

The Weight of Childhood Muses

BY DIANA RAAB

My mother wanted a parakeet instead of me. That's what she told my father the year after they were married. So, they went to the local pet store, bought a parakeet, a cage, and food, and set up the new bird's home in our family room off the kitchen. Two months later, after my mother forgot to close the cage following his evening feeding, the bird flew out of the window.

After the bird flew away, my mother cried for days. Dad tried telling her that kids also fly away, but only after 18 years or so. My father was adamant about having children, especially after losing most of his family in the Holocaust. Somehow, he convinced her to have me, but after me, that was it. She didn't want more kids.

Being born to a mother who preferred birds to kids and related better to animals than people left an indelible impression on my young mind, formulating a foundation of stories. I didn't realize it at the time. Only now, in my sixth decade, I see how early childhood experiences serve as muses for a lifetime of writing.

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As an only child of immigrant parents who worked long hours, I spent a great deal of time by myself. In general, writers are loners, but we can't write in a vacuum, and occasionally we need to get out and be a part of the world to find our inspiration.

My love for writing was born during those early childhood years, as my mother believed that children should be seen and not heard. From an early age, I felt frustrated by my mother's continual desire to silence me. The problem was that I desperately yearned to be *heard*. I wanted to share what was going on inside my developing head. I wanted to share my observations of people and the world around me. Often, I felt like an old soul locked up inside a child's body. To cope with my frustrations, I journaled or showered my dolls with words by sitting them in a row on the edge of my bed and reading to them.

I began journaling as soon as I learned the alphabet and figured out how to string words together. I started by expressing my feelings, what I did that day, my relationships with others, and what my dreams were. I also wrote poems and articles.

Each day I retreated into my walk-in closet with the string hanging in the middle of the ceiling leading up to the single 60-watt bulb. I pulled the cord and pushed my hanging clothes aside. I yanked down a sweater, deformed from the wire hanger, wrapped it around my shoulders, and plopped down on the cold and often-dusty wooden floor.

Looking back at that scene in the closet, I wonder if I was born a writer or became one due to my circumstances. I suppose

many writers ponder this philosophical question, and I imagine there are as many answers as there are writers.

I believe that writers are not only influenced by their circumstances but also by their muses. After more than 50 years of writing, both personally and professionally, I'm convinced that every creative person has had at least one muse during their life.

According to *The New World Dictionary* (1986), a muse is the "spirit that is thought to inspire a poet or other artist; source of genius or inspiration." A muse is someone who stands behind the writing and inspires it. Sometimes the muse is a spirit; other times, it is a real person.

At times, this muse figuratively rests on the writer's shoulder; other times, it is in another room or even in another home, but the muse is forever present. These muses or higher forces speak to me when I sit down to write. In return, I talk back to them. These muses are food for my soul and the inspiration behind my writing. They help ignite and keep the writing flame burning.

There's also another type of muse, as in my mother's case, who has injected controversy into my life. From an early age, she contradicted whatever I said. In a sense, she was my devil's advocate.

So, my mother was the type of muse who elicited enough emotion in me to generate my creative flow. Sometimes this creativity was a result of anger, and other times a result of

wonder. In a distorted way, someone like my mother can be a source of substantial creative inspiration.

In his book *The Writer's Mentor*, Ian Jackman says in his chapter on inspiration:

The inspiration is the writer's sense of self—it comes from him or her or it is of him or her. It is axiomatic that first novels often are autobiographical, and even the most fantastic created realms are conceived in the here-and-now.

Writers look for their own reality, however unusual or deranged it may be. At some point, they begin to assess and elaborate upon their experiences not simply as observers or participants but as writers.

This may explain why the interesting situations in our childhoods can inspire young people to become writers. As a child, I did not understand many of the strange occurrences around me, but rather, I thought they were normal—it was just how our family lived.

However, as I progress in years, I'm able to look back upon my youth to evaluate and elaborate on many of my childhood's absurdities. The distance has provided the necessary perspective.

