

## Bio and Thoughts on the Nature of Poetry

In 1997, a Professor at the University of Massachusetts, Annaliese Bischof, gave one of her third year classes the opportunity to correspond with a poet then write a paper on the nature of poetry as derived through the questions and answers of the correspondence. Andrew Port chose Ward.

When asked to submit a bio for this site, Ward thought a passable description of his life, education, and opinions on poetry could be gleaned from his answers to Andy's questions. Andy, the recipient of the following E-mails, agreed to their use in this endeavor, and indeed has been an exceedingly kind and perceptive ear piece. A few of the biographical details and publishing credits have been updated.

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Dear Andy,

I would put a slight spin on Rilke's answer to why one writes poetry (Because it's necessary). No doubt it's necessary; but in fact, I'd rather call it a compulsion. I write because I'm compelled to do so. I've actually tried to avoid it for snatches of years – at least twice during my life – yet I'm always dragged back by the proverbial scruff of my neck. Something within compels me to do this thing.

One could make a simplistic argument how Nature makes pleasurable those things it requires of human beings. Ingestion, excretion, procreation – it's all necessary to move the chromosomes from one generation to the next. But does poetry fall into such a primal category? Perhaps. Consider the buzz a writer receives when the words flow, seemingly unaided at times by the writer's brain, words pounding down to the page, a torrent of insights, a flood of intuition. As if the writer steps on the power-rail of luck, thoughts magically appear on the page, and it is these rarefied moments of creativity that bring – to use a hippie phrase – a rush. And if writing is indeed a drug, then surely poetry is crack cocaine.

So then, does Nature require certain poor souls to carve out these words? I think so. There's that oft-quoted axiom that one does not choose poetry, it chooses you. Again, I think this is so. In myself, I trace it back to grade school where I discovered the magic of creating prose. There was something definitive about it . . . this was a palpable thing I did, although to dubious ends other than its own creation. Still it felt purposeful. It felt as though I were meant to do this thing. And in the end, it felt good.

I do not mean to say I spent a lot of time as a child grinding away at fiction. Really such creative spurts occurred sporadically, or just enough to set the hook that would reel me in thirty-odd years later. One of these spurts popped up during my teenage years when I realized I could do this rhyming thing that Bob Dylan did, and where he did it so much better, I went through a flirtation with oddly rhyming words that fashioned a great obscurity; and just what is a subterranean homesick blues, anyway? I think I was about thirteen when I wrote my first dylan-esque poems, quickly learning what a wonderful tool of rebellion poetry represented. Paul Simon, and in particular, Leonard Cohen, were much better poets, but Dylan capitalized on obscurity emanating from a key phrase. 'Like a Rolling Stone' is a catchy punchline, but what do all those verses really mean? Still there is something quite alluring about it.

As a humorous aside, I should note my parents, always suspicious of literature, sent me to a psychologist for a few months. Of the seven children and two parents in the household, none of the others had any literary interests. Looking back, I believe my parents were alarmed by these early poems, and thought I

was writing quirky or even maniacal lines. I had thought we all participated in the heralded Generation Gap; the therapist surprised me greatly when he mentioned it was the poetry that had landed me in his office. Incidentally, I inspected these early poems recently, and found them obscure but tame; still I do sometimes suspect my current literary agents are themselves tempted to send me off to a psychologist due to my recent crop of poems.

In high school the rift between my parents and myself expanded, and in my senior year I left home. I put myself through the rest of high school, was accepted into Penn State but my dad declined to co-sign my student loan, and at last I ended up at a community college, working full time at a department store. My brief stay at college resulted in two life-altering events.

The first concerned a poem. Enrolled in a creative writing course, I submitted various pieces as assignments, one of which the instructor brought back to me, taking me and poem to the cafeteria. There he told me I had written the perfect poem – his words, I assure you – and we began a long friendship, in a mentor/protégé vein. Instantly I envisioned myself as a Shelley or a Keats; pretty heady stuff. I published in the school mag, was once asked to guest lecture on DeFoe's 'Journal of the Plague Years,' and moved a co-ed to tears reading one of my poems in class, although she might have responded more to auditory pain than my lachrymose poetic vision.

The second consequential event concerned a term paper I wrote for a History of Art class. I did an interpretive treatment of five Paul Klee paintings, putting about two weeks into the project, only to have it returned with an F. Aside the grade was the instructor's warning, 'Next time don't plagiarize.' I took the paper to her, professing, of course, my innocence, but she held her ground. 'No freshman,' she pointed out, 'could write at this level, particularly about Klee.' In a way it was somewhat complimentary, and I can't say I was too incensed since righteousness was on my side. I went to my assigned councilor, thinking it would be rather easy for me to get the mark reversed. After all, I knew I was the one who wrote the paper. My councilor said I'd have to go to the college president to get rid of the F, although there was an unlikely chance of reversal, and even if I prevailed I would only then have to deal with an irate instructor the rest of the term. His advice was to swallow it, and live to fight another day.

Out at my mentor's farm, I received further disturbing counsel. 'Why sweat this . . . someone with your ability to write? In the long run, this setback is inconsequential.' None of this placated me, and I ignored all advice – much more fiery days, back then – and walked out.

I don't recommend this course of action to anyone; particularly since the higher I rose in the business community, the more this shortage of a degree has become a liability. However there is some sense in this to those who might examine the daemon of a person's life -- this rebellion and my poetry are kindred compulsions. I later discovered there were fist-loads of poets throughout history who flip-flopped out of higher education (Shakespeare, Blake, Dickinson, Shelley, Hart Crane, Poe, Whitman, Dylan Thomas, etc., etc.); and there might be some apologies made how this scratching with bone, this writing of poetry, is something that must be sharpened and cut by the poet's own hand. Techniques and the fundamentals may be taught – although not to a bone-head like me – but a poet must meet the muse on his own. No one can teach the actual affinity. It can be explained, may be described, and could even be road-mapped . . . but the consummation will only be performed by the poet.

