Speaking of Ralph: Ingrid Wendt in Interview with A. Robert Lee

1. First, Ingrid, every heartfelt condolence from James Mackay and myself at the loss of Ralph in 2017. Let's start with writing itself. Both you and he shared a decades-long writing life together. How did that work?

Thank you for asking. What a wonderful life we had. We married when I was 24 and Ralph was 43. Quite the age difference, right? We didn't feel it. We were of one heart, one soul, with compatible interests and a mutual respect for our differences. How grateful I am that life permitted us 48 married years together.

Happily, our writing life together worked amazingly well— in great measure because our circadian rhythms and writing practices were so very opposite. Ralph's best writing time was very early morning. His daily practice was to rise early, sometimes as early as 4:30 or 5:00, fully alert—a body rhythm ingrained from childhood, when he'd rise before dawn, even on school days, to milk the cows before breakfast. He'd make coffee, take it to his desk, and wait for inspiration. He seldom had to wait long. When the sun rose, he'd interrupt his work to say his morning prayers and then return to the poem—or story—at hand. If working on a poem, he almost always had a solid first draft, from beginning to end, before noon. When writing fiction, he'd get a substantial start the first morning, and then come back to it on consecutive days until completion.

I, on the other hand, am always slow to awaken and, with the rare exception of writing residencies, I'd write only in the late evenings, whenever I had the prospect of two or more uninterrupted hours. This didn't happen as often as I wished, but I took lots of notes, which would later become longer, more complex poems, all the better for having simmered for days or weeks on the back burner. And I'd fallen

head over heels with teaching and parenting and working on the house we bought for a song and saved from demolition and moved across town, and all the rest: fully engaged with life *in the world* in ways I'd never before dreamed possible.

Also good was that our mutual respect, plus our vastly different writing styles, kept us from ever competing. And though we often were inspired by similar subjects and shared experiences, and held quite similar world views, we approached our writing from such different directions that neither of us feared slipping into the other's skin or fearing an editor might prefer the other's work. I rejoiced in Ralph's successes, and he in mine. We rarely sent our work to the same places, and rarely appeared together in print.

Looking back—though we had our occasional disagreements—we were a team in every possible way, sharing household responsibilities and co-parenting, even before there was such a word. Ralph was good with cars and tools of all kinds and could fix almost anything; he once even re-wired the house we moved. I took care of the everyday household things—all except the dinner dishes, which he did. I hated doing dishes, so this was a perfect arrangement. On the occasions I was invited out of town, on one- to three-week visiting poet gigs, Ralph took over completely: single-parenting, cooking, cleaning, the whole shebang. I did the same for him, when he traveled a month in India, for example, on a lecture tour sponsored by the U.S. Department of State, or when he traveled within the U.S. for conferences or poetry readings. I even taught his graduate writing classes.

After our daughter was grown and gone, we traveled together: attending conferences, giving readings, lecturing, teaching overseas on Fulbright professorships, sharing a residency at the Rockefeller Center in Bellagio, and more. Ralph, being older than I, officially retired from university teaching in 1994; and so from that year until his death in 2017, he wrote (as usual) almost every morning,

and—after an early afternoon siesta—he'd also work until supper. His literary output during the 1990s and 2000s was staggering! I, being younger, continued working half-time as a visiting writer, and the free time Martina's departure (in 1989) opened up was quickly filled with editorial projects, lecturing and keynote-speaking, and other professional engagements, until I was traveling throughout our home state of Oregon and to other states, as well. My own writing productivity increased, however, especially during several short poetry residencies, and by the end of the next dozen years I had three new manuscripts circulating. The last of these three was published in 2011. In other words, all our married life we orbited each other nicely.

The old saying that "opposites attract" was, in great measure, true. We complimented each other in so many ways, including temperament. But it was our shared world views, a shared sense of humor, an ability to laugh at the same things, including ourselves, and a belief in and respect for each other's work that kept us together and allowed for our writing, and our marriage, to flourish.

2. You were present at the creation of so much of his poetry and fiction – how did he go about his writing especially when combining it with the role of university professor?

From 1967 until his retirement in 1994, Ralph's teaching load in the English Department of the University of Oregon, consisted of one graduate poetry writing workshop each term, which he met for three hours, one evening per week, and mentoring the many students who signed up for one-on-one "Writing and Conference" credit, during his afternoon office hours. Some years, he'd also teach an afternoon literature class for one or two of the three university terms, or an undergraduate or graduate fiction writing workshop.

This schedule allowed him to spend mornings at home, writing—both before and after breakfast. He'd lunch, take a short nap to catch up on lost sleep, and then walk two miles, in all kinds of weather, to spend long afternoons at the university, taking care of the business that "comes with the job": department meetings, committee and juried dissertation meetings, correspondence, advising writing students, and so on. Then he'd walk home. All in all, it was a brilliant, win-win schedule for him as well as for his students.

As to his writing practices, for most of his life Ralph wrote rough drafts—of both poems and short fiction— with pencil and paper. His poems almost always began with his capturing an image seen from his desk or an image remembered, from the past or from a dream, and letting a stream of consciousness carry his words forward until patterns and themes emerged and evolved. I believe he never knew the endings of his poems in advance, and he seldom "tinkered around" with alternate routes to them, generally reaching them that same day. When he was finished with one poem and had more time, he'd revise it and/or others. I wish I knew more about the rough drafts of his stories; he seldom talked about his fiction. But I do know he wrote first drafts by hand, in pencil, on yellow-lined paper.

When large desk computers came along (was it during the late 1980s?) and three were given, by the UO's School of Liberal Arts, to the English Department, a kind of bidding war took place among the professors, with all contenders writing letters attesting to the extremity of their needs and their individual worthiness to receive one, for their own exclusive use, but only in their private offices in the English Department building. As one of the winners (an accomplishment he was proud of till the end of his days) Ralph received the use of a big clunker which he "took to" like the proverbial duck to water. How much easier revision became; and preparing work for publication was so much less drudgery!

As the years went on, and computers became smaller and more affordable, he bought one for use in his home office, as well, and slowly began transitioning from pencil and typewriter to computer, for even rough drafts of poetry and prose. Eventually, in the last 15-20 years of his life, he used the computer for every kind of writing, including voluminous correspondence, and was almost obsessive in backing up his creative work. As his literary executor, I can't help wishing his filing system had been more outside-user friendly, and that he'd saved physical copies of his email correspondence, but happily, most of his poems and prose are still accessible, as are two cardboard boxes of poems that I'm pretty sure haven't yet appeared in print.

3. Ralph clearly took great pride in his Cherokee-Shawnee ancestry, mixed as it was with his Irish and English roots. Yet in his autobiography, *So Far, So Good* he asks "Am I still an Indian?" What is your take on how he regarded his Native legacy?

Yes, that question *is* perplexing, isn't it? It's so unlike the rest of the book, I had totally forgotten he wrote this, and so I did a digital search and found it on p. 241 (paperback version). Until then, Ralph has fully embraced his Native, as well as his Irish-English, heritage and has given us many details of his father's having raised him in traditional Native ways: teaching the importance of reciprocity, while working the land; telling stories during long, winter evenings, with all 5 children gathered around, stories that sometimes involved mystical, mythical creatures his father had heard about as a child in Kentucky; fashioning a bow and arrow for Ralph, when teaching him, at a very young age, to hunt.

And all this without his father's revealing to his family that he had Native blood: a fact Ralph learned from relatives, as a young man, shortly after his father's death in 1958. But that first revelation allowed him to finally put together and to begin to feel, for the first time in his life, a true sense of "belonging." His private ways of

perceiving the world—the inner values that had made him feel so different from his peers, from the world outside of the farm, from even his siblings, who were perhaps less inclined to take deeply into themselves the lessons their father taught—suddenly made sense. He immersed himself in learning all he could about his Native ancestry. The "inner confusions" he wrote about in earlier poems and fiction, disappeared. That new context grounded him.

Though in his younger years Ralph had always been a good chameleon, nimble in making his way in the "White man's world," beyond the farm, the more he learned about his heritage, the more certain he was that he'd found his spiritual home. Ralph also became more and more sure of his purpose as a writer, as a teacher, as one destined to carry forward the values he hoped would keep our world from self-destruction. He grew to love his Indian ancestors, deeply and intimately, and, in similar fashion, he felt, intuitively, as close to many Native author-friends as if they were cousins.

So *yes*, he did take great pride in his Native ancestry. And even more than pride, Ralph carried a deep love for all his people, both living and dead, and a quiet dignity of bearing, very much in keeping with his Native heritage. Though he was a master teacher, a master lecturer, and an admirably patient listener, he preferred one-on-one conversation to larger social gatherings. He also took upon himself the responsibility of carrying forward, in his poems and fiction, the historical, social, cultural, spiritual, and ethnographic information about his Indian people, their way of life, and his awareness of the great wrongs inflicted upon them by Westward Expansion. He dedicated himself to transmitting this collective memory, determined not to let the Vanishing American disappear completely from public awareness.

So why that question, written when Ralph was in his 80s, "Am I still, after all these years, still an Indian?" Did he doubt himself?

I say he never *stopped* being an Indian. The question, I believe, is rhetorical, the kind of question good teachers sometimes ask. He did not doubt himself. I believe the question springs from his awareness of how he had been seen by those who lack understanding of mixed-race allegiances.

His question also reflects, I think, his ever-present memories of the racist reactions he'd encountered when he first publicly identified as Native American, with the publication (in 1982 and 1983) of three books in a row that boldly employed titles, topics and themes that referenced his Native heritage. Despite the emergence of what's now called the Native American Renaissance, despite the rapidly expanding circle of contemporary Native writers where Ralph and his work found acceptance and respect, the reception of Ralph's new books within the UO's English Department wasn't exactly warm. In those days, as I remember them, the movers and shakers and decision makers were academics for whom White male writers were the only ones deserving admission to the literary canon. The wonderful, worldwide, *current* proliferation of Native American / Ethnic Studies programs is, in the minds of many who studied and/or taught in the 1970s and 1980s, a dream come true. But "back in the day," when Ralph's three books appeared, there had been only a sprinkling of Native American Studies classes taught across campus--none of them in the English Department. In fact, a university minor in Native American Studies didn't become an established field of study until 2014. So, in essence, Ralph was leaping off a cliff without a net.

To be fair to his colleagues (some of whom *did* react kindly), Ralph—with his light complexion and blue eyes—had never been considered as other than whiteHe'd been hired away from Drake University (Iowa) in 1960, with a promise of tenure based on an exemplary teaching record and a strong publication history of poems and stories in national magazines. He was a rising star, a "golden boy," who, in

1961, published a poem in *The New Yorker*: a big deal then as well as now, though I strongly suspect that if anyone in his department actually *read* the poem, they'd been quietly baffled by its content, which was an exposé of the racist assumptions of the staff of a children's museum. 1n the early 1960s Ralph had—together with fellow department member and fiction writer James B. Hall—helped shape the new MFA program in Creative Writing, one of the first in the country. Ralph was also, by 1964, Editor-in-Chief of *Northwest Review*, a literary journal of national and international distinction. Even his first book of poems, *Ghost Grapefruit* (Ithaca House, 1972)—much of it written before he'd fully embarked on the quest to learn all he could about his Native heritage—didn't rattle anyone's feathers or sound any bells of alarm.

So, imagine the consternation in the English Department when, in 1982 and 1983, his second, third, and fourth books were titled *Pointing at the Rainbow*, *Spirit Beast Chant*, and *Going to the Water: Poems of a Cherokee Heritage*. To say his colleagues were not pleased is an understatement. And, as Ralph continued to publish poems that drew on his complex world view and his allegiance to his Indian-Caucasian ancestry? Let's say his promotion to Full Professor was a long time in coming.

"'Why are you always writing about those red Indians, man? Why don't you write about your Irish people?' … and I could only wish that I had written more about my Irish American mother." (SFSG, 240) This challenge from a colleague appears just paragraphs before Ralph's question, "Am I still…. Indian?" and leads me to believe that besides rhetorical, Ralph's question is also *empathic*. It's almost as if he's seeing himself through the eyes of that colleague, as though that long-ago colleague were still around to see *him*: an old white guy, more fluent in the language of academia than in the language of his Native people, good with a

computer and far from the hunter he once had been, far from the traditional way of life of his Native ancestors. How could this light-skinned, blue-eyed elder, walking the halls of academia instead of a dirt path along a Kentucky creek, as he'd done as a child when visiting his Cherokee-Shawnee grandmother (herself a descendant of the Cherokee who'd hid in the hills to avoid the Trail of Tears)—how could he be the "real thing"?

And who knows? Maybe, like the rest of us, Ralph sometimes *did* have self-doubts. If he did, and that's a big "if," the delightfully sardonic way he acknowledges that *(yes) he's led a way of life far from the traditional ways of his father and of his Indian ancestors*, implies other, hidden, rhetorical questions. The very next sentence, which begins a new paragraph, reads:

> Applying the Rez Test of authenticity, it is true that I have never lived in North Carolina, never lived on our single reservation, one that a kind white man bought for a few oppressed Cherokees after so many had been robbed of their fertile plantations, hunting grounds, and population centers, including our sacred city Echota—after so many had been ethnically cleansed, been massacred, been death-marched west. (241) [But does that make me less authentically Indian?] (*wordsin brackets mine*)

Ralph goes on to recall, again tongue in cheek, how even his "civilized" family was one step farther from the hunting grounds of his ancestors: his family used newspapers and the pages of mail-order catalogs, instead of leaves, for personal hygiene. [Was his father, then, a "lesser" Indian?] There's a note of sadness in Ralph's admission that he raised his own children even farther from the traditional ways of his Native ancestors, though he did teach his sons to hunt in the ways his own father taught him, and made sure his children learned family history. That he didn't pass on more: does that make him less Indian?

