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Of the World that Freely Offers Itself: An Exploration of Writerly/Artistic Rituals

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The author, a fiction writer, explores the relationship between the writer/artist and the so-called Muse, especially with respect to working rituals that precede the artist's creative expression and make it more accessible. She takes an informal approach to a collaborative inquiry and experiments with her own musings as she navigates through her colleagues' responses to a questionnaire in which she asks them to qualify and self-analyze their pre-writing/painting rituals and ensuing working habits. Her attempt to deepen her own experience by understanding the experience of others unfolds in this lyric essay in which linguistic strategies serve to differentiate inner process and discovery in the world. She takes liberties, invoking Franz Kafka, and even addressing him as one of her colleagues. The result is a hybrid form of creative-scholarly writing, informative and lyrical rather than analytical, that is inclusive of the researcher's voice as a fictionist, who, in collaboration with her colleagues, is reckoning with the Muse.

Keywords: *writer, artist, muse, musing, creative expression, creative process*

You do not need to leave your room. Remain sitting at your table and listen. Do not even listen, simply wait. Do not even wait, be quite still and solitary. The world will freely offer itself to you to be unmasked, it has no choice. It will roll in ecstasy at your feet.

(Franz Kafka, 1918)

I wonder if there's a writer—or artist—alive or dead, who upon first finding this small quote by Kafka doesn't take heart. Such relief it is to think that the words, the brushstrokes, will all come to the one who dares to create. So much solace in that phrase of Hamlet's it alludes to, namely that "readiness is all." As if readiness were something so simple, so facile, so achievable. As if it didn't take Hamlet five acts and two scenes to arrive at his epiphany, as if it didn't happen within an hour of his death. As if readiness weren't a loaded pistol full of demands, looming large among them, I imagine, a sufficient and accumulated knowledge that might pose as acceptance but remove the mask and you find faith—or if you believe in it, fate. Faith—not in a god or religion but in the certainty that something will indeed come.

Fate, of course, speaks for itself.

Ok, Franz. Is it possible to be ready and yet terrified? This is a large subject, and the deadline is in my face. Ok, Franz. I'm frightened but following. I'm sitting still. Solitary. I'm trying not to wait, but I am waiting. I have candles (oh, I blew them out), crystals

(somewhere), fifty pages of notes marked colorfully (but not color-coded). Of starts, there have been many. False they were, I suppose. Only now am I ready. After all, I'm not writing fiction. It's not simply a matter of waiting and letting go. As if this kind of waiting were actually simple—this settling into the mind, releasing it into its own scramble among the marvels and mystery, allowing the mind to search and select as though it were privy to the most wondrous gems of the universe.

It is all too human to harbor a fascination for the creative process, to celebrate a muse, to develop a plethora of rituals—all that writers (and artists, too) do to help them brave the journey. To begin is difficult, to face the blank page or the blank screen and write. A writer of fiction writes with a different set of tools than a writer of nonfiction. Perhaps both have notes, but perhaps the fiction writer has nothing. I began this collaborative inquiry more at home in the world of fiction, sometimes with notes, sometimes without. Still, it was as a creative writer rather than a scholar that I navigated this course.

Elaborate ritual and reckoning with the muse are not solely the province of the famous. I knew this when I began to think about gathering information from my fellow writers and artists from across the United States, asking them about their experiences of pre-writing/painting rituals and their ensuing creative process. My intention wasn't so much a scholarly enterprise as it was a matter of satisfying my curiosity and the desire to share and inform. In this essay, I honor my own creative process as well, invoking Kafka as my muse and weaving the replies of my colleagues depicted in this essay, as testimony to a multilayered relationship with the muse.

I have a number of sources for this essay. I have gone out into the world. Even in my going out, the world has answered me. In my explorations, I have asked for the experiences of others, and now I'm pulling from those sources. Currently, I'm waiting for the impulse, as I do when writing fiction. I'm sitting ever so still. Regarding my questionnaires: a fair number of writers and several painters have answered my questions. There are pages I've read from the thoughts of other curious seekers, creative writers, as well as scientists and psychologists and neuroscientists. At the moment, it seems that all I have is anecdotal. In the end, it will be a gathering and perhaps a filtering and structuring of the information, the stories, the thinking—a spreading of seeds, photographs of plants growing—caught and stilled, this moment in time—or trees that have tumbled like the tree that I saw brutally downed the afternoon I began compiling my notes, a tree that was diseased.

