

Unlocking the Creative Unconscious

By Gloria Saltzman

“We laymen have always been intensely curious to know from what sources that strange being, the creative writer, draws his material, and how he manages to make such an impression on us with it and to arouse in us emotions of which, perhaps, we had not even thought ourselves capable.”¹

I. The Idea

The question of how creativity is related to the unconscious is a redundant one. All creative acts, artistic or otherwise are related to the unconscious. The task of the artist or her guide is to find conduits to release whatever muse is waiting to be born. The artist strives to transcend the boundaries of the conscious mind in order to reach into the depths of hidden reserves and memories, collective and individual. The first step is to gain an awareness of the wellspring of material that exists in every one of us. We all have some creative expression to share that is worth digging into our soul for. Staying on

¹ Freud, S. (1908). Creative writers and day-dreaming. In A. Dickinson (Ed.), *Art and literature: The Pelican Freud Library, Vol. 14*. New York: Penguin Books

the surface of experience is safe and when expressed as art often dull. Going deeper can be startling, it can evoke very unsettling responses. For this reason, when urging a group of writers to go inside of themselves , the group leader should be skilled not only in teaching the process to access the information but also should be able to lead the writer through the complex labyrinth of emotional states that the journey of looking inward presents.

Writing forces us to externalize our experiences. We can see things as an observer, figure things out more clearly when we can read them on a page. Through writing the soul is given a voice; a way to show a true self to the world that may otherwise be hidden by social facades. Because writing demands honesty, even the most introverted curmudgeon can show the goodness within them by writing with they have held within. We can call it the unconscious with the goal always being to set free what is not otherwise easily accessible.

Being an artist is a way of life. When walking through life, it is an attitude, a way of noticing the smallest details and then putting them down on paper, with words, with paint, on film, or expressing

them with the body through dance, theatre, or releasing the moving spirit within through musical composition or performance.

“Writing is a process of deep listening, attending to some of the many voices in the self that are habitually blanketed during our waking lives.”²

II. The Process

“ Under the best of circumstances, the process of writing allows one to give oneself over to the imagination, trusting that it will act in one’s best interests, trusting that the use of the creative, the descent in language into the self, the rigorous scrutiny of the psyche, the inclination to dare the unknown will seriously enhance one’s life.”³

When leading a group or teaching a class, it is essential to create an environment that is safe enough for the participants to feel free to write what they dare not speak. For a group to have permission to free associate and grab onto the treasures that their minds hold onto, a structure must be clearly expressed at the onset of

² Gillie Bolton, *The Best Medicine*, www.gilliebolton.com

³ Metzger 1991, p.45 *Writing for your life*. New York: Harper, San Francisco.

the workshop or class. The moment that judgment or criticism is placed upon a thought or idea is the moment when the writer leaves the free associative state of mind and runs to the rationalizing intellect. Anxiety brought about by the groups' response, if based on competition instead of support, kills the fire that lights the cauldron of the creative mind. This sort of environment often leads to the appearance of an internal critic that says "I am not as good as the others," and an external bravado that alienates the writer from the other group members. If this happens one by one to each writer, what is left is an alienated group of artists stuck in the muck of clogged creative arteries.

"When the mind is shapely, art is shapely"

Lucien Carr

To be able to find the inspiration to begin a creative work is often difficult. In a workshop or class, the leader can offer prompts to trigger the memory and the unconscious and help to inspire the onset of creativity. This is not a simple free for all, but rather a discipline and skill that can be acquired. By practicing thinking in this way and

then writing afterwards, the flow between reaching internally and then expressing externally becomes smoother and smoother. At first it is crucial to illicit the material and then to get in on the page. Next comes the switch to the honing of the writing, the elaboration of the first thoughts that must be composed bearing a reader in mind.

There are many different prompts that can be used to jiggle the creative muse; these are a few of my favorite.

Use the Joe Brainard, “I Remember” form. The lines can be short or longer. Then use “I Don’t Remember”, writing lists of as many lost memories as you can.

Have each group member write their name down on an index card. Then, cut up each letter separately and write using the letters in varying combinations.

Pay a visit to a museum that has art you love. Find a painting or sculpture, any art form that catches your eye, observe it and then make up a story about the images you see.

Listen to a song you know well, then keeping the tune in your mind, write your own words to the tune as you hear it in your head.

Find a newspaper or magazine cut up several words that catch your attention, then use them paste them together on a page to create a poem.

Go to a natural setting, the beach, the woods, any place that moves you. Listen carefully to the sounds and then put your pen to the page and write.

Play a song, (or the instructor chooses a song to play), listen to the words and then write a story about based on the content of song.

There are so many different ways to exercise the artistic muscle and bring to the page whatever waits patiently to be told. What is essential is safety and comfort and to provide a non-judgmental environment; to support the commitment to keep going and to keep writing.

“Creating something is a labor of love, a play of delight. If you write to seek approval or love from others, you’ll be largely unsatisfied and often caught in the cycle of deciding what you can’t fully have. If you write to feed your soul, every session will be some kind of feast.”

Marge Piercy