

STEVEN BENSON

Working for myself, in collaboration

I'm a licensed psychologist. I work in an office I rent in a small town. As a psychotherapist, I've been variously and spontaneously hiding less, getting more real in it, including not knowing, in the moment, what anything means or what it's good for. My client and I have hopes, but these are subject to change. So it's close in some ways to how I work as a writer. Both situations let me be sincere and ethical. I get to decide how candid to be and when and how and why to say what I might later regret.

I get to try out roles and sides of myself, interact with diverse real and imaginary interlocutors, and explore my attention to language in its dynamic and uncertain action. I sometimes think of theories and precedent ideas associated with experience or reading, but I don't have a stable plan or a rationale for making one. There are ways I limit or block myself, which generally have to do with trying not to be tiresome, disrespectful, or hurtful. I get to care, and there are experiences of learning and intimacy I wouldn't find any other way. The more serious and earnest I find it, the more fun it is.

I couldn't feel as resilient, I wouldn't have as much fun, I wouldn't experience my own integrity or invention anywhere near as much, if I weren't self-employed. I could make lots more money in a hospital or a city job, with my degree, but the scale and role I have here allows me to recognize passion and happiness sporadically every day. I limit professional working hours to about 40 a week. I don't let the business grow. In my sixties, I don't expect to retire; I'll have two children in college later this decade. My independence allows me to treat people as equals and to improvise my orientation to whatever I decide to say or do.

In my experience, this job is "artisanal," in the meaning Andrew Joron applied to work, in his Labor Day 2010 talk – unquantifiable – qualitatively evaluated – and it's ephemeral, like performance work, leaving only "the record" as document of what's transpired. Like the "proletarian" Andrew describes, I have "nothing to sell but [my] labor," one of activating relations through speaking and occasional writing. I have control over what happens to the profit I am making and lots of say over my working conditions: this is precious.

My father's work was all in the advertising industry in Manhattan. He was gone 12-14 hours five weekdays and often holed up in the study working Sundays. He seemed pressured. Excessive smoking and drinking led to death by retirement age, debility and lost income before that. He missed out on relationships with his children. His career set a negative precedent we have variously reacted against.

I take time off work for my kids or for health care appointments, not to write. Time for what does something consequential with writing happens most in chunks, when they're away with their mom or when an externally imposed deadline gets me to work

in the evenings or while they play with friends. Evenings after work I swim laps half an hour away or go to various meetings and events in the community (like the peace and justice group, parent groups, a men's group). Once I'm home I'm cleaning my apartment, answering emails, following internet leads, and taking care of personal business until I make myself get into bed. I've been building a long work a few minutes at the end of each day in bed.

As a dad, I do things with my kids when they're with me, weekends and one school day afternoon. At the office, my professional work suspends my practice as a writer and as a parent. I am always a father, and I am always a writer, no matter what I'm doing or thinking. "Psychologist" isn't so inherent; it engages some inherent aptitudes and commitments.

I mention money and class with clients more and more—theirs, mine, and others', but rarely with clients I see as affluent or financially secure. I don't think I do mention it in the work of writing, either, except when explaining why I'm reluctant to travel for readings, performances, or conferences unless I can recoup travel expenses through getting paid. I want to find ways I can challenge these avoidances. Recouping the income for time lost from not meeting with clients is usually out of the question. Both kinds of work are break-even, financially, for me. My professional job covers my work and family and personal expenses, and my writing work doesn't even cover the expenses that go into producing it. I am happy with this situation, though it doesn't make any sense, and I have an increasingly grim attitude about property and capitalism.

This kind of job doesn't help me to read more poetry, poetics, and so on. But I may be doing just what I have to do to do my own best work, and to keep myself afloat, as a person in this society, as well as economically within this system. Twenty-five years ago, I wished I could work at nothing but my versions of art, a writer, an artist, but I saw no way I could support myself alone at that. A lot of writing has not got done. Maybe less is better. It's slow: in this I see choice, as well as flow.

I avoid doing readings or promoting my writing in the small town rural region where I live and am a therapist. I've been learning not to be so secretive about it, the past few years, but I'm reluctant to contaminate my client base with reflections on my status or value as an artist. I don't want to be a model, a hero, or a dramatic scenario for clients, aside from how we might realize this through the dialogue we make together. Our conversation is the work.

