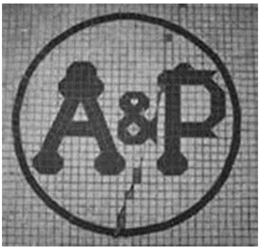
SHOP STEWARD: AN AUTO/BIOGRAPHY

By Dennis Parsons
State University of New York Oswego



My father was a company man, having worked 44 years as a grocery clerk for the same store. Those were the days when one could swear an allegiance to a brand, clock working hours that would fill decades and have grievances, whereby, both parties—employer and employee—might be able to achieve some kind of mutual understanding. He would punch out at 5pm but, rather than head for home, drove in the opposite direction, to the Cadman Plaza Post Office, where he would "throw mail" for an additional four or five hours of work. He'd leave the house before 8:00 in the morning and rarely return before 11pm.

For most of his 44 years at the A&P, my father was head of the dairy department. Though he would often proudly reminisce about working for a time as a butcher, as far as I can surmise, that kind of work could never be his calling. Meat cutters, a tight-knit, knife-wielding clan, only seldom presented themselves from within the confines of their frozen metal hole. For my father, having come from a long line of women and of men who prefer to be alone while in the company of others, perhaps working dairy was more suitable. Though he did have his customers, and the occasional part-time kid, the dairy section was tucked into the back corner of the store. While he was out there on the shopfloor, in the main, the work allowed him to keep to himself.

At around the age of 8, as the youngest of five siblings, I finally got my turn to go to work with him on the four or so Christmas Eves that followed. Uprooted as a family to the frontier of Staten Island, we'd return to Brooklyn on those frigid December mornings, over the Verrazano Bridge, taking the Ft. Hamilton Pkwy exit to my father's A&P.

Out in the world's classroom, beyond school and home, my father was my first teacher. Donning the crimson apron, twice folded over at the waist, I would help my father load the milk, stack the cheese, cradle the eggs into the case, rotating each of the soon-to-be out-of-date items to the front. (To this day, I reach to the back of the case when I shop; disappointed when I discover the clerk had not practiced this unspoken rule). My father showed me how to stock the waxy milk cartons in such a way as to ensure that every two on the bottom row together formed a platform for the second row, each gallon or half-gallon sliding into place between the rooftops of the two ridges. He trusted me with ink stamping the cheese, even after mistakes were made. Much of the day, I was left on my own; my father would disappear for lengthy visits to the inner sanctum of the meat room for a nip of holiday cheer. Part of the dairy's charge back then was to take in the bottle returns. Refunds varied by size, which was more arithmetic than this eight-year-old could get his head around. So, when he was off somewhere, anxiety took his place. Hoping at least customers would have all the same sized bottles, I resorted to guessing.

In these moments of panic, my father would appear by my side and, with a wave of his hand, arrive at the correct amount. Customers were always kind about my mistakes, his pride reflecting in their eyes. Towards the end of the day, Joe O'Brien, the store manager, would come around and press a very small manila envelope, folded over with

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my name written across the top, a five-dollar bill tucked inside, the deal sealed with a firm handshake over a job well done.

My on-the-job errors involved the exchange of real money as I negotiated the power differences of age and experience. A more vibrant, situated school math curriculum might have helped prevent the trauma that I internalized. During waking hours, at least, I was raised by nuns—the Filippini order while we lived in Brooklyn; Presentation Sisters of Staten Island after the move. We'd be packed in at around 60 pupils. The hours were marked by the saving and cleansing of our souls, with little room for Pythagoras or Copernicus. High school classes were smaller, and the staff was a mix of lay faculty and Christian Brothers, but the math curriculum for which I was unprepared was not much of an improvement. An otherwise fine teacher—in that I was finally learning—would end nearly every Geometry or Trig class with the warning that we had better brace ourselves for the next day's lesson. As a tactic of subjugation, the strategy worked. Were there only as much drama in the subject itself. We were on edge, but not on the edge of our seats. Despite doing well in these classes, the lasting lesson was self-doubt and an irrational fear of numbers.

