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Donald Hall's Amanuensis

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*The bond between author and assistant is often close. But in Donald Hall's case, his decades-long relationship with his assistant proved to be a lifeline that extended his writing career.*



When Donald Hall interviewed Kendel Currier for the part-time job of typing his correspondence in August of 1994, one of the first things he asked was, “Will you type curse words?” His earlier hire for the position, a woman active in a local church, backed out when she discovered curse words in a letter, and he wanted to make sure Currier wouldn’t quit, too.

Hall found Currier's response reassuring: She would type whatever he dictated, she told him, and keep a dictionary nearby in case she was uncertain of a spelling. She was thirty-six at the time and, by her own description, a stay-at-home mom and housewife. But she'd done secretarial work in the past, and Hall—not quite twice Currier's age at sixty-six—was impressed by her professionalism. So, he hired her on the spot, and turned up the next day at her house in Andover, New Hampshire, with a canvas bag that contained a model letter, a stack of stationery, and a transcriber for playing back the dictation on his tapes. "It was as if the universe offered me a gift," Currier later said, "and I was smart enough to accept it."

Currier obtained the typewriter she used, an IBM Selectric III, from Hall's previous typist, Lois Fierro. Lois also offered Currier a couple of tips: Hall insisted on the British spelling "cheque" for a bank check, and spelled "anymore" as two words.

Soon Hall and his amanuensis fell into their daily rhythm: he drove ten miles to her home in Andover to drop off the tape she was to transcribe with a guide sheet, and she typed up letters for the next day, when he brought her another tape. Because they used two briefcases for their transactions, the two rarely spoke. She would leave her briefcase with its finished work between her storm and front doors, where he could easily exchange it with his briefcase containing new work. Hall came early in the morning, and often, when Currier opened the door, he'd have already come and gone. In a way, she says, "we took up our own correspondence, I typing notes to him, and he answering me on the daily tape."

The voice she found on the tapes was hard to get used to at first. "He was a man I didn't know, and I had to learn how to hear him," she says. "And there was a lot of background noise, because he often dictated while he was watching a baseball game or driving his car." But she was immediately impressed by the recipients of his letters. "The first letter I typed for him was to Robert Bly," she says, "and there were all these other well-known writers." She gradually realized that the man she was working for was at the center of the American literary scene. He was an enormously prolific correspondent, who dictated ten to twenty letters a day and never let a letter go unanswered.

A continual theme in Hall's early dictated letters was his worry about his wife, Jane Kenyon, who was stricken with leukemia. When Currier began in her position in late August, he and Kenyon were waiting for a blood match for a bone-marrow transplant. It was a time of great anxiety. But three weeks after she was hired, they got a call that a match had been found, and they quickly made plans to travel to Seattle for the operation.

Before they left, Hall set up a system for delivering his daily tapes by mail. He supplied Currier with stationery, envelopes, and money for stamps so she could send his letters back to him for a final proofing. Now he could stay in touch with friends, readers, and professional contacts with only a slight delay in his responses. Currier gradually discovered that Hall's letter writing had another benefit: it gave him ideas for his creative work. After he repeated the same story from his daily life from one letter to the next, she says, it would sometimes appear in a poem. "I don't know that he ever spoke or wrote about this," she reflects, "but I certainly noticed it."

Much of the Seattle correspondence Currier typed was about the progress and results of Kenyon's operation. Early signs showed the transplant had taken, lifting their hopes. But in the weeks after the couple flew home to New Hampshire, her leukemia returned. Hall's letters were consumed by sorrow. When Kenyon died in late April 1995, friends and readers across the country wrote to share Hall's grief. "The outpouring of condolence by mail afterward was enormous," Currier remembers. Hall insisted on

answering every correspondent. “It was one of the busiest times I’ve ever had with him,” she says, “typing many, many postcards, notes, and letters.”

“Don was such a letter writer,” says Currier, “that he went on writing to Jane even after she died.” Hall’s letter-poems to Kenyon appear in his 1998 collection *Without* and take up nearly half of the volume. Offering spontaneous, intimate news of daily events to a recipient who cannot read them, the poems take us closer to Hall’s heartbreak than any of the more deliberate entries that precede them. They bring a new tone to his work.

“His grief was all he wrote about in his letters for a year after Jane’s death,” Currier says. As in the past, those letters, too, helped him with his poetry, providing observations and stories he later used in poems. Sometimes, “it worked the other way,” that is, he included in his letters things he’d already written about, as if to test their effect.

