Delegation Nation:
A Call For Citizen Poets

An Essay
For The History Club
Columbus, Ohio

Artie Isaac
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"…Never again would birds' song be the same.
And to do that to birds was why she came."

— from Robert Frost's "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be The Same"

In 2001, I walked beside Rabbi Dov Berkowitz in the Negev Desert. I asked him to say something rabbinic.

Rabbi Dov said, "Don't delegate the teaching to the rabbis," he said. "Be a teacher."

"But," I said, "My upbringing did not include Jewish education."

He turned to look at me. He knew how far I had travelled to stand beside him in Israel, thanks to a generous investment by a wealthy philanthropist to assure I would be a Jewishly literate lay leader. "You have," Rabbi Dov said, "one of the world's greatest Jewish educations. Do not delegate the teaching to the rabbis."

I am here with the same message: You have one of the world's greatest educations. Do not delegate the writing to the poets. If you think you are unqualified to write a poem, call me. I would like to hear that story. It might make a great poem.

Now you are a poet.

This is an essay. The French root of the word, *essay*, is "attempt." I will attempt to develop, convey, and convince you of four thoughts:

First, we are a nation of delegators. And the cost is substantial.

Second, everything is poetry. Your poetry is whatever you say it is.

Third, I will offer a description of my journey into poetry.

Fourth, I will propel you into — or deeper into — your journey into poetry.

I. Delegation Nation

I don't recommend Bernard Lewis's book *What Went Wrong?: The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East*. It is a biased slam against Islam.

I have not read this book. I delegate almost all reading to my beloved, Alisa Isaac. Reading is one of Alisa's top three activities. Reading is not in my top ten. I rarely engage with a book. Alisa is always engaged with a book. She is happy to receive a book from me when I ask, "Would you please read this and tell me about it?"

Alisa told me that Lewis wrote that there were highly advanced civilizations before anyone had the concept of time. The concept of time has not always been with us. The civilizations that first embraced the new concept of time suddenly had an advantage: their citizens could work as teams through delegation. Without the concept of time, delegation was not possible. Delegation became a global competitive advantage. The civilizations with the concept of time and delegation quickly surpassed the formerly leading civilizations who had created mathematics and science.

Fast forward — which is an expression that is only about time, and our dominion over time — fast forward to the industrial revolution and we apply time and delegation as more than teamwork.

We have turned time and energy into currency. If I mow your lawn, you will pay me $30 for my time and energy. Now I have $30 and can go to the Winds Cafe, here in Yellow Springs, where they have time and energy in their kitchen, and I will trade my $30 for lunch with Alisa, who will tell me about the book I gave her.

We delegate more than lawns and lunch. We delegate our most important work.

My mother fed me baby formula. How did she think this would be better than her own breast milk, Mother Nature's jet fuel?

Our daughter might ask Alisa and me a similar question, because we put her in daycare when she was still an infant. "You thought," Helen might ask, "it would be better for strangers to raise me all day?"

In fact, we did. We both had jobs that brought us meaning. We both thought that staying home might make us crazy. And that it might make Helen crazy to stay home. As an infant, she was turbulent and

restless when alone with us. She sparkled in company. We thought, "It does no one any good to be home with a parent slowly going crazy."

Soon thereafter, Alisa and I delegated to Columbus School for Girls most — not all, but most — of Helen's education. Surely Jennifer Ciccarelli and her predecessors have assembled a team that will teach our daughter many subjects better than we could.

While CSG and other out-of-home education might be the epitome of delegation, and might make a lot of sense, CSG graduates are not all delegating to a fault.

Consider my college classmate, Elaine Chu[1] (CSG '78), who is a talented artist and teacher in San Francisco. Elaine makes. She is a maker. She made this votive from one of my poems in *Pandemonia*. It's a poem about my intention.

And consider Paula Penn-Nabrit (CSG '72), who recognizes the need to develop food sources within underserved communities, the ones that, in the middle of Columbus today do not have access to fresh food or daily postal delivery (and that's been going on for many years). Paula has recognized that many churches all over the country have the largest open green spaces in their communities — and those green spaces can become teaching gardens, where children might taste their first fresh vegetables.[2]

Paula also doesn't delegate the teaching to the rabbis. Paula teaches Bible online every Sunday.

I delegate the driving of my car. I drive a Tesla, but won't bore you with the details. It drives itself. And it drives much better than I do. The computer scientists call it "artificial intelligence." It is, to me, delegated intelligence. Each of us uses machines — like our smartphones — so sophisticated that we don't know how they work. This is delegation.

Some delegation has horrendous results. We delegated the capture and return of slaves. Out of that ignoble profession has evolved our city police forces. They are still very focused on making sure that Black people aren't in white places.