Ralph then offers another admission: when his fiction and poetry referred to Indian history, or his protagonists or poems were written from a Native perspective (which many were) they were not always from his own lived experience. [Does this make him less Indian?] As a writer of poetry and fiction, he was comfortable writing, on occasion, from other people's points of view and with putting his characters in situations he'd never been in. When he wrote of traditional Indian practices, or of the challenges of being mixed-blood, or of being a full-blood Indian, he borrowed what he'd learned from ethnographers and from the autobiographies (written and/or told him in conversation) of other Native writers; they provided him with the *substance*, the *details*, of real-life situations. [Other fiction writers do this; are Native peoples not allowed to do the same?]

I love the way Ralph concludes his various responses to the rhetorical question, and concludes this section of the book, with a wonderfully subtle refusal to accept the "either-or" dialectical framework within which his own, rhetorical question is asked. The answer, he suggests—by referencing a story by a writer he greatly admired—is more complex than either *yes* or *no*.

> In Luigi Pirandello's short story "War," a bereaved father says that a father does not give half of his love to one child, half to another; he gives all his love to each of his children. I am a Cherokee-Shawnee-English-Irish person, not part this part that but all everything, whatever it is. (SFSG, 242)

4. His tough Iowa farm childhood and upbringing obviously weighed throughout his life. Why do you think it stayed with him so greatly?

Oh, you're so right—his childhood on the farm was a topic he returned to over and over, throughout his life. And to your question, I wish there were a simple answer. The "tough" parts—his family's poverty and state of near-starvation, their need to work tirelessly and be ever-vigilant, keeping guns at the ready to protect

themselves, in a society out of balance during the Great Depression, and the hardships of the Great Depression itself, as well as his father's drunken violence—scarred Ralph for life. Becoming a writer and a teacher, drawing upon (though often disguising) his experiences for subject matter, was a way of not only surviving but of prevailing. Of healing.

Examples of the violence include the time his father, in one of many drunken rages, shot into the linoleum kitchen floor around Ralph's four-year-old feet. In some ways similar to persons with PTSD, Ralph—for over a year, after we were together—would often be startled awake, right after he'd fallen asleep. He didn't know why; he thought it might be something neurological. His whole body would jerk, almost jump. But then one night he awakened with the full realization he'd been having flashbacks of that shooting incident, though the scars remained. And that was it: the sudden, startled wakings never returned.

He also told of another time when his mother sent him to warn his older brother Bob, working a tractor in the fields, that their father was coming after him with a gun. His brother returned to the house, planning to disarm their father, but by that time Charlie had passed out. He told, also, of being ten or eleven and accompanying his mother, whom his father had threatened to kill, as she set out on foot for a neighbor's house to call the sheriff, while his drunken father—from the front porch—shot bullet after bullet at or near her, kicking up the dust in front of their feet. Ralph's mother walked on, but Ralph returned to confront his father and begged him to stop his shooting. Ralph was successful, and—though he never remembered just what he said—that was the last time his father threatened any of his family with a gun.

The world outside the family unit was dangerous, too. One night when he was 15 or 16, at home with his mother, the two of them the only ones awake—his brother Bob off to war and his older brother Ray off to town with his father—Ralph went out the

back door with a loaded gun to frighten away a prowler. Thieves from cities often roamed the Iowa farmland, looking for animals or machines or whatever they could find, to sell on the black market. Seeing no one, afraid for his life, Ralph shot into the dark, never knowing whether he'd wounded anyone; but the sounds stopped. The prowler had probably fled through the fields. Another night, with the whole family at home, his father drew his gun on two men who had come to rob the family. They left and robbed a family down the road, instead.

What complicates my answer is that Ralph was able to live long enough, and conquer his traumas well enough, to recognize that there was more goodness, intertwined with the hard stuff, than he was aware of during his youth. And as he grew in ability to see his own suffering in a wider context, the more aware he was, I believe, that his background gave him the authority and the opportunity to explore larger social issues and to lead his readers towards a deeper awareness of poverty, violence, and their consequences.

From his conscious, formative years during the worldwide Great Depression of the 1930s—years in which he thought that President Hoover's first name was "Damn," years during which winter meals often consisted of milk and homemade white bread, or cornbread, spread with lard, sometimes with milk and potatoes and flour-based gravy—Ralph learned first-hand the concept of poverty. He learned first-hand how it felt to be overlooked by those who wield economic and political power; how it was to be working class, to be an outcast; he learned that Capitalism can deal out injustice, that Democracy works often at the expense of society's "have nots." He also learned empathy. He learned how to forgive his father (as can be seen in the many *good* memories Ralph shares in his autobiography).

Violence and economic hardships are, of course, almost always intertwined, as social scientists, therapists, psychologists, and others have been telling us for quite some time. And these interconnections were among Ralph's major themes.

I think he'd also agree that without his "tough childhood," without the darkness, he wouldn't have half been half the writer he was. Much of his work can be seen, I believe, as the work of a "survivor" who refused to be defined or limited by the traumas he experienced and who channeled his "fight or flight" response into something of beauty and truth. Ralph's own awareness of this seeming paradox—light growing out of, and indeed fueled by, darkness—is epitomized in the title of his book of poems, *Light from a Bullet Hole* (2010), with his deliberate choice of *from* rather than the more conventional *through*.

And there's yet another way to answer your question. Let's talk about the weight of Ralph's childhood in terms of "place." All of us were born *somewhere*. right? And for a while that place was the center of our universe. For those who remained in that place for most of our childhood years, it became part of who we are and the lens through which we viewed the world. That place was critical to our sense of identity. It shaped us. N. Scott Momaday, in his cover endorsement for Keith Basso's *Wisdom Sits in Place: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache*, says: "Keith Basso gives us to understand something about the sacred and indivisible nature of words and place. And this is a universal equation, a balance in the universe. Place may be the first of all concepts; it may be the oldest of all words."

Despite the tough childhood Ralph endured, he talked often, and wrote extensively, about his gratitude for growing up working the land, for its having connected him at a profound and intimate level with the cycles of life, of the seasons; he felt a kinship

with the earth and all its creatures, both large and small; he came to understand earth's power to give and its power to take away.

He knew, also, that the place which formed him was more than geographic location, more than the forces of the natural world, but the human society which he found there, with its own ethics, concepts of wisdom, of manners, of morals.

What I'm saying is not news, of course. What *is* new, however, *as I see it*, is the relatively recent development of academic fields of study in this area, and the proliferation of literary publications, both within and outside of the academy, devoted to the investigation of our human relationship to "place." I think of journals such as *Windfall*, which publishes writing exclusively from and about the Pacific Northwest; the online literary journal *About Place*, published by the Black Earth Institute and "dedicated to re-forging the links between art and spirit, earth and society." Another is *Claw and Blossom*: *human nature, natural world*; another, *Terrain*, which "searches for the interface—the integration—among the built and natural environments that might be called the soul of place"—and this is just the proverbial tip of the iceberg.

So, despite the tough times he endured as a child, the Ralph I knew also had happy memories, among the troubled ones, and he drew upon them to live a balanced life. His autobiography is peppered with memories of games he and his siblings played, the special desserts his Aunt Jennie cooked, his mother's flower and vegetable gardens, her canning. The first orange Ralph ever ate, at age six, was brought by distant cousin, visiting from Florida. Eventually the family (when Ralph was fifteen) was able to get running water and electricity.

His mother, whom I knew, had been for Ralph a model of patience and endurance, who shared with her children her own hard work ethic (as did his father) and her

sense of "the holy" within all living things. I loved her wry sense of humor, which Ralph and all of his siblings inherited. When we'd come to visit, his mother would say "Oh, good: now I have someone to help me clean out the refrigerator."

Of his father, Ralph had far more happy memories (looking back) than traumatic ones. When I met Ralph, in 1967, his father had already passed on, and Ralph had, long before that, already forgiven him. Apparently, his father had given up drinking, and by the time Ralph's sons were born, Charlie had become the loving grandfather they and their cousins remember.

No, despite the memories of hard times, Ralph loved and remained deeply connected with his family, until one by one they preceded him in death. Each family member, including his mother's sister, Jennie, who lived with them, is remembered in individual poems written for and about them. We went to the Iowa farm where Ralph was born, and on which Ralph's sister, Ruth, and her husband Bob Walker, still lived and farmed, as part of each Summer vacation for the better part of 40 years. Ralph's brother Bob and family owned the farm next door, about ½ mile down the now-paved road. Those were happy times; I have a video recording of the four surviving siblings (his elder brother Ray died in middle age) sitting around a kitchen table, reminiscing about Pappy and Ma (or Mother, as she was sometimes called). On other occasions, Ruth would get out the large, old, tin bread box with a huge collection of black and white photos saved, over the years, and spread them randomly on the table, leading her and Ralph to spend an evening of random reminiscing, with myself and our daughter, Martina, as their rapt audience.

So yes, back to your questions: the hardships of his childhood did weigh on Ralph throughout his entire life. They made for important stories, important poems. But balancing that weight was much goodness, which I think Ralph would want his readers to know.

5. War holds an immensely important role in his outlook – bomber-crew training, aerial bombardment over Berlin, Korea, and eventually peace activism against the wars in Vietnam and Iraq. Could you say something more of this trajectory in his life? In what ways did he regard himself as a "peace poet," especially in the context of nuclear power and arms?

From the time Ralph was old enough to grasp the socially-correct concept, glamorized during the early days of World War II, that fighting for one's country was a moral obligation and that dying for one's country was noble and glamorous, he wanted to become an Air Force pilot. As a teenager, he built model planes and imagined himself rescuing his eight-years-older brother, Bob, from a prisoner of war camp in Italy. Ralph enlisted in the United States Air Force when he was 17, and the day after his 18th birthday he was on a train for the first time in his life, headed for 29 months of military service, all of it in training on various air bases in the western United States. To his great disappointment, his rural high school had not offered him (or anyone) the necessary math to become a pilot, so Ralph did what was he was assigned: he trained as a machine-gunner and flew over two hundred B-24 and B-29 bomber practice missions.

Though he was proud of his endurance and the skills he learned, and grateful for having made friends who steered him towards getting a higher education, the horrors he experienced—witnessing flaming plane crashes that took two hundred lives (SFSG, 177), some of whom were Ralph's friends—led him to the devastating awareness that those deaths were pointless: that war was pointless; that he'd been propagandized; that dying was far from glorious. He often said that before enlisting, he hadn't really internalized what death, especially a painful death, actually *was*. He had been young and immortal (right?), like many young soldiers, all around the world, who enlist at an age when their prefrontal cortexes are still

forming, when their ability to look at all sides of the issues, to make rational decisions, is not yet fully operational. All that testosterone, each "invincible" generation repeating the enthusiasms of the generation before. He saw what Pete Seeger later immortalized in song, "gone to graveyards, every one." He learned at university and through family experience (his mother's first husband died in World War One), that almost every generation, throughout history, has had its own war, and that the reasons for war are closely tied to economics. Believing the world should not function that way, Ralph became a pacifist. His commitment, as you've rightly noted, was lifelong.

One of the ways his pacifism played out was through his poetry and fiction. I remember his talking about using the gift of his survival and his gift with words, to work to honor the memories of his friends killed in air crashes, by exposing the lies they'd all been fed and by telling the truth about war.

A sometimes-thorny issue, with which Ralph chose not to engage, was whether it was necessary for America to join the Allies in fighting the Nazis and the Japanese during the Second World War. What Ralph really railed against were the root causes of war and human blindness to the wheels of propaganda (among other complex reasons, such as the way Germany's resources were depleted after World War I) that initially induced the German people to follow Hitler, similar to the wheels he'd himself fallen under, in America. He argued against the political and economic forces which persuaded all the young and vulnerable into laying down their lives for no good reason. He made his points quite well, I believe, in his writing—though he never could persuade one of his brothers, Rex, the youngest in the family (who made the United States Air Force a lifelong career—during which he flew hospital ships and transport missions in Vietnam) that the Vietnam War was wrong.

Ralph also, by extension, loathed the nuclear arms race and felt an uneasiness, throughout his life, about the fact that American lives had been spared—at the end

of World War II—by the horrific destruction of the entire cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He feared that if left unchecked, the nuclear arms race, which escalated to epic proportions in the 1950s and 60s, and kept on escalating, would lead to nuclear holocaust and the ultimate destruction of our world. That threat is, of course, back with us again, thanks to multiple causes that don't fall within the scope of our conversation.

So yes, Ralph *did*, over a good many years, take upon himself the responsibility of reminding his readers that the nuclear threat wasn't going away just because the world's attentions might be elsewhere. His awareness of nuclear threat extended not only to bombs, themselves, but to the nuclear reactors that were predicted (and have, by now, at least twice been proven—in Chernobyl and Fukishima) to have disastrous consequences should anything go wrong.

There's something I need to clarify, however, before returning to the trajectory of Ralph's lifelong pacifism. Despite the realism and historical accuracy of his short fiction, Ralph never saw combat. He was not "The Indian who Bombed Berlin." He never went to Korea. In fact, he was never shipped over either the Atlantic or the Pacific. The news of Germany's surrender arrived when he was on a troop train bound for the East Coast, where he was to be shipped across the Atlantic. He then returned to another American air base, was trained to firebomb Japan, and was getting ready to get shipped there, when *Japan* surrendered. A few years later, an Air Force computing error sent Ralph an honorable discharge before he was even called up to serve in Korea. By the time it arrived, however, he'd already decided to serve only on the condition that he serve as a medic; if that didn't work, he'd officially declare himself a Conscientious Objector and go to prison. rather than fight. "Why didn't you become a CO right away," I once asked. "Because that would have meant going to prison, and my family would have had no income."

