

# ALEMbic

***DISTILLATIONS OF  
EXPERIENCE***



**BY**

**WRITERS AND TEACHERS OF THE**

**SOUTHEASTERN LOUISIANA WRITING  
PROJECT  
ADVANCED INSTITUTE AND GUESTS  
SUMMER 2004**





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# CONTENTS

<i>PREFACE</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>INTRODUCTION</i> RICHARD LOUTH	<i>xi</i>
<b><i>ALEMBICS OF THE PROFESSION</i></b>	<i>1</i>
<i>AN OPEN INVITATION TO ADMINISTRATORS</i> TRACY AMOND	<i>2</i>
<i>WHAT ART DOES FOR US</i> ROBERT CALMES	<i>9</i>
<i>A PARTICIPANT-OBSERVER LOOKS BACK AT THE SLWP 2004 ADVANCED INSTITUTE</i> GEORGE DORRILL	<i>14</i>
<i>WORDS IN THEIR EARS AND PENS IN THEIR HANDS</i> HOLLY JAMES	<i>22</i>
<i>THE LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE APPROACH AND ESL</i> DAVID JUMONVILLE	<i>27</i>
<i>CLICK . . . CLICK . . . CREATIVITY</i> GAYLE LADNER	<i>32</i>
<i>WHY WRITE?</i> DON MCDANIEL	<i>40</i>
<i>WHERE WERE YOU WHEN I NEEDED YOU?</i> KAREN OLLENDIKE	<i>44</i>

<i>LEARNING WHAT I ALREADY KNOW</i> TAMMY STIEBING	50
<i>HE'S KNOWN RIVERS (JOSEPH'S STORY)</i> VICKY TANGI	54
<i>THE FALL FROM GRACE: A PRACTITIONER'S VIEW OF RECOVERY</i> LYNNE VANCE	63
<i>HEARING VOICES</i> LISA WATTS	70
<i>FLYING FISH</i> ROBERT WEATHERSBY	78
<i>ON JOY IN WRITING—I DANCE IN FIRES, A FOOL TO PASSION, A SLAVE TO GRACE . . . I DANCE</i> JEFF WIEMELT	82
<b><i>ALEMBICS OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCE (MARATHON DISTILLATIONS)</i></b>	87
<i>ANNA, WAITING</i> TRACY AMOND	88
<i>AN ALEMBIC OF ONE WRITER'S MARATHON WRITING</i> GEORGE DORRILL	92
<i>MY LIFE THREAD</i> JERI GUNULFSEN	100

<i>ROLL ON, SWEET MEMORIES</i>	103
HOLLY JAMES	
<i>DAVIS AND FAMILY</i>	108
DAVID JUMONVILLE	
<i>(UNTITLED)</i>	111
MARY KOEPP	
<i>A PAST MARATHON</i>	118
MELANIE PLESH	
<i>LIGHT IN AUGUST</i>	126
VICKY TANGI	
<i>A MIRACULOUS DISCOVERY</i>	130
LYNNE VANCE	
<i>A WRITER'S SECRETS: FOR GRIFFIN (7) AND RILEY</i>	138
(5)	
JEFF WIEMELT	
<b><i>GUEST ALEMBICS</i></b>	145
<i>BONES</i>	146
AMY GILLIAM	
<i>A WOMAN, A DAY: FOUR SNAPSHOTS</i>	148
EVA GUILLOT	
<i>TRAVEL DAY—QUILTING MY STORY</i>	150
EVA GUILLOT	
<i>NAMELY</i>	153
HARRIET MAHER	



<i>(UNTITLED)</i>	155
MIKE MAHER	
<i>POEMS</i>	158
NETTIE MCDANIEL	
<i>A CALIFORNIA YANKEE IN KING LOUIS' COURT</i>	162
EVAN NICHOLS	
<i>THREE CHERRY LUNCH: A COLLABORATION</i>	167
BOBBI ORMISTON AND EVA GUILLOT	
<i>LES POISSONS</i>	169
AUSTEN REILLEY	
<i>POEMS</i>	171
MARGARET SIMON	



# PREFACE

Dear Friends,

In an effort to do anything but write, I told myself I needed to clean out my files and organize seven years of collected "stuff" before I could get down to the business of writing.

Sifting through piles and piles of writing project materials, old grants, student samples, and my own personal writings I stumbled upon an old spiral bound notebook. It was one of my father's journals. As some of you know, he has been communicating with me lately. Much of this notebook deals with his coming to a decision about selling his two newspapers and retiring. In this entry he has sold the paper and is just beginning to settle into retirement.

I felt the urge to share most of this journal entry with you. He would love it! I feel he is speaking to us all:

*Sunday August 22, 1993.*

*It has been a while since I wrote in this journal. I wonder why. I find it enjoyable to jot down my thoughts, knowing I will probably be the only one who reads them - a kind of letter to myself. I find that writing helps me crystallize my thoughts. . . .*

*. . . After 33 years of publishing two newspapers, I am used to writing for publication. I wrote because I had to. It was necessary to fill up the paper with something individual, something that could not be obtained elsewhere. In the process I learned to enjoy writing. To distill my thoughts. To manifest something*

*on paper that did not exist before. It is a kind of magic—a union with God, the creator.*

*Now I do it because I enjoy it. There is a joy in creation that is very satisfying. On a grand level it might be compared to the rapture of sex. On a lesser scale with the creation of a meal or craft project.*

*But the importance of it is that you have created something that did not previously exist. Your conscious is stimulated by a thought that grows slowly until it cannot be denied—as a grain of sand stimulates a clam to create a pearl. Though the result may be far less in value than a pearl, it is still the same process.*

*It occurs to me that in order to create one must have a larger than average ego. The effort expended must be worth the result. You must be pleased with your own creations or else you would not devote the effort. What a shame it is that we are not taught to appreciate the results of our efforts whether they may appear "professional" to others or not. The only way we can improve is by repeated efforts.*

*When I learned to write in school I started with crude printing. My reading was limited to "Dick and Jane" playing with their dog "Spot." What if I had quit at the beginning because my writing was too immature or because I could not yet understand the printed word of the classics? How could I improve if I had not started at a primitive level?*

*I cannot help but wonder how many wonderful creations have died still-born because people felt the results were not "professional."*

*Damn the comparisons! Love what you create! Do not become a member of the timid parade which fears to create because the results may not be perfect. Perfection is an elusive goal which will never be reached. It changes. . . .*

*. . . To hell with what others think! Develop that enlarged ego. If it pleases you that is all that is important.*

*Bill Irwin*

*(Written four years before his death)*

My gift to you all. Musings from my father, who was in this Advanced with me—with us all.

Much love,

Lynne [Vance]

# ***INTRODUCTION***

**RICHARD LOUTH**

**SOUTHEASTERN LOUISIANA UNIVERSITY**

This morning as I walked to the Croissant d'Or, looking for a breakfast and inspiration, I saw half a bicycle clamped to a lamppost. It had no tires, no seat, one fender, no handlebars. Its chain curled like a rusted snake on the pavement beside it. Had it looked like this the day before? I could not remember. What had the bike originally looked like, I wondered, and how much could you take away from it before it changed from “bike” to “broke” to “junk”?



I had spent weeks thinking about the Advanced Institute, wondering what to write about it, but was stuck until I saw that bike. Then I remembered another bicycle, one that I had seen a crazed man pull from the Mississippi River several days before. The river had been strangely low; I had never seen it like this before. Below the rocks, along a strip of mud, the river had pulled back to reveal the thin wired wheel of an English bike. I spotted it first, and thought of going down the bank to see, but a vagrant spotted it too, and loped down to the river's edge, hoisted the bike onto his shoulder, and carried it up the levy. He parked it a few feet away from me.

“How is it?” I asked.

“It’s lost its heart,” he said wild-eyed, and began walking in circles, spiraling further and further away from it, talking to himself.

It looked intact to me. Wheels inflated, fenders dripping Mississippi mud, gears, chain, seat, even kickstand in good order.

“It’s no good, it’s lost its heart,” he shouted back, and scurried away, not even looking back, but rummaging in trash cans along the river, searching for the last few sips of a day-old beer or a half-eaten poboy.

Between this bike and the other lies the story of the Advanced Institute.

\* \* \* \* \*

Promoted as an “Inquiry” experience, with each participant bringing a question about teaching or writing to the table, the Advanced Institute began as a frame without seat, steering, or brakes. Participants’ inquiry questions added some substance and coherence, but not enough. Some had “token” questions, some still were searching for meaningful questions the first day; few had committed fully to “burning” questions. Even I could not decide on a question to explore (which should have told me something). Not an auspicious beginning to a two week journey.

Another problem was that I had no idea what we would actually do each day. We surely would write, read, talk, and try to build a community, but the plan for the first week remained unclear. How to give direction without sacrificing the freedom necessary for true inquiry eluded me. My journal from the week before records my uncertainty:

*Finding your passion in teaching. Maybe I can begin—the first day—with my “passion” presentation. Put everyone’s question or issue on hold. Devote the first morning to tapping into your strength, passion, reservoir as a person and a teacher. It involves, also,*

*asking what you know, don't know, and are curious about. . . . What will keep folks coming back each day? What will keep them moving forward? Maybe we need to keep a reflective journal or log on this whole process. No gimmicks. Perhaps I need to begin with "cubing": Why are you here? What do you want to get out of this? What are you looking forward to? What are you dreading? What can someone else in the room do for you? What do you know on your subject? (Journal, July 1, 2004)*

But the largest problem was that, no matter how much I tried to rationalize, the first week's inquiry had no connection to the second week's Writing Marathon. The previous year, we'd had a successful Advanced Institute focused specifically on the Writing Marathon, with participants "marathoning" the first week and then reflecting on that experience the second week. The results—an anthology and radio show—were incredible. But there was no sense in doing the same thing over again. I wanted to keep the Writing Marathon, which I knew was the primary attraction for most participants, but I did not know how to make it fit.

Just as there's more to a bike than a frame, there's more to an Advanced Institute than a fully fleshed out plan. As the crazy man taught me by the river, it is the "heart" that counts. That's where the magic and the mystery and the power reside. If it has no heart, the best frame in the world won't help. If it has heart, other things fall into place.

And this Advanced Institute had heart. Its heart was in its participants and its faith in the National Writing Project model, which, simply put, values teachers, community, writing, and choice.

I originally set out to write an essay for others in my position on how to direct an Advanced Institute. There is no one way to do it, and I am probably the last director to tell someone else *how*. Instead, in the spirit of the Writing Project, let me address the



question of *why* we hold Advanced Institutes. The answer? Listen to my Advanced Institute's heartbeats:

***Teacher ownership:*** I can still see Vicky dragging a huge styrofoam cooler of food into the Writing Center the first day, something she offered to do without any prompting from me. And then there was George offering to write the first day's log, and Tracy, Lisa, and Mary carting supplies to the Writing Marathon. I hear Robert Calmes opening each morning of the Marathon with song and closing it "a cappella." And perhaps the best example: on the last day, when I asked, "What do we want to do now?" and expected the reply to be, "Drink margaritas!" there was Jeff, who persuaded us to keep writing after the Institute was over, setting up a Blackboard discussion group, and volunteering to edit the anthology. When teachers own the Institute, continuity comes naturally, for there is something worth continuing.

***Professional Inquiry Community:*** On the first day, we were 19 individuals representing nine different Institutes, and not everyone was present. But when the roundtable discussions began, I sensed a transformation. As co-director Melanie Plesh has so often reminded me, "Teachers need time to talk." So we provided time and opportunity. In our first "reading circle," Tracy quoted an article by Lad Tobin that raised the question of authority and freedom in the classroom, and I witnessed professional inquiry at its best as TC's talked it out. On the third day, we went around the table, describing our research, and what could have been a 20-minute series of monologues turned into a cross-table conversation that lasted almost two hours. Then there was the final day's readings of works-in-progress, where we all realized that even though the Advanced Institute would end, the conversation must continue.

***Writing at the Center:*** Our first activity every morning was to write together, and writing became the blood and bones of our Institute. That first morning we wrote and shared for two hours on a series of prompts—"Once," "Rock throwing," "What about the writing?" and "No/Know." By the second day we were meeting in

Response Groups, which continued throughout the Institute. By the second week, many were writing and sharing with strangers during the Writing Marathon and “publishing” our work aloud at the end of the day in Le Richelieu Hotel’s Paul McCartney Suite. The articles in this anthology, most of which were completed after the Institute, illustrate these TC’s commitment to writing as an integral part of their professional and personal lives.

***Choice, Serendipity, and Risk:*** Participants chose what to explore, what to read, what to write, and how to spend much of their time. Numerous times during the first week, I found myself asking the group: What do you want to do next? How much time do you need to write? What do you need? Amazingly, people agreed. “We need to write now,” they’d say, or “Let’s everybody do what they need to do till 3:15, and then we’ll see where we are.” Participants did not need to be told where to go, just asked. The spirit of serendipity guided us, because we were open to it, to ourselves, and to each other. It allowed some to take risks with their thinking and writing that before the Institute might have been unimaginable. We risked difficult, unanswerable questions about writing, like Don’s in “Why Write?”; frightening realizations about our teaching, like Lynne’s in “Fall from Grace”; dangerous positions like Tracy’s “Open Invitation to Administrators.” We risked wrestling with the mysteries of art like the two Roberts; looking deep within ourselves like Mary and Jeri; putting our best practices on the line like Holly, David, Tammy, George, Lisa and Gayle; probing the relationship between our personal and professional lives like Vicky, Jeff and Karen.

\* \* \* \* \*

Not until writing this piece did I realize how the Advanced Institute really ran. It was neither a frame locked to a pole nor a muddy machine without a heart. I think of it now as a hot red bike weaving through traffic, angling corners and jumping over curbstones, cutting down strange alleys, its basket spilling fruit and

loaves of hot French bread onto sidewalks, its rider releasing the grips and finally pedaling with “no hands.” Even though both weeks seemed incomplete and disconnected at first, something good happened. The bike took us all where we needed to go, and it hasn’t stopped moving.

***About the Author:***

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***ALEMBICS  
OF THE  
PROFESSION***



***AN OPEN INVITATION TO  
ADMINISTRATORS  
TRACY AMOND  
WALKER HIGH SCHOOL  
SOUTHEASTERN LOUISIANA UNIVERSITY***

We, the teachers, request the honor of your presence in our classrooms. No RSVP required. Just drop by any time. Really. We'd love to see you. Our students would love to see you. We don't need one day's notice so we can put on a dog-and-pony show. Just come on by any time you'd like. Our doors are open. We've missed you. If this invitation confuses you, allow me to explain.

***JUST LIKE BEING THERE***

It seems that over the past decade or so, a new administrative style has become popular, a style I call "virtual administration." It



is very much like the virtual reality that has revolutionized the computer industry. In virtual reality, medical students can practice surgery without harming live patients or working on cadavers. Military trainees can practice life-like battlefield scenarios, complete with simulated gunfire from an enemy that looks like he's standing right in front of them. And of course, the computer game industry has turned this serious technology into something fun and even

tawdry, where you can pretend to fight aliens, shoot it out with a gang of criminals, or have sex with a beautiful girl. Virtual reality allows the user to experience something that is much like the real thing without any danger or costly mistakes. The virtual administration style involves administrators substituting various forms of pseudo-supervision for actually entering classrooms and watching teachers at work.

Administrators earn master's degrees that include coursework in school law, discipline, scheduling, finances, community involvement, curriculum, and athletics. What seems to be lacking is an emphasis on direct supervision of faculty. Few administrators today seem comfortable confronting teachers regarding their performance in the classroom. Direct supervision involves getting into the classroom to watch teachers teach, and (here's the difficult part) dealing with teachers who are performing poorly.

Administrators complain that they simply don't have time to get into the classroom as much as they'd like. Or worse, they don't seem to realize the dramatic effect that a more hands-on approach could have on their school. I heard an administrator from a neighboring school district boast that she visited each teacher once a year; she seemed so proud of that. Once per year. Her school is on a seven period schedule, so her teachers have six classes per day. Multiply that times 180 days per year, and that's 1080 classes taught by just one teacher. With those numbers in mind, does one observation per year sound adequate? What's even worse is that I know teachers who have gone more than an entire year without a principal or district supervisor ever entering their classroom.

This is not a new concept, but it is one that administrators are avoiding, even running from. And to appease the guilt—that little voice in the back of their heads reminding them that they need to be in the classrooms more—they have turned to numerous types of virtual administration—the kind of administration that looks and feels like the real thing, but doesn't involve any confrontations. These methods allow administrators to feel like they're really

supervising their faculty without ever having to enter the classroom.

***If I Have a lot of Papers on my Desk, I Must Be Doing Something Right***

Paperwork plays a key role in virtual administration. Turning in massive amounts of paperwork has replaced direct supervision in many schools. Principals proudly tell their colleagues, “I make my teachers turn in their lesson plans every week.” Or “I make my teachers turn in their gradebooks once a month.” These seem like good ideas, and principals rush back to their schools to implement these paperwork requirements, which provide them with two key elements to virtual administration: a physical manifestation of teaching that looks authentic, and the act of sitting and reading the paperwork, which gives the administrator another reason not to visit classrooms to see what’s actually going on. Administrators complain, “I wish I had more time to get in the classroom, but I just don’t know how to do it.” They say this to each other and they say it to teachers, but I’m not convinced they mean it. I am certain, however, that they don’t comprehend the effects of avoiding the classroom while reading a stack of lesson plans.

What do principals gain by collecting data from their teachers? It seems like a lot of work, but they are willing to stay in their offices until late in the evening reading lesson plans and looking at grade ledgers. There must be a payoff, right? Mathematically, the idea staggers me. I teach on a block schedule and have one preparation in the fall and three preparations in the spring. I am one teacher out of 75. If we average 2 preps each, that’s 150 lesson plans per day. Look at the math involved here:

- ✓ 150 lesson plans per week X 5 days per week = 750 lesson plans to read
- ✓ 750 lesson plans per week X 36 weeks = 27,000 lesson plans



- ✓ 1 minute per lesson plan = 12.5 hours per week reading lesson plans
- ✓ 12.5 hours times 36 weeks in a school year = 450 hours spent reading lesson plans

That's equivalent to 450 one-hour observations. With a faculty of 75, that's 6 observations per teacher. How many administrators observe their teachers 6 times per year? Yet they're willing to collect and sort through 27,000 lesson plans over the course of a year.

Administrators often resort to this paper chase in the belief that this is a "hands-on approach," but it is virtual administration—all the props look authentic and the experience resembles the real thing, but it is not real. When administrators are faced with massive amounts of paperwork to wade through, something even more damaging occurs. Eventually, the task is overwhelming and they stop reading the plans. Teachers know this.

It's just like when we tell our students that keeping an organized notebook is a sign of a good student and so we're going to do notebook checks. Then, when we're sitting at our desk behind a mountain of notebooks, we realize that this is an impossible task. We also realize that sometimes our best students do not keep a neatly organized notebook, but they ace every test. Once teachers figure out that administrators are not really looking at lesson plans, it becomes a meaningless task that creates morale problems among the faculty and a loss of respect and credibility for principals.

A friend who teaches in another district suspected that her principal was not looking at the lesson plans that she and her colleagues turned in every Monday, so she began turning in the same lesson plans each week. For the remainder of the school year her principal returned her lesson plans with nothing but the word, "Good!" written across the page, even though the plans were identical week after week.

A more important consideration is why administrators believe that this print-version of teaching is an accurate portrayal of what's going on in the classroom. A good teacher may not have time to produce beautiful lesson plans, yet she may be doing an excellent job of teaching. Conversely, an inept teacher can produce impressive lesson plans, while doing a terrible job in the classroom. We should also remember that a lesson plan is an organizational tool for a teacher so he will have a goal and a plan for reaching that goal. Lesson plans are not an effective evaluation tool and they were never designed as such.

### *Cute Covers and Kodak Moments*

Another substitute for direct supervision is the Teacher Portfolio. Portfolios are an effective tool for evaluating a body of work by writers, artists, designers, and business people. A portfolio is a collection of work that demonstrates patterns of performance so the evaluator can get a clear overall impression of the person's abilities, talents, and potential. Portfolios include a variety of product-based artifacts and may be designed to illustrate the growth of the person's abilities. Writers and artists have always produced something like a portfolio, even before the word became ingrained in the administrative lexicon.

Because of their product-based nature, portfolios are not designed to be tools for evaluating performance-based jobs, such as teaching. Yet administrators assign portfolios to their faculties in the hopes that they will be effective evaluation tools. Principals ask teachers to include photographs of their teaching, sample lesson plans and handouts, resumes, past observations, and performance evaluations. This is a handy tool for a teacher to have in case he is thinking about looking for another job. But as a tool for evaluation—what many administrators have turned them into—portfolios reveal nothing of a teacher's true performance in the classroom.

This has spread to the colleges, with education professors encouraging preservice teachers to take pictures of their classroom

experiences. Placing pictures in a binder is called scrapbooking. It reveals nothing about a teacher's performance, yet new teachers often tote their portfolios along on interviews. I even heard a presenter at a workshop on teacher portfolios say that she included photographs of her family in her portfolio because that was such a big part of her life. That's nice if you're making a scrapbook, but to confuse a scrapbook with an evaluation tool is a sign of an administrator searching for any new technique that will replace the difficult work of physically entering a teacher's classroom and evaluating the teaching performance.

### ***Benefits of Being Visible***

School administrators are some of the busiest people I know. From the moment they enter their office in the morning, they are bombarded with parent phone calls, discipline problems, dress code violations, teacher complaints, and myriad other problems that occur in a normal school day. If administrators add to this busy agenda reading lesson plans, pondering gradebooks, and looking through portfolios, they can stay out of the classroom and still feel like they're doing a good job. But I believe they know this is an illusion. They know that there are ineffective teachers on their faculty and that no amount of checking lesson plans will improve their instruction.

Principals who make it a priority to be in the classroom are no longer distant, enigmatic figures among their student body. Students stop seeing them as mysterious authority figures and get to know them on a more personal level. If students are in trouble or in danger on their campus, they need to feel comfortable going to their principal. Principals who are a natural part of the classroom landscape embody the role they are supposed to assume for their students: the commander-in-chief, the leader, the person you go to if you have trouble and the person you are sent to if you are causing trouble. If students are stuck with an ineffective (or, in a more sinister vein, a predatory) teacher, they need administrators who are accessible and available, not distant and seldom seen.

Principals who are in the classroom know their whole student body, not just the problem students who are sent to the office. Instead of dealing only with troubled students and bad teachers, they get a clearer picture of their whole campus. They know the problem teachers whose ineptitude provokes phone calls from parents, but they also see the good teaching, the beautiful classroom management, and their students performing at levels they'd never dreamed of reaching until a dedicated, responsible, professional educator entered their lives.

Frequently dropping by teachers' classrooms rather than performing a once-per-year observation gives administrators more valid evaluation data. Every good teacher has a bad day once in a while, but if you've visited four times and all four of those were "bad days," then you know that teacher needs help. And that is the purpose of direct supervision: to identify both good and bad instruction and to help teachers improve.

What you may find surprising is that most teachers welcome the idea of direct supervision. They want principals to drop by frequently to see what's going on in the classroom, and they want feedback on ways to improve their instruction. Every teacher I've spoken to about the lack of direct supervision has lamented the infrequent visits from administrators. Teachers know that legitimate performance evaluations require personal knowledge of classroom practices.

So you are cordially invited to our classrooms. Stop by and see what's going on.

