

AN INTERVIEW WITH VICTOR CONTOSKI

Interviewer: Jewell Willhite

Oral History Project

Endacott Society

University of Kansas

VICTOR CONTOSKI

B.A., Ancient Greek and Latin, University of Minnesota, 1959

M.A., English, University of Minnesota, 1961

Ph.D. English, University of Wisconsin, 1969

Service at the University of Kansas

First employed at the University of Kansas in 1969

Assistant professor of English

Associate professor of English

Professor of English

AN INTERVIEW WITH VICTOR CONTOSKI

Interviewer: Jewell Willhite

Q: I am speaking with Victor Contoski, who retired in 2007 as professor of English at the University of Kansas. We are in Lawrence, Kansas, on July 31, 2007. Where were you born and in what year?

A: I was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1936.

Q: What were your parents' names?

A: My father's name was Victor Contoski and my mother's name was Josepha Contoski.

Q: What was their educational background?

A: My father had an eighth grade education and my mother had a master's degree. My grandparents on both sides came over from Poland.

Q: What was your mother's field?

A: My mother's field was social work. I suppose she would be called a social worker now. She ended up being a visiting teacher, going to various schools in Minneapolis and talking to the teachers about their problem children and talking with their problem children.

Q: What was your father's occupation?

A: My father was a plumber.

Q: Did you have brothers and sisters?

A: I have one younger brother, one year younger than I am.

Q: Did you grow up in Minneapolis?

A: Yes, and also we had a lake cottage up in northern Minnesota where we spent the summers, so that was very nice.

Q: Where did you go to elementary school?

A: I went to elementary school for the first six years at St. Benedict's, a boarding school in Altoona, Wisconsin. And then I went to Holy Cross Grade School in northeast Minneapolis.

Q: So you lived away from home while you were at this boarding school?

A: Yes, my brother and I did.

Q: This was a Catholic boarding school, I assume.

A: Yes.

Q: How was that to live away at school at so young an age?

A: Well, I know that my father had some difficulty finding work. My mother had her teaching job. I remember at one time that he had gone to Wyoming to look for work. I guess they just didn't have us at home. When my father's situation stabilized, then we were at home. My mother was 40 when she had me and 41 when she had my younger brother. So they could have been our grandparents. But it was rather nice growing up because I think whatever problems they had in their marriage they had worked out already. It was a very stable and loving environment. I couldn't have chosen two better parents.

Q: Since you ended up teaching literature and writing, were you one of these kids who read all the time?

A: I was. I would really get my younger mad because when we would go fishing, I would take a book. He said, "You can't go fishing and read at the same time." But I did.

Q: I know that you played chess later on in life. Did you learn that as a child?

A: Yes, I did. It is an interesting story how I learned to play chess. I was brought up Catholic with the idea that the world was going to pass away and we would just have the life of the spirit. I remember the good nuns telling me that all you will do in heaven is sing alleluia and amen. I was just a little kid. I thought, "I'm going to be bored out of my skull." So I saw some people playing chess. I had heard as they were talking about it that you can play chess in your mind. I thought, "Well, when the world passes away and everyone is up in heaven singing amen and alleluia, I'm going to find some chess player. We will sit in a corner and we'll play chess in our minds." From then on, I was just drawn to chess.

Q: Did you find other kids to play with?

A: Yes. In high school particularly, I found some people who are still my good friends. One of them is a professor of mathematics here at the University of Kansas. We played chess all through high school together.

Q: I know that some schools here in Lawrence have chess teams. Did your school have a chess team?

A: Yes, we did.

Q: Where did you go to junior high and high school?

A: I went to St. Thomas Military Academy in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Q: Were you planning to go in the Army or was this just something people did?

A: It's a military academy and among other things, you learn discipline. I don't regret going there. I did not exactly fit in to the military atmosphere. But it was a good experience nevertheless.

Q: Since your grandparents came from Poland, did you ever go back to Poland as a child?

A: Not as a kid. Neither of my parents had been to Poland. But because their parents had come from Poland, they had this longing to go to Poland. And after I finished my undergraduate work and got my master's from the University of Minnesota, I thought, "If I am not careful I am going to end up being a teacher, and I want to see the world." It seemed to me the most natural thing in the world to start with Poland. I'm getting a little bit ahead chronologically. So I'll tell you about that later.