Currier had good reason to know about the links between Hall’s letters and poems. In July of 1996, Sharon Broughton, who typed Hall’s poetry and prose, married and moved to California, and Currier took over her work. So in addition to typing his grief-filled correspondence, she was also typing the poems of *Without*, draft by draft.

Currier’s increased responsibilities came at exactly the right time: her son Tyler was about to enter the first grade, freeing her from childcare for a longer part of the day. But there were problems for her at home. “My marriage was pretty bumpy at that point,” she says, and sometimes, when Hall pulled into her driveway to drop off his briefcase of new work, the two of them talked about their personal difficulties, Currier with her husband and Hall with the women he was now dating. They were alike in some ways, both of them without—he having lost his life partner, and she sensing she would soon lose hers as well. And through these unguarded conversations, a bond formed and their relationship deepened.

In late winter 1998, as her divorce neared, Currier became concerned that she would no longer have a home office to work from and would have to give up her job. She was greatly relieved when Hall stepped in to offer the cottage that once belonged to his grandfather’s hired man.

The cottage was just seventy yards down the road from Hall’s farmhouse, a much more convenient location than Currier’s house, which required a car ride. With Hall’s blessing, she got a friend to build a desk in the living room large enough to hold a typewriter, a computer, and a copy machine. Over the next several weeks, after she had completed the day’s typing, Hall would meet her at the cottage to unpack and organize the boxes from his mother’s house that had been stored there, boxes of family photographs, mementos, and linens. The process became the impetus for his later memoir, *Unpacking the Boxes*. In October, after the unpacking was complete, Hall suggested that Currier move in and make the cottage her permanent home.

Because her new residence was so close to his house, a single briefcase was all the pair needed now for their daily exchanges. When Hall finished dictating in the evening, he left the briefcase outside his house in a porch chair. Next morning, before the sun came up, Currier collected the briefcase, and returned it in the late morning, full of letters and manuscripts. “I became known as ‘that woman who carries a briefcase on Route 4 in the dark,’ ” she says. Sometimes she checked the farmhouse through her north window just to make sure things were as they should be—the lights on or not on, depending on the time of day, the car in the driveway where it belonged. Like the hired man who had lived in the cottage before her, she began attending to the rhythms of the main house.

The essential rhythm between author and amanuensis, the exchange of the briefcase, altered as time went on, moving later into the day. They developed a visual code. Currier was to watch for the briefcase from her window, and when it appeared on its porch chair, she would know her day's work awaited. When she finished the work, she carried the briefcase back to its chair and placed it on its side, so Hall would understand that its contents were ready for inspection.

By the middle of 1999, Hall had assigned Currier an assortment of new chores—she'd become a trusted partner. She helped clear away Jane Kenyon's clothes. She alphabetically shelved the new poetry books he received and sorted family photographs. Then Hall turned over all his bookkeeping to her, and when he traveled, put her in charge of his house to deal with his mail, faxes, phone messages, and the care of his pets. She even drove him to poetry readings around New Hampshire and well outside the state. In his letters and prose, Hall took to calling her his assistant.

For years, Currier had happily conformed her life and schedule to Hall's, but now there was something she needed to do for herself. She wanted to go to college. Back in high school, when she'd brought up the subject of college to her parents, they were puzzled. Why would she waste her money on that, her father asked, since she'd be following her husband's lead wherever he went? Ultimately, her parents relented, but only if she agreed to take up something practical. She chose a program in business and science at the University of Rhode Island, but only made it through introductory courses before she dropped out from lack of interest. In the fall of 1999, she enrolled in the adult education program offered by the University of New Hampshire. Then she selected courses in the humanities and began to learn about the world of literature, art, and thought.

In hindsight, Currier sees how much Hall influenced the curriculum she chose. "Working for someone whose life was literature was an eye-opening experience," she says. "I was exposed to new ideas through Don, and I got to expand them by going back to school." When she had extra homework, Hall adjusted her schedule, occasionally giving her whole days off to catch up. "He believed in higher education," Currier says, "and he wanted me to have it."

By his example, Hall also taught her how to write. During her time as a student, he was working on *The Best Day the Worst Day*, his prose memoir about his life with Kenyon, and Currier was impressed by his discipline and his pursuit of perfection. "He wrote the entire book in longhand three times," she recalls, and after she typed up the third version, he scribbled revisions for retyping in the margins. "He would change a passage twenty times, and I'd say to myself, Oh my God, Don, please don't change that again! But the twentieth time it would be so much better." Guided by Hall's passion for revision, Currier won high praise for her own written work; one professor even asked to use her final paper as a model in future classes.

