**By Scott Owens**

HICKORY—A few months back, a writer friend of mine posted a negative comment on Facebook about writing prompts. Within hours, dozens of other writers jumped on the bandwagon, adding comments not only further condemning writing prompts but also joining the currently popular practice of badmouthing creative writing programs in general, especially MFA programs.

My first thought, not surprisingly given my core of low self-esteem that I'm told springs from early paternal abandonment, was what's wrong with me that I enjoy writing prompts. My second thought, remembering all the things my therapist told me about how I should see myself, was what conceited ***** writers become when they think they have a little success.

I didn't participate in the dialogue myself. I figured I had nothing to gain from doing so. Instead, I borrowed a prompt from Robert Lee Brewer and started what has turned out to be a damned good poem, one that has already been published in a favorite journal of mine.

The first requirement of writing is that one has something to write about. Thus, generative strategies are among the writer's most important tools. Most would-be writers have a handful of stories they know they want to tell. Many, however, are blocked by the fear that after they tell those stories they won't have anything else to say.

The purpose of a writing prompt is not to tell writers what to write about, but to shake them out of their complacency, their comfort of non-writing, or their belief that they have nothing left to write about. The truth is, writing is a way of perceptually, emotionally, and intellectually engaging with the world, so how could anyone ever really run out of things to write about? The further truth is we all already have a lifetime of perceptions, experiences, and thoughts to write

about, but we might sometimes need a little help recognizing those subjects or mining our memories, experiences, and perceptions. Good writing prompts simply remind us of things we already know that are worth writing about.

Perhaps my friend had in mind the sort of writing prompt that produces a single piece from each writer and that results in similar pieces from all the writers who undertake it. Write a poem about a mirror, for example; or worse, Write a poem beginning with “Love is.” I will readily admit that prompts of this nature, and workshops using prompts like this, mostly produce bad, imitative writing.

There are, however, other types of prompts that are much more useful—prompts that help us know where or how to look to find the subjects worth writing about—prompts that produce an endless number of writing opportunities—prompts that help us live more conscious, deliberate lives as writers. These perpetual prompts are the ones I use in my own writing, the ones I have used to fill dozens of notebooks, write eight books and nearly 1,000 published poems, and the ones I use when teaching, when helping others figure out how to write successfully.

***

SCOTT OWENS will lead a Saturday workshop at the 2011 Fall Conference. He is the author of four poetry collections and over 400 poems that have been published in various journals such as *Georgia Review, North American Review, Dead Mule, Chattahoochee Review*, and *Beloit Poetry Journal.*
He has been nominated for two Pushcart Prizes and a Best of the Net Prize. Born in Greenwood, SC, he now lives in Hickory, NC, where he teaches and coordinates the Poetry Hickory reading series
.

Registration for the 2011 Fall Conference, Nov 18-20, hosted by the North Carolina Writers’ Network, will open in September. Keep an eye on www.ncwriters.org for more details.