

# The Serendipity of A Poet's Ache

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Jason Olsen

Jason Olsen's poetry career as a writer began with a toothache.

He had terrible toothaches around the time he graduated with his bachelor's degree from University of Las Vegas. He realized it would be more cost effective to enroll in several college classes so that he could have student insurance.

So, to get insurance, Olsen took several fun classes in film and creative writing. Though he had a degree in

English, he didn't have much exposure to writing poetry and short stories. Martin Corliss-Smith, a poet from the United Kingdom, happened to be the guest creative writing professor that semester at UNLV. The toothache led him to Corliss-Smith and changed Olsen's life.

"I was at a point where I needed direction," he said.

Corliss-Smith told Olsen, very pointedly, that he had a talent and was going to get a master's degree in creative writing. He went as far as giving Olsen a list of universities to apply to and pushed Olsen to get his applications in. He ended up going to Eastern Washington University and then continued on to earn a doctorate degree from Western Michigan University, at Kalamazoo. The rest is history. Olsen is making his own history today with his award-winning writing. He is also winning awards as an associate professor at Utah State University Eastern.

In May, Olsen was named, "Professor of the Year," by USU Eastern's faculty for his excellence as a teacher. Students enjoy his creative classes. He has a way of mixing lighthearted creativity with his amazing drive and work ethic.

A passion for writing carries into Olsen's English classes. He enjoys interacting with all types of students. As a first-generation college student, he wasn't sure what to expect when he started college. His professors made all of the difference.

"Now, I have the opportunity to work with students who are just starting their college careers," he said. "Some are not enthusiastic about English and I get to share my excitement with them. "Other students are already creative writers. I get to help them develop their skills. They inspire me."

In addition to working full-time as a professor, Olsen is driven to write and publish. The main goal as a poet, for Olsen, is to make his poems easy for anyone to read and enjoy. His quips are laugh-out-loud funny and this lighthearted style rolls off his tongue so easily that it's possible to forget that he does it by design.

His poem, "Everybody's Jealous of Everybody Else," hit the big screen last fall. You can watch it on YouTube and find out why the Utah Division of Arts and Museums made him Poet of the Month as part of their "Poetry Bites" campaign.

Inspiration for the poem came from a conversation Olsen had with his mother. She has a handicapped-parking permit. Someone made a jealous comment to

her about how she was lucky because she could get the parking spots closest to the store. Olsen was amazed that someone was envious of his mother's disabilities.

"I was thinking about the way people view other people and their possessions," he said.

The poem takes a unique approach by examining the smaller, insignificant ways that we as humans feel envy. In a playful, but thoughtful attitude, he invites his readers to look inside.

"I wanted this poem to create expectations and then move in an unexpected way," he said. "I focused on mundane jealousies: food, hair, toys and clothes. Then the poem breaks, by piling on some transcendental moments. Then, just as fast, it returns to the mundane."

The Utah Division of Arts and Museums invited Olsen to choose one of his poems and to make a video of it at Twig Studios in Salt Lake City, Utah. The video combines Olsen reciting the poem with playful effects, graphics and music. The artists at Twig Studios had full leeway to design the video. Letting someone else determine the presentation of a work might be scary for some writers, but not for Olsen.

"The drawings and special effects created a collaboration that I am thrilled with," he said. "For me, when I write and share a poem, though it is mine, it belongs to everyone I share it with."

In addition to poetry, Olsen is an award-winning short-story writer. He is working toward publishing two books, *Robot Action Pinball*, a short-story collection and *The Behooving*, a compilation of poetry. The manuscript for *The Behooving* has been a finalist of semi-finalist for 10 book awards. The book is not destined to continue being the bride's maid and never the bride. Olsen's dogged determination will keep going until it is published as a winner.

*Robot Action Pinball* won first place in the category of book-length compositions in an original writing competition for the Utah Division of Arts and Museums. His work looks at serious life issues in a funny way.

"They are a loosely connected collection of stories about quirky characters who are on the outskirts of normalcy. One character, who is a linguist, is attracted to women's dialects over everything else. In another story, a couple moves into a town almost entirely populated by professional wrestlers. The stories deal with relationships and humor," Olsen explains.

Positive relationships with the faculty at USU Eastern drew Olsen to Price. He was finishing graduate school in Kalamazoo, and sent applications to universities and community colleges all over the country. The college in Price was appealing because it was only a five-hour drive to visit his family in Las Vegas.

When he interviewed on the phone, the appeal changed and Olsen was impressed with the people. He was offered a second interview and flew to Salt Lake City. When he came to campus and met with Greg Benson, the vice chancellor at the time, and the faculty in the English department, he felt comfortable.

"I felt a natural, organic connection with my future colleagues and students." He called his wife, Chapel, who was in Michigan and told her how he felt. She was from Michigan and hadn't even visited Utah before. They made the decision that day to accept the job.

Chapel trusted her husband to find them a place to live in a town she hadn't visited, in a distant state. What became a search for a rental property, became the purchase of a house located a few blocks from the college. Chapel moved into a house sight-unseen that he picked on his whirlwind visit.

Eight years later, the Olsen family feels firmly planted in Price. They have a preschool-aged daughter, Eliza, and just added a new boy, Eli, to the family.

"We feel a part of the community," he said. "The college has been terrific. I really like my job. I really do. It feels good to be in a nice safe place. There is a comfort that comes living here."

And good dental care too.

~ Renee Banasky