AMBER DIPIETRA

Post for Labor Day blog 2011

Please imagine the proceeding sections as non-linear, rounded confluences—my relationship to work/poetics as Venn diagram. For me, there is no longer any real separation between the various kinds of work I must do and my poetics. This is both a beneficial alignment and a chiasmus of energies. Fractal symmetries that sort of shove into each other while trying to surface.

WORK-WORK

The short answer to “What do you do?” is, “disability advocate”. Though, often, it is easier to respond with, “disability service provider” because people can interpret that as case manager or social worker and that makes sense to them. The longer, more accurate answer, is that I work for the Independent Living Resource Center in San Francisco, where I am absolutely not a social worker (via the old model of managing someone else’s choices and determining abilities based on bureaucratic qualifiers). Independent living centers exist nationally in most major cities. They are government-mandated, largely government-funded nonprofits that serve as places where people with disabilities can go to get information about resources, such as assistive technology, support groups, accessible arts programs, alerts about proposed legislation impacting disability issues. ILCs are where people can get help with navigating social services like personal or in home care, low income housing options, employment accommodations, etc. My work also requires me to keep up with the politics around healthcare, genetic testing, civil rights and technological innovations.

It requires me to be a constant communicator—either via phone, in-person, or increasingly, via social networking—since one of the biggest issues facing people with disabilities is the divide that still exists in terms of social integration. But most of all, this work requires me to sit with people and envision outcomes. People come to me with a mass of reality and their language around it—a new diagnosis or years of living with nagging, stupid issues that crop up. Things like: “landlord won’t let me have a ramp and now three steps keep me prisoner in my apartment”, or “I need to take Goldie to class on my shoulder because she can talk to the voices while I take notes for my exam”, or “I go to job interviews and as soon as I walk in the door with my white cane, the interviewer sounds plastic”. Primarily, mine is a job of collaborative making. A kind of peer counseling poiesis. I listen, co-brainstorm, share stories about folks in similar situations. I take the language that is given to me and give it back to the person who has come to see me—either by offering a way to prioritize around the issue, reframing options, or simply emoting in a way that is authentic and carries new momentum.

FREELANCE-WORK

As a “peer mentor” at my independent living center, it is hard to know how much or how little to do, how best to facilitate a space for the client’s envisioning process. Especially when we are stand together against such gaping holes in community support systems. There are appeals to file, requests to fill out, bureaucratic languages that must be worked within. Then I go home and I swirl these interactions around in my head for days at a time, trying to hit upon some creative suggestion I can offer in each individual situation. This “taking it home with me” is not really required as part of my paid work, but it is the part that makes me a poet within the context of the work. I have wanted to push that impulse further and I have wanted to combine my paid work as an independent living center worker with my work as one who writes poems. I have also wanted to bring in body-work, the hardest most basic work. I wanted to create a single space to function as a poet, a body-worker and a disability advocate, so I have been experimenting with Write To Connect (<http://www.writetoconnect.blogspot.com>). A creative writing class for folks in the disability community.

BODY-WORK

I ran out of cartilage over 25 years ago and all of my bones, including the vertebra in my neck, have been grinding to a halt since then. I am 32 years old. I have bone spurs, tendon impingements, and frozen joints. If I want to maintain any freedom of movement for the next, hopefully, several decades, I must work every day, slowly, tediously, to keep some modicum of space between my internal moving parts. This means undoing the time spent working by swimming, sitting in warm waters, lying down, making dull circles with ankles, shoulders, wrists, etc. It also means massage, acupuncture, and energy work. And Art workouts (<http://www.facebook.com/event.php?eid=163687127010167>)! (This embarrasses me, to go into all this, because I feel like I have said this stuff on the internets before. I am kind of phobic about being repetitive, because being repetitive in writing seems to mimic somatic constriction I experience all the time. However, it also tends to loosen gently, methodically, which is absolutely the point.)

All of this body-work requires a huge amount of money, time, and attention. I give far less of any of these resources to the body-work, than I give to other types of work. That’s because I get bored, because it is invisible, because it feels indulgent, because it leads me into claustrophobic self-narratives about the nature of how I do or do not move, because it seems simple and I haven’t figured out how to plug my somatic machinations into my writing in a way that is totally interesting and accurate. I think a sure bet is to find a way to offer the body-work to others. To have an energy work practice I offer out of my apartment, for instance. Currently, I’m confused about the apprenticeship process for that—and how I really feel about it as a fair exchange. If you know of an energy worker/poet who could help me legitimize this for myself, please send me an email. Most days, I want to be a practitioner of some unquantifiable transformations for and with others, more than I want to be a poet.

