Spring 5-28-2009

Liberal Arts Opportunities Inspire Openness, Change in Poet Alum

Jessica Block
Illinois Wesleyan University

Illinois Wesleyan University NEWS RELEASE

Illinois Wesleyan University News Service, P.O. Box 2900, Bloomington, IL 61702-2900
(309) 556-3181
univcomm@titan.iwu.edu
www.iwu.edu/~iwunews

May 28, 2009 **Contact:** Jessica Block '09, (309) 556-3181

Liberal Arts Opportunities Inspire Openness, Change in Poet Alum

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – When Mark Yakich entered Illinois Wesleyan in 1988, he never imagined becoming an award-winning poet with four published books and another on the way. The political science major, who later earned multiple graduate degrees and is currently an associate professor of English at Loyola University, New Orleans, did not enjoy English studies and notes that he only read two novels—Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*—before age 25.

Yakich is a multi-focused artist who, according to Susan Larson of *The Times-Picayune*, "makes the reader re-evaluate what a word can do, what a word can mean, even what history as we know it is all about." Here, Yakich explains via e-mail Illinois Wesleyan's integral role in his winding path to poetry and how he became an actor, of sorts.

When you were selecting your undergraduate university, what drew you to Illinois Wesleyan?

My mother drew me to IWU. Mom didn't want me to go far away from home, so it was either the University of Illinois or Illinois Wesleyan. I believe she liked the brochure we got in the mail. We took a visit to IWU, a day trip, and I thought it was nice and not too big. I liked the idea of a small, liberal arts university and I didn't want to be a number [like I could have been] at the University of Illinois even though I had a small plan to go there to major in architecture. I still love architecture and have kept many of the drawings I did of cotter pins, flywheels and one of a fireplace inlaid with black marble and bordered by stained glass in a tool chest in my closet for many years.

How do you feel that your experiences at Illinois Wesleyan changed you or your perspectives?

Once I got to IWU, I fell in love with it and with the whole college experience (perhaps one of the reasons I'm a professor). I think the professors at IWU were outstanding and my peers were intelligent—far more so than me—and I made good friends. I worked on *The Argus* and that was fun (though I still didn't enjoy reading) and I lived in two houses that no longer exist as they once did. Park Place was a male residence my freshman year before being turned into offices and I spent sophomore and junior years in Wallis Hall. It was magical to live in an old house that wasn't a frat or a large dorm with a bunch of other guys. We made our own little worlds.

You've mentioned in previous interviews that you were not an English major as an undergraduate and did not even enjoy English studies. From there, how did writing poetry develop as a predominant part of your life?

I was a political science major. In fact, I really didn't know what to major in at first. I took graphic design my first semester, then I really got into sociology. At one point, I asked my advisor, Jim Sikora, what I should major in and he said it didn't really matter. All liberal arts fields look good in the job market, so choose the one that most interests you now, he said.

The greatest thing I did, though, at IWU was study overseas in Vienna during my senior year. The experience was life-changing. I was supposed to go only for the fall semester, but once I got there I didn't want to come back. The registrar at IWU and my political science chair were gracious enough to waiver or substitute some requirement for me to stay in Vienna another semester, which allowed me to improve my German and to grow as a 21-year-old young man who would go to see *Salome* at the Vienna Opera, read *Unbearable Lightness* and fall in love with a certain middle-aged Russian woman who only let me hold her hand. She taught me the word *rasputin* which she said meant to fall in love with the wrong person; it wasn't until years later that I learned she was both wrong and right.

A few years later I went to Belgium on a research scholarship, became an expat[riate] working in the European Parliament and a loner who finally found friends in books. Poems, I mean, because they were short and, at 26 or 27, I still didn't like to read much. Strangely, though, I found myself wanting to correspond with the people in the books and with their authors, I suppose. I wrote a lot of love letters to Simon de Beauvoir and Tereza from *Unbearable Lightness*.

Do your political science and West European studies influence or shape your approach to writing or your poems themselves?

