A Writer Writes

William Packard

There I was in my senior year at Stanford University, and everyone else was busy making plans for the future—the engineers were all going off to graduate school, the pre-med students were all going off to medical school, and the co-eds were all going off to get married. But I didn't have the slightest idea of where I wanted to go or what I wanted to do.

And I don't think I even wanted to deal with the problem. All I wanted was to go out each afternoon and lie down on a long lawn and look up at the wide sky—California skies were almost always immaculate and clear—and I would stare hard at the sun until I could feel the bright eye of old Sol inside of me, that beautiful blazing day star which had me in a Zoroastrian trance.

And that was when I began writing poetry. Not that I thought it would help me to make up my mind about what I wanted to do with my life—but I liked writing, and those first early poems were miraculously automatic, they came effortlessly and often all in one piece. Maybe this was simply the lyricism of late adolescence, when one experiences the pulse of possibility in every body part. Whatever it was, I wrote endlessly—poems about love and poems about spring and poems about death and poems about poems.

I remember one day, going to get a haircut, and as I was sitting in the barber's chair, a young boy walked in and sat down. And for an instant I became the boy—myself as child, pre-chaos consciousness, shy innocence of a mind that was simply baffled by its own fabulous belief in life.

Well, that was a pretty rapturous beginning—to go through an experience of trance, and supreme trust in one's own intuition, and awe in the presence of such strong memory. But I knew it was almost too easy, that there had to be a lot more to poetry than just an accidental invocation of the muse. More than anything, I wanted to meet and talk with other poets, to find out what it was all about.

I began by submitting the "haircut" poem and a few others to Bread Loaf the following year, and I received the Robert Frost poetry award to attend the School of English in Vermont the next summer.

It was an opportunity to meet Frost—and I had always admired his genius for lyricism, his devotion to form and his keen ear for the "sound of sense"—but especially his dedication to the earnest work involved in verse, to what he called "the pleasure of taking pains" with a poem. This was no rhapsodic approach to writing, but a tough, shrewd mind that was fiercely jealous of its own originality. Frost also had a waggish instinct for mischief that ran through everything he did—as he commented,

> Poems are my little defiance somewhere
> of something that's commonly thought.

Behind his various masks, all his public roles and poses, Frost was profoundly Puritan, even to the point of extolling the virtue of rebellion:

> These are the very first stirrings of insubordination, when one discovers that there's something worth being insubordinate about.

Over the next ten years I continued to seek out other poets—I was passionately interested in listening to what they had to say about their work. I'd ask them lots of silly questions about writing and about life, and they would invariably be generous in trying to come up with adequate answers to satisfy my curiosity. Finally it was Frank O'Connor who said something I think I had always known:

> There is no loneliness in the world like the loneliness of a young man or a young woman who wants to write.

When I heard this I knew it was time for me to stop chasing after the shadow of other poets, and try to locate my own identity as human being and poet.

Well, that meant a long descent, and a coming to terms with the whole menagerie of my mind: the sharks of egotism—the cockroaches of self-reproach—the chipmunks of impulse scampering along the branches of possibility—and always, that unaccountable octopus that dwells in the deep sea of dreams, hidden in its own mysterious ink, and yet forever waving its ominous arms this way, that way, any way . . .

I know that I'm terribly inarticulate when it comes to talking about my own work—and that's no idle apology, because I believe my hesitation must come from some very shrewd source. Whereas I used to love to ask other poets all about "the creative process," today I feel it's terribly wrong to be glib and chatty about something that's so elusive. I prefer Von Hugel's gentle warning, in his letters to a niece:

> Be silent about great things; let them grow inside you. Never discuss them: discussion is so limiting and distracting. It makes things grow smaller. You think you swallow things when they ought to swallow you. Before all greatness, be silent—in art, in music, in religion: silence.

No, I know I could never begin to formulate a "theory" of poetry—I think craft is the only thing one can ever really teach or discuss objectively. Occasionally I can try to describe how it *feels* to be involved in the terrific risk of writing poetry.

It feels like you're continually hanging by your fingertips from a precipice—but the nice thing about hanging from a precipice is, you have an absolutely marvelous view.

Or else it feels like you're always going after the unutterable, after some unattainable state of mind that's always one world away from you. But the really important thing is that you keep going after it.

Because that's what it's all about. A bird flies, a fish swims, an ocean flows, a fire burns, a sun shines—and a writer writes. It's as uncomplicated and inevitable as that.

William Packard, poet, author and playwright, is currently teaching the course, "New York Poets," at the School of Continuing Education. His books include, "In the First Place," "Once and for All," "From Now On," "On the Other Hand" (four plays) and "To Peel an Apple" (poetry).