Sample from Frugal Poets' Guide to Life: How to Live a Poetic Life, Even If You Aren't a Poet, by Cynthia Gallaher

Sojourn Six: Frugal poets' guide to creativity

Cultivating the creative beast

As a child, I was fascinated with chemistry sets, microscopes, telescopes and gyroscopes. I participated in a host of elementary school science fairs. To me, dissecting animals in high school biology class were events I marked on my calendar. However, whenever a science teacher brought up the "scientific method," that step-by-step, trial-and-error procedure at the heart of scientific experimentation, I found attention drifting, my concentration faltering.

Although hardly a future scientist, and not quite on the path yet to being a writer, I still felt something was inherently lacking in the "scientific method." Could the shortest distance between two points be a straight line? In the method's one step forward, one step back approach, how could this zigzag represent the shortest route, or more important, the best one?

Eventually, I got wind of an alternative method, the "creative leap." Eureka! Why wait to go through steps one, two and three, when step 12 is calling your name. And step 12 likely has just the right visual image that you can wrap your mind and concept around. Making the "creative leap" can heighten the meaning of you original thought, and instead of A + B = AB, a combination of A & B, it now becomes A + B = C, the union creating a whole new image, experience or metaphor to shoulder your thoughts.

The "creative leap" is not a random jump or foolhardy stunt. You see the likely solutions before you, huddled like anxious groupies. These are the words, the images, the direction that a particular piece of writing might take you. Yet there, in the distance, stands that dashing hero of a transition, an end goal that can complete your segment or chapter or poem waving to you from afar. You may head down different byways that sometimes seem to come face to face with a brick wall. But then, finally, two divergent ideas you come up with may send you to a point when you can break out into an intense run, jump and leap into the "a-ha! moment" that melds the two into a new, seamless whole.

How about an out-of-this-world example of theoretical followers of the creative-leap method? Such as those possible and maybe probable beings called extraterrestrials. If you can even contemplate their existence, realize that they might think beyond connecting dots on the map. Do they pinpoint our planet in regard to their planet, then set controls on automatic pilot for the mega-light years it takes to arrive on planet earth? If they chose the point-A-to-point-B method, they'd all be powder by the time they got to terra firma.

Instead, they might possibly shoot through wormholes, bend time and space to arrive in no real trackable time. They've found a way that's much faster and offers less wear-and-tear on their unidentified vehicle and themselves. Without traveling farther, they travel smarter, and arrive with panache. It might be a little hard to compare their supposed, intergalactic journeys with writing, but you get the idea. They've found a "creative leap" that really takes them places.

Do clowns work harder, or smarter?

An image from childhood about the concept of "work" has always stayed with me. In one of our local library's children's books, a page showed a picture of two clowns. One was trying to lift a chair nailed to the floor, and the other was lifting a feather into the air. The first clown seemed as if he had struggled for hours, with sweat on his brow. He wore work gloves as he tugged and tugged on the chair, to no avail. Meanwhile, the carefree clown lifted the feather with a broad grin on his face, downy fluff dancing between his fingertips.

Then the book posed a question: Which clown did more work? I initially said to myself, "The first clown, of course." I considered all the effort he put in, the hours and the sweat. But the book's answer to the question surprised me. The second clown who lifted the feather actually did more work, the book said, because he moved something from one place to another, plain and simple. The first clown, despite his struggles, accomplished nothing, no work at all was done.

Many frugal poets put in numerous, sometimes endless hours in the workplace and at the writing table, myself included, racking our brains, butting against blocks, and fruitlessly trying to budge chairs nailed down solid. Our real work as creative people takes place in those other moments when work becomes play. It happens when our hearts are buoyant with excitement from the "creative leap," when we have the "a-ha" moment that moves our work forward, but almost doesn't seem like work at all.

We might perhaps venture through a scientific method of sorts thinking of possibilities, eliminating them, or washing, ironing and ultimately putting them away in a drawer. That said, as we shuffle through the virtual Rolodex of ideas that don't work, it can only get us closer to picking the right card, sometimes seemingly tossed our way by a magician, bearing the exact solution we need – or at least one that might sufficiently suffice until a better one comes along.

There were many times during my years as an advertising copywriter when I presented my boss with concepts, campaigns and ideas for commercials. When he really went for something, he might say, "Good work! I know you put a lot of time into this." Well, yes and no. I might have put some days letting my thoughts gel, letting the possibilities wash over me. I surely put in a lot of time into what didn't work.

But the idea that actually worked, the one he liked, took only five minutes, maybe one minute, maybe just the "a-ha! moment." But for the writer, all the conceptualization is work, because thinking is an integral part of the creative process. Journalist Burton Rascoe said, "A writer is working when he's staring out of the window."

