

**Intellectual and Cultural Leaders of Minnesota:
Oral History Project 2013-14**

**Institute for Advanced Study
University of Minnesota-Twin Cities**

**Interviewee: Mike Hazard
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Mike Hazard: Hi mom! Hi dad! How did I come to do what I do? I am the son of my mom and my dad. I grew up in a house where the arts and culture were a part of our lives. My mom is a Renaissance scholar whose lifework is a book called *Elizabethan Silent Language*. It explores how, in Elizabethan England, all aspects of the culture were related and all parts of life had meaning, from jewelry to books to architecture to theater. That has governed and guided and been a common thread through my life. My dad has a similar view of life. They are both English professors, but he has been more on the poetry, film side, has sought to look for ways to make English to be studied in the way that it is actually written and spoken, which is as a global language. This inspired the company that I run and am employed by, the Center for International Education. Its goal has been to use the newer media to make poetry and the arts part of everyday life. So, when I look at myself, from a little bit away, I see my mom and my dad – as an English professors’ brat. Actually, to extend the connections, I could share a couple of poems from this book of mine, *This World is not Altogether Bad*. (Is my mike okay, Peter? I’m teasing you now. It’s an inside joke. All jokes are inside jokes. Was that evil of me? We were talking about evil before, and so I kind of have that in my mind now.) This is a pair of poems for my mom and my dad. The whole book is celebrating people, portraits of people. There are 20 different portraits of people. For my mom, it’s a poem called “The Renaissance Scholar,” and it goes like this:

The Renaissance Scholar

My Mother comes & goes, taking on centuries
since she cradled me through Latin exercises.
She speaks in silent languages, rare as rosary beads
and the smell of homemade bread in the 21st century.
She quotes ornaments of the Elizabethan age,
on a random page Angel Day & Sir Philip Sydney,
Father Walter Ong & ornati simi viri-

My Mother comes & goes, investing centuries
of intelligence in my bank of memories:
"Busy old fool, unruly son, & think that only by
virtuous lyf, and good action, you may be
an ornament to this illustre Famylye."
She cries & whispers in the cradle of my ear,
Here & now with then, Michael my son, compare!

I don’t know whether that should be Michael the Archangel. My mother would only laugh when she called me that. That was what my uncle Al used to call me, and he was laughing when he did. He was a priest. But the line reads, “But now with then, Michael, my son, compare.” I don’t know where that Michael the Archangel came from. The Renaissance Scholar: a poem for my mom. This is a poem for my dad. It’s called “Father of a Father.”

Father of a Father

Father of a father, dear Dad, you once confessed
the sins of the fathers are squared in the children.
Whitman lookalike and feelalike, champion of Louis Sullivan,
you were only ever truly happy when you were on the road.
You showed me a streetlight might be elegant as an elm seed.
I learned to inspect bridges for the shape of their beauty.
You taught me liberation begins with a regular bowel movement,
then moves on to irregular vowel movements.
You slapped your stomach, "the guttaphone," until we hurt laughing.
You claimed your revenge on America was bringing Monty Python
to TV in the USA. Ha. This never fails to impress my students.
You divided your kingdom up like King Lear, and howls ensued.
You wrote it all down so the triptych was mapped, peripatetic Pater.
Like your father, you send money to school the granddaughter.
Now that I am a fond father too, and recall I found it hard to read
to my own child every night, I get the presence of absence.
Son of an absent father, dear Dad, I forgive and forget. Amen.

My mom and dad. So you ask, "How did I come to do what I do?" What do I do? I write poems. I take pictures. I always have a camera nearby. So I have one right here now, just for effect. A special effect. And I make videos. It seems to me true to say that I learned about words and pictures from my parents and how they come together is what I do, looking for ways to put words and pictures together. So that's how I come to sit here with you, Peter, trying to explain myself.

Peter Shea: It's a striking contrast, the everything-in-its-place, everything-with-a-meaning Renaissance room; I imagine a little picture with the angel and the significant flower and the significant gems and the significant dog. And Whitman: barbaric yawps and road trips and one darned thing after another, strung together. Did you experience that as a tension growing up? Is that a tension that is meaningful to you now?