SOCIAL- & DOMESTIC- WORK

Sicilian and Spanish immigrants by way of Cuba, people who are cigar rollers, nurses, hair dressers, musicians, waiters, bartenders, grounds keepers, actors, house painters, appliance repairers, and sales reps for cigarette vending machines, wine and beer—these are my family. Most of them with incredible genes that have them looking smooth, tan and athletic into their 70s. They've worked hard all their lives so I could stay home, in Florida, in their houses, and write poetry. If I had wanted, I could've done that. Or, my family cajoles, "You could rent a little place in the cool neighborhood where the gays and the arty people are redoing the old shotgun houses". And be my very own Ybor City Thoreau—with family to do the laundry and cooking.

But, I chose "to haul ass outta Florida" as my grandfather Chino put it. And since I have asked so much of my family—it is a lot for them to have accepted, emotionally, culturally, me putting 3,000 miles between us—the least I can do is fly across the country a few times a year. I don't make very much money working at a disability nonprofit (especially in a time when politicians want to cut funds that will allow people with disabilities the basic freedom of remaining in their own homes, outside of institutions). With the money I make, I save up to buy plane tickets home, to see my family. That's always my goal. Not money for writers' retreats or conferences or whatever. This is ironic for two reasons: 1) my family would buy my tickets and 2) I chose to spend an inordinate amount of money on academia which I then abandoned. That is to say, I used the excuse of "needing to go to grad school for creative writing" in order to move out to San Francisco.

The riddle for both are as follows: I felt like my family (many of them did not finish high school) would never let me leave Florida if I didn't use grad school, an obscure and irrefutable idea, as an excuse. I also felt incapable of work, an MFA was an expensive way of stalling. Which actually feels like ultimate dumb assery to me, the grad school thing (but it is also the way I met magical friends). To me, work was physical labor, which I always saw my family doing. Watched them doing when I, a 14 year old with locked shoulders, had a hard time even dressing myself. I got an MFA, but then decided being a creative writing professor had not enough to do with the peer mentoring work that needed doing, the kind of work I now do at the independent living center. Because by the time I had finished my MFA, I had also discovered the disability community. As for using the majority of my tiny savings for tickets home, that's about emotional debt (how my family let go while remaining present to fall back on) and a sense of honoring their work, much of it blue collar, by trying to match it with my own.

I think of Chris Daniels, in his talk for Labor Day, saying "I see labor as an attribute of human behavior which transforms reality. You make a chair, you've transformed reality. You work as a clerk, you take a pile of paper here and move it there, you transform reality. You teach for a living, hopefully, you want to transform a human mind, you want to help someone transform reality and in your work you are — hopefully — transforming reality." My little brothers are struggling, back in Florida, to figure out what kind of new

experiences they want to have. They are doing badly in school because we don't come from a studious culture. It is no longer clear to me what to tell them. My experience—a disability advocate/poet that left for SF—is a total anomaly. I want to do more work for them, help them transform their reality, but I am not sure where to begin. Especially if transforming means discarding cultural foundations.

POETRY- & SLEEP- WORK

In her Labor Day talk, Sara Larsen describes the time she spends under the San Francisco Bay, rapid transiting toward capitalism. I think about how much better I would be doing health-wise if I had stayed a small arthritic Hispanic girl in Florida, Thoreau style, soaking in the Gulf of Mexico with my abuela to help me out. In SF, I spend more time commuting, under the sea, than rehabilitating in it. It will always be too fucking cold for me to swim here.

I fantasize all the time about being able to have sex, conversations, swim/ambulate and connect people in my sleep. This is why I write poetry. It is a little like being able to do that. I love what Andrew Joron said during his Labor Day Talk about being a surrealist, about dreaming while you are awake. It makes me understand how I could possibly join work and sleep. I need to sleep at least 10 hours most nights to keep my joints from totally stiffening up. Sleep fees like productive work; my friend Lexi Brayton says, “sleep is emotional research”.