Q: Were you involved in extracurricular activities in high school?

A: The chess club, and that's about it. Even then, I was not much of a joiner. I tend to work by myself.

Q: Did you have influential teachers?

A: In high school, no. Later on at the university I had some marvelous teachers at the University of Minnesota and at the University of Wisconsin. But in high school, not really.

Q: Since you've done so much writing, did you begin writing as a young person?

A: Yes. I can remember that I loved memorizing poems. The poems that I memorized in high school were, unfortunately, not very good poems.

Q: They were probably the kind that rhymed.

A: Oh, yes. I can still recite Swinburne. I think in high school I just got that love of words and that experiences can be shared. That's remained part of my credo in life.

Q: Did you have jobs in the summer?

A: I helped my father with his plumbing business, but it wasn't a regular job.

Q: Was it always assumed that you would go to college?

A: My father, because he had only an eighth grade education, just really admired educated people and he had a love of education himself. So from an early age he told my brother and myself, “As long as you two go to school, I will pay for it and I will support you.” So, yes, it was just naturally assumed that we would go to college.

Q: Where did you go for your undergraduate degree?

A: The University of Minnesota. My undergraduate degree was in Latin and Greek.

Q: How did you happen to choose that major?

A: Well, I had Latin in high school. I didn’t particularly care for that in high school. But I remember looking at the catalog at the University of Minnesota and I saw a course in Latin and I thought, “Well, I’ll take it.” Then I had the most marvelous teacher. Her name was Mrs. Forbes. She just had a way of explaining things and appreciating things. And by golly, it got me hooked on Latin, so I thought if I was taking Latin, I might as well take Greek too because that is an interesting language and I knew some of the Greek literature in translation.

Q: You had probably read the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

A: Yes, and it was such a thrill to be reading them in the original. I still know a little Latin, but I think my Greek has just evaporated over the years.

Q: Did you have the idea that you might be a teacher and teach these things?

A: You know, I think everybody knew that I was going to be a teacher except myself. I thought, “I’m going to be a poet.” And, by golly, that’s the way things turned out. I think for some reason I thought, “Everyone wants me to be a teacher. I’m not going to be a teacher. I’m going to be something else. I’m going to be a writer.” But I didn’t realize that I could combine the two of them so well.

Q: When were you first published?

A: Back in 1959. I submitted a poem to the *Chicago Review*. That was my first publication. Now, as I look on the poem, the poem was nothing. I didn't include it in any of my books or anything like that. But it was such a thrill to get published.

Q: Was this a literary magazine?

A: Yes. Then as an undergraduate I started submitting my poems to various publications. When my first book came out, in 1972 I think, most of the poems in the book had been rejected by editors about 20 times. But I was just stubborn. I thought, "This makes sense to me. It might not make sense to this editor. Maybe it will make sense to another editor."

Q: I wouldn't have thought there were that many places where poetry is published.

A: There are a tremendous amount of places. There are fewer now, I think, because a lot of these magazines go on line. You just submit poems and then they publish them on line.

Q: I didn't know that.

A: When I first started sending out poetry, I would send it to *The New Yorker*, the *Atlantic Monthly*. Then I discovered the small presses. There were all kinds of small presses. There is a catalog that comes out every year, *The International Directory of Little Magazines and Small Presses*. That's where I got my real start in publishing poetry.

Q: Those are usually connected with a university, aren't they?

A: Most of them are connected with universities.

Q: Did you live in a dorm while you were in college or a fraternity?

A: I lived at home. And it was a very good experience living at home. Later on I lived in dorms.

Q: Did you have jobs in college?

A: My father did not want my brother or myself to work. He said, "Your work is to study."

I am so amazed at so many of my students. Some of them manage to hold down two jobs while they are fulltime students. I just have utter admiration for that and a lot of admiration for my dad in retrospect. He said, "I do not want you working. If you need money, you tell me, and I'll give it to you. I want you kids to study."

Q: When did you graduate as an undergraduate?

A: I graduated in 1959 from the University of Minnesota.

Q: Then what did you do?

A: Then I decided that I loved reading so much that I went on and got a master's degree in English. My undergraduate degree was in Latin and Greek. I got a master's in English from the University of Minnesota in 1961.

