrong Profession,” Mowe writes for the *Litigation Journal* that his “initial vocational ambition was to work indoors.” Mowe and all three of his siblings took piano lessons as children. In high school, Mowe sang in the choir and played the French horn, winning the John Philip Sousa award for his accomplishments. At one time, he considered a career in

Welcoming PORTLANDIA



Ron Talney with Portlandia in downtown Portland. Photo by Bruce Sussman for Oregonian Media Group.

On Oct. 6, 2015, Portlandia celebrated the 30th anniversary of her arrival in Portland. She made her final journey by barge up the Willamette River from Gunderson Marine, accompanied by a flotilla that included Mayor Bud Clark paddling a canoe, to take the seat reserved for her on architect Michael Graves’s new Portland Building. Weighing in at six and a half tons, Portlandia was inspired by Lady Commerce, the figure from the Portland city seal, her face modeled after the wife of the sculptor, Raymond Kaskey. She is the second largest hammered copper sculpture in the nation, after the Statue of Liberty.

Ronald Talney’s dedication poem rests on a pedestal across the street:

Portlandia

She kneels down
and from the quietness
of copper
reaches out.

We take that stillness
into ourselves,
and somewhere
deep in the earth

our breath
becomes her city.
If she could speak this
is what she would say:

Follow that breath.
Home is the journey we make.
That is how the world
knows where we are.

—Ronald Talney



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music, a path he speculates would have been “enjoyable but economically vulnerable.” Instead, and in spite of his lack of “any overwhelming desire to be a lawyer,” Mowe attended Harvard Law School and launched an “all-consuming” career in the legal profession.

Mowe enjoyed his work. In “40 Years (Almost) in the Wrong Profession,” he writes about the “inherent beauty in litigation,” the “high art” of case preparation and legal analysis. Still, for most of his career, he relied on music as a form of therapy, a counterbalance to the practice of law. Music helped him clear his head, says Mowe, to stop “constantly worrying about other people’s problems.”

Mowe plays French horn in two groups, a band and an orchestra, and also teaches music to kindergarteners and first-graders at a community transitional school. He finds music deeply relaxing and restorative, a “soulful” but also physical activity that expresses emotion and fosters deep connection with the rest of the group. During a performance, says Mowe, “each of you is creating something bigger and better than any of you could create on your own.”

Practicing law can be competitive and isolating. Often, it flexes the muscles of analytical thought but leaves emotions to atrophy. Little wonder, then, that attorneys find solace in avocations that nurture connection and emotion. For Maffei, dog sledging helps her restore connection: To her husband, because it’s an activity they do together; to her dogs, because they function as a team out on the trail.

For Mowe, playing music allows him both to connect with others and to express and experience emotion. For Talney, poetry evokes “an emotional response to the music of language.” It also



Greg Mowe, amateur musician.

gives him a place among a community of fellow poets — many of whom are lawyers, he points out.

The End of Work?

In “A World Without Work,” Derek Thompson posits an American future where “technology could exert a slow but continual downward pressure on the value and availability of work, ... a new normal, where the expectation that work will be a central feature of adult life dissipates for a significant portion of society.” Thompson sees both danger and promise there. In a society with less available work, there is a “glint of hope” that citizens will be more free to pursue the “immersive activities” — the avocations — that bring them fulfillment.

Can there or should there be unity between vocation and avocation, as Robert Frost seems to advocate? For Ron Talney, Laura Maffei and Greg Mowe, there is value in keeping them distinct. Mowe speculates that music would lose some of its restorative effect if he worked at it for pay. He insists that his new business card would describe him not just as a musician, but as an *amateur* musician. Why? Because, he explains, with his characteristic wry smile, “an amateur is someone who does something for love.”^B

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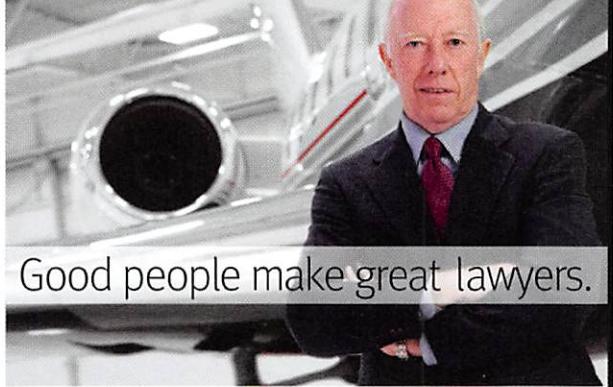
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