But in those early crisp December Brooklyn days, my father was sharing with me the secrets of his trade. In the dairy, we were also responsible for coffee. Even though a box cutter could always be found amidst a tangle of keys and change in his front pants pocket, he taught me how to pry open the boxes with my bare hands so as not to slice open the aromatic treasure. He showed me how to refold the corners of any sized box, alternating one flap under, one flap over, to form a secure lid. I watched him as he would break down the box, first with a quick punch to the bottom, breaking the seal, then reaching one hand into the seam and pulling at the cardboard, transforming a cube into a flat horizontal plane. We'd tie up the work bakery style, creating quadrants outlined with string—looping across and around the back, and then transporting accumulated efforts by hand truck into the backroom.

I found joy in stacking the coffee in tight uniform rows, the red bags of Eight O'clock, yellows of Red Circle, the Bokar blacks, alternating directions every few rows, inserting, as he showed me, a sheet of plywood to fortify the great square mass. But the job I truly loved most was grinding the coffee: the clicking sound of the silver arm of the ominous machine, technologically magical, reaching way over my head and emptying the bag, the sounds of beans tinkling into the funnel, the hum of the motor, its soft idle when the task was complete. I loved the punctuating task of tapping the spout to coax the very last of the grounds from its mouth. From his guiding hands and through my initial fumbles and repeated practice, eventually, I learned how to refold the flap and press the tabs into place and felt a great sense of accomplishment with handing the freshly ground bag to the waiting customer. Academic work just isn't geared for that kind of complete and immediate satisfaction; often our charges are long gone before its effects can be felt. Yet still I find myself plugging away at my desk, the hours passed in solitude and isolation, as I look for patterns, a sense of internal order in the perceived chaos among the outcroppings of student prose. Were it even possible to stand back and admire the efforts, and effects, of my daily and nightly toil, our subjects would already be long gone, scaling mountains of their own making.

In the spring of my high school sophomore year, after a summer selling Fuller Brushes door-to-door, fumbling with numbers and sales tax on people's stoops, I got my first real part-time job at the A&P. My father brought me down to the store at the end of New Dorp Lane. He shared his company affiliation with the store manager as he introduced himself, then me. Moments later, I was punching a timeclock, anticipating the same work as my father, reminiscing about the moments that transpired between him and my eight-year-old self.

My initiation was 18 months of mopping aisle spills and cleaning toilets. I suffered the humiliation of my peers, who undoubtedly took their cues from the boss. More than their dismissive glances, smirks, I found my invisibility unbearable. None of them had to endure such trials or at least not for such a long period of banishment. Spending hours on end in the men's toilet, suffering from cuts from the tiny pieces broken glass that worked its way into my skin, inhaling full-strength bleach in closed quarters, I was always on the verge quitting, rehearsing my resignation speech to the bathroom mirror and to my 16-year-old self. I wouldn't have been able to face my dad, failing at what he taught me, and demeaning his work. Still paid in cash, what was inside those small manila envelopes now seemed tainted. When I finally stood up for myself and confronted my boss, it was clear to both of us that I waited far too long for my moment. It seemed that with each spill that I was commanded to clean up, I felt shame, for myself and for my father.

I held on for five years, through the second half of high school and my initial attempts at college, switching over to the night crew and out of the public eye. I traveled to Fordham University's midtown campus by day. Ultimately, it wasn't my renewed commitment towards a college degree, or a muse like Updike's (1996) "Queenie," but the call of the open road, a summer long cross-country road trip, that finally put the A&P in my past, or so I thought.

By then I was a 22-year-old who had given up on the idea of Fordham. After long nights of stocking, sweeping, and mopping, and still not earning enough tuition money, I had run out of reasons for dragging myself over towards the island's north shore, to the ferry to the uptown 1 train to Columbus Circle. I surrendered to sleep rather than endure the indignity of being an underprepared and overall complete foreigner to college life. I slept for days, weeks, months, and then I tried once more. Although the road had called out to me soon into my second attempt, this time at Hunter College, I vowed to return that fall. With a semester of corralling a few B's and rounding up the occasional stray A, I was beginning to feel like I might be at least somewhat suited for life on the academic plain.

