

## Getting Stuck and Unstuck While Writing Poetry

By John D. Call

If you're like me, sometimes in writing a poem, you feel like you're on a runaway horse with lines coming faster than you can write them down. But more often we experience another frustration – getting stuck!

For me, getting stuck mostly means not knowing what comes next in a poem in progress. It's losing a sense of flow and a sense of the direction and orientation of the poem. This malady feels like getting caught on a giant piece of flypaper; you can't move! Hopefully each of us has developed some way to get unstuck and move on. Here are few that work for me most of the time. The first two are attitudes that are helpful to maintain when stuck, and the last five are specific techniques for getting beyond stuck.

1. Remember that getting stuck is a natural occurrence and an essential part of the creative process in all the arts. It is to be embraced as a positive, not resisted. It's like fighting the water and going down or relaxing and floating.
2. Realize that something is telling you something from a deep consciousness within. It may be questioning the direction you have taken in the poem and saying, "Stop, look. There's a better way."
3. Sometimes taking a "time out" from the poem can help. Focus on something else and allow your deeper consciousness to work on it awhile. It allows your mind a chance to "reset," so as to come back to the poem with fresh eyes and mind. This can help with what I call "writer's fatigue" in which your body gets tired and your mind turns to Jello, and it's hard to focus.
4. Consider the possibility that the poem is finished. We've all heard talks and readings of prose and poems when the speaker passes up many a great place to stop!
5. Try rewriting the poem from the start. When I try this, often I happen upon a better direction before getting to the "stuck place," so that when I get there the changes have eliminated the stuckness. Then sometimes you can write through the stuckness with the momentum of the rewriting.
6. Write about being stuck. Several times my poems written about being stuck turn out to be better poems than the ones in which I am stuck. At other times writing about being stuck loosens its hold. Coming back to first person, present tense allows for getting a firm footing in the present from which movement forward is possible.
7. Finally, the most effective technique for me for getting unstuck is imaging. Relax and in your mind's eye ***create images representing where you are stuck in the poem.*** Then simply watch to see what happens. Say, for example, you are stuck on the following line and are trying to get beyond it: "...evening shadows stretching across the yard..." You can image the shadows in your mind, and in the imaging you notice the picket fence and how the light is still splashed between the shadows of the pickets, so the next line might become, "the fading sun still dances between the fence pickets lengthening on the ground."

I hope at least one of these techniques for getting unstuck will work for you when you need it. Again, getting stuck is part of the creative process, and to get stuck means that you are involved in this process. May every stuck place in your writing be an opportunity for creating an even better poem.