

CHAPTER 2: “The Writer Writes ...”

Picture nearly every beginning writer: they grab a pen and paper, settle themselves comfortably, and say to themselves: “I’m ready to write!” And then they wait for their masterpiece to come to them. And they wait, and they wait... and they wait.

The beginning writer, just like their experienced counterparts, needs to have something to say before they can write it.

Inspiration is a key factor in writing hymns that are worthy of sharing. Inspiration can come from many places – from listening to a speaker whose words sparks something inside you; while reading the scriptures and being impressed with something you read; by preparing a gospel lesson and wanting to write something to send home with your students. Sometimes singing a hymn will spark the thoughts and ideas for another hymn on the same subject or even an additional verse for the hymn you’re singing. The sources for inspiration are limitless.

Sources of Inspiration

The late great Yiddish writer Isaac Behavus Singer was once asked how he came up with so many ideas for his writing. His reply was that God continually reigns thoughts and ideas down upon us, and it is our job to catch them, hold on to them, and to then find a way to express them. This is as true in writing as with any other form or art! To hold on to those flashes of inspiration, the beginning writer soon realizes they have to have paper and pen ready at all times – in one’s purse or briefcase; on the car seat next to you – actually, in a car a small recorder is much more recommended. Many writers keep pen and paper on their nightstand. Some even take them with them when they take their bath. I once saw a fellow hymnist making notes on the long, opening climb of a roller coaster! (It turned out to be a hymn about ascending to meet God.) I know another who carries his pocket-sized rhyming dictionary to all church meetings along with a small notepad; he says that the best place to receive inspiration for hymns of worship is while worshiping.

Does this mean that whatever spark of inspiration you receive is already a polished, finished jewel? No! The Almighty gives us the spark and we must then make it sparkle. In twenty-five years of writing stories, poetry, and hymn texts, I have only received one verse of one song word-for-word in that spark of inspiration, and even then I changed one word to make it fit current language usage.

There are Rules to Learn and Obey

Prosody, the study of poetic meters and versification, contains very demanding rules the writer must lean in order to write an acceptable hymn text that will be easily sung and appreciated by a congregation as well as easily convey the message of the text.

I see four things a writer must learn to write good hymn texts:

First, they must learn the metering patterns used in their language for poetry and lyrics. They must study them and understand how the various patterns are used and practice each of them. For English-language prosody, the two books I recommend most are:

- THE ANATOMY OF HYMNODY, Austin C. Lovelace (Chicago, Illinois; GIA Publications, 1965, 1982) ISBN 0-941050-02-5
- COMPLETE RHYMING DICTIONARY ed. by Clemet Wood (New York, NY, Doubleday, 1991) ISBN 0-385-41350-5

Austin Lovelace's book was written after he participated in the creation of a new hymnal and saw first-hand the need for such a book; this book is a standard for english-language prosody. The second title is a full rhyming dictionary with 117 pages of instructions on poetry at the beginning of the book. Both are invaluable to me.

Second, a writer needs to learn to rhyme. This is a must. They must learn the difference between a true rhyme and a near rhyme and when it's not acceptable. And, they must practice, practice, and practice.

Third, they must develop good language skills and broaden their vocabulary. They must learn the language for which they are writing well enough that good language shows in their writing. They need to have as many different thesauruses as they do rhyming dictionaries.

Along with good proper language, they must also learn the worship language for the congregation for which they are writing. Latter-day Saints are instructed to address Deity using the language of the Bible translation the Church utilizes in their language. So, when writing a hymn for use in my own church that addresses Deity, I normally write in what I call 'King James English', as that's the Bible translation used by English-speaking Latter-day Saints. When writing a text for a broader Christian use or appeal, I study the target audience to see what Bible version they use and what sort of language they use when addressing Deity. If a hymn isn't in the congregation's worship language, it will go unappreciated, no matter how good your writing.

Fourth, the writer must keep up with the writings of others. Collecting hymnals old and new - and reading them! - will show you what was sung in the past and what is being sung today. I will readily admit my favorite hymnists are still Isaac Watts, William Cooper, and John Newton, all of whom have been dead for several hundred years. They wrote timeless messages and did so in a day and age that use of the English language was a grand and glorious art. Because of this, many of my hymn texts sound like they'd be appreciated more by congregations that have been dead for many years but not so much by today's worshipers. Collecting currently-used hymnals will put the writer in touch with what is being sung by various congregations today. I am slowly learning to write for today's congregations, but I still love the older language!

There Are Rules to Break

Only after you are proficient in following the rules can you can successfully break them. Just as we must learn the rules to write well, we also need to learn how and when to break the rules and still create a good hymn. So, while the writer studies hymns to learn the rules, they should also study the rule-breaking hymns and see how and why they broke them.

Although it is important to learn the rules and adhere to them and only break them when you know what you're doing, the hymnist must keep in mind who has the final voice as to whether it is a good hymn. As Austin Lovelace reminds us,

“The hymnal is not a book to be admired primarily for its poetry, although great hymns are always masterfully shaped as poetry. It is a book of devotion for the people, and they are the final critics.”¹

Mr. Lovelace further quotes John Wesley's preface to the first Methodist hymnal:

“That which is of infinitely more moment than the spirit of Poetry, is, the spirit of Piety... It is in this view chiefly that I would recommend it to every truly pious reader, as a means of raising or quickening the spirit of devotion; of confirming his faith; of enlivening his hope; and of kindling or increasing his love to God and man. When Poetry thus keeps its place, as the handmaid of Piety, it shall attain, not a poor perishable wreath, but a crown that fadeth not away.”²

Should I Write Hymns When I Know They'll Never be Published?

“No talent is wholly wasted unless its owner chooses to hide it... they may not be praised of men, but they may cheer, console, inspire, perhaps, when and where you least expect. The brimming glass that overflows its own rim moistens the earth about it.”³

If the composer has felt the guidance and testimony of the Holy Spirit while composing, then the writing of that hymn has blessed him or her. It has been a vehicle for spiritual growth and the increasing of a personal testimony.

It also gives that composer something to fall back on and to share with others when they are asked to speak publicly or to express congratulations or sympathy. The most cherished moments of my life have been after I've posted a text on my website or sent it out to my friends and then received letters saying, “your hymn text has changed my life...”. To know that I've helped someone else along the weary path of Life is a wonderful thing – and helps me along that same path.

One of the great, defining moments of my life was an evening devotional spent at a boy's ranch for problem, troubled, and depressed boys. I read texts inspired by my own struggle with depression and spoke in that direction. At the end of the devotional the boys filed past those of us who had performed to shake our hands and thank us. One young boy tried to tell me something but just couldn't seem to get it out offered me a card and said “Thank you; I want you to have this.” It was a picture of Jesus that he carried in his Bible. I didn't think I had done much; just read some of my hymn texts and commented with spiritual thoughts. This picture is now in the front of my writing book – it reminds me of the evening I discovered that the greatest rewards are not necessarily gold or crystal statues from award ceremonies. I'm thankful this experience occurred before any of my texts were recognized in a hymnal or in a hymn search or other contests as it has served as a reminder of the real reason I love to write hymns – that of touching hearts, increasing faith, and changing lives.

1 - Anatomy of Hymnody, page 22

2 - Ibid

3 - Kate Douglas Wiggin, "Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm"