



# STEVE GILLETTE

## AUTHOR OF SONGWRITING AND THE CREATIVE PROCESS

### **SPIRITUAL MATERIALISM - THE SINCERITY ISSUE**

The Tibetan Buddhists, among them Chogyom Trungpa Pinpoche have written about the issue of "spiritual materialism". If we are to ask that the gift of creative thought to be given to us we need to examine the nature of our desire. The belief is that with enlightenment comes responsibility. The aspiring artist must be a respectful candidate for inspiration.

"As the artist works, some portion of his creation is bestowed upon him... along with any true creation come the uncanny sense that "I", the artist, did not make the work... religions often prohibit the sale of sacred objects, the implication being that their sanctity is lost if they are bought and sold. A work of art seems to be a hardier breed; it can be sold in the market and still emerge a work of art... but it may be possible to destroy a work of art by converting it into a pure commodity... I do not maintain that art cannot be bought and sold; I do maintain that the gift portion of the work places a constraint upon our merchandising." - Lewis Hyde (The Gift)

Is the great songwriter truly without guile, or is he just better at it? Very few artists can point to work they have done and claim that it is without

artifice, but with a healthy respect for the issues involved any writer can foster his own growth and approach his highest potential. Pablo Picasso made the following statement along these lines. I think he was being overly hard on himself but it gives us a glimpse of the way he thinks about the best in art.

"Today I am famous and very rich. But when completely honest with myself, I haven't the nerve to consider myself an artist in the great and ancient sense of the word. I am a public entertainer who has understood his times. This is a bitter confession, mine, more painful indeed than it may seem, but it has the merit of being sincere." - Pablo Picasso

Songwriters have no hourly wage. It seems that we're always paid far too little or far too much when we do get paid. When the lightning of notoriety strikes one of our songs, it is very hard to connect the success with the work we did. It's very hard to sit down and try to do it again. This whipsaw effect can be very disorienting. For this reason alone, a writer must find the way to keep the doors open and the lights on regardless of how long it has been between credits.

### **TRICKS OR TRUTH?**

By indulging in the practice of manipulation and using devices calculated to have an effect on the audience rather than looking within and reaching more deeply for something of our own, we cheat ourselves. The only songs we will want to be remembered for are the ones which capture some aspect of grace and preserve it for time. This is hard to do by calculation. The real magic of a song may only be arrived at with the aid of some unconscious process which defies manipulation. It invariably requires some investment of honest wonder.

"Neurosis is the way of avoiding nonbeing by avoiding being." - Paul Tillich

### **TO BE PRESENT, TO BE HERE NOW**

"To be here now" has been a popular slogan among practitioners of the new age. It has not lost its relevance. It raises the question of the quality of perception and awareness and speaks to our tendency to race ahead of or lag behind ourselves. Often this turns out to be an issue of anxiety. To really stop and smell the roses we've got to be sure that we can let down our guard for a

minute at least. We've also got to let go of the past, which may mean that we have to deal with its unresolved questions.

"Guilt is the call of being for itself in silence." - Heidegger

We have so much today but the tempo of our lives has risen to accommodate the many layers of things going on all at once. Through meditation and relaxation techniques we can lesson our speediness but a vague sense of guilt or feeling lost may still suggest the need for further soul searching. Choices may have to be made between comfort and effort, between having and the have nots, between sensation and being.

"The art of archery is not an athletic ability mastered more or less through primary physical practice, but rather a skill with its origin in mental exercise and with its object in mentally hitting the mark. Therefore, the archer is basically aiming for himself. Through this, perhaps, he will succeed in hitting the mark - his essential self." - Harrigel

In time, all writers come to a place where there is no longer room or reason for self delusion in any form. Not all writers take the same approach to this issue, some don't seem to be any more cognizant at the end of their lives than when they began. I believe Yates, who is someone whose creative life spanned more than sixty years put it pretty well when he wrote:

"Though leaves are many, the root is one;  
Through all the lying days of my youth  
I swayed my leaves and flowers in the sun;  
Now I may wither into truth."

- William Butler Yeats

Excerpt taken from Steve Gillette's book "Songwriting And The Creative Process" (1995) available from Sing Out Publications. Used with permission from Steve Gillette.