Q: Did you have to write a thesis for this?

A: Actually, that was one option, but I preferred to just take more courses. So I took an option where I just took many more courses.

Q: Were you interested in a particular period?

A: I was very interested in Russian literature in translation. I remember taking several courses in Russian literature.

Q: What did you do after you got your master's?

A: Well, I thought to myself, "I want to see the world. I had applied for a scholarship to Poland given by the Polinus Society of Poland. They accepted me. It wasn't a very big scholarship. I ended up living in a dorm with three Poles who did not know English. The

first words that I learned in Polish were (please insert Polish words) spades, hearts, clubs and no trump.

Q: Oh, they knew how to play bridge.

A: Yes. I played a lot of bridge.

Q: Did you know Polish?

A: You know, my parents spoke Polish at home, but only when they didn't want my brother and myself to understand. One of my ideas in going to Poland was to learn Polish. My brother to this day does not know Polish. There's nothing like rooming with people who do not know English to help you to speak Polish.

Q: Then you must have been teaching courses in English if you didn't know how to speak Polish.

A: I went there to learn Polish. They had a language school in the town of Lodz. It was an interesting language school because I was the only American. They had about 20 percent Cubans who were the nicest people. They did not care for the U.S., but they were very careful not to talk against the U.S. when I was there because they thought it would hurt my feelings. The other 80 percent were Africans. The Poles had given them scholarships to study shipbuilding. They had them learn the Polish language and then they sent them up to Gdansk to study shipbuilding. I didn't have any further contact with those Africans, but it must have been a very interesting experience for them because that was the time that Solidarity was getting started in Gdansk. So I have no idea how the friends that I had in that language school fared later on. But I should think they must have had an education larger and broader than the Polish government had bargained for.

When I was in Poland my mother wrote to some cousins. They still had the addresses. So one of my cousins invited me for Christmas. And it turned out that his wife had a younger sister that they invited also for Christmas. And the two of us fell in love and got married.

Q: What is her name?

A: Her name was Wieslawa, but everyone called her Gitka, which is little one. She had a degree in ancient Persian because her family was officially designated as enemies of the state. The government told her that she could not study anything that might influence people. She could not become a teacher. She could not study art. So she studied ancient Persian because it was a way to get into the university. She told me that in about her third year—those were very repressive times. Let me tell you a little anecdote because it is so funny and so human. Her cousin had married General Yezerinski, who was one of the leaders of the Polish underground.

Q: Was this why she was considered an enemy of the state, because of her relatives?

A: Yes. He then became head of the whole eastern section of Radio Free Europe. He was condemned to death in absentia. His parents were persecuted. All his relatives were persecuted. So during those Stalinistic times the secret police would knock on the students' doors at two or three o'clock in the morning and say, "Come down for an interview." She said the interviews were really stupid. "Do you have correspondence in America? Do you know any Americans?" That sort of thing. The idea was that the enemies of the state would not sleep easily. Of course everyone was really tense. She said that one night about three o'clock all of the students were summoned to the auditorium. Here they were in bathrobes and pajamas and they knew that something

really big was really up. There on the podium was the head of the Communist Party of Poland. He said, "My dear students, I have some very sad news for you. Our beloved leader, Josef Stalin, has died. Could we have one minute of silence." And my wife said that the silence lasted for about 10 seconds and somebody laughed. She said, "It was just like wild fire. There was this huge eruption of laughter, all of a sudden." They didn't know how things were going to change, but they knew there was going to be this change. There was just this joy and they didn't care. "Everyone was laughing," she said. "The Communist officials were on the podium with tears streaming down their eyes and the students were laughing, because when everybody else is laughing, why, you just have to laugh yourself. She said, "Afterwards the secret police were asking, 'Who started the laughter? Did the person behind you laugh?' 'No.' 'Did you laugh?' 'No.' 'Did the person in front of you laugh?' 'No.'" She said, "It was just so ridiculous because everybody was just laughing and laughing."

Q: How long were you in Poland?

A: Well, we got married that summer. My wife had one more year. When Stalin died, she could then study anything she wished, but she liked ancient Persian, so she got her degree in that. Then she was studying law. She had one more year to go to finish her law degree. So we decided to stay in Poland for that year. Then she broke her leg and couldn't finish that year, so we ended up living in Poland for three years. It was a very wonderful experience.