Anyway, off I went. I decided to write novels while working an assortment of jobs, calculating if one can write the perfect poem, why not the perfect novel? Interestingly, I wouldn't write another poem for twenty-five years (these literary misfires occurring back in 1969). Various novels, wives, and jobs all

came and left in the next eight years, none of them sticking. I managed to attract a literary agent who handled three or four novels and many short stories. Together we only made two story sales (to Nugget), and had one tremendous near-miss on a novel. Playboy Press came within a hair, my agent lamented, on one of the books.

The year was 1977, and it was time to dig deeper, and simply write better. I found a job at a True Value Distribution Center, vowing I would stay with this company until I published a book. How long could that take? A few years? Five at the most? Obviously you can see the punchline coming – I’m still here; I’m beginning to sense some considerable irony to my life, but, again, I’m still here.

I began a long and successful run of working my way up in the organization, to where, today, I’m in the top fifty of a business containing 5,500 employees. I read a USNews survey last week that puts my base compensation in the top 4% of all wage-earners in America. I’ve been married to the same woman for fourteen years, support four daughters, and own a six thousand square foot home in the Indianapolis area. Prior to Indy, I took six other transfers with the company. Recently the architect in my division referred to be as the quintessential self-educated man. I think such a compliment is particularly cherished by a bone-head like me. I do indeed read incessantly, perhaps to compensate for the deficiency of the degree. On the humorous flipside, I interviewed with a corporate headhunter nearly a year ago, and I brought up the topic of my literary pursuits. At the time I had three publishing credits, and when he heard I had been at it for thirty years, he suggested I might be a slow learner. We both chuckled, but on reflection, I think he had a good point. Sylvia Plath soared in her late twenties – fantastic poetry – while I was nearly comatose at the same age. Here’s the bio I send out with my cover letters:

“As for me, I’m a 49 year old business executive with 1,500 people in the division reporting to me. I only mention this because in a sense the daemon that propels my occupation also propels my poetry. For instance, Gertrude Stein once said, ‘If Mr. Robert Frost is at all good as a poet, it is because he is a farmer -- really in his mind a farmer, I mean.’

Am I a businessman who writes poetry, or a very minor poet successful at business? Who knows? But my daemon propelled me into such a good financial position that I could now quit my business dealings and comfortably write poetry the rest of my life . . . yet I am afraid to quit for fear my daemon will leave me, or my greed will taunt me for decades.

Formerly I managed distribution centers in Pennsylvania, Ohio, California, Arizona and Illinois. My wife and I now live outside of Indianapolis and are currently toiling with much determination on our second crop of children, having adopted four wonderful girls and fostered several others.

Fairly new to publishing my efforts -- this most challenging of all endeavors -- I have still been fortunate to enjoy some initial successes, and have published 351 pieces since late '96. Please see the attached list of credits. Current successes are: being nominated for the 1999 Pushcart; completing an interview with Israeli poet Elisha Porat (1996 winner of the Prime Minister Prize for Literature); being accepted by *Rattle* for the second time; *Sunstone*, *Porcupine Literary Magazine*; the Ezines *Pif*, *2River View*, *Oblique* and *Offcourse*; and by print magazines *Potpourri* and *Skylark* -- each for the third time. Lastly, I was selected as the Featured Poet by the Ezine *Seeker*, and the Canadian Ezine, *Pyrowords*.

The irony? The older I get, the more compulsive I’m getting about poetry, and the less successful I’m feeling about things in general. Now, money’s not a bad way to measure success -- a measurement mostly espoused by people with money -- and I’m happy I’m a smidgen affluent, but I’m still restless. I

am not content with this particular status in life. I'm disquieted . . . and only the creation of poetry will momentarily assuage whatever ambition drives the beast. Indeed these days I'm in the midst of a poetry torrent, writing over a hundred poems in the past year.

But I'm jumping a little ahead in this wordy bio. Four years ago I attended a two-week seminar on Human Resources at the University of Michigan. At the time I ran the HR department for True Value. I brought my laptop along and, at night, started refurbishing a novel I had written and re-written over the years. It went a lot easier than I had forecasted, and I merrily continued it as I traveled on business, in jets at thirty thousand feet. I quickly realized I was back in the buzz. Indeed the words slammed down – the torrent every writer seeks. Within six months I completed my theological science fiction, *Divine Murder*, then found a new agent, Jack Byrne (I learned my old one retired, although he protested that my unsaleable prose had not driven him to retirement). In the next six months I finished up the next novel – *Keenly Alive, Tony* -- a metaphysical romance.

In between novels, I placed a few short stories at small literary magazines, and Jack asked me to send the reprints to his partner, Larry Sternig, for re-sales. Larry later asked to represent my short stories, and he currently has fifteen or so of them. As of this writing there are two novels, fifteen stories, and a hundred poems of mine casting around America, looking to hook an empathetic or unwary editor. As I mentioned to Ms. Bischof, I am the most minor of poets; and I hope none of my musings has a deleterious effect on your own literary development.

Yet it is the poetry that amazes me the most. Of my publications, most occurred in the past two years, and the greater majority are poems. As you can see by my forwarded list of credits, these are mostly small literary magazines, with small circulations, however it's a gratifying start for someone who began all this almost thirty years ago. Another little gratification: two of the published poems were ones from my sole college year. Makes me wonder why I didn't stay with poetry back then . . . or perhaps it explains the current torrent.

To wrap up the bio, my early influences were William Blake, Sylvia Plath, Leonard Cohen, e.e. cummings, and Poe. Then I let it go for many years. Today I'm nuts about Sylvia Plath, Emily Dickenson, Robert Penn Warren (whose poetry sadly, incredibly, has mostly gone out of print), and James Dickey; also I'm leaning towards Robert Lowell, Adrienne Rich, Keats, Milton and a little bit toward Raleigh and Thomas Wyatt (did you know he had an affair with Anne Boleyn?).

