

AMERICAN LIFE IN POETRY

A FREE COLUMN FOR NEWSPAPERS BY TED KOOSER, POET LAUREATE OF THE UNITED STATES, 2004-2006
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Though at the time it may not occur to us to call it “mentoring,” there’s likely to be a good deal of that sort of thing going on, wanted or unwanted, whenever a young person works for someone older. Richard Hoffman of Massachusetts does a good job of portraying one of those teaching moments in this poem.

Summer Job

“The trouble with intellectuals,” Manny, my boss,
once told me, “is that they don’t know nothing
till they can explain it to themselves. A guy like that,”
he said, “he gets to middle age—and by the way,
he gets there late; he’s trying to be a boy until
he’s forty, forty-five, and then you give him five
more years until that craziness peters out, and now
he’s almost fifty—a guy like that at last explains
to himself that life is made of time, that time
is what it’s all about. Aha! he says. And then
he either blows his brains out, gets religion,
or settles down to some major-league depression.
Make yourself useful. Hand me that three-eighths
torque wrench—no, you moron, the other one.”

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