

Beyond the Clouds Deep Within- Writing as a Spiritual Act

I once read, “Life is too short to spend time with inferior books.” Ever since, when I pick up a book I ask myself, “Is this a superior book, or an inferior book?” And along the same line of thought, when I write, I ask “Is this inferior writing, or superior writing?” After all, life is too short for inferior works. To me, a superior work is not just something of skill, but also, of life changing power.

Hopefully, my writing is becoming less inferior. Fortunately, I have close at hand, the ultimate of superior works—the Bible. Its poems echo deep in the soul. Its stories captivate imagination and life. Its treatises fortify volition. And mysteriously it draws mankind to God. Here I ask myself another question, “Does my writing imitate such superiority? Does it draw people to God?” Our writing can be clever, handy, timely, marketable and a multitude of other good things, but is it our deepest calling? Is our writing transforming us? Is it transforming our world?

History frequently pivots on the words of one person, and perhaps within us all is a longing to be that person. Wanting to make a difference in this world is at the core of a Christian’s heritage. But our cluttered minds easily forget that, through our writing, God seeks to change us, and our world. Several steps that I have practiced for some years are helping me to key into that calling.

Preparing

As writers, we all write daily (now that’s a faith statement!), but there may be times when we sense a soft inner pull to prepare for something unusual. We sense something restless under the surface, something yearning to be given words. Typically we are clueless about what waits deep within, but baffled by the enormity of it. I have found that before embarking on such a writing task, a time of preparation is crucial. This preparation might include fasting, for a day, a week, or a partial fast for longer periods. The greatest fruit for me from fasting is never a sharper mind, but a simple attentiveness that says, as prophets of old, “Here I am Lord.”

Centering

For most of us, our outer life bombarded, and our inner life distracted. Not only is it hard to find our God, but even to be intimate with ourselves—thick clouds envelope us. Although we may be spending quality time in prayer and Scripture each day, at times, more is needed. Because of this, I have a habit of taking an overnight retreat of silence

at least once every season. A monastery is an ideal setting for this. My first day of retreat is usually just letting the inner noise settle. After this I can begin to find my heart. Often I am shamed to find how my motives have deviated from passion to ego, from loving God, to pleasing men. Much of the richest writings of the faith has come from the monastic tradition. This seems to echo the words of Brazilian writer Guimaraes Rosa, “The alchemy of writing demands the heart’s blood. For one to be a wizard of the word, for one to study the alchemy of the blood of the human heart, one must have been born in the immense empty spaces of solitude.”¹

Yielding

The first signs of yielding are often repentance. The exposure of heart and motive takes a lifetime. Layer upon layer, we see ourselves a little better. This is precisely why a person of true understanding is always a humble person. We are either people of humility, or people of ignorance. When I yield my faculties to God I sense fresh power that is far beyond me. A breathing exercise helps me to visualize yielding, as I breathe out I mentally release the bad, as I breathe in, I envision the invasion of the Spirit.

Intuiting

We never want to abandon our brains, but we do want to go beyond them. The mysteries of life and God are where our minds stumble, but our intuition steps through the door. In intuiting we begin to sense the Voice in both the quiet breeze and the lightening strike—the subtle and the dramatic. Spiritual writing does not mean we dream something up, carefully write it along the guidelines of Strunk & White, and then ask God to bless “our” work! God must call the shots, He must commission the work, He must guide the fingers on the keypad. I have learned from my Quaker brothers about letting go of my agenda and silently waiting for the Voice.

Listening

Listening refers to the Body. We are here to strengthen each other as titanium sharpens titanium. Teresa of Avila wrote, “It is a great advantage for us to be able to consult someone who knows us, so that we may learn to know ourselves. And it is a great encouragement to see that things which we thought impossible are possible to others, and how easily these others do them. It makes us feel that we may emulate their

¹ Rosa Guimaraes, “Literatura e Vida,” In *Arte em Revista* (Sao Paulo: Ceac, 1983) In Rubem Alves. *The Poet, The Warrior, The Prophet*. (London: SCM Press, 1990), 95.

flights and venture to fly ourselves...”² To maximize the possibility that, I am hearing God’s voice, am not blind to my own hypocrisies, and am writing out of love for my brother, I have my writing screened. Not just by someone skilled in writing, but someone skilled in godly living and discernment. It is in this, sometimes painful evaluation, that I am truly transformed.

We all know which creature runs around with its head off. Yet, how easy it is to flail around without a Head, and succumb to shallowness and impotence. But if we connect to God as we write, we may eventually connect others to God through what is written. I believe that superior writing is that connects others to God in life transforming ways. When we see writing as a spiritual act, we can enter the craft with a new vision, and perhaps find that one song, that one poem, or that one phrase, that will touch destinies, and maybe even change the course of nations. After all, it has been done before.

² Teresa of Avila. *Interior Castle*. Trans. Ed. E. Allison Peers (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 68-69.