***About the Author:***

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***WHAT ART DOES FOR US***  
**ROBERT CALMES**  
**LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY**



I am not an art teacher, but I've been involved in the arts of writing and music for most of my life. I cannot imagine my life without these things. I used to wish I were less sensitive, less aware of the world, less interested in the depths of existence. I thought that if I had a greater interest in those things that our society deems to be of common interest that I'd fit in and that my life would be less painful. My love of the arts gave me much solitude—which led to a greater appreciation of art. By the time I was in college, I had met other people in the arts and thus no longer found that I had to be friendless to be interested in the arts. To this day, I cannot fully explain what the arts do for me; I only know that I still feel the need for them. I know that life makes sense to me because of the arts. I have “made friends” with my love of the arts and have now found that life would actually more absurd and painful for me without them.

Recently, on a writing marathon with the Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project, I had a meditation on the purpose of art. I was sitting near a fountain in a courtyard near Decatur Street in New Orleans. The place was quiet and one could almost forget the

presence of the city with all of its modern comforts, dangers, beauties, grotesqueness, and ancient temptations. All cities need meditative “green” historically transcendent places like these in New Orleans. On the back wall of the fountain flanked on the left and right are ceramic reproductions of the many flags that have flown over New Orleans. On the front edge of the fountain sits a bronze statue of girl, dressed summery with short pants and short sleeves—such as one is apt to see in “The Crescent City” about seven months of the year. Her hair is braided on each side and joined in the back of the head at the middle, forming a “V” under which lies more soft-looking hair draping down on lithe shoulders. The girl does not look to be generated from any stereotypical New Orleans girls. Instead, she reminds me of pictures of statues I have seen from Norway. The sculptor has “clothed” her but her physical form is evident. She is quite feminine. I don’t know how one gets bronze to look feminine, but I think most would agree with me on this if they were to see the statue. How one creates the impression of softness and suppleness in metal is beyond me, but her buttocks—the form of which is as clear as if she weren’t clothed—appear to spread and give way to the concrete edge of the fountain on which she sits.

The girl has many friends, but they are only temporary. People stop and sit on the fountain and pose with her for snapshots. They talk to her, saying, “Girlfriend, I’m gone sit by you, ok?” Many of the tourists mimic her pose, reclining with their hands supporting themselves from inside the fountain. Somehow, she invites the tourists to join in her comfort. All of the women who came by while I was sitting there, sat just like her, but the man who posed sat up straight with his hands on the outside of the fountain. The fiftyish-looking man with his knee length shorts, button down plaid shirt, penny loafers, with his tinge of gray hair, looking office-workerish did not participate in the statue’s sensuous pose. One wonders if his flesh and blood buttocks relinquished their prim will to sit spread sensuously on the concrete.

How does this work of art “do” so much? Could the artist have anticipated its myriad responses? The statue confirms for me what I try to get across to my literature students. Artists cannot know all the ways people will respond to their work. No matter what the artist’s intent (to the extent that we can know our own intent) in sculpting the statue, his/her intent is lost in interpretation. This is not a bad thing; it is simply inevitable. There is no iconic interpretation of the work. The conversation about the work IS its meaning. The form is inseparable from the content; the medium is the message, but the message is really our own. What was the difference in the way the man understood and felt the statue? Or did I merely SEE him differently? What do our myriad responses say about us?

I am reminded much of Oscar Wilde in viewing the responses to the statue. If one reads *The Picture of Dorian Gray* carefully, beginning with Wilde’s discussion of aesthetics in “The Preface,” one will understand that this novel is an exploration of the nature of art/the artist/the public. I can’t help but remember Lord Henry’s complaint about “The Academy” (which may or may not point to all academic perusal of art). Henry discourages Basil from displaying his painting there by saying “The Academy is too large and too vulgar. Whenever I have gone there, there have been either so many people that I have not been able to see the pictures, which was dreadful, or so many pictures that I have not been able to see the people, which was worse. The Grosvenor is really the only place [to show one’s work].” Here, Henry affirms the value of the human response to art. Too many people viewing a work of art, revealing their many opinions—which Henry might have seen as tawdry and ill-informed—can lead to our confusion over a work of art as well as to the loss of our individual conception of the work. But, it is worse to have art in a void. What is its value in the absence of people? And what if there are too many paintings, which Henry says is worse? Perhaps then we have become too accepting. If everyone is an artist, then no one is an artist. Besides, with too many works of art we have no time/space to ponder a

work. I needed the isolated courtyard to observe the statue. I needed a space away from the sensory bombardment of the city.

In Wilde's preface to the novel, he wrote, "All art is quite useless." This seems an odd thing for one to say to an audience who is about to read one's novel. Viewed historically, one could argue that Wilde is responding to the utilitarian philosophy that pervaded Victorian life during the second wave of the Industrial Revolution. Surely, such pragmatic times may have led to the Aesthetic movement of which Wilde was clearly a mouthpiece. But perhaps Wilde had none of that in mind. Surely, he knew that the homosexual undertones of his work would engender much discussion—too many people for one to see a work of art clearly. Perhaps his statement was aimed directly at the explosion of opinions his work was apt to elicit. Perhaps the statement was his disclaimer of having a "purpose" or "agenda" for writing the novel.

Consistent with Epictetus' philosophy, which heavily informed both Pater and Wilde, is the idea that a work of art either touches one's soul or not. Underpinning this idea is the somewhat elitist notion that art and all that is "of a refined sensuality" is best appreciated by those who have been trained by both birth and education to absorb a deeper, subtler reality than most. The arts thus speak directly to us in pure beauty—an idea not inconsistent with the Church's notion that art reveals spiritual truth directly to the soul through "claritas."

All of this having been said, it remains clear to me upon reflection on the statue in New Orleans that art has a purpose—to reveal the onlooker to himself. That may well be what Wilde meant—that art has no *specific use*. A work may be useless to some and may have multifarious uses and meanings to others. How we act or fail to act in the presence of art says much about us. This is why Lord Henry finds the people in the gallery more intriguing than the paintings and has found Basil and Dorian more interesting than Basil's "techne" in painting. This novel cannot be about the painting, contrary to what its title suggests. The novel is about the



hubris and the loss of the soul that arises from our twisted response to art. The novel is also about Lord Henry as the objective observer of human events. There are layers of perspective in this novel—Henry seeing Basil seeing Dorian seeing himself, etc. The readers are in it too.

What about the statue in New Orleans? One thing is clear. I wrote alone. There were no other writers present. Once this piece is read, I'm no longer alone. My text may not even exist. Unlike Lord Henry, I would be glad for there to be so many people reading my text that one could not see it. I just hope there are people watching the people watching me.

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***A PARTICIPANT-OBSERVER LOOKS  
BACK  
AT THE SLWP 2004 ADVANCED  
INSTITUTE  
GEORGE DORRILL  
SOUTHEASTERN LOUISIANA UNIVERSITY***

***PART ONE***

Richard Louth, the director of the SLWP 2004 Advanced Institute, told us that the professional piece he was writing was an analysis of the 2004 AI, and asked us to help him out by writing on 4 x 6 file cards comments and observations. I have been looking back over my writing and have realized that the easiest kind of writing for me to do is first-person narrative, so I thought for my



professional piece I could write an analysis in the form of a first-person narrative of my experience in the 2004 Advanced Institute. I am hopeful that this analysis may be of some help to Richard when he writes his analysis up for journal publication. Also, since I am one of six people who participated in both the 2003 and 2004 Advanced Institutes, I could make some comparisons between the two institutes.

Before the 2004 AI started, Richard e-mailed us to ask us to bring to the Institute a question or questions that we were interested in pursuing. I came to the Institute with several questions. The most general question for me was “How am I getting involved in teacher research?” There was an even more general question implied in that one, namely, “What is teacher research?” I also had some more specific questions related to the more general questions. The previous fall, I had taught two sections of 101. I received good student opinions of teaching (SOTs) from one section, poor ones from the other section. Perhaps not surprising, the class with low SOTs had the lowest average of any 101 class I had ever taught. The situation raised a number of questions: Why were there differences between the two classes? Was there anything I could do about it? Could I avoid the situation in the future? How could I be a better teacher of 101? Would teacher research provide an answer to any of these questions?

There was a third set of questions. For the first time since I had participated in my first Summer Institute (2001), I was also teaching a summer session class. The class, another 101, met at 7:30-8:45, and I was using the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* newspaper as a primary text. I had used the newspaper once before, in spring 2003, not very successfully, and I was hoping to make better use of it this time. I was also hoping to publish an article about the use of newspapers in the composition classroom, since to my knowledge, I was the only teacher doing so at a college. As the class progressed, several new questions arose: How can I conduct teacher research in this class? How can I make this class more like a Summer Institute? Is this a good idea? Is it a good idea to attempt to teach a class and participate in SLWP Institutes as well?

So, as the Advanced Institute began, I had a number of questions to pursue. We spent the morning of the first day getting to know one another better by participating in a Natalie Goldberg-type writing marathon. The afternoon would be spent in reading. I

had checked two books out from the library that I thought would be helpful in dealing with my first question, “What is teacher research?” They were *Inquiry-Based English Instruction* and *The Writing Teacher as Researcher*. It turned out that afternoon that neither was particularly helpful. The first book dealt with student inquiry rather than teacher inquiry, and the second book was a collection of essays that was not basic enough for my purposes. So the next day, when we went off on our own after the morning session, I was somewhat despairing: I felt I had wasted the previous afternoon and didn’t know what to do next. Before heading over to the library again, I decided to take a look at my bookshelves to see if I possibly had anything. Last summer, we had to move out of our offices so that they could paint them and change the carpet, and when I moved back in, my books got jumbled up, and I had a hard time finding anything. I looked for a while without success, and just before I headed out for the library I spotted a book half-hidden between two others: *The Art of Teacher Inquiry*. This book turned out to be exactly what I needed. It gave me a basic introduction to teacher inquiry or classroom research, and it led me to a number of good sources at the library.

Meanwhile, in addition to the reading track, we were on the writing track as well. Tuesday afternoon, our response group—Tammy Stiebing, David Jumonville, Robert Calmes, and I—met for the first time. Robert was working on connecting songs and poems for a class he was teaching at LSU, and Tammy was working on several tracks—individual research by her students, voice, and serendipity. David was working on getting ready to teach ESL at St. Joseph Abbey. We decided to work on our writing on Wednesday and meet as a group on Thursday morning. Robert Calmes preferred to continue working alone, but the other three of us met. David read a piece on the connection between ESL teaching and early childhood education, Tammy had written more on her individualized research projects, and I read an analysis of the first sentences of a group of newspaper columns. I had been

writing in response to the assignments I had been giving my 101 students, and this was another example of such an assignment.

In last year's Advanced Institute, the New Orleans Writing Marathon occurred during the first week. The second week was taken up in preparing a publication based on the writing marathon. This year, the marathon occurred during the second week; there would only be one day of the Institute following the marathon. Richard had earlier envisioned people perhaps continuing to work on their professional pieces during the marathon, but this wasn't possible, at least not for me.

We were in something of a quandary when we met Thursday morning, the last day of our Institute. A number of possibilities were raised, but Jeff Wiemelt saved the day when he proposed to set up a Blackboard site for us to submit our papers for peer revision, and he undertook to perform the task of preparing the final drafts for publication. We needed this additional time, and it was a godsend for us.

Although the title of this paper is "A Participant-Observer Looks Back at the SLWP 2004 Advanced Institute," I am not just looking back; I am also looking forward to continued reading and research on teacher inquiry, and am already planning my fall 101 sections, incorporating what I've learned this summer. I am continuing to work on the newspaper in the composition classroom article, and am hoping to start a teacher inquiry network. This summer's Advanced Institute was a very productive one for me, and I am very grateful that I was able to participate in it.

### ***Part Two***

When you were reading part one, you perhaps noticed a kind of sketchiness, a kind of hurriedness towards the end, as if the writer were saying, "Come on, let's get this over with." That shows up in a lot of my writing, and is a product of the way I write. For a long time, I've been thinking about writing a history of my writing, but I haven't been able to do it. Writing a history of my reading was an easy matter; writing a history of my writing wasn't. For I

am a reluctant writer, one who writes only under the extreme pressure of deadline for any published piece. And so it was for the particular piece you just read. I was laboring under the misapprehension that Monday, August 2, was the final deadline for submission of our pieces for the Advanced Institute anthology, and I started writing part one at 4:30 that Monday morning. I had written my marathon piece the day before.

I had spent the whole week of July 25-31 avoiding writing. When I saw Vicky on Tuesday at the Hammond marathon and she asked me why I hadn't posted anything yet, I thought to myself, "You can't be serious. It's only Tuesday. I haven't even turned my 101 grades yet." A friend of mine had lent me a bagful of Tony Hillerman novels, and I read five of them that week, saying to myself each time, "Let me read this book, and then I'll start writing." Needless to say, I didn't go anywhere near a computer. That weekend, I went down to New Orleans, to stay with my wife and to get her to type up my pieces once I had written them. I had left Hammond in a hurry, and all I had taken with me was my journal and the 2003 Advanced Institute anthology—my main idea for the professional piece was the different dynamic in the two institutes. Having the New Orleans Writing Marathon in the second week rather than the first made a huge difference, it seemed to me.

Monday, August 2, was a frenzied day for me. I had to leave New Orleans by two to make a dentist's appointment in Covington by 3:30—I had to stop in Hammond first to get directions to the dentist's office. Having to go to the dentist was an unforeseen complication. Sunday night, July 25, I had a terrific toothache, and I had to go to the dentist's Monday morning after I had given my 101 final exam to get painkillers and find out what was happening. It turned out I had an erupted wisdom tooth that needed extracting. Hence the appointment with the oral surgeon in Covington, for x-rays and evaluation. Masako, my wife, finished typing at noon, and we spent another hour proofreading and making corrections. At one I logged on to Blackboard for the first time and panicked. I

couldn't follow Jeff's instructions, so I sent him an incoherent e-mail with the pieces attached, or so I hoped. After I had read his instructions a second time, I figured out how to put the pieces on Blackboard and did so.

The next day, Tuesday, back in Hammond, I went back on Blackboard, to see if my pieces were actually there. They were, and there was a response to my marathon piece by Jeff and a response to my professional piece by Lynne. I also realized that I had missed out on a great opportunity by not participating in the discussions the previous week. I didn't feel I could respond to the other pieces, because I had missed the deadline, but I was extremely grateful to be able to have a chance at revising my pieces. Alas, I found myself slipping back into the old ways, repeating the behavior of the previous week, avoiding writing and reading four more Hillerman novels. This second week was even worse than the first week. I didn't get around to revising the marathon piece until the day of the deadline, Monday the ninth, and I spent all day doing that. I sent Jeff an e-mail saying I planned to revise the professional piece later that night, but I didn't. I sent him an e-mail at six this morning, Tuesday the tenth, along with the original professional piece (part one) with the extra spaces removed, and asked him if I could have today to revise the piece.

But I really didn't know how to do a revision. Lynne had asked me for more on group discussions, but I couldn't find any of my logs or notes. She also asked for more observations—"Do you have a spy glass? What were the themes that emerged? Did you see communalities? Phrases that come to mind are: healing, accountability, assessment, creativity. . . ." My problem is that I'm not very good at observation and not very good at themes. The only thing I'm good at, if I'm good at anything, is writing first-person narratives and doing a little reflecting from time to time. So that's what I ended up doing in this revision—not really a revision, just an addition.

Here's the reflection. On Saturday, July 17, the Saturday of the first week of the institute, I came over to the Writing Center

and wrote one of those 4 x 6 cards that Richard had asked us to write to help him with his professional piece. Luckily, it's still posted on the bulletin board. Here is what I wrote:

*I wish this Institute could go on for three more weeks. I feel we are just getting started and now it's going to end. I need to think of some way of keeping this feeling going through the fall. There's a lot of energy here—I think it is a combination of old friends and new friends. On Monday, we just started in like we had been doing this for months. I'm getting lots of ideas for my writing, and finding that I'm able to do more of it. I'm looking forward to the marathon and doing more writing. I'm going to steal from Jeff's writing last summer and write a lot about my friends in the Institute. And I'm now reading Tammy's piece in the 2001 anthology (Sorry, Tammy, for saying "steebing" on Tuesday instead of "styebing.") when she wrote around the table. We did miss Melanie. I wish she could have been here in the flesh. I'm looking forward to seeing her do the marathon.*

There's a lot of irony in that posting. We did have another three weeks of the Institute, but I didn't take advantage of it. I didn't write about my friends; I wrote about myself, as usual. In my marathon piece, I wrote about the paradox that writing is a solitary act, but it thrives in community. I was so excited that Saturday because we had just spent four days being a community writing together, talking together. It's possible to carry on that spirit electronically, and some, especially Tracy, Jeri, Holly, Gayle, Karen, Vicky, Lynne, and Jeff, were able to do so in the two weeks following the end of the face-to-face Institute. But that's not possible for everyone. Richard talked about this conundrum on that



last Thursday. I don't know what the solution is, but I'm glad I've had this extra time and sorry that I didn't make better use of it.

***About the Author:***

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***WORDS IN THEIR EARS  
AND PENS IN THEIR HANDS***  
**HOLLY JAMES**  
**BOGALUSA HIGH SCHOOL**

Walk into almost any elementary class for a day, and you will witness teachers and students reading aloud. Elementary teachers know the value of their students reading orally; their students are beginning readers who need to hear the splendor in the sounds. In contrast, high school teachers shrink from this task. Reading aloud is time-consuming, and let's face it, tortuous. Many of our students are poor readers, lacking the skills to pronounce the words, much less read with any feeling or understanding. Secondary teachers generally lack training in teaching reading, and this makes us feel inadequate to help our students beyond correcting or aiding pronunciations. Skilled and unskilled readers in the class become bored, complacent, or at times, belligerent, as their patience is tried while waiting for the slow readers to labor through the paragraph. And so, we avoid oral reading. In doing so, we discourage our students from becoming better readers. In turn, we hinder their writing. If our students do not hear the voice in the reading, we will not hear their "voice" in the writing.

If we do not face the problem with creative solutions by using oral reading in our classrooms, we keep our students from ever learning the joy of language, written and spoken. Reading aloud to our high school students and calling on them to read orally allows students to heed the beauty and music of the written word. Listening to a variety of writings builds better readers with

stronger vocabularies. Oral reading, when used to illuminate the writer's craft, can develop skillful writers as our students see and hear models of excellent writing.

"Reading aloud is important . . . a way of bridging the distance between where the child is and where you would like the child to be as a reader," states Jack Wilde, a fifth grade teacher as well as an instructor in the New Hampshire Writing Program. By reading aloud to our students or having them read out loud, we are able to make more difficult texts available to our students. An added benefit is that after hearing it read once, many of our students will read it again for themselves. Oral reading creates a more literate environment.

Oral reading is active reading, and active reading engages our students. Active reading leads to better writing. "It requires effort, concentration, attention," says Andrew Solomon in his *New York Times* article, "The Closing of the American Book." Solomon's article is a lament on the lack of reading in America because it demands critical thinking, but it can also be viewed as a call to arms for educators. Hearing the written word spoken aloud with all of its varied expressions and nuances allows our students to hear and feel its power, comfort, anger, anguish, desire, love, passion. When the teacher uses oral reading, the literature *book* is not the textbook; the *literature* is the textbook. The concentration turns to the crafting of the stories, not just covering units in the literature book. Well-crafted writing holds lessons students must learn. Donna Skolnick asserts in "When Literature and Writing Meet" that "what children read and how they read does influence their writing." She feels and I agree that whenever we read aloud, we "illuminate the craft of the writer." Students take note of good writing and begin to craft their own works.

Proof of this happens in my classroom as it did with my American literature students this spring. We were reading works by Mark Twain, a task that my students find very difficult when faced with him only on the page. They usually struggle with the dialect, but after reading excerpts of Mark Twain's works aloud

and listening to a taped reading of “The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County,” my students chose a passage of dialect from one of the stories and rewrote the passage in their own created dialect. Twain, the master of dialect, did not intimidate them at all. Because they heard the language, they felt comfortable creating a piece of their own. As students read their dialect pieces to the class, they were pleased with the laughter from their fellow students. Within their voices was the “voice” of the piece.

I am not advocating some elementary “story hour.” It is not enough for us to just be enthusiastic about the literature, not enough for us to study the elements of fiction or poetry. Students need to see how sentences, paragraphs, and stories are crafted. Donald H. Graves in *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work* asserts that “Writing is *not* speech. It uses the same material: words, information, order, organization. It *differs* because you must supply everything.” When we read good writing out loud to our students, it helps the students see the difference between the two. We can use the literature that we read aloud to push students to examine how the words work together. As my students read Eudora Welty’s “A Worn Path,” they listen to the music of the words as she describes her character, Phoenix, swaying like a pendulum as she walks. In class we count the twenty or so prepositional phrases in the first paragraph and discuss how much detail is crafted into that opening paragraph with one type of phrase. My students hear the language, see the phrases, and then, hopefully, take them into their writing. I could assign the story as silent reading or for homework to be discussed the following day, but it would lose the moment.

In this day of research-based instruction, I am confident in my oral reading/writing approach. Looking at more than sixteen separate reading programs, a report from the National Reading Panel concludes that “guided repeated oral reading procedures that included guidance from teachers, peers, and parents had a significant and positive impact on word recognition, fluency, and comprehension across a range of grade levels.” In addition, the

National Institute for Literacy gives several ways to practice oral reading: student-adult reading, choral reading, tape-assisted reading, partner reading, and readers' theatre. All of these methods can and should be used in the high school classroom, and resourceful secondary teachers can find creative ways to do so.

When my students and I begin to read Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, we spend about 45 minutes of our daily 90-minute block reading the book aloud, a chapter a day. Whatever reading we do not finish in that day's chapter, they finish at home on their own. Normally, they would revolt, but they are so into the story, they embrace this independent reading. On a block schedule, this takes about a week.

I knew I was on the right track when a fellow colleague stopped to tell me that Brandon, a resource student who read very slowly, was using every spare minute in her class to read a book. When she kept hearing him react with laughter or spontaneous comments, she asked, "Brandon, what are you reading?"

Without missing a beat, he replied, "Steinbeck."

Reaching that student and turning him on to reading would have been rewarding enough, but the following week when students began working on their comparison/contrast essays on the book and film versions of the story, their papers were rich. They wrote about the use of language, the descriptions of the characters, the openings in the novel and the film, the differences in how they visualized the characters from the author's description and the screen's portrayal. While they enjoyed the film version, many of them said what I felt as well, "The book was better."

Poetry readings are great ways to allow students to read aloud. Most poems need to be read several times to get the full meaning, so why not let several students read the same poem? I assign groups of three a poem. Each group is responsible for analyzing the poem for meaning, structure, and devices. They present orally to the class by reading the poem to the class and then giving their analysis. They turn in a written response as well. We

are able to read many more poems this way and it is a student-centered activity.

This year I plan to institute a read-around, a time when students can bring in prepared readings of their choice for the class. I hope in this way to encourage students who have been reluctant oral readers to become engaged in the process. This will be followed with a written response time on those readings with focus placed on the author's craft. As students read many more pieces of writing, they will begin to model these writings without having formulaic writing forced upon them.

As the experts of the National Reading Panel state, “. . . reading instruction is most effective when combined with writing instruction.” Our challenge as English teachers is to bring the language to our students and show them the best ways to use it. If they do not hear the passion, the beauty, the hurt, the healing in the words, they will never try to bring that to their own writing. Oral reading is just one way to bring good writing to our students. Embrace it. Put the written word into their ears and mouths, and eventually the pen will move more smoothly in their hands.

