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Raymond Carver In The Workshops

by Douglas Unger

This essay is put together from the draft of a talk presented at the Associated Writing Programs Conference in Washington, D. C., in February, 2011, titled “Raymond Carver In The Workshops.” Carol Sklenicka, author of the critically acclaimed biography *Raymond Carver: A Writer’s Life* (Scribner’s, 2010) organized the session, intending to explore Carver’s influence as a teacher, about which not enough has been said or written. His teaching played an impactful role in transforming a literary generation.

My first reaction to Carol’s invitation was the thought that I didn’t know much about Ray Carver teaching workshops, since I never took one with him. Two writers I greatly admire were already set to talk on the topic: Bret Lott, author and former editor of *The Southern Review* and now of *Crazy Horse*, who had never studied with Carver, either, but nonetheless had benefitted from encouragement by Ray in his youth; and C. J. Hribal, writer of *American Beauty* and *The Company Car*, who took workshops with Ray at Syracuse University and became his friend, strongly influenced by his style and personality. Both seemed to me much more qualified than I was to talk about Ray Carver as a teacher. Still, through a strange, coincidental series of turns on life’s journey, Ray and I ended up shirttail in-laws—brothers-in-law through the Burk sisters: my late wife, Amy, and Ray’s first wife, Maryann. We became best friends for thirteen years, close in ways I’ve seldom spoken about publicly. Carol’s invitation got me thinking about those years again, something I don’t do often, as recalling the turmoil we lived through together as a family followed by Ray’s death and what happened to his legacy can be painful. No matter—having spent so much time with each other in close quarters, I decided that I might risk talking about Ray’s influence from my own unusual, perhaps valuable angle. Not lost also is the awareness that this year marks twenty-five years since his death and that terrible day I helped bear his coffin. This quick passage of time is astonishing, reminding me how much more needs to be said. That I’ve left this draft of a talk sit for more than two years is also the result of a lesson from Ray, who often let work sit for months before looking at it again, as he put it, “to make sure to get it right.”

Ray Carver and I first became friends during what he later called his “hardscrabble years” —those “bad old days” of hard drinking and even harder living right at the edge. He had been hopping from one teaching gig to the other: at Berkeley, at Iowa, at Santa Cruz. When I first got to know him, in 1975, Ray was too ill, mostly, to be teaching. We shared multiple low-rent living situations: in San Francisco and the Bay Area, in Iowa, in New York. For brief periods, he was my homeless guest. Those years of

the 1970s were filled with dramatic scrapes and shocks, and chaos in our families. My wife, Amy, suffered from severe manic-depressive illness, and her “psychotic breaks” wrought upon us the destructive power of hurricanes with seasonal regularity; and Ray and Maryann, after two bankruptcies and careless infidelities plus their two teenaged children raging out of control, were going through a rocky, torturous break-up. Ray and I made these family messes even worse, indulging in personal destructiveness caused by way too much drinking, powered, at least in part, by a bohemian embrace of the myth of a rebellious, decadent life that the creative artist should be living. “These are mythic times,” we used to say, drunk and stoned, blinded by our egos and selfishness. During those hard-drinking years, Ray spoke of teaching mainly as a burden, even irritated at his few remaining invitations as a visiting writer, when he’d have to haul himself, hung-over and sick, into the classroom.

Later, after he quit drinking, Ray and I shared better years. His life settled into something different; those were times of sincerest, heartfelt generosity to his students and friends. That sober period powered him with new energy and creative vision, during which he wrote so many of his masterpieces, “Where I’m Calling From,” “Intimacy” and “Cathedral” among them, and new poems flowed ceaselessly. He taught with the low-residency program at Goddard College, and at the University of Texas at El Paso, then at Syracuse University. Applause and fame came to Ray and his work with a truly mythic reversal and suddenness like no other writer I’ve known before or since. In 1983, Carver won the Harold and Muriel Strauss Living Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and I was among the first people he called to share the news with an ecstatic celebration. “I’m never going to have to teach again!” he said. Then: “Are you interested in my job?”