And now, here I am, again, letting some time pass before once again picking up my notes, after having gone to a portion of the large heart of a trunk, a chunk that I'd arranged to keep as a chair, and I sat there.

I bring it up, because that is what is coming to me unmasked, Franz, rolling at my feet, my own heart tumbled. But I am also humbled by the answers of this group of artists, some acquaintances, others not, but kind enough to answer.

Presuppositions

I couldn't begin this piece without you, Franz. I found nothing to pull it all together, until I remembered some of your words: "Remain sitting . . . The world will freely offer itself to you to be unmasked." That was what I remembered of you, and it restored me, my faith, my willingness to be still, to wait and to be. So, that is how I started.

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Acts of Freedom

I flitted through the Internet to see what other minds have reported. A number of us seem to take walks, design our space, select furniture, make decisions about light sources, favor specific equipment, as well as food or drink. Some rely on drugs. Some call the act of writing or painting or composition spiritual work, others call it a job, and others consider it a compulsion. Writing, as I tell my students, is the greatest act of freedom. I suppose you could say this is true of any creative endeavor, but writing is particularly democratic. All one requires is access to a language. One of the most succinct and gloriously clear passages that describes this phenomenon comes from a widely anthologized essay taken from poet William Stafford's (2002) writing primer: "A writer is not so much someone who has something to say as he is someone who has found a process that will bring about new things he would not have thought of if he had not started to say them" (p. 529). How mysterious, yet democratic, an endeavor! This point of view not only grants immunity to the writer, but it encourages one to imagine that the very act enchants the writer; the writing itself calls forth thoughts which, until that moment, did not exist—or they were thoughts of which the writer was not conscious; all a writer need do is be there, or "show up," as Woody Allen famously said.

Being there, showing up . . . how they are like waiting, or not even waiting. All reminiscent of you, Franz. What you said.

Pondering Readiness

Preparation as foreplay? I thank Freud (1908/1959) for this association. I remember wondering if the Muse would come to me, considering I was female. For me, something did come, and it still comes, although sometimes I am not ready. Sometimes I light candles, sometimes I put on special earrings, sometimes I clean the desk where I write. Sometimes I travel to find a writing place. What it is that comes when I am ready, I suppose one could call it the Muse. One might question whether the world that Kafka speaks of, or the notorious Muse, herself, is an inner or an outer entity, whether what we are getting ready to greet is within us or outside of us.

As to readiness, what are the methods employed by writers/artists/musicians to let the Muse know they are ready for readiness? It seems fitting to consider what it is writers/artists/musicians are preparing for—and how

it might be considered different from other occupations that would seem to elude the shadow that accompanies the mystery of creation.

Being-There Versus Shame

Where is “there?” What is “being” in this instance? Stafford (2002) proceeded to discuss two ideas that would be particularly helpful for the writer to consider—namely a certain kind of “receptivity,” and a “willingness to fail” (p. 530). Now with the Internet and the frenzy of digital media, the world of literature is more democratic—even as it leaves us with a level of distraction incomparable to anything imaginable before the age of computers. The creative person navigates through a series of choices. As the writer/artist is always selecting, s/he might find distraction as easily in the window as in the machine she is using. The nature of writing is such that the distraction itself might lead to the muscle of an idea unfolding.

Writing itself is one of the great, free human activities. There is scope for individuality, and elation, and discovery in writing. For the person who follows with trust and forgiveness what occurs to him, the world remains always ready and deep. (Stafford, 2002, p. 531)

Among my distractions, but what might be considered more of a reservation than a distraction, located not in the window or in my machine, but rather in my mind, is my memory as a grad student going for an MFA at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop many years ago, where it was considered anathema to discuss inspiration or method or technique. Little quips came through, but were we writers meant to take them seriously? Certainly no one wanted to give away any secrets. Were we all in competition? Were we all superstitious, afraid the telling would jinx it with the Muse? Is the idea of a Muse problematic in any way?

The ecstatic world at my feet is telling me that I’m stalling. An hour ago, I heard the wind and the traffic, and now the cicadas. I looked up to cats posing, but now they are gone. But Franz, you are correct, it is fascinating to read what we do to conjure the Muse, if there is such a thing, if she sits there with Santa Claus and the good fairy and the saints and the devil and the ever-dwindling bank accounts of most of us who make our living conjuring her. And if not our living, then certainly our souls, our identities, what rises up first, or

at least early on, when we think about what makes us who we are.

