

Reader Question: Where do you go for inspiration when the words just aren't coming?



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What to do to break through a creative funk?



This question arose in a recent conversation I had with a writer: *What do you do to find inspiration when the words just aren't coming?*

There have certainly been multiple times in my writer's life in which I found myself in need of some sort of creative jolt or at least a crumb or two of inspiration to feed my soul. So in thinking about this question, I scratched out a list of my go to sources of inspiration. Here is that list:

- **Exercise:** I've been a jogger for over three decades and for a number of years averaged 25 miles per week. As I've gotten older, I've cut back the mileage and added biking to the mix to give my knees a break, while splitting my sessions between walking and running. For me, it's not only the

exercise, it's about **getting outside**. I don't listen to music, rather I want to hear and see the world around me. My current five-and-a-half mile route takes me through a variety of landscapes: Urban, park, dirt path, marina, bird sanctuary, another park, beach, and home.



A view of the downtown Chicago skyline from the bird sanctuary on my jogging route

I spend **so much time inside**, not just in my home or university office, but *inside* my head — thinking, thinking, thinking — to be outside and breathe the air, feel the sun and breeze, hear the sound of my feet on pavement or dirt, listen to the voices of passersby, that simple direct experience of The World almost always enlivens me by reminding me... I Am Here. I Exist. Be Here Now. That alone is a source of inspiration.

- **Movies:** Like most folks, I have a loooooong list of Movies To Watch and so sometimes when I'm feeling less than creative, I'll just say, "Screw it," and knock off one of those titles. But even that can feel like a chore, so if I'm looking for inspiration, I will pick out one of my favorites and re-watch it. *The Apartment, Dr. Strangelove, To Kill a Mockingbird, Tampopo, Casablanca, Being There, The Shawshank Redemption.* If I really need a boost, I'll pick out an uplifting sports movie like *The Natural, Rudy, or Hoosiers.* I know some people get cowed by watching a great film. *How can I possibly write something as good as that?* I can certainly relate to that feeling, however, more often than not, movies inspire me. I remind myself that at some point, that project began with a writer in a room conjuring up an idea for a screenplay or novel. That very act of creation — something out of nothing — usually engenders a feeling: *I can do that.*
- **Read:** My job as a writer and educator involves a **lot** of reading, quite literally hundreds of pages each week, thus, the prospect of reading something in addition to what is on my To Do list means this is not the first item on my go to list for inspiration. However, I *do* read a poem every day, one of the first things I do in the morning. I've subscribed to The Writer's Almanac for years, then when that went dark (now returned), I frequented Poetry Daily. This is akin to a mental version of physical exercise in that those few moments spent reflecting on This World reminds me I Am Alive. In the commute to my office downtown, which takes about 30 minutes on public transit, I've taken to reading short stories. During the period of time between November and February, I will read movie scripts released by the studios as part of

their For Your Consideration campaigns and the annual Black List scripts which are announced in December. Reading a great script I find inspirational.

- **Listen:** I'm not a big podcast person, although I know people who swear by them, but when I want a creative boost, I'll sometimes listen to The Moth, This American Life, or Snap Judgment. Stories inspire me. So, too, music. On Spotify, I've got three collections of favorites I listen to depending upon my mood: Acoustic, 60s Rock, Instrumental Jazz. I also sing. Walking on the street to and from work. Heading off to teach a class. Washing dishes. That uplifts my spirits.
- **Writing Quotes:** For the 13+ years I have hosted this blog, every Monday (On Writing) and Tuesday (Screenwriting 101), I have posted quotes from writers about the craft. Every so often, I click on either of the links above and browse through quite literally **hundreds of writing quotes**. I just randomly scroll up and down the lists, and stop where I stop. Almost invariably, I'll see some writer's wisdom which will speak to where I'm at in that moment.
- **Journal:** I used to do this on a daily basis, but have drifted away from it over the last few years, however, I do keep a journal on both of my desks, home and office, which I use when I feel like reflecting upon my current creative state. This invariably leads me back to The Big Questions: *Why do I write? What does it mean to be creative? What stories should I be telling?* For twenty-one months, I found myself in an interesting place in that the type of writing I was doing with The Protagonist's Journey was more academic than anything

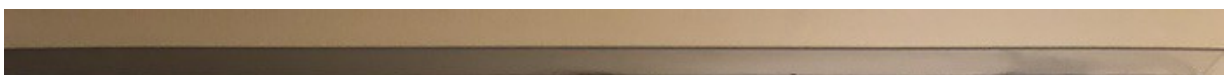
I have written before, yet I structured the book to tell a story. Thus, it was an intriguing blend of narrative writing and teaching. That process required a daily boost of inspiration, so I dipped into my journals more frequently... which helped.

