

How Do You Do It?

If you've been writing poetry for very long and have read for some appreciative audiences (of one or more), you've likely had the experience of someone saying to you something like, "How do you do it?" (translation – "I wish I could write like that!") It's easy enough to respond with a simple, "Thank you," for the implied compliment. But I believe there is more to it than this. I think that many people ask such a question out of a genuine desire to learn, coupled with a frustration of not being able to express their deepest selves as well as they would like.

So, I decided I'd take the question seriously and at "face value" – "How do you do it?" To at least begin addressing the question, I will point to several characteristics that I believe most poets, and others in the arts, seem to have in common and, in so doing, hopefully begin building a "profile" of a poet that can perhaps shed some light on the subject (or confuse it more, which would also be progress).

First, most poets have in their personalities a high tendency to be introspective and are as comfortable, if not more so, in their inner worlds as in their outer worlds. They tend to search within for answers and guidance. They tend to live more from their inside-out than from the outside-in.

Second, most poets seem to have a strong need for self-expression, perhaps as a counterbalance to the time spent within.

Third, most poets seem to have a lot of "yin" energy. It takes the "yang" energy to do the business of publishing, etc., but much of the composition and relating to the muse, as well as intuition, comes out of "yin" energy. "Yin" is the dark, inner world, feminine (not about sexual identity), right brain energy, while "yang" is the aggressive, outward, brightness, left brain, masculine energy (not about sexual identity), according to certain eastern thought.

Fourth, poets seem to be able to see or intuit the connection between all things. This is where our similes and metaphors come from and all the richness of other figures of speech, which are the poet's stock and trade.

Fifth, and a corollary of the fourth, poets have the capacity to hold dualities in their hands and work with them together rather than having to choose between them – examples: good and evil, light and dark, truth and falsehood, etc. The poet can allow each part to express its own truth and from this synthesis give voice to the novel and new.

Sixth, most poets seem to possess a sense of spirituality (not necessarily religious), in which they experience something larger than themselves, of which they are a part and within which they find meaning for their lives. For many, their poetry is an experience of this spirituality and an expression of it, which renders them a sense of wholeness.

Seventh, and a closely related aspect of spirituality, the poet can not only tolerate mystery but embrace it as well. This quality seems especially important in today's fast-paced, information-oriented world in which we want and expect answers and solutions now! For most people, mystery is to be solved and resolved. For poets it's to be embraced, first to accept and celebrate human limitations, then to allow mystery to reveal itself, partly or fully, if at all.

Finally, eighth, poets seem to have an innate ability to "trust the process," to find the "flow" and go with it. This is an active, not a passive, process, one in which the poet's creative energies join with those of the moment in order to fulfill that moment.

This short list of characteristics common to most poets and people in the arts in general, is my list based on my understanding and my experience. I could expand this list, and so could you.

But does this answer the "How do you do it?" question? Absolutely not! But I think these shared characteristics give us some "talking points" to include in future dialogues.

What makes a poet a poet? Certainly these eight characteristics beg the question of "nature and nurture." (The use of "and" rather than "or" pretty well sums up my own position.)

Perhaps I've mainly confused the issue. Well, if so, good! Is not confusion like a cloud through which we must walk, which leads us to the next patch of clear blue sky?

So, the next time (if I'm so fortunate) someone asks of me, "How do you do it?" I guess I'll continue to say, "Thank you," but in the back of my mind I'll be asking, "Just how do you do it?" and maybe I'll say, "I don't know yet, but I am working on it!" Or should we just accept it all as mystery?

Peace and Poetry,
John