Freud (1908/1959) preferred to connect the artistic output of writing with shame. He likened it to fantasy, suggesting that humans are ashamed to be caught daydreaming, that the reason the reader allows herself to take “pleasure” in the partaking of literature, comprising, Freud said, the writer’s “innermost secret” (p. 428), has to do with a “technique of overcoming the feeling of repulsion in us which is undoubtedly connected with the barriers that rise between each single ego and the others” (p. 428). He argued that this “technique” consists of the writer’s “altering” and “disguising” said daydream/fantasy, and that the reader is “bribed” by the “formal—that is, aesthetic—yield of pleasure” in the actual “presentation” (p. 428).

So, perhaps this reticence to speak about the mystery of creativity, rather than superstition, comes about because of a measure of shame (but perhaps not). Or just the reservations that we once associated with privacy—also in the days before what is now called social media.

My Questions

I have long been attracted to the subject of the artist’s inspiration, in addition to what writers do to make them more open, more present, more susceptible to whatever it is that governs the act of creation. I have read about the role of coffee in the lives of composers—how Beethoven counted out the beans. I have referred myself to the wonderful book by Mason Currey (2013), cataloging the *Daily Rituals* of no less than one hundred and sixty “great minds” (title page). I have read about neuroscientist Andreasen (2014), who selected a small number of contemporary great minds to undergo MRIs to find evidence of creativity in their brain activity. But I have not delved into the literature as much as wanted in order to hear directly from my colleagues and observe my response to their sharing.

I asked, attempting to keep my questions and the definition of ritual open to my colleagues’ interpretation, inviting them to expand and expound on their creative process, experience with the muse, inspiration, habits, or whatever they felt has been essential to their artistic practices:

1. Do you have any rituals you wish to share that help you get into a space where you are ready to write/paint/compose/play music? If so, please discuss what they are in as much detail as you’d like.

2. Can you articulate how you believe the ritual helps? If you are willing/able to—please give examples.
3. Do you think of this activity as functioning in a spiritual/magical/psychological way? Or otherwise. Please explain.
4. Do you perform these rituals all the time or some of the time—and again, please explain.
5. Do you look at the ritual as a kind of procrastination technique or something to inspire you? Or as something to prepare yourself, a kind of readiness to work?
6. Do you think you are entering a different sort of “consciousness” when you write/paint/sculpt/compose? And if so, why, and if you have thoughts about that state you wish to articulate, or examples you are willing to share, please do.

My questionnaire was written with the assumption that writing is unusual—different from music or painting, in that the medium lacks the dimensionality of the others. Unlike music or art or even dance, the writer’s language is purely a transmitter of meaning, and it would seem to have no other function. The color red, or the tone whose vibrational wave we’ve named “A,” for example, both have a beauty outside of their use in a composition. I recalled a remark of my professor, the novelist Vance Bourjaily, who also played the trumpet. He observed that there was no way to “warm up” for a writer—no scales, no obvious skill set to practice. It was in the spirit of collaboration that I added my thinking of writing as “making something from nothing,” but I also included, “This is my take on it. I don’t expect it to be yours.”

Many Voices

I did not expect any kind of consensus among the voices. I anticipated a variety of responses, and this is what I found, namely that my responders—most of whom were wordsmiths, but included a singer-songwriter as well as two visual artists—ran the gamut. I heard many different approaches to the summoning and producing of artistic expression. All of the artists I had invited to speak were serious, dedicated, committed artists; some have made their living from their art; some are teachers or professors or have work that is related to art/writing. The responses speak to various aspects of the art and also to a variety of relationships with the art/writing itself. Some alluded to the artistic endeavor as being “spiritual”

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work, and some spoke of it as if it were mundane. To honor my colleagues’ confidentiality, because artists often wear many hats, and because these questions that I have raised might challenge their privacy, those “hats,” I did offer the option of remaining anonymous; however, most (except where pseudonym is noted) chose to be identified and acknowledged for their contribution. I have extracted the following themes.

