# On (Not) Making It In Rhetoric and Composition

*Robert Danberg*

That a successful professional life in Rhetoric and Composition depends on a PhD, a tenure line, and an extensive publication record is complicated by the demands that family makes on a professional life. The notion of "making it" in Rhetoric and Composition can also complicate how the field judges the contributions of its participants and the variety of paths to success they take. The essay troubles the concept of "making it" by exploring how a "fatherhood," which looks in many ways like "motherhood," affects the way a practitioner who earns a PhD mid-career finds the authority to speak as a scholar, writer, and parent.

---

I expect I'm a familiar type in our field: someone who has come from a career in the writing classroom to Composition and Rhetoric as a research field. I am forty-five years old and I completed my PhD in Composition and Cultural Rhetoric in 2010. When I began PhD work, it was as if I'd begun again; I joked that for years I thought I'd been teaching writing and now I realized I was teaching composition. I thought I *had* been in the field. Acquiring the PhD put me simultaneously at the beginning of a career and the middle of a life, and, in a way particular to composition, in the beginning and middle of a career, where experienced teachers turn mid-career to PhD work. Though many factors have influenced my work life, I'd say the ones that affected me the most all stem from the way I chose to be a father.

Sondra Perl describes the changes children can bring to your professional and creative life when they pull you into their orbit, like an asteroid out of the sky. In a 1998 essay, "Composing a Pleasurable Life," she writes how, in the first part of her career, she resisted marriage and children to focus on a demanding, exciting professional life, although to call it demanding suggests that it was more than she wanted. It was, in fact, exactly what she wanted. The essay describes a woman who found a calling in a new field that combined much of what interested her, professionally and personally. She became a scholar, a teacher, a writer, a collaborator, and a creator. She taught full time, earned her doctorate, conducted important research, wrote, and traveled throughout New York City to work with and educate teachers. Her life was full of work in the way that work sometimes blesses us, times when, as Perl puts it, we have a sense of ourselves as someone with work to do in the world.

But when her daughter was a toddler, she and her husband Arthur had twins who, unlike their mild-tempered first child, didn't sleep. After a difficult, sleep-deprived time, she made a series of hard decisions.

> The first sane thing I do is resign as a director of the Writing Project. Then I request as simple a teaching schedule as possible. Then I stop presenting at national conferences. Then I stop attending local meetings. I have already stopped writing.
>
> As my professional world recedes, I am distraught. Losing the sense of myself as someone who has work in the world has been my greatest fear. Certainly I have been warned by women writers that children (more than one, Alice Walker cautions) will thwart creativity. Now, here I am, teaching, still, but only as a break from what I have strenuously avoided all my life and which now dominates my entire existence: two crying babies, one toddler, dirty diapers, piles of laundry, ear infections, antibiotics, Sesame Street, and hours of Dumbo. (Perl 249)

I recognized her distress when writing no longer seems viable and teaching, like writing, is no longer an exciting laboratory but more like work. Like she did, I fear losing "my sense of myself as someone who has work in the world."

I found Perl's essay when I looked for expressions of "making it" in Rhetoric and Composition that weren't tied to professional research and a tenure line. *Women's Ways of Making It in Rhetoric and Composition*, the 2008 book that's begun a lot of conversation over what it means to "make it" in the field, describes a vision of professional success many in Composition and Rhetoric aspire to. Its authors imagine women with tenure and a PhD, who publish well, who are "frequent keynote speakers," and who mentor other women in the field (Baillif, Davis, and Mountford 7). The authors' vision reminds me of the tangled expectations many of us find ourselves knotted up in. I find the description poignant because it expresses something more than success. It could count enough towards "making it" to be a tenured PhD with a serious publication record, but they also imagine women who influence the field and take up the task of mentoring others. It expresses a desire to recreate or change the past by being the mentor one never had. It expresses a desire not only to be heard, but to have fame.

The authors acknowledge that while many of the informants surveyed as part of their research concurred with the authors' initial expectations, some respondents challenged them. This make sense, since Composition and Rhetoric is a field made up of many, many different kinds of professional roles and participants; it could hardly be a field, or even a knowledge domain, if it relied solely on the contributions of tenured scholars. Besides, Rhetoric and Composition has always invited many kinds of wisdom into it, and the domain of Rhetoric and Composition is rich and complex because of the variety and number of contributions made to it.

