

Preparation for Inspiration

Generally speaking, “inspiration” is a spontaneous spiritual influence or creative impulse that makes a person think, speak or act in ways that transcend regular human abilities. As such, it is the source of various kinds of religious experiences and creative expressions and is found in many different forms. Most forms of inspiration encourage or facilitate action, often resulting in artistic or other creative expression. Whatever the source, inspiration arises spontaneously, independent of the individual's will.

Merriam-Webster defines inspiration as: “1. a divine influence or action on a person believed to qualify him or her to receive and communicate sacred revelation; 2. the action or power of moving the intellect or emotions; or 3. the act of influencing or suggesting opinions.” Merriam-Webster also defines it as “the act of drawing in; specifically, the drawing of air into the lungs.” This last definition refers to the term’s Latin origin, *inspirare*, which means to blow into or to breathe upon. Inspiration is sometimes viewed as an analogy between divine and human communication. As human discourse is physically a product of breathing, so, according to 2 Timothy 3:16, scripture is “God-breathed” (*inspirata*, in the Latin Bible). The experience of inspiration can suggest the presence of a *spiritus*, or “breath,” that is breathed into and stimulates the soul.

The experience and understanding of inspiration is diverse, with a fascinating past. The ancient Scandinavians found inspiration by drinking mead, a beverage that transformed the imbiber into a visionary or poet. The ancient Greeks sought the inspiration of the Muses in the creation of poetry and songs, similar to the way that Hindus might pray to Sarasvatī, the goddess of knowledge, music, arts, wisdom and learning. Plato recognized both prophetic and poetic inspiration, and viewed both as forms of madness, or possession, induced by the presence of a god within the inspired person. This “spirit possession” view of inspiration is widespread in tribal cultures throughout the world. In the Near East, inspiration was associated with prophecy. Early Hebrew poetry also indicates a belief in a divine spirit’s role in the creative process, a role related to the enlivening breath of God as described in Genesis. This general understanding of inspiration persisted for centuries, gradually evolving to give more weight to inborn genius and the significance of imagination, rather than the external influences of gods and muses.

By the late 18th century, the Romantics began to turn outwards to nature and the environment for inspiration. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Freud’s theory of the unconscious drew inspiration into the realm of the psyche. T.S. Eliot characterized this newly understood psychological basis for inspiration as “the sudden lifting of the burden of anxiety and fear,” in other words, the elimination of repression. The surrealists further dismantled inspiration from its spiritual associations by experimenting with techniques that hampered authorial control, such as automatic writing.

These examples shed some light on the diverse ways that people have experienced inspiration throughout history. Much has been written about the topic, but the phenomenon defies complete understanding or definition. Friedrich Nietzsche’s description of his own experience of inspiration captures this mystery: “One hears—one does not seek; one takes—one does not ask who gives: a thought suddenly flashes up like lightning, it comes with necessity, unhesitatingly—I have never had any choice in the matter.” *Nietzsche, Ecce Homo*

This overview was inspired by the essay “Inspiration” in the *Encyclopedia of Religion* (Macmillan, 2005).

I dream my painting and I paint my dream. *Vincent van Gogh*

The Greeks . . . created an entire group of goddesses. . . . These nine goddesses, or muses, were the recipients of prayers from writers, engineers, and musicians. Even the great minds of the time, like Socrates and Plato, built shrines and visited temples dedicated to their particular muse (or muses, for those who hedged their bets). Right now, under our very secular noses, we honor these beliefs in our language, as the etymology of words like museum (“place of the muses”) and music (“art of the muses”) come[s] from the Greek heritage of ideas as superhuman forces. *Scott Berkun*

I never made one of my discoveries through the process of rational thinking. *Albert Einstein*

Inspiration is not the exclusive privilege of poets or artists. There is, there has been, there will always be a certain group of people whom inspiration visits. It’s made up of all those who’ve consciously chosen their calling and do their job with love and imagination. It may include doctors, teachers, gardeners Their work becomes one continuous adventure as long as they manage to keep discovering new challenges in it. . . . A swarm of new questions emerges from every problem that they solve. Whatever inspiration is, it’s born from a continuous “I don’t know.” *Wisława Szymborska*

There’ll be what you might call a moment of inspiration—a way of seeing or feeling or remembering, an instance or a person that’s made a large impression. Like the sand and the oyster, it’s a creative irritant. In each poem, I’m trying to reveal a truth, so it can’t have a fictional beginning.
Carol Ann Duffy

The only place where I feel the joy of imminent domain is in my woodlot. My spirits rise whenever I enter it. I can spend the entire day there with hatchet or pruning-shears making paths, without a remorse of wasting time. I fancy the birds know me, and even the trees make little speeches or hint them. *Ralph Waldo Emerson*

Poetry is just the evidence of life. If your life is burning well, poetry is just the ash. *Leonard Cohen*

Questions to Ponder

1. Which of the above quotations is most meaningful for you? Why? This question will be used in the sharing at the meeting.
2. Some experience a bolt of inspiration fully formed after a night’s sleep or a shower. Others experience a more gradual glimmer of a new idea emerging from something read or a stimulating conversation with others. What inspires you to a mind-and-heart opening experience?
3. Describe an especially meaningful experience when you felt inspired. What did you do, if anything, as a result of that inspiration?
4. Does inspiration play a role in your spiritual life? If so, please describe.
5. What steps could you take to bring more inspiration into your personal or professional life?
6. What ways have you been an inspiration to others?
7. Comment on ways individuals in your communities have inspired you.