Q: Were you teaching during this time?

A: After my first year somebody from the University of Lodz, where this language school was, heard that I had a master's degree and they asked me, "Would you be willing to

teach one course in American Literature?” I had never really paid that much attention to American literature. I had always loved British literature. So I found myself teaching one course in American literature. Then the next year they asked me again. The American embassy said, “You apply for a Fulbright. There is no sense in you working for Polish money when you can get a Fulbright. And we will recommend you.” So I was a Fulbright professor there for the next year.

Q: Did the Polish government let people study American literature?

A: It’s very interesting the kind of literature they had under Stalin. For instance, for Theodore Dreiser the piece of literature they had for Theodore Dreiser was his letter of application to the Communist Party rather than any of his novels or imaginative works. But when I was there things were thawing out. Stalin had died. There was no longer this great repression. After I left, Solidarity came and John Paul was elected Pope and the Communists were out, something that nobody ever thought would happen in their lifetimes. They thought that, well, in many generations we will be free, but not now. Then all of a sudden it happened. It was a very exciting time.

Q: Oh, yes. So you came back to the United States with your wife. Did you then start work on a Ph.D.?

A: Yes, in American literature at the University of Wisconsin. Because my wife liked to study too, the idea was that she would get her Ph.D. and teach and I would write. But in the meantime because I just loved taking courses, I was taking courses too. The University of Wisconsin hired her to teach beginning Polish. And because of her background where she was always under the eyes of the secret police, she did not like to

stand up in front of an audience where all of the eyes were focused on her. She said, “I just cannot do this.” So I ended up being the teacher.

Q: Did you teach while you were getting your Ph.D.?

A: Yes, I was an A.I., assistant instructor, at the University of Wisconsin.

Q: How did you happen to choose that school?

A: Because they had a good program in American literature and in 1969 there weren't that many programs in American literature. For instance, the University of Minnesota did not have a program in American literature. Wisconsin did, so that's why I went to Wisconsin.

Q: What was your dissertation subject?

A: My dissertation was on the Southern gentlemen in American fiction. And it was very nice because I got to read all kinds of 19th century novels in which the character of the Southern gentleman appeared. And I enjoyed doing my thesis very much.

Q: When did you receive your Ph.D.?

A: In the spring of 1969. I had several interviews at this time. I already had quite a few publications. And I was also translating some contemporary Polish poets. I can remember how impressed I was with the man who interviewed me for the University of Kansas. His name was Gerhardt Suder. He later became chairman of the English Department. So many other people would say, “Well, you've published your translations, you've published poetry, and your dissertation is in the 19th century. Now where are you going to specialize?” I didn't know. I liked it all. Professor Suder, when he interviewed me, just looked it over and said, “Oh, it's so nice to see somebody with such broad interests.” I thought, “By golly, that's a guy I want to work with.”

Q: Mostly, when people get a P.H.D. they do specialize very narrowly.

A: Yes, but I have always had very broad interests.

Q: You came here at an interesting time, didn't you?

A: Yes, I did.

Q: That must have been quite a surprise.

A: Not really, because the University of Wisconsin campus was pretty much in turmoil also.

Q: Oh really? While you were there?

A: Yes. Their state capital is in Madison. There if you want to protest, you march six blocks to the state capital.

Q: Were the people in your department in Wisconsin involved in these protests?

A: Some of them were. But by and large it was the Vietnam War and it was the younger generation of students who were protesting.

Q: You mean the undergraduates.

A: Yes. There were some graduate students. I remember one kindly professor in the Slavic Department told my wife, "You do not have U.S. citizenship. When you see these protestors, you run the other way because people are arrested. And here is somebody who is not a U.S. citizen..." That was good advice and she heeded it.

Q: Did she become a citizen?

A: Oh, yes.

Q: When you were here then when things were going on, did this affect your students or you?

A: You know, I'm sure it did. I have several poems protesting the Vietnam War. And we discussed the war in classes. But it seems to me that one of the things I love about

literature is that it is related to everything else. So if somebody wants to bring in something, if somebody says, “I had a horrible day because my girlfriend has left me,” relate it to the text. What does this wise person who wrote this story or this poem have to say about your situation?

Q: That’s an interesting viewpoint.