In my life, no Black person in a hoodie has ever done me wrong. Almost everything I see that is wrong and abusive has been done by white men in suits. When I see a white man in a suit, I think: "Why is he here? What the hell is he doing here?" I really do.

And we have delegated our military. We have a squad of one million, three hundred thousand people who can wage war just about anywhere in the name of creating peace.

President Eisenhower summed up delegation. He saw that, if war is profitable, we will always be at war.

The United States has always been at war. Our children have not known one day when the U.S. was not waging war, threatening the daily lives of women and children around the world. And we aren't doing it to make people free. We are doing it to keep the U.S. dollar as the world's base currency, so that we can print money at the lowest cost. We invaded Iraq when Dick Cheney heard Saddam Hussein say he would price oil in euros.

Here's one thing we won't delegate, not as a country and not as individuals, with very few exceptions. We won't delegate our comfort. We might tithe some of our income. But we don't give the wealth that supports our comfort. Even while that wealth has its roots in slavery and continued structural racism.

That sounds socio-political, but is history. And you are The History Club.

Speaking of history and The History Club, I read your history and see that you used to write your own essays. Then you decided to delegate the writing of the essays to outsiders.

Did your standards rise above your willingness, beyond your ambition? Have you hired me like a party clown? Did you want a historian?

But I am not a historian. I'm a poet. And we have three more chapters to cover.

II. What Is Poetry?

The former Poet Laureate of the United States, Billy Collins visited Bexley several years ago, and spoke in the high school auditorium. Perhaps you were there. He described writing poetry. "The most difficult part of being a poet," he said, "was figuring out what to do with the other twenty-three-and-a-half hours of each day."

A couple years ago, I took a class with Billy Collins. The class is on MasterClass.com[3] and I recommend it to you. Billy Collins described what is poetry. "Poetry is," he said, "writing that doesn't go all the way across the page." My poems meet that standard.

As an example, here is the first poem from my first book. In the poem, there is a character called "Goodtime." I am "Goodtime." That is the name I think my dog calls me.

The Favor

You are sitting, staring, pecking at your desk.

I am on the floor, stretching, beside the ball.

Let me do you a favor, Goodtime.

Come down here, Goodtime.

Throw this ball and I will bring it back to you.
I will give you purpose.
I will return you to here and now.

I will do you the favor of returning you to us.

See how I did that? The words don't go all the way across the page. The former Poet Laureate says this is poetry. So does Rachel D.K. Finney, the CEO of Columbus Humane.

Did you know that Columbus Humane was founded in 1883 by two teachers, Louise Phillips and Harriet Brocklehurst. The mission: to protect women, children, and draught horses, all three of which were being abused by white men.

Today, 138 years later, the draught horses are no longer whipped in our streets, but women and children continue to bear the brunt of ills from our white male supremacist economy.

But credit where credit is due: we rescued the horses. At the glue factory.

What do you feel when I speak of police, war, and abuse of women and children? Physically, what is the physical sensation that you feel? Do you feel uneasy in your stomach? Do your shoulders hunch? Do you eyes narrow? Do you want to escape?

If you are feeling anything, you are on the verge of poetry.

Poetry is whatever you do when you have a physical sensation, whenever Mother Nature reminds you, physically, that you are alive. You write poetry to understand why you are having the feeling. Perhaps you want more of an emotion, and you write love poetry. Or you want less of another emotion, and you write poems about the Holocaust.

Consider this brief excerpt from the poem "In the Middle of Life"[4] by Tadeusz Różewicz (tah-DAY-oosh roo-ZHEH-veech):

> ...that old woman who
> is pulling a goat on a rope
> is more necessary
> and more precious
> than the seven wonders of the world
> whoever thinks and feels
> that she is not necessary
> he is guilty of genocide...

I first saw those lines, excerpted just like that, in the obituary[5] of the poet.

When I speak of poetry, I speak of any activity that you do that creates flow,[6] the optimal psychological experience, where your challenges become more difficult, requiring your skills to expand. You don't do what is easy. You do what is engaging. You are stretching.

For Alisa, it is guitar, watercolor, cooking, needlework, exercise, reading, and — most of all — gardening.

What is it for you? What would you do because you love to do it, not because anyone else thinks it is worthy?

I have always wanted to work in a delicatessen. So, when I was 50 years old, I worked a summer of Friday lunch shifts at Katzinger's Delicatessen, delivering food from the kitchen to the tables. When I had down time I would accost customers who were reading the sandwich board, directing them to stop wasting time and just order a Rueben because that is the #1 sandwich and they are unlikely to discover a better sandwich.