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The fullness before work. / The amazed understanding after.

"Work"—Raymond Carver

My father clocked 34 years in just that one small store over on Fort Hamilton Parkway. On warm days he would eat his lunch, legs stretched out towards the driver's side on the bench seat of the family car, a white, fender-dented, 63 Biscayne, the only time I ever saw him as a willing passenger. On a random Saturday afternoon, weather permitting, we, my mother with my five- or six-year-old self in tow, would surprise him with a visit. As we turned the corner, we'd spot him with his legs stretched across the bench seat, spying through the great expanse of windshield *The Daily News* suspended in front of him, forming the "v" of a black and white paper bird between his outstretched arms. In his red interior curbside office, surrounded by hot steel, he read books he borrowed from the local Fort Hamilton Public Library branch. I am sure he had to field questions and complaints or invasive salutations from customers who spotted him in his failed attempts at a mid-day sanctuary. In the cold months of winter, and without any exchange of money—my father, the handsome charmer, and the woman in the ticket booth, a store customer—spent his hour in the movie theater just a few feet from the store. He probably saw the first half of every matinee screened at the Fortway, late 40s to late 70s. Which perhaps explains why the only screening we ever attended as a family was *The Longest Day,* which to a five-year-old sitting through a three hour film about WWII's D-Day was quite appropriately titled. It only just occurred to me now as I write this that perhaps he was trying to show us what he could not bring himself to share with his own words, his experiences as a WWII veteran.

At some point, half of my siblings worked part-time at the A&P. I was the only child who followed my father's and my maternal grandfather's footsteps to go work for the Post Office. But from those cold early winter mornings driving to work with him and the dark nights returning, I learned the joy and the weariness and the endless tedium of work. From my father I also learned the shop floor motto, a common discursive practice even with my own job throughout high school and part of college: hustle to get everything done so we all could have some time to relax a bit at the end of a shift. To the like-minded cynic, this axiom was merely a managerial ploy to increase productivity, pulled off brilliantly because such occasions, though rare, did occur. But it was in those most quiet moments that I was most proud of my father. When the sweeping and the mopping was all done, a fraternity of young Brooklyn boys, almost as white as their shirts, aprons cast off, metal price stampers protruding from the back pockets of ink-stained Wranglers, would lean against silent mops and brooms or perch along the milk case ledge, drawn, as nearly everyone was, to my father. These moments, spent in the afterglow of work, the body having expressed so much energy, the final release of being done for the day combined with the expansive possibility of Saturday night.

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Oh, you can't scare me, I'm sticking to the union, I'm sticking to the union…
"The union maid," —Woody Guthrie

Sometimes talk, when it occurred at all, might turn a bit more hushed, company talk, as they looked to my father for more work-related advice. Too, there were other more pressing events when, midday, a worker would come back to our section and ask to speak with him, and he would take them aside, carefully listen, nod before saying anything. I learned through this embodied language of nods and gestures that matters were serious. Someone's work was in jeopardy. I knew that soon he would be going off to speak with management, to handle a grievance or deliver a defense on their behalf. That side of the negotiation I never got to witness.

I was, however, certain that my father had good rapport with the manager. Despite the tangible separation between worker and boss, exchanges between the two were nearly always warm and friendly. Every Friday night he would come home with an egg box filled with newly expired bread, cake, and dairy. And every so often, a brown paper sack full of errant coffee grounds that collected through a screen to a drawer beneath the machine. He would leave the box up front for the manager to check, before loading it into the folded down backseat of the family wagon. Many years later, his boss called my mother from Florida to express kind words upon hearing the news of my father's passing.

Local management treated him well; he reciprocated, supported by and advocating for a union that empowered its workforce. When contract negotiations failed, the union recommended that the rank and file go ahead with a strike for better pay and benefits. This I must have actually seen, because I have a vivid memory of him on the picket line, sitting in a fold-up aluminum lawn chair, green and white strapping, his face drawing shade from a ridiculous straw carnival hat.

