

Robert Burns and Inspiration - His and Ours.

Service at Glasgow Unitarian Church
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(Scotland's National Bard was born on 25th January, 255 years ago in 1759)

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The free dictionary on-line defines **in-spi-ra-tion** as :-

Stimulation of the mind or emotions to a high level of feeling or activity.

An agency, such as a person or work of art, that moves the intellect or emotions or prompts action or invention.

Something, such as a sudden creative act or idea, that is inspired.

Divine guidance or influence exerted directly on the mind and soul of humankind.

Inspiration (from the Latin *in-spir-are*, meaning "to breathe into") refers to an unconscious burst of creativity in a literary, musical, or other artistic endeavour. The concept has origins in both Hellenism and Hebraism. The Greeks believed that inspiration or "enthusiasm" came from the nine Muses, as well as the gods Apollo and Dionysus. Similarly, in the Ancient Norse religions, inspiration derives from the gods, such as Odin. Inspiration is also a divine matter in Hebrew poetry. In the Book of Amos, the prophet speaks of being overwhelmed by God's voice and compelled to speak. In Christianity, inspiration is a gift of the Holy Spirit.

In the 19th century, Romantic poets such as Coleridge and Shelley believed that inspiration came to a poet because the poet was attuned to the divine or mystical "winds" and because the soul of the poet was able to receive such visions. In the early 20th century, Sigmund Freud located inspiration in the inner psyche of the artist. Carl Jung's theory of inspiration suggests that an artist is one who was attuned to racial memory, which encoded the archetypes of the human mind.

So, there is a Universal recognition in all cultures, throughout history, that inspiration exists. **What are the sources of this mysterious experience - being inspired?**

Socrates wrote :- *“I have decided that it was not wisdom that enabled poets to write their poetry, but a kind of instinct or inspiration, such as you find in seers and prophets who deliver all their sublime messages without knowing in the least what they mean.”*

Scientists estimate that, on average, we have 60,000 thoughts every day. The majority of these thoughts are repetitive thoughts that we've had countless times before. But once in a while, a distinctive moment occurs in which an original or even exceptional thought crosses our mind. We have an idea or a stroke of insight that opens us to new possibilities and transformation.

I like this definition for *inspiration* - *“the creative breath of the divine,”* and according to the Bible, inspiration is an act of grace or a blessing. When we are touched by inspiration, we feel uplifted, energised, and liberated. It is only natural that we would want to open ourselves to having more and more inspired moments in our lives, yet many of us think of inspiration as a flash of lightning that strikes only rarely . . . or as the ancients believed, a muse that visits us on an unknowable timetable that is beyond our control.

We can tell, from Burn's body of work, the many elements that inspired him - the natural world around him; music - especially traditional tunes ; love and passion ; friendship and the brotherhood of humankind; independence of mind and spirit (no doubt influences by the ideas of the the French revolution) ; quite a long list!

What inspires us ? What inspires you?

I believe inspiration is both an act of grace and a *process* that we can actually cultivate - with a little bit of effort. We can create a process that gets our ideas flowing and leads to inspired thoughts. I am a member of a small creative writing group on Bute called Tale Spinners. We meet every Weds afternoon in a local church hall and write together - 'instant writing' - based of themes we take turn to choose for the group. There is no doubt that writing and sharing thoughts with others is inspiring - not always of course - but certainly more regularly productive than attempting to write on one's own. We spark off one another.

I believe all of us, to some extent or another, can become inspired and be creative on any number of levels. Creativity is much wider and deeper than the arts - we can make our lives creative in all sorts of practical ways.....we can be inspired to take action; to speak out ; to stand up and be counted; to do a good deed ; to forgive ; the list is endless.

It is possible to develop a *magpie* attitude to inspiration: seek it from all sorts of sources;....to be always on the lookout – observing people; watching films ; reading ; reflecting on experiences and encounters we have had.

It's about taking all the little everyday things and observing them with a critical eye; building up a scrapbook from which we can draw. Allowing ourselves to be influenced by others' creativity too and to borrow their ideas and build on them with our own energy.

I very much like this advice on developing inspiration from the Royal Ballet Choreographer, Wayne McGregor

- Do
- Empty
- Panic
- Forage
- Generate
- Embody
- Edit
- Decide
- Persist
- Practise

I recently read Stephen King's book *'On Writing'*, which is part biography and part manual of tips for aspiring writers.