***About the Author:***

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# ***THE LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE APPROACH AND ESL***

**DAVID JUMONVILLE  
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## ***The Language Experience Approach***

The majority of my teaching experience has been with very young children. In ECE programs there is an emphasis on readiness skills, reading and math. The reading readiness program that I prefer places stress on writing as a readiness vehicle for reading. The guiding philosophy behind this program is the Natural Language or the Language Experience Approach (LEA), which is based on the premise that comprehension precedes production, and that language is learned from whole to part. Within the Language Experience Approach there is an integration of skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing, all of which are developed simultaneously. The implication for reading is that students can read what they write—or as in the case of the younger children, they can read what they dictate to a classroom scribe.

## ***First and Second Language Acquisition***

Although The LEA format was designed specifically for native speaker's early childhood reading readiness programs, similarities between first and second language acquisition recommended it as a means of second language instruction. Subsequent developments have produced several versions of the approach designed specifically with the needs of second-language

students in mind (see Edelsky, Altwerger, & Flores, 1991; Moustafa, 1987).

Similarities in language acquisition appear to lie mainly in the process itself. Both first language and second language proceed through many of the same predictable stages making similar developmental errors and employing certain cognitive strategies like simplification and over generalization. Both are constructed from prior conceptual knowledge, requiring the learner must test and revise hypotheses, both require interaction, and both are aided by modified input.

### ***LEA and Adult ESL***

Given the similarities noted above between first and second language acquisition, and the fact that the Language Experience Approach is known to be an effective instructional tool with children, both native speakers and second language learners, it stands to reason that LEA could be adapted for use in the adult ESL learning environment. With any pedagogical device the key to success is the modification of the activity to match the cognitive level of the learner. By taking advantage of the adult ESL student's natural curiosity, need to be social, and previous experiences and knowledge, a teacher can guide the student in speaking, reading, and writing far beyond what might have been considered possible.

I believe that newspapers are an excellent means of implementing the Language Experience Approach with adult ESL students and maintaining sufficient cognitive sophistication and motivation to ensure continued progress in the target language. Newspapers are composed of various sections. By distributing assignments across various sections of the newspaper, we as teachers should be able to cater to the interests of a variety of students. Below you will find some activities for using newspapers in an adult ESL setting.

### ***An Adult Focused LEA Exercise***



News items of an international and national scope are generally reported in the first sections of the newspaper. These often reflect the national bias of the country of the paper's origin. An interesting activity is to examine national bias by comparing news reports from a variety of national sources. Have the students find and report on a news item from across the country, or from their home country or world region. Then have them use the Internet to find a more "local paper" and see what that source has to say about the same topic ([www.onlinenewspapers.com](http://www.onlinenewspapers.com)).

The "local news" often reports crime statistics by address. Have your students use a city map and push-pins to show which neighborhoods have the highest and lowest crime rates. Group these by categories: auto thefts, burglaries, shootings, and muggings. Remember that not all of the news in these section is bad. Have the students find and report on some "feel good" news.

The Editorial Pages, unlike most other features in the newspaper, are similar to reviews; editorials are opinions. Have the students read the editorials in the local paper and help them to see how these fall into two broad categories, "conservative" and "liberal." Using current events from the newspaper have the students share their opinions and write their own "editorials." They can then compare opinions within the class to see where they fall, "conservative" or "liberal." Be sure to use the letters to the editor as a teaching tool. Have the students choose a topic of interest and write a letter to the editor. Have them mail it in and see if it is accepted for publication.

When I think of the Entertainment section of the newspaper I immediately think of the theater and the movies. What's playing, where and when. There are also reviews by nationally known critics to help you in your selection. Using the local paper, have the students plan a field trip to see a movie. They will need to determine location, show times and cost. When they return to school have them write their own movie reviews to share with the class. Have them read professional reviews on-line and see if they and the critics agree ([www.rottentomatoes.com](http://www.rottentomatoes.com)).

I have seen how word games like Scrabble are popular in my adult ESL classroom. The Entertainment sections of most newspapers contain a number of challenging word games like the crossword puzzles, anagrams and “jumbles.” Even though my students find these enjoyable, I have noticed that working with a partner often makes it more fun and also relieves some of the frustration of solving puzzles. Be sure to have a good dictionary and thesaurus on hand for the students to resource. Here is a link to on-line crossword puzzles especially designed for ESL students at a variety of levels (<http://a4esl.org/a/c3.html>).

The sports section of the newspaper features articles about players, teams and events. No matter what sport captures your interest you can find it reported on here. Students can read an article about their favorite sport or team and prepare an oral summary for the class. Or they could track the play-offs of the seasonal sport. You can have your students attend or watch on TV some sporting event and write their own newspaper article.

Take some time to see what is included in the "Classified Ads." They may seem to be written in a language peculiarly their own but the students can become accustomed to it. Here too working with a partner can make the activity more enjoyable and less frustrating. Here is a little role-play scenario that I've used:

- You need a car or truck to get around, but you only have \$5,500 to spend. Use the classified ads to find a vehicle within your budget.
- Now that you have a vehicle, you can find a job. Find something that you are qualified for. Locate a second job to work part-time to help make ends meet.
- You will want your own place now. Find an apartment, two bedrooms and one bath. You plan on getting a cat, so make sure pets are allowed!
- You are ready for that pet. Find a free kitten.

Now that they have some understanding of how the Classified Ads work, have the students try writing some ads of their own.

- Now that you are working you can afford a nicer car. Your budget is \$10,000. Sell your old car/truck and find a new one.
- Your cat had kittens. You can not afford to feed six more mouths. You need to find them a home. Describe them in a way to make them sound irresistible.
- You've decided that living alone is not to your liking. Write an ad seeking a roommate. Be sure to list all the qualities you are looking for.

As you can see, by utilizing the LEA, format newspapers readily lend themselves to adult ESL instruction. They provide a student-centered focus by exploiting the adult student's curiosity, social needs, and previous life experience and knowledge. You can also see how all four language skills, *listening, speaking, reading* and *writing*, are integrated. I have learned in my transition from ECE to adult ESL that all it takes to adapt many of the readiness programs designed for young children to an adult second language setting is a little imagination.

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# ***CLICK . . . CLICK . . . CREATIVITY***

**GAYLE LADNER**

**LOUISIANA TECHNICAL COLLEGE**



Picture this—a classroom of students that are taught prewriting, writing and rewriting. Picture students rereading through their captured words to analyze their audience, proofread, edit, and revise their work. Picture a student using a critical eye to make sure that style and tone are appropriate. This is a technical writing classroom. Technical writing is distinguishable from other kinds of writing in that it is functional. Mistakes

and confusing directions accompanying an essential device in an automobile could result in a disaster. Technical writing calls for the same kind of attention and must be judged by the same standards as any other kind of writing.

Having creativity in a technical writing class means bringing something into being that may be new but has value for the student. Edward DeBono states that an ideal writing atmosphere allows freedom: “To be creative we must be free of constraints, free of tradition, and free of history” (DeBono 1992, 30). Because “some” of my technical writing activities are creative and are ideal for “most” of the class, there is still room to enhance my creative skills by including assignments to fit every discipline. It would be okay for a welding student to become the authority and bring in a

piece of writing that is unique to the welding department. Teaching old material using this new document is a way to enhance students' understanding of how and why they are learning. If the welding student is more cognizant of this, he will more likely take ownership of the assignment.

By evaluating technical writing textbooks and resources that have been made available to me in the Writing Center, I have found that the basic goals in the teaching of technical writing are common to most authors and publishing companies. All of them introduce, in some respect, a review of grammar, include the six C's of good communication (documents that are clear, concise, courteous, complete, concrete, and correct in format), require mastery of letter, memorandum, and report writing (ex. newspaper releases, accident reports, proposals, recommendation reports, etc.), and teach step-by-step formatting of employment documents. Beyond the basics, one might find a research paper assigned to fulfill the requirements of the course. My purpose in looking at a wide selection of teaching resources for technical writing is to find new, creative activities so that I may better include all of the students that enroll in my class from the various disciplines of the technical college. Students enroll in this course from the following departments: office systems, information technology, networking, marketing, electronics, biomedical, automobile mechanics and welding.

My research has not been in vain. Through my reading the many books and journals made available, my files are being expanded to include some different approaches to teaching the material. The wide expertise of the classmates in the advanced writing course and their sharing of their success stories have given me ideas to incorporate into some old and new activities. Also, Dr. Richard Louth has shared some of his successful activities in teaching a technical writing class at Southeastern Louisiana University. My search will continue beyond this summer, but I do have some ideas to take back with me into the classroom.

My first finding is an activity that came from DeBono in his book *Serious Creativity* (DeBono 1992) and then a complete writing about the activity in his book *The Six Thinking Hats* (DeBono 1985). It is an activity that best fits into a group assignment but could be used by an individual where problem solving is the priority. The activity, known as *The Six Thinking Hats*, (DeBono 1992, 77-85) is a framework process that allows for structured exploration of a subject. The idea is to encourage creativity and to make the interaction among students more constructive when dealing with problem solving by using one thinking mode at a time. There are six modes of thinking behavior that can be requested at any moment to guide cooperative exploration of a subject. Each mode of thinking is given a hat with an assigned color.

## MODES OF THINKING

### *COLORS*

White hat	Information thinking—pure facts, figures.
Red hat	Intuition and feeling—hunch, emotions.
Black hat	Caution and the logical negative—why it will not work.
Yellow hat	The logical positive—optimism, constructive, opportunity.
Green hat	Creative effort and creative thinking.
Blue hat	Control of the thinking process—thinking about thinking.

### *White Hat Thinking*

“Imagine a computer that gives the facts and figures for which it is asked. The computer is neutral and objective. It does not offer interpretations or opinions” (DeBono 1985, 54). The student never gives an opinion; he or she imitates the computer—lays out the facts.

### ***Red Hat Thinking***

It is sometimes valuable to get feelings out into the open. When a person is using the red hat there should never be any attempt to justify what he or she feels or to provide a logical explanation for these feelings. “Wearing the red hat allows the thinker to say: ‘This is how I feel about the matter’” (DeBono 1985, 202).

### ***Black Hat Thinking***

“The black hat thinker points out why something will not work. The black hat thinker points out risks and dangers. The black hat thinker points out faults in a design” (DeBono 1985, 203). Projections of failure or how things could go wrong may be stated. It is the time to ask negative questions. It is a pessimistic view; nevertheless, a very important part of thinking. Remember that black hat thinking is not emotional. The emotional thinking is the role of red hat thinking. Logical and relevant reasons must always be given that are truthful, but they do not have to be fair. Play the role as fiercely critical as possible. This is an important part of the thinking process and should be done well.

### ***Yellow Hat Thinking***

In the case of trying to find new ideas, the yellow hat should always be used before the black hat. Ideas, suggestions, and proposals come from the yellow hat thinkers. Remember that it will be positive change. “The glass is not half empty but is half full” is an attitude of a yellow hat thinker says DeBono (DeBono 1985, 132). It is concerned with positive assessment that includes value and benefit. From yellow hat thinking comes concrete proposals and suggestions.

### ***Green Hat Thinking***

Specifically, green hat thinkers are concerned with new ideas and new ways of looking at things. What is expected is a better



way of doing things, or change. A person wearing the green hat would be allowed to put forward his or her “crazy” ideas. “Ideally both thinker and listener should be wearing green hats” (DeBono 1985, 168).

### ***Blue Hat Thinking***

The difference between a good thinker and a poor thinker is found in their ability to focus. A focus can be broad or narrow. Blue hat thinking should be used to bring students back when they drift from the focus. Keeping the group on track by asking the right questions, defining the problem, and maintaining control is blue hat thinking.

“. . . You have both had your say. To go any further is arguing and that is not what we are here to do” (DeBono 1985, 194).

Putting on the blue hat results in the group deciding on summaries, overviews and conclusions. These can take place from time to time in the course of problem solving and also at the end. Mostly, blue hat thinking monitors the thinking and ensures that the rules of the game are observed. The blue hat thinker calls for the use of the other hats when needed.

These techniques are ways to ask someone to switch gears. The neutrality of the colors allows the hats to be used without embarrassment. You can ask someone to “take off the black hat for a moment” more easily than you can ask that person to stop being so negative. To remember the colors try remembering them as red and white, black and yellow, and blue and green.

Give a group an assignment that requires a quick exploration of the subject. Allow the group to choose a facilitator. The facilitator will review the rules for using *Six Thinking Hats* (DeBono 1985), and let them go to work. Allow the facilitator to put together the sequence to use the hats and then lead the group through them, one by one, spending about four minutes on each hat. There is no set sequence because the sequence will vary with

the subject, whether it has been considered before, and who is doing the thinking. There are two goals. The first goal is to make a plan. The second goal is to choose a way to incorporate the plan. If the plan is good enough, the best way will become obvious. Groups will be trained to do focused thinking instead of wasting time in argument or drifting debate. The result will be an enjoyable and disciplined approach.

My second finding was an opportunity to add a new twist to an old assignment of writing news releases. The idea came from the sharing of a journal entry by Dr. George Dorrill in the summer creative writing class. Dr. Dorrill has his students enrolled in a freshmen composition class clip stories and opinion articles from newspapers all semester and keep them in a scrapbook. Related articles will have to be grouped together. They write an essay at the end of the course showing the consistency that they find in the introductions, middle support sections, and the conclusions of the articles. Then, they contrast the differences that they find in each part.

In my technical writing class, the students have to write newspaper releases. By having each student collect news releases and mount them into a scrapbook, they become a teaching tool. The students use their new release models to compare and contrast the introductions, supporting details and the conclusions of each article. Students will identify with a highlighter who, what, where, when and why of the news articles. They can easily learn the standard format that editors and news directors expect. Students will be given instruction to write several news releases. With the actual samples of news releases that they have taken ownership of, the students will now have guides to make the task of writing a news release an easy one.

The third finding was from talking with Dr. Richard Louth, the creative writing class professor. His idea is to let the assignments from several chapters be ongoing when teaching students to format proposals, brochures and memorandums. Also, he suggested allowing the students to choose what they will use as

a proposal which causes the student to see relevance in why they are learning the material. To get beyond teaching isolated skills and to provide meaningful assignments is a personal goal of mine. An example of an ongoing project would be for a class to choose to write a formal proposal to solve the problem of not having a designated study place at school. After the proposal is formatted, then they would design a brochure to advertise the perfect study environment. Then, to complete the assignment, they would write a memorandum to the Dean asking for permission to take the suggestion for a new study hall before the Board of Directors. The flow and continuity of the ongoing assignments would cause the students to see how the big picture of technical writing meshes together.

Looking back at the snapshots in my mind of a semester of teaching and critiquing my work is both enlightening and rewarding. A way to improve upon the lessons that have been taught is to make an effort to bring fresh creativity into the classroom which is what I am asking my students to do when they try on *Six Thinking Hats* to solve a technical writing problem. My colleagues keep a trunk full of “tried and true” resources, like a file of cherished photo negatives, in folders ready to be copied, edited, and restored if they are told how much I treasure their expertise and support. My going back into a classroom as a student, and enjoying the lectures of a professor puts a whole new album of ideas in my heart to help me to make my classroom teaching more meaningful for my students. Reaching the student who would rather spend his or her whole day in a shop doing labor with his or her hands rather than being in a technical writing class is a challenge. I know that I have met the challenge when a student returns two years later to say, “Writing is a part of my job today—I am glad we did all those journaling projects about pictures of our future.”

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# ***WHY WRITE?***

## **DON MCDANIEL**

### **FRANKLINTON HIGH SCHOOL**

The all-to-familiar question that looms deep in the hearts and minds of many people is “Who am I?” I often hear students discuss their plans for the future, and what they want to be when they grow up. At mid-life, I am still pondering what I want to do when I grow up. I surely do not want to become stagnated in the mundane problems of life. Many times it is difficult to find and know our own self-identity. The pains, wounds, and scares of life cloud our vision of the inner being, the person who is searching for healing, understanding, and re-imagining. Writing can be the key that opens the locked door and initiates the process of growth and self-satisfaction. Through writing, we can listen to the deepest self. It helps us think more clearly and feel more deeply. Writing is the ear to our heart.



Writing gives us the opportunity to explore the secret chambers and inner depths of our being. It is like looking at an inner compass. We can check in and get our bearings. Through writing, we can navigate these unknown parts that have the ability to bless or curse us. Hidden patterns may surface through this practice. According to Julia Cameron in “The Right to Write,” writing is what we make from the broth of our experiences. If we lead a rich and varied

life, we will have a rich and varied stock of ingredients from which to draw on. Writing is about living; it is about seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling and touching (Cameron).

Writing can be the relief valve for the pressure cooker that we live in on a daily basis. It can bring a balance to a busy life; it is the way of slowing down and bringing a balance to our lives. My friend, who is battling cancer, stated that through writing he had found places within himself that illness could not touch. Writing leads us to the deepest awareness of our being, but it is free from censorship and the judgment of outside expectations. We can confront life's traumas, large and small, put them to rest, and heal body, mind, and spirit.

It has been scientifically proven that writing heals. In 1999, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* reported that patients who wrote about stressful experiences "had clinically relevant change in their health status . . . beyond those attributable to standard medical care." New research suggests that expressive writing offers physical benefits to people who suffer from terminal or life-threatening diseases. Psychologists James Pennebaker, PhD, of the University of Texas at Austin and Joshua Smith, PhD, of Syrvan University suggest that writing about various emotions and stress can boost the immune system in patients who are suffering from such diseases as arthritis, asthma, and HIV/AIDS (Murray).

Several years ago while working as a counselor at a psychiatric hospital, I used writing as a healing tool; it allowed individuals the opportunity to work through grief issues by providing an outlet to express various problems. Patients who were entangled in grief issues were asked to write a letter to the deceased person and mail it in an unaddressed envelope. This allowed the person the opportunity to release all of the internal emotions and feelings that might be suppressing his/her progress in life. At other times, patients who were facing traumatic experiences were told to write about their experiences, and then the writing would be burned before their eyes. This brought closure; it was a way to release feelings of hurt, anger, disappointment,

sadness, hate, and regret. Cameron states, “Writing is medicine. It is an appropriate antidote to injury. It is an appropriate companion to any difficult change.”

One of the most profound experiences I ever had with writing was during this time. Late one afternoon, a young lady who was in her twenties was admitted to the hospital due to depression and suicidal ideations. I was assigned to be her counselor; it was my job to find out what made her tick inside. For two weeks, I attempted every possible way that I knew to reach her. All of our contacts and conversations were superficial. After three weeks of hospitalization, she was released without ever learning the issues that caused her problem. Two weeks later, she was re-admitted to the hospital with the same symptoms plus cuts on her arms and wrists. For the next two weeks, she and I followed the same road that lead to nowhere. As I was leaving one afternoon, I gave her a notebook and pen and requested that she write whatever was on her heart, and we would talk about it the next morning. Needless to say, I had very little hope that she would write anything. But to my surprise, the next morning I was presented with several page of writing. I requested that she read to me her writing. At first she refused, but she reluctantly gave in to my persistence. Her writing was in the voice of a ten-year-old girl, who was trying to convince her daddy to not sexually abuse her. She wrote in graphic details of the four-year ordeal of horror. Her entire identity had been stripped away; the innocence of childhood had been robbed from her. As she read, she wept. Her tone turned from anger, to hurt, to guilt, to distrust, to humiliation, and to confusion. Upon completing her reading, she was curled up in a fetal position in the corner of the room, crying that her mother would come get her; her mother had died three years before. This started her healing process; she was able to write about the hurt that had haunted her for several years. Writing was the tool that allowed the demon of hurt to be released. After catastrophic losses in life, writing can aid in reconstructing the ruins. Writing is a powerful form of prayer and meditation. Cameron states, “We should write because writing is good for the

soul . . . because writing yields us a body of work, a felt path through the world we live in. We should write because we are writers, whether we call ourselves that or not.”

The question proposed is, “Why Write?” The answer is simple. It is our pointer in life; it can reveal to us who we are, and it can also show us where we are going. Writing can uncover the hidden snags that are grabbing us and holding us back from reaching our full potential in life. Through writing, we can find ourselves. Writing allows us the ability to tap into the underground rivers of our veins with the pen and bring to the surface the things that can apply the healing ointment to the wounds of life.

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# ***WHERE WERE YOU WHEN I NEEDED YOU?***

**KAREN OLLENDIKE**

I work a lot with new teachers. Part of my job consists of conducting training workshops for them, so I have gotten to know quite a few of who are entering their first year of teaching. Some of these teachers are fresh out of college, excited about their first real jobs as teachers, while others are older, more mature. They are seeking certification, or changing careers, or entering the workforce for the first time with years of life experience under their belts. These older teachers don't share the same naiveté of their younger colleagues, but they too are drawn by the siren song of molding lives and making the world a better place through education.

Many of these teachers enter schools in our state that are poor, especially those in urban and rural areas. These schools are often inadequately equipped, and teachers find themselves without even the basic tools to teach with. I had the opportunity to mentor three new teachers last year, two women and one man. All were working in poorly performing schools. I meet with them regularly throughout the school year.

Annie is a 23 year-old first year teacher teaching French in a rural school on the banks of the Mississippi River. I visited her at her school where most of her students look older and are definitely more street smart than she is. She doesn't have any textbooks, and the school has no money to buy them, so I worked with her all year to find activities and materials to use to teach her students.

Tammy is a 24 year-old woman with a very impressive transcript including course work from Columbia and Harvard Universities, who is teaching for the first time in Louisiana. She is soft spoken and smaller than her students as well. She started school with more students than desks in her classroom. Tammy teaches American History at a middle school where her textbooks are older than her students. When I went to visit her school the first time, I hit a pothole on the front drive so deep that it tore up the front of my car. The paint in the classroom is peeling and some of the windows were boarded up. We continued our visit during recess where I observed students silently walking around a pole in a circle. When I asked what they were doing, she told me that that is how one of the teachers punished his students for being bad. When I asked how often they were made to do this, I was told that some of the students walked in that circle every day for recess. They were never allowed to play; yet this was an acceptable form of punishment. I wonder why they had trouble paying attention in the classroom. Unfortunately, Tammy was so overwhelmed at the task of teaching in this environment that she quit after only 12 weeks to leave the profession.

The third person I mentored was Richard. He is 27 years old and has already taught for a couple of years, but is seeking additional certification in Social Studies. He is also the athletic trainer for the football team, coach of the basketball team, faculty sponsor for FCA and a first year American History and Civics teacher. His school was declared unsatisfactory this year because so many of the students failed the Exit Test (a test of basic skills that Louisiana students must pass to graduate). It is not a difficult test, yet many of the students at his high school, located in a low-income urban area of the city, don't pass it. Their standardized test scores are consistently so low that the school is in danger of closing. Annie and Tammy are just trying to survive and teach the students in spite of their difficulties, but Richard, who already has too much to do, dreams of making a difference even beyond his classroom. He wants to create a program to help these at-risk

students pass the exit exam and graduate from high school. He is overworked, with nothing to support him but his dreams; yet he is highly motivated to make a difference. I hope he does. These teachers and many other teachers in our state have a formidable task before them.

