

Cultural Daily

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Claiming Poetry: Conversation with Brenda Joyce Patterson

Mish (Eileen) Murphy · Thursday, September 16th, 2021

“I’m not sure that I’ve overcome all of the obstacles to become a poet. All I know is that I decided to claim poetry and I haven’t looked back.” — Brenda Joyce Patterson

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Our intrepid Associate Poetry Editor Mish (Eileen) Murphy recently talked with poet Brenda Joyce Patterson by email and face-to-face. Mish explains:

I first became acquainted with Brenda Joyce Patterson in about 2005 when we were both members of a local (Tampa Bay area) poetry group called “Poets on the Park.” Eventually, the group fizzled out, and Brenda and I lost touch with one other. I was glad to renew our friendship when Brenda gave a presentation at Polk State College a few years ago.

Mish: *You are a poet, TV show host, and columnist—not to mention your day job as one of the higher-ups at the Lakeland Public Library. Which of your many hats do you feel is most important—and why?*

Brenda: I’m not a higher-up at the library but thanks for the compliment! I’m just one of the librarians – Fine Arts/Adult Programming Librarian, to be exact – and get to do a number of interesting tasks under that unwieldy title.

Poet, TV show host, columnist – I don’t consider one more important than the other. They all fulfill different things for me. As a librarian, I get to help people and I learn any number of things while I do so. My inner geek/nerd has loved working at the library with all of the tech and information.

My writing – poetry and prose – has afforded me such cool opportunities. Using my library experience to write a newspaper column about libraries, literature, and reading. Using my love of writing/reading short literary forms to write about them. And to my surprise, using my love of talking about writing as a springboard for my turn as host of Writers Den.

Mish: *Tell me a little bit about your childhood—and is it in any way reflected in your creative projects?*

Brenda: The joy and the sometimes surprising way I connect things in my writing definitely comes from my childhood. My mother, Barbara Joyce Williams Patterson Small, encouraged us –

my older brother and me – to be curious and to revel in wonder at the natural world. She also encouraged us to be profoundly empathetic with the people around us. She always reminded us we might never know what burdens people carried and what situations they were forced to live in.

I strive to maintain a soft and welcome space for people and myself in which to rest. In both my life and writing. My childhood was filled with my mother sheltering women and children. For a day, for a season; whatever the person needed – whether they needed a friend, a safe space to stay, a meal, a mentor, some encouragement, or just to be heard. She lived the love – muscular and resilient – she taught us.

The world often labels kindness as weakness; she taught us how to be kind but also how to fight and stand strong for ourselves and others. And through it all – in my childhood, in my life and writing now – to laugh.

Mish: *Are you ever “blocked” in your writing and if so, what do you do to get it flowing again?*

Brenda: Yes, and I’ve written articles (see below) about being “blocked” in the hopes that taking it to task will lessen its grip on me. And by extension, I let my fellow writers know they’re not alone in this beautiful struggle to write. (See links, below)

The pandemic has thrown me off my pace of writing a poem a day and writing my DIY MFA column, Writing Small.

And although I’ve written some poems and an article for a local magazine, I’m still fighting my way out of this current bout of writer’s block.

However, I’ve been writing long enough to know that the more I write, the easier the writing gets. Though notice I didn’t say the writing is easy. It’s just easier.

Mish: *When did you write your first poem?*

Brenda: I wrote my first poem in junior high...and let’s just say that I “borrowed” heavily from a song by the music group, Earth, Wind & Fire. The poem was for an assignment in my 8th grade English class. The teacher liked it enough to recommend it be included in a county-wide anthology of student writing. Somewhere out there is that year’s (1978?) anthology with my first published poem.

Mish: *What would you say is your most unusual writing quirk?*

Brenda: Hmmm. I have no special rituals, no favorite pen or device. I write on scraps of paper, on the computer, via the audio notes app on my phone. The poems and prose I write lean, always, towards the visceral of whatever subject I tackle. I write at no special time of day. At the best of times, words are always simmering in the background. My only ever-present topic is dreams (and dreaming). (Oh, and also joy and wonder find their way into everything I write.) I often harvest visceral details – images, scenes, scents – people, and dialogue from my dreams.

Mish: *So, what did you get up to during all those years that we were out of touch with one another?*

Brenda: Living. Lots of years working toward degrees. Caring for loved ones. And watching my

writing carry me places I never dreamed of.

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Some of Brenda Joyce Patterson's advice to writers can be found at: "[Writing Through Fear and Anxiety](#)" and "[Writing Small in Viral Times](#)"

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