Perl's essay appeared in an anthology published in 1998 entitled *Women/Writing/Teaching*. *Women/Writing/Teaching* mixes poets and fiction writers associated with composition and collects personal essays on what it means to be a woman called to write, as well as study and teach. Nancy Sommers,

in her contribution to the anthology, sums up the complicated calling the volume describes. She writes,

> I want my students to know what writers know—to know something no researchers could ever find out, no matter how many times they pin my students to the table, no matter how many protocols they tape. I want my students to know how to bring their life and their writing together. (174)

The calling she describes puts this creative tension at the heart of the ethical, intellectual, and even spiritual project of writing and teaching writing.

> It is in the thrill of the pull between some else's authority and our own, between submission and independence, that we must discover how to define ourselves. In the uncertainty of that struggle, we have a chance to find the voice of our own authority, finding it, we can speak convincingly . . . at long last. (174)

Sommers calls this struggle a means to find a convincing voice we can speak through as we wrestle with submission and independence, or, in another sense, as we wrestle with aspirations and obligations. The tension between what we want and what we believe is our responsibility, between the authority we submit to and the creative reinterpretation that good work demands always troubles how we define who we are to try and speak at all.

A Jewish folktale explains the dilemma.

There was a prince who thought he was a crow.

He squatted under the table in his bedchamber, naked, with his hands tucked under his armpits to make "wings."

His doctors, the royal counselors, and his minders stood before his door consulting, as they had for several months, when an old man appeared at the castle gate and insisted he had a cure. He was led to the group outside the door who, at the end of a lengthy private consultation, agreed that something was better than nothing, and allowed the old man to examine the prince.

The old man entered the room.

The prince ignored him and pecked at the rug.

Then the old man took off his clothes and joined the prince under the table.

"What are you doing here?" the prince said.

"I am also a crow," answered the old man.

In the evening, he left.

This continued for the next several days.

Then, the old man brought in a tray.

"What are you doing?" the prince said.

"What do you think I'm doing," the old man said, "I'm having a piece of cake and a glass of tea. You can be a crow and eat cake and drink like a man."

The prince joined him.

And so it continued. Every few days the old man added something. The old man would say, "You can be a crow and wear pants like a man." Or, "You can play cards at the table like a man and still be a crow."

About two months later, the old man and the prince were playing Go Fish over dinner at the table, fully dressed.

"You know what the trick is," the old man said as he gave up a two.

"No," said the prince, who picked up the two.

"The trick," said the old man, "is never forgetting you're a crow."

When the story starts, I always wonder what it's like for a man to think he's a crow, and by the end, I am thinking about what it's like to be a crow who must pretend to be a man.

As a thought experiment, I wondered if my grandmother, Anne Sklov thought she'd "made it," and how my father knew he had.

Anne Sklov came from a Jewish immigrant working class family. She and my grandfather lived modestly in an apartment in Co-op City in the Bronx during most of my life. The only ostentatious thing they owned was a mirror with a thick gilt frame, twisted gold that held a four-by-four pane, which hung over the living room couch. At the mirror's base a button could be turned which changed the mirror to a "painting": a forest clearing surrounded by heavy-limbed trees and branches that hung down over the banks of a brook that ran over crags. My grandmother was fond of art, but not fond of Picasso—she'd seen an exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art and found it disturbing. She was a secretary and my grandfather was a bank examiner.

Something sticks with me from the visit I made when I dropped out of college and took a bus to San Diego, where she'd retired with my grandfather.

When I arrived in San Diego, the first thing she showed me in their small, rented apartment was a gas fireplace she could switch on and off. That weekend, she took me to Cabrilho Point and said, "Look, it's as pretty as a picture postcard," which meant that the blue water and blue sky and still boats were beautiful, and thus, true, and should be remembered.

Later, we sat in the laundry room, folding. She wasn't concerned about my future, only my happiness, so we talked very little about what the hell I was doing and folded the laundry. She showed me how to fold a fitted sheet, which I wish I could ask her about now.

The laundry room was cleaner and brighter than the one in Co-Op City, but more or less the same as laundry rooms and Laundromats everywhere. Stacked washers and driers, baskets on wheels, plastic benches and Formica-topped tables. She folded and folded, made the corners square, and imbued, as she always did when she folded laundry, each piece with the generosity she felt toward those who were part of her life, which was evident in the creases and corners of the folds, and in the neat stacks she made for each person.

I expect if I'd asked her if she had made it then, she might give me the same answer she gave me when I asked her what it was like to be a Jew in the forties: "I don't think it was like anything. It just was." But she saw to it that her life afforded her moments to appreciate beauty, and she had an aesthetic sense of time and her surroundings.

