

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Power Up

Stellasue Lee · Wednesday, January 20th, 2021

At the very end of autumn, under the threat of a temperature drop into the 30s, I was covering new plants with plastic blankets. I wanted to leave my work in the garden and call my mother. The problem with that is both my parents had been dead for some 55 years. I was in my early 20s when my father died, and on the same day three years later, my mother pulled her car over to the side of a road, lay down in the front seat and died. My dad was 50. Mom was 53. I never gave a thought to old age, but I also knew I didn't want my parent's lifestyle.

Mother tried to quit smoking when I was about 12, and already knowing everything at that age, I decided I would never smoke because, why start when you would just want to stop?

Both my parents had been really good athletes. Dad had boxed in the Marine Corps, and Mother had been a distance swimmer. They were tall, well built, good looking and smoked a couple packs of Camels a day. Weekends consisted of all the booze they could drink, maybe three packs of Camels each and poker. I decided Rock Hudson and Doris Day were better role models.

I never thought about being 80, it just happened while I was living my life. I got my first job bagging groceries at 14. Other than a few sick days, I've worked every day since. It turns out George Gobel was right, "Hard work never killed anybody—but then, again, resting is responsible for very few casualties." The secret, if there is one, is to work at what you love, and I love my work. Who would I be at 80 without my own writing and teaching others how to write? I can't even imagine!

I was 48 when I abandoned the big ship I called "My Life" and crawled, dying, into the hull of a lifeboat called "Poetry." I'd been given a diagnosis of hemolytic anemia. If you look it up, hemolytic anemia seems to primarily affect Africans, African Americans, some Arabic peoples and Aborigines in southern India. Somehow my blond hair and blue eyes didn't impress the doctor. He gave me six months to live. I spent my days in bed, so I started writing. At least that's something I could do from bed. I wrote a novel in 90 days. I heard about a writers' conference in Port Townsend, Washington. I just knew I had to go. I thought that was as good a place to die as anywhere. For those of you who've been to Centrum, it's not that easy, at least it wasn't almost 40 years ago and imagine, I was only out of bed about four hours a day.

By the second day, I realized my novel was dreck, I didn't know how to write. I had an M.A. in drug and alcohol counseling, but I didn't know how to write. I was able to register for a class with Olga Broumas. I didn't get anything she said, but after that class, she called me aside and told me I had a block in my vocal cords. Ummmmm, it was true back then, often people calling asked to

Speak with my mother... Holy cow, I was going on 50. At the end of 10 days, I'd met Robert Bly, Tess Gallagher, Gary Snyder, Stephen Dunn, and Jane Hirshfield. I came away with three epiphanies, 1) I didn't know how to write, 2) I wanted to live to learn how to write, and 3) I was a poet.

Diane Wakoski responded to the question in an interview with *RATTLE*, "How do you know that you're a poet as opposed to a novelist, or journalist, or something else?" She answered, "Well, it is a little bit like religion, you just know."

I got well, found jobs, anything just to get myself independent, and keep body and soul together so I could learn to write. I had found my passion.

I went back to school and got a Ph.D. in literature. When I was offered a chance to be on the ground floor of starting a literary journal, I jumped into a job I knew nothing about, but I had the passion, and set about to make it the best poetry journal on the market. And, I think it is, too.

Behind the front desk at the Van Nuys Community Police Station sat an officer with red hair, ruddy complexion and the physique of a 40-year-old Gaelic NFL linebacker. He looked as if he'd dodged a few snipers' bullets, rammed the car that ended the chase, caught the jumper before he went over the side of a ten-story building, tackled the runner, cuffed the bad guys, and carried a kitten from a burning building. He was bored senseless as he looked out over a long line of misfits with complaints wanting immediate action. He twirled a ballpoint pen between his fingers, tapped a form he was going to do his best to keep from filling out. I was sixth in line, and the line was growing.

I'd been getting telephone calls from a poet living in San Diego whose work I rejected. He wanted to talk about that rejection and his favorite time was 2 AM. I wanted his number blocked. The telephone company told me I had to file a police report before they would comply. I'd made it to 64 without ever having to set foot in a police station. A week before, I'd read that a woman presented the front desk sergeant with a stick of dynamite. All police stations witness unusual events, Van Nuys seems to attract a wide variety of characters. Let's not forget the man who walked in naked to file his complaint.

Finally, it was my turn to step up to the sergeant's desk. He looked right through me. I told him what I wanted, and he was about to turn me away when I thought to tell him I was afraid, this guy had threatened me and I lived alone.

His head swivels back to include my face in his gaze, and taking a deep breath, he says, "OK, first name?" "Stellasue," I said, "S as in Sam, T as in Tom, E, LLA, S as in Sam, UE, all one word." His head jerks up, the pen makes a smacking noise on the desk, "I've only heard that name once before," he said, looking suspicious. "Last name?" "Lee, LEE." Now he looks at me hard. He reaches under the desk and brings out a copy of my book, *Crossing the Double Yellow Line*. "You write this?" he asks, holding out the book. "Yes," I say. He leans in, "Would you sign it for me? My name is Bobby, Bobby Kelly."

That afternoon a detective called from the San Diego precinct. He addressed me as Dr. Lee, and told me he'd had a chat with the individual and that I shouldn't be bothered any more, but if I was, he gave me his personal cell phone number and told me to call anytime day or night. The power of poetry!

We are living approximately 33 years longer than our grandparents. That's a third of a life. Graduating high school, most everyone wants to get established, finish their education, get a job, find a life partner, maybe, have children. The middle years consist of supporting those choices, but a great number of people never find their passion. I've worked one on one with many people in their 70s and 80s, even a few in their 90s, who found writing to be their passion. Genetics play less than 30% of what determines how long you will live, but even those odds can improve with choices.

I got lucky. I never smoked, never drank much and after 65, not at all. Evidently, I have some pretty good genes (if you don't count my parents). I work out, eat healthy, get plenty of sleep and pursue my passion all day and half the night.

There are three elements to rewards: 1) You have to want the reward, 2) you have to believe you have what it takes to earn the reward, 3) you have to believe you will get the reward if you earn it.

Think back to what you loved to do as a kid or the first subject in school that rang your bell. That's where you will find a clue to what you love. My husband's grandmother gave him a camera for his 10th birthday. When I met him, he was a tenured professor teaching people how to start businesses. The first time I visited his apartment, he had a graph on his refrigerator that showed a line going down that represented his career at the university and a line going up representing his career in art. They intersected at his date of retirement. Today, we are both in our 80s, doing what we love, working harder than ever before, and going for those 33 extra years with gusto.

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