

WRITING AS TRANSFORMATION: HOW YOUR MUSE CAN HEAL YOU

By Julie Mariouw

It started out as an insistent tapping on my shoulder. I had not experienced it before, but suddenly there was an irrepressible force pushing me to get things down on paper. Not in the old ways I was used to—not planning and outlining—but instead writing with passion, freeing the trapped words inside my body, helping them come out and play on the page. I grabbed notebooks and raced to put words down before they disintegrated; I knew I must not let them get away.

My early notebooks were filled with impromptu journaling, interviews with myself, scenes, memories—they were like abstract paintings buzzing with creative energy. I never crossed anything out; the words just seemed to spiral from my fingertips down onto the page. It was a little like playing the piano. I learned to disregard the mistakes; I was much more interested in the heart of the writing.

I vaguely remembered that Ray Bradbury had said to write 1,000 words a day if you wanted to be a writer. I decided this would be my goal. And that helped; while my inner critic was doing her best to bury me, I could hold up my page of 1,000 words and know in my heart I was getting somewhere. Sometimes I got discouraged, wondering if I would ever break into writing fiction, but underneath

it all was my muse—unrecognized at the time—working to keep me on the right track. And I realized that, for me, to write was to live.

It was at that point I felt another tapping on my shoulder, and I was led to share this new writing process with others. Somehow this was essential, and I knew in my gut I had to do it, in the same way I had been led to write myself. So I created and ran ongoing writing workshops focused on writers supporting other writers. The muse quietly hummed in the background, providing inspiration and dedication. I got to experience, over and over again, the incredible power of human beings sharing their writing with each other. I wrote even more after that.

And finally, in the middle of a workshop one evening, it happened. I was suddenly and unexpectedly detoured down a long, winding passage within myself, the muse guiding me all the way. It started with an unassuming little metaphor exercise I had assigned in the workshop:

Finish this sentence: *Hearing her cry was like*_____.

My answer: *tasting sour milk.*

A crack in the universe opened, the light shone down on me, and—voilà—a new character was born. My muse handed her over to me gently; she appeared like a star, shining out through the words on the page. I suddenly felt the power of her in my hands. This was not like what I had learned in school, but rather the throbbing heartbeat of a muse who had existed before I had even created the words. It was a very humbling moment.

When I was young, my creativity was stagnant, due in part to childhood trauma. But what was happening now was the rebirth of my imagination. I could suddenly see, and feel, muses circling. And as I wrote further, I felt changes in my body. Never before had I written with such intensity. Whatever happened in the writing happened simultaneously in my body, as if the writing were taking hold of me and shaking me apart. My only job was to show up every day.

I began to use rituals to help me stay on track: I bought a diffuser and experimented with different essential oils. I finally found the one that literally made me sigh every time I smelled it: jasmine. The same thing happened when I swam. I started swimming because of an injured knee. I didn't expect the swimming to affect my writing, I just followed an internal impulse to move. But every time I swam a stroke in the pool, I would sigh, just as I had when I smelled the jasmine, and I knew I was literally moving in the right direction.

I was also drawn to a certain piece of music—the soundtrack from a movie called *K-PAX*. I had watched this movie a hundred times, drawn to it by some mysterious force. A friend of mine said that when you're drawn to things, it means they are your medicines, assignments from God. So I continued to watch *K-PAX*, searching for what it was I was supposed to learn.

I had also been using movie soundtracks as backdrops for my writing workshops, and I got the idea to use the *K-PAX* soundtrack for my own writing. I listened to it every time I wrote. And what I noticed was that the writing began to coincide with the music—or the music with the writing. Sometimes it felt as if the music were lending the writing a hand, leading it down a pathway toward its

center. At other times, I felt the writing coax the music, bringing out rhythms and structure I had not heard before.

I had read about authors entering a writing trance, but had never experienced it myself. Now my writing muse was showing me exactly how to enter that trance. I began to experience it every time I sat down to write; it enveloped me like a womb. I hadn't understood that I would feel like this, with the muse holding me gently and bathing me in warm light. I looked forward to the time I could devote.

In the past I had written poetry and a few magazine articles, but this time I had a novel on my hands. How did I know this? Well, my writing teacher told me! But I knew, in my heart, that it was a novel; it seemed different than any writing I had done before. This was on a much grander scale, and I felt that it was alive in a different way than my poetry. Instead of the brief, strong jabs of emotion that were the hallmark of poetry being born, this was instead a long, slow burn. And what surprised me the most was the way the story grabbed me and wouldn't let me go, the energy being so strong it felt like that of a star. I see now that it was because the characters inside me were, in fact, bursting out into the light when they had so long been held in the dark.

Once, when I was writing, a character tried to harm her baby. The very second this happened I jumped out of my chair, it felt like a dolphin bursting out of the water. And while it would be easy to psychoanalyze and say that this was repressed emotion in me, it is also true that this was my character coming alive, taking me places I had not been to before.

So what is fiction and what is truth? I know now that they are braided together inside of us, our imaginations always at work, unearthing and excavating, illuminating and focusing, healing and restoring. All you need to do to access these things for yourself is to show up every day and write. Find the rituals that feel right for you — aromatherapy, music, some form of exercise— and then share your writing with someone else. Writing can be a powerful tool for healing — it has certainly has been that for me.

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