Don't get me wrong, many in our state department of education and our universities are buckling down and working hard to try to make up for lost time and bring our schools up to a respectable national level. Louisiana is committed to President Bush's No Child Left Behind Act; however, for many teachers it is a living nightmare. In addition to coping with poorly equipped schools, there is no time for creativity and initiative in the classroom. They are bombarded with new directives, additional requirements focused on raising standardized test scores, new certification expectations, inclusion and special accommodations for students with special needs all requiring the completion of mountains of paperwork. Each teacher is required to document the standards and benchmarks they teach to ensure continuity and progress. I am not saying that these things are bad; they are necessary. Many teachers, even those who have been in the classroom for a while, need more structure to force them to raise their standards. But how can a teacher touch a life and teach in overcrowded, poorly equipped classrooms when they don't have time to teach because of all of the requirements outside of actually teaching that are put upon them? Many first year teachers begin the year full of anticipation and excitement, only to end the year barely hanging on by the skin of their teeth, disillusioned, where their only hope is to survive until the end of May.

In a perfect world, teachers would all enter well-equipped classrooms, with no more than 22-23 students and an aide to help with all non-instructional duties. Teachers would be paid well and given the support they needed to succeed. However, as we all know we don't live in a perfect world, so should we just give up on educating children until things change? Of course not! While we may not have the perfect working conditions, the key to our

success may be found within one another. If we pool our resources and work to support one another, we can make a difference in our classrooms and in the lives of our students. All teachers need support, but for many inexperienced teachers it can mean the difference between staying in the profession, or leaving defeated.

I experienced this kind of support from fellow teachers when I participated as a Fellow in the National Writing Project at Southeastern Louisiana University. We all taught different subjects at different grade levels, from elementary to post secondary. We came from different schools, even different school districts, yet we had one common goal, to learn to write better and to teach our students how to write better.

I entered the summer eager to learn, but not exactly sure what to expect. The first time we met we had an opportunity to share some of the things we had written. It was immediately apparent that I was out of my league. There were some very talented writers among us, and I felt totally inadequate as a new writer with my simple little pieces. We met as a large group each morning for six weeks, but for part of each day we broke into smaller response groups of four to five teachers. In our response groups we daily brought a new piece of writing, or one that had been newly revised to share with our group. I purposely asked to be in a response group with people whose writing had spoken to me in the larger group—people I admired and wanted to learn from.

I believe these small response groups impacted me most of all. I brought my poor little pieces of writing every day to the group and they listened intently, not just to my words, but also to what they felt I was trying to express. Slowly and skillfully they drew me out and helped me restructure and improve what I was trying to say. They helped me think about what I really wanted in my writing. My response group helped me see how I could become a better writer. Though each of them was a more experienced writer than I was, none of them discouraged me, or rewrote my pieces for me. Instead, the response group members noted what they felt worked in my writing, and what they felt could be

improved upon. They shared suggestions and asked questions about things that were unclear. Then they challenged me to write—they empowered me to express myself in ways I had never done before.

Not only did they help me, they were also interested in my thoughts on their writing. We drew from the strength in each other. It was amazing. No one officially told us how to write; yet through the entire process we all became better writers. We all taught each other. We didn't hear lectures on writing or even use books, yet it was the most meaningful professional development I have ever experienced.

I know I left that first summer longing to stay with my response group—sad that we could no longer remain together as a tight unit that supported one another. We each had to return back to our different schools and different responsibilities. This past summer some of us were able to get together and write again and it was as if we had never separated. The heartfelt support we had for one another had forged a bond between us that will last forever. I believe we experienced a model of how teachers can help each other, not only in the area of writing, but also in all aspects of our careers.

Imagine groups of teachers committed to helping one another manage the day-to-day challenges of teaching. Imagine teachers being able to bring their questions about how to reach the reluctant learner to a more experienced teacher and have him or her care enough to listen and offer constructive help. Imagine knowing that someone is there who doesn't criticize you for your inexperience or failures, but helps you through them. Imagine if Annie and Tammy and Richard could have had such groups in their schools. It could change teachers' lives and the entire profession.

Our support groups will change as our needs and circumstances change. Each school has its own unique set of challenges, and the key to success in meeting those challenges are teachers that are open and willing to help and learn from one other. I no longer have the physical support of the members of my

writing project response group, but I know they are out there cheering me on, wanting me to succeed.

If we can duplicate that model in our schools, then we can better cope with the challenges of teaching and be more effective. By sharing resources and advice, encouragement and empathy, we empower one another to be better teachers. Good teachers don't stay good teachers with all of the obstacles set before them if they are left alone and hung out to dry. Teachers need more than just an occasional pat on the back—they need the ongoing support of their peers. It will cause new teachers to grow in skills and confidence, and more seasoned teachers will find that they have renewed passion for teaching that they may have lost. Together we can overcome obstacles. Together we can make a difference.

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***LEARNING WHAT I ALREADY KNOW***  
**TAMMY STIEBING**  
**FONTAINEBLEAU HIGH SCHOOL**



This year's advanced institute summer writing marathon carried many themes for me as a writer. It is not until I revisit my writing that I am even aware of this, but the center of gravity of my writing is all about my perspective—my reality. As I reread entries in my writing notebook, I see themes of independent study, serendipity, childhood memories, reliance of intuition, personal faith, and teaching philosophy, and yet I still find myself wondering if I have anything new to say.

These are the things that encompass me, that fuel my passions in life. I realize as I reflect on them that I am evolving as a human, but evolving into a simpler state of being. I have learned that the most important things in life, or the most intriguing things in life, are the simple things. Ironically, as I pondered the best way to compose one grand writing piece out of many random journal entries from the writing marathon, I decided to visit the weblog of another summer fellow, Evan Nichols. Reading his "Papa Journal" helped remind me of the spirit of the writing project. And at the bottom of one of the web pages a quote caught my eye. It said, "to simplify is to evolve." Wow. How profound. I actually wrote about that in my journal during the first few days of the institute. Here's what I wrote:

*I find that the older I get, the wiser I've become, and the more I get back to the basics of simplifying—simplifying to get authentic writing—saying what is true rather than what is expected—using my voice. . . . Simplification. No labels. Just let us be so we can teach.*

So seems to be my voice throughout my experience in the advanced writing institute. Admittedly, I started with a burning question of how to properly implement an independent study with gifted high school students, but became sidetracked by the notion of serendipity and how much it influences my teaching. Only now, as I reflect, do I realize that serendipity as well as simplicity is the key to an authentic independent study. I spent a summer complicating my notion of the ideal independent study, all the while searching for the “how to’s” only to once again come back to the beginning. Through reflective writings, and furious page flipping through books that might offer me a glimpse of the ideal scenario, I came to the conclusion that my solution to planning the perfect independent study is to plan very little. The best way, is to keep it simple. In this respect, I can allow for and ultimately give way to the possibility of serendipitous discoveries for my students. And really, the more I ponder my ultimate goal for my students in an independent study, I realize that what I inevitably want for them is to experience the surprise of discovering the knowledge they didn’t know they were searching for—to discover the happy accidents.

At the end of the last school year, I haphazardly implemented a three week independent study with my 11<sup>th</sup>-grade American Literature class. I didn’t have a model of an independent study of any sort, only ideas, inspiration and excitement. My students thought I was crazy since we were at the end of the school year, and they were already “finished” with me. Almost instantly, when I mentioned the words independent study, I got the one-eyebrow raised look from thirty 16 year olds that said, “You want me to



WHAT?” But I told them, “This is a no brainer. I am only asking you to authentically engage in researching something you really have an interest in.” Within a few days, and some preliminary digging in the library stacks, their reluctance turned to intrinsic motivation. One student, who was researching the Christian references in C.S. Lewis’s work looked at me with excitement in her eyes and said, “Wow. What a concept . . . researching something I want to know about. Why haven’t I done a research paper on this before, Mrs. Stiebing?” Another student’s anticipation for her summer program inspired her research of exothermic and endothermic dinosaurs, with her ultimate plan being a debate with her father’s colleagues at the University of New Orleans. The apathetic students required more prodding, but eventually fed off of the more successful students’ energy, and they eventually engaged. I depended on my constant “mini-conferences” to assess learning outcomes, and although this wasn’t the most scientific method of assessment, I felt it was the most authentic. Through one-on-one conversations students honestly admitted their successes and failures and even shared their newest discoveries with me. Because of accountability issues, I did create research log sheets for the students and required written reflections, but in the end, I knew that what was on paper wasn’t the proof of their learning experience. The dialogues we had, the interaction among us, and the energy of their authentic inquiries spoke volumes over the written word.

To say I know anything more about independent studies would be a lie. To say I didn’t really know what I was doing while implementing the experimental independent study with my students would be closer to the truth. All I really had was an objective in mind, coupled with intuition and the energy of a handful of students to tell me which way to go next. But at the end of my own writing journey in the advanced summer institute, I realized what I already knew—the students are the only ones who can ultimately guide the journey; I cannot, as it’s not mine to guide. I am only a passenger who motivates and supports. I can

only nudge and provide an environment primed for authentic and serendipitous discoveries. My only responsibility is to keep it simple.

***About the Author:***

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## ***HE'S KNOWN RIVERS (JOSEPH'S STORY)***

**VICKY TANGI**

**EAST BATON ROUGE PARISH ADULT  
AND CONTINUING EDUCATION**

*“I’ve known rivers,”* the poem begins. I read it slowly to my class, adults from other countries learning English as a Second Language. A mixed group of immigrants, refugees, and visiting researchers and their spouses from all over the world, they converge in my classroom with the common purpose of learning English. They listen, eyes closed. I read it again, *“I’ve known rivers deep as the flow of human blood in human veins/ My soul has grown deep like rivers.”* I notice one student, Joseph, swaying gently to the rhythm, eyes still closed. *“I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young. . . .”* I continue. *“I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.”* When I close with the repetition of the line, *“My soul has grown deep like rivers,”* there is an almost beatific glow emanating from Joseph’s ebony face.

The students talk about what they heard, and then I give them copies of the poem, “A Negro Speaks of Rivers,” by Langston Hughes. We spend time looking at the various language components—vocabulary, syntax, rhythm, stress and intonation. We examine the imagery, talk about the geographical and historical allusions (*“I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans. . . .”*). Students discuss anything about this poem that reminds them of the life they left behind or the one they have found. We read it again, in unison.

The class ends with singing. This time we sing the folksong, “Michael Row the Boat Ashore,” one that works well with second language learners because of the simplicity of the language, the melody and repetition, and a theme that is easy to grasp, yet can vary in meaning from student to student. The idea of crossing a river with the expectation of “*milk and honey on the other side*” evokes powerful images for most of my students, as some have literally crossed rivers or seas to freedom. Almost all have come here with the expectation of a life that is somehow better than what they have given up in order to get here. Some students are here only temporarily, perhaps while a spouse is finishing an advanced degree or while they themselves are on a short-term assignment with their home employer, or even just having a semester’s visit with a relative. They still yearn for the familiarity and comfort of their home culture and language.

Yet even those students who have fled desperate circumstances have also left behind at least a fragment of something irreplaceable that they will always yearn for. Poetry and music can sometimes reach students in a way that ordinary texts do not, connecting their prior experiences and knowledge with emotions and memories that make the daunting task of learning a new language and assimilating into a new culture less intimidating, more within their grasp.

The night we read “A Negro Speaks of Rivers,” Joseph lingers after class. He is smiling and wants to talk. “That poem is for me,” he says. “It’s like in Africa. I’ve known rivers, too.” And he tells me about the Nile he knew in Sudan, the homeland he fled as a young child with his family because of war. He tells me of the Atbara River and the Blue Nile in Ethiopia, the land of his refuge where he spent many years. And now he knows the Mississippi here in Baton Rouge, his home today. Joseph talks to me about rivers, but he also talks to me about the poem, how the poet has touched something deep inside him, expressing feelings he had not known how to voice in English. He asks to borrow my book of poems and the CD with the song we all sang together.

As a teacher, nothing excites me more than to see a spark ignite in one of my students, something that shows me the student is making connections that will keep him coming to class for more than just a few weeks. My classes are under the local school district's Adult and Continuing Education program with funding provided by a federal EL/Civics grant for teaching a social studies component and preparation for citizenship along with English literacy. In an open entry, free adult program, it is typical for many more students to enroll than will actually stay for a full semester. Most newcomers to our society want to speak the language, but few realize how hard it will be and that it can take years to become fluent enough to achieve their dreams of getting a good job or perhaps owning a business, entering an institution of higher learning (technical college, community college, or university), or becoming credentialed in the profession they've already trained for in their native country. Students with children want to be able to communicate with their children's teachers and administrators or other people in the community. All will have to deal with "survival skills," like supermarket transactions, health care, housing, banking, local laws, and all those things that are part of daily living. With many students, however, the desire to achieve overall communication skills in addition to basic language fluency is often cancelled out by real life impediments, such as childcare issues, work schedules, or transportation, along with frustration over the amount of time and energy required.

Therefore, I seize the opportunity to keep that light in Joseph's eye. I go to the library and find an audiocassette of Langston Hughes reading his own work. At home Joseph listens to the poet, following with his own voice, matching the cadence, feeling the meaning. He also memorizes the song, humming the tune throughout the day. When Joseph returns to class, still humming, he is in paradise.

Later he writes for me. It's not about rivers or boats, it's about his life as the son of a tribal chieftain in Africa, the significant customs of his culture, his values, his deep spiritual

beliefs. He shows me pictures of the village pastor. He tells me of the atrocities committed against his people in the name of religion. He shares with the class the customs of his people, explaining how all the men go to his father for advice, even in the refugee camp far from home. Although Joseph has lost much, he is not bitter at all, is in fact joyful much of the time. His passion jumps off the page in his writing, making him willing to undergo the tedious process of revision and editing. He doesn't want to merely write a perfect paper for one particular assignment, he wants to be able to express himself coherently in print for the rest of his life.

Joseph tells me his hopes and dreams—to master English, to get a GED, and then to go to college. However, this will be a long road for him, as he received only a sixth-grade education in the refugee camp in Ethiopia. He is on his own here, without family, supporting himself at a minimum wage job, and he is not yet 21.

Although Joseph's circumstances and hopeful attitude are not unusual, his perseverance is less common. Refugees are particularly challenged in struggling to find employment and transportation, both of which are essential in order to survive. These and other issues make regular class attendance difficult and sometimes impossible. Many refugees are unable to break out of a cycle of underemployment and stressed living conditions because they cannot find suitable work, due to inadequate language skills. Not having enough income hinders their ability to buy a reliable car, a necessity for getting to work or to class in a city lacking sufficient public transportation. Sometimes they must work two jobs just to feed and shelter their families. They know they must acquire more than minimal language skills, yet with so many obstacles in the way, it is easy to give up or postpone ESL classes.

The stories of my students' struggles to master English and to become members of our society could fill a book. In my efforts to find connections between "before" and "now," we use many poems and songs. For example, the old song, "Guantanamaro," in Spanish, speaks to my Hispanic students. The lyrics come from a poem by the same name, written by the 19<sup>th</sup> century Cuban

political activist José Martí, a prolific writer whose voice still speaks for oppressed people around the world. As one student told me, “José Martí is for all of us from Spanish speaking countries, even if we do not suffer today.” We play Pete Seeger’s version of that song, with his own inserted translations of key phrases. Even those of us who do not speak Spanish are moved to tears by the power of the lyrics (with minimal translation). The Hispanic students have the opportunity to translate further, teaching us the significance of the memories evoked by their nonverbal, as well as verbal, communication. When we talk about this song, students typically group together to find the English words to explain something that is at the core of their cultural identity. This leads to global classroom discussions, followed by writing, about contemporary human rights issues around the world.

Meanwhile, Joseph continues coming to my class, sometimes walking miles in bad weather or catching rides from supportive people in the community who understand his need to continue learning. His skills are noticeably improved, but not enough to get his GED. Finally, he is able to buy a used car. His relief is short-lived, however, and he tells me he needs to take a second job in order to meet his monthly expenses and to repair and insure this car that takes him to work. I beg him to hold off, to keep coming to class until he has enough English to pass the test for the GED. He agrees but asks, “How can we make this faster? There is still so much I need to learn.” He already spends his lunch break sitting in his car studying, no matter how hot or how cold the weather, and studies many hours at home every night.

I agree to help him outside of class. He begins spending Sunday evenings in my kitchen, discussing vocabulary words and playing out essay themes while I cook. But before we begin, he always says, “Let’s pray first,” and offers an eloquent prayer in perfect English, asking God to bless this time of learning. I am humbled by this reminder of the sanctity of my role and that I am also learning. We continue the discussion over dinner with my

family. My family loves Joseph, and his presence inspires them. We all learn from this experience.

Sometimes my students ask for more information about things that come up in class. Whenever this happens, I try to point them in the right direction, frequently lending them my own materials. When Joseph asks where he can go to learn more, I supply him with books and videos. He goes to the library for even more. He learns to use the computer for Internet research. Joseph is a sponge for information and knowledge, and he shares his excitement with his classmates who work a little harder due to his example.

Martin Luther King Day rolls around, and in class I play excerpts from "I Have a Dream," following with video clips of Martin Luther King, Jr. delivering his most famous speech. Joseph is rapt. Again he sways to the music of the spoken word, not understanding all the geographic or historical references, yet knowing deep in his soul what this is all about. In class I read a notice about local events to commemorate Dr. King's dream and to further the cause of racial understanding. Joseph and a few others are excited to learn that they can participate in any of these activities. We organize a group and go together to the MLK Candlelight March at LSU. When someone begins singing, "We Shall Overcome," Joseph's beautiful tenor is loudest of all. Afterwards at the panel discussion in the Union, Joseph hangs on to every word. He writes about this later, saying, "We all have to help. We must." For Joseph and other students, involvement in community events is a critical component of being a member of society and not merely an observer.

One Sunday afternoon our class takes a field trip to see a movie about Lewis and Clark and their great expedition to explore the Louisiana territory. This is the first time Joseph and two other students from Sudan have ever been to a movie theater, and the surround screen takes their breath away. They identify with the Native Americans in their attempts to communicate with the white men, relying on three-way translations. "That's how it is in



Africa,” Joseph says. “Sometimes you need three people to translate between two tribes or with foreigners.” He tells me later that the movie experience was so real to him that in the river scenes from inside a rapids-tossed boat, he felt as though he would be thrown overboard. His delight is genuine, and he writes at length about the experience.

As time passes, Joseph asks me where he can find out the requirements for working for the UN. “Someday I will go back to Africa,” he tells me. “I want to help my people. Their needs are so great.” Then he adds, “But it’s more than that. So many people have helped me, and it is right for me to give back.”

He follows my suggestion and goes to a reference librarian for help in finding information about the UN. He learns that he will need lots more education to fulfill this dream. He knows this will take a very long time and that he will need a lot of money for college, yet he is not discouraged. In mid-May we adjourn for the summer.

In late July I get a phone call from Joseph. “Vicky,” he begins. “I’ve been calling your home a lot, so I knew you would be back from your travels by now. I think you are very busy, but I really need your help. Can you please help me like before?”

I hesitate. Teachers walk a fine line between their professional and personal lives. We are warned to be cautious for many reasons—to avoid burnout and mutual dependency and a host of other troubles. Joseph is right; I am very busy. I am usually pulled in more directions than I can feasibly manage. I cannot possibly do for every student what I do for Joseph; in fact, can only do for a handful what I do for Joseph. But then, not every student seeks or needs this.

I contemplate Joseph’s request, seeking balance between the reality of his need and my own limitations of time and energy. Yet my experience as a learner and as a teacher has been that when a student finds some kind of connection to the subject, it is rarely through a textbook. More often it is through the arts—poetry, music, drama, or some type of interpersonal relationship. When

this happens, that student suddenly becomes more teachable, the whole world opening up to him, things making sense in ways they never did before. This student will work harder, ultimately soaring on his own in a way that might not otherwise have happened.

In my own life, I have been that student. I have had teachers who became mentors. I have had powerful encounters with poetry and literature in which a line or two has captured me so completely that the words are always close to the surface of my being, lifting me up and making me hold on to my dreams or helping me comprehend things in ways that defy explanation. Lines from James Dickey's "The Bee" thrust me onward when I am exhausted, frustrated, and ready to give up on something that is vitally important, but seemingly impossible. The "dead coaches" shift into the shapes of my present day mentors, the ones who know the heights I can reach, and that I must have encouragement from the sidelines. ". . . *Dead coaches live in the air, son live/ In the ear/ Like fathers and urge and urge. They want you better/ Than you are. When needed, they rise and curse you they scream/ When something must be saved. . . .*"

Conversely, when I am impatient with the slowness of progress and want to force events or results, I hear Sam Fathers from Faulkner's "The Bear," muttering at me, "*We ain't got the dog.*" I am thus reminded that there is a time for everything. I remember the boy in that story who finally gets the right dog, and only then does his time come, yet his confrontation with the long-sought bear does not end as he expected. Remembering those words tells me that when the elements ultimately converge, I'll have "the dog," yet cautions me that my encounter with "the bear" may bring unexpected results. I hang on to this, trusting that the time will come and my dream will reach fruition. All the while, that human connection with someone who serves as a mentor, be it professor, colleague, or friend, is vitally necessary to me.

It sometimes happens that I am the teacher who falls in the path of a student who latches on to something from class that he

embraces and claims as his own, something that beckons me to offer more than I might otherwise have done. I cannot walk away.

Two years ago Joseph heard a poem about a river and it spoke to him; that's where it all started. Now those rivers are calling him back, and his energy, his enthusiasm, his determination, and his perseverance have somehow swept me up in the current with him. I'll make time for this because for now it is part of my life as well as his. We agree to resume the following Sunday. Eventually, Joseph will cross that river. It's going to take a while, but for now he's got help. In time, he'll row his boat ashore, and I will have become a better teacher and perhaps a better person because of my small part in his journey.

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# ***THE FALL FROM GRACE: A PRACTITIONER'S VIEW OF RECOVERY***

**LYNNE VANCE**

**SUMNER HIGH SCHOOL**



The beginning of the year is a sacred time. It is Eden. As the first rays of the sun cast a white light illuminating the earth's subjects, the world looks fresh, moist and new. There is a tender energy about the atmosphere. Hope gently embraces life and the day is filled with possibilities. There is no sin, only a joyous sense of belonging and unconditional acceptance.

One of the things I love most about the beginning of the year is this sacred time. It is a time when my classes are fresh, each student an unknown entity, clean and sinless. I know not the trouble makers, the lazy bones or the zealous "A" seekers. I am not worn down by endless paper loads, administrative duties, or an overwhelming sense of futility. I am filled with hope at the possibilities latent in this school year. My expectations for myself as well as my students are high.

What happens to this Eden as the school year progresses? When do we fall from grace? When do I become a judgmental god

weighing the works of my students against my own standards, instead of benevolent creator content with my students just as they are?

Ironically it was a thirst for knowledge that cast Adam and Eve out of Eden, and it is a thirst for knowledge that will keep my students inside of this classroom Utopia. It is not something that they have done that is forbidden, it is generally something they have not done. As long as a student is trying, he or she will remain in a state of grace within the context of my class. For students to remain just as they are is not acceptable for me. Studying a course is a time for growth. One is expected to be different from the beginning to the end. It is a time for self-discovery, discipline and personal growth. It is a time to read new things, to practice skills and become better at communicating and understanding one another. I am not the same teacher at the beginning of the year as I am the end. I have learned things from my students that I will carry into the next year. I expect the same from my students.

As the creator of the context and atmosphere of my class I ask myself what I can do to meet the needs of each of my students. A friend of mine who is a physician refers to the practice of medicine as both a science and an art. But, she cautions, medicine can only do so much, the rest depends on the patient and the divine. I view the practice of teaching much the same, as a science and an art, and I too believe that much is up to the individual student and circumstances beyond the classroom.