So I suppose I do know something about Ray’s teaching, informed by my own early success as a writer, helped at times by Ray, combined with a bit of Carver nepotism that caused me to take over his vacated teaching job at Syracuse. And over the years, I often observed Ray reading manuscripts and listened to him talk about his best students. He shared a great many of his thoughts about writing with me. I’ve seen both sides of the man and artist—leaning over his shoulder; taking coffee breaks with him; spending I don’t know how many dozens of hours on the telephone, chatting away happily about writing and writers and just *how to be a writer in the world*, which he spoke about with full-throated generosity, wanting, I believe, what *his* first teacher and later close friend, John Gardner, pointed out that all writers really want, deep down: to be loved and admired, especially by other writers, and not only for our words but for *who we are* as artists and as people. We want to be admired for our *characters*, as Gardner put it, both our fictional characters and the human characters we show to the world. For Ray, to be called a “good fellow” meant high praise. Sobriety moved this sea change in his character.

In the language of Alcoholics Anonymous, I’m convinced that, for the last eleven years of his life—his non-drinking years—Ray devoted significant energy into extended eighth and ninth steps in the twelve-step A.A. program; *Step 8: Made a list of all people we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all*; and *Step 9: Made direct amends to such people whenever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others*. Crucial to his sobriety, Ray Carver transformed himself into a conscientious, caring teacher, both in and out of the classroom. This, combined with the artistic achievements of his best stories and poems, is why we’re still talking about him a quarter-century later, and why, as poet James Galvin so aptly says, “Ray Carver is the least-dead dead writer we know.”

My first introduction to Ray Carver’s writing happened in 1972, when I served as the managing editor of the *Chicago Review*. Editor Richard Hack brought a manuscript into

the office that had been passed on to him by Curt Johnson, editor of *December Press*. The manually typewritten pages were ragged and dog-eared, looking like they had been folded up and stuffed into several jacket pockets along the way. Curt told Richard that we should read this story by this “great” writer and that we should publish it. All on the student editorial committee were skeptical, at first, not used to submissions coming in this way, right off the street. Then we read “They’re Not Your Husband”—that classic Carver story about the unemployed husband of a coffee shop waitress who comes in every day to count her tips, overhears two jerks comment about her weight, then puts his wife on a diet, reading the scale every night—a darkly humorous glimpse into Carver’s world of struggling, blue-collar men and women sidelined by American prosperity, no longer knowing the proper roles to play in their relationships while straining to comprehend just what has happened to them. Of course, we accepted the story immediately—the only time I can recall this happening at any magazine I worked on as an editor or assistant. Three years later, after falling in love with the Broadway actress Amy Burk, who was studying with the University of Iowa Theatre Department while I was at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, I learned a lot more about Carver, reading all his early poems and stories through the remarkable coincidence that Amy was Ray’s sister-in-law and kept a shelf of his signed small-press books and literary magazines. Amy had grown up with Ray through the 1950s in Yakima, Washington. We made our first trip to the Carver home in Cupertino, California, during the Christmas break of 1975, to spend holidays with Ray, Maryann, and their family and friends.

During those “bad old days” Ray kept a vodka bottle always at hand—little half pints under the ripped-up seat of a dented Mercury Comet station wagon it seemed nothing short of a miracle could keep running down the road. At Chuck Kinder and Diane Cecily’s flat in San Francisco, we’d all fuel ourselves up with alcohol and our aspirations then read manuscripts to each other, our works in progress. (Chuck Kinder would later write a very lively *à clef* novel, in large part based on his friendship with Ray, titled *Homeymooners: A Cautionary Tale*, powered by the tragi-comic excesses of the romances they shared.) That year was my first as a teaching fellow in graduate school. I was astonished at the way drunk Ray, too sick to hold down a steady job, scoffed at teaching. He referred to certain former students as “time wasters.” Yet he couldn’t say enough about the students he liked, converting them quickly into friends. Still, Ray seemed to have little use for classrooms or workshops, making this clear after I shared my own enthusiasm for teaching, which I loved, as did many of Ray’s best friends, Bill Kittredge and Chuck Kinder, especially. When he was broke, dependent on his friends for drinks, he’d say, “Well, at least I’m not teaching,” then he’d laugh darkly. Ray had landed in serious legal trouble by continuing to collect unemployment from a former job at UC Santa Cruz while taking a visiting position at Iowa, and he was on court-mandated probation. Ray was running from both teaching *and* his probation officer—the “running dog” as we called him then, in all conceivable ways.