A Question of Identity

Claudia Liu, who didn’t exactly answer the questions but pondered them, is still pondering, and spoke to me about how it is we identify ourselves, as this pondering led her to a question of identity: how do we position ourselves in the world—to ourselves, to each other, to our work? She did not wish to commit, did not wish to answer. Or possibly did not come to a conclusion. She is someone who makes her living as an artist, but she does not consider herself an artist. She paints pumpkins and wooden cut-outs, designs stage sets for dance companies. She makes money as an artist. Her entire income comes from her art, but she does not claim this identity! This subject is nothing if not provocative.

Partly it is provocative because the nature of art itself cannot be universally defined, and partly because of the relationship of the art to the artist. Of course, this is a changing relationship, as there is great flux in the function of art with respect to the artist. What might begin as something “fun” to do with one’s time could conceivably morph into an activity that is marketable. As it becomes marketable, it becomes an entity that is public. Alternately, creating art might serve the function of a spiritual release. Or it might exist as the one place the artist can be herself/himself. What comes to mind is separating the spider from her web. How intimate is the web, how deadly. How lovely, how useful. How vulnerable, how unlike anything else on the planet or off it. It calls up the issue of identity, along with the idea of information itself—what is public and what is private. For some art is a way of catching bugs, for some art is a way of creating beauty, for some it is a way of making sense, for some art is a way of getting to know the self, for some art is simple communication.

Rituals

Some of those interviewed wrote of elaborate rituals. Sheila Josephs (pseudonym), a doctoral candidate, who writes and publishes both poetry and fiction, performs yoga—specific asanas, before writing, and she works with several stones. Josephs explained:

One is energetic and the other is tactile. If I feel stuck, I can hold them in my hand and rub my thumb over them, sort of like you would with a worry stone. It's a pleasing sensation and gives my mind a minute to relax from the forward motion of writing. I also think they call different energies into my writing space. Kyanite is good for honest communication, and rose quartz is linked with compassion. Because seriously, do you want honest communication without compassion? (S. Josephs, personal communication, October 9, 2014)

Josephs noted that the preparation performs a psychological function: "It's a way of saying to myself, 'Hey, time to write.'" (S. Josephs, personal communication, October 9, 2014).

Robin Bourjaily—a writer, editor, and yoga instructor—also incorporates yoga into her writing life:

Yoga gives me insight into character and action. If I'm stuck, I take the question of the character to my mat and flow through various poses asking the question and waiting for the answer to bubble up. I think I'm stripping away the noise of daily life and moving into a more interior mindset when I write. It's not a different sort of consciousness so much as a heightened and softened one. (R. Bourjaily, personal communication, November 3, 2014)

Kelly Kathleen Ferguson, writer and professor, remarked that she assembles items that are "totems" to help her focus. Her ritual involves objects, less a matter of tactile or energetic items, but inspirational mementoes—"a Moroccan tile, a little statue of Flannery O'Connor . . . Mardi Gras beads . . . tons of stuff from my friends, or from a place I traveled, and in general might give my brain a jump [a good one] if I look around"—and the books of her "idols." She explained:

For nonfiction, I tend to buy a bunch of books and then immerse myself in the subject matter until I start to make connections. For fiction, I keep my idols handy (Wilder, Atwood, Joy Williams, Lorrie Moore, Katherine Anne Porter). Without a bookshelf of A-listers behind me, I'd feel lonely and lost. . . . Other than that, I just sit and work and work and work until my head explodes. (K. K. Ferguson, personal communication, October 14, 2014)

It is interesting to note that for some the pre-writing rituals often bleed into the actual writing time.

Janice Buckner, a singer/songwriter, writes that she does not need "a ritualistic setting," when writing a song.

When an emotion strikes that is stirring—no ritual is needed. [For] creativity to flow, I have to release what is building inside. Like a mama bird who chews the food and feeds it to her young so they can digest it, I am serving up my interpretations for others to digest. (J. Buckner, personal communication, October 14, 2014)

Receptivity

The idea of receptivity, recalling Kafka (1918), and Stafford (2002), comes to mind in thinking about Buckner's statement, as it also does with painter Kyle Blumenthal, although her point of view about ritual is very different. Whereas Buckner denies any need for ritual, Blumenthal suggests that the very spiritual nature of her work requires her to take a moment aside and prepare herself for the activity.

Even though she is painting in her mind while not at work, Blumenthal needs to feel peace, safety, and comfort when she paints. She likes to make a cup of tea before painting, along with a tea-break while painting. Like others, who may use the word "meditate," Blumenthal will "pray" before painting.