A: One of the things in all my education, nobody ever asked me what I thought about anything. It was, “Go to the library and find out what these critics think.” So one of the things that I have always tried to do with my students is say, “How does this situation apply to your life?” When my wife was very ill, we went to the Mayo Clinic. We had been told that she had at most a month to live. It turned out that they could operate on her spleen and she lived another five years. And those were great five years. But this was completely unexpected, so I had to cancel the whole last month of classes. The department said, “Fine. This is a family emergency. But assign the students something to do.” So I told everybody to write a 30-page paper on why this work is important to me at this stage of my life. And those papers were just so great. I thought, “Why didn’t I think of that before?” So from then on in every course I always had a personal essay. This is not going to the library. You will be penalized if you go to the library. But why is this work important to you at this point in your life. Over the years I’ve received some absolutely marvelous and heartbreaking essays.

Q: What sort of literature were you teaching them when you were asking them these questions?

A: American literature.

Q: Not just the 19th century?

A: No. I love teaching from the very beginning, from the explorers, the Puritans and going right up to the present.

Q: Kind of a survey course.

A: Yes.

Q: And you taught poetry too, I suppose.

A: Yes, and I taught creative writing. I taught all of the creative writing courses. I also taught fiction writing.

Q: I guess I thought creative writing was fiction writing.

A: Yes, fiction writing, poetry writing, playwriting. It's divided in that way.

Q: I see. I've read that sometimes you had your students in your home.

A: Oh, yes. That used to be a regular part. At the end instead of having my students write—I wrote so many term papers myself where the professor knew what I had written and I knew what I had written but nobody else knew what I had done. So I got the idea from somewhere that if you want to do a term paper you can, but you may also do a term project. You may present a work that we have read in any way you choose. I've had people do paintings. I had one group in American Literature I where the girls in that class went to the library and they made a Puritan dinner for the rest of us. It had a menu printed out and where they had gotten those recipes from. So I've had some wonderful class projects over the years.

Q: Have there been changes in the department during the time you've been here?

A: Yes.

Q: Are there more students taking American literature courses now than there were?

A: I don't know the statistics on that. My courses always filled up, maybe because the word was out that I was an easy teacher or whatever.

Q: Were there more faculty in the department as time went on?

A: Yes. I think one of the big changes in American literature is everybody is paying more attention to minority writers, which, of course, is a very good thing.

Q: It used to be that they didn't pay attention to them at all when I was in school. I suppose the course offerings have remained about the same.

A: Well, one of the things when I'm teaching American literature I tend to vary the authors or the selections simply so that I don't fall into a rut.

Q: You were talking about publications. You've had several books published.

A: Yes.

Q: Were these books of poetry?

A: Yes. I think I have five books of poetry, a couple of books of Polish translations. I've got an anthology of Polish-American poets that I edited.

Q: I see under publications you have listed the following:

Four Contemporary Polish Poets (translations), Quixote, 1967.

Astronomers, Madonnas, and Prophecies (poetry), Juniper, 1972.

Broken Treaties (poetry), New Rivers, 1973.

Planting Beeches (translations of Harasymowicz), New Rivers, 1975.

Names (poetry), New Rivers, 1979.

Unease (translations of Rozewicz), New Rivers, 1980.

A Kansas Sequence (poetry), Tellus, 1983.

Midwestern Buildings (poetry), Cottonwood, 1997

Homecoming (poetry), New Rivers, 2000.

Q: Then you continued to write while you were teaching as well.

A: Yes.

Q: I read somewhere that a couple of your writings were set to music.

A: Yes.

Q: Were there particular occasions for these?

A: I think the occasion of one of these was some anniversary of the University of Kansas.

Charles Hoag wanted to do something about Quantrill's raid. He's a professor in the music department. So he asked me for a text. And it was very nice working with a composer. He would say, "Now I want something that is a little bit jazzy. It goes 'Tum ta tum ta tum.' Now I want a slow section." It was great fun working with him.

Q: Then you did another one, *A Kansas Sequence*.

A: That's a collection of poems about Kansas. I fell in love with Kansas and my wife did too when we came here. I found that Kansas was a very fertile subject.

Q: Was that set to music too?

A: No, I don't think so. He took some of the poems and just set them to music for voice. I know that he did some of the Kansas poems. They had a performance of that about five years ago, although he'd written them much earlier.