There is a desire for the continuous, to be a single fluid element. For there to be no mess. (There wasn't space to elaborate on domestic-work in this talk—the part of me that, as a disabled woman with a bit of the super cripple syndrome, has a need to keep very clean floors. So that I know I can. Absurdly, with splintered ankles, four cats, and dwelling in close proximity to the Tenderloin. How DOES she do I do it, they ask? A boyfriend that sweeps and mops! Love as economical exchange—a whole other subject on the spectrum of work. I should add that he is also not insulted by my longing to converse and have sex while staying asleep. And that he has recorded this podcast.)

Poetry is messy. It is filtering bits of mica or raking the flats for a resonant tone. It is Sisyphus stuff, as work-work is often compared to. The labor it takes for things to elapse in time. I move in small circles, trying to find clearings and new energies. Work-work, freelance-work, body-work, poetry- and sleep- work align in the moments outside time, real time. Which is not trying, but dreaming. Awake, together with great fervor and to much use.

ANONYMOUS from *five o'clock*: SLOPE's daily weather report for March 2011
Labor, Poetry & Professionalization: pastiche of journal entries

I am thinking about professionalization, labor and poetry. How the counterpoint echos off each of these. Yet, these caverns find themselves pressured together, by little quakes, by life's demander/s and other bandits: These are the attempts to crumble them into fluidity. If this essay had a title it would be: stealing time.

I work four jobs: part-time permeates every move I perform. Today it is sunny and almost too hot, a reprieve from the rain dumping on this coast and my hair and the news is reporting on radiation floating. I worry about getting sun stained; I wish I had my lover's skin; I realize the privilege in this thought, which also feels.

Part-time afterschool program coordinator, part-time administrator, part-time poetry editor, part-time bartender and part-time lover. I live 300 miles away from my lover. The inability to dedicate myself to anything drips off the walls of these caves onto my skin, which can't help but absorb. Yet, dedication (investment) is what I seek in each job. The economy of investment, its exchange, makes it beautiful between lovers, but despondent on a large scale and rarely beautiful at a job. Though, these jobs do want to be a part of this beauty, even if they are subject to the same imaginary-dollar-house. It is this nuance and intention that causes my feet to trip over themselves, that causes me to over-invest and therefore, under-invest in each cave. Like when you write/ read something so determinedly good that it renders its opposite as clearly as the intended essence. I realize that failure also feels. I picked these positions because they were the best to me and the best for me. "The Best" is a vague qualifier, as lazy in practice as it is in writing or use.

Are my caves the best because they allow me to funnel my unrelenting need for labor into a category of professionalization, a need resulting in my class and upbringing? A need which connects me to disparate family? Did my class and upbringing fool me? I am not special in thinking this and my generation is not unique in feeling it. I have had fourteen jobs since I was 14, which is also when I started working. It's like that Tee-Shirt made in Hawaii or somewhere: "QUIT YOUR JOB/BUY A TICKET/FALL IN LOVE/ NEVER RETURN"



I started reading a piece that told me ellipses were an ethical gesture because they indicated a missing text. This creates a culture that is embarrassed to use the text, I thought. Culpability must also extend past my writing into a utility driven self-reflexivity. Yet, I create permissions. Permissions we create. What I am trying to say is that culpability can, and perhaps should, be the fluid that forges the flood: the flood that cleans or damages anyone's caves. Perhaps, the damage will be to those houses of professionalization, labor and poetry.

aside: These are not the houses that my grandparents lived in, and they are not real. A table because I put my hand on it and call it a table. No, the houses of professionalization are the breeders of imaginary money. They operate in imagination as well and often at a faster pace than the artist. And none of this has to do with a poet I am publishing in my next journal needing to flee to Japan to repair her home and my wanting to write to her endlessly about her journey: the selfishness in that.

For the latter of the two houses (labor and poetry), I carved poetry into a laborious endeavor. This might qualify as a success in my life. Therefore, I can write without the guilt of privilege convincing me my imagination did not deserve such luxury. However, with four jobs, I have to steal time to do this; I avoid walking home under dumping rain and grabble with the dump truck that is my liver now. I wrote a poem today when pulling over on the side of the freeway on way home from work. The exit was called "Fish Ranch Road." What happens off of "Fish Ranch Road?"