Diane Warren, the co-founder of Katzinger's, paid me one loaf of bread per shift — unless someone complained about me and, if that happened, I would receive two loaves of bread. It was a highly motivating incentive.

Joe Blundo wrote a column about it. *The Dispatch* ran a photograph.[7] It was a joyful experience.

After Blundo's story ran, I remember an elder at a cocktail party, criticizing me, asking me, "Don't you have anything better to do with your time?" I barely knew who she was. She was either waiting to rain on my parade or she was just randomly casting shade on everyone in the party.

I asked her, "Better use of my time? Like squashing other people's passions? Do you think I am too rich or high and mighty to work in a delicatessen? Is this what you do: go around telling people not to enjoy life? I have always wanted to work in a delicatessen. Leave me alone."

If I did only what that critic thought was worthy, or only what makes money, or only what adds to my resume, I can't imagine how noisy my death would be, with me shouting, "I didn't do what I wanted to do." I wouldn't have acted on stage. I wouldn't have spent more than 30 nights below the rim of the Grand Canyon. I wouldn't be here now, talking with you.

In *The Geography of Bliss: One Grump's Search for the Happiest Places in the World*,[8] NPR correspondent Eric Weiner traveled the world on assignments and, in each country, he would assess the overall level of happiness.

The happiest place? Iceland. Any poets there? Ninety percent of Icelanders write poetry.

An article in *The Columbus Dispatch* last week, "Pandemic has raised the profile of poetry," suggests that our neighbors are becoming poets.

Which leads us to the third chapter, a description of...

III. My Journey Into Poetry

I think I write poetry, but I don't much think myself a poet. Other poets don't think I'm a poet either, because I don't follow the rules. A real poet writes many poems, submits each for publication by journals whose editors decide what is worthy and, more often, what is not, and then the poet finds a book publisher who will publish a collection of the poet's poems — at least 60% of which must have been previously published by those journals.

I have no interest in that path. I don't need an editor to tell me the quality of my poems. There is only one judge of my quality. Me. Because I'm a grown up. The editors can all take a flying leap into the Scioto. (They probably wouldn't think the Scioto worthy of an editor's leap.)

This thought led me to write a poem. Here it is, a poem that is a working draft:

Poetic Industrial Complex

Somewhere sit several
self-satisfied censors,
pasty-faced pairs
of spectacles
scanning
verse

and
deciding
like Graces
what is a poem
and what is sub-standard
and what they will deign to publish.

Protecting rusted gates of poetry
their self-important bindings
once held the fate of poets
who rhyme and tickle
against the letter
of rejection.

Oh, they posed
ever less imposing
while my father typed
private meter in his study,
his poetry spinning past them,
leaving them in their own fusty dust.

I like this poem because the right margin is cut like the teeth of a saw I imagine my father using against the forces that discouraged him from becoming a poet.

I'm not angry. It's emotion expressed in poetry. I have feelings. I don't dismiss my feelings. I write poems.

So how did I get here?

I was trained at home and at The Columbus Academy in three skills: writing, improvisation, cheerleading. Some of you saw that happen.

Wherever I have been, I have been those three things: a *writer*, listening for the meaning of words; an *improvisational actor*, engaging in the present moment; and a *cheerleader*, offering old-fashioned encouragement.

Billy Collins recommends that a poet have self-awareness, a definition of the poet's persona. During his visit to Bexley, he described himself as "a man sitting at his kitchen table, looking out the window, with all the time in the world."

I'm not that poet. I'm in a hurry. I am worried about all of us. I can't sleep. There is something I need to tell you.

Here is a short poem I wrote to describe how I see myself as a poet.

Persona

after a lifetime
of masquerading
as other than

a writer
an improviser
a cheerleader

awake in bed
before my alarm
thinking

a few words might
encourage you
to do what we all need

I write. I have written advertising (direct mail, print, web), eulogies, a book, lyrics, a play, essays, a financial prospectus, an annual report, sermons, speeches, classroom lectures, workshops, newspaper articles, corporate videos, love letters, toasts, and poetry. I write. I enjoy writing in different forms.

Just last Monday, I heard Alisa on the telephone. "Yes," she said, "I am married to the poet." You see, in Yellow Springs, I'm not known by many people. But if you meet someone out here in Greene County who does know me and you asked them about me, they would likely say, "He's a local poet."

"Yes," said Alisa on the phone, "I am married to the poet." And then she added, "I'm — the poet's — wife."

What does it mean to be "the poet's wife"? It sounds very difficult.

Here are a few moments in my journey to becoming married to the wife of a poet.

First and foremost, I was born to two natural writers, one of whom was an English major, the other, self-taught.