In her book *The Lives of Muses*, Francine Prose says, "The desire to explain the mystery of inspiration, to determine who or what the 'moving cause of art,' resembles the impulse to find out a magician's secrets." Sometimes artists can quickly identify

the source of their inspiration for particular pieces of work, but other times the source is more nebulous. The artist may not know the muse's role until the project is well underway or even completed.

In the section where Prose discusses Yoko Ono as John Lennon's muse, she says, "Artists know there is no clear path on which to trace one's steps back to the wellspring of a work. To attempt to analyze or quantify inspiration is as futile as trying to describe a mystical state, which is what inspiration is."

In his poignant book, *The Zen of Writing*, Ray Bradbury has an entire chapter called "How to Keep and Feed the Muse." He says:

What is The Subconscious to every other man, in its creative aspect becomes, for writers, The Muse. They are two names for one thing. But no matter what we call it, here is the core of the individual we pretend to praise, to whom we build shrines and hold lip service in our democratic society. Here is the stuff of originality.

Bradbury goes on to say, "To feed your Muse, then, you should always have been hungry about life since you were a child." I was a starving child, as evidenced by my need to write at an early age.

Looking back, I realize that I've reaped many benefits from the muses in my writing life. They have comprised of spirits, family members, friends, and lovers. Although many of them have come and gone, I believe that childhood muses live

with us for the rest of our lives. My mother, for example, has been my longest-living muse.

Now, at the age of 91, she has provided me—through her complicated and eccentric life—with endless musings. Although there were many times when I was angry with her for not being there for me, I believe that subconsciously she freed the writer from within me.

Many believe that some of the best writers in the world emerged from troubled childhoods. In my case, there was always something going on in my home to write about. Sometimes the words exchanged between the adults were spoken with daggers.

Still, most often, there was an underlying sense of someone's discontent, whether it was my mother's, my father's, my grandmother's, my grandfather's, or my cat, Pixie's. Someone was often mad or complaining about something or somebody. Anyway, that's how I remember it. The cloud of anger drove me to the written word. In this way, writing became my savior.

A love of books often permeates a writer's life way before the actual act of writing does. When I was a young child, my mother surrounded me with books. She was an avid reader, perhaps due to her undergraduate English degree from New York University. Once a week, she drove me to the local public library, and I'd spend hours in the children's section reading biographies. It's no wonder I grew up to be a memoirist and poet.

My childhood stresses often revolved around the loneliness of being an only child. I quickly figured out that to survive in my home with my hardworking immigrant parents. I had to learn early to be in touch with my heart center and do what brought me joy, and writing has always done just that.

When I was ten years old, my grandmother, who lived with us, took her own life. My mother bought me a Kahlil Gibran journal and told me to write down my feelings. The book was about the size of those black-and-white speckled school notebooks used by young school children, except it was thicker, maroon in color, and had a protective plastic sheath. On the top of each page were Gibran's most famous sayings.

Each day, the words usually poured out of me. I didn't understand the writing process, but I knew that whatever I did felt right. I made a habit of writing daily, like others who might gulp down their morning vitamins. On those rare days when I was stumped about what to write, I would glance at the saying at the top of the page and allow Gibran to guide my thoughts. Each writing session had one thing in common: how elated I felt after writing.

Here is one of my favorite passages from Gibran's, *The Prophet*:

*Go to your fields and your gardens, and you shall learn
that it is the pleasure of the bee to gather honey of the
flower,*

*But it is also the pleasure of the flower to yield its honey to
the bee,*

For to the bee a flower is a foundation of life,

And to the flower a bee is a messenger of love,

*And to both, bee and flower, the giving and the receiving
of pleasure is a need and an ecstasy.*

Another unusual thing about my mother during my childhood was that she was an avid environmentalist before its growing popularity. One of the first books she ever bought me was marine biologist Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), which she encouraged me to read more than once. The book launched the modern environmental movement. It also earned Carson a slot on *Time*'s "Most Influential People of the Century" list.