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"I delivered more junk mail than the junkyard would hold."
"Ain't hurtin' nobody," –John Prine

Our pockets must have had holes in them after just six weeks on our cross-country trip. With apologies to Kerouac by way of singer-songwriter John Hiatt (2011), once you reach California, there's "nothing to do but turn around"—turn around and come home. After my brief sojourn west, I kept my promise to myself and resumed my studies at Hunter that fall. Though fairly soon, I would be distracted by the jingling of mailbox keys: a siren song of steady income and security. Despite steady college progress, an inner voice of working-class doubt told me that I had better sit for the US Postal Service exam, an insurance policy taken out against my loosely woven aspirations of upward mobility. I got the call soon after. When it came, I was hardly making any money pumping gas and checking oil at the local *Gaseteria*, once again back on the nightshift. Only this time, I was trying and mostly succeeding at getting myself to college by day. A phone to my father assured me that this would be the right decision. I started at 19K, quite a few grand more than the going entry-level rate on Wall St. My employers assured me that I would be working nights; the decision for me would not be so life altering. I could finish out the term, maybe slow down a bit on the number of future classes. They put me on days. Spring semester was torpedoed right out of the water, raining down as a mountain of mail, mostly junk mail.

One might say that, by that point, I had managed a compromise, a truce of sorts. I was determined not to allow even a small body of water to divert me from a degree. After a five-year hiatus, I had returned to college for my third undergraduate attempt, this time enrolling in night classes, this time settling on The College of Staten Island. The professors were highly ranked and well paid, but the company of peers I had to keep, at the time at least, tarnished the college's reputation. Attending college with the same batch of students from high school is like kissing one's cousin, not in a creepy way, just not all that exciting. While other college bound students escaped the Island, their families taking on second mortgages and considerable debt, gambling on the promise of their children's upward mobility, a NYC CUNY tuition, once free but even then, only a paltry sum, was the equivalent of entering into a very low stakes poker game. I was at least 10 years older than nearly everyone else. We were just a clump of working-class lads and lasses, many passively resisting or overtly lashing out, subconsciously determined to fight our way out of, but in ways that land us right back into, working class "shop floor" jobs (Willis, 1977).

Living in a thinly walled 60s-era duplex, I am certain that I alienated my adjoining neighbors, firing up the painfully slow and screaming banshee of a dot-matrix printer well after midnight and until 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning. In a few short hours I would be dragging myself to work, always, on principle, a few minutes late. Once there, amidst the din of sexist jokes and racist language, I would sort and tear down my route and soon be carrying the heavily laden mailbag over the hills and up the countless steps of Staten Island, alone in the company of others, then on to that evening's class. In Mike

Leonard's documentary about him, the late singer-songwriter John Prine relates how he composed several of his early classic songs between bites of his ham sandwich, while escaping the weather inside one of those army green utility mailboxes (Kogan, 2016). Hardly as romantic and barely significant, I would compose sentences and sometimes full paragraphs of term papers in my head while looping the neighborhood, returning to the mail truck, and quickly writing down my thoughts, freeing up my head up for the next few lines as I continued on my route, a working class peripatetic. Often drenched to the bone, and/or stuck with overtime, I took to changing into street clothes in the mail jeep, refusing ever to show up for class in a postal uniform.

Over the two years that it took to complete my final year of undergraduate school and catapulted my way through a master's program, I had become the student I despised in high school, the one I resented and was intimidated by in my first two prior attempts at college, asking more questions than were necessary, receiving A's, mostly, and mostly because even the thought of a lower grade had me convinced that I was dive bombing my way towards another college belly flop. Balancing academic life with a physically strenuous and psychologically stressful job was an ongoing challenge I never felt capable of meeting. Successes did little to assuage feelings of being an outsider and an imposter.