Loosely using the analogy of teacher as physician, I begin to examine my role in the lives of my students. At the beginning of the year to help get a broad picture or a baseline of where my student's writing skills are, I generally assign a diagnostic essay. I look for strengths and weaknesses, listen for voice and strive to find the heartbeat. I begin to ask just who this person is. What does he or she need from me? How can I help them learn?

After diagnostic essays, the basking in the glow of the rays of unconditional acceptance is cut short. Another assignment brings out the surgeon in me. Lifting red pen in hand, I draw blood. My

pen slices their words like a scapula, targeting the disease in the flesh of their words. I do plastic surgery, rearrange, and make suggestions for improvement. Yes, this is old school. I do have peer response groups, and I do use rubrics, but generally when it comes down to it, one on one, they want me to show them the error of their ways. They expect me to help them fix it. Am I turning out well-rounded independent learners? Probably not. The dew has dried, the sun rises higher and the activities of the day begin to feel less sacred, more like toil and strife. Unconditional grades are not an option. Evaluation bursts the bubble of Eden.

Cosmetic surgery is the easiest. The mechanics, while frustrating and tedious, are the mathematical part of the English teacher's equation. They are rules and formulas, we simply apply them. It is the internal injuries that are the most difficult. Where is this student's voice? Where is the passion, the logic, the intellect? Why does this paper filled with words seem void and empty? Deep down we know the answer. This student does not like to write. It is seen as a chore, something they must do to earn a grade to pass your course to move on in their lives. It is something that must be done because one HAS to do it, not because one WANTS to do it.

Diagnosis—apathy. Prescription—write about something one cares about. Make a personal investment. If the effort is not worth the result, then the error must be traced back to the effort. Motivation becomes part of the practitioner's job.

I have tried many strategies to overcome this stagnation and apathy in the writing class. One of the most successful strategies has been the use of “place-based” writing prompts. A “Place-based” writing prompt is simply a prompt centered on things, people, events, places and experiences embedded in the student's own life. They are the expert in this area. They are the only one who knows this information and the only one capable of imparting this information to the rest of the world. Research has shown that much of what is stored in long-term memory has an emotional attachment tied to it. It is this spark of emotion that brings out voice in student writing. Emotion also enhances descriptive writing

because the experience is generally either positively or negatively connotated, thus bringing out tone in student writing. It is generally chronologically developed, thus helping organize and sequence student writing. Having students write about things that are important to them will improve the effort that goes into their writing which will enhance the results.

Another successful strategy I have used is the act of “storytelling.” While most students will complain that they can not write, they have demonstrated that they are capable of telling intricate life stories filled with rich details. I use excerpts from Joel Saltzman’s *If You Can Talk, You Can Write* to remind students of their innate capacity: everyone can tell a story. It is a non-threatening approach to introducing the narrative. I often begin a school year with a “story quilt.” Students create a piece of art to represent an icon of a personal story they want to tell. They come up to the room individually and place their icon next to the others. One by one, as students layer their experiences we create a sense of community and are left with a visual reminder of the glimpse we just shared into each other’s lives. Storytelling is both my strength and weakness as a teacher. I see many “teachable moments” wrapped in story and am known to sometimes share this gift in excess. It is my Achilles heel. A valuable balm if used in moderation. A word of caution to myself and others: just as people will build up immunities to antibiotics, a medicine will lose its power if overused.

Both “place-based” writing and “storytelling” can be used to connect and build community and cultivate a healthy environment in the classroom. Both are tools used to help students grow and strengthen communication skills. It is this healthy garden, an Eden-like environment that we all seek, one free from guilt, pain, resentment, drudgery and conflict.

Unfortunately, I have not found the elixir to maintain this unconditionally accepting atmosphere within the walls of my classroom. Negative vibrations ooze in between the cracks generally about the same time the word “revision” is mentioned

and grades are attached. I may say I don't know why the word "revision" has such negative connotations, but I do. I have experienced that same frustration myself many times as a writer. There is joy in creation, but frustration in falling short of meeting the expectations of others and ourselves. I continue to search for ways to make the revision process more positive. I was amazed to hear broadcast journalist and radio producer of Rural Voices Radio, Deborah Begel, say that she loved the revision part. To her the hard part was in the creation. Once she had something to work with, her job became easier. I know I have told my students similar things, but hearing these words gives me reinforcement. They strengthen my reserves. As I enter the stage of revision with my classes I will remind myself, *the hard part is over, now I have something to work with.*

When it comes to maintaining one's health, it all boils down to diet and exercise. In the classroom, the diet becomes the things we put into our student's minds. Healthy reading nurtures both the mind and the soul. The stories, books, essays and poems and plays that we read and digest give us energy to imagine and recreate our world each day. Just as the body is constantly in a state of regeneration, so is the mind. What students don't realize is that the words and images we take in affect the way we perceive our world. Reading, both prescribed and voluntary, is necessary to sustain a healthy mind.

Writing is exercise. In order to grow stronger it has to be practiced. Writing daily journals, building place-based portfolios, sharing stories are all positive ways to build up strength and stamina to prepare for addressing other modes of writing. It is a fact: the more you write, the more fluent you become, the easier it becomes to write. But writing is still hard. Technical writing, analysis and argumentative modes are not effortlessly generated. They require strategic tools to craft and develop. Just as athletes tune into their physical bodies to prepare strategically to meet their challenges, students must be prepared to meet their challenges. Athletes know the payoff of mundane repetitious weight lifting and



running strengthens their body and disciplines their mind. They know that diet and exercise are essential to their health and strength. Students need to know that reading and writing are the diet and exercise they need to become mentally empowered.

Teachers and physicians are both seen as caretakers of society. While one is concerned with the health and well being of the human body, the other is responsible for helping humans develop cognitive tools to survive and succeed in today's world. However, there is a dichotomy in these comparisons when viewed by society. In the hierarchy of job status and salary in today's society, doctors are ranked very high, while teachers are ranked on the lower end of the economic and status scale. This is a perplexing dilemma to professionals in the teaching realm. Teachers are yoked with the harness of accountability. They become asses carrying the burden of the ills of society. If a student fails to function normally in society, there is a tendency to blame the system. Teachers are part of that system. Yet, we too often feel like victims. We are mandated to prove the excellence of our practice en masse, and are ranked along with the hundreds of our students by performance test scores. This numeric picture does not accurately portray the picture of a teacher's class. Even though we as teachers must march to the beat of the drums of curriculum demands, performance test scores and grade level expectations, we know deep down that as professionals we must ignore these social mandates, look beyond the sea of numbers in accountability scores and find the individual student. That is the genesis of our success or failure.

The return to Eden is an arduous task. I don't know if it is truly my desire at the end of a school year to return my students to Eden. If they felt like they had consumed fruit from the tree of knowledge and knew all that there was to know at the age of 16 or 17, what a bore life would be. It is the desire to learn that I wish to inspire. It is in this desire that one acquires grace.

***About the Author:***

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# ***HEARING VOICES***

## **LISA WATTS**

### **WALKER HIGH SCHOOL**



With only nine weeks left in the school year I realized my students weren't writing and it was all my fault. These were high school seniors who were soon going to be college freshmen, so I didn't have much time left to make amends. In my defense, I thought they were writing. I had a small mountain of papers on my desk as proof that they were writing. I included writing prompts on their tests where I expected them to use examples from the literature we studied to support their work. They wrote literary analyses that required them to focus on character motivation. They created sonnet kits and original sonnets. And while all of those activities suggested that writing was taking place, none of this was what I considered "real" writing. I was looking for writing that was authentic and contained an identifiable voice, but I couldn't find it. More often than not I found writing that was recycled from our class discussions. These made me suspect that my students were only writing what they thought I wanted to hear. In fact, they weren't writing anything that hadn't first been through my own professional clearinghouse. Perhaps I was drowning out their voices.

To squelch this self-criticism I pointed rather smugly to the daily free-writes. This was a writing activity that we observed religiously. Every day a student gave a word or phrase as our writing prompt. I set the timer for ten minutes and we all wrote, going in whatever direction the prompt led us. Students volunteered to share their free-writes with the class, receiving a simple “Thank you for reading” from the rest of us. Wasn’t this an outlet for student creativity? Didn’t I guard this time for my students like a dragon guarding his treasure? Didn’t I tell my students that time spent free-writing was sacred and should be treated with the same respect as church? While all this was true, there was still something missing because I didn’t hear their voices emerging; I didn’t see them embracing writing the way I wanted them to.

And why weren’t they? What was I missing? Yes, we all participated in daily free-writes, but they were writing in ten-minute intervals on a given topic, then putting their composition books away so we could move on to something else. Move onto what? Where did I want them to go, and did I want them to take their writing with them? That’s when it hit me that my students weren’t going to find any real value or joy in writing if I restricted their writing time to ten minutes a day. If writing was only worth ten minutes of a ninety-minute class to me, what was it worth to my students? I was guilty of reducing something as enriching as free-writing to little more than a bell ringer. Small wonder then, that there were no identifiable writers in my class, much less a community of writers.

I was determined to use what little time I had left with my students to find the writers in my class. I was confident they existed. Hadn’t I listened to students share free-writes that were touching, witty, clever? Hadn’t I read tests that contained insightful essay responses? Surely, this collection of seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds had something to say. I just had to figure out how to create the right environment for their voices to be heard.

For me, the most obvious answer was through response groups. I had spent the previous summer as a member of the Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project; consequently, I had first-hand experience with response groups and knew how important mine was in helping me develop my writer's voice. Through my own response group I learned the value of writing in my voice and not trying to adopt someone else's. I wanted to give my students that same opportunity. I wanted to encourage and nurture their voices. I wanted to give them the liberation and intimacy of a smaller audience. I firmly believed this was the best way to preserve the authenticity of their writing.

Once I decided to use response groups to create a community of writers, I needed to answer the question of when to implement them in class. Because teachers are sticklers for schedules and timelines, this could very well have been the deal-breaker. Should I wait for the next grading period? Maybe I should begin this on the first of the month. How about the next full moon? The term was half over. What was I waiting for? Two days later I was ready to introduce Writer's Block (a play on our school's 4X4 block schedule). I used the anthology from my summer with SLWP to create a handout of sample contributions that contained fiction, poetry, and some narrative essays and gave a copy to each student. I pointed to a date on the board about five days away and asked each student to bring an original piece of writing to class. The questions that followed were typical and predictable:

*"How long does it have to be?"*

*"How much is it worth?"*

*"What are we supposed to write?"*

I told them that they could write whatever they wanted, however long they wanted, and for them not to worry about the grade. They looked at each other and then back at me. I could see the wheels turning; they were trying to figure all the angles and identify the catch. Surely there had to be a catch. No length requirement? No

format guidelines? No grading rubric? What was Mrs. Watts trying to pull? I was afraid I was going to lose them before they ever gave themselves a chance to write. I felt myself in danger of falling into the trap of being the dominating teacher; I had just crawled out of that hole and I wasn't going back in without a fight, so I gave them a little speech: "I've given you the handout just to show you that good writing comes in a variety of styles and voices. I'm not trying to be mysterious and vague, but I don't know how long your writing should be because I don't know how much you have to say. I don't know what it's worth to me until I see what it's worth to you. I can't tell you what to write because I don't know what you care about. I can't ask you to be original and then put you in a box with a bunch of rules."

Next I told my students about response groups and how they worked. Using my board as a sheet of paper, I demonstrated Peter Elbow's "plus & question" method of drawing a line down the center of the page and using one side to write comments about phrases, images they liked about a piece of writing and the other side to write questions about the piece. I modeled the process by having them act as my response group for some writing that had gone through my own response group at SLWP. After I read the piece aloud I asked for volunteers to share their responses. After hearing from various students I took up everyone's response sheet. Panic ensued: "You didn't tell us this was for a grade!" I think I surprised them all when I told them, "It's not for a grade. This is for me. I can use your responses the next time I get a chance to work on this. Thanks for your help." I wanted to show them that what they had to write was important, but what they had to say about each other's writing was important too.

The first day of Writer's Block all but two students brought something to share with their group. Since this was a class of 30, I was optimistic. I got them all started simply by saying, "Okay, somebody needs to start reading so the rest of the group can respond." And that was it. Trying to be as unobtrusive as possible, I strolled through the groups of five. At first each group was very

aware of my presence, but soon they didn't even look up when I approached. I kept walking around in case someone needed my expert opinion, but oddly enough no one did. They were, for the most part, engaged in the process. I was puzzled, but this wasn't my first rodeo and I knew better than to question my good fortune, especially when I was experienced enough to know that once the novelty wore off I'd be necessary again. I would have to cajole some and browbeat others into bringing new pieces for the next Writer's Block. Imagine my surprise when that didn't happen.

The next Writer's Block was as much a success as the first. This time everyone brought something to read. Some students brought new pieces, while others brought revised pieces to share with their group. As I walked around the room I heard comments like, "Tell me more about. . . ." or "I like the way you said. . . ." I didn't just walk around the room; I glided. There was real energy in my class that I had not felt during other "writing assignments." My students weren't writing to fulfill a requirement of mine. They were writing because they had something to say, to each other and for themselves. They weren't just participating in a cooperative group activity; they were members of a writing community. They began asking if they could meet with their group if we had some time left over from the day's lesson. I soon learned that I could make whatever adjustments necessary to accommodate fluctuations in the daily schedule, but I could not tamper with Writer's Block. It had become the sacred cow that I originally intended free-writing would be.

And speaking of free-writing, something wonderful happened there as a result of Writer's Block. Students became more imaginative with their topic selection, which in the past had been numbingly predictable based on the school calendar: Valentine's Day, Homecoming, Mardi Gras. Suddenly those events were being given a new twist. Instead of Prom, the topic was Bullet-Proof Prom Dress. New life had been breathed into free-writing, transforming it from a bell-ringer to a valued time for writing, a small gift we gave each other every day.

At the end of the term I asked my students to select one of their pieces and submit it to me, along with the comments they had received on it from their response group. I had kept my hands off their work for the entire duration of five Writer's Block sessions, and I had stood it as long as I could. I didn't intend to grade it the way I would an essay, but I did want to read what they had written. I wanted to hear their voices, and what I heard gratified me, even when it didn't thrill me. Many of the females in the class wrote poetry about broken hearts and how their men "done them wrong," and others wrote clichéd stories about parties and fatal accidents. But there was the technical essay from Tosha about the Veri-Chip and its similarities to a world run by Big Brother, while Ashton wrote an amusing tale of her frantic escape from her job at a day-care:

*As soon as the door was opened wide enough for Ashton to see the hallway to freedom, she tossed the screaming child she was holding to Ashley. Ashton sprinted out the door, down the hall, and out of the entrance to the building.*

The males in the class were the real surprise, especially those who didn't consider themselves artistic or imaginative. In Aaron's piece about his future he writes:

*I feel as though I am on a ship sailing down a river. Sometimes the current becomes swift and navigation can seem difficult. At other times the river becomes shallow and stagnant, and I nearly forget about navigation altogether. Yet, regardless of the conditions of the river, I still have a ship to sail. I am the captain and a captain never abandons his ship.*



David, class valedictorian and academically devoted to math and science, wrote a narrative about his days of celebrity during recess at elementary school:

*Thirty young pupils sat anxiously waiting for the sound, the sound of freedom. That moment they had been waiting for, and the time when all could be unleashed. When the children could finally do what they wanted. For some it was a time for fun and games, but for others like myself, it was more like a business. A time when one had to protect something. Something that was earned, and that I would not yield without a fight. Nothing tests a man's soul like a foot race.*

Did all of my students experience an epiphany and vow to change their college majors to writing curriculums? Would there be a shortage of accountants and engineers? Of course not. What they did find was value in writing down their thoughts. Some of them were surprised to discover a creative vein, and others said they never knew that writing could relax them, relieve stress, help them sort out their feelings. Certainly there were some who looked at Writer's Block as an opportunity to skate by, but most of the students in the class put forth a genuine effort to write something they could be proud of. I think of Chad, who wrote a poem about setting a new personal best in track. He misspelled the title and several other words were used incorrectly, but it was a poem about perseverance and how it may not lead to fame but it can lead to personal triumph. In one of his final free-writing entries Chad said that he never knew he had anything to say, and that he planned to continue to keep a journal as a way to get through tough days in college.

I had been searching for authentic writing, straining to hear my students' voices. In the end, I discovered that all I really needed to do was give them the opportunity, get out of the way, and listen. The voices were not all lyrical and harmonious, but the

sounds their words created were beautiful, perhaps because these voices had faces like Ashton's, Aaron's, Tosha's, David's, Chad's. . . .

***About the Author:***

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## ***FLYING FISH***

**ROBERT WEATHERSBY**

**SOUTHEASTERN LOUISIANA UNIVERSITY**

What inspires writers? Where does inspiration originate? Is it outer stimulus connecting with inner being? We speak and write and read about being inspired by art, music, literature, performance,



and a plethora of all kinds of external stimuli. But no inspiration can occur apart from the connection between the stimuli and our inner being. The single Hebrew word *lahv* best embraces our inner existence in its wholeness—no dividing lines isolating heart from mind from will. *Lahv* encompasses all three simultaneously.

A single whispered word emerged from the depths and heights and middle of my inner being when I first stood transfixed before “Flying Fish” in the artist’s studio. The present-day artist captured exceedingly well the several black lined, pale blue and white with sienna accent bodied fish leaping to fin-wing flight in and over pale green white-capped waters—“schooling.”

Two other paintings preceded my providentially gazing into “Flying Fish.” In contrast to my attraction to color, content, and mystery of this particular painting, I had just turned away from the artist’s rendition (an oil on what looked like parchment-colored marble) of a medieval Italian family portrait but focusing only on the wife’s eyes, selfish and somewhat mean, even according to the

blurb on the wall. The printed history of the original painting along with her biography revealed a sad life ending with illness—definitely not a painting to my taste.

Then I had turned toward the simple two-stroke gold cross, noticeably smaller than the sad-eyes portrait. The gold against the gray granite (like light shining in darkness) reaffirmed my own conviction about what really happened on a simple wooden cross long ago just outside Jerusalem.

Finally, my roving eyes led me to the swirling “Flying Fish,” first on what seemed to be their ancient fragmented tile and then on numbered black-bordered paper copies of the original. I felt vibrant life thrust from wind-tossed waves to brief soaring flight in balmy Mediterranean air, their schooling bursting from watery underworld into sun-bright airy sphere. What mysteries might their school impart?

After several minutes of study, I turned and walked to where their artist worked with sweat and concentration. When I asked him about his travel and study, the copyist corrected my assumption about journeys while assuring me of the scope and content of his personal library. I complimented his skill demonstrated in “Flying Fish.” When I inquired about that gold cross, I immediately sensed his mild contempt for what he believed to be a mere tourist item, perhaps keeping only bread and butter on his table. What one person values “precious,” another appreciates only for its utility.

About a week later, the image and colors and lines of flying fish swam fast and flew fantastic in my mind’s eye while reconstructing the particulars of my arrival in the Quarter and my cataloguing my time and work in *Vieux Carre*. I remarkably rediscovered in my ongoing writing the initial impact of “schooling” under watchful eyes of “Flying Fish.” I finished my first draft after visiting my dictionary and reading the roots of symbol and meaning:

- (a) “schooling”—*pres. part. of tr.v.* 1. instructing; educating. 2. training; disciplining.
- (b) “school2”—*n.* A large group of aquatic animals, esp. fish, swimming together; shoal. —*intr.v.* To swim in or form into a school.
- (c) “schooling”—*n.* 1. Formal instruction or training given at school. 2. Training or instruction obtained through experience or exposure.

The turning point in the writing process had come when I purposefully consulted the dictionary—doing the research, but only while boldly sprinting for the finish line and capturing images in metaphors for “Flying Fish.” The definitions simply underlined the reality of our “schooling” within our profession—teachers of writing. When revising, I both added and subtracted materials pertinent and extraneous, while polishing the overall unity along the way. If writers understand and practice real freedom within revision, audiences prosper.

I discovered within these definitions our being flying fish, teachers of writing, schooling/ writing together, especially as we educate and discipline one another, then braving the strong currents of our profession, and finally bringing formal instruction and training into careful alignment with shared experience and exposure. We must carry that same balance home to our writers in classrooms.

Our being inspired and inspiring others invite flights above our circumstances to occur singly and collectively (I can visualize seven “Flying Fish” in various stages of airborne freedom). We as writers reach the point beyond sluggish resistance of mind (the dense resisting water) and take flight where revelation always outstrips pensive preoccupation, that exhilarating flight of unhindered creativity like gleaming fish lifting high in wind-blown music of the spheres.

Writers manage singly and at times collectively (while “schooling”) to wing above waters of ordinary thought to reach

soul-electrifying shocks of creativity as our hands and pens struggle to keep pace despite or because of some larger fish chomping with grave intent at our tales. Within my own perception, experience, writing, and revision, “Flying Fish” offers an intriguing yet limited perspective on inspiration—holistic engagement of heart, mind, and will, so eloquently expressed in the Hebrew *lahv*—swinging wide the doors to eternal realms.

***About the Author:***

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***ON JOY IN WRITING—I DANCE IN  
FIRES,  
A FOOL TO PASSION, A SLAVE TO  
GRACE . . .***

***I DANCE***

**JEFF WIEMELT**

**SOUTHEASTERN LOUISIANA UNIVERSITY**

*I take my seat again among broken pavements and moss-draped stones of walls left crumbling by care's neglect. I watch as cautious sparrows, protectors of this quiet space, flit out from guarded greenery to join me at my table, bring soft choruses of nature's song to welcome my return. I let the old mood enfold me, carry me back to the warm comforts of familiar themes. My fingers tap in perfect time to songs of grace and passion. I write. I dance. . . .*



I've been working on this piece a long time, really, my thinking about *affect* in writing and in teaching. I've been at it about a year, now, off and on. It's come uneasily for the most part, all fits and starts, mostly the product of my occasional Writing Project meetings and

French Quarter writing marathons, like the one I'm at today. And it's come mostly with the cold sweat and anger and disappointment of feeling so utterly incapable of finding the words I wanted, the patterns and movement of ideas I've grown almost desperate to capture and hold. But one thing's come easily to me over this time, carried me even from the very beginning: the next-breath certainty that my writing—our writing—is all about our deepest emotions of desire and of joy. Or it should be. Needs to be. *Screams* to be, if we'll only hear.

I've written a good bit this past year about *desire* in writing. And I've felt gratified to understand that desire has driven me to *this* writing today, sustained me, as an unrelenting urge to move and shake the words free from the jealous hold of my dark insecurities. I've found a writer's sacred honesty in my desire, let it open me up to stink and bleed and pulse and heal and touch and be touched. And I've learned that my desire is infectious. It's laid hard upon others at times, my friends, my partners, opened them up to fits of fevered impulse, and healed them in the good graces of their own writers' desires.

And I've written much about the *determination* and the *trust* and the *diligence* and the *poetry* and the *human relationships* of our writing—all those qualities that bend in willing servitude before the illuminated altars of our desire.

But what about the *joy*? I've been saying that writing—good writing, at least, real writing—follows its desires to find the joys of a writer's accomplishment. But what *about* the joy? For this I've waited, cautious, afraid perhaps that my thoughts were only dreams, happy fictions I've built to lure and seduce my friends and readers and partners to open a space and give me leave to drivel in the excess of words lost in knee-deep emotion—empty words, maybe, or a resonance of echoes against the bare walls of a space grown too large to contain. Or perhaps a more base accomplishment still—some adolescent's wet dream of unknown pleasures, left to drip as something secret and forbidden from the sterile pressed sheets of my more austere piety of intellect.