After reading Carson's book, my mother began recycling paper, glass, and aluminum cans, some of which she found lying on the street while walking or driving. After shaking out whatever liquid was left in the can, she tossed it into her carpeted trunk. My mother also kept a compost heap in our backyard, where she piled everything from coffee grains to orange peels. We did not use aerosol cans, as she proclaimed that they destroyed the ozone layer. To minimize our contribution to pollution, instead of driving to the grocery store, we walked. We usually bought enough food for just that day.

by the time I turned 15, my mother had also converted me into an avid environmentalist. While my friends were rushing

out to get their driver's licenses, I was busy picking up aluminum cans on the street, redeeming them for a hard-earned five cents at the corner store. On a larger scale, I began community-recycling programs.

All this environmentalism served as exciting material to write about in my journal and for the high school newspaper. I only decided to learn how to drive when heading out of town for my junior year of college. Until then, I'd zipped around the neighborhood on my ten-speed bike that I named Artemis after the Greek goddess of the hunt. Artemis was a green Raleigh bicycle that I once took on a 500-mile bike trip with a group of other teens in New York, across the state of Maine. There was an article in the local newspaper about our bike trip, and like most teens, I delighted in the attention. I also think the article served as a major turning point for me. For the first time, I understood the power of the written word, as many at school and in the community approached me with questions about my bicycle trip.

It was about that time when I was assigned the position of yearbook editor, a job that fascinated me for a long time and ended up sparking my interest in journalism, which I minored in during college.

My next childhood muse was my sixth-grade English teacher at P.S. 173 in Queens, New York. Mr. O. was a huge part of my writing career; like many muses, he was a little out of the ordinary. He was an animated, thirty-something-year-old teacher from Brazil who loved dancing. Every Friday afternoon,

he locked the classroom door, pulled out his tape player, and gave the class a private performance. We all gathered on one side of the classroom while he stood on the double desks to perform a Flamenco dance. Mr. O held castanets in both hands while twirling himself around. We all giggled, thinking he was a hoot. He was a relatively diminutive blond man, only about five feet six inches tall. He was so adorable, and I fantasized about being 20 years older so we could date.

Mr. O. loved everything I wrote, and I received an A+ on all my writing assignments. I now realize that adults can make or break a child's creativity, which becomes more apparent as I raise my three children. We can have such a significant impact on what they become. I also believe that strengths, such as writing, can be identified quite early in life.

Although I didn't realize it then, my maternal grandfather, Samuel, was my next muse, as he taught me the fine art of people watching. Each year he took me on trips to either Miami or Paris. On our Parisian getaways, we would sit for hours in the cafés talking about and watching all the eccentric passersby. We played this game where we'd guess their professions and personal situations. We fabricated a story about any interesting-looking stranger. This daily ritual sparked my interest in fiction writing, and I loved the fact that I would make my grandfather laugh with all my concocted scenarios.

Traveling was an integral part of my childhood. My parents saved enough money for a few international trips on my father's meager salary as a store manager. It was the sixties, way before it

was vogue to travel overseas. I felt quite lucky, plus it gave me more fodder to write about.

Vienna served as an essential muse because it aroused a tremendous emotional response in me. I found the Viennese to be an icy group of people who held little respect for youth. Consistent with my mother's philosophy that children should be seen and not heard, the Austrians paid little attention to the other kids or me in stores or hotels. Plus, Hitler was Austrian. How could I reap pleasure from visiting his homeland even though my mother had been born there? I'd lost so much of my father's side of the family in the Holocaust. The truth is that my mother was born in Austria, but our heritage is not Austrian. Her parents only lived there for eight years after she was born. They had initially emigrated from Poland between the two world wars.

Education is essential to the European people, and my family was no different. This characteristic of Europeans was imprinted deep inside my mother's soul and rubbed off on me. She wanted to instill a sense of worldliness in me more than anything else. My first international trip was when I was 11. None of my friends had traveled to Europe. We went to Israel, and I remember driving for miles on the highways with my dad holding his movie camera glued to the front window and how boring it was to look at the reels upon arriving home.

I recall the men whistling at my mother in Greece as we walked down the city streets. I remember the fabulous dancers in the streets of Yugoslavia wearing festive clothes and these flat

leather shoes turned up at the toes and tied around the ankle. I can still hear the noisy shoes of Holland. The footwear of faraway lands completely took me. That year I began collecting miniature shoes from all over the world. I have since moved on and collected real adult shoes. My husband gave me the nickname Imelda Marcos.