Mike Hazard: Yes and yes. My father tries to describe America as a conflict between the two Walts: Walt Whitman and Walt Disney. That is not all at all to suggest that my mother is Walt Disney. But there is something about the slick simplicity of Walt Disney and Mickey Mouse culture – I'm tempted to say it's a kind of evil, just because we were talking about evil – but it's certainly not a healthy kind of awareness in life to live, I don't think. Whitman, on the other hand, to flip over to my mom, may have been sprawling barbaric yawps, but he was also, "It's all holy, it's all connected. We are all part of this universe. We are all linked." And so, I don't see a clear contrast of the two, but, at the family level, there came a time when they could no longer live together, and split. Maybe there was something to that, just as deep as it appears.

Peter Shea: So Monty Python is your father's revenge on America? He actually brought Monty Python <to America>?

Mike Hazard: He had a job in the early '70s – I think it was about '72 – working for Time-Life television in New York, and his job was to look at programming being made around the world, to be imported to the USA, to go on TV for Time-Life Films. He loved Monty Python; the family had lived in London in '68. Loved Monty Python. In the words of one of his colleagues at Time-Life, he was literally falling out of his chair laughing. Nobody else in the office, again according to the story, thought it was funny, but he was so struck by it that they thought there might be something here. And so they did begin to distribute; they imported it and began to distribute it. And the rest is – some kind of subversion of the Mickey Mouse culture of the USA. So that's why he claims his revenge was bringing Monty Python to the USA.

Peter Shea: John Cleese's career comes out of Monty Python; a good bit of the history of comedy is that sort of stuff. How are you with America?

Mike Hazard: The word "evil" is hard to avoid, Peter. Right now, with some 750 bases around the world, with drones blowing up people in God knows how many countries, and with, simultaneously, the largest incarcerated population in the history of the world, the decay of our streets and our schools and the quality of our food, it's hard to remain even guardedly optimistic about America. Because I'm an idealistic hippie from the get go, dreaming in Whitmanesque visions of a joy for all – we're poisoning the world with our manufactures and our munitions, and it's hard not to see a culture with no morality, no standards, and no vision which is life-fulfilling.

At the same time, when I teach kids, the joy is there. You step back and you look at what's being done in our name, and it's hard not to be profoundly disturbed by where things are and what is happening today everywhere. Pick a subject: the elephant can be touched in all these different ways, the elephant of empire. No matter where you grab him, the trunk, the tail, the ear, the word "evil" just comes back. Robert Bly said, "We were the ones we intended to bomb." Really, we are just destroying ourselves by this madness. "We were the ones we intended to bomb." Yet the birds are singing outside, even though these neonicotinoids, what are these things we're selling in stores that actually kill the birds? You're supposed to feed the birds, and yet the birdseed kills the birds. It's a polysyllabic insanity. People can do little things, and it's important that you do something whether it's, "Eat organic even though it costs more," join a CSA, help a neighbor to shovel their sidewalk, go shopping for them. Do little things. There are signs: maybe they'll stop the pipeline, this time. Who knows? Do little things, and maybe, as Pete Seeger said, all these little things will suddenly tip, the darkness that I see that surrounds us now might give way to some new light.

That's an evil question, Peter. Evil is a four-letter word. I don't know really how to address that in a positive way. The evil things being done by America have changed my life. I would have preferred to make videos just about interesting people. For me, the camera is a way to see into the lives of others, to see the pleasures and the labors and the intricacies of other cultures. I would have liked to have made more films like Portraits of Poets. It's turned out, ever since we started bombing Iraq, first time, I found that I have to

make movies about nuns working for peace, Paul Wellstone, activist and agitator for a different society. I ended up making the film with Jim Northrup because of the war in Iraq. It was his activism for changing the way things are that really became the source of that. My film with Gene McCarthy, again a poet, was about looking for a different way to do things. That pulled me in that direction. I enjoyed all those projects. In a way, I felt they were thrust on me, rather than chosen by me.

Peter Shea: How do you understand those projects – perhaps in different ways – as opposing, undermining, trying to find a way through, evil?