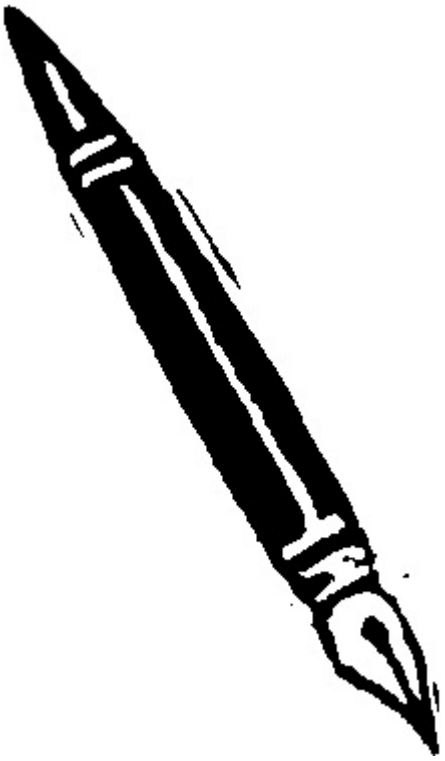
Are you the "creative type?"

If you think you are creative and pursue creative outlets such as writing poetry, fiction, nonfiction or drama, painting or sculpting, writing and performing music or acting, then you are creative. You can also be a creative cook, quilter, decorator, architect, physicist or inventor. Creativity can infiltrate numerous areas of one's life. All true creative people have the soul and sense of the frugal poet.

But what if you're not sure if you're creative? Maybe you haven't tested many creative waters or only briefly stuck your toe in. Or perhaps you think you're creative, but want to be reassured that indeed you are? The alternative therapist and thinker Deepak Chopra often discusses traits that he believes most creative people exhibit:

- You can enjoy silence.
- You connect with and appreciate nature.
- You can remain centered and function in the midst of chaos and confusion. You trust your feelings.
- You are often child-like. You enjoy fantasy and play.
- You are self-referring. You have a high trust in your own consciousness.
- You are not rigidly attached to any point of view. While passionately committed to your creativity, you remain open to new possibilities.

Do any or all these traits apply to you? Other experts cite risk-taking, motivation, resilience, unconventionality, a sense of humor and even an androgynous psychology (meaning personality, not one's physicality) as being key traits in a majority of creative "types."



The creativity expert in the alfalfa field

I had the pleasure of meeting and becoming acquainted with creativity and gifted-child expert Jane Piirto, a poet and professor at Ashland University in Ashland, Ohio. This was during a time when I worked as a "creative manager" in Chicago for a company that had its manufacturing and parts facility in Ashland.

While "creative manager" might sound like a glitzy title, my not-so-glamorous duties included putting together catalogs and sales flyers on the virtues of our pumps, solenoid valves, sprayer hoses and sewage holding tanks. To fend off the routine of various overnight visits to the factory, I figured I might as well find out what kind of poetry scene Ashland had to offer, if any. Poets need community wherever they go, and I was no exception.

Ashland is a mid-size town in north central Ohio and the self-declared "World Headquarters of Nice People." Yes, there are quite a few nice people in Ashland. In addition, some streets are dotted with beautiful historical buildings dating back to the 1840s with the town itself surrounded by farmland and Amish settlements. I was pleasantly surprised to discover that Ashland also had a thriving literary platform, thanks mostly to the university and its strong emphasis on creative writing.

I attended a couple of poetry readings held at the university during different business trips. After one particular reading, I was invited to a party Piirto was holding at her Victorian-style home to fete the night's reader. The party was brimming with poets-in-residence from the university, students and creative locals who knew how to heartily swap stories, laugh, dance and enjoy.

I hadn't heard of Piirto before. I soon learned that she was the author of books on the topic of creativity, including *Understanding Those Who Create* and *My Teeming Brain: Understanding Creative Writers.* At her home, she took many of us on a tour of her quirky and quaint two-story house and I remember even poking our heads in her lofty attic. After chatting for a while, I found myself intrigued by what Piirto had to say on the topics of creativity, talent and giftedness, which I found out she both taught and wrote about. She told me that women such as myself who lacked a father figure often become creative (and while I had a good stepfather, John, in my later childhood years, my actual father Gilbert had died when I was a toddler).

Open and friendly, both she and her Ashland crowd made sure to make me feel included by explaining any inside story or joke, or what the local politics meant to them, and how nearly all at Ashland University were originally from somewhere else. Although I was only the occasional town drop-in, I found Ashland to unexpectedly become my literary home away from home, and picked up with my new creative alliances whenever I was in town. Along the way, the university press editors generously published poems of mine in two of its subsequent anthologies.

I soon made it a point to obtain and avidly read Piirto's nonfiction books on creativity, as well as her poetry (how could I resist a book of poetry called *Saunas*, which focuses on Piirto's cultural relationship with Finnish saunas, one of my favorite habitats). Among her creativity books' pages, I also found another aspect of myself that she believed pointed to the creative nature, an aspect that I had struggled with, which had confused me, but had often delighted me with a secret sense of knowing and strength. And it was something like this, "creative people often have an androgynous nature" and surely "societal gender expectations incongruent with their essential personalities."