Over those holidays, Ray Carver introduced me into a world I’d not seen before, though I’d been around a lot of writers, editors and literary people at Iowa and previously in New York during a stint at Random House writing filler for a cookbook under the direction of legendary senior editor Jason Epstein. No: this San Francisco scene was very different, filled with hard, tough cynicism among men who put on fresh shirts in the morning, rolled up their sleeves, then sat down at a kitchen table to start drinking the way other men went off to work—writers who brooked no weakness in each other, especially with language. Not one wrong word usage was allowed to pass our lips without a chortle or a groan in reaction when we read to each other. Chuck Kinder read pieces from his

lyrically written new novel, *The Silver Ghost*, about a young, tough would-be criminal who worshipped James Dean. Ray read very early versions of stories or drafts of poems in different stages of completion—I recall stories with material that would later be written more fully as “Distance” and “Where Is Everyone?” not yet fully formed, but Ray mainly read poems at these sessions. At least a dozen well-known writers moved in and out of this crowd: Jim Crumley, Jon Jackson, Gurney Norman, Max Crawford, Leonard Gardner and Gina Berriault among them. We read to each other through a boozy haze. If a passage sounded especially good, Ray would indicate approval mainly by repeating a line or two right back at the writer. If a passage were weak, he’d scoff or he’d laugh, or just say, “Oh, no...” with an expression of having suffered an offensive indignity.

My first turn for this crowd in Chuck Kinder’s living room, I read from an experimental story I’d written for a workshop at Iowa, a cut-up, post-modern fiction that featured an exotic main character who wore glass platform shoes with live goldfish swimming in the heels. Chuck had encouraged me to read with a big, warm-hearted smirk and good-buddy enthusiasm for up-and-coming writers he always expressed. Nervously, I cleared my throat and started. After a few paragraphs, I looked up to see Ray staring off into space, no longer listening; and there was Chuck, still gripping his glass of Dickel on the rocks, his face frozen into that same encouraging smirk except that he had nodded off, fast asleep, his glass tipping to one side. I learned from this and other sessions with Ray, Chuck and their writer buddies something essential: it’s best to confront the hardest crowd imaginable with your words, readers most likely to scoff or get instantly bored; and one test to prove a story works is if your drunk friends don’t have to fight to stay awake.

Later, on the ride back to Cupertino, passing a half pint of vodka back and forth, Ray taught me two important lessons about writing a short story, after telling me, “Just bag that one,” in reference to the story I’d just read. Ray said, “First, you have to set the scene or situation. Give it at least a page and a half before cutting away or flashing back.” Then he added, with a hard edge of irritation, “Don’t get chi-chi or pretentious. Don’t get carried off by the sound of your words. For sure, don’t do it in the first paragraphs of a story.”

This would be my workshop with Ray: in the front seats of cars or on shabby sofas in rented living rooms or cheap motels, during those harsh, bad old days. I remember especially the time when Ray visited Amy and me at Iowa, that next spring. He gave a reading for the Iowa Writers’ Workshop then got so drunk at the party we threw for him afterwards that he was too sick to make it to his Yaddo residency. Instead, he lived and drank in our basement on Caroline Court for the next four weeks, during which he read early parts of my first novel, *Leaving the Land*. (Harper & Row published it eight years later, in 1984.) Several afternoons, in a few clear-headed hours, he ran a pencil through excessive prose, always cutting the sentences down to more manageable size, making war in dark lead, especially on the adjectives, and converting dependent clauses into stronger, stand-alone assertions. One evening, I recall striding into the living room, just home from teaching—the teaching I loved and still love, and remain astonished that anyone in this world would pay me to spend quality time with other writers and read books, which I’d be doing anyway. That night, Ray was just finishing up the first long part of my manuscript. I discovered him with a thick sheaf of pages stacked on the coffee table. Another twenty or so pages lay scattered face down on the carpet, where he had carelessly tossed them, his scuffed, rubber-soled shoe even scraping across a page as he sat: Ray’s way of doing a hard-edit in those days, contemptuous of excess, my greatest fault as a young writer (and this remains a fault now). Those pages on the carpet scuffed by his shoes didn’t make it into the final version of the book I completed years later.

