

Mustering the Muse

By John D. Call

After a sustained period of time writing poems, I begin itching to write something about the poetry writing process. So, this brief essay is my scratch for that itch.

The only thing that is more intimidating to a writer than facing a blank page with no direction is facing a whole legal pad full of blank pages. Recently I finished the pad I was writing on and reached for another. In noticing its emptiness, it stuck me that my job is to fill it with words and phrases and sentences and thoughts that are somehow approachable, and with images and rhythm and sometimes rhyme that find a resonance with another human being.

The empty page reminds me of the seemingly empty abyss within myself that, although it appears empty, is actually teeming with life. That life (the muse*) must sometimes be coaxed from the abyss much like a snake charmer coaxes the snake from the basket with the music of a flute. Most of the time, however, a basket and flute are not too effective in coaxing or calling together or mustering the muse.

In my approximately 35 years of writing poems, the following has proven helpful in mustering the muse. The primary skill needed is the skill of waiting. Contrary to our usual meaning, this waiting is far from passive. In fact, we might call it, "active waiting." I believe that this active waiting for the muse must be saturated in the following four attitudes:

1. The attitude of openness says, "I am here, ready and available to be inspired and guided. This openness can be seen in body language as well as mental and emotional focus.
2. The attitude of expectation that something will happen is vital. You may express this attitude by having a comfortable chair and pen and paper at the ready: anything that signals the muse that you are making a serious effort to tap their wisdom.
3. The attitude of welcome says, in essence, "I will consider all things you send my way – all contributions are appreciated and will be given serious consideration."
4. The attitude of trust is of two types. First is trust in the whole process that inspiration and guidance can be imparted and received within an artist. The second type of trust is that which is committed to follow the lead that the muse may offer. The poet Robert Bly, while being interviewed by Bill Moyers, quotes William Blake's quatrain that I think speaks poignantly to this following of the muse:

I give you the end of a golden string,
Only wind it into a ball.
It will lead you in at heaven's gate
Built in Jerusalem's wall. **

This active waiting skill cannot press the muse into service. It can, I believe, set the stage in such a way that they are more likely to come out from behind the curtain and play their parts. I share it with you in the hope it might be of some use in our common journey and that you will in time share with the rest of us what is working for you.

I think I'll go muster the muse ----

Yours in the journey,
John D. Call

* When I use the word “muse,” I am speaking of deep inner parts of ourselves, mostly unconscious, that when accessed can become a source of inspiration and guidance in the prosaic or poetic process. They are characterized by being intuitive, clear thinking, and having access to the unconscious where the memory of the race is archived.

** Quoted by Robert Bly in an interview with Bill Moyers in the book entitled, The Language of Life, A Festival of Poets, Bill Moyers.

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