I've never been the one to sing the song from the Rogers & Hammerstein musical, "I enjoy being a girl" with hearty verve. I'm not "girlie." I don't particularly care for pink, lace, diamonds, high heels or the Rococo era. I hate crystal chandeliers. I like darker colors, "middle earth" décor, heavy wood furniture, and substantial conversation topics (as many real women do!).

My husband Carlos argues that I am nothing but feminine (I even scream when I see spiders), though he also thinks I'm often a tough chick. And he's a tough dude. One of the reasons I chose Carlos is because he is the first man who I ever dated who is smarter than I am. I admire that.

But for the most part, I've been closely in touch with my overall "personhood" over any "feminine" persona, which also includes a sense of self-sufficiency, an ability to

"rough it" if need be, a desire to know how to do practical tasks myself, a low-maintenance sensibility, and a sense of adventure for the new and untried.

The concept of androgyny is something I previously didn't give great thought to. But personally, I have had somewhat of a hard time feeling particularly "feminine" in a stereotypical sense, though I always feel tremendously heterosexual. Nevertheless, nearly all my interests can be connected to the "feminine" spirit, such as cooking, beading, aromatherapy, poetry, fashion, makeup, a former modeling career, and a decades-long marriage with children. Yet I haven't closely related to identification with my gender per se, except when it in fact comes to relationships with the opposite sex, being a mother, a sympatico support of the Women's Movement, and the fate of my girlfriends.

Perhaps that's a lot of feminine. But immediately upon reading this "androgynous" profile in Piirto's book, a sense of relief washed over me. She explained that not only is such a nature acceptable, it was a positive in the creative arena. Personhood trumps any ideal of gender. Her words were a revelation, confirmation, a salve. And throughout my reading of her books, I was impressed by both her research and ability to explain the creative personality in an accessible and highly readable manner.

I also read a white paper that Piirto wrote, which is available online to anyone, called "The Creative Process in Poets." Among other creativity-related topics in the paper, Piirto delves deeply into the specific personhood of poets and writers, and the influence of what she calls the five "suns." According to Piirto, these five suns are factors that make the difference between whether a writer's innate talent is developed or whether it atrophies.

Piirto's "Suns"

Piirto's fascinating research more clearly outlines a personal profile of the archetypal American poet, if there could ever be one such individual poet! What she has labeled as "suns" reflect the dominant or recurrent themes that emerged during her studies of the lives of 160 contemporary U.S. writers.

The "sun of home," "sun of community and culture," "sun of school," "sun of chance" and "sun of gender" comprise her "Piirto Pyramid of Talent Development." All the themes, traits or trends, of course, need not be present for one to be a poet or writer, such as living in New York City, attending a prestigious university or getting divorced! Do you recognize your personal background or traits among Piirto's "suns?"

Sun of Home themes: Unconventional families and family traumas; extensive early reading; early publication and interest in reading; incidence of depression and/or acts such as use of alcohol, drugs or the like; being in an occupation different from parents.

Sun of Community and Culture themes: Feeling marginalized or an outsider, resulting in need to have group's story told; later career recognition.

Sun of School themes: High academic achievement and many writing awards; talent nurtured by both male and female teachers and mentors; attendance at prestigious colleges, majoring in English literature but without attaining a Ph.D.

Side note: Interestingly, John Barr, former president of the Poetry Foundation observed, "With a few important exceptions, no major American poet has come from the academic world." Think of Wallace Stevens, an insurance executive; Walt Whitman, a printer; Emily Dickinson, largely unemployed but a caregiver for her mother in her later years; Allen Ginsberg, one of the few poets to actually make a living as a professional

poet; William Carlos Williams, a physician; Carl Sandburg, a journalist; even a Nobel Prize poet such as Tomas Transtromer (Swedish) was a psychologist by profession, and the list goes on.

Sun of Chance themes: Residence in New York at some point, especially among the most prominent; the accident of place of birth and ethnicity.

Sun of Gender themes: Conflict with combining parenthood and careers in writing; societal gender expectations incongruent with their essential personalities; history of divorce more prevalent in women; military service more prevalent in men.

I won't venture into further explanations or interpretations of Piirto's poetic profile. Instead, I invite and encourage you to investigate her numerous books and articles to learn more about her well-researched insights into the creative personality. Find more of her work on BEpress and ResearchGate online sites. Ultimately, Piirto feels that more than chance or innate traits, it is one's own actual performance that matters most in being a creative success. Agreed!

Another quip on creativity

One other significant description of a creative person that really perks up my ears is from creativity expert Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who said, "If I had to express one word that makes their personalities different from others, it's *complexity*. They show tendencies of thought and action that in most people are segregated. They contain contradictory extremes; instead of being an 'individual,' each of them is a 'multitude.'"