The next Email will cover your questions concerning the creation of my poetry. I thank you for giving me the opportunity to think all this out and write it down. It's actually the first time I've put it on paper, and the exercise has been quite interesting, although perhaps lengthy. If I inundate you, tell me to immediately stop.

Regards,  
Ward

Dear Andy,

There's that old saw about becoming a writer – if you want to be one, you first have to write a million words. Where's it's an old saw, I still believe it to be true. However you seldom hear mentioned what should be tagged to the end of it. The axiom should include the reason for the million words – all these practice words put a writer in position to use the best literary advice I ever discovered. That advice is “don't think.”

At first this might appear to be a paradox. How can one write thoughts if one should not think? Regardless of the temptation to discuss the great volume of thoughts expressed daily with a complete absence of thinking, I will instead suggest there are sound reasons to disengage the controlling conscious when approaching creative writing, and in particular, poetry.

It's analogous to improvisational music. Let's take improve jazz (the phrase in itself is mostly redundant), blues and rock. In order to really do improve, one must first put in – paying the dues – a hundred million notes. The learning experience in this is not simply the development of skill with the instrument – whether guitar or pen – but primarily to learn the location of that point where the conscious mind lets go and something else takes over. This is the moment of great improve . . . and great poetry.

How does one find this point? Its island is charted somewhere in the midst of that ocean of a million words, and the meridian lines you use to get there are those strands of pleasure that come when certain thoughts emanate from the pen. These discussions always tip into the metaphysical, although I'll later make a case for the opposite, but for now let's stay with the pleasure concept. In an earlier Email, I mentioned Nature makes pleasurable those things required of human beings, and if a human is caught up in the throes of poetry, the thruway can be found by following the strands of pleasure.

It took me many years to identify this simple idea. But at last I understood that those times I received the greatest pleasure from writing occurred when I released the most conscious control. Many times though, when I finally gave up control I feared I was writing crap or tripe or obscure jargon – a buzz but meaningless; yet when I went back to edit and re-write, I discovered some of my best stuff resonating there. From this realization, it then became an apprenticeship of learning how to best intuit. More and more I learned how not to think.

These concepts all came from the prose, but eighteen months ago I learned how to apply it to poetry. I think, in poetry, I had always known of that exhilaration emanating from release, but it wasn't until early 1996 that I applied it to the origin of the poem itself. I distinctly recall the place – I was in a jet somewhere over the Rockies – and the time: late at night on the red-eye. And then the potent thought: what if I didn't think at all about the subject of the poem? What if I didn't think about how to fill the blank screen on my laptop? My mind drifted to that mental groove, a bio-feedback type of groove, that I recognized as the place where control is not used. And, whoosh. The poem pounded down, my fingers staccato-rapped the keyboard, the thoughts swirled around, the words backflipped pool-ward, page-ward, and slapped the electronic screen; I had no idea what most of the thoughts meant . . . but I felt great.

This perhaps sounds implausibly metaphysical, or in the very least, new-ageish, but I think I can talk my way out of those labels a little later; for now, hang in there with me. As Coleridge says, a good reader of poetry should make a willing suspension of disbelief. So back on the plane . . . when I stopped typing I realized what had at first made little sense was now beginning to coagulate. Some strategic surgery here and there, a little word substitution, and an approach to it as a mystery to be solved, or something to be

fathomed, and at last the insight of the title, the intuit naming of this thing . . . it all resulted in the birth of a poem.

This first little Frankenstein turned out to be about the eyes of a business executive; I named it "Icy, Jammed Windows," and it was eventually picked up by Purdue at Calumet's literary publication, *Skylark*. It's always good to publish, but soon I was primarily fascinated with the process, and this was how I swam into my current torrent of poetry. I learned how to approach this thing of poetry: the initial 'don't think' level of mind, the later unobtrusive guidance from myself as the words parade by, the herding of the cats so to speak, then the moment of awareness, of 'I know what this damn thing is about!' which occurs sometimes in the middle, sometimes at the end of the poem, and then the wrap-up of the final verse reflecting the first verse (when I had no idea at all what was coming) that so often unnerves me. All this speaks to me of a wondrous process. And is this not the way to best approach poetry, as a wonder?

And is this not the best time to discuss the three ephemeral components of poetry? They are the Big W, Inferred Montage, and Reverse Prayers. Bear in mind, this is the world according to Ward. Concrete components such as Denotation, Connotation, Imagery, Metaphor, Metonymy, etc., etc. can all be readily learned from any creative writing class. What I'm interested in discussing is the whiffy, the ephemeral, the ghostly properties that makes a poem resonate. Those very components that are, almost, too difficult to discuss.

Poetry should aim at a scales-dropping-from-the-eyes awareness, an abrupt dawning of realization; poetry should get the reader to exclaim "Ahhhhh!" The job of the poet is to intuit, then transcribe it in a manner that will transport the reader somewhere definitive – and ultimately recognizable -- within the human condition. I call it the "Big W."

Have you ever seen the 60's film, "It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World?" If you have, bear with me while I encapsulate the plot: The ten or so main characters in the film are present at a car accident where a dying gangster tells them he buried a fortune at a Santa Rosita, CA park, right at the Big W. Then he dies before explaining the meaning of a Big W. All the characters charge off, and most of the film chronicles their transportation attempts to be the first to arrive at the park. The picture culminates with all ten characters running frantically, criss-crossing each other's path throughout the sunny park by the ocean. What is a Big W? Windmill? Waterfall? Watchtower? Water Chestnuts, for crying out loud? Nobody knows, yet everybody stampedes on. At last Jonathon Winters runs through the middle of four palm trees who lean apart like two pairs of V's . . . or seen from afar, they are indeed a giant W.

There's a wonderful shot of Winters running through the middle of the palms, speeding toward the camera, galloping, galloping, then abruptly he stops. His eyes widen with the dawning potency of the idea. He has found the Big W!

