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Prompts For Two Workshops

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Prompts for the workshops:

Week One Prompts - 9 Discomforts:

1. We are shaped in ways seldom recognized and often misunderstood. Our association with landscapes establishes an atmosphere, climate, and geography of our ways of living. Artists often paint inner-landscapes, and writers dedicate whole books – even epics to them. Most often the landscapes that haunt us, and it is a kind of haunting, are created by our living in them. Often, however, are created by visits, reading, videos, and vacations. Still, certain landscapes dominate our conscious and unconscious lives. Write about (1) your dominant landscape(s) and (2) what examining those landscapes means to you.

2. Write about what keeps you awake at night.

I think it's a Santana song that has the lyrics: "Children, keep your light on. There's a monster under your bed." Writing about what keeps us awake is not always a confrontation with monsters, but we do know they are there and have been the stuff of stories and tales for centuries, perhaps brought on by the dim memory of dark nights and trembling fires when we lived on a broad plain and were food for cats with long teeth. In fact long teeth seem to keep a lot of people up. It may be too that all the delights of the world keep us awake, not only the worry we pack around with us but also the rich tapestries of our excursions into the world and the light dancing and flickering between our relationships – both good and bad I guess. It may be that we CAN describe the demons and angels that go to bed with us. They may look like dolls or critters (are there rats in the basement in your house) or the thrill of a loving embrace from a lover – or a bear. Go ahead tell me about it.

3. Write a letter as a poem to someone who influenced you in history – including an ancestor if you like

We carry histories with us all the time. Our ancestors rummage through our trunks in the attic, waiting to find the right clothing to put on and emerge, unannounced in our kitchens for a cup of coffee. In that same attic hanging out with our ancestors are a multitude of historical figures, some frightening and some gentle and kind, Attila for example sits with Albert Schweitzer. Pick someone and write a poem to or for her or him. As you do, you might describe something that happened to you and ask them what they would do and try to answer for them. You might write about something they said that influenced you. One thing that is helpful in writing a poem is to know where it is located. You might locate the poem in a historical setting. Or, it could be interesting to bring a historical figure into the world today and see what they think of the world today. Feel free to write dialogue or not. Let yourself imagine and dream of this relationship.

4. 140 Character challenge.

Write a 140 character or less poem to contemplate or meditate about an object that you are fond of or something in nature that is alive to you.

We have moments of peak experience, where all the complexity of life suddenly distills into a realization – a satisfying ah-ha. Of course there are big bang AH HAs and more subtle

ohhh ya experiences. These moments can be invited into our lives but they are not something we can make happen, unless I think we deliberately honor the process of discovering them. That process seems to be evident in Haiku or zen poems that work with images in the first two lines and then third line with a comment on them. Traditionally there are three lines, there's even a syllable count of 5/7/5 recommended in the literature – but I think that is up to the writer really. If you want to work with the count, go ahead, but that is up to the writer and not necessary. In fact the 140 character poem, Haiku or not, is a process to discovery.

5. Imagine that we are living in a world where tattoos suddenly appear on our bodies to mark events in our lives. You woke up this morning with a new tattoo. Write a poem in which you describe it to us and help us understand the event it commemorates. ~ Colors, designs, designs on life, wishes, commemorative imaginings, in honor of what . . . ?

6. Jacob wrestled with an Angel all night and then gets a new name. Some fun you say? Write about a disorienting night, some dream, some vision and tell us the name you get for it.

7. Just when you think you have it figured out, life tricks you. Write a poem about a Trickster. Who or what is the Incarnation of your trickster ~ Crow, Loki, Coyote, or some other spirit being or critter? What do they do to you and/or for you. Or, simply describe your trickster.

8. Jimmy Baca says he likes writing prompts that "cut through the bullshit." During a recent workshop he asked writers to write about a betrayal in their lives. Tell us about a betrayal.

9. In the first sentence of a short story by Kafka, the main character wakes up as an insect. You wake up in your story or poem as a toddler. You hear your parents talking in the kitchen. What do they talk about? As young as you are, you can speak and have all your memories. What might you say to them?

10. This one is about joy. Write to celebrate a moment of pleasure or a shift in seasons or some gleeful experience that deserves your attention because it is joyful.

