

# Alpha Muse

by [Carl Nelson](#) (April 2023)



*Ice Clouds over Coniston Old Man*, John Ruskin, 1880

**The Muse is the Alpha** in my life, and this explains all.

Or, as this snippet of verse applies:

I'm a dog for thought,  
for it has collared me  
and made me its pet  
rather than the other way 'round.

A warm, dark night with fireflies blinking unexpectedly from

here and there, pretty well describes my consciousness. My thinking, when latched onto, bats about like great big frightening, fuzzy gray, lost moths. They will often spiral around some burning question until exhaustion, or are drawn away by even brighter possibilities. A bit compulsive, these enchantments may circle for one to two weeks. I can remain enamored for a month or two. After that, it's lights out.

Most people are much more consistent, I've noticed. They can remain enamored for around two years, and questions don't burn. It's like their heads are full of damp wood. Sparks just fall by the wayside.

"Life" as John Lennon suggested, "is what happens when you're making other plans."

I agree. *Surprise*, to my mind, is life. However, *desire* describes life to far more people, I would estimate. And perhaps Lennon is describing those lives surprised by desire. Nevertheless, narratives of desire have a clarity and prominence of telephone pole wires while my narrative is as buried cable.

Desire is the inchoate id making its plans. And the audience loves to watch it at work. Whereas, surprise puts a lot of people off. Desires have goals and a plan while surprise is disjunctive. It's an interruption. It hasn't much to do with them. Desire is the language of the spheres, the community currency of choice. Surprise however, like God, often doesn't feel to many folk like it is dependable or something they could know. Surprise is something in the stars—or unfortunately another axle breaking pothole in the road.

But an epiphany is always a serendipity to me.

Telemarketing put me on to these truths.

Then the theatre cemented them like boots and tossed me off the pier.

## Picture Puzzle

Wandering is life pulsating,  
like Johnny Appleseed with tin pot hat  
propagating the apple.

'What sort of odd man  
would embark on life like that?'  
In these poems I find  
a picture puzzle of clouds  
snapping together. And that

everything is itself plus an indication.  
Nothing arrives on its own.  
Even at its worst, furthest, saddest or most lost  
you will happen upon indicators  
of the presence of God.

Oh, what the heck!  
One intuition will often fit another  
rather like my head fits my neck  
—though I've lost the diagrams  
along with the package insert.

My natural inclination is to get lost, to put my thumb out and see where people take me. Summers, school years, I hitchhiked all over the place—mostly listening. (There is a great thirst out there to talk—and to be heard, I found.) I hadn't much interest in talking about much that I already knew, except perhaps to explore further.

The telemarketers job was to qualify the prospect (that person at the other end of the call) and if qualified, to obtain a meeting for them (with my wife). To qualify meant they had the need (for copier equipment) and they had the money.

My wife was rather gleeful, that I had offered to do this while bed-ridden after foot surgery and loaded me down with scripted sales pitches. Not only did the scripts feel very stagey, but also brazenly aggressive to this naïf. Moreover, they sounded patronizing.

For example, here are two examples from off the web;

*"I'm calling to introduce you to our new product/service that can help you with ..."*

*"Would you be interested in learning more about how I can help you?"*

I had all sorts of objections. For example, if someone called to offer me "help," I'd immediately respond (politely), "No thanks." and hang up.

However, experience proved the scripts right and me wrong.

For example, whereas I thought the scripted statements were too aggressive, the prospects responded to them. 'This seems to take a lot of brass. Can you really say this to people,' I thought. But you could, and they responded, positively!

Perhaps it was because for establishing rapport, honesty does it best. These were business people. They knew I wanted something, otherwise I wouldn't be calling. "So cut to the chase. Tell me who you are and what you want. If you'll do these two things we'll have all the rapport we need," is as I later would imagine their mindset.

To do otherwise "is not selling, it's conversation," as I overheard a sales veteran explaining to her apprentice one day. (I continued phoning later from a spare desk in the company offices.)

An interesting reverse corollary to this aggressive conversational demand, is that if you don't say that you want something—the fellow on the other end of the line still assumes that you do. By not aggressively going for the sale, you are waving a red flag before the prospect. Recalling a memory, an example of this occurred between my cousin and myself.

My cousin's family is extremely successful and travels in the top tiers of U S industry and government. His son became a billionaire before leaving home. Perhaps because of this they tend to be reserved and private. We're the (relatively) poor relations who tend to leave our laundry lying around.

In any case, my cousin had some sort of midlife epiphany and wanted to refresh his relations with our end of the clan. So he took the time over lunch between flights to do so as he passed through our city. He wanted to make this opportunity so that he could catch up on things with our family and get to know each other better, he said. He and I had summered together at our lake cabin as school kids. And I had stopped by his rooms at Stanford once while hitchhiking.

