



Poetry: *The Highway to Humility*

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When I was in high school, almost fifty years ago, my first poetic crush was on Carl Sandburg. He was so pure, so elegant in his simplicity, and yet so savvy, so smart. I wanted to be him. I wanted to cultivate a cleverness that would somehow catapult me into his league. I wanted to override my inclination toward insecurity, and become great. And soon.

Writing poetry cured me of my illusions; for that, I am eternally grateful.

These years later, I have come to the wisdom that to be a poet is to be in a state of moving toward something, something unnameable and elusive. Every draft waits to be revised, every poem points me toward a better poem; there is no coming to the end, no finishing the process of becoming a poet. There were times when the reality of this seemed crushing, the patience required of me seemed impossible. But along the way, I let go of the frustration and just went with the onward flow, the weaving of words into something my own, whether it would ever be great or not.

Reading other poets hastens this acceptance. Being in workshops, or leading them, reminds me continually of the brilliance of all the voices out there brave enough to organize their thoughts into lines and stanzas. Working with poets in the Medium Security Prison teaches me that we all have something to say, and that it is powerful to be able to start from a place of no importance, no pride, and write our way toward each other, toward connection.

And then it gets down to craft, years and years of the tough work of choosing the right words and tossing the rest. You know, the construction work all poets must learn. And what joy that process can bring, when it goes well, what torture when it doesn't!

By now, it is a comfortable humility that surrounds me as I work. The more readings I give, the more I merge with my desire to be better, and the easier it becomes to realize I am just one in the ever expanding community of those who call themselves poets. Most of us are not famous, many of us not widely read, but all of us are either gearing up, or already audacious enough to share or send out our work, or stand at a microphone, offering our thoughts, our lines, ourselves.

How can it be anything but humbling?

But once we start down that highway to humility, joining our voices to the ancestry of those engaged in the art of exploring life through language, we know we are on a solid path, one that leads us both deeper into ourselves, and farther out into the world. Sometimes we find the world welcomes us, listens to us even. And of course there are all those other poets, urging us to travel on. Humbling maybe, but satisfying as well.