



Inspiration or Perspiration?

Don't wait. Jump in.

Conventional thinking tells us not to wait for inspiration. Famous authors and artists advise against going into a holding pattern in the hopes the muse will strike. Nearly all writers' and artists' blogs that discuss inspiration advise you not to sit around waiting for that lightbulb moment. The rest of them tell you what to do to get inspired and get back to work. No one suggests you simply wait for inspiration to show up.

This advice is well founded. Waiting for inspiration can be a clever disguise for resistance. You tell yourself, "I'll write/paint/create later when I have a better idea of what I'm doing." And before you know it, you have more of a WAITING Habit than a Writing Habit or Painting Habit, etc.

And Yet...

Creativity is not constant doing. As Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi writes in *Creativity*, "The energy [of creative people] is under their own control – it is not controlled by the calendar, the clock, [or] an external schedule. When necessary they can focus it like a laser beam; when it is not, they immediately start recharging their batteries. They consider the rhythm of activity followed by idleness or reflection very important for the success of their work."

Sometimes the best thing to do is to wait. There are times when pushing will not generate the results you're looking for. In fact, the middle stage of the creative process, Incubation, is primarily about waiting for inspiration. There's a limit to how far the conscious mind can take you, and when all your

Genius is one percent inspiration, ninety-nine percent perspiration.
– Thomas A. Edison

Inspiration does exist, but it must find you working.
– Pablo Picasso

You can't wait for inspiration. You have to go after it with a club.
– Jack London

Inspiration is wonderful when it happens, but the writer must develop an approach for the rest of the time...The wait is simply too long.
– Leonard Bernstein

I don't believe in total freedom for the artist. Left on his own, free to do anything he likes, the artist ends up doing nothing at all. If there's one thing that's dangerous for an artist, it's precisely this question of total freedom, waiting for inspiration and all the rest of it.
– Federico Fellini

efforts and pushing bring you to that limit, you have to wait for your unconscious to complete the journey.

You cannot force creativity, any more than you can decide after 6 months that you're tired of being pregnant and are, by sheer force of will, going to deliver a fully grown baby right here and now.

I know it's risky to say this. I know I'm fighting an undercurrent of judgment that insists waiting for inspiration is a sign of weakness, laziness or both.

In fact, when I started to write this issue of *Imagination InkLinks*, I planned to add to the conventional thinking and write about how you shouldn't wait to create. I tried to push my way through, tried to put in the work that is supposed to bring inspiration in its wake, but something was off. I couldn't figure out what was missing. All my striving and driving was taking the writing nowhere.



It took a few days for the inspiration to arrive. Maybe the inspiration arrived earlier, but I couldn't see it because it wasn't the answer I was looking for. The reason I couldn't explain why it's wrong to wait for inspiration is because waiting is not always wrong. Pushing is not always the solution.

Waiting vs. pushing, aka Inspiration vs. Perspiration, are opposite ends of a continuum. Like breathing in and breathing out, inspiration motivates us to work and perspiration often generates new questions that need more inspiration. The two are interdependent; you can't do just one, you have to do both.

In other words, Inspiration vs. Perspiration is one of the creative polarities I've mentioned in previous issues, a polarity that creative people must learn to manage. (For an introduction to the idea of creative polarities, see Volume 13, Issue 1 of *Imagination InkLinks*. If you didn't get that ezine, go to www.RosanneBane.com and click on Newsletter.)

Downsides of Inspiration

It should be easy to review the drawbacks of waiting for inspiration, but before we do, let me emphasize that these are the limitations of waiting TOO LONG for inspiration.

Waiting too long can get you stuck in waiting mode. You either get complacent or frustrated. If you get too comfortable with waiting, you develop a Waiting Habit that interferes with productive work habits. You waste time. On the other hand, if you're frustrated, you want to move, but you can't figure out how to proceed or where to go.

Waiting too long means nothing changes. Nothing happens and it can start to feel like nothing can happen. Others perceive you as lazy. You may perceive yourself as lazy. And eventually, you really do become lazy.

Upsides of Perspiration

If you've been listening to conventional wisdom, you know the virtues of working hard at your creativity. Perspiration will get you unstuck. Something changes.

Doing something, even if it's not the right thing, often brings inspiration. Even if taking action doesn't induce inspiration, it produces results that give you direction for where to go next.

Things get done. You look productive, you feel productive, and the satisfaction of taking action inspires you to keep moving.



Downsides of Perspiration

Because we are so judgmental of waiting, we have an unfortunate tendency to overfocus on the pushing end of the polarity. You may have the best of intentions to avoid all the negatives of overfocusing on Inspiration, but you can end up forcing yourself into a different, but no less damning, set of downsides.

When you try to push your way through a creative undertaking, you make premature demands for particular results. You get too attached to a specific outcome and can't recognize other possibilities. You become dogmatic.

You may be able to grind out product, but the results are often unoriginal and formulaic. You exhaust yourself and burn out your colleagues and collaborators. You have to push harder and harder to get less and less output. Eventually, you end up just as stuck as someone in the downside of Inspiration.



Upsides of Inspiration

Author Frank Tibolt is right when he says, "We should be taught not to wait for inspiration to start a thing. Action always generates inspiration." But he's

wrong when he says “Inspiration seldom generates action.”

Inspiration can be a great motivator. Who doesn't want to create when we're in the flow state? Inspiration is the gateway to the bliss of creative flow.



Waiting for inspiration is a receptive state of consciousness. When we open our minds and our hearts, we get powerful insights. We recognize things we couldn't see before.

Inspiration is the home of the original. Literally, inspiration means 'to breathe in' and it implies breathing in the divine. Waiting for inspiration opens us to a spiritual connection.