Mike Hazard: Well, just to stay strictly with the MacDonald sisters, Paul Wellstone, and Eugene McCarthy, and Jim Northrup, these were human beings who faced the evils that were in front of them and didn't pretend they weren't there. We were speaking before about a common reaction to evil: to pretend it's not there, to say nothing, whether it's apathy or passivity. The knowledge of something there that's not okay doesn't lead to action. What I found in the life of Gene McCarthy, in the life of Jim Northrup is a really, truly divine energy to say no, to look for good ways to say yes to a different society. Watching those movies might give the viewer a model of a different way to respond to the troubles in their path in our paths. That's one of the reasons I love making poems, pictures, motion pictures, you can offer a different way of seeing things, whether it's in the behavior of a person whose good energy might give you a model for your own, or maybe just seeing that the sound of the birds outside should lead you right out of your rut and into an appreciation of the beauty of the earth which might then inspire you to fight for proper labeling of GMO foods. You have to translate all of these things into your own actions, but how do you learn what's wrong? How do you articulate it, and then, how do you move from that knowledge to action? Maybe being alert, aware, open to others' experience, by looking at pictures, by watching films, by reading poetry, you can find a more lively life. I certainly believe you can.

Peter Shea: You find the folks you've taken the trouble to get to know this way to be followable? Sometimes heroes are so far ahead that all you can get from them is the direction. Are there practical things to imitate?

Mike Hazard: I am pretty sure that we learn by example. Looking at the lives of others is the way that we learn to be evil, or to be people who want to change the way things are. It's interesting. I'm trying to think what these for individuals – Paul Wellstone, Eugene McCarthy, Jim Northrup, and the four MacDonald's sister– have in common? One thing they all have in common is a really good sense of humor. Simultaneously, they had or have a sense of social justice, a sense that each of us is a worthy human being. Curiously enough, I think all of these individuals are also Americans in the traditional sense of the word: the values of equality and justice for all. Each of them, with humor, have faced the impossible and looked for little things, like going out and standing on the bridge on Wednesdays over Lake Street at four or five o'clock, depending on the season, every Wednesday, and carrying signs about the wars that are being waged. Or Gene McCarthy, we just decided that the war in Vietnam was so evil that he had to sacrifice his life as a politician, and as a human being, to fight for what he thought was right. Jim Northrup

continues to publish and write and – in his own way – be a champion for the rights of the Anishinabe and for you and me. I feel like I'm drifting. I don't have a program to offer, or specific things, except that you've got to start walking forward, you've got to take a step and do just a little thing that makes you feel part of the change. The beautiful thing about all these individuals: they learned, as I learned from them, that doing the right thing is a way to just feel like a better person. You're not just doing good; you actually feel good about it.

Peter Shea: We're of an age, part of the baby boom moving into retirement age.

Mike Hazard: I started Social Security last week.

Peter Shea: I am wondering what you're learning about the possibility of being old – essentially, of being an old activist?

Mike Hazard: Being an old person in America is not a safe thing to be. In 1978, I was recording Robert Bly reading a poem by Ralph Jacobson called "Old Age." It has always been clear that American culture trashes all things old – not just televisions and cars, but also people. I've kind of known that all my life. And yet now I do discover that I am one of them. In various little ways, (and it's a good thing) I've noticed that the kids get the grants. The calls to teach in the schools have dropped off, significantly, the way that I've earned a living. It could be that I'm getting too old. The positives: the older I get, I feel like the more I see. I don't want to say that I'm getting wise, but I've learned a lot about the world, and I feel like my eyes are still open and my ears are still listening. So, like McCarthy, who was trying to make sense of the world until the day he died, like Wellstone who went down running, like the MacDonald sisters who are still out on the bridge every Wednesday at four, like Jim Northrup who is still cracking jokes that have sometimes terrible truths at the heart of their humor, you carry on.

My hair is getting a little gray. It's getting harder to learn some things, like new software. Not too hard. This World is Not Altogether Bad: a lot of these poems are about old-timers. There's one I'd like to share. There was an old man who lived across the street from me when I lived on Ramsey Hill. His name was Paul Leonard. Paul was a plumber. He had arguments with the world. He was shanty-, not lace-curtain Irish. He was born in the house that he died in – literally, born in the bed that he died in. It was at least five or six years after moving across the street from Paul before he would tolerate me. Of course, I was curious, because he was quite a character. He hated having a his picture taken; after a while, after we got to know each other, and he didn't mind at all my taking out my notebook and starting to write down stories and things that he would say. On particularly nasty days, he might yell across the street, "I was born here; what's your excuse?" Paul watched himself get old; this is a poem called "Slice of Life":

Slice of Life

Scythe. After letting it grow wild
all summer, Mr. Leonard has decided

to cut down the grass in his yard.
Scythe. He swings his long scythe:
the wide perfect arc, his white hair:
He is old man time himself, scythe,
with too much and too little time
on his hands, scythe. Scythe.
He hates Communists. Scythe.
When water bubbles, he thinks
of Teddy Kennedy; scythe. Scythe.
Scythe. He hates growing too old
to cut the grass. Scythe. Scythe.