This is what poetry should do. This is the potency of poetry. And this is what should be flimflamming down from the 'don't think' side of things through the poet's fingers to the page. This is why I talk of a buzz or a rush. And the poet really shouldn't be involved with the poem if none of this is going on. However I don't claim that the reader will react like Jonathon Winters to every poem. They seldom do, but the poet should every time.

*As far as readers are concerned, maybe one in twenty, or one in thirty, are shot between the eyes by a poem. One lives for these moments. Still I'm usually surprised by this lack of uniform reactions. The Emily poem that found its way into a classroom at UMASS has been read by others*

*who shrug. However, it blew me away when I saw it developing . . . as well it should have, since I claim all of a poet's poems should at the very least blow away the poet. I sent my agent the James Dean poem, and he said it bowled him over, but he didn't know why. No one else has singled out the Dean poem, with the exception of the editor who accepted it. The individual Big W experiences are fascinating, I think.*

Speaking of Emily, I read a poem of hers yesterday that illustrates the Big W (for me, maybe not for you, but see what you think):

There is no frigate like a book  
To take us lands away,  
Nor any coursers like a page  
of prancing poetry.

This traverse may the poorest take  
Without oppress of toll;  
How frugal is the chariot  
That bears a human soul!

I read this while at a mall's food court with my daughters, and I exclaimed under my breath, "All right, Emily!" But I must have spoken more loudly than planned, because my daughters again shook their heads over further bizarre remarks from the old man.

The second ephemeral component is Inferred Montage. In film-making a montage refers to the ability of one scene following another to form a third concept or awareness in the mind of the viewer. The cliché of this is the one scene of two lovers gazing into each other's eyes, followed by a scene of a locomotive entering a tunnel. Two scenes when juxtaposed equate to the consummation of the sex act.

The Inferred Montage is not exactly the juxtapositioning of scenes or phrases or words in the poem to create a third idea, but rather it is the gradual appearance of an idea, a coagulation of a foreign element where there wasn't one exactly intended, similar to alien markings that appear in wheat fields where yesterday one would have sworn there were no markings. The analogy continues: like the indentations in the field, it is clear these portentous markings mean something – but what exactly is the message?

Something comes forth within the poem to signal, to connote, the awareness of an alluring idea that – where related – is different than those the poet currently wrestles down to the paper. For the poet, this is an awareness that goes beyond the Big W.

First an overall example that umbrellas my body of work the past year, then I'll give you a few specific examples. About a year ago, as I wrote while not thinking, I began to write about historical figures in my poems. Over the past year about 75% of the poems I produced had to do with a historical or deceased literary figure, with three women in particular coming to the foreground, Joan of Arc, Sylvia Plath and Emily Dickinson. What came out of the seven or eight Joan poems was a message of forgiveness; what came out of the Emily poems – of which you've seen the first and the end (The Circumference of Emily) -- is a message of Emily the poet finding a new language to speak of the circular existence or nature of the soul. As an aside, T. S. Eliot instructed his tomb be engraved with the phrase, 'in the beginning is my end, in the end is my beginning.' Emily, of course, states she was 'called back' on her own tombstone,

inferring she had been there once before. So far as Sylvia, I'm still in the middle of her series, so I don't yet know how it ends.

Specifically, there are certain lines that poke at my contentment, over and over again, until I become aware of the reason for their resiliency. One such line is in 'Emily Chooses to Hide:'

“. . . something, somewhere, must sail out to touch the soul.”

This line stayed with me, quite incessantly, until I completed the seven-poem Emily sequence. Another such line is in a poem I did on Tolstoy, although I don't feel compelled to pursue Tolstoy right now:

## Leo's Totem of Words

Anger fires the mammoth words,  
snarling . . . hairy, with muddy tusks  
aimed to gore the sagging bellies,  
the sinking skin that has become  
the lives shared for so many years.

You will never object to argument,  
for it is the underbelly of lust . . .  
and you will never think to avoid  
the Cro-Magnon hunt of formidable beasts  
because great mounds of meat are always  
dangerous to earn.

And you would never scream out;  
you would never die;  
you would never dream the totem  
of your passion's eye or breast . . .  
and you would never accept the tusk  
into your crested ribs  
without a proper disembowelment;  
you must see plenty of blood  
to soak up all the spilling  
words of anger or love,  
but hardly ever forgiveness,  
since you suspect absolution  
is the chastity belt rebuffing  
a certain literary lust.

*Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) was one of the greatest authors of fiction the world has produced. Best known for "War and Peace" and "Anna Karenina," he enjoyed a long literary career spanning the youthful extolment of Cossack life to a later quest for moral and social certitudes. He became a conscience to the world, and developed a credo of five commandments: do not become angry; do not lust; do not bind yourself by oaths; do not resist him that is evil; be good to the just and unjust. His avocation of a life of poverty increasingly brought him into conflict with his wife, and his final years were marked by incessant bickering with her. In the end, the*

*quarrels drove him from home one night, and he died three days later at a remote railroad station. He once wrote, "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."*

The line I keep returning to is: 'And you would never scream out; you would never die; you would never dream the totem of your passion's eye or breast . . .' Someday, I know, something else will come out of this line. Then there's the Robert Penn Warren poem:

## **Robert Penn, Siphoning**

Curling around the saviors of our specters --  
those who would think to separate happenstance  
from determination, those who would think  
to show us the skeletons of disbelief  
that prop up the flesh of our hopes --  
sailing around the prophets who predict  
our souls are meant to mourn our mortal days . . .  
curling, sailing, displacing:  
this is the stuff of proper spirit.

You have always threaded your way through . . .  
tiptoed . . . placing paths below your clever feet,  
siphoning the marrow from the bones of this age;  
yet you were meant to come clear early,  
meant to hit the beast head-on, square, mean,  
the wallop that causes a slight but proper veer . . .  
And this you delivered long, long before  
your own flesh lost its hold  
on the cadaver of our world,  
and you sailed and curled out,  
forever out, now that you understood  
the difference between happenstance  
and determination.