The Only Way Out is Over

When your attempts to perspire your way through a project have created all the downsides of Perspiration listed above, you have to move over to Waiting for Inspiration mode. And if it turns out you've been waiting for an inspiration that, like Godot, simply isn't coming, it's time to turn up the Perspiration.



The key for managing creative polarities is to first identify your personal warning signs that you're heading into the downside of either pole. When you see those danger signals, you have to be willing and able to shift your focus over to the other pole. The challenge, of course, is to recognize how long is long enough and how long is too long to stay with either side.

Resting in Motion

It's important to recognize that waiting doesn't have to mean immobilized and taking action doesn't have to include the expectations and demands that push us into the downside of Perspiration.

In *The Artist's Way*, Julia Cameron mentions the concept of resting in motion, like lying in the bottom of a boat while the current carries you downstream. It's a kind of Zen concept of doing without doing, of allowing things to unfold



without striving to make one thing in particular happen. It is about balancing waiting with pushing in a way that helps you maintain momentum and stay out of the downside of either end of this polarity.

To rest in motion, I recommend 3 Basic Practices: Process, Self-Care and Product Time. These three practices encourage the creative person to respect and manage the Inspiration vs. Perspiration polarity.

Process is creative play. You do something creative just for the sake of doing it without striving or even having any expectation about what the outcome will be. Process is a great way to stay open and receptive to creative inspiration.

Self-care is not only about preserving and enhancing your ability to produce creative results; it's also about giving your body something to do while your conscious mind is waiting. It's about moving the body to induce inspiration.

Product Time is the time you give to a creative project that you ultimately want to share with other people – the writing or art you hope to reveal to an audience in some way. The key to Product Time is that you do not measure it according to how many pages you produce or how good it is on any given day. You measure your success only by whether you show up and put in your time.

Product Time isn't just the time a writer spends with fingers on the keyboard or a painter spends with brush on the canvas. It's also the time spent brainstorming, freewriting, reflecting, listing ideas, musing, doing exercises, researching, incubating, sketching, exploring, revising, networking. Product Time gives the writer/artist full credit and space for all the actions that go into the final product. It's designed to give you opportunities to keep taking action without thinking you have to push prematurely on a part of the project where you're still incubating.

(For more info on the Basic Practices, check out the Writing Habit class, call me at 612-722-4130 or send an email to Rosanne@RosanneBane.com. For info on the Advanced Practices, check out the Writing Our Way Through Shadow and Writing Resistance classes.)

Another excellent way to move between inspiration and perspiration is to use random generating methods. These include freewriting, using writing/creating exercises and prompts from books or

classes, interviewing your characters, and so on. (My Improvisational Fiction class, for example, is full of random generation exercises and techniques.)

Here's one writing exercise you can try the next time you feel stuck somewhere on the path between forcing out a good idea and giving it the space it needs to show up on its own.

Make a list of 36 verbs and number them

1-1, 1-2, 1-3, 1-4, 1-5, 1-6, 2-1, 2-2, 2-3, and so on up to 6-6.

Write the names of two characters with a blank line between them. Roll a pair of dice and match the numbers to the verb list. So if the first die comes up 3 and the second die comes up 5, you put the verb numbered 3-5 in the blank line between your two characters and use that to start a freewrite.

You can create additional lists of 36 locations, 36 objects, 36 smells, 36 sounds, and so on. Roll the dice for each list and add that element to your freewrite. If you're a visual artist, make lists of colors, textures, objects and so on and incorporate the elements selected by the dice in a piece of work.

Let random chance be your inspiration and see where your perspiration takes you from there.



Come Play with Me at the Loft!

For more information or to register, contact the Loft at 612-379-8999 or www.Loft.org.

The Writing Habit (Section A: Mondays, Sept 15 to Oct 20, 6:30 to 8:30 pm; Section B: Thursdays, Sept 18 to Oct 23, 1:00 to 3:00 pm at Oakdale Library) You'll experiment with the 3 Basic Practices to tailor writing habits that keep you open to inspiration and committed to perspiration. Our weekly check-in will give you safe and supportive witnesses to help you become accountable to yourself. We'll explore the creative process, identify your priorities, generate plans, cultivate sustainable habits and develop a support network to help you maintain momentum.

Improvisational Fiction (Fridays, Sept 19 to Oct 24, 1:00 to 3:00 pm) If you wait for inspiration to strike, you can spend more time waiting than you do writing. If you drive yourself to grind out pages anyway, you drain your creative energy and the writing is often flat. This class helps you balance the Inspiration vs. Perspiration polarity with a third alternative. We'll play improv games to engage our imaginations and inspire the writing. Don't wait – discover what you want to write as you write it!

Writer's Resistance (Thursdays, Oct 30 to Dec 11, 1:00 to 3:00 pm at Oakdale Library) You love to write, so why is it so hard to sit down and do it? Managing polarities (like inspiration vs. perspiration) is one of the topics we'll explore to acquire insight into the sources of resistance, the surprising forms resistance can take and what you can do to energize and inspire your writing self to keep showing up to put in the work.

Writing Our Way Through Shadow (Mondays, Oct 27 to Dec 8, 6:30 to 8:30 pm) All writers have a shadow side that can show up as a missed deadline, a sudden outburst of inexplicable emotion, a block that won't give way, or lack of energy for writing. We'll explore shadow issues specific to writers, such as taboo topics, fear, and forbidden fruits of fame and success. Weekly check-ins give you a place to notice shadow influences in your writing and inspire you to work with shadow and the energy it holds.

Please contact me to talk about coaching or classes.

612-722-4139

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"Since starting to do the recommended practices, I've been writing every day that I planned to write. I started out around page 50 and ended up with 208 pages of my novel, beginning with just writing 10-15 minutes at a stretch a couple of times a week. This class helped me get my writing back on track."

Miriam Queensen, Writer