No, about Berlin and Korea, Ralph was merely doing what fiction writers do, *imagining what could have happened*, right (?), what memories he would have carried, what recognitions he would later have had, had he actually been in those bombers. And why should he worry that readers would assume the stories were autobiographical? Did anyone assume that N. Scott Momaday had been in the Army, when he wrote about a WW II soldier returning to his New Mexico reservation? I see various future research papers here: WW II veterans who became writers, specifically those with Native American heritage.

I'm surprised, now that I think of it, that Ralph's editors did not insist on a disclaimer at the beginning of his books of short fiction, stating that "the places and the names….etc., are not based on actual characters or events," or however that goes. Misleading his readers was never Ralph's intention.

Autobiographical details that Ralph *did* bring to that Berlin story were his having lived and taught in Germany, several times, as a Fulbright professor; having been to Berlin several times (before and after the Wall came down); and having participated in anti-war rallies, in Oregon and California, during Vietnam War years and during the early days of the still-ongoing wars in the Gulf.

But back to the trajectory, and to contextualize Ralph's political activism during the Vietnam War era, when Ralph— by then a professor at the University of Oregon— was openly decrying the United States military involvement. In those days, the term all of us used was "anti-war poet"; the terms "peace poet," "pacifist poet," and "activist poet," had yet to evolve.

With your kind permission, I'll digress just enough to give a bit of historical context to Ralph's peace activism and mention the non-profit, umbrella organization called "American Writers Against the Vietnam War," created in 1965—the year American forces landed in Vietnam—by American poets David Ray and Robert Bly, for the

purpose of organizing readings, meetings, rallies, teach-ins, demonstrations, and the like. Bly and Ray also co-edited and published (in 1966) an anthology, still available, titled *A Poetry Reading Against the Vietnam War*, which contained work by many of the most highly-regarded poets of the time: Galway Kinnell, Grace Paley, Allen Ginsberg, Adrienne Rich, Donald Hall, Robert Lowell, James Wright, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Louis Simpson, William Stafford, Robert Creeley, Denise Levertov, Bly and Ray, themselves, and many more). The significance of that anthology cannot be overemphasized. It inspired many other writers and editors to do something similar, and it fostered a wave of poetry readings throughout the United States, all of them passionate and well attended. One can find many accounts of this anthology, and the movement, online.

It was during this time that Ralph, as Editor-in-Chief of *Northwest Review* conceived of a special "Protest and Affirmation" issue, which I, as Managing Editor from 1967-1968, helped create. Behind that title was his belief—first articulated, he told me, by poet Denise Levertov—that there are two ways to resist oppression: to actively *name and resist it*, and to praise and celebrate what it is we live *for.* Or, as Oregon-born poet Phyllis McGinley once said, "In times of unrest and fear, it is perhaps the writer's duty to celebrate, to single out some values we can cherish, to talk about some of the few warm things we know in a cold world."

Farther along in our conversation I'll come back to the political backlash from the University of Oregon's publications department. It wasn't pleasant. But Ralph held his ground, got two other faculty members to back him, and the issue was published (after prolonged delay).

Both Ralph and I, in the following years, participated in several readings, rallies, and marches against the Vietnam War. Some were in Fresno, California, where I had a temporary assistant professorship at the state college (now university), and where

Ralph had been hired as a visiting professor for two years. One memorable march was downtown, where we and many hundreds of students, faculty, and community members marched through the streets on a hot, hot day. The march was peaceful; we never doubted it would be. Oh, we were so innocent, in the days before the deadly shootings at Kent State (May 4, 1970). On the Fresno campus, FBI agents were everywhere, every day, for months—easily identified by their gray suits. (Who wears gray suits with large walkie-talkies in their bulging breast pockets on campus?) I strongly suspect that to this day, our names and faces are in some FBI files, somewhere. At one of the marches on campus, our group of protestors was approached by a group of young, macho males (aggies, they were called: agriculture students, very right wing) swinging heavy bicycle chains in our direction. We didn't linger.

Ralph's officemate in Fresno was a young Everett Frost, an English professor/friend who, on his own time, counseled young men who wanted to know their alternatives to military service, should they be drafted. Everett, consequently, was suspended from teaching by the college administration (over loud objections from the English department) for allegedly conspiring to blow up the grand piano in the music school—an absurdity that didn't hold up in court. For a couple of days *all* English professors, including ourselves, did not have access to our offices, while all filing cabinets were searched for evidence. Strange and ugly times.

But I digress. On we go to the wars of the next generation. First, it was the Gulf War, began under (Republican) President George Bush, in early 1991, with the bombing of Iraq: the goal, to oust Saddam Hussein, who had invaded Kuwait. The days prior to the first "shock and awe" wave of U.S. bombings of Baghdad were excruciating for us, as they were for many millions of our fellow citizens, unable to stop the Desert Storm and Desert Shield operations that had begun, actually, with buildup of troops in 1990. Both Ralph and I responded by writing protest poems, as

did many others. We participated in readings, locally, though there wasn't the same kind of nationwide movement as during the Vietnam War, in part because that military action was of a limited duration.

Ten years later, however, after the (second) Bush administration announced a war against terror (and its mastermind, Osama bin Laden, leader of al-Qaeda, who had planned the simultaneous attacks on New York's World Trade Center's Twin Towers and the Pentagon, in Washington, D.C.), a whole new nationwide protest movement erupted, with poets again at the helm. This time the first move was made by the late poet-publisher Sam Hamill, after he declined an invitation to attend First Lady Laura Bush's White House Symposium "Poetry and the American Voice," in February 2003—a symposium that was canceled as a result of much negative publicity. Hamill called for poets to submit work to what became the huge, online anthology *Poets Against the War* (part of which was later printed as a book). That site, now archived and difficult to access, originally contained over 4,600 contributions from poets worldwide and grew to include over 10,000 poems. It became a forum where poets could register their opposition to the Bush administration's initiating war with Iraq. I encourage readers to search online for more details.

What happened next, and happened almost simultaneously, was that a great many editors of journals and/or small, independent poetry presses, all across America, also published print editions of state-specific, or city- or region-specific anthologies of anti-war poems. Here in Oregon, Ralph and I both appeared in *Raising Our Voices: An Anthology of Oregon Poets Against the War*, edited by Duane Poncy (Cherokee) and Patricia McLean, in 2003. Again, we participated in readings. And we organized two of them, a year apart, timed to celebrate the January birthday of Oregon's most world-renowned poet, William Stafford (1913-1993), who had been a

close friend. Stafford, a Conscientious Objector during World War II, had spent three years in work camps in Arkansas, California, and Illinois, fighting fires and maintaining roads, which he described in his memoir *Down in My Heart.*

We called the first event: "Every War Has Two Losers," a title taken from the posthumous publication of Stafford's anti-war poems and related prose. To this reading we invited audience members to bring and read either a favorite Stafford poem, one of their own, or one by someone else, that decried war and/or promoted peace. Our second event, titled "The Unknown Good in Our Enemies," came from a Stafford poem titled "For the Unknown Enemy." (Again, readers can look online for either "The Unknown Good in Our Enemies," an article I wrote, and/or google "William Stafford For the Unknown Enemy".) For this program we researched anthologies and put out an online call for work by poets living and writing in the Middle East. We chose about 20 poems, from several countries, and assigned local poet friends to share in reading them at our event. We also produced a small booklet of these poems for each audience member to take home.

Although those readings were long ago, Ralph maintained his anti-war and pro-peace activism throughout the rest of his life. Which brings me back, Bob, to your designation "peace poet." That slight but important semantic shift from Ralph's considering himself "anti-war" to "pro-peace" was very gradual, very undramatic. Thank you for catching that. Looking back, I'm not finding where Ralph publicly used this term; I surely have missed something. But the term was certainly how he increasingly grew to think of himself, the seed having been planted, perhaps, with his editing the special "protest and affirmation" issue of *Northwest Review.*

What comes to mind right now are lines from a Denise Levertov poem, which we greatly admired. "Nothing we do has the quickness, the sureness, the deep intelligence living at peace would have" (from her book *Life at War*, 1966). The *positive* tone of these lines, and Ralph's thinking of himself as a "peace poet," were

clearly in keeping with his lifelong commitment to use his teachings and writings to make significant social change, to work *within* society, rather than to attack it. He maintained this stance all his life, right up through his final, as yet-unpublished, book of poems *Living in the Mouth.*

I'll conclude by taking advantage of our digital format and mention a YouTube performance of a song that means a lot to me, personally, in its almost perfect expression—in words by Argentinian poet Mario Benedetti, put to music by Alberto Favero— of how I saw Ralph and his work for peace and justice and how we walked *cado a cado*, elbow to elbow, in the streets and in all we did as teachers and writers, supporting each other's work for 48 years. It's a love poem, of sorts, in which one lover says, "If I love you, it's because you are / my love my accomplice my all / and out in the street arm in arm / we are so much more than two / …. Your hands are my caress / my daily reminders / I love you because your hands work hard for justice …. Your mouth that's yours and mine / Your mouth that's never wrong / I love you because your mouth / knows how to yell like a rebel … And for your honest face / and your vagabond step / and your weeping for the world / because you're one of the people, I love you …. and out in the street arm in arm / we are so much more than two."

During Ralph's memorial service, while a local *a cappella* choir performed this piece, the audience could follow along with program inserts that contained the original Spanish poem and, across the page, the English translation by Paul Archer (which, online, is at the bottom of the screen). The choral arrangement is by Liliana Cangiano. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jLEDo1tYztc

6. The both of you spent much time in Europe, Germany and Italy especially.

The Fulbrights and the travel. What was Ralph's sense of Europe, its cultural strengths and yet its battle-scars?

Oh, we were so very fortunate, from the very beginning, to be able to visit many different countries in Europe and to have extended stays in several of them. And, different (I like to think) from most tourists, our experiences were more than skin deep.

Our first European trip was in 1976, when Ralph took a Spring term sabbatical at full pay and we added an extra three Summer months, living on savings. We spent a total of almost 6 months in Europe, traveling on a 3-month Eurailpass, which in those days was affordable and could be spread out longer by staying for 10 days, 2 weeks, or even a month or more, in one place, before traveling on. With a 4-year old in tow, that was not only practical: it was essential.

There was another reason we stayed for long periods: a month in Murnau, Germany, for example, at the foot of the Bavarian Alps; a month in Tossa de Mar, on the Costa Brava of Spain. Ralph always, from the very beginning, wanted to live "among the people." We stayed outside of tourist areas and took public transit where we wanted to go. We most fervently wanted, also, *not* to be instantly identified as Americans, so we could observe and learn and maybe even interact with people on *their terms*, not ours (though we still, no doubt, stood out "like sore thumbs.")

We almost never stayed in hotels. For shorter stays of a week or 10 days, we'd find a room for rent in an ordinary household. Airbnb's didn't exist. In German and Austrian small towns, we'd walk from the train station, find a "Fremden Zimmer" sign in a window, and knock on the door. In tiny Murnau (home to Gabriele Münter and Wassily Kandinsky more than 70 years before us), we stayed in a Bavarian farm household, sharing the roof and a wall with the barn. We met such kind, wonderful people that way. Or, in larger cities, we'd consult our well-worn Frommer's Guide,

phoning—at the very last minute, from the station—private homes recommended by travelers before us. We also spent some time with distant cousins, from both sides of my parentage: two households in Backnang (near Stuttgart) and one in Wiesbaden.

Our next trip to Europe, in 1983, was for Ralph's Fulbright Senior Professorship at the Goethe Universität in Frankfurt. His assignments involved teaching Native American Literature and Creative Writing, for the Spring and Summer semesters. Both of us were invited to give readings at the Amerika Haus in Frankfurt. Ralph was also invited to lecture at the University of Arhus, in Denmark.

During this period, we, with our then-eleven-year-old daughter, initially stayed for 6 weeks—for lack of available university housing—with friends of friends, with whom Ralph had corresponded, but whom we'd never met: teachers Guenter and Mechthild Hesse and their five year-old daughter, Anna. The Hesses opened to us their beautiful home in Bad Homburg, just outside of Frankfurt, and opened their hearts, including us in family meals, introducing us to the German way of life, taking us on excursions and walks through vineyards and forests, showing us small, historic cities close enough for day outings. Every night, after *Abendessen*, and the girls were asleep, we'd stay up till all hours, drinking wine and talking politics and cultural differences and education and everything else under the sun. We're friends to this day, and our paths have crossed often, over the years, both in Germany and in Oregon. Whenever Ralph and I flew in and out of Frankfurt, maybe a dozen times, *en route* to conferences or guest appearances or his Fulbright research award in Norway, we'd stay with our friends. I did so just last September, *en route* to the Native American Studies symposium at the University of Valencia.

In 1994-1995, I, myself, had a Fulbright Senior Professorship in Frankfurt, and Ralph was privately offered a class in Native American literature. Together, during the year, we traveled to 10 different German cities, where I gave workshops on the teaching of Creative Writing in the Classroom, to secondary and university level teachers of English. Two years later we were south of Munich, where I had a one-month residency at the Villa Waldberta, under the sponsorship of the Kulturreferat, München, to work collaboratively with Munich visual artists Traude Linhardt and Susi Rosenberg—on an installation piece (painting, sculpture, and poetry) titled "Space/Word/Time." Seven years later we were in Germany again, teaching for two Summers in a row at Freiburg's University of Education, as Fulbright Senior Specialists. How could any two people have been luckier than we?