My husband Carlos has given me one of my treasured compliments. He told me I had an "extremely layered personality." Even though we've been married many years, he said that just when he thinks he knows me or figures me out, I reveal another layer of myself that he finds unexpected. I definitely don't do anything like that on purpose. And its not as if I'm hiding anything, at least I don't think I am. I suppose what I feel is that as life goes through different phases, times arrive to find out something new, to experience something else and to learn more about another area of life.

I call it curiosity. Curiosity keeps us passionate about life, in my viewpoint. That may be why I sought a certification in yoga as my corporate career transitioned, why I took up mandalas, beading and aromatherapy as pastimes, why I'm attracted to the movement of earthquakes and volcanoes, the quality of food and water not only for our consumption, but also for the fate of nature, and why I feel an overall need to return to "hippy" roots, shunning the voice of bureaucratic authority, never to wear a skirt suit again.

Homegrown alpha state for creativity

When I was in college, a self-awareness system called biofeedback gained popularity. It was a method of controlling your mind or brain waves to change your heart rate, lower blood pressure, relieve migraines, or alter other normally involuntary bodily function. A varied set of "biofeedback machines" were used to gauge these waves.

More important to me was how biofeedback gave people a perspective on how they could get in greater touch with their internal feelings, intellect and sense of self. The concepts surrounding biofeedback have been around in India and other cultures for millennia. Some of the early biofeedback studies in the 20th century were done by D. Shearn.

Most people experience life in the beta state of ordinary consciousness, which is the sharp, focused, wide-awake and alert state. Alpha brain waves operate on a frequency a notch lower than beta. The alpha state is when things slow down a bit. In an alpha state you become more relaxed and take on a creative mindset, perfect for visualization.

Many beginning writers feel that such a state should come over them naturally before they feel in the exact mindset to write. In other words, they need to be in a creative "mood" before they begin. But I believe you can enter this "mood" or "alpha state at will." It just takes a little practice.

Although I was never personally hooked up to any type of biofeedback machine, my friend Sue did go through the actual process. I accompanied her there. Once in place, the technician hooked various electrodes to her head and upper parts of her body. Then he asked Sue to concentrate on different ideas, on what made her laugh, what made her angry, then guided her to relax and empty her mind. The machine indicated when she had reached an "alpha state." The specialist told her that she could begin to match certain feelings and mindset with this state on her own, without the machine, and gain benefit from it.

I liked the concept. Catching the drift of it seemed to suffice for my needs. Without much guidance other than reading, I trained myself to reach what I call "alpha state at will." I don't wait for the alpha state to knock on my mental door to be ready write. Conversely, when I have the time to write, I aim to get in the alpha state in short order.

I clear my mind, focus, let my thoughts play. While freeing myself, I also try not to let my imagination just randomly skittle around the universe as if I were only daydreaming. Rather, I rally my thoughts, however loose and wild, to make them play as part of a team towards my writing goal, whether that goal is to come up with a concept, story or poem.

Quite literally it's using mind over matter, and a disciplined yet highly flexible mind renders wondrous and playful results. Don't try too hard. Toggle between will and play until it feels right. Entering the alpha state is something you can teach yourself. It requires patience and even a little faith.

Sit yourself down, focus on what you want to write, and get started, even if what you're writing might not be a string of literary pearls. Relax and let the work kidnap you. Give into it. "Defragment" your mind. Don't try to be controlling. Be present. Let your writing pull you in. Play the game, but set the rules, so you don't go off on too divergent a path, or worse, fall asleep.

Woody Allen has that much-quoted line, "Eighty percent of success is just showing up." If you make a poetry date with yourself, show up. Then count the next 15 minutes, or hour, or two hours as your "date" strictly focused on poetry. Nothing else, no other distractions. Shut off your smartphone. Give yourself permission to have fun and make the most of your date. As in the song "Luck Be a Lady Tonight" from the musical "Guys & Dolls," your poetry date needs your undivided attention. "A lady doesn't leave her escort. It isn't fair, it isn't nice. A lady doesn't wander all over the room, and blow on some other's guy's dice."

Abandon your ego-centered self on your poetry dates, forget that outer you, your hungers, thirsts, sexual desires, feelings of heat and cold – give yourself up to the poetic experience. Strangely, you may find that after giving a set half-hour commitment to the

process, you look up and see that two hours have transpired. If this happens, it is not "lost time." It means that are doing "this creative thing" the right way.

You *can* be creative at will. You *can* enter the alpha state at will. Don't wait for the "perfect time" to write. Don't wait for the next workshop, retreat, vacation, three-day weekend. Don't wait until you finish this or that project, get married, get divorced, wait until your child finishes school, wait until the paint dries. Write now. Write tonight. Create your alpha state at will as you put pen to paper, or brush to canvas, or fingers to keyboard, depending on your discipline.

