

THE JOURNEY BEGINS



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Courting the Muse

Finding the place where time stands still

*‘To this day I do not know whether the power
which has inspired my works is something related
to religion, or is indeed religion itself’*

Kathe Kollwitz

*‘ . . . when I am alone with my notes, my heart
pounds and the tears stream from my eyes, and my
emotion and my joys are too much to bear.’*

Giuseppe Verdi



I REMEMBER THE moment. It was ten o'clock on a warm August night in a small German town. I was alone in the workshop of an antique restorer who had generously allowed me to help in his shop so I could learn German for my American graduate school. Everyone else had gone home for the evening.

I was standing before an old, battered workbench. A string of electric lights flickered on a single cord above my head. With the streets outside dark and quiet, I was as alone as a man in a foreign country, with no friends or family or familiar language, can be.

On the bench in front of me lay a piece of maple – a slab about three feet long, two feet wide, and maybe six inches thick. It had been given to me by

the workshop owner when I had asked, tentatively, if I could perhaps use some of his chisels to try my hand at woodcarving.

I had taken to visiting the local churches and folk museums and had found myself transfixed by the old crucifixes carved by devout peasants and farmers, probably to while away the dark German nights of the Late Middle Ages. The carvings had been so filled with heart, so honest in their spiritual yearning. I, who was in graduate school for the study of religion, and deeply unfilled by the academic dissection of human faith, had found in them a spiritual presence that I experienced nowhere else. Nothing in my experience had prepared me for the effect these works had on my heart and imagination.

I did not know how to carve. I did not even know how to hold the chisels. But somewhere inside of me I had a vision born of those many visits to the museums and churches, and of the deep spiritual hunger and loneliness that was surrounding my life so far from home.

With a first stroke, I cut into the piece of maple.

The mallet in my hand made a hollow sound as it hit the butt of the chisel. The wood moved and a shaving curled up. I hit the chisel again, moving yet another chip of wood. Then another. I dug into that wood with no understanding of what I was doing. I only knew that something was alive and waiting to be released from inside the block of wood on the bench before me.

I hit the mallet again and again, seeking something I could apprehend but could not see. The wood moved, the block changed; inchoate forms took shape in my mind's eye.

When at last I was too tired to continue, I looked up. The clock on the wall said 5 a.m. I had been standing over that bench for seven hours and I had experienced no passage of time.

At that moment I understood, for the first time in my life, something about the magic of art. Each hour spent in my books in graduate school was difficult. Some were fascinating, filling me with new thoughts and ideas. But none had ever annihilated my sense of time.

This experience bordered on the mystical. I did not want to stop; I did not want to sleep. Only my weariness caused me to put down the chisels and make my way back to my garret room. I could hardly wait to return and begin again.

Since that time, as both a sculptor and a writer, this ecstatic annihilation has called to me, beckoning me with the promise of being taken out of myself and transported to a place where I am nothing more than a vehicle for a vision.

All artists know this experience. This, more than almost anything else, is why we do what we do. It is an occasion of grace, and, once experienced, it holds with a power that will not let go.

This is also the reason why artists often speak of their work in religious terms. To be lifted out of yourself – to be taken up and used for what feels like a higher purpose – is to feel, if only for a moment, that you are participating in the creative power of the universe. You are held in the hand of something greater than yourself.

All of us want this experience. It is what lifts our

work from craft to art, moves it into the realm of the spiritual and silences the critic who whispers constantly from our shoulder. It is the embrace of the incandescent present.

Artists have many ways of courting this embrace. Some have a ritual of preparation – from the simple way they lay out the work before them to a period of deep prayer or meditation. Some have physical spaces they have set aside where only their creative work can take place. Some work in silence; some surround themselves with music.

Japanese sword makers, seeking not ecstasy but clarity in their tradition of spiritual discernment, have a time-honoured and elaborate ritual of preparation and entry that becomes a portal to creative forces beyond themselves.

All of these have the same purpose: to put you inside the act of creation, so you are not making art, but art is being revealed through you.

If you would make a life in the arts, you must find a way to enter into this state. Chances are you have already experienced it, ever so slightly, while immersed

in the practice of your art. Very likely it is what has driven you to dream of the artistic life.

But understand – just as there are days when you live in the presence of the creative spirit, there will be days when all your efforts turn to dust. Your work will seem false, your inspiration clouded. Instead of walking into a garden of imaginative possibilities, you will find yourself plodding through dry places where nothing seems able to grow.

Do not let the dry stretches and arid days deter you. They will come and go at their whim, and there is little you can do to change their course except to push with discipline during those times when you cannot proceed with grace, and to prepare, through ritual and spiritual focus, for the moment when once again you can be taken up into the joyful immediacy of creation.

What you cannot do is let yourself fall under the sway of the romantic notion that you should work only when filled with inspiration. Inspiration is a cruel mistress and a wily deceiver, and waiting for it will turn you into a lazy artist. Sometimes you

must rely only on your own will to drive you forward.

Whether those times of working from sheer force of will produce good art or only prepare the ground for more inspired creation in the future is not for you to say. Yours is only to work, by such lights as you have, seeking the moment when once again you are not making art but art is speaking through you.

Remember this: if, in the act of creation, you find yourself, just for a moment, losing all sense of time and being lifted up into a great, all-embracing ‘Yes!’ where there is neither past nor future but only the magical and incandescent present, you have found the place where creation takes wing.

Honour this, seek this, court this. Do whatever you need to do to find that place where you inhabit your art and your art inhabits you. Then claim it and name it and find a way to call it forth – whether by establishing a space dedicated only to your work, or establishing a ritual of preparation and entry, or any other act that takes you away from the concerns of

daily life and opens the door to the place where the muse sits on your shoulder.

When you find it, cherish it. In its own distant fashion, it is perhaps the closest we can come to a touch with the divine.