Our brief travels and extended periods of residence in Italy evolved throughout the 1990s, beginning with Ralph's receiving, in 1992, a 5-week Rockefeller Residency Award at the Villa Serbelloni in Bellagio, on a hillside overlooking Lake Como. In 1995, the Fulbright commission sent both of us on a joint reading tour of three cities in Italy: Turin, Parma, and Rome. We also accepted private invitations to read in Padova, Florence, and Venice. In Parma, we were hosted by a group of writers and artists whose parents had been partisans in World War II, and we learned some rousing songs that honored their resistance. Also, in Parma, we met some Americans in the breakfast room, who (it turned out) had an apartment for rent in Venice; we took it for three months in the late Winter/early Spring of 1996. While in Venice, two Parma friends came to visit, introducing us to the sisters Sandra and Flavia Busatta, who—from their home in Padova—were publishing *HAKO*, a journal of Native American history and culture, from their home in Padova. One thing led to another, and Sandra invited us to visit her ESL high school classes. And the following year, our daughter Martina, who was working in Florence as Assistant

Dean of Studio Art Centers International, found us an apartment *there*, for the month of February 1997.

As to how Ralph saw Europe's cultural strengths and its battle scars, what a huge question! Though wary of generalizations, my first response is that he probably saw these as somewhat connected, as do I.

One of Europe's cultural strengths, Ralph would have said, is its art: the centrality of it, how integrated art is into society—vibrant and visible and valued by the majority of the population (at least the populations we saw, from our American perspective). Everywhere in Europe, we found streets bearing the names of artists, writers, composers. One of the first things Ralph wanted to do, whenever we arrived somewhere new, was to visit whatever art museum(s) that city had to offer. We did day trips to small towns, if an art museum was there. We even bicycled to the Kröller-Müller Museum in the Netherlands, far out in the countryside.

Ralph had studied art as a university student, intending to be a painter, before he discovered his love and talent for writing. He was at his happiest, "in his element," with visual art, and he shared much of his knowledge with me, who'd had but one semester of art history in college. He loved the paintings of Rembrandt and Van Gogh, he loved the German Expressionists, he loved the Surrealists, and Picasso, and Goya. He loved the Miró museum in Barcelona. The Prado in Madrid. The Kunsthistoriches Museum in Vienna. And in every museum, of course, it was inescapable: representations of war. The art of Anselm Kiefer in everywhere. Reminders, reminders. Battle scars. We wondered if ever there were historical periods when one or another war, somewhere, did *not* plague Europe. We also talked about how some of Europe's greatest visual artists, writers, and musicians (we went to many concerts, too) were creating their finest masterpieces during periods

of wartime; it had to be more than coincidence. Observing these correspondences enriched our/Ralph's experience.

Another strength he saw, I believe, was Europe's dedication to keeping history alive. Centuries-old fountains everywhere. He applauded the preservation of old buildings; he applauded the adventurous designs of the new; he applauded their integration. He applauded the European way of renovating interiors, to keep up with more modern conveniences and styles, while preserving their historical exteriors. He loved the ancient cathedrals.

In those days (the 80s, 90s and early 2000s; I'm sure it's changed now, with the huge influx of immigrants) Ralph saw a cultural strength in Europeans' having grown up in places that have been there for centuries: "belonging" to those place in ways most Americans have never experienced. Alas, it seems to be our American way—a way Ralph often bemoaned—to tear down the old to build the "new and better." There are exceptions everywhere, of course, in the United States, especially on the East coast.

While Ralph both admired (and, I believe, envied) Europeans their being surrounded by tradition, he equally admired Europeans' ability to adapt to the demands of growing populations. He admired the "co-housing" developments springing up in Freiburg, in the early 2000s. He admired the many ways—design, architecture, the transportation infrastructure, recycling, caring for the environment—Europe was far head of America. We felt a bit like the youngest kids in class, always two developmental steps behind our older classmates.

Yet, amid all that he saw as good, Ralph also saw the battle scars. He noted the architectural differences between the "truly old" and the "hastily rebuilt": those

huge, monochromatic, cement-gray, working-class apartment buildings in downtown Frankfurt (and other cities, throughout Europe, bombed heavily during World War II). What strength it must have taken *everyone*, in all countries, to get their bearings again, to move forward with their lives, while bearing grief for everything and everyone they had lost. Everyone, including Germans, the perpetrators, had suffered greatly. As had the Italians, Germany's cohorts, for a while. We saw the bridge in a town near Padova, where bullet holes still remain. We saw the trees from which dissidents were hung with barbed wire. Different from most Americans of his generation, different from even his siblings, Ralph was keenly aware of the victims on *both* sides. He refused to see his generation as "the great generation," a slogan that was in vogue in the 1990s, back home. Aware, too, that he *could have been* part of the American air raids on any of the many German cities we visited, he was extremely thankful that he didn't have to bear that kind of guilt.

In Germany Ralph saw another, unique, kind of cultural strength: the open admission of guilt and a determination to never let this happen again. The concentration camps, open to the public; war memorials everywhere, including the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church in Berlin, deliberately *not* rebuilt, its bomb scars intact, as a reminder. Because we were in Frankfurt for the first half of 1995, and then came home, I/we didn't really know how that year was marked in other European countries, but surely there were commemorative events. In America, we saw upon returning, town after town was celebrating "50 years of Victory." Germany, on the other hand, was celebrating "50 years of Peace," with major exhibits in major museums and in other places, as well: the lobby of the opera house, the lobbies of government buildings, in banks, at entrances to cemeteries and cathedrals. I wish I could remember more about the exhibit that revealed the secret involvement of everyday citizens as members of the SS, and the other exhibit

of photos taken by foot soldiers, during the war, that was that talk of Frankfurt. We went to a photo exhibit in Bonn: German women clearing the rubble after bombing raids. In Nuremberg we visited one of Hitler's largest stadiums, built for mass rallies, turned into a museum documenting, in both German and English, the rise of the Nazi party (which bears rather frightening parallels to what Ralph saw happening in our own country in 1995, and is happening again today, at an even faster pace.)

And of course, seeing all this open admission, as well as Germany's ongoing efforts at restoration, Ralph was keenly aware of what is still lacking in America, where most of our countrymen and women carry on as though slavery never happened, as though the genocide of 90% of all Native Americans never happened, as though putting Japanese-Americans in internment camps never happened, as though the Ku Klux Klan didn't still exist. (How angry he would be, had the crisis at our southern border—immigrant parents and children being separated at the border, and held in detention—happened while he was alive.)

He was also aware that almost every German his age or older had some painful memories of the war. People we saw every day—retired people strolling in parks on Sunday afternoons, or market vendors, or older proprietors of business establishments, had quite possibly lived through bombing raids and had seen horrors we cannot begin to imagine. Some had possibly been combatants, or the relatives of combatants. All those who had survived, he intuited, had learned to deal with humiliation, shame, unimaginable guilt, as well as grief for their own people lost in battle. Memories of unimaginable suffering at the hands of the Russians. Battle scars everywhere. Palpable.

He also saw the cultural strength of resilience, in Germany and throughout all of Europe. He was keenly aware that Europeans have endured what the dominant

culture in America had never, in memory—except for the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, in 2001—had to endure: an invasion by a foreign power. If today, in 2019, American memories of 9/11/2001 are still fresh, how much wider and deeper and longer the memories of the many millions of European survivors of World War II, who suffered losses day after day, for years.

All this, and so much more, Ralph was keenly aware of. We talked about it. He wrote about it. But complicating and deepening his feelings was the awareness that it was *his generation* that had been fighting in that war, and that greatly heightened his respect and compassion, coupled with a deep caring for everyone he met.

7. What, in this connection, of the translation work he did with Harald Gaski on the Sami writer Nils-Aslak Valkeapää?

Oh, I was hoping you'd ask about this. Ralph and I, in 1987, participated in a conference called the "International Writers' Reunion," in Lahti, Finland. Ralph, by that time, had already published four books of poems that drew heavily on his Cherokee heritage and his sense of kinship with indigenous people around the world. He went to Finland well aware that what we used to call Laplanders (also known as the "white Indians of the north," due to their fair complexions and light-colored eyes) were now being called what they call themselves: the Sámi (one of several spellings). He hoped to meet at least one Sámi writer in Lahti. When that did not happen, he waited till the "farewell" cocktail party, where all participants were gathered, to take the microphone and announce his hope that someone could connect him with one or more living Sámi poets. The happy result was that someone whose name is not on my radar, put Ralph in touch with world-renowned Sámi poet Nils-Aslak Valkeapää (1943-2001).

Thus began a lively correspondence and exchange of poems, which led to Ralph's receiving three of Nils-Aslak's books, already translated from the Sámi into Norwegian. This, in turn, led to Ralph's freely undertaken, 7-year project of translating Valkeapää's work into English, with no expectation of reward other than the satisfaction of making Nils-Aslak's poetry available to the English-speaking world.

Knowing neither Sámi nor Norwegian, Ralph enlisted the aid of Swedish-born and Oregon-based vintner and scholar of American Literature, Lars Nordström, Ph.D (Portland State University). Lars, fluent in English, was also fluent in Norwegian, so he gave Ralph a word-by-word, literal English translation of every poem, which Ralph then turned back into poetry, very closely approximating the form, intent, and as much of the literal content as possible.

Lars lived outside of Portland, 100 miles north of Eugene, but they spent many afternoons, over the next seven years, at our dining table, translating three books: *Trekways of the Wind*; *The Sun, My Father*; and *The Earth, My Mother*. In 1990 they were able to enlist the aid of a third person, Professor Harald Gaski of the University of Tromsø, Norway: a native Sámi speaker, fluent in English, sensitive to the nuances of poetry, and a close friend of Nils-Aslak. Harald's participation was essential to ensuring the fidelity of the translations to their original Sámi versions.

The three translators met for the first time in Tacoma, Washington, that same year (1990), when Harald—much in demand as a public speaker—was participating in a symposium at Pacific Lutheran University. Ralph drove north to Portland, picked up Lars, and the two then drove another 150 miles north to meet Harald. The three hit it off right away; and from then on, all three corresponded intensely for quite some time—focusing almost exclusively on *Trekways*. Harald was also able, a year or two later, to come to the University of Oregon for a different symposium, and they worked together in person, which speeded things along. *Trekways* was published in

1994 by DAT (a Sámi publishing house based in Norway) and distributed by the University of Arizona Press. Visually, the book is stunningly beautiful, Valkeapää contributing his own vividly colored cover design and interior black and white illustrations.

About Nils-Aslak's pleasure in their translations, Harald has recently written, "Nils-Aslak was very happy for the English translation of his poetry, he said several times that they had kept the Sámi sound, rhythm and feeling for the text, so he preferred to use the English translation rather than the Norwegian and Swedish ones, even in Scandinavia."

But even before *Trekways'* appearance, Harald had begun planning, together with the United States Fulbright Commission, to bring Ralph to Norway so that the two could work together on the second book in the trilogy: *The Sun, My Father* (published by DAT in 1997). Harald was successful: Ralph received a Fulbright Research Award to spend the Summer of 1994 in Tromsø, 250 miles north of the Arctic Circle; and Nils-Aslak—the one time we met him, at his home in the middle of the Finnish tundra, almost a day's drive from Tromsø—was wonderfully welcoming. His gentle spirit filled the room and drew us all—Ralph, me, Harald, and his wife, Britt Rajala—under its wing.

Lars and Harald continued the work on the finalization of *The Sun, My Father* at the Rockefeller/Bellagio Center (Italy), for a month in the Spring of 1995 from the Sámi original *Beaivi, áhčážan*. Ralph joined them for an intense last week, turning their literal translations back into poetry.

Quite the well-traveled, world-renowned poet, who can be seen on YouTube participating in the opening ceremonies of the 1994 Olympics in Lillehammer,

Valkeapää tragically was severely injured in a traffic accident in 1996, stunning all of Scandinavia and especially the Sámi. He died in 2001, in Helsinki, on his return from a chain-poetry reading in Japan. A deeply moving, half-hour tribute video, which includes sections of an interview conducted with the pensive, mature poet/singer/artist talking about his life, his philosophy, and especially about the uniquely Sámi *yoik* (a kind of identity-song), can be seen at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pINieDqXOvw.

This documentary, which I highly recommend, also contains many

clips and photographs of the poet at different ages, and provides a good window into the Sámi culture, in general. And—a bonus—about 12 minutes into the film we can see Nils-Aslak at his home, entering the door I reognize.

The last book in the trilogy, *The Earth, My Mother*, was first published in 2001, shortly before Nils-Aslak's death. The Norwegian translation came out in 2006. Harald and Lars (who'd returned to live in Sweden) waited several years before meeting, during a two-week residency program obtained by Lars to translate the book into English. In 2016 they presented their work to Ralph for his corrections.