I gave up on poetry in high school. It didn't make sense. I didn't grasp that poetry is freeze-dried language and we, the readers, have to add water — and that water is us. I just felt ignorant, so I walked away from poetry. I read newspapers instead, preferring the more emotional sections: letters to the editor, comics, and obituaries. Obituaries? See you there!

At college, I heard a poet named Richard Hugo express two thoughts. He said that, when he stopped drinking, he was surprised by how long the day was. And he said, great poetry is never finished; it is merely abandoned. I have thought about that for nearly 40 years.

During those 40 years, I wrote a few birthday poems and commemorative verses. I recall one heartfelt, schmaltzy poem called "Tableau for Eight," written in 1988, the year that Don Mykrantz and I were married — surprising some of you because it wasn't to each other — after a dinner with our parents and new brides. I recall that Peter Mykrantz, Sr., liked how each stanza added another line, until there were eight lines per stanza.

For the past dozen years, I have presented on the topic of creativity to groups of CEOs around North America. When I set out on this adventure, I asked Alisa what poem I might include. She recommended Robert Frost's "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be The Same." I memorized that poem and have recited it a thousand times. I think that experience changed me as a writer.

Moving to Yellow Springs with Alisa has led me to write poetry. Living with a creative role model, an autotelic learner, someone who is never bored — has led me to my own creative experimentation.

In recent years, I took a class called *Creativity & Personal Mastery*.[9] The monthly assignment for May 2019 was to identify two daily, mundane activities — one I like and one I don't — and engage in them mindfully, not rushing to completion so I can return to real life, but rather deeply falling into the process of doing these regular chores. I chose walking the dog and washing the dishes. I don't recall which I liked and which I didn't. I like washing dishes. And, if it's raining, walking the dog can be a chore.

Anyway, by the second or third day, I was walking the dog and mindfully engaging in the process. Rather than cajoling her toward swift production, I was looking down the leash and conversing — *sotto voce* — with Margo. It occurred to me that I have always compared notes with dogs — on the weather, flora and fauna, on other dogs and people — and have said the same things to hundreds of dogs over my lifetime. I have greeted many dogs, preferring them to continuing any conversation with any human.

That same month, I was in a weekly writers' group called *Shut Up And Write*.[10] We would meet in a coffee shop and introduce ourselves — all strangers — and then, for the rest of the hour we would, well, shut up and write. Everyone had the same experience: surprised at how much we wrote. And we would look up and be surprised to see that only the first 20 minutes had passed.

At one of those sessions, I made a list of the things I say to dogs. I thought there might be ten recurring conversations. There were thirty or forty. That list became the table of contents. And I wrote the poems.

And then I did nothing.

Coincidentally, around that time I visited Santa Barbara for a California-style navel gazing retreat.

I came home with a reckless disregard for quality control. I quickly laid out the book. I grabbed a watercolor of a dog that Alisa had painted, with her permission, for the cover. I self-published it within a few days of getting home. With technology these days, there is no delay. Self-publishing is instant gratification.

Throw Me A Bone: Poetry For Dogs is on Amazon,[11] fully priced, because all my proceeds are donated to Columbus Humane.

When it was released, it was #2 in the category called nature poetry. Mary Oliver was #1, of course. But, since she is dead, I figured I would someday surpass her. I described this competitive strategy to Alisa, who said, "Unless they discover her unpublished work."

So, go to Amazon, **or if you want an inscribed copy, just ask** — *and make your own donation to Columbus Humane.* For the draught horses, right?

Here is one last moment that comes to mind in my journey into poetry. These days, every other Sunday night, I meet with Beth Weinstock on a Zoom call[12] — open to the public (very few of whom are there) — where Beth and I read our poetry and offer encouraging critiques.

Beth used to be my primary physician, but she recently graduated from Bennington with an M.F.A. in poetry, so I still consider her my doctor, but now for my poetic ailments.

That's how I got here.

Now, let us turn the topic to you, the fourth and final chapter.

IV. Your Journey Into Poetry

Let this be a message in a bottle, washing up on your beach today. You uncork the bottle, pull out the rolled paper, spread it, and read, "Write poetry."

Here are several ideas on where to start.

Start by imagining we are standing on a football field. I hand you a shovel and tell you to dig. Will you dig a deep, deep hole? Or will you dig a hundred shallow holes?

There isn't a right answer. I would dig a hundred shallow holes, so when I write, each poem has a single idea, a swift entry and exit — and not much in the middle. My poems are short. I have to take my shovel and move on.

If you would dig a single deep hole, your poetry will go deep, with care that the walls of the freshly dug hole don't cave in on you.

Start with Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way.*

When Lisa Dolin was Dean of the Business School at Capital University, she suggested I teach at Capital. I visited her one afternoon to discuss the idea. Lisa asked, "What do you want to teach?" I was ready to move on from other subjects, so I said, "Creativity."