Were there any hard feelings about this unceremonious treatment of my manuscript? (And more than just that one. Ray scuffed up others, tossing pages aside—he even did this once in a coffee shop in San Francisco with people at tables around us watching, baffled.) No: I didn't mind this one bit, grateful for his close reading. Did I ever give such treatment back to him, when he showed me his manuscripts? Ray rarely let me read any work that he had not put through at least two or three drafts and more, so by then, his prose would be so tough and ready, with that pared-down precision of his language that could rattle my teeth, that it would be hard to do much more than to suggest a slight nuance, or a minor addition, or to comment on something the story-in-progress or poem reminded me of—the lesson learned from Ray in this exchange was never to show off any work until it's been through enough drafts *not* to deserve pages tossed to the floor.

And about Ray's early stories and poems, I'll share something that may seem strange here, even self-serving, though it's not meant in this way at all: Ray Carver *took* things from me, little ideas I'd mention, minor details here and there, or tiny bits of stories I'd tell him. Carver was a literary bandit, as most great writers are—ask Jim Heynen, author of *Boy's House* and the *The Fall of Alice K.* about that fish story Carver stole from him for his poem, "Eagles"; or ask William Kittredge, author of *A Hole In The Sky* and *We Are Not In This Together*, about the origins of "Why Don't You Dance?"; or ask a host of writers with similar examples. The most extreme case of Carver's literary thievery, one that I use now in graduate workshops, is his last masterpiece story, "Errand," based on Chekhov's final days while dying of consumption at Badenweiler, with a strong focus on the room service waiter Chekhov's widow, Olga Knieper, sends off on the great master's last errand after his death. "Errand" became a *Best American Short Stories* selection, published in *The New Yorker* in 1987. First, read "Errand." Then read the chapter "Ich Sterbe" plus some pages from chapters before and after that one in Henri Troyat's 1986 biography *Chekhov*, translated by the late, great Michael Henry Heim. Lay the pages out, side by side, and compare them. Sentence after sentence, Carver balances on a tight-rope stretched across any conceivable boundary marking the line between literary borrowing and outrageous plagiarism. He lifts phrase upon phrase, image after image, from Troyat (and Heim). That he pulls this off—that he transforms such blatantly stolen words into something all his own—is a remarkable achievement, as most (by no means all) of my students have concluded over the years. Carver defined limits, and literary thievery is one of them.

Even so, Ray Carver—that shameless word-thief, bless his memory—*stole my poor mother's teeth* and put them in a story. This story was first published as "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" in 1981, the title for his second major collection. And the process of its writing became a source of intense literary furor when it was re-published in the December 24 & 31 edition of *The New Yorker* in an earlier, longer version with the title "Beginners," appearing alongside an essay and selected letters about the Raymond Carver-Gordon Lish controversy over editorial intrusions and/or influences, still much discussed and debated. Never mind about this controversy here, please. My mother's teeth found their way into both versions of the story.

My mother suffered from a vaguely-diagnosed psychosis most of her life, resulting in at least a dozen commitments to psychiatric wards. During one of her worst psychotic episodes, she drank ant poison, attempting suicide. She barely survived. Emergency medical procedures saved her, and psychiatric hospitalization followed, including electric shock treatments that lasted more than a year. In 1979, Amy and I had just been back East to visit my mother (which we only did three times in our twenty-eight years together).

My mother's teeth had been damaged by the ant poison, resulting in a very severe kind of gingivitis, so later in life, her gums pulled back hideously, exposing her teeth like fangs. Hard to say how much the ant poison was a primary cause for this, but she insisted to Amy that her shockingly ugly dental condition resulted from the gradual, deteriorating effect of poison burns years before. She was about to have all her teeth removed and get dentures, and she kept apologizing for her appearance.