Mr. Leonard. I don't know if it's true, but one night, he told me about some of his war stories. He was in the Pacific, described human skulls eaten clean of their flesh by ants. This bony skull was an image that seemed to haunt him. It gave me the thought that it was really the war that had turned him into an angry human being. I thought he was a pretty wise individual. I learned a lot from sitting and listening.

Here's another poem for Paul, called "The Old-timer." I think it was five or six years before he told me that he had been a plumber. The first time I asked him what he did – just like your question, "How did you come to do what you do?" – he said that, for a living, he had to maintain sundials. He said that he was such a sensitive person that the works literally were too loud for him to handle if he didn't do it in a tent. So he would work undercover when he maintained sundials, Paul Leonard. So this is a little poem, really a story that Paul told, and I wrote it down.

The Old Timer

"What's it all about?" howls Paul,
the old timer across the street.
"You can't win. Your ticket is writ.
All you can do is like it.
When I die, I want my ashes
placed in hourglasses and egg timers.
To run on and on, turning over
in my grave. What's it all about?"

You asked me about old people, or what it's like to get old: well, among the richest experiences of my life has been following my father, and how he handles his old age, and following my mother, and how she survives with grace, and paying attention to these old-timers like Eugene McCarthy, who was quite elderly by the time I got to know him. I had a buddy who accused me – a great camera man named Jim Mulligan – who accused me of being an ambulance chaser in my video work because all of the subjects of my films were old-timers. But I've found that – certainly to a point – that old-timers, they have stories for us. This is a little one called "Silver-Tongued." It was about a family relation named Carl.

Silver-Tongued

Silver-tongued Carl was
always called on to bless
the family meal at holidays.
In a well-rehearsed ceremony
of high jinx, he teased-
always pretended to refuse-
was perhaps rehearsing silently.
When all at once the old Swede
would bow his silver hair
and out'd pour a prayer,
in the song-singing language
of the old country.

So, old-timers. I've got to read this one. It's called "Bill Somebody." I never learned his last name, so I just called it "Bill Somebody."

Bill Somebody

I smell his big nose,
glossy with mentholatum
and fat as toilet bowls.
Every morning we got into the fruity shorts and t-shirt,
the black pants with one hole,
the short sleeve pinstripe shirt
with delicate stains in the arm pits.
Every morning we had to pull
the white socks out of shape
to get them on his stiff ankles.
I feel his cane poke my bottom
as I run to dress someone else.

At meal times, arm in arm,
we walked from the TV room
to his place in the dining room, where
men and women never sat together.
Over coffee we talked about homes,
bad food, and our friend, bending
into sleep again, sitting up.
I saw the first time he burst
in his own pants, tied in mad knots
around his feet, as he managed
not to cry, in front of me, at least.

Every night, flat on his back,
wearing just a funny grin,
I powdered his penis, stuck
out like the stem of a pumpkin.
Every night, almost in another body,
his eyes'd buzz about the room
like aromatic whiffs of Ben Gay.
I watched Bill watch himself grow
more and more like the rest.

Here's another old-timer; this was my mentor for community action and community media: how to work in the public, out there, engaged in the community, now we call it creative place making and community engagement and other kinds of words. This is a poem that started in 1978 when I was an artist-in-residence in Saint Anthony Park with the CETA program, a program like the WPA that gave jobs to lots of people, trained them to do other jobs. It was a jobs training program. I was an artist-in-residence with COMPAS. It changed my life. I went through Macalester. I was a garret, ivory tower artist, who cut his eye teeth on abstract expressionism, and my experience of working in a neighborhood with community organizations and just people on the street to try to make good art changed me to a more engaged, involved individual. My mentor at that time, who was the community organizer in St. Anthony Park, a woman named Gerry Jenkins, was a person whom I modeled my own life on. She was a good model. I wrote this poem about her. She loved bluebirds, so I wrote a poem about Gerry called "A Bluebird of Happiness."