*Robert Penn Warren (1905-1989) American author, was named the first poet laureate of the United States. He is best known for his novel "All the Kings Men." Astonishingly most of his poetry is now out of print.*

The recalcitrant line here, to me, is: 'our souls are meant to mourn our mortal days . . .' This one eventually wormed its way into the Emily circumference poem. It is the process that becomes as fascinating as the poems themselves to me.

The last of the ephemeral stuff I'll inflict on you is the Reverse Prayer idea. Prayer emanates from the beseecher, a request of the individual which flows out into divinity. Poems, I believe, are the reverse of this process; poems radiate inward to the individual from the exterior of the poet, little requests from the

great outside. Poets are people who are a smidgen more attuned to these remarks from the exterior, but they still cannot interpret the concepts succinctly. The struggle of the poet is to translate a wordless language into a poem that will knock somebody, somewhere, off their feet. Possibly one could make a case for the divine not hearing the exact words of the beseecher either . . . but intuiting the soul. Again, in reverse, is it not the role of the poet to intuit the divine?

It took me awhile to arrive at this place; but after I had it fleshed out, I felt rather proud of it, even somewhat unique. Bonehead that I am; what in the past million years of human beings on earth has really changed in human nature? Surely not pride. A year later, I was startled to read in an essay on Emily by Richard Wilbur, "Sumptuous Destitution" that Emily called poems 'bulletins from Immortality.' Spooky, is it not? Or maybe it's akin to Spielberg's 'Close Encounters of the Third Kind,' as though there are poets, like pinpricks throughout the country, all building clay models of a mountain they've intuited. Eventually the poets -- like Eliot's and Dickinson's tombstones -- will arrive at kindred places. Forgive me, but I can't resist saying at this juncture that I'd like the line 'our souls are meant to mourn our mortal days . . . ' engraved on my own.

When I was seven, and I clearly remember the incident, I was sitting in church one Sunday, listening to the sermon. The priest was speaking about immortality, and made the point that no one can possibly know for sure what awaits us after death. And hence, one needs faith to explain this world and the next. Being a bonehead even at seven, I wondered why no one had ever been able to figure it out. Maybe adults just gave up on it after a while. Why couldn't it be done?

I decided that if someone thought about this subject all their life, if one studied the issue long enough, if one were properly dedicated, they could indeed solve this mystery the priest described. And why not I? Young Lancelot, there in the pew.

So forty years later, here I am, but I assure you that even I am not pompous enough to say I've got it solved. Far from it; because it cannot be solved. However, you asked me to explain why I became a poet, and this little story is the beginning of my particular affliction. For if one does not use theology -- faith in religion -- or philosophy -- faith in logic -- to apprehend the afterlife, then there is really only one other tool left to use. And that is poetry, which requires a faith in the poet's ability to intuit.

Poets, priests, shamans . . . they are all doing the same carving with bones. They are all scratching away at the same question. All fielding or tossing the same whiffleball prayers. And there is really only one world-series question to aim at the human condition after all, and that is 'why?'

Lastly, let's see if I can pull this whole discussion away from the metaphysical, like I promised much earlier. Sometimes I fear this sounds like I should be out under a cardboard pyramid, lining up my crystals with a favorable planetary conjunction. In discussions of poetry one can easily pratfall into a New Age spiritualism, and I well understand the risks of sounding baffoonish on the subject.

However, if one subtracts religion -- any form of religion -- from the pursuit, and approaches it agnostically (and not atheistically, since that too requires a type of faith), there is still something beyond the human being to be intuited. Whether using one's intuition, or one's conscious study, or even one's subconscious premonitions, this state beyond death is always sensed. Sensed. The only problem is the age-old one -- you simply can't prove it. You can't uncover something tangible, like finding a butterfly wing on a trail deep within a forest then bringing it back for other people to see and gently touch.

Even though the ephemeral wing cannot be produced right now, I've always suspected that in the end our race will discover it's actually physics, and not metaphysics. Today we're simply not clever enough human beings yet to create strong enough microscopes or telescopes to pierce the other side of our natures.

I say it's physics, and not metaphysics. And as poets, we are all some strange combination of scientists and priests.

Regards,  
Ward

Dear Andy,

Thanks for your kind words. I got back from Oregon Friday night. I always get to do a lot of poetry on my lap top during those long flights, and perhaps 30,000 feet is the proper setting for some of my outlandish offerings.

To answer your question on ‘our souls are meant to mourn our mortal days:’ The line started out in a poem about Robert Penn Warren as a view in opposition to Warren. He always had an optimistic slant to his poetry, albeit a craggy optimistic slant. Still one could make an argument that all poets are optimistic – surely we all have, at least, a profound belief in posterity.

The poem heralded Warren for transcending modern day writers who dwelled more on pessimism:

**sailing around the prophets who predict  
our souls are meant to mourn our mortal days . . .  
curling, sailing, displacing:  
this is the stuff of proper spirit.**

At first I double-clutched on the line, thinking it had a tad too much alliteration, but in the end intuitively went with it. It appeared to belong there.

Months later, the line continued to unsettle some sense that desires a completion. Whenever I re-read the poem, my eyes were drawn to that particular line, and gradually I came to understand this was one of those ‘inferred montages’ I claim exist independent of the original poems or concepts that give them birth.

Maybe, I thought, this is not pessimism at all. Maybe if one considered this in another concept, the line might come to represent something much more significant. This is one of those lines that haunts one, at the beginning for no apparent reason, but in the end bursts through, one hopes, into its intended purpose. The line eventually came rushing out, half a year later, in the midst of an Emily poem, indeed right at the punchline:

**you hinted our souls are meant  
to mourn our mortal days,  
then at last you were called back,  
you testified, with the inference you  
were there at least once before,**

**and you’ve now completed the current circle.**

So, here’s what I think it means. I think it has something to do with Plato’s idea that all souls, before they are born, get to choose the exact parents who will enable them to fulfill their natures, or daemons. I can’t say I accept the idea, but it would certainly put many an unhappy childhood into perspective. Back to my line: perhaps life is meant to be a trial, for this is how art is born. Art comes from the abrasion between reality and the ideal. Art seeks to make sense of things; art yearns to discover the reason for this place we all inhabit.