If you had asked me that question before my first book, about five years ago, I would have said no. My first book, *Unrelated Individuals Forming a Group Waiting to Cross*, contained no real-world people or characters but instead included archetypical or fairy-tale type characters such as the Blind Girl, The Man With Sixty-Four Lovers, and The Invisible Man's Daughter. But after 9-11 and the Bush years, I started to wonder what good poems did or do in the world. I didn't expect to but I did find myself tackling political questions and issues in my next book, *The Importance of Peeling Potatoes in Ukraine*. I tried to do it in an unfamiliar way, through the tragicomic and slant (a la Emily Dickinson's "tell all the truth but tell it slant"). I don't believe in protest or memorial poetry—they never move me. But tragicomedy, like the movie *Life is Beautiful* or the novel *Slaughterhouse Five*, has always moved me, ever since I first watched the Marx Brothers' *Duck Soup* at age four with my father.

Do you learn more about writing from reading or writing?

The two go hand in hand and I learn from both. Reading is so integral to writing because writing is a generative art, as are painting and music. I suppose all the arts are generative. When I say generative, I mean that one artwork builds on another. Nothing is made in a vacuum and you can't be so-called over-influenced by another's writing. The art of influence is how anything and everything gets created in this world.

What poets did you begin reading and which ones do you read now? How did they inspire you?

I began reading East and Central European poets—Wislawa Szymborska, Vasko Popa, Czeslaw Milosz. I think I admired the fairy-tale quality of some of their works and, of course, the tragicomedy. I didn't read Whitman and Dickinson until I was nearly 30, which sounds like a disadvantage for a poet—not to have read our two mothers of poetry—but for me, it was an advantage. I came to both these poets with a seriousness and a mind I wouldn't have had (and didn't have) at, say, age 16 when a lot of poets first read them.

Was being a professor something you always thought of doing, regardless of what field you settled on?

I always thought it would be a good profession, and as a senior at IWU I applied to four or five Ph.D. programs in political science and I was rejected by all of them, thank the Lord. As a poet, you don't have many choices for profession. Or rather, I didn't since I'm not good at anything besides making little poems, so being a professor allows me to make a living. The thing I didn't realize as I was getting my M.F.A. is how much I would love teaching. Teaching keeps my mind doing circus tricks. Teaching also is in many ways a performance. So I'm doing an act a few times a week—and a lot of improv— and that is how I fulfill my dream of being an actor.

As a professor, what is the predominant message or idea that you try to impart to your students?

Question everything you've been taught—not only by teachers but by your parents, by the world around you and by the system of order. I'm not admonishing anarchy here, but calling for thinking for yourself and building your own system, not living necessarily by another's. At the same time, I try to get my students to stop thinking about "I." Often, young writers believe writing is primarily about self-expression. It is and it isn't. I try to get them to think about others and "the other" in their writing and in their lives. Finally, I try to get them to push their own boundaries in their writing—this involves a lot of experimenting.

Are you still as multi-interested as you were at IWU, or do you feel that you've found a focus in your life's work?

I'm multi-interested as I was before, but more in the area of the arts—painting, drawing and writing. The thing is that those are very large fields and often I incorporate things from other fields, even economics or scientific data, which to some might seem not arty or literary at all. The division between science and art is, like the mind-body division, a false dichotomy. At least for me, it is.

What do you think of your books being read on electronic devices like Kindle versus their traditional paper form?

Kindle is fine, sure. But I really love to be able to hold a book—the paper, the binding, the cover image, the accoutrements of a book can't be replaced by a digital thingiemabob. I also like to write in the margins or cross out excerpts I don't agree with or have thoughts on in a book. This gives the book a kind of biography. I suppose you might be able to add comments in a Kindle, if not now, then soon, but it simply wouldn't be the same. Not the real handwriting, not the real fading of the handwriting over time.

It's like in painting—when photography first arrived people thought it would replace painting, but they didn't realize that painting was doing something beyond conveying a picture or an image. A book does more than convey information. Or at least it has that possibility. I have many times slept with books in my bed. I don't see myself doing that with a Kindle. Once you've had one Kindle you've had them all.

-30-