

On how day jobs can benefit your creative work



Writer Toni Mirosevich on physical and intellectual labor, abandoning assumptions, and feeling out of place in academia.

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As told to Shelby Hinte, 2437 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Day jobs](#), [Education](#), [Process](#), [Collaboration](#).

You have an interesting background. I'm curious to hear a little bit about how your relationship to work has evolved.

I've been thinking about it, and recently I went back and looked at my very first book, which was called *The Rooms We Make Our Own*. The very first six poems are about the physical work I did. The first one is "Gandhi Joins the Workforce" from when I was pressure washing restrooms in the park. The next one is "Madonna Joins the Workforce" from when I was a truck driver. Then "Ophelia Joins the Workforce" from when I was a swimming pool operator. It goes on and on. So the very first poems that I ever got out in the world in terms of a book were work poems.

I come from very working-class people. My dad was a fisherman. My mother was a tuna cannery worker until she had kids, and then was a cafeteria worker in a hospital until she was 77. I can't even think of a relative who didn't do physical work. So my relationship to work is, "What the hell am I doing in academia?" "How did I end up there?"

It's not that I don't value that work, it's just a world that I wasn't familiar with. I felt pretty out of place, except for in the classroom, because there you can toss out new ideas and then respond to what ideas come back and link those up to the lesson or text. You're the one who helps steer the discussion. You're the captain of the boat and with a willing crew, you can end up with a wonderful catch.

The protagonist in your new book *Spell Heaven* has a similar question to working in academia. It's like "Where are my people? These aren't my people." What about academia was it that maybe made you feel so othered?

Part of it is not knowing academia. There's status, there's hierarchy, there's power, there's politics. There's status and power and politics if you're fishing with a lot of other fishing people, but it's not the same. Not only did I not grow up in in that world, but I felt that I just didn't belong there. I found out I belonged in the classroom and that was a great thing.

While reading your book I thought of this interview I recently listened to with the writer [Bud Smith](#). In it he talks a lot about how before his short stories ended up on the page, they were stories that he told over and over again at the bar until he could tell his wife was sick of hearing them. I remember hearing you tell some of the stories from *Spell Heaven* in your classroom and I wondered what you see as the relationship to oral storytelling and the page?

Both my grandparents were from what we call *the old country Croatia*. They were big, big storytellers. My dad was

a big storyteller. And I spent a lot of time on the fishing docks when I was a kid. Everybody there was a storyteller. That's a very familiar world for me. And one of the things in the classroom, and thank you for listening to those stories in the classroom, was that one way to make the academic world real to me was to bring the outside into that space. It's not an ivory tower if you bring real life inside of it and find a way to tell a story.

The way you write, and even the way you teach, feels as though you're trying in some ways to look at the world differently than you might initially see it.

I think looking at the world differently has to do with the trajectory that you put yourself on. If you're inside a building and you're inside a classroom, that's going to be your world. But once you walk out into the world and you meet people that you've never met before, suddenly you have a connection with them and you start to chat and they open up their lives to you, and maybe you even have a few assumptions. For instance, there's a story in the book about a woman who seems to be on meth and the narrator's assumption is that she must be an awful mother. Later the narrator comes to the understanding of, *Wait a minute, If I get to know this person, and if I forge the distance between me and her, maybe I'll find out that she's actually a very good mother, but until I put myself on that trajectory outside of a hermetically sealed environment, that thought or insight isn't going to happen.* The thing about writing a different world is you have to put yourself in a different world.

Teaching, specifically teaching writing, comes up quite a bit in the book, and it made me wonder about how being a professor shaped your own writing practice.

When I was a truck driver—which is a great job for a writer; you're alone; you're in the truck cab; you jot things down; it's a very wonderful little internal world. And actually, almost all of the jobs that I had were—from cleaning restrooms to attic insulation to delivering blood—they were all where you're on your own. They were great worlds to write in. In terms of teaching and writing, I think that the great benefit was being able to come in with stories and try them out on the class. If I told a story and the class was with it, and they actually responded, sometimes those responses would make me think about the story in a different way, and that would help shape the story. So, it was like a draft—like a living draft. The draft comes into the room, you speak it out loud, and people respond. It's almost like collaboration.

I like that so much because I think a lot of times writers talk about writing as being something that happens in isolation, but maybe it is always just a way to convey a story.

Yes, and that's the best times in the classroom. And it's not just me doing it. You all would share all your stories, too. And that was when suddenly it became less academic or ethereal. Suddenly people are talking about their lives and then they're writing about their lives. And that's pretty wonderful.

It makes me think of one of the first stories in *Spell Heaven* where the protagonist goes to the pier to write stories and a woman who is called the fish wife comes in and she feels compelled to tell the protagonist her story. She says something along the lines of, "I always wanted to write." And then the protagonist thinks, "Well, I always wanted to do what you do,"—which is captain a boat. Do you think that there's ever anyone out there who isn't constantly thinking about how their day-to-day might look different than it does?

