

Graduate study in English literature and history was the wrong path. "Eighteenth-century literature is useless," relatives told him in his mid-twenties. "You're too smart for your own good." The latter comment was not a compliment. It meant he knew too much about areas of knowledge that had nothing to do with earning a living, while he had failed to study science and technology to the level needed to land a lucrative, career-track job. Joe never learned what he had been told as a boy that, in his life, "it's not what we want to do, but what we have to do." He was taking too long to build a career for the purpose of buying a home in University Heights or the Skyline Subdivision and raising a family. Soon skyrocketing housing prices would have prevented him from doing that even if he had earned an advanced degree in petroleum geology and had been hired in the Alberta oil patch at the height of the oil-price boom.

In his mid-thirties, at a boarding house in a Prairie community, Joe would read at the breakfast table before heading off to work for the day at a small daily. "Don't you ever turn off your mind and relax?" his landlady asked.

By his late thirties and early forties, political correctness and corporate newspaper editors' emphasis on bulletin-like short articles prevented exploring any issue or idea to any depth, causing him to relegate imaginative work to his off hours – what free hours there were at the end of the day. Performance reviews got worse. Eventually union intervention saved his job, but it always seemed he continued his career under siege. Joe approached the literary community, but eventually he strayed off the correct theoretical path and was shunned at, or even ordered to leave, literary readings.

In pursuing his literary interests he was not contributing meaningfully to the economy, exports or the creation of productive jobs.

Joe took off two weeks one spring and drove down the Oregon coast. At one beach a rogue wave came up and swept him out to sea. At least he was free of the course.