I cannot have any distractions. I play music that is soothing and encourages a high level of thinking. I have wind chimes just outside my studio door that have high tones . . . The music and my own energy need to work as one. . . . [And when] on location . . . I do not play music, as nature is my music. (K. Blumenthal, personal communication, October 16, 2014)

Blumenthal considers painting a spiritual activity. "To be hypersensitive to the Universe and the times and reflect that in my work takes a ritual in preparing to do my work. All my paintings are spiritual" (K. Blumenthal, personal communication, October 16, 2014).

Silencing the Inner Critic

Eric Olsen, a journalist, has his own theories; he has done some exploration of his own on this and related topics. Some may know Olsen as part of the duo (along with Don Wallace) who put together a book of about thirty of his writerly friends from Iowa, extensively interviewing them—some famous (like Jane Smiley, Allen Gurganus, Sandra Cisneros)—and some not. Olsen's response is offered in its entirety, as it's clear he's given this idea much thought, and his comments

are extensive, entertaining, and provocative, very much worth pondering:

On a bookshelf over my desk, I have a St. Jude candle and St. Jude “retablo” (a small painting on tin). The candle is in a glass jar with an image of St. Jude printed on it. I get them at the local Safeway for a couple bucks each. You can get all sorts of saint candles at Safeway, or at least the one in my neighborhood—St. Michael, St. Anthony, Our Lady of Guadalupe, St. Francis, and plenty more.

For a long time, whenever I sat down to write fiction in the morning, I’d light the candle and let it flicker while I wrote, or tried to write. Then when I was done for the day—or gave up, usually—I’d blow out the candle. I wouldn’t bother to light the candle when I was working on nonfiction for a buck; that was just a job, who needs inspiration? But I felt that the fiction was different, thus the candle.

These candles would last for weeks, though, a sorry commentary on how often I’d work on my fiction, so these days, since I don’t need to be reminded of my short attention span, I usually don’t light the candle when I write fiction, but St. Jude is always there, hovering on a shelf above my desk, a *presence*. I find myself looking at the guy now and then. Maybe it helps my writing. Or maybe not. . . . Can’t hurt, certainly.

St. Jude is the patron saint of lost causes. When people are in a jam, if they’re sick or in some other way afflicted, they light a candle and pray to St. Jude for a miracle, or at least for comfort or relief from whatever ails them. St. Frances de Sales is the official patron saint of writers, but St. Jude seems more appropriate to me. He had his head lopped off in Lebanon in 65 C.E., the ultimate rejection slip. I’m afraid I view my writing as a sort of affliction, and certainly a lost cause. I keep at it, though common sense tells me I ought to be doing something else more useful.

It’s not as if I expect St. Jude to relieve me of my desire to write something, or to help me with my writing. Rather, I suppose when I light the candle (or these days, not light it), it’s more an acknowledgement to myself that I ought to write for the pleasure of writing *at that moment* (not that it’s often pleasurable), rather than in some expectation that I’ll actually finish something and sell it to a big NYC publisher and get rave reviews in the *New*

York Times and make a zillion dollars. I mean, St. Jude there over that desk is a reminder that I need to *lighten up*.

And I think for a long time, I viewed the lighting of the candle as the beginning of a “special” time, only for fiction—no emails, no phone calls, no radio tuned to the local left-wing station with the endless ranting of Marxist nut-cases, no radio at all, though maybe a little Bach in the background now and then.

Then it occurred to me that I was being maybe just a bit self-indulgent, having my special time for fiction; if I were serious about my fiction, I decided, all day every day should be a special time. I think this idea of a special time also added too much importance to an activity that, for me, I think needs to be a bit more playful. I have a vicious, severely anal-retentive internal editor who’s always yammering at me about how what I’m writing sucks, and big time, why don’t you cut the crap and get a real job. . . .

These days, when I sit down to work on fiction, while I don’t light the candle very often, I always give the beheaded saint a little nod of greeting, as if to say, “Yeah, I’m still at it, god help me,” with an underlying and unvoiced plea to please, please, please, dear Saint, please make that internal editor *shut the hell up*.

There is certainly some psychology at work in my “thing” with the St. Jude candles. I think it helps me to not have expectations. St. Jude doesn’t make promises, at least not to me. In this, he reminds me of Sisyphus and his big rock. Not long after I discovered the joys of science fiction as a pre-pubescent proto-nerd, I discovered the . . . well, not *joys*, certainly, not comforts, either, but perhaps *validation*, of the French existentialists, and in particular Camus and in particular Camus’ essay titled “The Myth of Sisyphus.”