Sadly, Ralph was never able to hold this exquisite English translation in his hands, for it was not published till 2018, due to the complexity and expense of publishing such a heavy (2 ½ pounds), large (8 ½ x 9 inches), and visually stunning book. Its full-color dust jacket and black cover, embossed with silver, as well as the full-color end pages, incorporate Nils-Aslak's paintings and designs, and the book itself, in addition to poetry, contains many full-color reproductions of his paintings, as well as hundreds of black and white, as well as color, photographs which Nils-Aslak had taken on numerous visits with indigenous people all over the globe, including the American West. I refer readers to a webpage https://www.dat.net/product/the-

earth-my-mother/ for a glimpse of the front cover and DAT's description, part of which reads:

> In the *Earth* book the Sámi perspective has been expanded to embrace indigenous people around the world. The Sámi stood in the center of *The Sun, My Father*, while the speaker in *The Earth, My Mother* travels far and wide to visit jungles, and he does not pretend to be like them even though he registers kindred values and ways of life. *The Sun, My Father* (1997), originally published as *Beaivi áhčážan* (1988), won the Nordic Council's Literature Prize in 1991. The book combines poetry, original artwork as well as color and black-and-white photographs. In this book the indigenous peoples' voices are expressed through poetry and imagery. The contrasts between insight and primitiveness in the traditional western sense of these words are transformed into a message about humanity's relationship to the earth. As part of this there is also a cosmic and religious dimension of indigenous peoples' faith and gratitude for everything that makes life good. The images are, in addition to the author's personal photographs and paintings, collected from various archives and photographers.

These words for me describe not only the book but also the basis for Ralph and Nils-Aslak's and Harald's close friendship, across the miles, and how, philosophically, temperamentally, and spiritually, they felt themselves brothers. I believe, also, that their friendship deepened Ralph's own sense of connectedness with indigenous people everywhere, which we find increasingly reflected in his poetry of the late 1990s and early 2000s.

8. Politics. He evidently saw himself of the Left as do you. What form did that take? What did that mean in terms of Party – and especially during the Clinton and Obama presidencies?

Ralph stood, all his life, firmly on the Left, in all issues and policies. He was a champion of many liberal and progressive causes: Social Security and affordable healthcare for all, minority rights, gender equality, economic parity, social programs to help the disadvantaged, gun control, environmental protections, expanded educational opportunity, social nets for those who need them, abortion rights, limited military spending, and so much more. The tax loopholes available to the uber-rich disturbed him greatly. He would find it in intolerable that today, 1% of the United States population has the collective wealth of the bottom 90% (a statement made by Presidential candidate Senator Elizabeth Warren, who knows her economics).

One of the earliest forms Ralph's Left-leaning took was combating racism at the college—Texas A&M—where he taught from 1951-1955. Like all other states in the "deep South," Texas, at that time, was still deeply segregated, and Ralph—who was shocked at the racism he found among his students—very quickly determined he had a moral and ethical obligation to stand against segregation, which his young, privileged, white male students took for granted. I remember his telling about students in his Beginning Logic class trying, in vain, to defend their arguments that Blacks were inherently inferior, challenging him with such questions as "would you want your sister to marry one?" Ralph didn't relent; and when the students ran out of verbal agility, Ralph began to receive thinly veiled threats to his life and property. One night, a Molotov cocktail (a bottle filled with gasoline, with a lit fuse stuffed into the top) was tossed onto his lawn, close to the porch. Fortunately, it didn't explode or catch his house on fire.

This didn't stop Ralph from continuing to challenge injustice, but when (in 1955)the opportunity arose to return to his home state of Iowa, to teach at Drake University, and to move his family a thousand miles north, he took it. His activism continued, but on a different path. While at Drake, where he taught for three years, he received a tip from a friend who worked at the Des Moines Register (the state capitol's large newspaper), that the University was secretly planning to bring then U.S. Vice President Richard Nixon to campus to award him an honorary degree. A Republican, Nixon was not trusted by most Democrats (for complex reasons I won't go into). As Martin Luther King once said, Nixon "almost disarms you with his apparent sincerity" and warned that, if in control, Nixon could be "the most dangerous man in America."

Ralph, appalled at what the University administration was planning, leaked the word to an English Department friend, and the word spread like wildfire. Many faculty members, across campus, let their ire be heard; and Nixon, as a consequence, was un-invited. But Ralph's own head was close to the departmental chopping block, and he knew when to leave. By 1960 he was at the University of Oregon, where he continued—through his writing, his teaching, his mentoring, and editing—to use his gift with words to come out against injustice, discrimination, and repression, wherever he saw it.

Another form Ralph's stance took was consistently voting a Democratic ticket, regardless of whether the race was local, regional, or national. He was born in 1926, remember, just before the Wall Street crash that started a years-long, worldwide Depression; there were winters when his family was barely able to put any kind of food on the table. When he was old enough, he worked 10-, 12-, 14-hour days on the farm, when he wasn't in school. And even during the school year, he rose before dawn to milk the cows and he worked after school until suppertime,

and often later, doing the evening chores. He went to a one-room country school for the first eight grades. His high school, in the closest town of Aurora (five miles from the farm) provided a limited education. So, from an early age through all his adult life, he identified as working class, a designation he wore like a badge, with pride.

Our country is built on the working class, he'd say, whose labor keeps the economy moving. The working class deserves, and has always deserved, throughout history, better working conditions, better pay, better security. And so, for that matter, did the middle class, especially in public service fields such as education. (How he loved the re-runs of Charlie Chaplin films, by the way, especially "Modern Times"!) He learned early on that Capitalism, the economic and political system upon which our country was founded, depends—if it is to thrive—on humanism, fairness, good will and philanthropy, of wealth *not* being in the hands of the top 1% of the population. He knew that Capitalism, in our country, has seldom worked as it should. And though we haven't yet had another Great Depression, Ralph lost a good 1/3 of his retirement savings during the Recession of 2008, the final year of the presidency of (Republican) George W. Bush. Contrast that to Bill Clinton's time in office, when the U.S. had strong economic growth (around 4% annually) and record job creation (22.7 million). Toward the end of Clinton's tenure, the U.S. federal budget had three *surplus* years, the first since 1969 that weren't achieved through a war economy.

Ralph was a great supporter of Clinton and was especially supportive of Barack Obama, whose response to the crash of 2008 was to create the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, and, with the help of Elizabeth Warren, to enact Wall Street reform and pass the Credit Card Act of 2009. Obama also sponsored Unemployment Insurance Reauthorization and the Job Creation Act of 2010. He was the first president to create anything even *resembling* universal health care, with a program nicknamed Obamacare: a now-defunct health plan that insured

many millions of previously uninsured citizens and did away with all insurance companies' refusal to accept new clients with pre-existing conditions. Obama was, furthermore, an ardent and active environmentalist, a supporter of civil rights, and *also* a great *reader* of both poetry and fiction. Ralph loved him!

How did Ralph's personal convictions play out in private life? Something not widely known is that we purchased our first home—a 1920s wooden bungalow (considered "vintage" in the United States) for a $20 legal fee, from a MacDonald's hamburger restaurant (so they could build a parking lot) and hired house movers to haul it across town and deposit it, on stilts, on a vacant lot we purchased with an early inheritance given us by his mother. Ralph, with help from his teenage son Brian, Brian's friend Jay, and me (when our baby was napping), spent a Summer taking off the low-peaked roof, too high to pass under the cables that were stung, in those days, over every intersection in town. Once the house was in the new location, Ralph dug the 6-foot deep sewer line; he built a higher second story onto the house; and framed the new roof with the help of a retired carpenter. We both dug the foundation; Ralph re-wired the whole downstairs so that the electric company would hook us up to power lines. We built the front steps and a balcony with lumber salvaged from the old roof. The following Summer and Fall, he covered the second story outside walls with wooden shingles salvaged, with my father's help, from the 2-car garage that came with original property, which Ralph had cut into manageable chunks with a chain saw (like reversing the pre-fabrication of a house), and hauled, in a utility trailer, into the vacant back yard.

But when we first moved in, October 1972, with our 11 month-old daughter, we lived—for two months—in two rooms, the kitchen and bedroom, with no indoor plumbing and only one electric light and a space heater, made possible by the electric cord coming from our neighbor's garage and through a crack in the kitchen

window. Crazy, right? But to put things in a world perspective, we had it better than many millions of people in third-world countries, then and now. We were happy. And we were in love.

In the coming years, even when we were more comfortable economically and Ralph was receiving accolades for his writing and invitations to teach and speak overseas, he never forgot his roots and was always a champion for the working class and for racial and ethnic minorities. One of his favorite t-shirts, one which came from the 2012 "Split This Rock" protest-poetry festival in Washington, D.C., sported—in large, bold, white letters on a black background— words originally attributed to Hopi elders, brought into public awareness by African-American poet June Jordan: "We are the ones we've been waiting for!" He wore that t-shirt everywhere.

Looking back on all these years, from the perspective of 2019, I think there was never a time when Ralph was *not* engaged in Left-leaning social activism. Not only was he alert to any and all opportunities to rally (I remember his marching at my side in a Eugene demonstration to support local teachers), to sign petitions, and to write poems that spoke against oppression. I believe he considered all of his writing, teaching, and editing as a form of social activism, on many different fronts: civil rights, pacifism, environmentalism, gender equality, economic parity, redressing the wrongs done to Native Americans and other minority groups. Toward the end of his life, when his health kept him more housebound, he signed so many online, political petitions his email in-box was overwhelmed, but every day, he continued to sign, with the result (of course) of getting on every other Liberal's mailing list. But he never complained.

How pleased he'd be to see the flourishing of today's activist writers of conscience. Poets of color, representing many different ethnicities, are becoming rising stars in celebrated literary circles and among the reading public. He'd be thrilled that

Muskogee (Creek) poet and musician Joy Harjo, with whom he'd appeared in Native American publications and events, is our current United States Poet Laureate. I just today learned that Democratic Presidential candidate Senator Elizabeth Warren has added an African-American, feminist poet, Camonghne Felix, to her communications team, and I encountered the term "civic poetry." Ralph would be cheering.

I'll let him have the final say right now and conclude with a biographical statement from his website. "Dedicated, as he says, to the Tribe of the World, Ralph Salisbury comments: 'Though I have lived and worked among the intelligentsia of many nations, my writing comes from having lived as a questing, mixed-race, working-class individual in a violent world, and my work is offered to the spirit of human goodness, which unites all people in the eternal struggle against evil, a struggle to prevail against global extinction.'"
www.ralphsalisbury.com

9. He was also a committed environmentalist as, again, are you. How would you characterize his views, living as the both of you did for decades in the Pacific Northwest?

Yes, Ralph came to Oregon in 1960, and I, in 1966. Oregon, as you know, is enormous; our European friends are always surprised by how long it takes—a whole day—to drive border to border, from the Pacific coast to the Snake River, which divides Oregon from neighboring Idaho. Oregon, about the size of Germany, together with Washington State and Idaho, constitute the Pacific Northwest (though Montana is sometimes included), with most of the population centered in the

westernmost parts of Oregon and Washington, between the Cascade mountains and the Pacific Ocean. Oregon's coastline is 363 miles long (another long day's drive, since much of it is curvy and slow going).

Ralph's view of living here is beautifully expressed in a statement he makes 10 minutes into a just-released documentary, *Writing Oregon*, available online at https://www.write-place.org/current-projects/the-film-project/. I believe it can be streamed to a larger screen. The film's very subject is what it means to live in close relationship with, and to bear witness to, the majesty and complex ecology of our unique Oregon landscape, which encompasses the Pacific coastal areas, the valleys between the coast and the high Cascade mountains, and the many miles of vast, open, high desert plateau to the East. Ralph's contributions, as well as my own, are heard in interviews and as voice-overs of brilliantly filmed and edited footage of our diverse landscape, together with interviews, poems, and prose writings of several other notable Oregon writers and historians, delicately woven in.

The footage of this film, shot in 2013, was just a day or two after we'd returned from a few days at the beach cabin we owned for 39 years. Of the ocean, Ralph says, "It's so big, it makes you feel humble … attuned to the ways of the universe. I feel very ennobled to be there." I think he also felt ennobled each time we camped in the Cascades, or drove, on occasion, to the vast opens spaces of Eastern Oregon, where far-distant mountains (the Wallowas and the Steens), visible across miles and miles of rolling, high desert plateau, give one a sense of just how very small we humans really are. Later in the film (30.31 minutes) Ralph reads his poem "Sheep Ranch Home Near Airbase," about that very far-eastern Oregon, in which Basque immigrants have made their living raising huge herds of sheep.

The Pacific Northwest, says professor, writer, and editor Laura Laffrado, is "different in all ways from other places in the United States." I think Ralph would totally agree. A related topic, which could be a paper—someday—for any student or scholar,

would be on the "Pacific Northwest aesthetic," as seen in the proliferation of artists working in all media. In poetry and fiction, for example, several writers of prominence during the 50s and 60s—including poets Theodore Roethke and Richard Hugo, and fiction writers Ken Kesey and Ursula Le Guin)—wielded great influence over the writings of the next few generations and put the Northwest "on the radar" of environmentalists nationwide. Gary Snyder and Jack Kerouac are two other names associated with Oregon. Perhaps the most profound, far-reaching influence of all was the prolific poet and pacifist William Stafford, who died in 1993—having published about 50 volumes of poems (more keep appearing, posthumously) and having served for many years as Oregon Poet Laureate, a position now held by his son Kim.

Ralph's sense of humility in the face of the Oregon landscape, reflected in the work of Northwest writers, is also part of the social consciousness of most of our neighbors, near and far, throughout the Pacific Northwest. By contrast, in the American *Midwest,* where Ralph and I were born and raised, the horizon can, for the most part, appear within walking distance. And though it's dangerous to speak in generalizations—especially when speaking from personal experience and observation—this *close horizon* seems to have created a disproportionate sense of human self-importance and a regional attitude—passed down from the first white settlers—that the fruits of the earth, the fertile farmlands and woods and the animals who lived there, were given by God to serve human needs: to be cut down, to be tamed, subdued, and controlled, along with America's First Peoples. That attitude was carried, of course, by the earliest wagon trains across the Rocky Mountains and Oregon's Cascades, when the "West was won."