Lisa said, "Great!" Actually, she didn't say, "Great!" She said, "September 15th."

"What's September 15th?" I asked.

"That's the day you start teaching creativity." The meeting was over.

I walked to my car, thinking, "I have never taught creativity. I have never read a book on creativity. I have never taken a class in creativity."

I drove to Barnes & Noble. I went to the information desk and said, "I teach creativity at the Graduate School of Business at Capital University."

"Very impressive," said the clerk.

"Problem is," I continued, "I don't know the first thing about it."

"Ah, follow me," said the clerk, taking off for the Self Help section. I had always looked down on the Self Help section. I thought it was for losers. Turns out, it is for people who are trying to help themselves, like Capital University, or — I presume — The History Club.

The clerk handed me *The Artist's Way*. It's a 12-week workbook. It's now thirty years old, looks cheesy and smells like California, but I bought it and took it back to my office. When I arrived, I bumped into a visitor to the advertising agency, Mark Hillman, a writer who has won the world's single most prestigious award for copywriting. He's a big deal. I showed him the book.

Seeing the cover, he said, "I do that every year."

Since then, I have visited bookshops all over the country and always present my original quandary, "I teach creativity but I don't know how." Each clerk always takes me to this book.

If any of you agree to start the 12-week process, I will gladly facilitate a group conversation in the first, third, eighth, and 12th weeks. You don't need me to do that, but it will be fun.

Start by lowering your standards.

When Alisa and I took an adult course in introductory Hebrew, all of us adult students became concerned during the third week when the difficulty seemed to grow. The teacher was the legendary Rabbi Elka Abrahamson. She said, "Don't worry. This is supposed to be fun. This is not your work. Nobody is going to take your children."

The same with your poetry. Don't worry. This is supposed to be fun. This is not your work. Nobody is going to take your children.

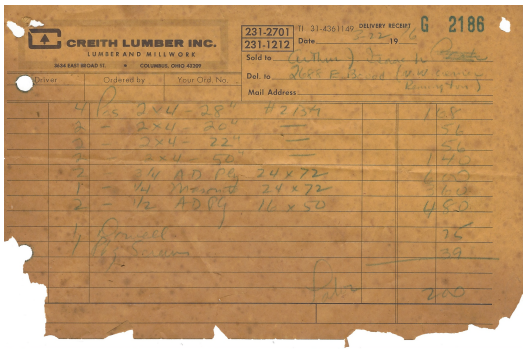
Start by preparing a space. In Genesis, in the beginning of God's creating, God clears away a space, defining a work surface within the void. Making space for your creativity is the first step.

Is it a favorite chair? Is it a desk by a window? Is it your breakfast nook? Choose a place that is comfortable, not formal, a place that makes you smile. A place you won't fall asleep.

For me, it's coffee shops.

These days, during Covid, it's here and there in our house, mainly the dining room table, either of two big chairs, or my desk, where I am sitting now, which is a workbench I built when I was too young to drive.

My mother drove me to Creith Lumber the day before my sixteenth birthday. I still have the receipt with my mother's beautiful handwriting: her name, our street address for delivery.



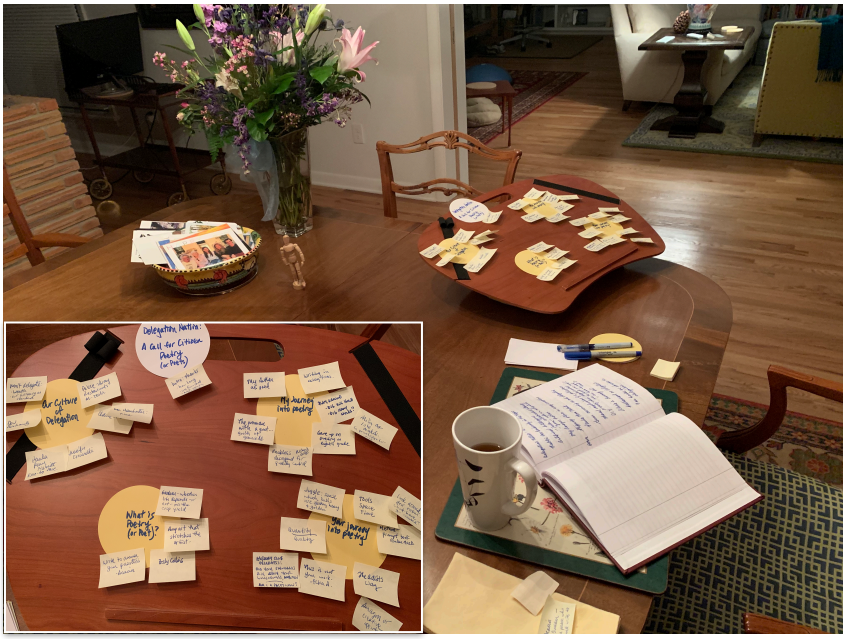
After space, assemble your tools.