Q: Then you wrote a poem for the 75th anniversary of Watson Library.

A: Yes.

Q: Was this a poem that you wrote especially for that occasion?

A: Well, it was a poem that I had and I was looking for something and I thought, "Oh, this is just right." It's a poem entitled "Old Book." It was just right for the Watson Library. I have a copy. I'll send it to you.

Old Book

I've been too long away from that book.
Time to read it again,
Go through those dog-eared pages
Looking at my friends in their old fashions,
But they are different;
The chapters mixed.
Sally is older.
I can't find the young lieutenant
And where is the jolly life in the greenwood?

A long time I walked behind my friend
And didn't recognize him, not at all
--he was so wasted, unshaven,
The light gone out of his eyes.

Something is wrong here,
As if I were reading it backwards.
I remember she married the orphan
And the Duke recovered his inheritance
--but not here.
It's all wrong.

Here it's the Duke who dies in Africa
wasted, unshaven,
the light gone out of his eyes.

That's my friend. I'd know him anywhere.
There were marshmallows
And father and mother and Uncle Bob.

But the book is a different color.
The pages are torn.
Nobody respects it any more.

Where has the lieutenant gone?

It's the wrong book, I say,
For I remember

I remember.

Yet here and there I find
A drop of blood
Brown and brittle as the pages.

It's my blood that I used long ago
For a bookmark.

Q: You were probably on University committees.

A: Very few. That's really not my thing. I'm not a joiner. I love teaching and I love writing but I'm not very much for committee work.

Q: I understand that you won the HOPE award in 1999. I think you were a finalist in 1998.

A: Yes.

Q: What do you think makes a good teacher?

A: Love and enthusiasm. Those are qualities that you can't fake.

Q: You mean love of your subject?

A: And love of the students.

Q: Have you found that the students have changed over the years you've been teaching?

A: I think the students now are much more socially aware than when I first started teaching. They are more aware of the environment. They are more aware of the position of minorities, that sort of thing.

Q: Did you ever take a sabbatical?

A: Yes, I did. In fact, I wrote the poems in *The Kansas Sequence* on sabbatical.

Q: So you just stayed here.

A: I don't remember. I think we just stayed here and I wrote.

Q: Do you remember outstanding former students who have gone on to greater things?

A: Denise Lowe was my student. I think she is the current poet laureate of Kansas. And Don Levering, who has published something like 11 books of poetry, was a student of mine. We are still in touch.

Q: I think I read that you still write to some of your students.

A: Yes. One of the things that I didn't like about teaching when I got started teaching was you teach them for one semester and they go and disappear into the world. So I always tell my students that any time you want to correspond, I will always reply to letters or e-mails. One fellow, Damon McMurray, who was in the first class—well there are more than one in that first class. He was in my first class in 1969. He's married now and he's got a little girl. We've kept in touch and corresponded all these years. There's another student from that class, gee, there are three students from that first class. She sent her two daughters here to KU. But they never ended up taking any of my classes. I've been in touch with her. She invited my wife and myself out to her father's farm. There's a third person in that class. We hadn't corresponded. Then her son was my student about three years ago and we got back into correspondence through her son.

Q: Did you have graduate students too?

A: Oh, yes. Particularly in the poetry writing courses. Both Don Levering and Denise Lowe were graduate students.

Q: Those graduate students go on to teaching positions, I suppose.

A: Yes. Denise teaches at Haskell. Don Levering does not teach. He works for the State of New Mexico. Most people with a graduate degree in English end up teaching some place or other.

Q: Did you belong to professional organizations?

A: Very few.

Q: You probably didn't hold offices in them.

A: No. I tried to avoid that like the plague.

Q: Were you involved in community activities?

A: I've given all kinds of poetry readings. I think I am more involved in community activities now that I've retired. I'm teaching classes in my home.

Q: Oh, really?

A: Yes. My wife died in 1999. I've had such marvelous spiritual experiences since she died that I just have to share them. So I've got these courses in spiritual awakening that I'm teaching with a friend in my home.

Q: Are you involved with some sort of organization that sponsors this?

A: No. This friend of mine also had some marvelous spiritual experiences. We're probably going to incorporate as a nonprofit organization.

Q: Do you advertise your classes? How do people hear about them?