I remember my father once told me how he knew he'd made it once when he was twenty-one. He used to get a trim, a shave, and a manicure every week then—a manicure was a "guy who made it" thing in the fifties and early sixties. We went to LeWinter's Bungalow colony during the summers in 1969 and 1970. He owned a maroon Pontiac Bonneville with a white hardtop. He'd dropped out of high school, married my mother, and went to work as a stock boy for Shelburne Shirts. By the time he was twenty-one, he'd worked himself up to sales. Many years later when he became Vice President of Shelburne, he started smoking cigars and driving a silver Cadillac. He also began to wear hats, the kind of hats men his father's generation wore in movies until the fifties. I was nineteen or twenty then, and I remember wondering if the Cadillac and the cigars and the hats were, like the haircuts and manicures, a sign that he'd made it once again.

Since my father's life encompasses the height and end of the Jewish garment industry, his fortunes are tied up in its fortunes. Shelburne, my father's "place," closed when he was in his fifties. Small family-owned companies like it disappeared into other, larger entities. Manufacturing and management moved South, while manufacturing continued on to China, South America, and Pakistan. Just before Shelburne closed, I came home from college, about to graduate. I didn't know that he'd begun to negotiate an end to that part of his life or how worried he was about losing ground.

On my way out the door, I reeled off what I might want to "be"—an actor, a writer, a teacher, a rocket scientist, a G-man, an astronaut—and where I might live—Brooklyn, Portland, Seattle, Austin, Chicago (still suburbs of the hope to "make it" for graduates of artsy liberal arts colleges)—while my father sat in the corner of the couch looking at the TV in the opposite corner. Now I know that behind his wide forehead, the maps were spread out on the table and the flags were on the maps.

He said, "I don't know what to tell you. I didn't have those choices."

Last summer, I sat with him on the deck of his home in the "over fifty-five" community where he lives, quite comfortably, with my mother. He shared with me a detail from his childhood, which I knew had been hard.

We lived in a house of beds, he told me. The living room had a bed each for him and his three siblings. His parents took the bedroom.

"And we used to make toast over the open gas flame on the stove."

As another experiment, I replaced "rhetoric and composition" in the phrase "making it in rhetoric and composition" with "financial services,"

"dog walking," "raising children," and "love." I found it unproductive to say "making it as a parent" and awkward to say "making it in love," but productive to say "making it in dog walking" or "making it in stock trading." When I thought about "making it in love," the awkwardness of the phrase put me off—part bad slang, part bad self-help.

Dog walking and stock trading made sense though, since in each case success can be quantified: How many dogs; how many dollars? Does this dog walker want to be the boss of dog walkers and count her dogs in the teens or hundreds? Does this trader want to throw it all in and open a barbecue restaurant when she makes her first million? Will the trader know she's made it when she can throw it all in? Will the dog walker conclude that making it isn't worth it if "it" gets between her, the animals, and their owners?

"Making it as a parent" implies that one day I'll no longer worry whether my children are safe, say no to drugs, or choose mates wisely; or whether my homework support, clear limits, and R&B and Soul will guarantee good students, moderate eaters, and people I let work the car radio with impunity.

Still, the choice of how I would be a father has made the most difference when it came to "making it in rhetoric and composition" because once I decided how I would be a father, I spent most of my time "not making it in rhetoric and composition." I attended no conferences, I served on no graduate committees, I wrote no papers for publication.

We—my family—ground out the PhD life: teaching, exams, and the dissertation process; the commute, the weather, and the constant search for work to keep us afloat. No one with a family gets a PhD alone. My ex-wife had a demanding career and career aspirations, too. As a man, I've found I've had to explain how what might be described as the default position of mothering—to arrange play dates, fix dinner, pick up and drop off the kids, and be with them in all the everyday ways—was at the center of my life, and, as such, wasn't—how should I say it—one among many options to choose and perhaps set aside in favor of something else. I arranged my schedule to pick up my son from the bus at three and to take him to school or the bus stop. Sometimes my daughter stayed home with me. It was my contribution. I cooked meals and shopped and did a persistent but lousy job of housework. I learned something about mothering that added to the way I see fatherhood—placing me in relation to my children in a way that feels like I've taken an oath and a spell has been cast over me.

It is like a spell in that it is a mysterious, powerful experience in which I am compelled to act, suffer, and enjoy in ways that would baffle the person I was before my children were born. It's like an oath in that it feels like a promise that could not have been made any other way.

