

The Two Driving Forces of Creativity by Maria Popova

“A self-respecting artist must not fold his hands on the pretext that he is not in the mood,” Tchaikovsky wrote to his patron as he contemplated the interplay of discipline and creativity. A century later, James Baldwin echoed the sentiment in his advice on writing, observing: “Talent is insignificant. I know a lot of talented ruins. Beyond talent lie all the usual words: discipline, love, luck, but most of all, endurance.”

But for those of us who show up to do what we do day after day, inner rain or shine, as the days unspool into years — Brain Pickings turns 15 this year — there is something more than white-knuckle discipline making the steadfast labor not only bearable, not only sustainable, but vitalizing, inspiriting, joyful. What fuels the engine of endurance is a passionate enchantment — something of which Baldwin’s “love” reflects a glimmer but does not fully capture.

The most marvelous part of it is this: It is an enchantment we cast upon ourselves.

How to cast that enchantment and how to couple it with the requisite endurance is what Your People’s Poet Laureate Naomi Shihab Nye, composer of the existentially symphonic “Kindness,” explores in a short, splendid prose reflection tucked into the final pages of her altogether soul-broadening collection *Everything Comes Next: Collected and New Poems* (public library).

In a sentiment evocative of Bertrand Russell’s lovely notion of “largeness of contemplation” in calibrating the relationship between intuition and the intellect, Nye writes:

Two helpful words to keep in mind at the beginning of any writing adventure are pleasure and spaciousness. If we connect a sense of joy with our writing, we may be inclined to explore further. What’s there to find out? Perhaps too much stock has been placed in big ideas or even small ones — a myth! — but regularity seems like a key. Don’t start with a big idea. Start with a phrase, a line, a quote. Questions are very helpful. Begin with a few you’re carrying right now.

In consonance with John Steinbeck’s life-tested, Nobel-earning conviction that “in writing, habit seems to be a much stronger force than either willpower or inspiration,” she adds:

Small increments of writing time may matter more than we could guess. One thing leads to many — swerving off, linking up, opening of voices and images and memories. Nearby notebooks — or iPads or tablets or laptops — are surely helpful.

With this, Nye turns to the ongoing dialogue between the magic of creation and the mechanics of discipline:

Make a plan, and return to it. It's a party to which we keep inviting ourselves.

And we have so many realms of material that are very close by:

Families

Neighborhoods

Changes

Memories

Spoken language woven into poems — something someone said to you a long time ago and you still remember it — why, out of all the talk, do you remember that thing?

Pets

Losses

First Times

Last Times

Fears

Friends

Being Sick, Being Well

What we see out our windows

Gifts

History — what used to be in this very place where we are sitting now?

Start anywhere.

Although such constructed starting points might seem mechanistic, they are the lever that unlatches the expanse where the unexpected can begin to unfurl. That incubus where ideas collide with one another into the unconscious combinatorial process we call creativity is also the place where the joy of all creative labor lives.

Returning to the twin consecrating forces of discipline, pleasure and spaciousness, Nye writes:

Spaciousness — any page is wider than it looks. You have no idea where this thing might be going. Write in nuggets — here are my questions, here are some details I saw within the last 24 hours, here are some quotes I heard people say today. Gather material first — then select and connect from it... Each thing gives us something else.

The more any of us writes, the more our words will “come to us.” If we trust in the words and their own mysterious relationship with one another, they will help us find things out... Consider the pleasure we feel when we go to a beach. The broad beach, the bigger air, the endless swish of movement and backdrop of sound. We feel uplifted, exhilarated. Writing regularly can help us feel that way too.

In a short poem from the same book, calling to mind poet Ross Gay's reflection on writing by hand as an instrument of thought, Nye considers the practical tools that carve out this observant spaciousness in which impressions can collide and coalesce into ideas:

ALWAYS BRING A PENCIL

by Naomi Shihab Nye

There will not be a test.
It does not have to be
a Number 2 pencil.

But there will be certain things —
the quiet flush of waves,
ripe scent of fish,
smooth ripple of the wind's second name —
that prefer to be written about
in pencil.

It gives them more room
to move around.

For more practical and philosophical reflections on the craft from great poets, savor Mary Oliver's advice on writing, Elizabeth Alexander on language as a vehicle for the poetry of personhood, and Rilke on the relationship between solitude, love, and creativity, then revisit Rachel Carson on the sacred loneliness of writing and Walt Whitman on the discipline of creative self-esteem.