Week Two Prompts:

Prompts for Workshop 2: 9 Joys

1. Being. Write a poem that is an observation of something that is a common sight but that catches your eye or other senses. I like William Carlos Williams was a master at this sort poem – the Red Wheel Wheelbarrow, This is Just to Say . . . and he was able to translate by reflection his observations of those things he saw and describe a physician's point of view of working "case by case" to heal.

Let the snake wait under
his weed

and the writing
be of words, slow and quick, sharp
to strike, quiet to wait,
sleepless.
~ through metaphor to reconcile
the people and the stones.
Compose. (No ideas
but in things) Invent!
Saxifrage is my flower that splits
the rocks.

2. The Body. That temple, that ragged bone shop, that river of blood, the tears and tissue and electric sparks, the place where we dwell on earth, that broken down vehicle, the miracle, the body. Write about the body and some moment in time when it made itself known to you or to others. Look in the mirror or at your hands or at the face of a loved one . . . get to know that companion that is with us until the end. Walt Whitman, among other things, was a great poet of the body.

3. Meaning. “Challenging the meaning of life is the truest expression of the state of being human.” Victor Frankl, what did you mean? This is serious business – or is it. What is it that you mean? Is it mean to want a meaning sometimes? Sometimes a small memory makes my life mean. A joke. Sometimes I know what I am called to do with my whole being awakens me to living. It’s all good. What is it that drives you and makes the world tingle and glow a bit? Write about what calling you have or what purpose drives you, or write about looking for that purpose and meaning.

4. Hope. Hope is I think having something you can do about living well. It is, I know, related to faith in what is going to happen or what is happening or what might happen. Write about some example of hope, some moment when you either experienced or saw hope manifested in the world. Tell us a story in poem or prose about hopefulness.

5. Peak Experience. You can experience moments of perfection but it seems they come to us unexpectedly. We suddenly sense or are aware of how things come together, how they reverberate, or how in the moment we have captured something eternal and fleeting all at the same time. Describing a peak experience is like having one – we can’t really plan on it but we can be ready for it. Write about a time when some thought, image, sound, smell, taste, or touch brought your mind, body, and soul together in one place. There are many paintings and poems about peak experiences – Whitman, of course, comes to mind, and Rumi.

6. Blessings. A list of blessings is a poem in itself. Write about a blessing in your life or write about more than one, but let us know how the blessing was embodied in some person, act, animal, or object – how something or someone made your life a blessed event. Blessings can also remind us of what we should be and raise our expectations of what we

should be and do. I love James Wright's poem because it captures the moment when something was so beautiful it challenged him.

Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota

Over my head, I see the bronze butterfly,

Asleep on the black trunk,

Blowing like a leaf in green shadow.

Down the ravine behind the empty house,

The cowbells follow one another

Into the distances of the afternoon.

To my right,

In a field of sunlight between two pines,

The droppings of last year's horses

Blaze up into golden stones.

I lean back, as the evening darkens and comes on.

A chicken hawk floats over, looking for home.

I have wasted my life.

7. Artfulness. When we live an artful life we are practicing artfulness by engaging in making art, transforming through our seeing, interpreting, feeling, and thinking what would be missed otherwise. Write about a time when you practiced artfulness or saw yourself as an artist in the world and expressed that sense of yourself in visual, literary, or performance art.

8. Study. We love what we study, even when what we are studying is hateful to us. When we study the history of the Holocaust or a genocide, we hate it but love the possibility of finding in our anger and the suffering of so many a way of easing suffering and stopping the cycle of genocide. We love what we study. We lovingly observe and read about our children and children or lovers our hungers and our passions. Write a poem or literary non-fiction piece after you have studied, briefly something that interests you but that you have not, as yet, had the chance to study.

9. Service. Repair, provision, offer support, give a ceremony, feed, console, advocate. What service to others and the world offers us a blessing of work that both is greater than us and that fills us with greatness ~ not in the ego pounding sense of great or service to a customer that we all know is great when we get it, but the sort of greatness that is shared by human beings when they give of themselves to others. Write about some service you have witnessed some one do and share with us that greatness.