Just for the record, brain wave activity vibrating at a notch lower than alpha state is called the theta state, in which you can enter a deep state of meditation that almost skirts the border of sleep (it's also the range of people with schizophrenia or under the influence of hallucinogens such as LSD). Finally, delta brain wave activity is rendered during deep restorative sleep. I discuss more about sleep and dreams a little later on.

Self-disappearing act, voila, subject appears

One of my favorite authors, novelist John Steinbeck said, "Ideas are like rabbits. You get a couple, learn how to handle them, & pretty soon you have a dozen." When you abandon yourself and leave daily issues behind, you can enter that creative space in which you unleash countless pleasures, fascinating insights, original viewpoints. There is nothing "new" about approaching writing or any other creative discipline this way. The Greeks called it the "visitation of the Muse." Poet Brewster Ghiselin called it "oceanic consciousness." The creativity expert Csikszentmihalyi called it "flow."

In his book on the craft of writing, *Next Word, Better Word,* poet Stephen Dobyns explains how the great German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, around 1907, attempted to find a "new way" of writing. Instead of waiting for inspiration to engulf him, he would just begin to write on a particular subject, and the inspiration would appear as he wrote. He actually caught such an idea from another great, the sculptor Auguste Rodin, for whom Rilke had worked as a secretary. Rodin often made preliminary studies of his sculptures in clay. At this point, he didn't firmly plan on what he wanted to make, but once engaged, inspiration would fall upon him as the subject *revealed itself*.

How distractions dampen the creative experience, in any era

In an upstairs New York artist's studio across from Carnegie Hall, a group of journalists, playwrights, composers and other artsy types gathered most weeknights after their daytime careers at the *New Yorker* magazine or theater rehearsal halls. Someone usually sat down at the piano, to strike up the latest popular song or newest composition. Others sang.

More people than the small sitting room might comfortably hold milled about talking, laughing, eating snacks and drinking liquor tapped from the apartment's bathtub still. Before long, ruckus party games were drummed up for group participation.

In the midst of it all, a woman in a smudged smock worked feverishly at her easel, plying an array of colorful pastels to paper, creating elaborate portraits of women to appear on the next month's magazine covers, whether it be the Saturday Evening Post, McClure's or McCall's. Her name was Neysa McMein, and this was her 57th Street artist's studio.

The above scene captures a typical evening for members of the Algonquin Round Table in the jazz-era 1920s. This group, which included writer and humorist Dorothy Parker, authors and playwrights Edna Ferber and George S. Kaufmann, and comic actor Harpo Marx, lunched daily in the Rose Room at the Algonquin Hotel. Come evening, however, they most likely stopped by Neysa's studio "salon" before running off in different directions to dinner or the theater.

Neysa, born Marjorie McMein, was one of my ancestral cousins, an earnest girl raised in the town of Quincy, Illinois, which hugs the Mississippi River. Majorie was an only child. Her mother was confined to a wheelchair, her father was a sometimes newspaperman and an all-time alcoholic. Meanwhile, because of her less than ideal nuclear family situation, her friends and neighbors soon became her extended family. After a generous neighbor took pity on the girl and helped fund her arts education at Chicago's Art Institute, there was no looking back.

After Chicago, Marjorie headed east to New York City, found work as a freelance illustrator, changed her name to Neysa under the suggestion of a numerologist, and eventually became swept up by the most gregarious, notorious, glamorous group of writers and other artistic types known during the prohibition era – The Algonquin Round Table.

Neysa's ragamuffin-to-riches, small town girl to the toast of New York, is indeed a glamorous story. How many hundreds of would-be poets, fiction writers, playwrights and artists imagine the glamorous life, the overnight success, the adoring fans, friendships among the most interesting, intelligent and talented people, a calendar full of

excitement, newness and wonder. Unfortunately, this is not the typical artist's or writer's story.

How Neysa and other members of the social, fun-loving Algonquin Round Table got canvases painted, plays written and manuscripts completed might be one of the wonders of the early 20th century. While the types of lives many of the Algonquiners led were fascinating, so-modern (no matter the decade!) and definitely quotable in the papers, they were nonetheless the antithesis of the typical artist's or poet's life.

While we all need breaks, enjoyment and friends with mutual interests, the productivity of the writer or artist is ultimately not linked to an atmosphere of excitement, but of one that *lacks distraction*. How Neysa McMein could continue to work at her easel in the din of nightly festivities was more likely due to her calm concentration, off-hand manner and Midwest work ethic than to the ongoing, unending experiences around her serving as any kind of inspiration. In addition, while she'd sometimes show up at the Round Table's lunch get-togethers, her visits to those were far and few in between, relatively speaking. She had work to do in her studio!