Yet here I sit, alone in the crowd of a French Quarter coffee house, a half-second or less away from bursting apart in screams of self-affirmation. Screams of joy and delight and adolescent ecstasies too new and urgent to restrain. I write with the joy of a writer's desire, feel the pulse of my heartbeat in the press of each keystroke.

A brief history of my delight. . . .

One year ago. It's 5 a.m. In a few hours I'll arrive for my first Writing Project meeting. Richard, our project Director, wants us to bring a piece of writing to introduce ourselves. I don't have it. For my whole life I haven't had it. But no time to plan or think or cut and paste anything anyone might want to hear. And I'm *desperate*. This feels like a last chance, a gasping suck of air before I sink and drown in a dirty pool of mundane intentionality. I want to write *importantly*, about *important things*. So I write. Just write. But I write with a desire born of desperation. And I write about that desire, write about it from deep within. I write honestly in words that come like music to me, and I trust the harmonies of heart and sound. That day I read, desirous and desperate.

*. . . [A]nd I feel desire now. . . . I feel it move my hand across the keyboard as I write these words, compelling me. I desire to shout these words I'm writing—no whispered secrets here—strip myself bare for the readers in my group, dance for them, and I bless my partners for this gift they've given. From the grace of their collective will.*

I leave my partners to cry. And I find my first taste of a writer's joy in the salt of their tears.

I continue to write, and learn to nurture those desires that found me, fill myself with the music that carries desire's soft words. I lose myself in the unknown spaces the words are opening before me, then filling up again with new private and shared significances. I follow their echoes to ever deeper resonances of

want and fulfillment. I've never written like this, so *unself-conscious* and trusting in the music of the words. My Writing Project partners hear it too, and dance and sing along to build a chorus that compels me on. Our voices begin to deafen old whispers of doubt and insecurity. Our song becomes an Ode to Joy, triumphant, affirming, thunderous.

I write about the transformative power of our relationships, the movement from intellect to affect in my own writing with this group, who become like muses to deepen my delight:

*I no longer write to my group. I write through them, and in them. These aren't my partners anymore; for me, our relationship is something much closer, more intimate. I've joined with them, and they with me. My writing is now their writing, my voice their voice. . . . My sweet muses. I write these words for you. Desirous. Determined. With Discipline. In Delight. Your gift to me. My gift for you.*

More than ever for me, my writing burns with the spark of human relationships, and I dance in a fire that won't consume.

But that summer's end brings a loss of joy. Our Project ends, and we leave each other to feel our ways through empty chambers, darkened caverns of unsettling silence and isolation. Alone, I lose the music of my words, lose the words themselves, to remember only, like some wasted addict's back-alley regrets. And I learn that my writer's joy is so dearly bought, not mine alone but a collective purchase. It's a song of my desire, but one sung through the straining voices of my chorus of partners, *my voice through their voices*. And I wonder if they've still the strength left to sing for themselves.

A quiet year of disappointment and neglect. I do not write. Nor dance nor sing.

But now a new Project commences, and a new writing marathon brings me back to this sacred writer's space I inhabit.

The chorus of voices resumes. New cadences fill the space around me, bring new life to old motifs. I write again in desire's good grace, at once the same yet changed, as familiarity and warm comforts transform and deepen with new relationships. Hot fires renew, and my dance quickens. I bow to the grace that commands me, and let my passions smile again.

I've written a lot this past year about my writing, my own writing students, and my near-despair at what we sometimes do to these kids in the unholy name of "teaching." And I think I understand now the utter simplicity of what's really needed, most important. My students need what I need, nothing more. Nor less. We all need the assured comforts of a safer space to write and share. An air of trust moved gently by the soft warm breaths of our desires. The mutual will to guide those desires through committed acts of diligence and determination. And an unconditional care for the human relationships that shape our writing, find voice in the poetry of our words. To write is just a dance we lead, a romantic turn in time. It's a simple song of affect, or some grander Ode to Joy. We owe these kids their chance to dance and sing, to light the flames of their desire and burn with the sacred joys of a writer's rich fulfillment.

***About the Author:***

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***ALEMBICS  
OF  
PERSONAL EXPERIENCE***

***(FROM OUR FRENCH QUARTER  
WRITING MARATHON)***



**ANNA, WAITING**  
**TRACY AMOND**  
**WALKER HIGH SCHOOL**  
**SOUTHEASTERN LOUISIANA UNIVERSITY**



Anna is in Jackson Square past her bedtime. She has big round eyes and angelic blonde curls and tells me straight up that Draco is not her father.

“He’s not my dad. I don’t have one.”

Draco’s table is elaborately furnished: black and white cloth, runes, candles, hunks of crystal, and, of course, his well-worn cards. He is insincere and seems bored with his own invention of himself. I chose him from among the other readers for the anger I saw in him earlier, as girls from a church youth group stole his potential customers with their “Free Psalm Reading” table. He was angry when I snapped a picture of George sitting at the table while a teenage girl read the Psalm he chose and wrote down his prayer requests. I smiled over at Draco.

“Quite misleading, isn’t it,” he says.

“Maybe so, but clever, I think,” I shoot back. He doesn’t laugh. He glares at me and then at the girl.

I tell him I’ll be back later for a reading and he rolls his eyes. “I promise,” I say. He glares.

I return after dinner that evening and he is surprised that I have kept my promise. Jackson Square is not crowded; most of the

tourists are at supper or in bars. The river provides a slight breeze, and St. Louis Cathedral frowns down upon those of us dabbling in the darker side of mysticism.

Draco introduces me to Anna and says that she is his apprentice, Lady Gaseous. She collapses in great peals of laughter, in between which she confesses, “I farted on him!”

“Did you really?”

“I did! He threw me over his shoulder and I farted right in his face.”

I look to Draco, who nods solemnly. He tells me to cut the cards three times and place my stack of choice on top. He begins turning them over, looks hard at me for a moment, then instructs Anna to sprinkle a red, sandy substance around the perimeter to cleanse the negative forces. From the way he looks at me, I guess I am the negative force.

Anna takes her apprenticeship seriously, sprinkling the red substance, then walking the circle counter-clockwise. Then the child in her takes over, and she walks faster and faster until she is running around the table and Draco says, “Anna, hon, chill.” I assure him that she’s not bothering me. She is the real story here, not the angry tarot card reader who cannot muster up the energy to dazzle me with his powers or at least his ability to hustle a country girl out of twenty bucks. At first I think he is coy or trying to act cool, but then I realize that he is genuinely indifferent—to the cards, to me, and especially himself.

“Where’s your mama?” I ask Anna.

“Working.”

“Where?” I press. Draco turns over more cards.

“In the Quarter,” he answers for her.

“It’s not what you think,” she says quickly.

“How old do you think she is?” Draco asks. Anna looks straight into my eyes, as though she’s sending me the answer.

Without hesitation I say, “Nine.”

“Exactly,” says Draco, placing a smooth pink stone on three cards he has just dealt.

Anna beams at me. “You’re quite perceptive,” she says.

“You’re quite intelligent.”

“Yes, I am,” she confirms.

Draco loses a layer of indifference long enough to remember that his payment (or donation, he calls it) is at stake and re-engages me with tales of how I’ll be traveling soon unexpectedly and then moving to that place. How a colleague is going to give me a large sum of money, and how I’ll change jobs due to sexual harassment.

I feign interest in these predictions as Anna sneaks away weaving rapidly among the row of tables like a mouse in a maze. Draco tells me I’m affectionate and indecisive.

When he’s done and I’ve donated more than I know I should, Anna produces two large red plastic cups. “Where’s the penny?” she asks and stares deeply into my eyes. Without breaking our gaze, I point to the left cup.

“This one.”

She dumps the penny out, looks at me mysteriously and says, “You’re extremely focused.”

Draco takes the cups from her. “My turn,” he says, and Anna turns her back to him. He puts the penny in the left cup. “Now,” he says. Anna turns to face the cups, staring solemnly between Draco’s eyes.

After a long pause, she points silently to the right-hand cup. Draco turns it over, empty, and Anna stomps her foot. “Do it again,” she commands, and turns her back.

Draco looks at me, rolling his eyes but halfway smiling. He puts the penny back in the left cup and tells Anna to turn around. She stares between his eyes again, longer this time.

“She’s really trying,” I say.

“She’s trying too hard,” he says, as though there really is a trick to knowing which cup the penny is in.

Anna chooses the right-hand cup again, and when she discovers she’s wrong, storms off before returning for one more try. This time Draco winks at me and hides the penny under a card on the table, holding up two empty cups for Anna, who repeats her

routine of gazing into Draco's forehead. She chooses the left-hand cup, and when Draco shows her that it's empty, she grabs the other cup out of his hand, seeming to know that he cheated her. She throws the cups at him and flops down into her chair, pouting.

I reach into my backpack and hand her a dollar.

"For me?" She's immediately back to her exuberant self.

"You're an excellent apprentice," I say.

She looks over her shoulder at the iron gate surrounding the park. "Come with me," she commands, and takes me to the steps. She looks around, then points down to a nickel that I can see is glued to the step.

"Pick up this nickel," she says.

I bend down and pretend to struggle at removing it. "It's stuck. I can't move it."

Anna looks immediately dejected. "You are not the chosen one."

"No, I guess I'm not." I am truly sorry that I can't pick up the coin for this little child of the Square.

"Don't worry," she assures me. "One day he will come. He will come and release this coin." She is suddenly animated. "I will hold a crystal ball and he will gaze into it, and when he does I will have all of his power and I will be taken up," and she raises her arms to the hot night sky, her fingers dancing wildly, her eyes shining like twin flames.

I bid her goodnight and leave Anna there on the steps, staring at a nickel filled with hope.

***About the Author:***

*See p. 8.*



***AN ALEMBIC OF ONE WRITER'S  
MARATHON WRITING***  
**GEORGE DORRILL**  
**SOUTHEASTERN LOUISIANA UNIVERSITY**

Melanie Plesh, in the introductory session of the SLWP 2004 Advanced Institute New Orleans Writing Marathon, gave us the word “alembic” as a prompt for our first writing. An alembic is an apparatus for distilling, and by extension the word can mean something used for distilling. For example, my friend Paul O’Herron once wrote a book entitled *An Alembic of Philosophy*. In the introduction he wrote this: “This work introduces philosophy by distilling six items and some fundamental distinctions or ‘tools’ in its alembic.” In *this* work, I want to distill my writing process during writing marathons, particularly this marathon, focusing on one particular genre of writing, one I call the “read-around piece.”

Last year, in the book *Voices from the New Orleans Writing Marathon*, I published a piece called “My Fourth New Orleans Writing Marathon.” In it I included all of my marathon writing, plus a narrative of what went on before and after the writing. It ended up being twelve pages long. I don’t propose to do that again. Instead of discussing what I write, I want to discuss how I write, since at the end of this marathon and the writing we did on the following day, I was starting to have some insights about how I go about writing during a marathon. The other reason I decided to do this was that the only other thing I could think of to produce as a piece of marathon writing was a collection of my bathroom pieces, which didn’t seem to be a particularly edifying choice.

So here is my analysis of what I do at writing marathons. In the morning, starting off, I find myself with a small group, usually of my friends, usually at a coffee shop. The first writing is usually desultory, just observation, commenting on and describing the surroundings, the other people, the music. Sometimes that triggers memories, which I write down. I don't feel any particular need to write anything "good." It's like warming up, like a writing exercise. You can find examples of this kind of writing in my piece from last year.

After we have our first reading, my writing tends to respond to what others have written, and tends to be written with the others in the group as my primary audience. Something in their writing may bring up a related memory, or I may continue to write about the surroundings. The more we write, the better the writing seems to get. I particularly like to go to a place where there is fast music playing. I try to write while keeping up with the music, and this sometimes achieves some of the loss of self-consciousness that Natalie Goldberg talks about in her "Writing Marathons" essay.

A particularly good place for me to do this is at Molly's at the Market. In Richard Louth's "The New Orleans Writing Marathon" article published in *The Quarterly*, the excerpt he quotes from my writing comes from my writing about music at Molly's. In last year's Advanced Institute New Orleans Writing Marathon, the piece I read at the first read-around came from writing to music at Molly's. At this year's first New Orleans Writing Marathon, I put \$5 in the jukebox so that I would have plenty of music to write to.

There's another particularity about writing at Molly's, and a paradox. I tend to write by myself there. Others like the window seat, but I like to sit at the first table inside the door. It's directly under the fan, so it's cool, and I can look through the door to the outside, but outsiders can't see inside, and I can sit there alone. The last is important, and is the paradox. I find that I do better writing when I am by myself. That may be because writing is essentially a solitary act. It may be because I'm not confronted

directly with the group I'm a part of, feeling that I have to write for them particularly. I don't know: it just seems that my best writing comes from that circumstance. I like it when we get back together and read to each other and talk and socialize and eat and drink together, but when I actually write, I like to be by myself. The conundrum is, when I am by myself, I don't write: I need the support of others writing around me to get myself to write.

And this leads to the focus of this work, the read-around piece. I usually like to try to have a piece for reading at each read-around. Often, I need to write a piece particularly for the read-around, since nothing I have written so far that day seems especially suitable. It often seems to be the case that my writing gets better as the day goes on, so my best piece of writing is the one done directly before the read-around. For this piece of writing, I like to go off and be by myself. I usually try to write something humorous, because many of the pieces read at the read-around are very serious, and I believe a humorous piece offers a welcome change of tone. Also, if I write something serious, I often end up crying while I read it, and this is embarrassing to me. I also write with the particular audience of the read-around in mind, making jokes that would be understood by most of those there. I try to have a really strong ending. A strong ending can make up for many faults in the piece. At this last marathon, I wrote my first read-around piece sitting at the Carousel Bar by myself, while Tracy and Lisa were in the bathroom. It wasn't overall a humorous piece, but it did have touches of humor in it, like "bird shit" and "axillary floss." Mostly, it was a rip-off of Lisa's story about listening to Dixieland jazz in France. It ended with a little prayer, as often my writing tends to do.

My read-around piece for the marathon's second day was written at the Envie Coffee Shop, the place where we had started off that morning. The riverfront street car had an advertisement saying you could get a free coffee at the Envie by asking for the Streetcar Special, and I couldn't pass that up. I was by myself, our group having split up after descending from the street car, and it

was an hour before the read-around. I knew what I wanted to write about, the encounter with the film crew, because I had only been able to write down hurried notes and scraps of conversation while the event was unfolding. I knew others would be writing about the event as well, and I wanted to get my version in first. I am including the piece in an appendix, because I want to include some actual marathon writing in this marathon essay, rather than it being completely writing about writing. Besides, it will make this essay longer, which in the academic world is usually better.

The final read-around piece is probably the most important. Everybody is exhausted, the emotional level is very high, and some excellent writing gets read at the final session. So there's a lot of pressure to have something good to read. Last year, at the Summer Institute New Orleans Marathon, I spent the final morning writing with Jeff Wiemelt in the courtyard of the La Marquise coffee shop.



That place is special to me. At my first New Orleans Writing Marathon, in 2001, I was in a group with Trish Benit, Jeri Bankston, and Sarah Larsen. Our first writing stop was at the St. Louis Cathedral. We couldn't read there, so we were looking for a nearby coffee shop. Trish was familiar with La Marquise and suggested we go there, since it was only a half block up Chartres. We got our coffee and croissants, and went to the little courtyard in the rear. We were alone there, and it was like a little Eden. After we had eaten and drunk, we read our first writing. All the women had strong pieces, and Sarah's was particularly strong. We wrote in that courtyard, and Trish took pictures, and we spent the whole morning there. Ever since then, La Marquise has been a magic place for me, and I try always to return. So there we were, Jeff and I, that last morning of last year's Summer Institute marathon. He sat in one corner; I sat across from him. We were together, but each of us was alone. And

it turned out that each of us wrote passages that we would later read in the final read-around. This brings me to another paradox: so far, I have been talking about the composed read-around piece. But what I wrote that morning was not composed with the read-around in mind: I was just writing. And what I wrote turned out to be probably my strongest read-around piece. Unfortunately, it was so strong emotionally that I had a very hard time reading it at the read-around—I got choked up and teary. I probably should have realized that I would, since I was tearing while I was writing it. Because crying embarrasses me, that is probably why I have retreated to the composed humorous read-around piece. There must have been something in the air that morning, because what Jeff was writing turned out to be one of the most powerful pieces read at the final read-around. I encourage you to read it. It's in his "A History in a Moment," included in the 2003 Summer Institute anthology, *Out of the Bucket*.

But to show you how shameless I am, when I came up blank for a final read-around piece for the Advanced Institute marathon two weeks later, my "bad" marathon, rather than keeping silent I went back to that emotional piece and read it again, knowing that only Richard, Melanie, and Mary Koepp would be in on my dirty little secret. I also knew it would be recorded, but it didn't show up on the marathon radio show. You can read it in my article in the *Voices from the New Orleans Writing Marathon* anthology.

In an earlier draft of this essay, I had gone on to describe the writing of my final read-around piece for this year's Advanced Institute marathon, the La Madeleine bathroom rant. It was a funny piece, but there was nothing there to add insight into how I wrote during writing marathons. However, something did happen after that marathon that did provide me with additional insight, and I want to conclude my essay with describing it.

On the Tuesday of the week following the marathon, I was asked to lead a group of young writers for the Downtown Hammond Writing Marathon, as part of the SLWP Young Writers' Camp. The group I led consisted of four young ladies—Lana,

Emily, Christina, and Michelle. Lana and Emily were in the fourteen–fifteen-year-old age range, and Christina and Michelle were about ten or eleven, I think. We went to three places—Garrison’s, Bayou Booksellers, and the library. We wrote at each place. Michelle was complaining that her writing sounded like an advertisement for each place. When we got back to the Levy building and were waiting for the other groups to get back and finish eating lunch, I noticed that Michelle was writing furiously. When lunch was finished and the read-around started, Michelle read the piece she had just finished writing. What she had written was the story of her marathon, using what she had written earlier as raw material. I was very impressed and realized I wasn’t the only one who wrote read-around pieces. I’m not saying that Michelle had the intention of writing a read-around piece—it was she who told me that she was writing the story of her marathon. Instead, what I think I’m saying, like Natalie Goldberg, is that the writing is cumulative, and that it takes a lot of what may be crappy writing for what may be better writing to emerge, and that even that is not a hard-and-fast rule—lightning may strike any time. I realize none of this may be exactly earth-shattering, but the writing of this essay has given me a chance to reflect a bit on my own writing and thinking processes, and maybe even distill a little of that experience. Wine is fine, but there’s nothing like a glass of brandy.

## Appendix

*“Starting here, what do you want to remember?”*  
*A quiet afternoon in Algiers. A different atmosphere entirely, like a small town in the 50s. A little triangular memorial park in the middle of the town. Facing the park, the Holy Name of Mary Catholic Church. On the lawn in front of the church, a bizarre sight: four men—two sitting or kneeling behind a low camera; a third, holding a sun-blocking apparatus; the fourth, a big*

man with a Frank Zappa t-shirt and head phones, throwing a giant set of keys into the air over and over. On the sidewalk, a New Orleans policeman, looking a little bit like Wynton Marsalis, is providing security. Lola, Jane, and Tammy, being bolder than Richard and George, walk across the street, to find out what in hell exactly is going on. Richard and George remain on the steps of the closed coffee shop, the Shack, that they had been looking for after their lunch at the Dry Dock. The ladies strike up a conversation with the policeman. After a very long while, the policeman gets in the patrol car, reverses up the one-way street, and parks in front of Richard and George. They think he has come to arrest them. No, he is providing protection for the camera crew, who are now setting up in the middle of the street in front of Richard and George. The director, a no-nonsense professional in gray pants and a Hawaiian shirt, calls out, "Our extra hasn't taken off in the van, has she?" The Frank Zappa t-shirt man, evidently an assistant producer or a production assistant, speaks into his headset, and a white van appears. Two young ladies in tank tops and blue jeans and a hunky young man alight from the van. The director sends the girls off to change their tops—no whites, no logos, directs the P.A.—but unfortunately their car is too far away for this operation to be observed. Tammy and Lola fill Richard and George in: they are filming a Disney TV movie, called "The Keys to his Heart," set to appear in the fall. A young man is hit on the head by a set of keys, and romantic complications ensue. Elizabeth and Darren, the sub-extras, go off together a half block down the sidewalk in front of the part, and Laura, the extra, waits in front of the writers. She's a Loyola student, and is not new to the extra game—extras are not union, speak no lines,

*and do no acting. She was in another Disney TV-film, "The Brook Allison Story," directed by Christopher Reeves. Tammy asks about Darren. "He is an LSU graduate and also a stuntman," Laura says. The director is ready. The PA calls out, "Background Action!" Darren and Elizabeth start walking up the street. The director cues Laura. She starts crossing the street. The PA had previously told her, "This is a Disney movie. Look both ways before crossing the street." The couple passes Laura in the middle of the street, and she continues down the street. The director asks them to do it again. Meanwhile, the bells of the Holy Name of Mary Catholic Church are chiming "Queen of the May" and "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee." At a break in the action the PA looks over to the writers, most of whom are furiously scribbling [Lola had been schmoozing the policeman all the while] and asks, "What are you writing? Are you from the local paper?"*

*One of them answers, "No, we're universal writers."*

*The PA, perhaps mishearing, then asks, "Are you from the University?"*

*The answer comes back, "No, we cover the universe."*

*The director is satisfied with the second take, the crew starts setting up for another shot, and the writers head back to the ferry taking them to the east bank. A quiet afternoon in Algiers.*

**About the Author:**

*See p. 21.*

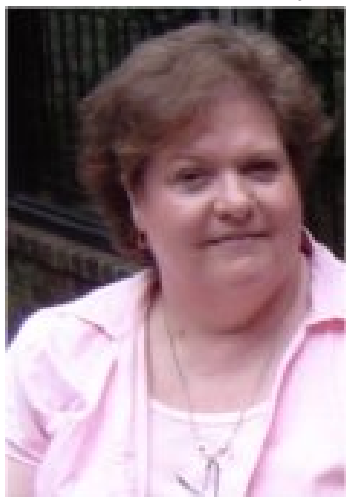


## ***MY LIFE THREAD***

### **JERI GUNULFSEN**

### **BOGALUSA HIGH SCHOOL**

I have hung by this thread before—this thread, this fine line. I have heard about this thread, this fine line, that separates sanity from insanity, good from bad, life from death. I tried to hang on to keep from getting lost, but I did get lost. I lost my way in the world. I tried to face my happy, homemaker self as a divorced young woman. Not only was I divorced, but I was the mother of four,



young children, and I had no one to help. You see, I always pretended to be so strong, and I guess I did a good job because no one came to help. I was going through life totally unaware like one of those actors in the old-time zombie movies—but I was not playing the part; it was real. I was lost and perhaps on the verge of insanity, dangling on that fine thread. It seemed that the only way back to sanity was to back track and rewind that thread that hung there alone, hoping that it would not be like a yoyo—up and down and up and down. Life, I guess, is just that way—good and bad and good and bad. I wondered if I had broken only my thread or did I go about breaking those of everyone around me? Would I continue to break threads so I would create a hole that could never be patched?