A friend once wanted to journal at eight o'clock every evening. She put her journal and pen on the coffee table. Every evening at eight, when she sat to journal, she noticed that the glass top of the coffee table was a little dusty. That wouldn't do. So she would immediately get up and find the Windex and dust cloth. And she would clean the table. And the mood passed. No journaling.

We decided she would leave the Windex and dust cloth on the lower shelf of the coffee table. She would sit down to journal each evening at 7:55, budgeting five minutes for the Windex and dust cloth. Journaling would start with the ritual of cleaning the glass. It was a nice metaphor: cleaning the glass as a way of writing clearly, seeing the world clearly.

Have a space. And have the right tools. I have some tools which I use differently every time. I especially like the round PostIt notes from Germany.

Here is a photograph of my tools.



After space and tools, attend to time.

When is the best time for your creativity? You know mine: middle of the night. That's the tale I told you in the poem, "Arrival."[13]

I prize a good night's sleep. But if writing wakes me up, the rockslide of ideas, I hop out of bed with a smile. There is work in the play, play in the night.

Elizabeth Gilbert (of *Eat, Pray, Love* fame) describes in a Ted Talk[14] that a writer stands on the great plains. An idea comes like the wind from behind. It strikes the back of your head. You either swiftly write it down, or the wind will carry the idea away, across the plains, gone forever.

I heard Terry Gross interview Joseph Heller,[15] who wrote *Catch 22*. He described his morning ritual, writing two pages before breakfast every day. "And I know what you are about to ask me," he added. "I double- or triple-space. The margins are generous. If I don't like how a sentence looks, I cross it out and re-write it. But I will tell you this: by the time I sit down for breakfast every morning I have at least two sentences and maybe two pages written by Joseph Heller. I know writers who go years without writing."

Start by identifying a topic about which you deeply care, a topic that consumes your imagination and ambition.

Years ago, I was co-writing[16] a Jewish adaptation of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, because — I felt that the story isn't about Christmas as much as it is about connection and humanity — which is what Christmas is about: *connection and humanity*. We fashioned it like the Passover Seder. It played a second year, after a major re-write. Perhaps you saw it. No refunds.

Anyway, in the middle of the writing, I was stuck, unable to figure out an aspect of the plot. I bumped into Acacia Duncan. Perhaps you know Acacia from Available Light Theatre.[17] That's where I met her and even worked with her.

I told Acacia I was stuck and she asked, "What question are you trying to answer?"

"Answer a question?" I asked. "For the audience?"

"No," she said. "For yourself. The only person who is going to go to the trouble of writing a play is a person who is trying to answer a question for himself. You need to be burning to answer a question for yourself. Then, in the end, you hope there is an audience who is curious about how you answered the question."

Start by keeping a diary, a writer's journal. Put ideas in it. Save them for later.

My friend Parker MacDonell,[18] who you might know from Broad Street Presbyterian or the Refectory where he plays guitar in a combo, writes and performs — and records — original songs.

Parker keeps a small journal in his pocket. Whenever he hears or imagines a phrase and thinks, "That might make a good song," he writes it down. Next time you see Parker, ask him to read from his list of potential song titles. It will make you smile.

In that moment, watch Parker exhibit an artistic seriousness. For a songwriter, that list might be legacy. Each title is like a fossil of an animal that has not yet lived.

Start by trying different voices and forms. Are you funny? Write something funny. Are you angry? Write something angry. Try different forms, from limericks to sonnets to essays to love letters.

Juggle the different voices and forms as if they are juggling balls. Notice which of the balls becomes more golden and heavier. Keep that one in the air and put down the balls that are duller and less substantial.

Start by prioritizing quantity over quality. If you try to do well, you will be frustrated. You will over-polish a single apple.

But, if you try to do a lot, and you produce many poems, you are more likely to produce a few you like.

Start by letting other things wait. Balancing your checkbook is not important. You have money. Balancing your checkbook is distracting you from telling your story.

Start by thinking of yourself as a writer.

At the funeral for Bobbie Shook, who died far too young, her widower, Bob Shook sat privately with their children. He asked the kids — then in their late teens and early twenties — to dedicate their first books to their late mother. According to Bob, a well published author, the children responded by saying, "But you are the writer. We aren't writers."

Bob replied, "Now you are."