One of the themes of my novel, *“Divine Murder,”* is that of all the planets and beings that God created, he only created one place where the inhabitants felt pain and died. The reason for Earth, as he created it, was for human beings to create art – and to do so they had to first suffer.

My second novel, *“Keenly Alive, Tony,”* takes up the theme that life is a consequential struggle. Simply, we all know life is a struggle (and who from the poorest to the wealthiest does not struggle and think their path is uniquely difficult?); yet we all, I also claim, think life is consequential. We feel strongly that there is something purposeful to life. Only, we all are hard pressed to describe the consequentiality. It either comes out as religion, or art, or passions, or despair. But few of us can succinctly describe it.

So back to ‘our souls are meant to mourn our mortal days.’ Perhaps this is the whole point. When we’re incarnate, we’re meant to struggle and mourn and try to make some sense of things. Perhaps this is how we earn our spirituality. Or perhaps this is the grace of human beings.

In the end, the line speaks to me of some type of continuity, or circularity of existence. I think Emily intuited this when she says her business is circumference, and on her tombstone she says she was ‘called back,’ inferring that she had once started from a conscious spiritual plane. I think T.S. Eliot describes something similar on his tomb, “in the beginning is my end, in the end is my beginning.”

“Our souls are meant to mourn our mortal days.” Prior to corporal life, and after corporal life, our souls might soar; yet here, we are in the midst of it, and perhaps are meant to pound away at the art of breathing well.

I have no proof, of course, of any of this, and only describe it as a point I have intuited from writing poetry for thirty-odd years. Unluckily this is all about feelings, and not a shred of scientific evidence. But perhaps that is why human beings need poetry.

Here’s a new poem I’m fleshing out:

### **Sylvia Pounding on the Point**

I gallop on the point, though it never moves,  
my hands pummel down the words,  
my feet tango and staccato out the thoughts,  
my flesh rolls over the forms that are  
these reverse prayers . . . does it matter  
where they originate, once they appear  
so vibrant?

The point, the point, it requires hammering,  
a blacksmith’s thundering diligence,  
the billows, the coals, all inflamed  
while the dust of history whirls  
like fleas or no-see-um prayers . . .  
and psalms flipflop everywhere.

I can never keep my hands on the point,

I suspect no one can . . . one can touch it,  
genuflect to it, kiss it like the blarney stone,  
but no one can keep hanging on . . .  
and those who have tried have all died,  
some in kitchens, some in oceans.

So I go on, this lusting for the point,  
and sometimes, briefly, between  
the hammering, on the upstroke's  
pinnacle, the point will whisper back,  
a kiss or caress back, that it really  
shouldn't matter where the receptor  
minds originate either . . .  
it is the process that must be  
perpetuated.

*Sylvia Plath (1931-1963) American poet, published her first poem at the age of eight. Suicidal from a young age, she endured, at various times, electroshock and psychotherapy. She married the poet Ted Hughes, who went on to become England's poet laureate. The marriage lasted seven years, but failed when Hughes left her for another woman. Months later, Plath killed herself with cooking gas. In a macabre twist of irony, the woman for whom Hughes left Plath also gassed herself to death. Another poet-suicide, Anne Sexton, wrote of frequent drinking dates at the Ritz with Plath: "Often, very often, Sylvia and I would talk at length about our first suicides; at length, in detail, and in depth between the free potato chips. Suicide is, after all, the opposite of a poem."*

*Encyclopedia Americana: POINT, that which has no part, but merely position. There are various definitions, all to a degree unsatisfactory and defective because of the elemental nature of the term.*

Stay in touch.

Regards,  
Ward

Dear Andy,

I received your paper. It's very interesting, and extremely well-written. I would say you cut right to the heart of my poetry, and it's quite edifying to read the prose of someone so attuned to one's own poetry.

On to your recent Emails: How does one know his purpose? Joseph Campbell answers this question by saying one should always follow his bliss, and if you do this with integrity, doors will naturally open for you in places where you have previously seen no doors. Are you familiar with Campbell?

All this begs the question, how do you know where your bliss lies? I answer that by saying one should become attuned to what is it in life that compels. What gives mental satisfaction or pleasure? This is the main clue. For myself poetry fits the above criteria. Campbell says everyone has something they were meant to do. The two tricks are discovering it, then following it. Most people double-clutch on one or the other.

Flying back from Sioux Falls, I struck up a conversation with a retired Ph.D. who had taught comparative language in Chicago. When he spoke, for example, of the Latin roots of Celtic words, he spoke as an inflamed evangelist. Clearly in his seventies, he possessed a youth's passion for his bliss. This is what one needs to find in life (Rilke's necessity) – something that makes one want to grab the lapels of a stranger and extol the necessity of understanding that which makes you passionate. People who have this fire in old age are surely the successes of life.

I'm quite honored that you would suggest I might fit into a mentor role. I will endeavor to find one pearl or two I can pass your way, while endeavoring not to impede the facility you possess for writing. One pearl would be: graduate at all costs!

Here are two interesting quotes I stumbled across this week, after I read your paper and Emails: The first comes from John Ruskin, a 19<sup>th</sup> century art critic, "But this poor miserable Me! Is *this*, then, all the book I have got to read about God in? Yes, truly so. No other book, nor fragment of book, than that, will you ever find . . . That flesh-bound volume is the only revelation that is, that was, or that can be. In that is the image of God painted; in that is the law of God written; in that is the promise of God revealed. Know thyself; for through thyself only canst thou know God. Through the glass, darkly. But except through the glass, in no wise." This appears to reflect yours and Rilke's awareness of God that comes from the self; at any rate Ruskin pulls off capitalization and the italic.