Amy and I saw Ray shortly after this visit to my mother, and Amy couldn't help but tell the story of the teeth. Ray seemed to be deeply affected, even moved, by her description of those teeth, or he pretended to be, and by all signs, he was grossed out, too. He kept cringing and saying, "No! Oh, no..." But he kept asking about it, pushing Amy to repeat her dramatic description of the teeth with more details, no matter how uneasy and embarrassed I might be for my mother and her suffering. Then two years later, whose teeth did I read about in a new issue of *Anteus*? Teeth belonging to the tragic, suicidal boyfriend character of "Ed" in Ray's new story? (Or "Carl" in the earlier version?) The pitiful boyfriend who took "rat poison" and whose "gums went crazy from it" so that "his teeth stood out like fangs"? Now ask yourselves: how would you feel about a writer who steals your suicidal mother's unfortunate *teeth*? But this, too, is Ray Carver in the workshop, as he always taught: "Keep your eyes and ears open. If something's good, take it and use it. Take it and use it first, before anyone else."

Fair game, and really, I couldn't be more grateful for the privilege to have been the beneficiary of Ray's honesty, no matter how tough or brutal. Hard honesty remained ever at the core of his teaching, even to close friends, or in my case, to family. Above all else, he taught *be honest, no bullshit*; at the same time, *don't hold back*, and *don't go easy on anything or anyone*. He taught that better than telling another writer what to do, find some way to show the writer exactly what you think of the work, with dumb gestures and even silence, if necessary. Though not a religious man, Ray valued words too much not to treat them as sacred. Any mistakes, any wrong word choices, especially just plain *bad* writing, he reacted to with clear offense, as at an act of deliberate rudeness. He couldn't stand bad writing, and he would say so: "Just what do you *mean* here?" Or: "You really think this is good enough? *Do you?*" Or: "Question everything that happens... *everything.*" And: "Make every word count, because it does." Finally, when there's no way to make it better: "Just bag that one, will you, please?" At the same time, Ray expressed a quiet, respectful encouragement for the whole risky enterprise of attempting to write in the first place, but if he thought a work or a writer really wasn't worth much, he wouldn't take the trouble to keep reading. That Ray kept finding something in my work to keep him reading really meant something, enough during the hardest years out in the cold that his voice helped me to continue writing.

In Ray Carver's later, more generous years, after his success or "luck", as he called it, had come to him, his harsher criticisms toned down. He'd react to a passage he questioned in a manuscript with the simple phrase: "I don't know." And if he talked about this questionable passage, a forefinger would stroke at his lips, as though shushing him from saying anything more that might be hurtful. During his Syracuse years, I spent time over at his house, initially when he was still teaching. What I came to understand was just how much Ray felt burdened by teaching, and no longer because he was drunk. He groused about the time it took from his own writing, powered by an inner sense, or instinct, which turned out to be correct, that he was running out of time. Tenure? "Like an ox breaking itself to harness," we quipped back and forth. Students? "They'll eat you alive if you don't watch out," he said.

Ray resented teaching at the same time that he loved without qualifications so many of his students. I heard about his students on the telephone, or he would introduce them to me at his house or at faculty-student parties: C. J. Hribal, Robert Olmstead, Robert O'Connor, Jay McInerney and Mary Bush, among others at Syracuse; and before that, Dan Domench, Allan Gurganus, T. C. Boyle, Barbara Grossman, and on and on. He spoke about them not so much as students but as equals, as writers with promise, writers who were *going places*, part of a growing fellowship of writer-friends he was excited to be a part of, and Ray was determined to do all he could to make sure they got where they were going. He spoke about their quirks and idiosyncrasies, admitting them into a revered, mythic congregation of "good fellows" in his mind, paying reverence to their words, admiring their characters as artists. Writers, in Ray's world, were special people, singled out from the crowd. "Yes," I heard him insist once, during an argument, "writers are better than other people!"

