



Shaped by a Silky Attention, by Jane Hirshfield

A request for concentration isn't always answered, but people engaged in many disciplines have found ways to invite it in. Violinists practicing scales and dancers repeating the same movements over decades are not simply warming up or mechanically training their muscles. They are learning how to attend unswervingly, moment by moment, to themselves and their art; learning to come into steady presence, free from the distractions of interest or boredom.

However it is brought into being, true concentration appears -- paradoxically -- at the moment willed effort drops away. It is then that a person enters what scientist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has described as "flow" and Zen calls "effortless effort". At such moments, there may be some strong emotion present -- a feeling of joy, or even grief -- but as often, in deep concentration, the self disappears. We seem to fall utterly into the object of our attention, or else vanish into attentiveness itself.

This may explain why the the creative is so often described as impersonal and beyond self, as if inspiration were literally what its etymology implies, something "breathed in." We [poets] refer, however metaphorically, to the Muse, and speak of profound artistic discovery as revelation. And however much we may come to believe that "the real" is subjective and constructed, we still feel art is a path not just to beauty, but to truth: if "truth" is a chosen narrative, then new stories, new aesthetics, are also new truths.

Difficulty itself may be a path toward concentration -- expended effort weaves us into a task, and successful engagement, however laborious, becomes also a labor of love. The work of writing brings replenishment even to the writer dealing with painful subjects or working out formal problems, and there are times when suffering's only open path is through an immersion in what is. The eighteenth-century Urdu poet Ghalib described the principle this way: "For the raindrop, joy is in entering the river. Unbearable pain becomes its own cure."

Difficulty then, whether of life or of craft, is not a hindrance to an artist. Sartre called genius "not a gift, but the way a person invents in desperate circumstances." Just as geological pressure transforms ocean sediment to limestone, the pressure of an artist's concentration goes into the making of any fully realized work. Much of beauty, both in art and in life, is a balancing of the lines of forward-flowing desire with those of resistance -- a gnarled tree, the flow of a statue's draped cloth. Through such tensions, physical or mental, the world in which we exist becomes itself. Great art, we might say, is thought that has been concentrated in just this way: honed and shaped

by a silky attention brought to bear on the recalcitrant matter of earth and of life. We seek in art the elusive intensity by which it knows.

Published at www.awakin.org on Jan 09, 2017