The thread that runs through my life was frayed so that the one piece divided into many ragged ends. I feared the thread would break. I was lonely and searching for someone or something

without even knowing who or what, and I encountered problems with a lack of money as I tried to raise four children on a teacher's salary. I got closer to the break every time the electricity was turned off or the phone was dead and our callers heard we "were temporarily disconnected." There were the pills to go to sleep, and the pills to calm the nerves. The last day of the writing workshop in the summer of 1995, I learned my twenty-year-old daughter had thyroid cancer. Another time I searched for and could not find my youngest daughter. I was in a panic. I found her in an emergency room in Baton Rouge—my "sweet Melissa," my drug addict child had overdosed on purpose. I could not help but wonder if I had helped to make her life so bad that she could not face her future. I felt abandoned, and I asked God what I had ever done to make him hate me so much. All these incidents frayed my thread and made it weaker until it finally broke. This time friends and family came to my rescue, and each brought his thread and knotted it to mine. With their help my thread was no longer weak and alone; it had begun to be stronger.

Learning to be a knitted thread has been very difficult for me. I guess I wanted to be a thread on her own—dangling free but still attached at some point. Then I just broke. And being reattached was difficult. It required many hours of being pulled in all directions and knotted both physically and mentally. It involved therapy which was horrendous for me because I keep everything to me. I had to learn new ways to manage and how to be there for my children. I had to drive three nights a week for two months to Baton Rouge to be a part of Melissa's way out of addiction. Often times I did not know where I would end up. Other times I was afraid I did know.

Today, I am a piece of a cloth that has been sewn with love and care through the help of others. The threads of my life have all come together—perhaps through destiny, or God, or whatever because it was meant to be. And my little patch of threads is constantly joining with others so that together we make a quilt

where no one hangs as a single thread, but each is covered and sheltered and protected.

***About the Author:***

*Jeri Gunulfsen is a teacher at Bogalusa High School in Bogalusa, LA. She teaches 12<sup>th</sup> grade English and will be teaching English 101 at the high school in 2004. Jeri can be contacted at [gpurdy@bellsouth.net](mailto:gpurdy@bellsouth.net).*



# ***ROLL ON, SWEET MEMORIES***

**HOLLY JAMES**

**BOGALUSA HIGH SCHOOL**

Every Wednesday in my little home town, the weekly paper arrives. A popular feature at the bottom of the front page is the “quick interview,” a series of questions answered by a notable of Washington Parish. One of the questions usually appearing asks, “What is your favorite thing to do in New Orleans?” The usual answer, “Find the nearest exit.” This disturbs me. What is it that makes people react so negatively to this city? Yes, there is crime, but I think it has more to do with racism and fear than other factors, and so they rob themselves of the richness of this city. They prejudge the city just as they prejudge many of its citizens, but for me, New Orleans is a city of splendid memories.

I am an eight-year-old child. My mother has two sisters who live here. We do not go on vacations like my other childhood friends; we visit relatives. Today’s excursion is downtown to Canal Street. We are going to the movie, to the Saenger, and we are there to see my hero—Tarzan. I have seen other Tarzan movies at the picture show at home or on TV, but I have never been to a theatre. I feel the rush of coolness as we pass through the doors and the air-conditioned building engulfs me. Never have I seen anything so beautiful—thick, rich carpeting, high ceilings, ornate walls. I am in heaven.

We bound up the steps—Aunt Inell’s five grandchildren and I. I insist on the balcony. In my little hamlet, the balcony at McRoy’s Theatre is for “coloreds.” I think they have the best seats

in the house, a bird's eye view—a strange allowance of being “above” in a world that usually treats them as substandard.

I don't remember much about the movie, but I am sure Tarzan saved Jane and Cheetah helped and all was right in their jungle world. Years later I pass the beautiful cinemas only to find that they have turned into triple-x-rated film houses, their lovely heyday passed. But things have a way of “righting” themselves, and today when I attend a concert and musical production at the Saenger, I am transported to that glorious day so many summers ago.

It is summer again. I am ten. We are going to Ponchartrain Beach, the amusement park on the lake. My trip there is with the cousin unit: Tinker, Bobby, Becky, David, and Russell. It is captured in photos, me in a yellow and green-striped shorts outfit with a matching fisherman's hat, looking quite the geek. We swim in the lake and then head for the rides. The Wild Mouse is our first, a ride built on the idea of a mousetrap maze with quick turns that convince me that any minute I will go tumbling to my death.



Then I face the ultimate—The Zephyr—a wooden roller coaster that seems to touch the sky. I am so frightened—unsure if I want to ride the massive rollercoaster. To my amazement, my mom—my mom who I view as the most uptight, “unfun,” strict woman—volunteers to ride with me. We take the front car—my heart is in my throat as we tick, tick, tick up to the top. Then down we roar—screaming and laughing—my mother's shrieks of delight—music to my ears. Then it is over—too quick—

“Let's do it again,” I shout, anticipating a negative response, but to my amazement, my mother, my forty-something, old mother who counts every dime (literally, that very morning the woman

held the door of the bathroom stall after we inserted the dime to enter until we had all had a turn), this mom said, “OK!” What fun! Her spontaneity is better than any ride.

The years pass, and suddenly I am twelve. It is 1968. My mother is forty-seven. She is staying at my Aunt Pete’s house in the city. I am with her. She and Aunt Pete spend hours laughing and talking in the kitchen. I am bored and Aunt Pete teaches me how to play solitaire to keep me busy and out of their hair. I wander the streets of the neighborhood and find the levee and walk the edge of the Mississippi, amazed at its size and power. The Bogue Chitto River of home is no match for this river.

We are in the city because my mother is ill. She is being treated for breast cancer, twenty-five cobalt treatments that are slowly roasting her skin. I watch through the window as they roll her in for her radiation. She is alone and afraid, not afraid of the treatments—afraid of leaving her daughter alone at twelve, the way she was left on her tenth birthday when her mother was killed in a car accident.

My father comes for the weekend and Aunt Pete seems to sense that we need an adventure. “T. J., you evah been to Bourbon Street?” He has not and we are off.

It is a time before barricades and we drive the length of the street that night. Bumper to bumper the cars are lined in the musky, mucky summer air. The barkers call to us from every door. The music swells and rings in my ears. Topless women are in the windows. Mom is in the front seat with Aunt Pete; I can feel the tension. Mom doesn’t like my presence there.

Aunt Pete says, “Holly, Close your eyes; don’t look!” There is a pause; then, “You either, T. J.” My father’s face reddens; Mom laughs; we all laugh. The tension is broken and another night passes in the city.

Fast forward to 1973. It’s my high school graduation, and Mark and I are in the French Quarter. Graduation and Bourbon Street are both rites of passage. We are only seventeen, but we get past the ID checker at Pat O’s and order hurricanes as much for the

souvenir glasses as the liquor-laced punch that fills them. Later we have our picture made, standing arm in arm, our hair equally long on the shoulders, dressed in bell bottoms and flowered shirts. He buys me a handmade leather purse with a painted flower on the side flap from a hippie vendor. It is twenty-four dollars, a fortune then, but we are young and lust fills the air and I could have asked for anything—and he would have found a way. We cross the causeway at sunrise and I am so happy.

In 1977, we move to this city, to a double on Robert E. Lee near the Lake. Mark and I, two children, an aquamarine super beetle, and \$500.00 a month to live on. I am a student at UNO, a university that was about as old as I. Mark boards the city bus at the corner of Franklin and Robert E. Lee, off to medical school, returning each day reeking of formaldehyde and full of stories. We learn many lessons in these years. I learn that even in a city, people have routines, the same grocery, pharmacy, bakery. The man in the meat market knows me by name just like at home. When my car breaks down on the expressway and I walk down the on ramp to Galvez Street with a toddler at my side, a baby on my hip, and absolutely no money, it is a big black man (the one I was taught to fear at home) who loans me the money to call my husband. It dawns on me today that if you really want to get the essence of this city, you must live here and be poor.

These years are not full of touristy New Orleans. There are no dinners at Galatoire's or carriage rides or nights at the Windsor Court. Instead they are filled with cadavers, exams, co-op day care, daily commutes across the Huey P. Long to teach in Marrero, Mardi Gras parades with the kids, and living close, way close to neighbors. These are the neighbors who "save" their groceries, who eat "ersters" and "berl" their "wahta," but they are kind and genuine and love this city that they call home.

In the twenty or so years since moving from New Orleans, we continue to return, this time with a little cash in our pockets. Sometimes it is for turtle soup at Mandina's hanging with the locals, sometimes for a Sunday afternoon race at the fairgrounds—

not in the air-conditioned grandstand but in the bleachers with the regulars trying to garner some betting tips before the next race. Sometimes it is Audubon Park and the zoo, first with our kids, now with our grandkids. Sometimes it is for a concert at the arena or a dinner at Galatoire's ordering Crabmeat Maison. It is always for Jazz Fest and Crawfish Monica and the gospel tent and in James Taylor's words, "with my baby, and my blanket, and my bucket of beer."

I will not allow crime and corruption to diminish my love for or my memories of this city. I will not let racism and fear creep into my thoughts. Yes, there is crime. Yes, I've been robbed, but that is just one ingredient of this gumbo town. I only wish I could get others to see this city through a new pair of eyes. I want them to smile at the lawyers in their blue seersucker suits and snappy bowties and to enjoy being served by white-coated waiters. I want them to hear the sweet jazz flowing in the air as they amble in French Quarter neighborhoods where hanging baskets brimming with lush ferns rock from wrought-iron balconies. I want them to look beyond the painted ladies to see the painted houses with old black women and young children lolling on doorsteps, fanning in the heat. They call this city the Big Easy or the City that Care Forgot but she is so much more. She is a place where tarot card readers sit amidst the hush of cathedrals. She is street car lines and the unique cemeteries with the rows of dead, buried but not in the ground. She is a city of water, surrounded by the river and the lake, embedded with canals and bayous. This city, despite its problems and like my memories, will flow on, flow on, and those who take the first exit, well, they miss the ride.

***About the Author:***

*See p. 26.*



## ***DAVIS AND FAMILY***

### **DAVID JUMONVILLE**

### **ST. JOSEPH SEMINARY COLLEGE**

*Much of what I did during the New Orleans writing marathon was what I call character study. I would pick out people at random and then create lives for them. What follows is an example of how I go about that process.*



Working on Bourbon St. . . . so many characters:

Three women; two black one white. They are tourists, with cameras and shopping bags, looking like tourists look when they're walking and looking.

White woman with dyed red hair pulled tightly back, very fair and a little fleshy. She's wearing the "little black dress," a waitress.

Black man goes by. Never having finished high school, he works as a porter. He is wearing a gray tank top and red shorts and pushing a noisy green dolly. He has a gold earring in his left ear. Davis likes to think of himself as a gangsta but has a wife and two little girls that he adores, and he goes to the African Episcopal Methodist Church every Sunday.

White man fat and sloppy wearing a blue checkered shirt and dirty jeans rides an old one-speed. His name is Robert, but

everyone calls him Bobby. He lives in the “By-Water” with an ample mother who’s been widowed most of her life. Bobby hasn’t had a date since high school; he’s devoted to his mother.

Davis and his family live in the left side of the blue double that Bobby and his mother share, and while they are much more than cordial, they only socialize on the stoop—never setting foot in one another’s homes—it wouldn’t be right. Sometimes Bobby’s mother, Dolores, watches the girls while they play on the banquette. Davis is working on his GED nights at Douglas, and without the girls under foot, Claudia has a chance to catch-up on the housework. Dolores so wishes she had grandchildren!

Though I still haven’t seen Davis’ wife, he says that his girls look just like her, especially little Zoë, so I know she’s beautiful. I imagine that she’s petite—small even next to Davis who is of no great stature. She works in the CBD as a paralegal. Davis told me that her mother and two sisters, her whole family, died in that terrible house fire in Tremé last Christmas. Claudia works a lot of overtime to avoid dealing with her grief. She claims it’s because she’s the one holding them together financially.

Earlier I saw Davis’ oldest daughter, Eden, walking to school with the big girls. She attends kindergarten at Holy Names Academy and is so cute in her uniform, plaid skirt and crisp white shirt. Dolores presses those shirts for Claudia, even though they’re permanent press. She’s of the old guard and believes that a uniform shirt has got to be starched. It’s done out of her grandmotherly affection for Eden; Dolores wants her “bébé” to look perfect when she goes out. It’s certainly not for the money Claudia insists on giving her each week. Hell, what Dolores doesn’t spend on holy candles down at the Catholic Church two blocks over she uses to buy popsicles.

Almost every afternoon Dolores buys a few from that man who comes around in the rusty panel truck, obnoxious music blaring, to announce his presence to the neighborhood. Dolores keeps her freezer stocked year round for Eden and Zoë, and all the other little kids on her block. Sometimes Bobby gets angry at this

extravagance, but it is Dolores' money and her house, and besides, she always lets her little boy have first pick.

*These “studies” are not only valuable to me as exercises in imagination, but they also have potential for later use. One of these vignettes might be the beginning of a short story or even a chapter starter for a longer work. When reworking them perhaps not all of the characters will be retained and characters from separate vignettes might merge into a wholly new fantasy. Aside from the possible utilitarian value of this process, I enjoy doing it for its own sake. After all, the real reason that I write is for the sheer joy of it.*

***About the Author:***

*See p. 31.*

**(UNTITLED)**  
**MARY KOEPP**  
**COVINGTON HIGH SCHOOL**



“When I feel like a stranger in my own skin, writing reacquaints me with who I am.” Tracy Amond wrote these words in response to a prompt during the first week of the Advanced Institute. I wrote it down then and even tried to use her words as inspiration to write something great, but nothing great came from my pen.

I was trying too hard. All week I had been forcing words onto the page, pressuring myself to feel inspired, rather than allowing myself to *be* inspired by everything around me—the people, their energy, our lives.

But then, as it always happens during a writing marathon (when I stop trying so hard), I got out of my own way and let my pen do what it had wanted to do for months. The sights, sounds, and smells of the city, its buildings and its people, they all became my muses. I gave myself up to them, and they, in return, rewarded me with over thirty pages of raw, passionate, meaningful words. Not all of it is great, and maybe none of it is great to others, but I feel great just having written it.

After months of house hunting (which turned into looking for land and a builder), concern about mortgage rates, learning about escrow and closing costs and amortization schedules, while dealing with my six-year-old and the possibility that she is developing

OCD, my students' test scores and a host of other issues that are life, I became reacquainted with me.

### ***Day 1—St. Louis Cathedral***

*There's something about the Catholic religion, the pageantry, the pomp and circumstance, that makes this a very beautiful religion. I grew up Catholic, for all that that means. To me, it meant getting out of bed earlier than I wanted to every Sunday, getting dressed in appropriate church clothes, and loading the entire family into one of the many station wagons we had growing up so that we could attend mass at St. Anselem's. Although I went through the motions week after week after week after week—kneeling, standing, shaking hands, the sign of the cross—I never really knew what it was all about. I never felt it. Religion was never spiritual to me as a child; it was parental.*

*After church we'd eat doughnuts, as we were never allowed to break fast before communion, even those of us who were too young to receive it. I can see all of this, even the breakfast nook of our house, a house I haven't entered in twenty-five years. But I don't ever remember feeling anything. We all went to CCD class; we made our first confession in the process leading up to first communion. Again, it was more parental than spiritual.*

*I remember questioning what I was being taught in CCD when we were told that only Christians would make it to Heaven. I didn't really understand, in third grade, what exactly it meant to be a Christian. But I knew that our very good friends were Jewish, not Christian. I didn't know what being Jewish meant either, but I knew that Jewish people were not Christian. I wondered how being Jewish made them any less worthy of entrance into God's kingdom.*

*I sometimes think my doubts about Catholicism began there. And along the way, I drifted further away. Sure, I still went through the motions—church on Sunday or Saturday night if one of my older siblings was going and allowed me to tag along so that I could scratch church off my weekly “to do” list. Then, my sister Nanci and I figured out that if I just ran in and grabbed a bulletin, we could do whatever we wanted for an hour and our parents would never know the difference. Shortly thereafter, I made my confirmation, once again going through the motions. My confirmation saint name was Elizabeth, not because I knew who she was, but because it was the name each of my sisters before me chose. It worked for them.*

*Somewhere between that time and college, the church granted my father an annulment, and my apathy toward the Catholic Church turned to anger. I don’t think anyone will ever be able to explain the annulment to me in a way that is reasonable. It’s more going through the motions. It was around that time I gave up Catholicism for Lent and stopped calling myself a Catholic. I began thinking that all organized religion can do as much harm as good. Doesn’t it all go back to the Golden Rule? No matter what name you give your God, don’t all religions grow from the basic belief that we must be kind to one another? To love thy neighbor? Aren’t we all supposed to make the world a better place? It seems like when we move beyond those fundamental values, the walls go up and we actually move in the opposite direction.*

*So, where does this leave me as a mother? I know there is a God. I don’t know his name (and I’m not totally sure of his descendants). I feel God all around me, in nature mostly. I think that mankind and his organizations are ruining the paradise that God*

*created for us. But how do I help my children make sense of all of this, to grow spiritually? In this crazy world, spirituality is essential to inner peace, and it's my responsibility to my children, to their health, to help them develop their own spirituality.*

*So I guess I'm glad for my childhood and all the years of going through the motions. It is a place to come back to, a place where they can begin.*

I realized, after reading through my journal pages from the marathon, that much of what I have written somehow relates to my family, my children mostly, and thoughts that I want to share with them one day. I know that much of my anxiety stems from the fact that the world is really screwed up and there is nothing I can do to keep my children safe forever. They will be hurt, and I won't always be there to make it better. The marathon allows me the needed distance to express my thoughts, my fears, my hopes, my dreams about the girls, the world we live in and the one they'll face when I'm not around.

I've given up the evening news. It was a bad, bad habit that sucked me in and intensified my deepest fears about humanity. I *know* that life is beautiful, and people are beautiful, despite their surroundings. I have to believe this or it's all for nothing. And I want my children to know this, really know this. . . .

***Molly's at the Market (still day 1)***

*"I saw Billy get up and stagger to the bathroom. He's definitely drunk. . . . I looked into his eyes. He looked so wise. He was probably handsome one day. . . ."*

Tammy said this about a barfly sitting near the jukebox. She became my muse.

*What leads a person to the place where someone says, "He was probably handsome one day"? It's not*

*age; age does not negate beauty. In a life lived right, age enhances beauty. So where has he been? What led him from handsome to now? If I sat with him and listened to his story, would he make me cry? No one sets a goal to be a drunkard on a barstool at the end of the bar at 4:00 in the afternoon. What makes some lives brilliant while others crumble? Where has he been? Is he still wise despite his lack of handsomeness? Have his years at the end of a bar diminished his worth? If so, according to whom? Where do we as humans begin to measure our worth?*

*I know my own worth shot up immeasurably when I became a mother. I never knew how important I would be in another's life. And now, times two. So the pressure is on to fulfill that role, to be worthy of my position.*

*I've never thought of myself as beautiful in appearance. My nose is too bulby. My teeth, despite wearing braces two times, have a gap like Letterman's. No, it's not like Lauren Bacall's, like my sister tried to convince me; it's like Letterman's. My skin, with the years, becomes more puckered and less silky. And the flab—well, it is what it is. But I want, more than anything, to be beautiful to my girls. When they were babies, I felt beautiful in their eyes. But as the years go by, and they absorb more and more of society's standards in regard to beauty and worth, will they still see me as beautiful? Will they learn to look beyond a person's outer shell?*

*I'm sure there will be a time, namely their adolescence, when no matter what I do, I will not meet their ideals of what is worthy. But as long as we come out on the other side and they see me again as beautiful, I will be fulfilled.*



**Day 3 (the last morning)—Envie**

*One of the countless traits I got from my mother is my love of people watching. I'm watching the people come and go in this coffee shop. The best part is that they don't know it. . . .*

*Is this guy on the phone as much of an asshole as he appears to be? Maybe he's just loud with a Chalmette accent. What did he do before cell phones and Nextel? He's got one to one ear and one to the other. He makes me want to run straight for a quiet meadow with nothing around but grass and sky, maybe a quiet lake. I want to lie there and just breathe. Somewhere that cell phones won't even work. I want to just breathe and look up at a blue sky, feel the wind blow over me and hear it rustle in the tall grass that is all around me.*

*And for some reason, I want to take him with me, have him lie next to me, looking at the sky, listening to the wind, the grass, and his heartbeat. I want us to just be still, breathing, feeling our heartbeats, marveling at everything around us, appreciating the magnificence. I don't want to talk to him, but I want us to connect. I don't want him there as a lover; that would take too much energy. I want him there as another member of the human race. I want to feel peace, and I want to pass it on to him. Then, in turn, he could bring someone to this place, maybe two people, and share this peace with them. They would bring two more people. One human being to another, breathing, feeling, sharing peace.*

*That's where I want to go.*

**About the Author:**

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***A PAST MARATHON***  
**MELANIE PLESH**  
**FREDERICK DOUGLASS HIGH SCHOOL**



*(These are two excerpts from the story of a trip I made in St Petersburg, Russia. In this part I have just come from Tallinn, Estonia, by bus.)*

***THE FIRST DAY***

I had gathered from my map that the bus station would be right in the center of a sparkling St Petersburg, and assumed that I could exchange my Estonian crowns for rubles there and find a taxi, maybe even eat a meat pie. The usual new country business. But I was wrong. Extremely wrong. Dangerously wrong.

This is the *other* bus station, and it's nowhere near the center of the city. It's in an utterly neglected sand-colored neighborhood that is haunted by ruthless men, a saint could see this, men like evolved vultures who no longer simply anticipate an imminent death and wait to squabble for the bounty, but conscious creatures who *will* death.

I don't ask for his help, but the bus driver has correctly read my situation and takes it upon himself to help me anyway. He asks if I have any American money. I say yes, one ten dollar bill. He steps out of the bus and tells me to wait. I watch him go from one dilapidated taxi to another, pointing occasionally to the bus, talking to drivers, most of whom seem only half alive.

He returns and points to a taxi and says this man will bring me to the hostel. He says I should give the driver the ten dollar bill, and that I should say nothing. While I'm gathering my things, gratitude running through me like hot blood, I ask if I can exchange Estonian currency in the bus station. He laughs.

The driver wishes me luck though I can see he fears for me, and boards his bus again, leaving me in his diesel exhaust while I roll my cart to the taxi he'd arranged. If not for the kindness of this man, I believe I would have been in the kind of danger with which I could not have reckoned.

I ride in the back seat of this wreck of a vehicle down dirty pocked streets through neighborhoods with people who clearly have nothing to lose. There's a lawlessness. The driver is intense, silent, angry, and driving fast. Every single building I pass is powdered thickly with soot, the chipped and cracked surfaces, vague underneath, about a hundred years overdue for re-plastering and paint.

I cannot believe this is St Petersburg, Russia's showcase city.

It's a thirty minute ride to Sovetskaya 28. I pay the taxi driver the ten dollar bill (which is against the law in Russia) and he leaves me in a neighborhood only somewhat higher than the one we'd just left, at the door of the St Petersburg International Hostel. I'm not sure if I'm glad or not.

But it turns out okay. The heavy door has an automatic locking mechanism. Inside, the world is different. And I'm comforted by the serendipitous good fortune that the woman at the desk, Angela, is the very person I'd spoken with by telephone four months ago to make arrangements for my visa. And she remembers speaking with me.

\* \* \* \*

My most pressing need is to procure rubles, which is everybody's need here, I see. It's still afternoon enough for me to go out, though it's getting very cold. But I have to have rubles so I can eat. Primary on my mind is to not get lost, so I memorize my route: right from the door, right at the green cobbler's bench, follow the iron fence to the modern white building, left there, right at Uprising Square. That's Nevsky Prospect.