I think maybe people do that all the time. There's a book out called *The Midnight Library* by Matt Haig and in it there's a woman who is not having a good time in life and she wants to call it a day. She wants to end her life. She ends up in this midnight library and each book on the library shelf is a version of the life she would've had if she'd made a different choice. Just the idea is fascinating—what would it have been like if I...if I... if I. *What if I didn't marry this guy and wasn't on a fishing boat and I always wanted to write and what if I wrote? What if I never left physical work and really decided that I would just go on and do attic insulation?* I think that's kind of the great thing of imagining different lives and different possibilities.

I think about this a lot because writers and artists often get accused of not being in the present moment or of living in the imagined world. And I always wonder, where is that line between being a collector of material versus being an active participant in your life? Where do you draw the line between the two?

Usually if I'm out in the world, if I'm listening to people's stories, if I'm taking a walk, I'm in it. I'm in the moment. I'm fascinated with what someone is saying to me, or I want to be open to what they're saying to me. I think it's only later when I'm trying to write or it's 3:00 AM, then suddenly I'm not in that moment at all. I'm just like, "oh god, this person said *that*," and then I'm off on some kind of really fantastical thing with the imagination.

I wish I was in the moment more of the time, all of the time, but I think it's only when I forget the self that I'm in it. It's like if you're walking along and you're chatting with somebody or you walk out on the pier and the sea is gorgeous, then you're just in it and you're not thinking. It's best when you're not thinking. I wrote down a quote from W.G. Sebald because I hadn't read him in a while. He was talking about people fishing and said, "They just want to be in a place where they have the world behind them and before them nothing but emptiness." And I just thought, *Man, isn't that the best thing?*

I sometimes feel like I should be more present and other times I feel like writing is when I'm the most present. It's sort of like the spiritual practice. I can like tap into something that feels so in tune with my experience.

Yeah, but that's great when that happens. It's the best part of writing because really the world drops away. You're totally in that. You might be writing about being on some boat in the south sea or something, but you're in it. You're so in it.

How do you know when something is more than just a story you listen to or something you observe in the world? How do you know when it belongs on the page?

I don't think I do know when. I used to do something in classes called findings. In a finding you don't think story. You don't think poem. You don't think, "Oh, I'm going to turn this into something and I've got to have the character, the plot, the landscape, the setting, dialogue." You just sit and write some things down. Just think, "Well, I'll write this down and then maybe it'll remind me of something or maybe things will start to gather around it." Things trigger a memory or another thought or another small story. And then things start to move towards each other, what I always like to say is they *beckon* to each other, and then you write bazillion drafts.

A theme that comes up a lot in your book is a fear around being shackled to a nine-to-five. I sometimes hear writers talk about writing in a similar way, like it is this task they have to go to and it's a very laborious thing. On the other hand, there is this sentiment that art can set you free. Where do you fall on that spectrum of thought?

I think when I'm not worried about or concerned with turning something into something and if I'm not concerned about publishing, then writing is a freeing activity. Being out in the world, out by the sea, is a freeing activity. I do find it unusual or surprising that I ended up inside of buildings for a long period of time.

How did you end up inside buildings? I've always been curious about how you got from these sort of wild, physical jobs to working in the universities.

The truth is that I was also an anti-nuclear activist. I did a lot of political work and I imagined that I would do that and do these physical jobs and that would be what I did. I got very ill in my mid-30s with something called Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, CFIDS, and I could no longer do physical work. That's why I went back to school.

You know, you have a trajectory that you imagine your life is going to take and it absolutely changes. You cannot predict. So why I would end up in a university is really an unusual thing.

I jumped over some nuclear submarine fences and did some political organizing in the Northwest and then, after I became ill, I got a quick BA. I wrote about being sick and there was a fabulous teacher, Ani Mander, who said, "Send that to the graduate program in creative writing at San Francisco State."

That's the other thing, isn't it? People that you don't expect come in and they change the course of your life by

a suggestion. It's chance too, isn't it?

You've been that person for a lot of people. I wasn't even going to bring this up, but since we've talked so much about institutions and academia, I'm really curious—you were a professor for a long time, and in the MFA, but you also taught "Teaching Creative Writing," and in the last few years people have been pretty vocal about scrutinizing the MFA. What are your feelings about teaching creative writing or teaching art in general?

I think the one answer, the simplest answer is, it was my job. I got a job. And felt so very fortunate to get it. When I think about the people in the classes that I taught, I don't think about the degree. I think about the experiences we had in those classrooms that were kind of extraordinary. Now, is it worth going into debt? I don't know. My experience of teaching was that I felt damn lucky to have a job. That my experiences in the classroom were extraordinary.

Toni Mirosevich Recommends:

After Life, a film by Hirokazu Kore-eda (all of Kore-eda's films!)

"Strangers" essay by Toni Morrison in the *New Yorker*, 1998

"Good Old Desk," song by Harry Nilsson

Hiroshi Sugimoto's photography series of the Ancient Seas

"Oblique Strategies", by Brian Eno/Peter Schmidt. Select a card at random at the start of each day.

Name

Toni Mirosevich

Vocation

writer

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Shotsy Faust