Cousin Neysa, while not a fine artist, was a highly regarded commercial one in the early decades of the 20th century. She was the token artist among the group of Algonquin writers, and from what I've read, seemed to maintain a sunny, open-to-all, though slightly eccentric attitude amidst the hub-bub and jadedness of Manhattan, as expressed in her biography, *Anything Goes: The Jazz Age Adventures of Neysa McMein and Her Extravagant Circle of Friends by Brain Gallagher* (no relation).

Most people today have never heard of her. But she indeed produced a ubiquitous amount of artwork in her studio during those roaring-20s evening salons with the Algonquin group. I've collected dozens of her magazine covers, mostly obtained from eBay, spanning her 40-year career as an artist. As I look closer at her body of work, I find she plied her best pieces earlier than her Algonquin-involved days, in the teens of the century, which was soon after she arrived in New York. She was relatively unknown, living in a cold flat with a roommate and eating bowls of popcorn to keep her stomach from growling.

Her post-1920s work was also significant, in the 30s and 40s, at a time when the Algonquin group dissipated and Neysa's life took on sharper focus on family and a smaller group of loyal friends. She nonetheless produced a large amount of hired artwork in her studio during those roaring-20s evening salons with the Algonquin group. But would distractions have anything to do with the quality of work she produced during that period?

Even Dorothy Parker took note of the distractions that the Algonquin Round Table days had on her work as a writer. While we'll always love and remember her for her witty quotes and humorous poems, and perhaps her hand in a later screenplay or two, she personally regretted never writing the novel she wanted to or finishing other literary projects she had planned.

From the poem "Neysa McMein: American Illustrator 1888-1949" (appears in "ELM: Eureka Literary Magazine")

galleries with mirrors;
some with streaks and cracks, ragged edges,
others sparkling and clear in smooth frames,

her frenetic figure blurs past each in smudged smock,
disheveled hair, she pauses for a moment,
a wise hand brushes her face.

Focus on the moment, not on multi-tasking

"The ability to control one's attention is perhaps the single most important quality of the creative mind," said author Frank Bures in a 2011 article in "Poets & Writers" magazine entitled "Inner Space."

According to singer/songwriter Bob Dylan, "There's a lot of distractions for people, so you might not never (sic) find the real you. A lot of people don't."

Many 21st century folks take claim on the special, modern talent to multitask in ways that previous generations could not, for example, driving while talking on a cellphone. Or surfing the web during a lecture. Or trying to write a poem while having a Facebook page open next to a Twitter feed. Kissing and driving. Do we moderns possess unique skills that even 20 years ago couldn't be fathomed?

An ancient thinker, Publilius Syrus said, "To do two things at once is to do neither." Nevertheless, there is no getting around that the Internet age is hooked in through our fingertips, giving us the ability to interface with legions of others at once on social media. Torn by these powers to connect, many writers bemoan the amount of time the Web can pull from their days, a distraction that can lure even the most disciplined.

Many college students may have their laptops open during class and still insist they have the contemporary savvy to surf the Web while still managing to absorb what the professor is talking about at the front of the class. However, scientists have recently proven that these students are mistaken. Distracted students miss quite a bit of what's discussed and cannot multitask like they think they can. In an article called "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" Nicolas Carr says, "What the Net seems to be doing is chipping away at my capacity for concentration and contemplation."

Look at babies. They are not into time management. Look at children. Multi-tasking is not in their vocabulary. They might have short attention spans and seem to go from one thing to another, but their approach to each toy, person and experience is with full and with focused awe. Babies and young children experience each moment separately, not in multiple.

Remove thyself or remove distraction

You read a poem or novel and suddenly experience a magnificent sunset, a breathtaking view from a mountain, a dense, mysterious jungle teaming with exotic birdcalls that the writer has mapped out for you. But can you guess how many sweeping sections of your favorite author's novels or poems were created on the grayest, mundane, laundry-on-the-clothesline kind of days? Probably most of them! Those are the kind of days when our stomachs growl, heads ache slightly and the craft of writing nearly leaves us wishing for a moment to be somewhere else or to do something else, to be "distracted" by the easier or more familiar. Or shall we say, most writing days are just plain, ordinary days.

These are the very days that can prove the most creative. A good writing day could be one that's just plum without any distractions of its own – or one filled with a

bevy of events from which you, with mixed feelings, purposefully remove yourself to get your writing done.

Shakespeare's plays are performed on stage to adoring applause. But they were written in private. Most likely Will was holed up in a chilly room with the hearth on its last sputter, his actor friends out at the pub having laughs, but he all alone, wearing a pair of moth-eaten gloves as he plied his quill. And while his fingers may have felt nipped by the frigid air, his words moved faster than wildfire, with ink wet and occasionally smearing his sleeves as he made his indelible mark on literary history. Once he set himself down and let his pen to weave scene after scene of his plays, he became part of the drama himself. Ultimately, little could drag him away from it, save intense hunger or utter fatigue.

