



Deborah McGill - Sacred Path

## *the sacred tabula rasa*

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AS AN UNDERGRAD I LEARNED ABOUT English literature from two years of studying Shakespeare to analyzing the twentieth-century minimalism of Thomas Pynchon. After earning a master of science in education, I decided to go back and really learn my craft by getting a master of fine arts in poetry. While in graduate school I managed to publish two books of poetry (one of them being my thesis) and a third book of fictional memoir. I had to ask myself: what did I learn about writing that I didn't know before? This was my answer: keep my rice bowl empty! The worst thing a writer can suffer from is not writer's block but hubris. Remember that, if nothing else!

My answer comes from the old Eastern adage that in order for the Buddhist monk to be taught anything from the Master, he must empty his rice bowl first, hence the Master throwing the novice's rice into the air and catching the student off guard with surprise and enlightenment. Very early on, when I got my first C grade in Shakespeare, I realized that a hard-earned C was worth more than an easy A any day. I also learned that the more I programmed myself to relinquish my preconceived notions about the form and function of language and its art form of literature, the more I learned about what it was that I really chose to study with a focused eye.

I studied my buttons off trying to understand Shakespeare and more importantly, took notes, realizing I didn't know a damn thing.

When we are young, we have the hubris of being young. Don't fall for the oldest trick in the book. You will regret it for the rest of your natural artist life. When you enter school in fall and the teacher asks you to write about your summer vacation—wait! Realize the task is a riddle and wake up to the truth that it is not what happened to you over summer that is important but why you are choosing



to write what you are putting down on the page. The teacher will inevitably use your summer vacation essay as an early literary narrative assessment of your writing for the rest of the semester—a self portrait, if you will, of who you are and why you write. So plan ahead. As Krishnamurti once said: *Seeing is the meditation*. Look out the window of your classroom and write what you see now! In other words, writing is the experience, not the memory. Attempt to transfer the experience, not the objects of memory that have no life. In the present, you are always a clean slate, ready to learn.

You may think it is important to recall what happened to you in the past. But it is the brass tacks of the task to convey your experience to others using the current environment to transfer meaning to the reader with present associations, not dead things that have no connection to your past. You must relate to the reader why it matters now! The true value of literature is the timeless quotient of its validity through cultural change, questioning, and language evolution. Just like a poem is only as strong as its metaphor, a story is only as strong as its analogy to current time and living.

So when I was surrounded by fellow classmates in my MFA program, I immediately emptied my rice bowl and started taking mental notes and learned from whomever I had to in order to grow and develop my craft. Coming from Chicago and the urban areas of the Motor City, I learned that Nelson Algren meant more to me than the novelists of my generation—those being Jay McInerney of *Bright Lights, Big City* fame, Brett Easton Ellis of *Less Than Zero*, and *Generation X*'s Douglas Coupland. My generational angst books were rooted in a time that would quickly become archaic, and the apathy that was each writer's statement of lament quickly became cliché and anchored in past cultural norms reduced to stereotypes. Nelson Algren spoke to me because he teleported me in real time to a frighteningly relevant place in my present



that I could care about. I was the boxer in his stories that lost. I was the lonely sod walking on the city concrete half crazed out of his mind, looking for drink and human connection. I was the lonely apartment dweller watching the neon lights in the dead of winter, wishing I had company despite my non-committal neurosis. The empathy in his books transcended the human history of his characters into the real-time, contemporary human condition that I painfully related to on a personal level.

So, to make a long story short, don't let your book just be about you. In other words, empty the rice bowl and make it about the world as it stands in the now—electrified, relevant, timely, and acutely collective as the voice of humanity. Look around you and see what is going on. Forget your summer vacation and write about the *Coney Island of the Mind* in present tense. Ferlinghetti did and created one of the most experiential shared poetry books of the twentieth century.

Often, when I walk around with *tabula rasa* consciousness, people misunderstand and think I am a few sandwiches short of a picnic. But quickly, with humility and quiet surprise, they realize there is a method to the madness; there is something beneath the quietude and soft spokenness. It takes a lay person to learn because the artist who knows everything cannot be taught! Remember, empty your rice bowl before putting that pen to paper. Only then will you give yourself a fighting chance. There is nothing worse than being thought of as a fool after all is said and done, and your best is not good enough; the words ultimately misunderstood despite being written in volumes. Embrace the responsibility and task of being a lay person first because you will ultimately share in the wisest gift later, that of touching and changing others through language and ultimately uniting with the unbroken circle that is the collective muse of humanity. 🐾