A: A little bit. Most of it is just word of mouth.

Q: Do you do writing along this line too?

A: Yes, in a way. One of the things I got interested in after my wife died was dreams. I conduct two dream discussion groups on the internet, many of them with former students of mine who are also interested in dreams. The thing is that only you as a dreamer can really say what a dream means because the message is so personal.

Q: So often it seems like dreams don't make much sense. How do you figure out what they mean?

A: Every dream that I have I have myself trained where I wake up immediately after the dream and write it down. So my sleep schedule is a little cockeyed. Then a couple of months later I go back over that dream and see if it's got something, and then about six months later I go back. After I go back about six months later I am amazed at what the dream is telling me. Lots of times an experience that I had will apply so perfectly to that dream.

Q: Does the dream give you some kind of insight or predict what is going to happen?

A: I have had precognitive dreams that have predicted what will happen. But I think an awful lot of it is guidance from my subconscious. My wife has often appeared in my dreams, as have my parents.

Q: Do they talk to you in your dreams?

A: Yes.

Q: That must be an interesting experience.

A: It's a fascinating experience. For instance, my father loved to take the family on drives on Sunday afternoon. So often in my dreams he is driving the family someplace.

Q: I understand that you played chess by correspondence.

A: Yes. I grew up playing chess over the board. When I got married I took my wife to a chess tournament. She said she had never seen anything so boring in her life. So then I took up correspondence, because it was something I could do at home. After many years of playing, I won the U.S. Correspondence Chess Championship. I qualified for the semifinals of the world championship. I had thought that I was going to be playing chess all my life. Then my wife died. Somehow I just knew that logic can only take you so far.

Whatever else was going to be happening in the rest of my life it wouldn't have to do with any logical ability.

Q: So you don't play chess now.

A: I simply stopped when my wife died. I stopped cold. It had never occurred to me because being a chess player was one of the ways I defined myself.

Q: I understand that you sent postcards with your moves. Is that the way it works?

A: Yes. I played more than one game at the same time.

Q: So you keep all these chess boards set up in your house.

A: Well, they've got what they call the postal chess recorder album. They've got little boards where you can fit the pieces in the slots so you don't have to set up the position each time. You can just open to this page. Okay, on this page I've got this game and there's the position. If I want to set it up and analyze it I can, but most the time I would just look at the position.

Q: I suppose you would have more time to contemplate your moves if you were doing it this way.

A: Yes.

Q: You've talked a little bit about what you are doing in retirement. Is there anything else you are planning to do?

A: I'm working on about four books simultaneously. After my wife died I simply stopped writing poetry. I thought I had said everything I had to say to the world. And I just stopped writing poetry. Last summer an old, old friend invited me to spend a week with him in New Mexico. And the two of us just talked poetry 24 hours a day. And I came back and started writing poetry. All my poetry now is based on dreams. So it is very

interesting. I am writing my dream poetry. I already have all kinds of poems on that. It is going to be a big, thick poetry book, probably too thick, but I can weed it out. I have been taking courses the last few years at the Monroe Institute in Virginia.

Q: What is that?

A: They teach courses in human development. One of the trainers said, “You’ve taken many courses here. Why don’t you think about writing a book about the courses you’ve taken here.” I usually end up with about 50 pages of notes for each course. I’ve got lots of material for that.

Q: Is human development the development of children?

A: No. It’s the development of your potential as a human being.

Q: I see.

A: I don’t know if you’ve heard of remote viewing.

Q: No. What’s that?

A: This was a super secret U.S. Army intelligence program. A couple of laser scientists by the names of Pudoff and Tark were working at Stanford University. They met an artist by the name of—this is just so exciting—Ingo Swan. They were having cocktails and Ingo Swan asked them, “What do you guys do?” They said, “We can’t tell you. We work for the C.I.A.” He said, “You can’t have any secrets from me. I can remote view them.” They said, “What?” These guys are scientists. They invited him out to their Stanford research institute and the first thing he said was, “This is a false floor. There is some kind of machine under there. I don’t know what it does, but I can draw you the machine.” And he drew them the machine. So they said, “This is something we can use in the Cold War against Russia. We have heard that Russia has got psychic spies spying

on us.” Incidentally, a whole bunch of this material has been declassified. So they sent to some of their contacts at the C.I.A. and said, “Just give us the latitude and longitude of something that is really top secret. Don’t tell us what it is.” So they sent them. Pudoff and Tark in their book *Mind Reach* tell about this. They gave Ingo Swan latitude and longitude. They said, “What is there?” Ingo Swan drew the super secret model of the new M-1 tank. When they F.B.I. found out about it, they thought, “It is impossible that this guy could do this, just from the coordinates.”