Back then, and even today, shoes continue to be a muse of sorts for me. At times, I feel so obsessed with shoes that when sitting in a bookstore café, or some other public place, I'll glance down at everyone's feet. You can learn a lot about people by the shoes they wear. Looking at shoes has also helped me dodge writer's block. When sitting and writing in public places, I often keep my eyes glued to the feet walking by. Similar to bodies, they come in various shapes, sizes, and colors. This momentary fixation on watching feet transports me to the next part of my story or essay.

When I was 15, my mother sent me to the International Teen Camp in Lausanne, Switzerland for two summers. Those two summers were the best of my life. The people I met there served as muses for much of my writing during my adolescence. Although many of the campers were American, there were many others from all over the world. I was exposed to many languages and cultures and was amazed by how many foreigners were fluent in English.

I came to understand the extent of their fluency during the first week of camp and how much better everyone's English became by the end of the summer, and I realized how proud I

was to be an American. On July 20, 1969, we were all asked to assemble in the large meeting room for a very special news report. On that Sunday afternoon, two American astronauts, Neil Armstrong and Edwin Aldrin, piloted the Apollo lunar module named Eagle and landed it on the moon. The time was 4:17 p.m. EST. I still remember the first words they uttered from the moon— "Houston, Tranquility Base here. The Eagle has landed."

The campers and counselors gathered to watch the news on a 26-inch television suspended from the wood-beamed ceiling. We sat on the hard wooden floors and listened attentively. The acoustics were horrible, so we were told to remain extremely quiet. One American girl didn't care about the news broadcast and didn't stop talking. The camp director approached her and motioned for her to follow him. They ended up in the camp office with the director phoning her parents in New York. The following day she was put on restriction because of her lack of respect for her country. I found it fascinating to muse about that girl and why she would have acted that way. I loved trying to figure out the reason why people did and said the things they did. From a very young age, this was a constant source of musing for me and greatly empowered my writing.

During my second summer at camp, I met my first foreign muse. He was an Arab from Kuwait. Although my family was Jewish, we were not highly religious. Like many other Jews, we focused on celebrating mainly during the high holy days such as

Passover and Yom Kippur. My mother was apathetic about religion, but my father never wanted to forget his Jewish roots. He survived for five years in Dachau's concentration camp and respected Israel more than any other country in the world.

Rasheed was a suave 18-year-old with intense dark brown eyes. He wore brown leather sandals that flopped as he walked. We often met after curfew in the courtyard and engaged in some heavy kissing and petting. One time he came to my room when both of us stayed behind during a field trip. The chemistry between us could have powered a car. I'm sure it had something to do with the stars we were both born under.

Rasheed and I corresponded for a short time after camp until his last letter said he would soon be drafted into the army. I never heard from him again. I shudder to think about whatever happened to him. For a while, when watching the evening news, I thought I might see a photo of Rasheed when they showed images of the casualties in Kuwait.

My next muse was another boyfriend—Michael, a Spanish beau who drove a blue Volkswagen beetle. Something about the way he shifted its gears turned me on. One day, his flirtations led me to his attic bedroom after his mother, a nurse, left for her evening shift at the hospital. I swore I would remain a virgin until my wedding night, but Michael didn't let me keep that promise to myself. Somehow as things often happen, I became smitten and lost my sense of control. Michael was my last childhood boyfriend, and my mother's wish came true when I decided not to marry him.

Writing is my passion and life purpose. I have published more than ten books and thousands of articles and poems. My mother is still alive, and I must admit that I spent a good amount of my adulthood complaining about how unloving and insensitive she was throughout my life. But I now realize that all that strife gave me fodder for my writing, and muses, in general, are contradictory. Muses know how to both motivate and hurt. My mother has elicited a lot of emotion in me—and inspired me by conflict—and I now have the wisdom to be grateful.

About the Author

Diana Raab, PhD, is an award-winning memoirist, poet, blogger, speaker, author of 10 books, and a contributor to numerous journals and anthologies.

Her two latest books are, "Writing for Bliss: A Seven-Step Plan for Telling Your Story and Transforming Your Life," and "Writing for Bliss: A Companion Journal."

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