So, like they did for my mother, worries about my children distract me at work. On normal days, my daughter GoGo and I get home at 6 p.m., and

if I haven't made dinners to freeze on Sunday, things get severe. I found a good after-school program for her but it costs an arm and a leg. Still, it's one less worry to know she's someplace she likes that I can trust, since it's crucial I show my department that I am *present*—can make the meeting, meet the visitor. And it's crucial, I've found in academia, to linger when the meeting is over. It's the academic's version of the businessmen's golf game, where deals are made between holes. It doesn't really always work to pack up quick because the commute is long and the weather wet.

In my career, I've had women as bosses most of the time—at least three quarters of my career—and I've been fortunate because I've found, almost uniformly, that employers have helped me find a way to juggle work, school, and family. It came at a cost, but I was able to work. Often, I took jobs so I could split days and nights when I was married and now that I am a single parent, sympathetic bosses have continued to help me to sort sick days, pick ups, and drop offs with class and work schedules.

I take heart from many of the women I've worked for and many of the women writers I've known whose careers followed the arc of their families. They found their way to work and grew more creative as they grew older and their children grew more independent. I also discovered that it helped not to see my life as having shrunk to something, but to go deeply into what it is right before me; I could find my art in it. But at work and in graduate school, it is simply true that to be taken seriously as a professional requires a certain kind of effort and commitment, and to "not be taken seriously" is the kiss of death. It certainly diminishes the likelihood that one will find opportunities where one can be taken seriously.

Still, despite the obstacles that women face in our profession, I was struck by how, in *Women's Ways of Making It in Rhetoric and Composition,* professional success offers the same satisfactions, makes the same demands, and takes the same toll on women that the garment industry took on my father. Like the professionals its authors hope to discover, he relied on mentors to help him navigate a world he brought native intelligence to, but little family experience to draw on. Like him, many successful women find it hard to "have a life" and also succeed beyond expectations; and the kind of professional success that he and those who "make it" enjoy requires single-mindedness, determination, and the support of others. The authors of *Women's Ways of Making It* ask their subjects how to "have a life" when professional success demands so much; but for these women, like my father, like Sandra Perl and Nancy Sommers, the work is the life they have. The difference between me and my father, of course, is that he could not have considered the choice to be the kind of father I have been. The difference between me and my mother is that I—and my ex-wife—regarded it as a choice.

Another feature of *Women's Ways of Making It in Rhetoric and Composition,* which may be attributed to the fact that it offers practical wisdom, is

that it's possible to focus on the good advice it offers and overlook its other realities. In the last part of the book, which devotes single chapters to women whose careers model the kind of success the book's authors describe—Andrea Lunsford, Susan Jarratt, Jacqueline Jones Royster, and others—car accidents, unexpected divorce, rebellious children, professional setbacks, and untrustworthy colleagues eddy on the surface of career biographies intended to exemplify "making it." And by and large, the careers they recount, while successful, do not in general follow a straight path from college to graduate school to professional success. As a student of mine assured me once, "The long way draws sweat; the short way draws blood."

Another reason I find the vision of success the book describes poignant is because it reminds me of how tempting it is to believe that the effort I exerted to bring work, family, and ambition into line translated into anything other than a temporary solution to outcomes I might have been able to do little more than cross my fingers over. I don't know if a book in which men were offered as models of "making it" would allude to the subject's teenager's adjustment to moving following a divorce in the context of a new phase of his career; but in chapter after chapter in which exemplary women recounted the lives they have made for themselves in the field, in whirled a car wreck or a crisis at work. Stories told this way also describe someone who has made it; she is wise enough to admit uncertainty, embrace it, and make it part of the work itself. She also knows the difference between her work and the field.

We who teach Rhetoric and Composition find strength in the idea that understanding language is the key to understanding everything—which makes me wonder if potters think everything can be explained by the containers we put things in and how they are fashioned—and we are also prone to thinking that there is an "everything." We convert what surrounds us into texts. We believe that language and texts construct us—some in strong ways and others in weak ones—and if a text can construct an identity, changing the text can change *who comes next* or who we are right now.

Even as I embrace writing's transformative potential and mystery, a mystery worth spending my life with, I consider the belief that how we *understand* language and texts puts that mystery to rest. I call it "Balaam's fallacy." Balaam is the prophet in the Torah that King Balak hires to curse the Israelites camped across King Balak's land. Despite every effort to avoid doing so, every time Balaam opens his mouth to curse, he can only bless, eloquent, elaborate blessings that became part of daily liturgy. I've always seen Balaam as a kind of very-successful court magician: your neighbor's grass withers when he curses it.

He's definitely made it in his field.

However, Balaam believed that he had control over events because he has control over words. Instead, my life is not a text to read. It's more like a book I sit down to analyze that, every so often, someone snatches from my

hand to throw under a bus, or takes from my hand to tell me I am loved, or I drop because I hear a thump and tears in the next room or tires squeal in the street.