Sisyphus, you may recall, had offended the gods with his rather irreverent attitude, and was condemned to spend eternity pushing a big rock up a hill. Once he reaches the top of the hill, the rock rolls back down to the bottom and Sisyphus has to follow it down, so he can push it up again. Forever. Camus makes a big thing out of that walk back down.

Of Sisyphus, Camus writes: “Sisyphus is the absurd hero. He *is*, as much through his passions

as through his torture. His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing.” Sisyphus the writer. . . . (E. Olsen, personal communication, October 23, 2014)

For all his angst, Eric Olsen’s rant allows for humor and offers honest insight into the complexity of a writer and his relationship to his work. While Olsen denies there’s anything magical or spiritual in this endeavor, he nonetheless invokes a spiritual entity, along with a mythical entity—he invokes the archetype, with the remark that something in the realm of psychology is at work, although it would seem to resonate more with Jung than with Freud.

Olsen speaks of “lost causes” at the same time he speaks of a great ambition, along with the sabotaging inner critic, that judge with whom he is in conversation. What would Kafka say? Perhaps only that this is the ecstatic world, populated as it is by saints and geniuses, in Olsen’s case, along with a well-read, self-deprecating comedian who has a decent command of world history.

Pragmatism, De-mystification, Discipline

It seems both writers and artists do sweat the “small stuff.” There are rituals that seem to invoke the sublime as well as some that are downright mundane. Nava Renek, a novelist, editor and professor, always reads before she writes. Abigail DeWitt, a novelist and professor, always writes “by hand on white unlined paper.” Cheryl Olsen, a fiction writer and editor, writes with a mechanical pencil and a new yellow legal pad. “When I first started out,” Olsen responded, “the physical landscape was more important. Had to be in a quiet place without distractions” (C. Olsen, personal communication, October 20, 2014). To minimize distractions, DeWitt has her desk positioned so that it never faces a window. Olabisi Gwamna, short-story writer and professor, writes in long hand with a blue pen, with music in the background, “or else I run dry of ideas” (O. Gwamna, personal communication, October 9, 2014). Martine Bellen, an editor and prize-winning poet with eight collections, interrogates the word “ritual” in my questionnaire: “I’m a morning writer. I tend to drink my coffee, meditate and then write.” But she says that she does not consider this “ritual in that it isn’t ceremonial, though it is consistent. It’s practical” (M. Bellen, personal communication, October 12, 2014).

Pragmatism seems to be as much a part of the endeavor as the mystique. DeWitt’s reasoning offers insight into the way a writer’s idea of success insinuates itself in the managing of her environment:

Thinking of writing as a more ordinary activity, and letting go of the idea that only Nobel-worthy work was worthy, and only Nobel-worthy work would legitimize my presence in the world, has, needless to say, made it much easier for me to write, and made me a lot less controlling of my environment. (A. DeWitt, personal communication, October 11, 2014)

It would seem here, also, that DeWitt is reckoning with the inner critic—in a very different way than Eric Olsen does. Right up front, she’s enlisting Stafford’s (2002) advice: accepting a willingness to fail. Renek, who said her “takeaway” after answering the questions was that she really needed to find more time, but also said: “If I’m lucky, I enter a different sort of consciousness. . . . I also think that ability to enter this other consciousness is like building muscle—if you stop, you have to regain the capacity little by little” (N. Renek, personal communication, October 20, 2014). Renek’s description begins to sound a little like discipline, and offers one way to demystify the activity, to make it safe and attainable. The daily-ness can render even a mystical activity ordinary, which is perhaps why Bellen questions whether writing, in the end, is perhaps not very different from being a seamstress. Ross Connelly, a journalist, writes: “Ritual? Deadline approaches. Just do it” (R. Connelly, personal communication, October 10, 2014).

The Sustaining Ritual

Novelist and professor Anita Garner writes she has had a number of various rituals in the many years she’s devoted to her craft. Now, Garner likes to write while sitting on a swing overlooking the river.