Ray gave to student-writers what I think most young writers need—that sense that they've got a chance, they've got a shot. "Keep going, just this way. With luck, you're going to make it," he'd say. Or he could communicate this in fewer words, by a phone call at just the right time, or by pointed comments written on a manuscript page he handed back to the student. He made a writer whose work he liked feel embraced and anointed into the literary world. That kind of confirmation he gave out generously, as Bret Lott writes about in the broader context of a nurturing literary patrimony and as a matter of religious faith in his newly published memoir, *Letters & Life*; and that C. J. Hribal can speak about more experientially, with the closeness and warmth of having been Ray's friend and next-door neighbor in Syracuse. Carver held back his generosity from some writers, yes, whose work he didn't like, in which case he simply didn't have the time for them. But for writers he did like, he'd do almost anything. Need a job? Ray would talk up the writer on the phone, to everyone. Need an editor or an agent? He'd "get on the horn"—as he called it—to a whole list of powerful people he knew, or he'd send out notes: *pay attention to this one*. Ray didn't respect writers who don't help other writers. He spoke of them as stingy or stuck-up, too selfish and self-involved.

As for Ray Carver's teaching, I carry and pass on a lot of his lessons from those years. "When you're finished with a story, set it aside for a while. Pick it up again and write the two pages that come before the beginning to make sure you've begun in the right place. Do the same with the ending. Try the two pages that follow it just to make sure." And from his craft essay, "On Writing": "At any point in a story, anything can happen. Stay open to suggestion, no matter where it comes from." (Ray did this himself, famously, when he answered a wrong number from an obviously African-American voice that asked, "Is Nelson in?" He hung up, sat back down at his desk and began to write a black Vietnam veteran character named Nelson into his story "Vitamins.") And he used to insist that when a writer believes a story is finished, try it at least one more time, one more draft. Only by a rare accident can a good story happen without extensive revisions. "Fifteen drafts might be enough," he'd say. "Or sixteen." Or: "I can't understand writers who say 'if I'd only taken the time to go at that passage once more.'" And finally: "Never let go of any story too soon. And some stories, well, if you can't bag them, better never let them go." Impatience is an enemy of art, as Ray well knew.

Still, maybe the best advice Ray Carver ever gave me was personal, at the very end of those "bad old days" when chaos and turmoil raged in our family lives. He said that in order to succeed at writing, much else in my life must be sacrificed, even the devotions and duties of marriage, no matter how loving—that making art must come first, no matter what; and even then, it would be tough to succeed. Ray had no home left to go

to. His own marriage was on the rocks, his wife, Maryann, having kicked him out of her house and already in a new relationship. My beloved wife, Amy, had escalated suddenly into a weeks' long bout with the manic-depressive illness that she and our family suffered from almost all her life. Her current "psychotic break" had been an especially severe one, bringing on horrific dislocations and bizarre behaviors that doomed us to be forced to move again, since Amy would be too embarrassed when she came back down from it to be able to face the people we knew. She despaired about how to apologize to our landlord, even such a compassionate one as the St. James Episcopal Church in San Francisco, who owned our rented flat in which Ray was now staying as our guest, after she had fled imaginary demons, screaming, running naked down the street one Sunday morning, witnessed by many in the congregation. For about two weeks, Ray and I had spent anxious hours chasing her all over the city, then sitting in emergency rooms, praying the legal system would show mercy enough to commit Amy again. We took turns visiting her in the psych ward, wondering how in the world we had ever landed here, right at the edge of turning ourselves in, too, to the lock-up wards, both of us ready to be declared crazy if anything more went wrong with our lives.

"Madness is catching," Ray would say. He would repeat this phrase, over and over again. I recall one of these nights, after visiting hours, sitting and smoking in his car parked on the street near St. Mary's Hospital. Ray was still shaky, getting through his first weeks of quitting drinking—the sobriety he felt sure would stick this time, for the rest of his life. He turned to me and said, "At some point, if you want to keep writing, you'll have to pack up and run."

And I said straight back at him, "You, too, Ray. You, too."