Then, all at once language is no longer my instrument; I become an instrument upon which other powers play.

My son Rubin helps out some, but he's fourteen, and fourteen is like four: tall enough to scrabble a hand around in the knife drawer but not tall enough to see what's inside. When he calls me at work to say he and a few friends were going to hang out at home after school and have a snack, he perturbs the seismograph. Right now I know he means *Pardon the Interruption* and *Around the Horn*—ESPN on TV—and that there won't be any orange juice left for tomorrow morning, there will be dishes on top of the other dishes, and the lunch snacks will be gone. But—well, this doesn't make me different from my own mother or grandmother—I know that I'll need some combination of luck, hard work, and trust to keep him from driving into a ditch.

Lately, my nine-year-old daughter has taken to asking me from the back seat if I have what I want. I have lost several things—we both have—in the last few years, things we really liked. In the past, I've wanted lots, behaved as if I'd be satisfied when I had what I wanted, and, at the moment I did, often thought "I want this to go on forever" or "I wish I had someone to share this with" or "You know, a Cream Soda would make this perfect." Getting what I want seems to be a yellow light that tells me to speed up to beat the red. The desire to have a satisfying and challenging job, a rich and productive creative life, to be in demand professionally, and to be fully engaged in our family's life—there is great hope there, even while such a hope seems like a prescription for an "anti-anti-depressant," one designed to replace acceptance with a persistent feeling of dread.

I always answer that I have everything that I want—by which I mean that I am grateful that I have what I need. This sounds like a lie, or at least disingenuous. She knows I'd like to be able to afford a bigger apartment for us and her brother; I'd like to work closer to where I live; I'd like my visiting position to flip to a tenure line; I'd like to see one of the poetry manuscripts I've written between covers. I know that some of "making it" has depended on others—I write, others publish; I apply, others hire. What I want depends on what others give as well as effort, luck, and timing. I have to figure out how to persist, despite the likelihood that I will want more than I get and that my desires may run at cross purposes: I'll disappoint people I love and need to please people I don't like. If I appear disingenuous, it is because to say "Yes, I have everything that I want" is like not thinking of a peach tree while saying, "I am not thinking of a peach tree." Or saying, "I never get anything I want" or "I will stop wanting."

There's a Hasidic tale in which a wise man keeps a slip of paper in each pocket. One slip says, "The world was made for me," and the other says, "I am but dust and ashes." When he needs to find his way back from arrogance or despair, he reaches for the appropriate pocket. As I've considered my own choices in terms of "making it," it's occurred to me that either pocket works. It's not "in case of deep despair" on one side or "in case of arrogance" on the other. Both encourage a middle ground of gratitude, as well as an awareness of what is in my control. From this ground, I may find it possible to work with the arrogance that leads me to despair and the despair that sparks my angry arrogance. I think of arrogance and despair as two sides of a specific coin. Where it usually says "In God We Trust," these lines from Frank O'Hara's "Meditations in an Emergency" are inscribed: "I am the least difficult of men. All I want is boundless love." But in moments of dinner and dishes, papers to grade, and just before bed, remembering that I need to get GoGo a snack for her class tomorrow, to find cash to rent Rubin's cello, go to the Laundromat in the near future, write something I want to write and something I need to write, plan something I need to plan because that is my work and my job—if my daughter asks, "Do you have what you want?" I always can answer, without lying, "Yes," because at that moment I am in the midst of wanting what I have.

The trick, of course, is to remember I'm a crow.

## Works Cited


Ballif, Michelle, Diane Davis, and Roxanne Mountford. *Women's Ways of Making It in Rhetoric and Composition*. New York: Routledge, 2008. Print.

Kinney, Kelly. "Of Queen Bees and Queendoms: Fairy Tales, Resilience, and *Women's Ways of Making It in Rhetoric and Composition*." *WPA: Writing Program Administration* 32.3 (Spring 2009): 150-54. Web. 13 Dec. 2010.

O'Hara, Frank. "Meditations in an Emergency." *Poetry* (Nov. 1954): n. pag. *Poetry Foundation*. Web. 10 Oct. 2010.

Perl, Sondra. "Composing a Pleasurable Life." *Women/Writing/Teaching*. Ed. Jan Zlotnick Schmidt. Albany: SUNY P, 1998. 239-54. Print.

Sommers, Nancy. "Between the Drafts." *Women/Writing/Teaching*. Ed. Jan Zlotnick Schmidt. Albany: SUNY P, 1998. 165-76. Print.