I am here with the same message: "Now you are." Now you are a poet. Dedicate your first poem to your late mother. If your mother isn't late, dedicate your first poem to your mother. If your mother isn't worthy, dedicate it to someone else's mother. If you never had a mother, call me. I would like to hear that story. It might make a great poem.

Now you are a poet.

Start with reading poetry. I haven't read a lot of poems, but I have memorized a few. I feel that I don't understand a poem until I have memorized it. Even then, the poem continues to unfold.

Earlier, I described how I first encountered a specific poem by Robert Frost. I will close this essay with this, the full story.

At dinner one night, I asked Alisa to recommend a poem that I might include in my workshop on creativity for CEOs. She said, without hesitation, "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be The Same."

"What's that?" I asked.

"It's a Robert Frost poem," she said. "It would be great."

I hadn't heard of the poem, but I knew we had a volume of his poems, so I asked to be excused from the table, and brought it back to the table. I found the poem and asked, "Would you like me to read it aloud?"

"That would be nice." And I read it to her.

I'd like to read it to you now. I'm going to recite it, because I like when the words come from inside. After I recite it, I'll show you the text.

Before I do, a word of preparation. Frost's language is simple. You know all the words. But the language is freeze-dried, just the essence, so no matter how slowly it is heard, it doesn't make full, literal sense. I invite you to just listen for the sound of it. Let the words simply flow into your ears. Afterward, we will look at it and decode every line.

Here is "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be The Same" by Robert Frost. For ten years, I ended my CEO workshop on creativity with this poem:

Never Again Would Birds' Song Be The Same

He would declare and could himself believe
That the birds there in all the garden round
From having heard the daylong voice of Eve
Had added to their own an oversound,
Her tone of meaning but without the words.
Admittedly an eloquence so soft
Could only have had an influence on birds
When call or laughter carried it aloft.
Be that as may be, she was in their song.
Moreover her voice upon their voices crossed
Had now persisted in the woods so long
That probably it never would be lost.
Never again would birds' song be the same.
And to do that to birds was why she came.

I once asked a rabbi what a blessing meant. The rabbi said, "It means what it says. It's not written in code. You might not understand the words. You might not agree. But it means what the words say."

Same here. Frost's poem is not in code. But let's decode it.

Who is "he"? There are cues. He's in a garden with Eve.

Frost does invent a word: "oversound." He defines it with the next line: "Her tone of meaning, but without the words."

For a while, I thought "call or laughter" was bird call and Eve's laughter. But I have come to think it was Eve's call (and Eve's laughter). What was Eve's call? "Adam! Adam!" The most beautiful sound in the Garden of Eden.

Notice the ninth line. It is a complete sentence on a single line. English majors have learned a secret code.

It's like a secret signature that a traditional furniture builder leaves. If you disassemble an antique chair, you might find the original craftsman's signature inside a joint. It is a message, a greeting in a time capsule, that can be retrieved only by a later craftsperson.

The same with this line. English majors are taught that, when the poet places a full sentence within one line, it's the heart of the matter. And, in this case, the first half of the ninth line doesn't mean anything. "Be that as may be"? Frost might as well have said, "Whatever." I'd say, "Bob, you can do more with the first half of the ninth line." But he would say, "I'm Robert Frost."

It's the second half that is the heart of the matter: "...she was in their song." In birdsong is the voice of Eve.

And he goes on. The situation persists.

Each time I recited this to a small room of CEOs, I would describe that I come from Ohio, in the northern deciduous forest. We open our windows at night. And when we hear birdsong, we hear Eve's tone of voice, the oversound that connects us to original creation, to the first creativity that humans ever witnessed.

And that's where I left it for several years of reciting this poem.

I would close my workshop by saying that, when I finished reading the poem, I looked up at the dining table to see Alisa with tears on her cheek. She was crying. This is usually a bad sign. I asked, "What?"

She said, "It's just so touching." The oversound opened her tears. She had made the two-foot drop, from head to heart, a trip she can make.

Where was I? Decoding. Finding the first one-line sentence. Taking furniture apart. I was all in the head.

It was in San Clemente, in front of yet another small room of CEOs, when I put it together. I said, "Wait. The last line: 'And to do that to birds was why she came.' Friends," I told the CEOs, "I never put this together until this moment. This is why Alisa is here. To teach me how to make the two-foot drop, to connect my head with my heart. To do that to this bird is why she came."

One of the CEOs said, "Dude. That sounds important. You should call home."

We all laughed. I agreed. It was the end of the talk, so I immediately called Alisa and told her about the last line.

She said, "Ten years with that poem. You are coming right along."