Poet Laureate of Los Angeles, memoirist and friend Luis J. Rodriguez lived in Chicago for several years in between his sojourns in East L.A. He wrote how the grey, low-lying Chicago clouds helped keep him inside to write versus the sunny days in L.A. that tended to lure him outdoors.

Shaking off distraction

One week in early May I found myself as a writer-in-residence at Shake Rag Alley in the artsy southwest Wisconsin town of Mineral Point, a town filled with art galleries, restaurants, bookshops and pubs. Trouble was, Mineral Point is a "summer town." Almost every establishment is closed or with limited hours until June. The month of May that found me there was still off-season.

In a town ordinarily with much to do, there wasn't. So, in between writing bouts, I took midday hikes around the charming, hilly town for exercise and made my own meals in my apartment kitchen. Perhaps I wandered into a shop or two, if open, and enjoyed but one outing for an evening meal at a restaurant open on weekends only. With fewer distractions than I was used to, I forged ahead with a tremendous amount of writing. Feeling free and motivated, some days I wrote morning, afternoon and night, stopping only to eat or hike.

The absence of distractions was a productivity blessing. I had removed myself from the distractions, somewhat unwittingly. But I could have, a little less easily, removed the distractions from myself. This is what faces us each time we sit down to write. Getting away on a writing retreat is a luxury. We, on a regular basis, deserve to treat ourselves in our everyday life to the luxury of writing without distraction in our own, familiar environments.

Committing to writing is like committing to a lover

While the so-called "ideal person" may strive for a balance of work, fun, distraction and rest, the individual with the mind of the frugal poet might need to adapt a different level of commitment. To get the actual work done, turning away from distraction can make all the difference in fulfilling a poet's dreams of creation. A fellow Chicago poet, Al Simmons, once told me something like this, "Writing is not about thinking about the act of writing, or talking about writing, or reading about writing. It's actually about taking up your pen and writing!"

In his autobiography, *Chronicles: Volume One*, Bob Dylan tells the story of his early days in folk music, when he'd play the guitar by himself in his Minnesota college

dorm. He propped the guitar on his lap as he sat on his twin bed, strumming, riffing, experimenting. Night after night, playing for hours on end, he'd fall asleep with the guitar in his arms. He didn't get much schoolwork done. Before long he dropped out of college completely and eventually headed to New York City. But it was here, alone in his room, that he began to master the instrument that helped make him legend.

According to Ralph Waldo Emerson, "One of the illusions of life is that the present hour is not the critical, decisive hour. Write it in your heart that every day is the best day of the year. No man has learned anything rightly, until he knows that every day is doomsday."

Anyone with a frugal poet spirit should only fall asleep at the end of the day holding on dearly to his or her love, be it writing, music, fine art or other creative endeavor. Only fools fall in love immediately. A true relationship is a nurturing process in which you slowly get to know your work. In return admiration, your creative work shines. If you are new to writing, you might want to start by setting aside a mere 15 minutes or half hour writing every Wednesday night. You will gain momentum as you go along.

You wouldn't run a marathon without building on your training over time. In the same way, though it *can* happen, a person who's never written or is fairly new to writing just doesn't sit down and write an entire novel or book of poems over a period of a few weeks. Some who try may completely lose steam and give up. It can be like a romantic relationship that burns hard and bright in the beginning, but soon fizzles out. The spark is dead.

Instead, a creative practice builds naturally along with your enthusiasm. The love that grows and branches out is the more true relationship, the more real and poetic one. After a while, frugal poet, you may find that you and your writing can't live without each other. May you and the urge and power to create ultimately become inseparable.

Succeed when others merely quit

Some of the best advice of my writing life came from an older poet I met while I was a 20-something. I was working my way around the Chicago poetry venues on Lincoln Avenue, performing at open mics and trying to get my poems published in local small press literary magazines. This woman said something along the lines of, "It's simple. If you keep writing and don't give up, you will be successful. The world is full of quitters. People quit left and right. People have quit yesterday, today and tomorrow. Quitting is the 'norm.' If you don't quit, you will be a writer and the others will not."

This woman, whose name and even face I have unfortunately forgotten, left me an indelible message I'll never forget. What she said has been an inspiration and source of encouragement over the decades. Best of all, she was right.

With that said, I'll turn the tables a little. Sometimes we need to quit. Yes, that's right. Writing may not suit us. Something else will. I've quit ballet, stained glass, acrylic painting, Tai Chi, ice-skating and other pursuits that were nonetheless fun in my experimental teens and 20s. Ultimately, they didn't really suit me. One of the best things I ever quit was smoking. After 15 years of being a semi-slave to cigarettes I took the decisive step of going cold turkey. It saved my health as well as a lot of money!