The second quote is Judith Farr describing Emily: "What most interests Emily Dickinson is of interest to us all: the complex fate of human beings in this tragic yet beautiful world and the possible fortunes of the human spirit in the subsequent life." I find I have more intuitive affinity for the second of the two quotes.

Lastly you spoke of a nature running deeper than most people. Clearly you bear the albatross of introspection, and how you bear this will determine the grace, or lack of grace, of your life. It will either be a wonderful gift to you, or a penance. Since I spend so much time in planes, traveling has taken on metaphorical meaning for me, quite out of perspective. Yet it gives one the opportunity to observe numerous strangers. I'm always amazed to look around the cabin of a plane and see so many people simply sitting there doing nothing. For hours they will peer at the seat in front of them.

How do they do it? How can they not engage their minds? It would drive me to distraction, yet they appear to be quite content. And the metaphor? The majority of people have a similar approach to life

itself. They are quite content to avoid a closer examination of life and death, and perhaps this is an attribute. But not an attribute granted everyone.

When I read your words concerning that you are left to share the vast majority of your thoughts with yourself, it reminded me of traveling strategies, and the grace that comes from recognizing one's nature, or as James Hillman may have it – one's own daemon -- then determining how to create grace from it.

In the end, I'm quite grateful for your questions and comments, since I'm usually not called on to apply a proper logic to these ideas, proper enough to commit them to prose. Thank you for your poignancy.

Regards,  
Ward

Dear Andy,

Here's what I say regarding you not being inspired to write to or from the muse: never a problem. No worries, mate. Some people talk of 'writer's block,' but that only occurs to scribblers who force it. When one truly learns how 'not to think,' then the muse will find them with vast fluidity. How does one know what he's supposed to be writing about if he's trying to force it by thought? I often think about the writing frenzies experienced by Emily in the early 1860s, and Sylvia Plath the last year of her life. These were the results of lifetimes of devotion to being a conduit.

Besides the avoidance of thought, there is another way to jump start the process, or entice the muse to yourself . . . with a correct reverence. And that is to simply read the poetry of others. James Dickey works well for me. Someday I'll be reading Andrew Port books to motivate myself.

To answer your questions at the end of your last Email: "You look to the afterlife. Why there more than here?"

I believe it's the role of the poet to examine the human condition; and most poets eventually attune their antennae to the afterlife. Most questions concerning the human condition can be boiled down to 'what are we doing here?' Or, 'is there a purpose to all this?' Or, simply, "Why?" So priests or poets are supposed to answer these basic questions.

Although it's not only the afterlife I've been studying. In the past couple of years I've been sensing the circularity of our souls' natures. I'm coming around to the point of view that a soul has the ability to dive in and out of life, or as I refer to it on occasion in my poems, the teaming. Not everybody, and not on a schedule, but perhaps when a soul is ready to dive back into the teaming, it has that ability. Perhaps there is a voluntary reincarnation. Yet who can prove such things?

It always interests me that when I zero in on one of your questions, I come across examples in my week's reading, or it arises as a poem. So here's a couple of quotes for you on this circularity topic, both final lines of a poem. The first is from Rilke. See, this is the monster you have created, when Rilke is quoted back to you. It's from 'Das Lied Des Selbstmorders,' or 'The Suicide's Song.' He's talking about an inability to join life's feast:

It makes me ill, though others it feeds;  
Do see that I must deny it!  
For a thousand years from now at least  
I'm keeping a diet.

The other is from Charlotte Mew (1869 - 1928):

And They live so long and They feel no pain,  
I shall grow up, but never grow old,  
I shall always, always be very cold,  
I shall never come back again!

And then there's the poem I'm working on today:

## Algernon

In the end, down the cobbled street,  
on an old, chestnut, tired horse,  
your one hand gloved, one hand  
naked and mottled, you knew  
it must be said, though none  
would know of it to the bone,  
to the end of where their cells conspire,  
none would turn this over  
like a cobblestone above larvae,  
and in the very end these vermin  
are like your fingers under stone,  
yet you thought to say . . .  
you knew it must be said . . .  
“as a god self-slain,  
on his own strange altar,  
Death lies dead.”

Yet we go, in the end,  
as a god sustained, and you  
came to suspect it's physics, physics,  
not metaphysics, only we're not  
clever enough yet to perceive,  
or create, strong enough instruments  
to pierce all the way to the other side  
of our souls or natures, to the bend,  
all the way down to see enough  
that Death lies dead, a knot,  
because instead . . . our souls  
circle on and on,  
sometimes Algernon,  
on and on, sometimes not.

*Algernon Charles Swinburne, a 19<sup>th</sup> century English poet and critic, was saved from excessive drink by his friend Theodore Watts-Dunton. With "Poems and Ballads" (1866), Swinburne endured one of the most famous literary scandals of the Victorian period, as the public registered shock over this celebration of physical love. The lines above in quotes are from Swinburne's poem "A Forsaken Garden."*

I liked your Rilke quote about some folks letting the riddles pile up, then dying like animals, without making sense of it. Indeed, we all have -- or perhaps have been assigned -- a certain chore to carve these poems out with bones.

And in this chore, I do not believe it is a muse that comes to us as a separate entity. This thing we call muse may simply be that part of our soul that can whisper these reverse prayers back to us. Do we not all have one foot in the grave? Only some of us may have an articulate foot?

And yes, I'm happily married, but I never think about being also married to a muse . . . for even from childhood I've sensed that this capacity comes from within me, is a part of me or my own soul. This is why I suggested the muse looks into your eyes, but is staring at the rear of your eyes. She is within you . . . there inside . . . ready to help you with your chore . . . if you can learn how to coax this part of your soul to whisper back to you. And you surely have.