Early on in the book, he makes this comment -

'Let's get one thing clear right now, shall we? There is no 'Idea Dump, no Story Central, no island of the Buried Best Sellers; Inspiration for good stories seems to come quite literally from nowhere, sailing at you right out of the empty sky ; two previously unrelated ideas come together and make something new under the sun! Your job isn't to find these ideas....but to recognise them when they show up.'

Robert Burns was a great poet and songwriter with the common touch. He wrote about love, universal brotherhood and the human condition. He was also a keen social commentator and could spin a good ghost story.

He spoke from the *heart* to the *heart*. He makes you laugh, he makes you cry. Note the change to the present tense. For that's the point. There's something immortal about Burns: his words, his melodies, his humanity, his spirit.

He was not only inspired, he continues to inspire others, today. Bob Dylan has named his own greatest inspiration as the Scottish poet Robert Burns. The American singer-songwriter was asked to say which lyric or verse has had the biggest effect on his life. He selected the 1794 song *A Red, Red Rose*, which is often published as a poem.

Recently there has been a resurgence of creative interest with contemporary singers like Dougie MacLean, Jean Redpath, and Eddi Reader doing emotionally powerful cover versions of songs like *Ae Fond Kiss* and *Green Grow the Rashes O*. Dougie MacLean (the bard of Dunkeld) often sings Burns' songs at his concerts and albums. Eddi Reader sang a number of Burns' cover versions when she was with Fairground Attraction but now as a solo artist she is finding Burns to be an increasingly inspiring muse. She feels that in Burns there is still an un-mined vein of emotional gold.

If inspiration is the Creative Spirit breathing into us, I would like to think that our chosen spiritual path....being a Unitarian.... Unitarian ideas.... Unitarian worshiphelps to inspire us.

It should, shouldn't it? Does it?

Frankly, I was rather taken aback by Bill Darlison's outspoken article in the Jan Inquirer, entitled '*Why I am still a Unitarian*'. He said some uncomfortable things about our movement. Reluctantly, I had to agree with a lot of what he said. If you haven't read it, get a hold of it! It's thought provoking, to say the least.

Did you watch Christmas University Challenge in the run up to Christmas? There was a set of questions about the scientist and theologian, Joseph Priestly. Jeremy Paxman asked what religious movement was he associated with, which denies the divinity of Christ? The mature student team answered correctly - Unitarianism - and I was saddened that there, in that moment, our movement was summed up - defined - by a denial - what we *don't believe*.

We cannot hope to be inspired or inspire others, with denials - we need affirmations!

Theodore Parker said Unitarianism is too often full of pale negations.

Unitarian worship, like inspiring poetry, should not only connect with our heads - our intellects - but must also speak to us in our hearts.

Bill Darlison feels that Unitarian sermons can be 'cold, bloodless, bland, dithering, inoffensive' - and so academically rigorous that they should be offered with footnotes. Bill ends his article on a positive and hopeful note, thanks goodness. I quote from his final paragraph :-

'Change is needed NOW. If we are to survive, we must develop a comprehensive religious system which is intellectually stimulating enough to satisfy the mind in its healthful moments of quiet reflection, but which also has the emotional power to help us through these inevitable periods when our lives are beset by turbulence.

If we can successfully marry the two - and I honestly believe that we are beginning to marry them, that we are starting to do what Rilke calls 'the heart-work' - then we can help to change the religious consciousness of Britain.'

All I would add to that is to say, that we may have a mountain to climb....'Heart-work' may take 'hard work' for many Unitarian Worship leaders..... but if we stay open and can allow ourselves to be inspired and to share that with one another....together, we can get there!

Thank you for listening.

Closing Words

Did you happen to see the STV Hogmany programme all about how 'Auld Lang Syne' became a global hit? - a world-wide anthem? ...despite very few folk knowing the correct words! or sometimes, not understanding them!

(Actually, Burns never claimed to have written it from scratch - he collected it and adapted it.)

The singer, Eddie Reader, who has recorded and performed this song so beautifully, commented on just how unusual and rare it is for a song's lyrics to ask us to reach out and touch one another - to hold hands :-

*'So here's a hand my trusty friend
an gie's a hand o' thine!'*

Many speakers in that programme, spoke of how the combination of melody and lyrics, powerfully grabs our emotions - speaks to our hearts. So let's sing it now as our closing verse.... (and don't be ashamed if it brings a tear to your eeye!)

AULD LANG SYNE