By the time we arrived, however, that attitude, especially west of the Cascade mountains, was greatly diminished. And now, in the 2010s, we're seeing a movement towards acknowledging and honoring First Peoples by replacing some place names—streets, rivers, bridges, mountains, and so on—with their original tribal names or with words taken from the languages of the tribes who lived there (at least 46 different tribes, who spoke in 26 distinct languages). As to environmental protections, Oregon has long been among the nation's leaders. An example would be the 1971 passage of the Oregon Bottle Bill, the first in the nation. which requires a cash deposit on every can or bottle of beer and soda, redeemable upon the containers' return.

So, in addition to Ralph's falling in love with the landscape of the Pacific Northwest, especially of Oregon—a place whose beauty inspired and welcomed him—he also found himself in a human community that, increasingly, shared his own, personal, environmental values, including his awareness of the dangers of nuclear reactors and their immense threat to all life systems. One, in particular, had the potential to destroy much of our beloved Pacific Northwest. Ralph's poem "Respecting Uktena" is a protest against the Trojan Nuclear Power Plant—the world's largest pressurized water reactor—built at a cost of $460 million, along the Columbia River northwest of Portland, 160 miles north of our home in Eugene. Operations, which began in 1976, gave the Pacific Northwest not only more electric power but also kindled a huge, 17-year backlash and protest movement among environmentalists.

Ralph's voice was, of course, but one of many of thousands of relentless Oregonians speaking out until—after the discovery of a major earthquake fault line nearby—the plant was taken down. (The threat of catastrophic earthquake, however, remains.) As a fellow activist, our neighbor Camilla Pratt, herself instrumental in getting our local utility company to divest its stake in Trojan, has eloquently said of Ralph's

poem: "It is wonderful, amazing, and reassuring how personal, altruistic endeavors coalesce to nourish human connectedness."

One of Ralph's strongest environmentalist poems is "Around the Sun: Alaskan Oil Spill," which I append, with poems on other subjects, at the end of this conversation. "Around the Sun ..." was his response to an oil tanker's running into a reef in Prince William Sound and breaking open, spilling millions of gallons of oil and killing millions of mammals and other sea creatures—a catastrophic event of epic proportions, unlike anything ever seen before. Ralph saw this as an ominous turning point in the health of our planet. It was an event, he feared, that could happen again, elsewhere. And it has, many times.

Given today's flourishing of literary journals that put environmental concerns front and center, Ralph would be right in there with everyone else, calling himself an "environmentalist poet," or "climate poet." Terms keep evolving, as the climate crisis intensifies, and our political parties become increasingly polarized.

10. What do you think the role of spirituality, especially Cherokee, was in his make-up? "My experience of being struck by lightning has become, after 53 years, a Spirit Awareness." (p. 283, Sfsg)

What an insightful selection of sentences to pair with your good question. Thank you. But before I go any further, I'll point out what I think is Ralph's typographical error; instead of "53 years," I think he intended "*63* years," which would better coincide with his writing these words in his late 70s. The lightning strike occurred when he was 15.

Ralph's spirituality centered him and, I believe, lay beneath everything he did and everything he wrote, for most of his adult life. But, as he suggests in the passage

you quote, he wasn't entirely conscious of the connection between his Spirit Awareness and the lightning strike until he began working on his autobiographical memoir.

Ralph's Medicine Path took, in Ralph's early years, a circuitous route. A line by Theodore Roethke comes to mind, "I learn by going where I have to go" ("The Waking"). And so it was for Ralph. His father had given Ralph his own Native ways of looking at nature, without naming them as such. His mother, raised in a Methodist family, did not belong to any church, but she had her own private faith: God lived, she said, within each flower within each living, growing thing, a faith Ralph remembered her sharing with him when he was very small. So, Ralph's parents, each in their own ways, instilled in him a reverence for the earth and all creatures that live upon it.

But the reverence they taught had no framework, no context; his family professed no religion, they belonged to no spiritual community beyond the farm. Ralph was in awe of Nature's beauty and its power to give and to take away, but he had no words to describe it. He also was deeply aware of the family's dependence upon the earth for their sustenance. That lightning strike at age 15 broke, I think, like the blow of an axe, into his sense of oneness with nature. It was deeply unsettling; and this unease stayed with him, as well. It was, in fact, in the lightning strike's aftermath that Ralph began to long for a religious context which might, through language, bring inner peace and understanding.

He'd noticed that people around him seemed to draw comfort from Christianity. They went to church, they prayed, they talked about the Bible. So, at age 18, in Air Force training camps, he read, cover-to-cover, the military-issued New Testament. Twice. He said it didn't "reach him as it should." Older Air Force friends, some of

whom had already started university, told him about the Koran. He found it at a public library near the air base. It didn't work for him, either. In college he read in the Vedic holy books and in the Upanishads. Still, nothing resonated. So, he read psychology, he read Freud, he studied art history. In college he discovered the Surrealists. They had a deep influence on his writing style, they validated for him the importance of dreams, which they—and, later, Ralph—often used as sources for their writing. But I don't think he found in them the comfort, the *solidity*, he was seeking.

Following the advice of friends and encouraged by university professors, he embarked on a life of writing and teaching, still without having found a place his spirit could rest. But he remained open. And when, at age 34, he learned of his Native heritage, everything changed, and he gradually embarked upon a many-years-long study of the history, culture, religion, sacred rituals, formulas, and myths of his Cherokee forebears, which *did* speak to him, profoundly, as did his wide reading in the poetry and fiction of his Native American contemporaries. The more he learned of the Native world view, the more he found himself "at home": a home he embraced, in the remaining two-thirds of his life, with the passion of one who is reunited with a country from which he'd been separated at birth.

He adopted words from the Native American spiritual lexicon: words such as "Medicine Path" and "destiny." Those words became part of his everyday speech, part of his daily prayers.

He prayed every morning to the spirits of the four directions, the spirt of sky, and the spirit of earth. During the last decades of our life together, he said a silent prayer before each evening meal; we had a ritual of holding hands and closing our

eyes, silently letting go of the day and being mindful of the moment and where our food had come from. We talked only once about what words if any, were in our minds at such times. Ralph said that his ritual had long been to recite a prayer he'd composed years earlier. It appears in the preface to *Rainbows of Stone*: "I thank the Creator for my small place in all the immensity, power, glory, and beauty of Creation. I pray that I may be worthy of my Medicine Path and live well enough and long enough to fulfill my destiny." Over the next thirteen years, this developed into a lengthier version: "May I live long enough, and well enough, to fulfill my destiny. May I fulfill my Medicine Dream. May I follow my Medicine Path to its end. And may I and my loved ones live a life of beauty and happiness after death." (*SFSG,* 284)

What was that destiny? That Medicine Path? I think the answer is connected to the words you've quoted, in your question, to which I now return. For the longest while, Ralph talked and wrote and gave interview answers about that lightning strike and how it affected him; he often attributed that strike to the Cherokee god of thunder, without revealing *why* he was struck, or what the thunder god's *purpose* might had been.

Much earlier, in a 1983 interview with Bo Schöler (available online), Ralph states only that it left him "with a sense of awe and an intense love of life; that's all I can say." Four years later, in his essay "Between Lightning and Thunder" (in the collection *I Tell You Now*, *Autobiographical Essays by Native American Writers*, edited by Arnold Krupat and Brian Swann, 1987), Ralph quotes lines from his poem "A Midnight Dawn" (*Pointing at the Rainbow*, 1980), which recount his being struck by 'Red Man … God," but Ralph still does not theorize *why* he was struck. In that same essay, he goes on to say that "Red Man, Spirit of Thunder and Lightning … an important part of my religion [,] infuses my awareness…." Is he suggesting that

"awe" had replaced "fear"? I can only speculate, but that would be consistent with his response in the interview.

So, you've hit the nail right on the head, when you refer to that sentence near the end of Ralph's memoir. I think what we're seeing it that Ralph, now—at the end of a long book in which he's been looking back at the parallel, sometimes simultaneous, paths his life has taken, tracing them back to their beginnings—has finally found what he'd been seeking. The reason for that lightning strike, I suggest, was that Red Man, the Cherokee god of Thunder, had marked him, had bestowed upon him a destiny, a Medicine Path, a spiritual quest in which—learning from going where he had to go—he would come to his Native heritage, learn its essence, and in so doing, find his spiritual home. This destiny also included the responsibility to bring his learning, along with his life experience, into his poetry and fiction; to preserve and to pass along the collective memory and heritage of all of his people, both Native American and Caucasian; to use his talents to help others; and to save all that he loved, including the human community, through his writing and teaching. I thank Arnold Krupat for pointing out, in his introduction to Ralph's 2009 book of new and selected poems, *Light Through a Bullet Hole*, that Ralph's commitment "to save" everything he loved, is a thread that runs throughout his entire work.

Ralph was careful to use the words "Medicine Path," "destiny," and other similar terms with respect. For him these adopted words were as natural as breath, and helped, I think, give him the courage and strength to keep going, keep writing, despite whatever demands his teaching, editing, mentoring, parenting, householding, and later, his health and staying alive might make.

He had many other, related, spiritual beliefs, as well. He believed in the mythical, mystical spirit powers of animals, for example: not that Hummingbird would bring

him his people's sacred tobacco, as in the myths of his ancestors, but that Hummingbird's very presence was a gift. He taught me how to see and identify the hoof prints of Deer, which were evidence of Deer's recent presence: a gift he delighted in finding. Those hoof prints found their way into many a poem.

He believed the Spirit World, in which his people "on the other side" now lived. Different from the Christian view of a separate Heaven and earth, he believed that the Spirit World is all around us: in the air, the trees, the winds, within birds and other living creatures.

He believed that some of his deceased family members had visited him, during nighttime dreams and in waking visions.

His personal belief system also converged, at times, with some of the basic elements shared by most of the world's major religions. He was comfortable incorporating words from other faiths into his own poetry and prose. He was comfortable using the word God, for example. Another example would be his memory of waking, as a child, in the middle of the night, to the beautiful sound of singing; he believed then, and he believed all his life, he'd heard angels singing.

He spoke often, and he wrote, in *So Far, So Good*, of an experience we both had in 1996, when Italian friends Sandra and Flavia Busatta (self-proclaimed atheists) took us to the cathedral of Saint Anthony, in Padova, and suggested we place our fingers lightly on the side of the green marble tomb. We did as they suggested; and we later talked about the almost-tingling sensation, the nearly imperceptible vibrations, the energy—who knows what to call it—emanating from the spirits of thousands of others who had touched that wall before us. Or was it the spirit of Saint Anthony? Our friends had not told us what to expect, but later, they said they felt it, too, each time they placed their fingers on that tomb.

There's another aspect of Ralph's spirituality I'd love for someone, someday, to explore in depth. Though Ralph claimed to not have read much about the Buddhist faith, a reviewer of his first book of poems found it to have some of the qualities of Zen Buddhism. He was intrigued by that, as well as by a comment from a former student, the award-wining poet Olga Broumas, who referred to him as a Zen-like teacher. His only explanation was that it must be a natural affinity, because, as he said, he knew nothing about Zen.

Two Summers ago I was reading an interview with Norman Fischer on the "Tyranny of the Self." Fischer, raised in the Jewish faith, which he never abandoned, also has become a senior dharma teacher of Zen Buddhism. What Fischer expresses several times (*The Sun,* August 2018, p. 6) is almost identical to beliefs that Ralph held, about which I've written in my essay "The Vitruvian Man": that every moment of what is conventionally called "the present" includes "all the past, a concern for others, and a sense of going beyond one's own limited sphere of identity." The present moment, according to Fischer, also includes the future. Ralph would have wholeheartedly agreed.

Words from another *Sun* interview, this time with David Budbill, in the February 2017 issue, also resonate. Budbill is talking about the life of the hermit, in various religions; and in a way, I think Ralph would also have made a good hermit, too, or monk. Although he loved his role as teacher, he loved corresponding with indigenous writers, editors, and friends with whom he felt a spiritual connection, and loved being part of such literary gatherings and conferences as the Associated Writing Programs annual conference, or Native American writers' "Returning the Gift," I was his link to the everyday world of neighbors, family, and friends. He was most comfortable talking one on one, or—paradoxically—in front of a group; but

small, and even deep, talk in small groups, became more difficult as the years went by.

Budbill talks about the social role of the "recluse," saying that "many ancient societies—being less pragmatic and more mystical [than ours]—understood that monks and nuns and hermits have visions that will benefit the whole society." He goes on to describe a Buddhist friend whose contribution to peace and justice is to split wood: to do no harm to humanity. He refers to the role of Thomas Merton, the perfect example of the "engaged recluse." "In order to think this way," Budbill says, one realizes what Christians call the "Mystical Body of Christ, and what other religions call the Universal Soul, the Tao, or the One," is to accept the idea that "we are all one unified being." Ralph would have, again, agreed wholeheartedly. "Engaged recluse." Yes. That was Ralph.

11. Back to writing. How would you best characterize Ralph's style of literary voice, the poetry, the stories and the autobiography?

I'm not sure one can lump the literary style and voice of all three genres into one description, but if there *is* one common characteristic, it might be a fusion of the first words that spring to mind: "passionate," "intense," "from the heart," "lyrical." Much of Ralph's work was multi-layered, with imagery working double time or more. His work was always motivated by felt experience, be it his own or that of someone else, into whose point of view he entered , using his dual gifts of empathy and imagination. His writing became a way of gaining, for himself and for others, a deeper understanding of that felt experience, by re-creating the context in which it occurred and, then, through its re-telling.

