

Opinion

Musings About Muses: How *EyeNet* Opinions Are Born

“Dr. Mills!” The voice sliced through the cacophony of the Annual Meeting exhibit hall, causing me to slow my gait to allow the stentor to catch up.

Breathless, the pursuing young ophthalmologist blurted, “We don’t know each other (gasp), but I recognized you from your picture in *EyeNet*, and I just wanted to let you know that I really enjoy your editorials and I just wanted to shake your hand.” Fortunately, the ensuing clasp was firm but respectful of our mutual need to reuse our hands as eye surgeons.

And then he uttered the inevitable First Question: “If I may ask, how do you keep coming up with topics to write about? I mean, your mind must occasionally be blank, yet the deadline looms. At least that’s what happens to me when I have a writing project to do.” Encounters like this one have been replicated many times over at the Annual Meeting, and at other meetings, and even occasionally on the sidewalk. (There is a downside to having one’s picture in every issue of a monthly magazine: Anonymity is out the window.)

It always amazes me that people think the most challenging thing about writing a monthly column is coming up with ideas. Like most people, I lie in bed on occasion with my mind racing, overflowing, with ideas. So having the ideas isn’t the problem. I would submit that the truly challeng-

ing thing is choosing a particular idea from among the multitude of options, one that can come alive for the reader and resonate with his or her professional experience. For that, you need a muse.

Much has been written about muses ever since the nine Greek goddesses held court over all aspects of human creativity. Most authors admit to depending on their personal muse. Even Homer asked for some help when launching into the *Odyssey*: “Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story. ...” But the problem is that the muse isn’t “on call”; she doesn’t carry a beeper or cell phone. She appears when she is ready to appear, and this is frustrating to control freaks (not that any ophthalmologists fit in that category, of course). The late film critic Roger Ebert said it best: “The Muse visits during the act of creation, not before. Don’t wait for her. Start alone.”

Scientific writing is certainly more structured than “creative” writing, but someone must still conjure up the words. Writer’s block is as vexing a problem for the scientific writer as for the fiction writer. Snoopy, of Peanuts cartoon fame, overcame writer’s block by beginning each typescript with “It was a dark and stormy night ...” just to get something down on the page. But faculty members at prestigious academic institutions are regularly stalled for promotion because they have been unable to produce

peer-reviewed publications. Their writer’s block is truly a disabling condition for their advancement.

My muse is reliable and respectful of deadlines, though she cuts it close more times than I am willing to admit. In a sense, I have begun to think of my muse as children think of Santa Claus. I am not the only recipient of her attention. There are a lot of stops to make on deadline eve, but she always makes it happen before morning. My muse knows when my deadline is, she knows when I have travel plans, and she insists that I devote my last available hours before departure to her business. I am not inclined to object; after all, what is the alternative?



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