In the spring of 2003, when Currier crossed the stage in her cap and gown to receive her degree, she heard her son shout from the audience "Way to go, Mom!" That same year Hall asked if he could dedicate a book of essays to her, *Breakfast Served Any Time All Day*, which she'd just finished typing. Currier was flattered, and surprised, too, though on reflection she surmised the reason for his dedication. As she typed the book, her admiration for it grew, and she told Hall that his essays about writing poetry would be helpful to anyone who wanted to write.

Still, she wasn't sure about the book's title, she told Hall, because she thought it had nothing to do with the content. He responded by editing his opening essay to explain the title. It was her college degree, she says, that gave her the confidence to tell him what didn't sound right to her in his work, both in that

manuscript and in others that came after. Her degree also gave her a different attitude when she sat in Hall's audience after driving him to a poetry reading. She felt, she says, "more like I belonged there."

Currier sent her question about the title of *Breakfast Served Any Time All Day* through their regular channel for communication: notes sent back and forth in the daily briefcase—he dictating his notes to her, and she typing a comment or question. In this way, Currier also told him about her multiple sclerosis. Since her disease had not interfered with her typing, she'd had no need to discuss it with him. But in the manuscript of a short story he was working on, one of his characters died of MS, and she was compelled to explain that people don't generally die of MS. Then she had to explain how she knew.

In the first decade of the 2000s, Currier's MS steadily progressed. First, she wore a brace on her left foot, then she began to use a cane. A few years later she graduated to a rollator walker. Today, she gets around on a disability scooter. In 2007, she began to type with voice recognition software because she was losing function in the little and ring fingers of her left hand—"a and s," she says, "are very important letters."

By that time, Hall had his own disabilities to deal with, the result of old age and a lifelong aversion to physical exercise. In his prose book, *Essays After Eighty*, he confesses his immobility: "I sit on my ass all day writing in longhand, which Kendel types up." Five years earlier, in *Unpacking the Boxes*, he described how hard it was to raise himself out of his living room chair, a problem eventually solved by a mechanical lift.

Currier remembers how often Hall fell. One morning in winter, as she checked the farmhouse from her north window, she noticed his car had been warming up for a long time. When she went up to check, she found Hall lying in the driveway beside the car, unable to get up. Another day, as she entered the house, she heard him calling out in panic from the floor on the far side of his bed. Unable to lift him because of her own disability, she talked him into a position from which he could get himself up. On later falls, when he couldn't manage to lift himself, she called the local fire department for assistance. Her list of responsibilities continued to grow; it now included the role of safeguard and protector.

In 2008, during the period of his falling, Hall got into his second car accident. Nobody was hurt, but he lost his license. This made it easier for Currier to keep an eye on him throughout each day, when she brought him his breakfast sandwich and *Boston Globe* and picked up the briefcase for work. Always the two of them talked a bit in the morning, and longer in the afternoon, when she brought her typed pages back to him and he'd finished his writing for the day. Sometimes the subject was their mutual disability. Currier told him about the benefits of getting around on a rollator, and once, after she began to use a scooter, Hall suggested she might one day want a grabber like the one his daughter Philippa bought him for grasping things beyond his reach.

Currier didn't know about grabbers, and she appreciated the thought. Still, the most important way Hall helped her with her disability was simply by understanding. "He told me how horrible and unfair it was that I had MS," she says, "and he was always very concerned about it." For her part, she sympathized with him about the growing troubles of old age. Once, when he was depressed by his infirmities, she counseled him to try and see things differently, as she had learned to do with her MS, accepting life as it actually was, and finding the good in what might seem a hopeless situation. Hall was determined that people couldn't change their feelings, and her advice never took. But the life she led by example did. He understood, she says, "that my sympathy was limited because I had my own disability. He knew he couldn't play the disability card with me."

Currier was not the only woman who looked after Hall in his eighties. There were several such women, and the locals had a nickname for them. Linda Kunhardt, the love of his life after Kenyon died, discovered the nickname when she dropped off some of Hall's mail at the post office in Danbury, New Hampshire, and a clerk asked her if she was part of "Hall's Harem." The members of the group are listed in the dedication of Hall's last book, *A Carnival of Losses*: his housekeeper, his personal trainer, two women who delivered his mail and his prescriptions, and, at the very top of the list, Currier, his all-purpose assistant, and by then, his dear and trusted friend.

Unlike the other helpers, Currier emerges in *A Carnival of Losses* and *Essays After Eighty* as a constant companion, a fully developed character who's not afraid to pull rank when it comes to Hall's best interests. She was especially worried by his smoking. In a passage from "No Smoking," Hall relates that she once noticed "the carpet between my chair and a low bookshelf was burned away, as were the backs of some books." When he explained that the damage came from a lost, burning cigarette, Currier was horrified and refused to leave the farmhouse until he promised to call her whenever he couldn't locate a dropped cigarette. In the same essay, Hall describes the two of them on their way to New York City, Currier driving and he occasionally cracking his window to smoke. "Somewhere around Springfield, Massachusetts," he writes, when he took out another cigarette, Currier parked the car and asked him to smoke outside. "I could not smoke in my own car," Hall writes. "Kendel is kind, but Kendel is a hard case."

The affection and respect Hall felt served Currier well in the period after he finished *Essays after Eighty*, when his mood turned dark. He was discouraged, not only because he didn't have a subject to write about, but because even if he did, he wouldn't have enough energy to manage the job. Watching him adrift, day after day, made Currier unhappy as well. She finally told him, "If you don't work, I don't work." Those words "seemed to shock him a bit," she says, "because I don't think he'd ever thought about the impact he might be having on me." Afterward she pleaded with him to "write anything, whether it was publishable or not, just to get writing again." At her urging, he began the short essays of *A Carnival of Losses*—"notes," as he called them, each tailored to fit his reduced periods of concentration.

The glaring exception to shortness is the essay "Necropoetics," over twenty pages concerning Jane Kenyon's influence on his poetry after her death. The essay was long enough and important enough for Hall that he gave it the prominence of its own section in the book. It was Currier who urged him to write the piece, first reading his thoughts about the theme of necropoetics in his letters, then prompting him, repeatedly, to explore them during afternoon chats. There's little doubt that her encouragement was crucial not only to the creation of "Necropoetics," but to Hall's last volume itself.

Not long after he completed *A Carnival of Losses*, Donald Hall died. The memorial service, held in the South Danbury church, took place nearly two years ago.

Currier still lives in the small farmhand's cottage, but the farmhouse, now empty, has been sold to a hastily formed group whose stated purpose is to preserve it. Currier now awaits the results of an application she has made to a nearby retirement community, and she has joined a counseling group to deal with the grief she feels. "I cannot look up there every day knowing that Don's not there," she says, "knowing there's no reason to look anymore."

But she has her memories. She recalls, for instance, the times she surprised Hall with results from her online research: biographies of poets he knew as a young man for his "Selected Poets of Donald Hall" section in *A Carnival of Losses*, or an early photograph of himself with an apple in his mouth, which she persuaded him to reprint with his essay "Dictating the Pig." She remembers moments when he asked for

her thoughts about a word or a piece he had written. She remembers especially how he honored her with his dedication for *Breakfast Served Any Time All Day*.

And of course Currier has the memory of her daily journeys with their shared briefcase, in all weather, from her cottage to Hall's farmhouse and back again for more than twenty years, first in the dark on foot, sometimes in the winter on cross-country skis, and during her last years riding on her disability scooter, the briefcase tucked behind her legs under the seat. By that time the case showed signs of its continuous repair. "At first when the stitching at the seams came undone," Currier says, "I would hand-sew it back together." Later, as she lost the use of her left hand, she repaired the briefcase with duct tape. The record of its restorations honors the commitment of the two people who spent their life together, filling and emptying it.

Currier's last official day as Hall's amanuensis was in the fall of 2019. She closed down his email account. She deleted his emails from her private account, along with his remaining Word files. Then she sent in her final pay numbers to his accountant. With a few keystrokes, "I let go of what I'd continued to hold onto since Don died. It was far more emotional than I expected."

Before Hall's son, Andrew, and daughter, Philippa, dealt with the contents of their father's farmhouse, they asked his housekeeper, his personal trainer, and Currier if there was anything each of them would like to have. Without hesitation, Kendel Currier requested Donald Hall's grabber. He had told her there might come a day when she would need a way to grasp things beyond her reach. She needed it now. "Every time I use this grabber," she says, "I find myself thanking him."

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