A Bluebird of Happiness

A bluebird of happiness flies
in Geraldine's aquamarine eyes.
I feared she'd died and flown
to heaven when I found her,
here in this rest home since
she can't remember when.
She's good on the old days,
not so on the current questions
she repeats like bird calls.
Are you a good husband?
Are you a good husband?
I answer you're my teacher
in the school of hard knocks.
She says her daughter once
spelled that knocks "k.n.o.x."
Giving her a little peck goodbye,
I flutter away, stopping to study
the bluebird picture by her door.
In Geraldine's aquamarine eyes

a bluebird of happiness flies.

Your asking questions about old people is bringing out some of these poems. Clearly, there is a connection to my praise for old people, and many old people that I have met. This is a poem for my grandma.

The Blue-Haired Moon

Your belief in The One Above made us
get down on our knees and close our eyes.
The sacred heart of your faith is
a prize of prayers and praise.
By the Great Horn Spoon,
good night Gramma, and do not cry, please:
I promise by the blue-haired moon,
we will always hum and sing your lullabies.

This World is not Altogether Bad: people smile when they hear the title. I think it was a good choice. I think it touches a chord, because people know that there are evil things happening to us and in our name; I think that's the hidden ground why people smile a little bit and say, really, it's not altogether bad? Did I answer that question, Peter?

Peter Shea: My mother's writers group put out a book called, I think, *I Can Handle this Life*. It seems in the same spirit.

Mike Hazard: I like that.

Peter Shea: I had the privilege of interviewing Gene McCarthy five years before he died. I keep showing that interview because it seems important to understand how someone of that age thought and communicated. I show it to ask people, "What's different about someone of that age reflecting on his life and spinning out a long thought?" I have wanted to ask you, since you had a chance to hang around with him much more than I did, how you saw him thinking.

Mike Hazard: Gene McCarthy was one of the smartest people I ever met. It was said that he could recite all of Yeats. I got involved with him because he came to town to introduce a film about Ireland at the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Film Festival. That was the first time I ever saw him in person; it was '99. He was so bright and witty and charming and satiric and wicked. It was in the old Bell Auditorium and, as he came up the aisle, after introducing this film, I almost stood up to shake his hand, because I was taken with his presence. I didn't, and off he walked, and I thought, "I'll never see him again."

There was a party for the film at Kieran's Pub afterwards. I went to the party, the after-film party. For a while, I couldn't figure out where the party was; it was a busy pub, but there were no film people. Then I realized there was a back room. I went in the back

room, and Gene was standing in the middle of the room, reciting poems – wicked poems about Hubert Humphrey and wicked stories about LBJ and heartbreaking stories about Vietnam. He also recited a poem of Yeats. I love Yeats, and I love poets who can recite poetry. At the intermission, I introduced myself to the Senator, and I said, “Senator, I love poets who can recite their own poems, but I fall in love with poets who can recite the work of other poets.” He smiled and said, “What do you do?” I said, “I make films about poets.” He said, “Make one about me.”

And so that’s how I got drawn into making a film about Gene. I spent six years following him around and reading most of his books; he wrote a lot of books– 25 or 26 books. We included a Yeats poem in the film: *I Am Sorry I Was Right*. The film used his poetry as the spine of the piece. The poems are really his personal story. The film ends with a poem called “Courage After Sixty.” He said he kept changing the title as he got older: “Courage After Seventy,” “Courage after Eighty.” But I think I saw Gene’s life as he lived it: a man, a human, who lived his values. He was raised Catholic, he studied to be a priest at St. John’s, he graduated from St. John’s and, to this day, he has the highest grade point average of any graduate of St. John’s ever. Simultaneously, he was also playing hockey, football, and baseball, and starring in those sports.

He was one tough son of a bitch. You had to be hard to fight Lyndon Johnson. To fight the system in America, you had to be a warrior. Gene was a warrior. What I saw was a person who tried to live the values of a person who believed in social justice, who believed that it was not okay that racism ruled the land. It was not okay to drop bombs on people that weren’t your enemy. He saw the evil, and then he acted. That was, to me, the brilliant life of Gene McCarthy. I never met anyone who I spent any amount of time with who hadn’t made mistakes, who didn’t have what I call stickiness in their lives and life story. Gene had his share. But, to the end, Gene never gave up trying to make sense of the world, by writing, by talking, by standing up for what he felt was right.