Have a wonderful Thanksgiving!

Regards,  
Ward

Dear Andy,

You certainly packed enough questions per square inch in your last E-mail -- somewhat like vacuum-dehydrated coffee -- but I will endeavor to foliate them, then answer all. You remind me of a similar intensity in myself thirty years ago, and at first I'm tempted to answer flippantly how the only cure for youth is for the patient to somehow traverse it. Get through it. Yet this reply would never have done for me when I was your age. So I'll press on . . .

I believe artistic drive is something that must be sublimated. If it's not, it flashes brilliantly then consumes itself. James Dean or Hart Crane come to mind. Or, this story: I had a friend in my early twenties who was also compelled to do poetry, yet he agonized over it. Maybe he should have never read *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, but you get the picture -- a wild-eyed, struggling artist. As impassioned as he was about writing, I noticed he seldom produced a work. He would tear up a hundred pages to find two or three perfect words.

Don't get me wrong, you need this passion to be able to create. As before, I answer the question why one writes poetry -- because you are compelled to do so. You have no other choice. But I also believe the next step after compulsion is to become attuned to the process itself. Is it agony? Or is it learning how to become a conduit?

And if poems are truly reverse prayers, one cannot rail against infinity and still be a receptor. If the 'don't think' concept has validity, then one has to learn how to channel the passion into a funnel. Your passions can swirl and become torrents, they can cascade and form currents, but they must never become impediments -- or to stay with this watery metaphor I've apparently swum into -- they must never become dams.

Next Question Answered -- Yes, I appear to be accelerating with success. November has been a good month, and I've had six poems accepted, along with a request from a small publisher for a synopsis of one of my novels. I might be becoming more adept at submitting the poems. One of my confidantes pointed out 'Salem's Shot' was once named 'Peter Salem Shot a White Man,' but by placing the historical prose device at the bottom of the poem, it enabled me to shorten the title. Her point was I frequently use my titles to explain some of the history. I think she's right. 'Salem's Shot' went from pen to publication in less than three weeks. A record for me. Even earlier than 'Salem's Shot, though,' I had taken to explaining, or illuminating, the topics of my poems in my cover letters to editors. For instance, if I sent out 'Emily Chooses to Hide,' today, I'd write the editor, 'for your consideration, here's a poem concerning Emily Dickinson.'

Previously I thought it took some of the 'big W' out of the poem when I'd tell someone who it's about; but I now think it has increased the amount of acceptances by adding these descriptions to the cover letters.

Next Question -- Are not poems best answers? Reply -- Yes. Indeed this is the whole idea, is it not? Any poet worth their salt had better be answering the basic questions of life. However this endeavor should not be confused with truth. Perhaps we are not meant to know of the truth; perhaps we are meant to produce grace from this human condition. And this is what poets do best -- they produce grace. Grace is found in the answers we conjure. Grace is found in the balm we find. The truth, I'm afraid, will be found to be physics, and not the more graceful metaphysics.

Question from Long Ago – you asked me many Emails ago to enunciate my ideas concerning forgiveness. I haven't forgotten, but I haven't thought it all the way through yet to a succinct answer. I think it has something to do with the shock one feels when learning of Bishop Tutu's truth trials, then weeks later having the shock transmute into an understanding of grace. Perhaps forgiveness is the ultimate expression of the intellect. I'll get back to you on this one, once I can enunciate Joan of Arc's message of forgiveness.

Question – why do I feel as if I were writing to myself, playing a game with myself? Reply -- Is this not the whole idea also? If reverse prayers are coming from the beyond into the interior, could they not come from your own soul, that part of you still residing in the beyond? My advice is to practice at not thinking. See what happens when you clear your mind, then write the first thing that glides in. Don't worry about meaning. Look at what you've written, and wait for the next connected thought. Write it down. Frequently I'm not certain what the poem is about until I reach the middle of it. Frequently too, I'm amazed at how the end tailhooks into those first couple of lines that at first looked like nonsense.

Question – Why play this game at all? Reply – The game has selected you, so you probably have no choice but to play this hand. Remember, I somewhat abandoned it from age twenty to age forty-five as I upward-mobiled myself through this business career I'm in (while writing about five novels). But poetry jerked me back. Recently I've discovered another poet who went through a similar twenty year hiatus. Also I think a lot about these poetry frenzies some poets go through. So again, it selects you, no matter how you try to squirm away. Best advice – don't think, don't worry, allow it to yank you to the pen when it wants you. And try to avoid being like my buddy who was too agonized to produce.

Question – Who needs us to become a master at this game? Reply – one of my favorite questions. You do. You are the one who needs to become a master at this. The rest of the world can get on quite well without our poems. But if you are requested so kindly to engage this carving with bones, then you must give it your best. After all, in the end we just might come up with a poem that can deliver some grace to another human being or two. And then we have validated this trust that was put in us.

Statement – shutting the door on darkness and doubt. Reply – I'm not convinced, Andy, you're meant to shut this door. Once given the gift to open the door to inspect these demons, I think shutting the door is a good way to torment yourself. Look at how many writers flipped all the way out: Plath, Crane, Brautigan, Hemingway, come to mind in the first second or two; the list unluckily goes on and on. Maybe they struggled too vehemently against the darkness. I think, instead, we're meant to inspect the darkness and the doubt, then discover how to make grace of these supposed demons. It is this grace we are meant to deliver through our poems. Now we are exactly at the bone and indeed scrapping away with another bone – how to produce grace from disquieting existence. This is the task of the poet.

Question – What child calls to us faintly? Is that child real, or did I imagine her? Reply – Now you've slipped into poetry, at last. So I don't have to answer a poem, thank you.

However, I will point out that in your very Email you've underlined the process I've described above. You identified your own darkness and despair, you inspected and described it, you lamented a little bit, then you instinctively turned these potentially scary thoughts into a poem bearing grace.

It is quite an honor corresponding with you.

Regards,

Ward