

# Encounters with the Muse

Cherise Lily Nana

*“If we trace the stem of the word ‘inspire’ down to its seed, we find that it means to inhale a divine beauty and to become animated with this blessing.”*



A number of years ago, I started hearing whispers from a muse in the middle of the night. She met me on the page, asking me to write, *write because the trees are begging to grow their limbs through your words and their foliage through your verses*. This call continued to reverberate throughout my dreams, and over time, I began to listen. I welcomed the muse; she was responding to my yearning to unlock my voice, to break free from the chains of the inner critic and demolish the barriers that dammed my self-expression. I sensed that, buried somewhere in the mud of those waters, I would find the key to my creativity. What I didn't anticipate from my conversations with the muse was a greater sense of meaning and a passage of self-inquiry that would ultimately guide me home.

Since that night, the muse's presence has steadily grown in my daily life. Sometimes she brings me the sweet, sunlit perfume of jonquils in bloom and other times puzzle pieces of stories, flashes of fiction ferried from the uncharted waters of my unconscious mind. She envelops my psyche in mythic poetry and draws my attention to the way the ocean's tides mirror the rise and fall of the breath in my belly. I hear her murmurings in meditative insight and embodied revelations, and in wild and domestic encounters with the more-than-human world.

It would appear that the muse accompanies me through not only the luminous voyages. During moments of despair she has presented me with grace, reminding me that these experiences ask me to deepen my trust and soften my walls, so that I may converge with a love that is so much bigger than the tension in my heart. She is also

an emissary for my ancestors, delivering the wisdom found in the didactic rhythms of a talking drum or the depths of a highland loch. In every one of her gifts, the muse continues to offer inspiration, beauty, and initiation into the life-affirming expression of the great mystery.

The face of the muse takes many different shapes. One depiction is the whimsical image of the genie, the firefly spirit that keeps us awake at night. Then there is that of the beloved, the people in our lives that crack open our hearts and reconnect us with parts long forgotten. The Romantic poets found inspiration in communion with the way light moved through the woods. Perhaps the most common icon that emerges when we think of a muse is the alluring and evocative—yet often passive—embodiment of the feminine. Maybe this inability to truly comprehend the muse's elusive nature explains why the ancient Greeks divided this energy into nine goddesses.

In this mythology, the nine muses personify a very active part of our deep imagination. At heart, they are forces of nature that transcend gender, serving instead as metaphors that illustrate the many facets of our interior life. The muses are the daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne. Mnemosyne, a titan and the goddess of memory, was born to Uranus, god of the heavens and Gaia, goddess of the earth. As such, the lineage of the muses upholds the union of spirit and matter. They urge us to remember this relationship through tending to the creative fire that we each carry within. Regardless of whether we are birthing an idea or project, the muses are an ally in the body of work that is the unfolding of our life story.



While the nine muses are ambassadors for many of the age-old artistic forms—poetry, storytelling, music, dance, etc.—underlying these is a devotion to the divine, and at times contradictory, qualities inherent in life itself: the comedy (guided by the muse, Thalia), the tragedy (Melpomene) and the quest for meaning in it all (Urania). Erato brings our attention to the biographies of our heart, Terpsichore to the tales of our bodies, and Calliope to the stories of our personal and collective mythology. Clio advocates the importance of connecting with our ancestors and the intangible heirlooms we've inherited, while Euterpe accompanies our unique melody, our sense of belonging. Finally, Polymnia is the keeper of the sounds and silence of the sacred resonating throughout the universe.

If we trace the stem of the word “inspire” down to its seed, we find that it means to inhale a divine beauty and to become animated with this blessing. The late poet, theologian and philosopher, John O'Donohue, references beauty in a transcendent language. He once said that beauty is about “an emerging fullness, a greater sense of grace and elegance, a deeper sense of depth, and also a kind

of homecoming for the enriched memory of your unfolding life.” This definition speaks to the idea that beauty is found in the most authentic expression of who we are. In this way, it thrives in the diverse ecology of our inner landscapes, in our joy and our longing, our sorrow and our fears. Beauty here is not limited merely to the visually pleasing or easily palatable. Rather, it seeks wholeness, welcoming a breadth of the alchemical elements necessary to transform visions from the unseen realms into the material world.

So how do we reconnect with the muse amongst the well-oiled machinery of modern-day life? By bringing attentiveness to that which genuinely moves us, attuning to that current that stirs the soul and enlivens the heart. We can access this state by engaging a sense of wonder within ourselves, our communities, and our earthly home. How could we incorporate more of this awe into our everyday? Could we suspend our disbelief long enough to inquire into the contents of our mythic imagination? Can we create space to turn our attention inwards towards the subtle sensations that inhabit the heart, to allow each emotion to belong, and then find compassionate outlets of expression? And on those occasions when we lose our faith, when the overwhelm of a rapidly changing landscape sinks into our bones, can we allow the balm of beauty to soothe our wounds and swaddle us in moments of solace?

In an age where so much of our technology is headed for robotic automation, we are reminded that what makes us human is the capacity to feel, to open ourselves to this ever-flowing river of inspiration and to create from this place of deep integrity. The gifts of the muses beckon us to send down our roots so that we may uplift towards the heavens, through the generative practices of wisdom and beauty that emanate from the midpoint, the heart. The Greek root word for “person” means, “the sound that passes through”. We can think of this sound as an animating force, a creative energy that literally sings us into being. If we can allow it, the inspiration received from the muse tunes our unique song to the greater rhapsody of life.

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Illustration: Rachel Urquhart