So deep are the entangled roots of working class that both of my parents voiced their shock and concern nine years into my Postal career—although indirectly through my siblings—when I finally mustered up the courage to dig myself out from all those circulars and mail order catalogues and quit. How could I possibly leave a "good civil service job" to pursue an academic career? I am reminded of Borkowski (2004) with whom I once shared a collective office space with fellow adjuncts while teaching at The College of Staten Island. Already three chapters into the completion of his dissertation, he was sent a notice from his well-intentioned, certainly Italian, and definitely from Brooklyn, mother. Affixed to clippings from *The Chief*, a weekly newspaper that provided information on all NYC government civil service job applications and deadlines, was a handwritten note that read, "It's not too late to take the civil service test!" O, the tribal pull of social class!

I started a PhD program before my father's steady decline, quite some time after I had symbolically balled up and tossed my A&P apron and soon after I turned in my US mailbox keys for the very last time. In so doing, I had crossed a great divide. I traded in my blue collar for a black robe. Right up to the end, my father was determined in his thinking that only physical labor was real work. Of course, he was right, at least in matters of intensity. Although many might also agree that the world we inhabit, a world of conjuring words from computers, is physically demanding, even backbreaking. Without hesitation, I am sure I was not his sole audience. It seemed that he was also defending the path that he took or that was chosen for him, to himself.

My father got as far as sophomore year in high school. He started out in a small privately owned grocery store, counter service, stocking shelves, bicycle deliveries. On his daily runs, those who could hardly spare a bit of change, he once told me, always tipped. Others never parted with their expendable income. When the storeowner became gravely ill, bedridden for months, at 16, the same age that I was when he was figuratively dragging me by the ear to my first job, he was already working full time, entirely on his own, keeping the man's business running. Some sixty years later, that not even a word of thanks came, still bothered him.

Working along the academic border, Mike Rose (2003) shows the high-level thinking that occurs in what might appear as the basic and banal work of the hands. With the example of a cabinetmaker who measures, walks over to his worktable, pauses, looks back at the site of installation, thinks some more, Rose illustrates the complex transformations and higher order of thought required from a carpenter, drawing from function, form, aesthetics, which, on the surface, seem only to be the simple application of a computation with a measuring tape. Rose (2009) challenges the prevailing notion that the type, quantity, and enduring length of one's formal education alone belies their intelligence, and that "work requiring less schooling requires less intelligence" (para. 9). Further on, Rose writes: "Our cultural iconography promotes the muscled arm, sleeve rolled tight against the biceps, but no brightness behind the eye, no image that links hand and brain" (para. 10).

Dealing with the sacred task of cleaning out my father's bureau, I immediately knew the purpose of the neat, narrow rows of numbers penciled in his own hand, the weekly list of eggs and other dairy products representing the replenishing of inventory. But representing his work as a simple task of filling lacunae ignores spoilage rates or other disparate sources of knowledge, such as individual shopping patterns and idiosyncrasies, seasonal or holiday spending. "Although we rightly acknowledge and amply compensate the play of mind in white-collar and professional work," writes Rose (2009), "we diminish or erase it in considerations about other endeavors—physical and service work particularly" (para. 16).

After his retirement, my father had become a voracious reader: books, magazines, anything set before him. He was also fast. When I questioned him about a book that I had given him for his 72nd birthday, Gurganus' (1989) *Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All*, wary that the choice might not have piqued his interest, he told me he already read it. As if I could ever play the role of his teacher, scolding him into submission. The inscription I included in the Gurganus novel was a gentle but humorous reminder of the task he sought to begin: "Perhaps this book will jog your memory a bit!"

My father had been writing a few poems: romantic pastorals. He had purchased an electric typewriter and was teaching himself to type in order to finally tell his stories about the war. Meanwhile, my mother's muscle memory from her long-ago high school classes kicked in, and she effortlessly blew by him, pretty much dusting him with sheathes of "all work and no play make jack," in a display of columns of perfect symmetry marching down the page. I cannot be certain that this sudden surprise attack of competition may have put him off the idea of becoming a competent typist. He also always wanted to learn how to play the piano, but the baby grand I bought some years ago and, with the help of many, muscled into the living room, instead became a platform for family photographs and a fancy home for several generations of mice. He was convinced that his hands were too big, his fingers too thick to be able to play. My father had the largest hands of any man that I have ever seen.