Hi ho! This is exactly what I like to do. However, by the time I was driving him back to the departures level at the airport he was quite exasperated. "What do you want from me?" He demanded, seemingly from out of the blue.

I was dumbfounded. I didn't want anything! (No loan, no job, no networking help.)

If you view the world without great desire, but just enjoy feeling people, this is just one the many misunderstandings you may generate.

Desires are the coin of the realm. You show me your desire and I'll show you mine. I found this to be as true for play scripts, as for sales, as for conversing with just about any other human being. Realizations and epiphanies are great, but

can annoy others. Desires, however, provoke a discussion that will hold its audience; you are having a discussion with another human being and their desires, so you are doing business.

Sales scripts were instructive. They religiously pursued the narrative of shared desires. As long as I kept to the script, I could have conversations with other people lasting two to three minutes before the script ended and I fell off the end of that world to ... *"where there be dragons."* That is, where I began to prattle normally and few prospects wanted to go there.

One of the rules of living is that, you can't win if you don't play. One of the facts of life is that it's a jungle of conflicting desires -both within yourself, and between individuals. Finding allies and satisfying these desires is the predominate game. If you can't locate a contrasting desire—the key to your opposite's lock—there is no game. This is the illumination that came through the door which sales opened for me.

Unfortunately, to re-iterate: *A warm, dark night with fireflies blinking unexpectedly from here and there, pretty well describes my consciousness.* This would also describe the darkened theater during production of one of my plays—sputters of laughter in between stretches of silence, something like a stuttering lawn mower—where whatever overarching desire the piece claimed, rose to a certain level and flat lined. The tone was meditative, no matter how the characters connived. Alas, one of the rules of audience is that their members must recognize something of themselves in their performer. The more desires the performer projects, the more audience members might be attracted and co-mingle emotionally. Contrary desires drive narrative, and complimentary desires command audience. (Don't even bother to talk sense to them.)

My chatter within a gathering is much the same. I provoke a

few laughs and maybe provide a call back or two. But I rarely ever venture to talk sense to anyone, and the conversational narrative moves away. Excepting now and then, when I encounter someone of my own nature and it's like birds chirping in the trees. (Springtime for Carl!)

So there it is. I prefer wandering and getting lost to 'mansplaining' all that I might know. (And Lord, I hate Trivial Pursuit!) I find problems interesting and I like to flutter around them like a horrid fuzzy moth. To my mind, everything is practical, but my wife complains that I always joke about everything. "He's never serious."

But life is dialectical; it's funny; it's a quantum theory.

You know what's serious? Orcs! When you are not narrative, people will still come at you with their overwhelming desires like a hoard of Orcs, and you have nothing with which to defend yourself except perhaps a stab at humor and a bit of surprise—a very frail Dew Line, to be sure. People will contest over anything and everything. Like dogs, they love a bone.

In fact, just the other day I was chatting with a guy in the locker room about his hearing loss, while trying to listen above an argument ten feet away. Two fellows were locked in verbal combat, voices rising and with both repeatedly interrupting each other over an agreement! Each felt that their reason for their agreement was the better.

I mentioned this to my locker companion who was describing his hearing loss, but it seemed the humor of it was lost on him. And after he put the finishing touches to the description of his hearing disability and his unsuccessful efforts to cure it, the conversation dwindled away. (Oftentimes talkers you suffer, contrarily do not find you worth listening to—much like those individuals who would not join any group, which would have them for a member.)

But sometimes rather than hearing them out, all that needs happen to end a visit is to laugh. They will often say something surprising, as when a youthful orchestra hits a sour note. And even laughter can be taken poorly, too.

### **Narrative Illusion**

*“Poetry is a kind of language that wants to happen all at once, so it often walks backwards.”* –Jeff Dolven, poet/professor

Call it the narrative illusion,  
with time being the illusion it describes.  
An illusion only described by its passing—  
as in its essence when stopped,  
it is always and again, this and that.

I’m afraid life as it is—just that and this,  
frozen, as if caught naked in harsh light—  
like poetry, bores us ... doesn’t ‘happen’. Won’t move!  
While life moving more or less as it isn’t,  
has a lot happening, is an endless tale,

which proceeds with much abandon, on and on ...  
“full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.  
And all the men and women merely players ...”

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**Carl Nelson** has just finished a book of memoirs and poetry celebrating his current area of Appalachia titled *Become Remarkable*. To see this and more of his work, please visit [Magic Bean Books](#).



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