One constant I require . . . is a point to look up from and focus. I call this my Imaginary Point. There is no doubt in my mind that writing when done well is a different level of consciousness. The best writing I have done is the writing I discover as I am inside the writing process. It’s the writing in which the writer loses track of time and just goes with the flow of writing. That’s when things get good. (A. Garner, personal communication, October 20, 2014)

Laurence Moffi, a poet, writer, and publisher, reminds of the sustaining power of ritual:

A ritual must mature, evolve. . . . And those of us who sustain our rituals, continue to write. . . . In other words, in time, writing itself becomes the ritual, the means to an end, which is not writing per se, but, as the poet James Seay has written, “a different life.” (L. Moffi, personal communication, November 2, 2014)

Muse Descending?

Angélique Jamail, a poet and essayist, responded:

Sometimes the story just “writes itself” for a little while. . . . Maybe that is the Muse descending? . . . I try not to think about it too much because it feels like this sort of thinking detracts from or trivializes the very real and hard (albeit rewarding) work that I have to do to be a successful writer. (A. Jamail, personal communication, October 11, 2014)

But the ritual and the discipline may go hand and hand, and the quotidian nature of the work does not necessarily obviate the reverence that others seem to point to. Both painters who responded, Blumenthal and Robyn Bellospirito, consider the work sacred.

Yes, for me it is both psychological and spiritual. It is psychological in that it helps me to quiet the mind, to focus, to be open, to feel deeply that something important is coming, and there is an excitement in that. It is also spiritual to me, as spirituality is intertwined in my art and so much of what I do in my life. Creating art is a sacred process because I never plan anything that I paint, instead I allow images to emerge on their own, usually from a brown wash on the canvas. This feels like a channeling of sorts, so to be open to it means stepping aside for that Muse (for lack of a better word) to come. (R. Bellospirito, personal communication, October 23, 2014)

Musings about the Muse

In what passes for the communal history of the Muse, or the muses, is the information that they grew in number from one to three to nine, that some living female writers (Sappho and Anne Bradstreet and Sor Juana among them) have been assigned the title of the “Tenth Muse.” For the purposes of this article, having woven a broad cloth of contemporary artists’ sources, rituals, and mundane practices for inspiration, I’ve come to consider the Muse as an entity of inspiration, willing to approach any of us—whether we be seamstress or poet

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or painter or musician, and whether we be female, male, transgender, or intersex.

Wide and diverse is the individuality expressed in the pre-rituals/activities of working writers and artists. Perhaps this is also true in cooks and teachers and contractors and gardeners alike. It seems that none of those who answered my questions came to their creative work *without* a certain readiness. Whether this readiness is to get the job done or to be open to a daemon, whether it occurs in the morning or after midnight, with an object assigned a quality or with an elixir, whether it’s with a prayer or a candle, whether it’s associated with a place or with a chair or silence, or the choicest music, it might not make a difference.

Rather than looking to penetrate further into the mystery, I find myself wishing to take a step backward, to retreat, to allow the Muse herself a bit of privacy. Give her room—don’t pin her down!

Perhaps it is time to destabilize the Muse? It seems some of us are decidedly ambivalent about the term. Perhaps she/he, too, is ambivalent! For some, the Muse wants music, and for some the Muse wants silence. For some the Muse wants a prayer, for others, the Muse has no patience, is off and running; for others, the Muse plants a feeling—with or without a prayer, with or without a walk, with or without the smell of rotten apples, with or without sixty coffee beans counted out, with or without Benzedrine or opium or a special pen or a special couch. For some the Muse understands that business is business, that nobody cares whether she’s there or not, so she acts accordingly, as she pleases. For some the Muse enjoys a naked body, for others, the Muse wants to play dress up—a suit, special earrings. For others, the Muse will take what she/he can get, a pair of jeans, a three-day old shirt, sweat-ridden and full of holes.

Clearly, the Muse has become more egalitarian in her old age, showing up as she has increasingly to those of her same gender. She respects a hard-working journalist just as much as she respects those who yearn for more of a spiritual connection.

Would it make a difference if someone successfully proved there was no such thing as Muse? Or no such thing as the Muse as we know her? I’m guessing we would still try to invoke her, and quite possibly we need not investigate the deeper aspects, whether it be for shame or superstition. Perhaps, it is enough that this conceit works. Leave the lower stratospheres to the

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neuroscientists, the geologists of the brain, to find the answer. Surely, they must invoke the Muse first!

The readiness factor notwithstanding, I'd like to think the Muse would never have had the heart to turn down the young Keats, the young Anne Frank or the ever-ready Kafka, the inveterate world of past and future purring at your feet.

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