He was always, always aware of the musicality of language and the power of words to hook and to hold readers by the sheer power of sound. I speak as a musician as

well as a poet and reader, and the sounds of his poems, which were *linguistically* highly compressed, shone, from within, like crystal. The chimes of his words had power, in addition to the intensity of their meanings. Poet Kwame Dawes has recently described the quest for beauty in language as an act of resistance and protest in the face of the ugliness of human oppression. I think Ralph would say that was one of his goals, as well.

As to accessibility, Ralph's poems often needed more than one silent, visual reading to fully grasp. More compressed than either his fiction or his autobiography, Ralph's poems were sometimes difficult, I think, for audiences to follow on first hearing, without the texts in front of them. Daring, adventurous, multi-layered and highly unconventional, the majority of his poems make giant, quick leaps from image to image, which—like individual pieces of a jigsaw puzzle—don't make sense until a whole flower or mountain comes together. I can think of no other poet whose style is even closely related to Ralph's. Useful to remember is that Ralph was greatly influenced by the Surrealist movement and the dream analysis theories that studied during late 1940s and throughout the 1950s. This intense compression became a bit looser, more relaxed, I think, as time went on. His final manuscript of poems, *Living in the Mouth*, currently seeking a publisher, is perhaps the most reader-friendly of all, and—in many ways—most beautiful. I'm eager for it to appear.

His fiction is to my mind the most straightforward of the three genres he wrote in. Stories vary greatly in their degrees of formality, yet they are always engaging. Sometimes the voice is distant, almost scholarly. Other times it's full of playfulness and wit ("The Sonofabitch and the Dog" comes immediately to mind). Sometimes it's conversational and, dare I say it, almost conventional—in *style*, mind you, *not* in subject matter or theme. And there was always a clear beginning, middle, and end.

The structure of his prose autobiography, *So Far, So Good*, and his prose essays are equally accessible, as well as elegant and full of philosophical asides. There's also a compelling circularity to the narrative, which—though the book does begin with his birth and ends with his final years—is not precisely chronological. Within each chapter Ralph, the narrator, groups memories together, by the process of free association, according to subject, topic, and theme.

For example, *So Far, So Good* opens with of an incident that occurred in infancy, in the dark of winter: glass falling from a bullet fired, from outside, through the window over his baby bed. His fear captured and forever held in subliminal memory, the very next sentences jump to *another* time he felt such fear: as an eighteen-year-old crew member in a World War II airplane's below-zero bomb bay. In terms of style, wow! From baby bed to bomber. That's one heck of a stylistic leap! And it's also the beginning of a recurring theme: the presence of many fearful, life-threatening events which shaped and colored his sense of self as well as his writing—some of which, I believe, can be seen as the work of a "survivor," as a way to channel his "fight or flight" response into something of beauty and merit, as well as a refusal to be defined or limited by the traumas he experienced.

Such clusters of memory, within each chapter, could—to a reader expecting clear chronology—seem chaotic and random. But Ralph, the innovator, was also a master storyteller, and he saw to it that each cluster had its own inner cohesiveness—just as one piece of glass, one color, in a kaleidoscope has its own internal integrity—and there is no one, correct, linear order in which to put those pieces, just as there is no one "correct" turn of the kaleidoscopic wheel, to put the colors in.

To look at it another way, I am convinced, though Ralph and I never talked about it, that this book is a demonstration of his spiritual belief in the interconnectedness of Past, Present, and Future, as well as the oneness, the interconnectedness, of all earthly existence. This is a huge topic, and I discuss it at length in my essay on "The

Vitruvian Man….," which appears elsewhere in this issue and concludes with the book's final chapter, which weaves together kaleidoscopic memory after kaleidoscopic memory—as lovely, flowing, and lyrical as a long, long prose poem—in which we find reappearances of all of the book's recurring themes, subjects, and topics. To my mind, it's one of Ralph's most exquisite and profound works.

12. Who were the writers, past and those who were his contemporaries, that he admired? He was also, in turn, a mentor to other writers – what do you recall of this?

Let's start with Ralph as beloved teacher and mentor to other writers. After his death, letters from former students came pouring in from all directions, telling me how much his faith in them and their writing, his gentle guidance, his "seeing them," gave them the courage to follow their own voices, to build meaningful lives as writers and responsible human beings. Many of his students went on to careers of great distinction: poets Olga Broumas, for example, and Brigit Pegeen Kelly (their studies with Ralph several years apart) both received the prestigious Yale Younger Poets Award. Marilyn Krysl—author of many books of poems and stories, as well as remarkable essays—became head of Creative Writing at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Barbara Drake, like Krysl, born in Oregon and a prolific poet and essayist, is now Professor Emerita of Linfield College. Oregon's current Poet Laureate, Kim Stafford, studied with Ralph, as did the bestselling author James Abel (pseudonym for Bob Reiss). World-renowned author Barry Lopez studied with Ralph and took the cover photo for Ralph's *Going to the Water* at Lopez's home on the McKenzie River. Acclaimed poet John Witte, who in 1980 began a 29-year stint as Editor-in-Chief of *Northwest Review*, studied with Ralph. The late Steven J. Cannell, celebrated novelist and creator of several classic television series, including "The Rockford

Files," "Barretta," "The A-Team," and "21 Jump Street," and owner of his own television studio, went out of his way, in all interviews he gave (to *Time, Newsweek*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and so on, as well as on television) to credit Ralph with having given him the faith to believe in himself as a writer, despite his struggles with dyslexia. In a short, 5-minute video (http://cannell.com/dyslexia.html#video-div) Cannell devotes the last 3 ½ minutes telling how Ralph changed his life. (Scroll down and click again on "Dyslexia in Adulthood.)" Patty Dann, author of the novel *Mermaids*, studied with Ralph. Her novel was turned into the 1990 film by the same name, starring Cher, Winona Ryder, and Christina Ricci.

One of Ralph's happiest afternoons was in May of 2012, when a room full of former students, from all over Oregon, paid him tribute in a bevy of speeches and poems inspired by or dedicated to him. Ralph's response, which was filmed, included tributes of his own—to late poet-colleagues as well as to his own professors, most notably the poet Robert Lowell—and his reading of a poem written to honor his one-room school teachers, who nurtured his talents: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qhIx5R0Qeqc

Going back to the writers who influenced *him*, whose work he admired, whose work suggested new ways of seeing and navigating the world beyond the farm, as well as ways to write about it (if only that *their* writing on a particular topic or theme gave him the inspiration and/or courage to do likewise). In random order, assigning a higher rank of influence to no one author (and I'm probably forgetting many more):

- Samuel Johnson, whose work he read while studying English literature, offered many valuable life-lessons. Here's a line Ralph often quoted: "A man, sir, should keep his friendships in constant repair."

- Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of Courage*, which he read while on air base guard duty, led him to understand the futility of war.

- Walt Whitman. Ralph felt a close affinity with Whitman's expansive, all-inclusive, humanitarianism vision, as well as his rambling style. One of Ralph's early poems is titled "After Whitman's 'There Was a Child Went Forth'." I think there's a strong chance that Ralph thought of himself as that child.

- Albert Camus. Existentialism. Ralph taught himself to read French, so he could read *The Stranger* in the original.

- He loved the work of Mexico's Nobel Prize-winner Octavio Paz; the Peruvian poet Caesar Vallejo; Spain's Federico Garcia Lorca and other Spanish and Latin American poets. Ralph spoke pretty good conversational Spanish and loved to recite sections and sometimes whole poems he'd memorized for their musicality as well as for their content. In fact, that's one of the ways he won my heart, reciting poems in Spanish on long car trips. His little paperback Penguin anthology of Spanish and Latin American poets, in both Spanish and English translation, is falling apart.

- The writings of Sigmund Freud, both in content and in style, which he found beautiful, despite translation.

- He credited the Surrealist painter and writer André Breton, in particular, with influencing his stream-of-consciousness method of writing. He did not, however, believe that the French had "discovered" Surrealism. In "Between Lightning and Thunder" he says that visions and dreams are nearly always important in tribal life, and that the French were actually "rediscovering" so-called "primitive" African art. "I think it's a fair assumption," he says, "that

contemporary Native American writers—particularly the ones who grew up in primitive ways, as I did—derive their 'surrealist impulse' from the ways of their own people rather than from the educated French writers, splendid though some of those writers are. … I'm glad for having grown up in a context that let me value dreams and carry them with me into my waking day."

- Ralph's father, in his storytelling and ballad singing, also exerted what Ralph once said was the most important influence of all. The family had no electricity, no radio, no television, and his father was the family's evening entertainment. Ralph hoped to carry forward that oral tradition in his own writing and to incorporate the cadence of his father's masterful and elegant storytelling voice.

- Ralph credited William Faulkner with giving him a sense of the sanctity of his Indian heritage. Faulkner's character Sam Fathers, son of a slave and a Chickasaw chief, became his spirit father. He loved Faulkner's "headlong surge of words" in search of meaning, and he loved that Faulkner's voice was like his own father's storytelling voice: Southern, and in keeping with the oral tradition. He mentioned that Faulkner's voice had helped him make the leap—between his father's storytelling and ballad singing—into writing fiction and poetry.

- He read all the ethnographic materials about the eastern-band Cherokee he could find. Transcriptions of Cherokee folktales reconstructed from the field notes of Frans Olbrechts. The "Swimmer Manuscript: Cherokee Sacred Formulas and Medicinal Prescriptions," collected by James Mooney and published by Olbrechts. In "Between Lightning and Thunder," Ralph says

that "Cherokee history, tradition, and myth are part of my awareness, and I try to be faithful to them in all I do." In the Bo Schöler interview he tells how, having grown up not knowing his heritage, the work of James Mooney—an ethnographer who lived among the Cherokee during the second half of the 19th century (as did Olbrechts, later)—helped him realize his people had a past, a civilization, which gave his own experiences "universal validity…. It gave me courage." He thought of Mooney as a "spirit guide."

- As to contemporaries whose work he admired, oh, there are so many I'm afraid that I may commit a sin of omission should I name just a few and/or forget anyone. William Stafford. Joseph Bruchac. Jim Barnes. Joy Harjo. Simon Ortíz. Duane Niatum. Kimberly Blazer. Leslie Marmon Silko. Louise Erdrich. N. Scott Momaday. James Welch. Gerald Vizenor. Sherman Alexi. Louis Owens. Raymond Carver. Joyce Carol Oates. Denise Levertov. Charles Olson. Gary Snyder. Robert Creeley. Allen Ginsburg. The Beats. The Black Mountain Poets. All were important to him. Some were personal friends.

- Ralph also credited his university writing teachers—and their own writings—for inspiration and encouragement: Robie Macauley, James Hearst, Robert Lowell, R.V. Cassill, among others. Just being part of Paul Engle's elite Iowa Writers' Workshop itself gave him confidence as well as teaching and organizational skills.

13. Say something, if you would, about the work that went into editing *Northwest Review*.

Ralph's first experiences with *Northwest Review* were as Poetry Editor for a handful of issues, in 1960 and 1961. In 1964 he stepped into the editorship, on the heels of

a rather contentious period when the Fall 1963 issue—edited by Ralph's predecessor, Edward van Aelstyn—had aroused quite the furor among conservative Oregonians, who complained that their tax dollars had gone into publishing work they thought too radical.

Founded in 1957 by English and Journalism students at the University of Oregon—funded by the UO administration, with printing done by the UO's Student Publications Board—the primary mission of *Northwest Review* was, for its first five years, to publish new poetry, fiction, essays, and book reviews by established writers, in the manner of the most prestigious, university-affiliated, literary journals of the time—*Kenyon Review, Southern Review, Sewanee Review* and others which—as I remember from my undergraduate days at Cornell College, Iowa—were extensions of The New Critics' aesthetic and whose function was to provide a venue for literary criticism and reviews of contemporary books of poetry and fiction. First publication of new poetry and fiction, in *those* journals, was limited. This is where *Northwest Review* differed, its staff choosing to publish much more *new* work than writings *about it*.

Northwest Review, however, under van Aelstyn, went even "farther out" and quickly became one of the most adventurous of university-funded journals, seeking out new, "cutting-edge" work from younger, less-established writers who were garnering public followings outside of academia (although some of them taught in it): Bernard Malamud, Charles Bukowski, Charles Olson, Gary Snyder, Michael McClure, Robert Creeley and others whose work had begun, in the 1950s, partly as a rebellion against the Modernist tradition and the constraints imposed by the New Critics, partly as a reflection of wide-ranging influences, including Eastern religions. The *Northwest Review* Ralph inherited from van Aelstyn was already publishing the Beats, the Black Mountaineers, the Deep Image poets, poets from the "New York

Schools," and others. The journal also hosted visual art, including work by Ansel Adams.

Ralph, appointed as van Aelstyn's replacement in 1964, was on the "same page" as van Aelstyn in their shared aesthetics and their interest in the intersection of poetry and politics. But Ralph also kept faith with the literary traditions in which he, himself, had been schooled, and he published—alongside new writers—poetry and fiction from more established, mature practitioners, whose work exemplified excellence, regardless of style. Ralph's *Northwest Review*, the one I worked on from 1966-1968, was a thrilling amalgamation, if you will, of the sedate and the outrageous, the traditional and the daring. In short, it published the best of new writing from around the globe, while retaining its Pacific Northwest identity. The Spring 1966 and Summer 1967 issues, in fact, contained special Northwest Poets sections, in addition to poems by such luminaries as Robert Penn Warren and James Merrill. And *NWR* now published a heftier chunk of literary criticism and book reviews than before.