This does not mean the writing before (or under) this sign was "the best," only that it occurs/ed. It doesn't even mean that what I am writing now is even good. It only means that it happens with using my hands, performing a physical action over and over, so that process develops into a laborious one that forges intimacy between the endeavor of writing and the writer or me. By the time the poem enters the landscape of the computer, it engages again with the anxieties of its facade, and the process of writing begins to wither much like the enraged orchid on the kitchen table, disillusioned by her image.

I cannot reconcile (my) poetry and (my) professionalization, and maybe I am also disillusioned. I'm not sure I have time to take care of myself. A woman at my afterschool program calls me "The Machine." And, though others have, I do not curse myself or my imagination for inhabiting The Bar space, along with these other positions. They put mirrors behind the bar so the patrons can see whose coming up behind them and so the bartenders can watch the patrons when they turn to pour a whiskey. Where I live even the bar-bandits have degrees with poison ivy on them. In those places that I'll never be able to afford to live, the ivy is just a little greener. The Bandits are everywhere — <http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/450-a-world-of-bandits-a-philosophical-dialogue-by-alain-badiou>

Here is the best description of a hangover I read aloud this weekend while in California. I read it to my lover, who made me apple and mascarpone crepes and drank a breakfast beer. From Roberto Bolaño's *Monsieur Pain*:

I woke with stiff limbs, an unrelenting ache in my neck, and a frightful hangover. It was eleven in the morning and a glassy dust was falling, or rising, through the gap in the roof. The warehouse was quiet; the junk was stubbornly guarded by an aura of neglect: objects banished from the realm of human concern—even the light seemed to shun them. It was not hard to find the door; it had no handle and opened onto a gravel-strewn courtyard with abandoned flowerbeds on either side. The morning, the sky's crown, seemed to be falling apart. Which was comforting, in a sense, since I was in a similar condition. To the left I noticed a metal door, which was shut. Beside it was a little wooden box, which seemed to have been waiting there for centuries; I sat down on it. I took a deep breath. Images of previous hours—escape and disappointment, dreams and delirium—tumbled through me. It's finished, I thought aloud, the carriages bound for nowhere are finished. The sky over Paris, though clearer than the day before, seemed more sinister than ever. Like a mirror hanging over the hole, I thought. But we could never know for sure. An indecipherable tongue. I urinated against a wall, profusely. I was tired; I felt wretched, alone, and confused in the midst of a labyrinth that was far too big for me. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't tell whether the sky was shaking or I was.

Like the Talking Heads (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-pCZ5E5tn4I>) *I hate people when they aren't polite*. Learning how to move impolitely—stealthily—is what professionalization is; it is learning the moves so well that by being impolite you appear polite! Our mastering of maneuvering and the maneuvers themselves are what make one good or bad at moving within profession they embody. We learn these moves so thoroughly that we succeed or fail at them on grand scales within the interior landscape of our selves, which go onto generate the imaginary numbers that appear online in our bank accounts. These successes and failures are what cause me to claim that money is imaginary. A claim of this sort could be construed as threateningly condescending to the class that I inhabit and those on much lower class rungs. However, by eliminating the symbolic concept engendered from the paper-cotton-money, I would just take and give what I wanted. I would exchange and trade without the need to participate in those symbolic trades that further detach me from reality and from other living beings, making us all easier targets for the bandits. Because of all of these threats, poetry somehow created or suffered from the generation of a poetic infrastructure within the shelter of the university: the academic teaching-poet was formed. However, there are not enough university positions to hold us all, and why should we be so privileged to fight amongst ourselves for such shelter...Am I being ethical? I hope the gesture is at least.

At the most, *I want to imagine existence as a poem*. This is what I wrote during Andrew Joron's talk at the 2010 Labor Conference in Oakland (http://labday2010.blogspot.com/2010_09_01_archive.html). I agree with Joron and the person (lost to my notes now) that he quoted: "Jobs are Jails." They involve coercion against our wills and poetry operates against coercion's imperative. I believe in the benefits of labor, and that labor pulls one out of the selfishness and privilege that the self can develop and is often encourage to develop in America, while your uncles are out back burying thousands in the backyard.

I believe in the process of writing as an act of labor. Thus, the rambling here explores the cave of a poetic position as well: one where we can choose how to focus our robust exploration and need to perform such labors. Work is necessity and Poetry is Freedom. I steal time not only to love the way someone speaks to me in the morning hours but also to write poems out of the corners of my eyes, the static climbing off me.

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<http://labday2010.blogspot.com/>