A video of the presentation of this essay, with excerpts from the Q&A with members of The History Club is available here:

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[1] For more on Elaine Chu and her art: *https://www.instagram.com/egchu1* and *http://egchuhandcrafted.etsy.com/*

[2] "Moving Beyond The Pews And Into The Garden To Serve Their Communities," Danae King, *The Columbus Dispatch*, April 16, 2018, *https://www.dispatch.com/news/20180416/moving-beyond-pews-and-into-garden-to-serve-their-communities*

[3] *MasterClass.com*

[4] translated by Czesław Miłosz

[5] "Tadeusz Różewicz, Fierce Poetic Voice of Postwar Poland, Is Dead at 92," Douglas Martin, *The New York Times*, May 20, 2014.

[6] For more on FLOW, I recommend *Finding Flow: The Psychology Of Engagement With Everyday Life*, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *https://www.amazon.com/Finding-Flow-Psychology-Engagement-Masterminds/dp/0465024114/*

[7] "Unusual Intern Savors Slice Of Life At Deli," Joe Blundo, *The Columbus Dispatch*, September 9, 2010, *https://www.dispatch.com/article/20100909/LIFESTYLE/309099699*

[8] *https://www.amazon.com/Geography-Bliss-Grumps-Search-Happiest/dp/044669889X/*

[9] See *https://TheRaoInstitute.com*. I have taken the fundamental course *Creativity & Personal Mastery* three times.

[10] *https://shutupwrite.com/*

[11] For *Pandemonia: Poems in Seclusion* and *Throw Me A Bone: Poetry For Dogs*: *PoetryForDogs.com*. For an essay on writing poetry for dogs: *https://the2020club.files.wordpress.com/2019/10/isaac.2019.canine-poetry-slam.pdf*

[12] Poetry Circle with Beth Weinstock (and me) is every other Sunday: *https://us02web.zoom.us/j/81532407076?pwd=MFFMZFg2RXNFd1lKajFjcEtQR0UzZz09*
If you want to be on a reminder list, just let me know at *artieisaac@gmail.com*. Please note: the program is a conversation with Beth and me. Others are rarely unmuted.

[13] Connie Johnson invited me to speak to The History Club, filling in for the originally scheduled speaker. (Thank you, Connie.) I offered several topics that were ready on the shelf — and one that might be fun, from scratch. Connie chose the unwritten essay, "Delegation Nation: A Call For Citizen Poets." A day or two after the conversation with Connie, I woke with a start — and too many ideas to scribble on the pad on my nightstand. If the ideas are awake, I get up and write — otherwise I don't remember them all, or I fear that I have forgotten, or I look at the note pad in the morning and can't decipher what I've written in the dark. During that night, after the ideas were noted, only minutes had passed. I fixed my tea and wrote the poem, "Arrival," here included on the following page, and mailed it to each of the members with a copy of *Pandemonia: Poems In Seclusion*.

[14] *https://www.ted.com/talks/elizabeth_gilbert_your_elusive_creative_genius*

[15] *https://freshairarchive.org/segments/novelist-joseph-heller*

[16] with Matt Slaybaugh and Sean Christopher Lewis

[17] *https://avltheatre.com/*

[18] For music by Parker MacDonell: *https://open.spotify.com/artist/1LLAcSoPQb3PN1xk13eGAI*

Arrival

First, a kettle of water
on the smallest burner,
to stall the boil,
an infusion of leaves
in the mug at the ready
— the naturally sweet tea
from the Aveda salon,
where I last delegated
the styling of my father's hair.

Thé réconfortant sans caféine
of licorice root and peppermint,
the only responsible delight
at this time, the middle of the night,
just barely late enough
to rise and call it early,
to slip into the elegant robe
my mother sewed for my father,
our shared initials,
embroidered on the breast pocket.

I go to work with pen and paper,
not a pencil, use the ink, *don't go back,*
like my friend's father on Metro North
who would start the *Times* crossword
as the doors closed on 125th Street
and finish upon arrival at Grand Central.

I scribble against the rush of forgetting
the ideas for the essay — the attempt —
the rockslide of the night's sleep,
scrambling to stay atop,
not buried in the juggle of stones,
chopping and throwing onto the pile,
for the daytime work of sorting and placing
each in the river for crossing with you,
some stable enough for stepping,
some too small,
some unnecessary
because the river is only so wide.

I couldn't sleep
with so many stones in the bed.
Now they are sorted, stacked,
and stored in my journal.

Perhaps I'll return to bed,
awake with the thought
I would be better rested
if I enjoyed more sleep,
and I could delegate my sleep
to someone who does it better,
off-shoring or cross-mattressing
to my beloved
always fast to sleep
and fast asleep now.

But now the kettle calls
and I will rest
with a mug of sweet salon tea.