But to circle back for a moment, to 1964, and the circumstances surrounding Ralph's appointment (which carried, beyond editorial duties, an order from higher-up, to lead the journal in a more reputable direction). History has it that van Aelstyn and his entire editorial staff had been fired for publishing an issue **(**Fall 1963) featuring the works of Philip Whalen, Antonin Artaud, and Charles Bukowski, plus an interview with Cuba's Fidel Castro by Charles O. Porter, a former member of the United States House of Representatives and a feisty Oregon activist. The whole university came under the attack of Oregon conservatives across the state, for printing what was perceived as sacrilegious poetry, pornography, and Communist propaganda. Numerous letters of indignation and numerous petitions demanded accountability, including the resignation of Arthur Fleming, the university president.

Fleming did not resign. Instead, "Despite letters of support from prominent poets and the formation of a Faculty Committee for Academic Freedom, Fleming removed van Aelstyn as editor and gave responsibility for the journal to a *Faculty* Publications Committee. When that committee promptly reappointed van Aelstyn as the editor, Fleming suspended the journal altogether." (https://www.edwardvanaelstyn.com/obituary). Van Aelstyn subsequently kept his selections for the next issue, which would have followed the scandalous one, and established his own independent *Coyote's Journal*, which flourished.

What I know of that time is pieced together from what Ralph told me and what can be found online; but I do know that Ralph was an active supporter of van Aelstyn and the *Review*, throughout the altercation, and Ralph was instrumental in getting *N*WR up and running again, with the support of the English Department, by creating new protocols for faculty approval, before publication, of all accepted materials, and a structure that would give the Department greater control over staff hiring. Ralph also, I believe, promised to regain the trust of Oregon voters by bringing back a more "balanced" table of contents, more in line with the other leading university-affiliated journals of the 60s. To himself, however, Ralph vowed never to censor content. "Excellence" was still the determining factor in whatever he chose. In fact, Ralph actively continued to encourage submissions by writers who challenged the American status quo, who broke boundaries both in style and content.

Ralph's newly-structured *NWR* staff, which I joined as a first-year graduate student in 1966, included himself as Editor-in-Chief and eight to ten Associate Editors, all of whom were faculty members, tasked (if I remember correctly) with "screening" future tables of contents to be sure nothing scurrilous sneaked in. The Associate Editors also occupied a prominent position on the masthead and gave *NWR* an air

of stability. This was a brilliant stroke on Ralph's part: the title looked good on their CVs, having faculty watchdogs reassured the *Review's* readership; and the work the Associate Editors did was (in practice) minimal.

Below them on the masthead stood the Managing Editor, generally a second-year MFA student, and then five to seven Assistant Editors (first readers), selected from MFA students and senior English majors. Several Staff Assistants handled business and office affairs, including intake of unsolicited submissions and the attendant paperwork of sending out letters of acceptance or rejection. The masthead also included various Consulting Editors, including William Stafford, W.D. Snodgrass, James B. Hall, Frederick Candelaria, and other prominent writers and editors not affiliated with the University of Oregon. For Ralph, the position relieved him of teaching one class and allowed time for his extensive *NWR* responsibilities, which included a great deal of reading, decision making, and correspondence.

Without good records of the duties everyone performed, my memory says the Assistant Editors read everything submitted and voted among themselves what to accept and what to return. During my first year on staff, I was part of this group. Not everyone read everything, but every poem, story, essay, review, or work of art was read and viewed by at least two people. If they both agreed to keep the piece for further consideration, they sent it to the Managing Editor. If they both voted to reject it, the piece went no further. If they disagreed, a third reader was assigned. The Managing Editor's job—which I held my second year of the MFA program—was to whittle even further, and to send a final batch to Ralph, for his final selection, via the Associate Editors. I don't believe they ever turned anything back.

Ralph and I, then, collaborated on three issues of *NWR* during the academic year 1967-1968. The last of the three, the Summer 1968 "Protest and Affirmation" issue, was right in step with the "American Writers Against the Vietnam War" movement:

a non-profit, umbrella organization founded by poets Robert Bly and David Ray. (See my answer to question 5.) Our special issue contained work by many distinguished writers of the time: a story by Joyce Carol Oates; poems by Karl Shapiro, Joseph Langland, Diane Wakoski (Diane's, I remember as wonderfully daring), Eugene Wildman, Charles Edward Eaton, and others; several essays, including one by William Cadbury on the literary aspects of The Beatles' song lyrics; William Witherurp's translations of Sergio Echeverdia; Edith Siffert's translations of Yuki Sawa; nine book reviews; and much more.

The issue also contained, right in its center, on glossy paper, a series of six black and white images on the subject of war and its consequences: a photograph by Harry Gross; an oil painting by Berk Chappell; a relief etching by David Scrafford; a sculpture by Jan Zach; and four drawings by Argentine-born Mauricio Lasansky. While all of the artworks make clear anti-war statements and were created to arouse discomfort, it must have been the photograph by Harry Gross, with an eagle holding a dove in its talons, against a backdrop of the American flag, and particularly the set of drawings by Lasansky, that most touched the sore nerve of someone in the printing department of the UO (still governed by the Student Publications Board). Seeing these drawings again, today, as I write, I am struck once more by Lasansky's unambiguous evocations of horror: each drawing a grotesquely-distorted face of child shrieking or crying, or turned half-skeleton, or with a Nazi helmet/skull atop a screaming mouth held open by fingers, bringing immediately to mind the now-iconic photographs of Vietnamese children running down the road, burned by napalm. I think of Edvard Munch's "The Scream." I think of Goya. But to my mind, Lasansky's drawings are even harsher: they shock; they wound.

And so, right at the height of the Tet Offensive, when the anti-Vietnam War movement was gaining strength throughout America, we had—at the University of Oregon—a single person, or maybe several people, in the UO printing office,

staging a counter-protest, apparently offended by the difficult images or the anti-war sentiments. The printing of that special issue was held up, in fact, for many months, and—although the *cover* says "Summer 1968," my memory says it came out in early 1969, though it may have been even later. One thing I *am* sure of is that I have a copy of a letter from Joyce Carol Oates, written to Ralph on December 18, 1968, asking whether her story, "The Heavy Sorrow of the Body," had been published yet.

I also have clear memories of Ralph's working closely with his incoming Managing Editor, Bill Sweet, in the Fall of 1968, making phone calls and sending letters to prominent writers and editors of other journals across the nation, asking that letters of protest be sent to the English Department, which—for obscure reasons—seemed disinclined to challenge the university administration, which was supposed to oversee the Student Publications Board. Maybe the Department had been through enough hassle, back in 1964. (And, despite all I've said earlier about forward-thinking Oregon, this was still the 1960s; and the faculty majority was still older and conservative-leaning.) My best hunch is that the Associate Editors, most of whom were also Ralph's friends, stood up on his behalf and were outnumbered.

The matter took so long to resolve that by the time the issue was finally printed, I had finished my MFA program and was teaching at Fresno State College (now University) in California, so my name was listed as a "Consulting Editor" and Bill was listed as "Managing Editor." Bill, a year behind me in the graduate program, had worked as an Assistant Editor under me and, as incoming Managing Editor, saw things through after my departure. Without Bill's efforts *Northwest Review* would have died then and there, because—sometime that Autumn or Winter, before the issue was finally printed—the English Department removed Ralph as Editor-in-Chief

and (some months later) replaced him with one of his friends and colleagues, John Haislip. The Associate Editors were also removed.

The next issue came out nearly two years later, in Winter, 1970, with a much-diminished staff: only three Associate Editors (two graduate students and a former professor who was now teaching in Texas); one Managing Editor; two Assistant Editors; two Staff Assistants; and no Contributing Editors. That was quite the purge!

What I strongly suspect—and this is the only thing that, in retrospect, makes sense—is that the English Department, facing pressure from the letter-writing campaign, arranged a *quid pro quo* with the University administration: Ralph's dismissal as Editor-in-Chief, the removal of all of the UO's Associate Editors, and the removal of the Consulting Editors, for the issue's release. Lots of hand-slapping, all around. Or, who knows—I'm the last alive who remembers—maybe they all resigned, in protest. I can't help hoping this is what happened.

14. I've heard you give a public reading to poems of his that you most like. Which stand out for you? Why?

May I append a dozen or so poems at the end of this interview? These are the ones I chose for the public reading you heard in Valencia, Spain, at the international symposium on "Teaching and Theorizing Native American Literature as World Literature," October 1-2, 2018. I chose these poems for their wide range of topics—from the complexities of mixed-race identity, to environmental activism, to expressions of Ralph's deep spirituality, to his pacifism, and to his love for and loyalty to family—as well as for their brevity and accessibility, upon first hearing and/or first reading, and for their teachability. I would find it extremely difficult to choose, among these and many other favorites, which ones I most like, out of his 11 books of poems, as well his final collection, *Living in the Mouth*. More important to

me, right now, is that his poems be discovered as the truly remarkable and wonderful gems they are, and that readers will want to find his books to read more!

15. Hard to summarize of course, but what do you think is his legacy not only as humanist but author?

Oh, this is challenging. Ralph would, I believe, see those two designations—humanist and author—as inseparable, when applied to his work. His writings (and teachings) were his tools of choice for (first, as a very young author) arriving at self-understanding and self-expression but mainly (throughout the rest of his life) for the betterment of all humanity. He wished his writings to carry forward his ancestral values and beliefs and keep alive the memory of the oppression of ancestors on both sides of his family. He wished his work to help future generations of readers to find parts of themselves in his own "felt experiences," transformed into stories and poems, to help them feel less alone in turbulent times; to recognize the sacredness of the universe and of the human community to which we all belong. He wished that his work would help combat propagandized versions of reality; he hoped for his writings to endure as long as Shakespeare's and that they would inspire readers to recognize the inherent goodness that lies within themselves, to have faith in themselves, to honor their oneness with creation, to live in harmony and peace with each other, and to unite as one voice in a universal chorus of praise.

But stepping outside of Ralph's sense of purpose, I believe Ralph's literary legacy has already taken its place alongside that of many leading late-20th and early-21st century Native American writers, as evidenced by his presence in a great number of anthologies, his editorial work, and by his decades of participation in correspondence, readings, panels, and personal and literary friendships with other Native American, as well as non-Native, authors.

What has yet to happen, and I think it will, is that Ralph's poetry, even more than his fiction, will come to be valued not only for its evocation of Native American realities and humanitarian concerns, but also for its uniqueness of vision and voice, its highly-compressed elocution: as markedly different from the poetry of his contemporaries as William Blake's poetry was from others of Blake's time.

To look at this another way, Ralph, as a young man, wanted to be a painter and studied painting at university; but poetry lured him in and kept him hooked. Add to this his sense of kinship with the Surrealists as well as the Senoi dream people of the Malaysian highlands, whose society was built around the practice of sharing dreams. Perhaps Ralph's early and mid-career poems will someday be seen as dream canvasses, as vision's embodiments: images connected by visual/intuitive associations and dream-like juxtapositions that, in a painting, would be seen by the eye in one moment of time, all images existing simultaneously.

What I hope will also emerge is that Ralph's legacy as a poet will more and more come to be viewed as that of a mystic, a "seer," a shaman of sorts, with his poems acting as "received visions": often cryptic, difficult to describe, but with a commanding presence, the kind of spirit power that passes between a shaman and one whose mind is open and ready to receive it, who does not try to translate instinctive understanding into "meaning," who takes the time to suspend conventional expectations and just absorb and be enriched and be fortified by the experience.

What interests me, also, is that during the last decade of his life, Ralph's poems became less and less dense, they became more conventionally "accessible," and their focus was increasingly on family connections and on the glories of the natural

world which has, so far, survived (though already diminished by environmental degradations) and continues to bring us joy. Aware that his own personal future was shortening, Ralph chose to celebrate the spiritual legacy he was leaving to future generations, honing down the complexities of his world awareness to what he felt most essential to convey.

16. Could you offer a personal vignette which for you helps memorialize his gift?

Ralph was a masterful public speaker. Whether introducing another writer at a public event (or teaching a class, or giving a reading of his work, or speaking as an invited guest to classes and conferences around the world), his humble, playful heart and brilliant mind always put his audience at ease and opened them to what he, uniquely, had to offer, letting them know he *saw* them. This was one of the things I most loved about him — the caring, the poise, the dignity, and the humility with which he spoke directly from the center of his best self to the best selves of his listeners, in all of their own, many complexities. A good example is a reading he gave to a large audience at Tsunami Books, in Eugene, Oregon, in 2012: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W4-57qSDLXg\

One such happy and very brief moment, which stands out in my memory, demonstrates not only Ralph's love of connecting with people but also his love of catching them off guard by saying something unexpected, letting them know that despite his credentials, he was, like them, vulnerable and human.

The occasion was his guest appearance in an advanced English language and literature class, in a public high school in Padova, Italy, taught by Professessora Sandra Busatta, co-editor of the Italian journal of contemporary Native American

studies, *HAKO*, which had recently published some of Ralph's work. She had prepared her students well, having shared some of his poems beforehand and leading them to expect a writer of considerable distinction. While he was being introduced, the students were politely attentive and (judging from their body language) expecting to be bored.

What neither they, nor Sandra, nor I expected, was that Ralph's first words would be a sentence he'd learned that day on the train, as together we'd continued to master essential, conversational Italian. In a loud voice, he seriously proclaimed, "*Vorrei un bicchiere di vino rosso.*" The class broke up laughing. The last thing they'd expected to hear was, "I'd like a glass of red wine." He had them in the palm of his hand.