Q: Were they going to lock him up?

A: Yes. But then he convinced them that he could do this. So then he started teaching people. Then they were thinking, “Can we...”

Q: You mean this isn’t an innate ability. It is something people can learn.

A: I took a course in this. I wasn’t very good at it. But I got one target out of about 60. But all you need to know that it works is just one. It was sort of like playing hide and seek for a whole week. We were given these pictures in envelopes. We were not shown what the pictures were. We were told, “View the scene of the picture at the time the picture was taken.” In one, I remember seeing in my mind’s eye some crisscross lines underneath. I saw some structures and there were these kind of round hats. I said, “These are either buildings or people with round hats. There seems to be some sort of flowing, either people or water flowing through this. My monitor was writing this down and said, “What’s that on the right hand side?” I said, “I can’t see. There is something big blocking my view.” Then we looked at the picture. It was a picture of Red Square in the rain. Those crisscross things were the tiles and the round figures were the onion domes of the Kremlin. To the right of the picture was this huge statue of Lenin or one of

those people that just blocked the view. That was my only success. But that's all I need to know that it works. I'm not going to be a professional remote viewer.

Q: Have they discovered that other people besides this one guy can do this?

A: Oh, yes. They say that it is an innate ability in all of us.

Q: How did he learn to do it? Did he teach himself?

A: Apparently he just had. On the internet he has courses that you can download. The Hawaiian Remote Viewers Guild—One of the interesting things....

Q: You mean there are clubs for this?

A: Absolutely. One of the interesting things was one of the remote viewers—this program had been going on for about 30 years, top, top secret. One of the remote viewers it turned out was mentally unstable, a guy named David Morehouse, who has since written a book about this. He was having an affair with his secretary and at the same time he sent her husband into a combat zone. That's a court martial offense. At the same time he was having an affair with a lap dancer and got so mad at her he took her into the woods and tied her to a tree and beat her up and left her for dead. I was taking this course with a couple of policemen. The policemen leapt up and said, "That is attempted murder. You can't get away with this." He was all set to go on trial. What he did was call up Ted Koppel and said, "Do you realize that the U.S. Army is spending money on psychic research?" So Ted Koppel did a big, huge expose and all of the people in this one program—there must be other programs—had their cover blown. So they've all become teachers. They've all written books. It's amazing the amount of material out about this. Most of it is by military men. It's not some psychic people. These are career military men. So I find that absolutely fascinating. So that's one of the courses that I took there.

It was taught by Skip Atwater. He doesn't say he is a C.I.A. agent now, but he said, "People ask me if I work for a secret organization. I ask them, 'Do you have a right to know?' If you don't have a right to know, it is none of your business. If you ask me, 'Would I lie to you?'" He said, "Of course I would lie to you if I worked for a secret organization. So now if you ask me if I work for a secret organization, I will tell you no."

Q: To finish up, what is your assessment of KU or the English Department, past, present, hopes for the future, that kind of thing?

A: I've loved working at K.U. I've loved the English Department and particularly the fact that I think the English Department has resisted the pressure to have huge classes. I can remember at the University of Wisconsin and at the University of Minnesota some of my undergraduate classes, you have these huge lecture classes in which the professors didn't know the names of their students. You know, you've got 300 students in a lecture class.

Q: They have lecture classes like that at K.U.

A: I think it is awfully good that classes in literature are not that way yet, and I hope they never become that way.

Q: You can't discuss in large classes.

A: And it is very hard to discuss things that are important to you with people who you don't know.

Q: That too.

A: I was thinking when I was coming down here I was writing to a former student whose e-mail address is gratefuljayhawk. When you've got people using that as an e-mail address, you're doing something right.

Q: Is there anything I've left out or anything you'd like to add?

A: I don't think so. As you know, you just get me going and I talk.

Q: Okay, thank you very much.

A: You are very welcome.