Poetry and I get hitched in Colorado

With poetry, it was different. From the start I knew it was for me. I first began my life as an active poet at age 22, and wrote and published individual poems for several years. And like many 20-somethings, I also had friends, work, boyfriends, parties, concerts, dancing and multiple activities that also took up my time and kept my head whirling. Then at age 28, something special happened. I took the plunge to actually "marry" poetry. It may sound silly, but I felt like this is what happened to me, and it was ceremonial. How do you "marry" poetry? There is no set way, as far as I know.

My "marriage" took place while hiking on a Colorado mountain trail during a half-day break from a busy writers' conference in Aspen. Leaving the other workshop participants behind, I went off by myself. I took a short bus ride into the wilderness. Dropped off, I followed a meandering trail alone, where I strolled and pondered. As the wind tethered through the mix of coniferous and deciduous trees along the trail, whistling softly, I began to ask myself what I was doing with my life. Where was I heading now as I neared my 30s? Then it dawned on me. Or should I say something swept over me. Why hadn't I realized this before?

Everything within me told me that now, today, this very moment was the time to totally and completely make a lifelong commitment to writing. I stopped for a long while and stared up at a glorious azure sky festooned with billowy white clouds, framed by a bristly patch of conifers below. An eagle slowly circled high overhead. The air was sweet. The sun soothed my cheeks.

Quietly and to myself, I took vows to dedicate my life to writing. It was if, for once, for me as a word person, whatever words I included in these vows weren't that important. What stood out was my intention and certainty that I would be bound to my commitment to poetry for the rest of my life, even if the path ahead were as circuitous and uncertain as the mountain trail before me. I felt bathed in the surety of what I was pushing forward with. What a beautiful place for a wedding! On that spur-of-the-moment hike, poetry and I had eloped in a manner of speaking, in that Colorado forest.

After more years of writing, and more poems published in individual magazines, I finally came out with my first published collection of poems at age 35 called *Night Ribbons*. By that time, I had in "human fashion" actually married my heartfelt love and fellow poet, Carlos, and had given birth to my son, Julian. Nevertheless, poetry and I are still going strong and I have no plans in the future to have it any other way. Carlos and I are still together, as well! I guess you'd say that we and poetry are all a happy family.

What is your definition of success?

The signs of success for a poet are often quite different than a measure of success for other writers, however. Even successful poets are seldom on a road to riches like novelists such as Stephen King or J.K. Rowling. These novelists' books became blockbusters and subsequently made into profitable films. Poets struggle to gain any sizable audiences and attention in America. Nevertheless, there are more people writing and reading poetry than ever before.

In the midst of talking so highly about not quitting poetry, even "marrying" it, you might interrupt me with a question, "So, frugal poet, where are your successes?" Many view success as manifested in outward, visible, external signs. Many of us have some of those. My successes in the advertising field were often immediately apparent, but successes as a poet are far more subtle, but more deeply felt, if only by a smaller number of people, or even just by myself.

I may be a "frugal poet" and not a famous one, but after a long learning curve as a beginner and working my way around the often bumpy path of words, I've published a wealth of poems (more than 100), three full collections of poetry and two chapbooks, have received grants from the Illinois Arts Council and City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs, garnered honors, among them being placed on the Chicago Public Library's list of "Top Ten Requested Chicago Poets," given scores of writing workshops and guest appearances in numerous universities (while holding only a bachelor's degree**,** and one not even in English), and finding my work included in a number of national anthologies, including two from University of Iowa Press.

Yet for every outward sign of success, I've had more than my share of failures and disappointments, rejections and being passed over. No writer improves or learns his or her craft without making mistakes, making false suppositions, heading in a dead-end direction, writing crappy pieces or, worse, seeing such crappy pieces forever in print.

My name is not a known one by any stretch of the imagination. I really make little monetarily from poetry. I've always had a day job and needed to keep one. Somehow, I feel like a poetic success nonetheless. How can that be? More important than anything else, when it comes to my personal measure for success, it is this: I live the real life of a real poet and have done so over an extended time.

I have experienced many different selves at different times to different people. I have had liaisons of varying length in the worlds of musical theater, children's drama, feature writing and creative nonfiction. But first and foremost, I can say I am a poet every day of my life. It is my life's work, and I have made the commitment. I can't imagine being happy otherwise.

The poet Sam Hamill said, "Poets in America don't have 'careers' in poetry, but I have a life in it." And poet and Nobel prizewinner Derek Walcott described being a poet as a "religious vocation."

According to Malcolm Gladwell in his book *Outliers*, one becomes an "expert" or accomplished in a subject if they've logged an intensive practice of 10,000 hours. Writing is a lifelong pursuit. The hours of creative work have been worthwhile and continue to be variously textured, sometimes utterly frustrating, and once in a while personally magnificent.

In an article called "The Republic of Noise: The Loss of Solitude in Schools and Culture," published in the American Educator 2011-2012, Diana Senechal said, "We cannot accomplish anything of beauty unless we are willing to spend many hours working on it alone…(and sums it up by saying) Without solitude, our very thoughts tend toward one-liners."