I visited my parents one weekend while still mired in the muck of trying to figure out graduate school, whereupon my father, modest but proud, brought out two identical Sony tape recorders, one for me, one for him. I would use mine to record interviews for my dissertation. He would use his to record and transcribe his stories about WWII. Turns out that he was listening to me after all. He planned to put my suggestion in motion: set aside his afternoons, sit down, open up a beer, and talk into the machine as the tape rolled. His project slipped into the recesses of my mind until I brought it up again some years later. His player "didn't work" he told me. I neither pressed nor bothered to take a look.

A few short years later, both of my parents gone, the ink on my dissertation barely dry, I set myself to going through the remnants and effects of their collective lives. Along with some other of my father's things, I discovered the tape recorder in a brown paper bag in the garage closet, along with a few cellophane-sealed blank tapes. My own tape recorder had since become glitchy, so I plugged his into the wall to see if I might be able to get it to work. There was a small lever on the side of the machine, which, unbeknownst to my father, had been set to pause. Save for the few stories he told repeatedly during the holidays when alcohol lubricated his tongue and loosened the words from his memory, all other traces of what had happened, all that he endured, all of the stories as he would get to tell them, are gone. I would have hoped his renderings might explain how he lived his life in the aftermath of his hero's journey: four enlisted years, two of them in Europe, the role of his Fourth Armored Division's in The Battle of the Bulge, landing in France on Utah Beach, south to Reddon, Lorient, east to Nantes, Lemans, Orleans, fighting their way across in the rolling, close-quartered metal enclosure, on to Bastogne, leading Patton and his Third Army, the muddy trudge across Germany, liberating Ohrdruf Concentration Camp, and on through to Czechoslovakia.

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Neither my father nor my mother was able to finish high school. In spite of an education system that failed them, they managed to keep me from the brink, advocating for my elementary schooling when I was in trouble and at risk of expulsion. But negotiating the complex system of education required social capital that they simply did not have. They could not identify with my desire to jump social class. Instead, throughout my prolonged and elongated college career, they fretted silently while offering emotional support.

The trappings of social class kept me in jobs that I could not bring myself to leave yet propelled me towards a career that I dreamed about but secretly felt that I could never possibly hope to obtain. In my subsequent search for an academic post, I took more than a few hits of rejection, dusted myself off and tried again. However, mine is not a story of one individual overcoming the odds. I simply cannot lay claim to working-class grit without acknowledging the invisible power of white male privilege at work in my life story. When I was in graduate school, and my mid-thirties fast approaching, I did not feel the pressure of having to "settle down." A woman would have had a much different experience. I began teaching freshman composition as a graduate assistant and as an adjunct, shifting towards teacher education by way of visiting appointments and ultimately, a tenure-track position. Although I felt the need to adapt my persona in my transition from blue collar work to academic career, I never felt that I would have to dress or even talk a certain way in order to demonstrate my intelligence. The hurdles that I faced were class-based, whereas others experience a variety of obstacles at every step, with signage delivering the same message: "You don't belong."

My father taught me the curriculum of work. Our stories demonstrate how education happens *despite* school. Beyond the world of work, in the time in between, and especially after he hung up his apron for the very last time, my father read widely. He also wrote and, in his final years, expressed the desire to write more and to leave behind a legacy of words.

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This past fall, decades since ever setting foot inside any of the A&P's that once had a dynastic hold on the supermarket industry—since been swept off the face of the North American retail landscape—I found myself in a small IGA in Boiceville, NY. Just meaning to pick up a few things, I ducked into the backroom to use the facilities, and I was stunned by the combined smell—an alchemy of soap, sacks of onions, unmistakable Eight O'clock coffee—and pieced together how years ago this building, with the smells of my childhood emanating from its pores, once housed and A&P. Perhaps out of an unshakeable forty-four-year habit, company loyalty, or maybe because he just wanted to help safeguard a corporation that, though floundering, was still signing his monthly pension checks, my father would take my mother to shop here, several miles out of the way from where they set up their retirement, in the same house over which I am the current, passing steward.

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