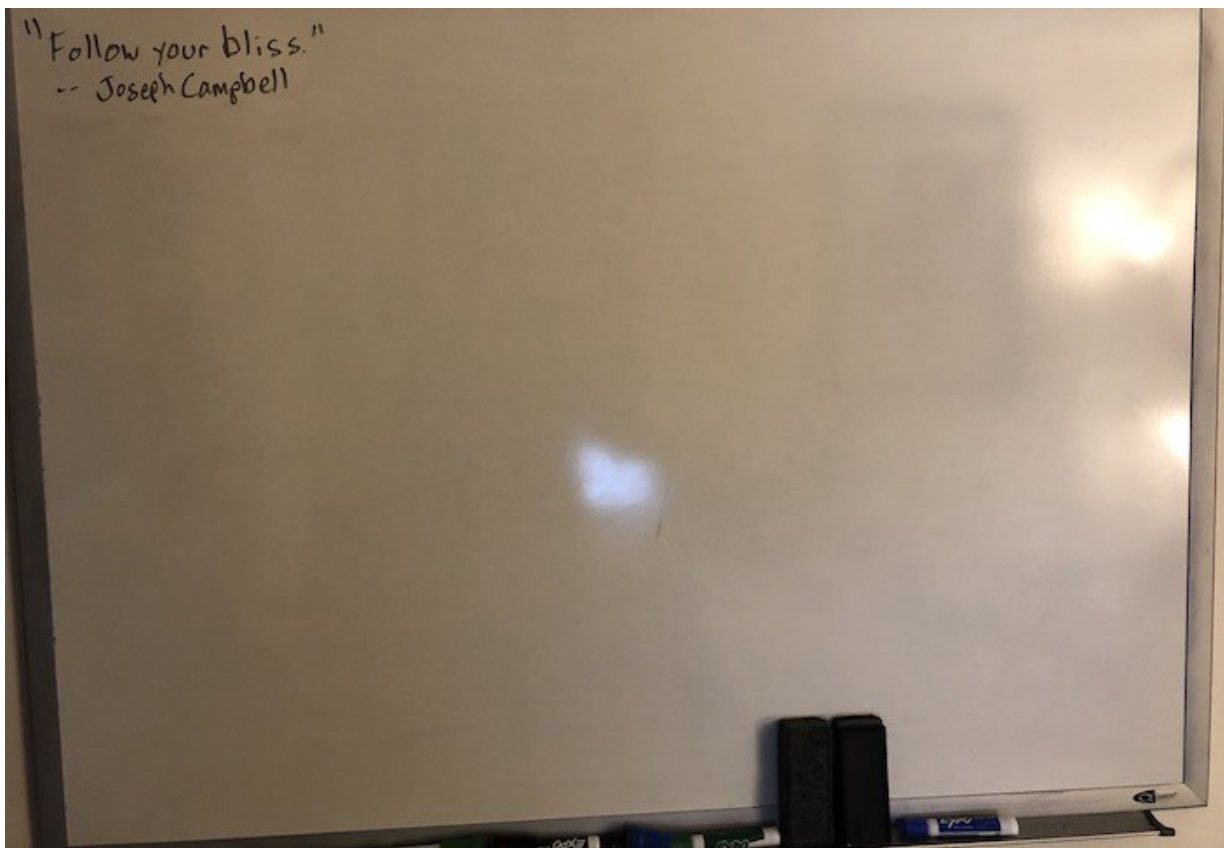
Finally, there's this: Prayer. While I rarely attend church services, I do consider myself to be a religious person (whatever that means). Part of my religious life is daily prayer and I always begin with the same words:

"Thank you, God, for this day, this chance to be alive. Give it up. Let it all go."

I do this to remember to be grateful. While in the long view, my life may be a mere blip of time on this speck of dust floating through space, it is still a unique opportunity to Explore and Be and Do. Each of us has been granted this amazing gift of Life. When I pray, I remind myself that there is something more to life than the expectations of the world, what our culture may typify as 'success,' that by continuing to let go of those attachments, I can focus on something of much greater value: My Purpose. I am here to Write. I am here to Teach. I am here to be a Husband, Father, Friend, and Colleague.

On the white board in my office at the university, I wrote these words the very first day I started my job as an assistant professor at the DePaul School of Cinematic Arts:





Follow your bliss. Those words remain to this day as a reminder to my students and, yes, to myself that our chief obligation is to discover that which exists within us and enlivens us, for which we have a talent, something we can bring into being with joy and rapture. If we align ourselves with that aspect of our psyche and follow a life-path which enables us to pursue that bliss, either as vocation or avocation, then we not only do something of inestimable value to ourselves... we also do something which will benefit the world.

Those are some things I do to find inspiration. It can be a struggle. And as I say, laid up as I am at present, I am definitely not at the high end of my creativity. However, writing this post has helped to refocus my thoughts and feelings.

At the end of the day, I guess that is the greatest source of

inspiration: To align ourselves with our True Self.

Onward!

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