Currency exchange outlets are as ubiquitous as beggars on the street. I look into the windows of every outlet I encounter, perhaps twenty or so, expecting to see Estonian crowns among the currencies listed in which they're willing to trade. Apparently, none considers Estonian money viable cash. I don't understand this. Estonia borders Russia, and was part of the Soviet Union. It seems so unpatriotic of Russia. And it's not like I'm asking for something exotic.

This problem worries me a little, but I also realize that Nevsky is a very long boulevard. I have to assume that eventually I'll find a way to exchange for rubles somewhere. Meanwhile, at least I have one last \$20 American traveler's check left, which of course is no problem to exchange.

I choose the least seedy looking exchange outlet I can find and, after a twenty minute wait, place my passport and traveler's check on the teller's ledge. She wordlessly hands over 400 rubles for my twenty dollars. I feel almost like a criminal. The normal exchange rate is about six rubles to the dollar, but the ruble crashed in August, two months ago, so now I receive twenty rubles for each of my precious American dollars. No wonder it feels so dangerous to me here. Police and private guards in black suits watch each patron's transaction. I feel paranoid holding so much money. And now somebody outside the hostel knows I'm an

American. And that I have money. I make my moves as discreet and private as I can, pull myself in close, and walk out.

I believe the guards expect I'll come to no good outside on the street. It's my thinking, too.

I slip out into the even colder evening and walk an erratic path back and forth across Nevsky, even looking over my shoulder to see if I'm being followed. I'm not generally a paranoid person, but paranoia is probably a useful survival tool here. When I finally feel free of the eyes I perceive are behind me, I purchase a sausage sandwich and a beer from a street kiosk and stash them in my backpack for supper later in my room. I walk past the beggars on the street, attempting to keep my gaze pointed forward. I can't absorb too much this soon.

I walk a few blocks to the Fontanka Canal. Traffic is heavy. A woman is weaving among the temporarily stopped cars on Fontanka. She's very young, seven or eight months pregnant, and she's carrying a silent baby. She's wearing the shreds of an orange plaid dress and is barefoot. Her blond hair is dull and matted, like she's been sleeping in the mud, even though it's October and cold enough for gloves. At first I think she's simply bullying her way through traffic. Then I see she's begging, and I see the light is out in her eyes.

The horror comes when I see a little child, about four years old, still on the curb from which the woman had just come, trying to see a way through three or four erratic lanes of traffic, trying to find his way to his mother. His eyes show that he is terrified, but he doesn't say a word and he doesn't cry. She makes it to the other side of the street and keeps walking. The traffic light changes and the cars don't wait for the child, who is forced back to the curb. He stands on his toes, trying to see over the cars, trying to keep his eye on his mother, who continues walking.

All I can do is run away.

I run back the way I'd come, past the beggars and the currency exchange outlets, past the sooty facades, past two men and a woman carrying cellos, past haughty military men in flashy

tailored uniforms and sharp crowned hats. A slick young man in a leather jacket stops me, gets right in my face with his cheap smile, and asks for something. I raise my hand, palm out and in his face, and walk away fast. I go left at Uprising Square, right at the modern white building. I follow the iron fence to the green cobbler's bench, left at Sovetskaya, left at #28 into the hostel.

Safe.

But now I know something.

Dostoevsky. He'd already described this woman to me in a canal scene in *Crime and Punishment*:

*Suddenly he (Raskalnikov) started, saved again perhaps from swooning by an uncanny and hideous sight. He became aware of some one standing on the right side of him; he looked and saw a tall woman with a kerchief on her head, with a long, yellow, wasted face and red sunken eyes. She was looking straight at him, but obviously she saw nothing and recognized no one. Suddenly she leaned her right hand on the parapet, lifted her right leg over the railing, then her left and threw herself into the canal. The filthy water parted and swallowed up its victim for a moment, but an instant later the drowning woman floated to the surface, moving slowly with the current, her head and legs in the water, her skirt inflated like a balloon over her back.*

### ***Dostoevsky (the fourth day)***

In St. Petersburg in October gray rainy days are warm and blue sky days are freezing. The cold is so disturbing one almost prefers the rain. But the rain disturbs in a more subtle way, running down the neglected facades, glazing rusted roofs so that they sparkle, bringing more attention to the disorder here. What is one to want in a situation like this? Which sacrifice is greater?

Today the sky is blue, and I'm cold, whether I like it or not.

I'm walking the other way down Nevsky Prospect where it meets the Neva downstream, looking for Dostoevsky's grave. At my second coffee stop in the freezing morning I hear Elvis singing, "*Wise men say, only fools rush in. . . .*"

The graveyards are behind a church at the end of Nevsky, within sight of the Neva. There are two of them, walled, one on each side of a paved alley. I choose the one on the right, the place of the poets, artists and musicians, and purchase a ticket from a patient lady who has a little trouble getting me to understand that my camera requires its own ticket. But she is very kind about it, which surprises me.

It's profoundly quiet here. Russia struggles outside, but here inside this wall the struggling is over. So is mine. I feel my limbs relax and my breaths come easier.

I'm the only living human just now inside the wall.

I walk directly to Dostoevsky's grave as though I knew all along where it would be, and circle it, numb, keeping a distance from this face that I recognize carved into black marble above his crypt.

The stone above his bust is fluted into a Christian cross. The grave is enclosed with a decorative iron fence, its gate ajar as though to invite me inside. Yellow leaves from three different kinds of trees pad the ground above him.

I now know that this is the pinnacle of my journey. I'm afraid I will botch this treasured opportunity, afraid I won't know how to handle myself in the presence of it, afraid I'll be too small for the moment.

Because I am here in St. Petersburg at the grave of a writer I believe in, someone who knows me in all my dark intricacy, someone with the gift to bring truths of human nature into the light, onto the pages of books. No one has ever moved me like Dostoevsky moves me. In my mind, he works directly for God, translating hearts' troubles and pain and relieving the troubled among us, me in particular, by showing me I'm human, and not alone. He sees me. He speaks to me. He tells me. He draws me into



the human race because he sees the secret darkness in us all. He's my mentor. I want to do what Dostoevsky did. I want to tell people's stories and show them to themselves so they too can leave the oblivion of solitude.

I sit next to his grave on a stone and sob. Tears soak the knees of my brown jeans and shine in rivulets down my leather jacket. I feel gratitude—stunning, earth-moving gratitude. And I ask him to help me.

I have come all the way to Russia for this, to seek Dostoevsky's help. I've been walking alone and heavily on these St. Petersburg streets, almost overcome with grief, the instances and episodes of sorrow and pain and utter loss that I soak into myself here coming close to undoing me. And I've walked and walked and haven't known why. At Dostoevsky's grave, I know why. I feel a burden lift.

This is the world. Russia holds a concentration of all the passions. Every other place I know has its specialties—France, the senses and the flesh; Poland, pure heart; Estonia and America are proud spirited boys who trust themselves; Germany is intense and intellectual. But Russia has everything, and she's deep and stark and wears the passions day and night, on every face Russia wears them, in every whisper. The entire spectrum of the myriad aspects of the human soul are here. And I cannot avoid their voices.

I have come to Europe for this, to find out that the world I learned about from Dostoevsky has been a metaphor for me all along. This journey is a way to pull myself together, to walk through what is my life all the way to the edge, to confirm the truth I've always suspected: there is darkness and light, and both exist in me. Dostoevsky shows me this by using Russia as the medium. Russia manifests the edges. It gives me that perspective which then makes it possible for me to extrapolate and find the middle of myself. Russia shows me the broad landscape of myself. It shows me the darkest edge so I know how far I can sink. It shows me the light so I know to what I might aspire. And because the Earth, within which this landscape exists, is not flat, I realize that the dark

and light edges touch. I see there really aren't any edges after all. The world is a circle. I am a circle. There's no beginning or end. Everything is here always and I'm part of it.

I'm not in Russia for the adventure of it. Russia is personal.

***About the Author:***

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***LIGHT IN AUGUST***  
**VICKY TANGI**  
**EAST BATON ROUGE PARISH ADULT**  
**AND CONTINUING EDUCATION**



August is not a light month, despite the brightness of its long days. It hangs heavy with heat and humidity, the air buzzing thick with mosquitoes and the ripeness of summer dreams almost fulfilled.

It was such an August long ago that my younger sister and I were awakened at daybreak by the sound of something hitting the enormous screened window of an unfamiliar bedroom. Deposited at a friend's antebellum home in the middle of the previous night, we had arrived half asleep to be scooted up the winding staircase and tucked into a four-poster, canopied bed.

Somewhat disoriented, we heard more noise against the screen, and then we heard our father calling up to us, his voice tinged with excitement and joy, emotions we rarely saw in him.

“Girls! Girls! Wake up!”

We clamored from the bed, running on tiptoe across cool wooden floors to the window. There on the sidewalk far below stood our normally serious father, absolutely beaming, pitching pinecones at the window at 6:00 that August morning.

“It’s a boy, and his name is Robert Lewis Russell!”

A brother! I finally had a baby brother, something I'd seemingly waited all of my seven-and-a-half years for, begging my mother incessantly to please, please, *please* have one just for me.

I remember the drama of the night before, awakening at midnight to my mother's moans as she called, "Charles! Charles!" and running into her bedroom to see what was wrong. Her thin cotton gown revealed the mysterious, hidden presence of this unborn child, now struggling to find his way into the world, making it impossible for her to get out of bed, as she cried out to me, "Get Daddy, and tell him to hurry!"

I raced down two flights of stairs, finding him in the basement cleaning out cabinets, the nesting instinct apparently transferred, the French doors flung open to the patio, and the fan droning. He sprang into action with all the precision of his drill sergeant days in the South Pacific more than a decade before. He grabbed our carefully packed suitcases, efficiently locked us in the backseat of the Chevrolet sedan, and then gently helped my mother into the front seat, where she continued to plea, "Hurry! Just *hurry!*" as he cautiously sped through red lights. "Everything's OK," he said soothingly. "We're almost there."

"There" was Highland Hospital, where she stayed the required seven days postpartum, only blocks away from the elegant mansion that took my sister and me into another century, embraced by the collective and all-consuming devotion of our eccentric friend Ella and three elderly servants, who were like Ella's beloved aunts. They were Peale and Dolly and Maud, each a different shade of brown, one of whom had been her childhood nurse in New Orleans and still called her "*enfant*."

The house itself wrapped us in love, with high-ceilinged rooms leading into more and more rooms until we'd get dizzy trying to find our way to the kitchen, and a library of old books, magic stories for me to read on the steps of the secret stairway off the kitchen. The ladies doted on us as if we were visiting princesses, making biscuits and pies early in the morning so the kitchen wouldn't stay hot all day and leaving sun-dried towels for

us by the claw-foot bathtub that we were allowed to fill almost to the top, and turning down our crisply ironed monogrammed linen sheets before we went to bed.

Every morning we played “having babies” with a slightly older neighbor girl, unsuccessful in convincing my five-year-old sister that she couldn’t have any because she was too young. Ella set us straight by saying that Cesca could go on and have all the babies she wanted, and we’d just have to accept that. Afternoons, we all took naps, recovering from the heat by an hour of quiet stillness.

Ella treated us like miniature adults, with two bits of sage advice. “Don’t ever be fat in the summertime,” she warned us, flapping a paper fan frantically across her florid face as she collapsed into a porch swing, a large smock hanging loosely from her rounded form. “And don’t *ever* be shackled to some man. You can get married, but don’t be *shackled*,” as she muttered under her breath about having put up with a husband herself for about ten years before she finally ran him off.

The morning we left, Peale and Dolly and Maud gave us boxed white gloves wrapped in tissue paper and Ella let me take a suitcase full of her treasured books when our father came to get us, to take us home for the moment I still remember with near ecstasy.

Daddy parked the car on the sloping driveway, put on the emergency brake and, suspending the rules, let us run like the wind up the slatted steps to the back porch, slamming through the screen door, through the kitchen and foyer, up iron-railed stairs to the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor, and then we were in our parents’ bedroom at the end of the hall where our gentle mother held out her arms to us, a tiny precious bundle lightly covered in blue batiste sleeping in the white wicker bassinet next to her bed. Our father, still wearing the smile that hadn’t left the whole week, was right behind us saying, “Girls, meet your little brother.”

I would like to end the story here saying, “Let’s just read this part. We’ll skip the rest.” This is the picture I want to frame and hold under a spotlight, keeping all the characters in this safe place

forever. Real life, however, does not always continue happily ever after, and golden moments sometimes get lost in tarnished endings we wish we could re-write.

It's easy to judge a story or a life by its ending, evaluating the whole by the conclusion, focusing too much on the last page. Writing teaches me what I hope to teach others, that life is filled with light and dark, and while I cannot change a story's ending, I can pull out bits and pieces, finding new ways to hold the light, illuminating moments of sweetness and beauty or darkness and shadow, depending on what I want to teach or need to learn. The act of writing lets me make sense of things, revealing truths that are larger than facts, brief moments that are as significant as endings. Like a woman trusting her husband to get her to the hospital on time; and two little girls welcomed into a loving, magical place that had been prepared just for them for this exact moment in their lives; and a jubilant father throwing pinecones at a window, the bright light of an August morning framing his face, as he proclaimed the good news; and a baby boy conceived in love, whose birth brought immeasurable joy to them all.

In the heaviness of that August, my father's heart was lighter than it had ever been or would ever be again, as we four became five, and he had the privilege of saying for a few short years, "my son," in the present tense. This is the story I want to tell today, what I need to remember now.

***About the Author:***

*See p. 62.*

***A MIRACULOUS DISCOVERY***  
**LYNNE VANCE**  
**JEWEL M. SUMNER HIGH SCHOOL**

The Marathon began with words from Natalie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones*. In the introduction of her book she advocates using writing as a practice, "a way to penetrate your life and become sane." Dr. Richard Louth, director of the Southeastern Louisiana University Writing Project, led and christened the 2004 New Orleans Marathon by reading the basic ground rules Goldberg states for effective implementation of this writing practice. He then sent us out into the city to write our way home. On the first day of this two-and-a-half day excursion I began by meandering throughout the city practicing the craft of writing and sharing with an assortment of new and old friends. It was during the second day of the marathon that something intensified inside of me, and I felt the need to penetrate deeper into my purpose for writing. Writing was becoming a link that could connect my inner world with my outer world. I was searching for something to fuse my relationships between these two worlds. Something that would provide symmetry, balance and restore my sense of equilibrium. I needed to feel grounded.

I found myself driven on a quest uptown. I was on a pilgrimage to the Church of St. Mary's Assumption accompanied by a young teacher named Amy from Kentucky, who told me she is a healer. We had just met that day and knew nothing about each other. She was surprised when she realized we were walking towards a church on the river. She told me about an experience

with a bone reader the previous day in the in French Quarter. The reader's insight acknowledged her energy to heal and advised her to go to the river and pray. For a moment I felt like two cogs interlocking in the internal gears of time. Coincidence had synchronized our settings and for a brief moment we walked in harmony.

When she asked me why I wanted to go there, I told her I wasn't really sure, but I knew it was for something more than prayer. I didn't tell her of the troubles that had shaken the tranquil waters of my family the week before I left for the Marathon. Those fears had not yet found form in language and were not even ready to be shaped into prayers. I needed to be in the presence of something holy, something so holy that it would infiltrate my heart like osmosis, and instinctively heal without my ever having to utter a word. I was seeking an omnipotent power strong enough to envelop my brokenness, digest my deepest desires and make me whole.

I had heard of the healing power of a Father Seelos associated with this church. He was a Redemptorist priest who died while tending the sick during an epidemic of yellow fever in 1857. The depths of his goodness are said to transcend the boundaries of time and even though he died almost 150 years ago, his healing powers continue to exist. His life is presently being scrutinized for the canonization of sainthood. The process requires three documented miracles. The third miracle took place a few years ago at Children's Hospital when the family of a young girl in a coma on her deathbed prayed to Fr. Seelos and she lived.

Recently my parish priest told me of using the relic of Fr. Seelos to bless another parishioner who recently had a kidney transplant. I smiled and nodded as if I understood. I didn't even know what his relic was. I imagined it to be some kind of magic wand with a crown on the tip of it, one of those high-rounded-bejeweled-chef-hat crowns, like the ones that would appear on your head if you took a bite of Imperial margarine. I hadn't a clue.



This was my quest. I was drawn to the church like a blind moth drawn to the light.



As we continued to walk, the church gradually came into view. It looked both old and proud. The white statue of Mary announced that this was the one. We quickened our pace only to find that the entrance to the church was sealed tightly behind an iron gate. A green sign read, *If locked go to 2030 Constance Street*. We found that this address was the site of the Fr. Seelos Information Center. It was closed. Disappointed and confused, we wandered around the parking lot and noticed a statue of Fr. Seelos. It faced an

overgrown area that was probably once a garden for prayer. A sidewalk covered with crisp brown magnolia leaves and yellowed fronds of dead ferns led to another locked door. Two cement benches blackened with mold, but sheltered from the heat in the shade, and three crooked picnic tables bowed down with slanted tops towards the statue offered us a place to write. I crawled atop a crooked picnic table. The heat had not seemed too intense while we were walking, but in the stillness as I wrote I became aware of its movement. It hovered over me pulling at my insides like a magnet. I felt the moisture bead up on my skin and I tasted the salt of my own flesh as I wrote. The beads grew into droplets and began to trickle and flow. I felt the single drops join together and form streams as they traveled down my back and between my breasts. I thought this must have been what it felt like to be in a Native American sweat lodge. My body was opening wider and wider; it felt as though I were being turned inside out. I was being purged.

Out of the corner of my eye I noticed what looked like a Vietnamese family walking down the sidewalk to my left. I continued to write. Amy noticed that they entered a side door. We

tried it but found it locked. As we pressed our faces to the cool glass, Amy then noticed the feet of a young boy. She rapped loudly on the glass wall and a side door opened.

We walked through the opened door into a darkened foyer. The Vietnamese man came over and gently asked if he could help us. We asked if we could just look around a bit. He left us to join the woman and boy. We noticed that beside the door there was a tiered table filled with candles. I mentioned that it was a good time to pray. We illuminated our prayers and watched them change from intangible thought to solid, liquid then gas as they rose higher and higher to be consumed and become one with the atmosphere. We continued to explore. Enclosed glass tables displayed personal belonging of Fr. Seelos. We followed the Vietnamese group and saw that they were in a small room with a large, glass-encased, ornate, gingerbread-style house. They stood quietly beside it as the man gently whispered something to the boy. We left to give them privacy. We wandered around a bit and returned again to peep into the small room. They were gone. A partially opened door on the other side of the room revealed a light on the other side.

We slipped through the crack in the door and found ourselves inside the vast sanctuary of the church. The high, dome-shaped ceiling made me feel small in the presence of this magnificent refuge. Behind the altar a multitude of ornate colorful statues created a visual symphony. They were angels lifting Mary up to the heavens. We walked to the back of the church and dipped our hands into the bowl of cool holy water attached to the wall near the entrance. Making the sign of the cross, I stepped onto the old wooden platforms supporting raised pews on either side of the main aisle. The wood creaked beneath my feet. The large, rounded edge of the pew was curved like a scroll. Its dark wood squeaked as I knelt on the wooden kneelers. I ran my hands along the smooth mahogany arch and imagined I was on the bow of a large wooden sailboat at sea on an unknown journey.

The Vietnamese man came over and introduced himself as Father Luang, the pastor of the church. He explained that normally

he was never here at this time, but that he had just been reassigned and some friends had come to say goodbye. He was leaving for Oakland in two weeks. We talked of Father Seelos and the possibility of his sainthood. He led us back through the small ante-room behind the altar on our way out. I paused before we left and asked him just exactly what the relic of Father Seelos was. He calmly replied that they were his bones. I was taken aback at this news. I asked what he meant by “his bones.” He pointed behind me to another enclosed glass artifact. I turned and saw a gray, flat-shaped item resembling both a flame and a shoehorn. I didn’t know what it was. He informed me that it was the sternum of Father Seelos. Looking closer I could see the scalloped edges where his ribs once interlocked. I asked him where the rest of this man’s bones were. His arm opened and he slowly extended it toward the gingerbread house as if it were a shrine. He said they were inside the house.

We thanked him and left with a feeling of awe. I wanted the story to end there with a circular sense of completion; from bone to bone writing my way to discern meaning and purpose in my life. But there was one thing he said that nagged at my conscience. As much as I wanted to delete it, it would not go away. As we walked out the door, he called out an invitation to us.

“Come back tomorrow when the gift shop is open. Then you will be able to buy a relic of your own,” he smiled.

I winced as if doused in ice water. The impact of his words shattered the structure of my fantasy. I wanted to believe that miracles did happen. That they could be traced to something with divine power and that this “thing” outside of us could somehow impart this power inside of us. The story of Father Seelos began to sound like a Catholic fund-raiser. Miracles were supposed to be priceless. I asked if he actually meant that they did in fact sell the bones of Father Seelos. He said yes and explained that there are first, second and third class relics. He said that first class relics were actually a small chip of bone, second class relics were things that had been touched by his bones and third class relics were

things touched by his belongings. In horror I began to think that all that was left of Fr. Seelos was his sternum, that the rest of him was not in that house-like shrine, but had been ground up into meal and they were selling him off grain by grain. Instead of a renewed sense of faith, I felt cheated. In anger I began to doubt the possibility of miracles.

Then I remembered the miracle of the little girl from Amite, Caroline Crouch, who survived a medical death sentence and now lives a fairly normal life. I had known that she was near death and lived, but I did not know the specific details that would signify a miracle. I called my friend, Dr. Ann Kay Logarbo, a pediatrician in Covington, to ask for more details of the story. The first thing she said was that it had absolutely nothing to do with his bones, and that they had never even heard of Father Seelos or his sacred bones until Caroline's desperate situation. She explained that Caroline had been recovering from sinus surgery and had also been recently diagnosed with cystic fibrosis. Her mom was trying to give her a nightly dose of medicine when she found her unresponsive. She had stopped breathing and had turned blue. Caroline had contracted a viral brain infection known as encephalitis and was having seizures due to brain swelling. Ann Kay told me that to seize for twenty minutes was bad news, but that Caroline had seized for over fourteen hours. She was put into a drug-induced coma to attempt to stop the seizing. She continued even after entering a coma. Her EEG showed extensive organic brain dysfunction. The doctors told the family it would be a blessing if she died. If she lived, she would be nothing but a vegetable. Her family continued to pray for a miracle. When the child was anointed with last rites, someone outside of the family mentioned having her blessed with the cross of Fr. Seelos. They had never heard of him but researched and found the Seelos Center in New Orleans. They called to request a blessing. The woman who answered the phone said she was sorry, but everyone was away on retreat. She said that they would begin praying for Caroline to Father Seelos immediately, and that someone would be out the

next day. From the time of that phone call until her release, Caroline began to recover. They did not know it at the time, but after studying medical transcripts, immediately following the phone call, Caroline took a breath of her own above the respirator. Her eyes opened during the blessing of the cross and she grew stronger day by day. She went into the hospital near death on the fourth of August and was released on August 15<sup>th</sup>, the feast of the Assumption of Mary (the name of Father Seelos's church). Caroline started the first grade a few days later than her peers. Although she continues to live with cystic fibrosis, she has no signs of brain damage.

I began to realize that it was not a relic, but faith that healed Caroline. I recognized faith not as an object to be grasped, but rather a devotion to be cultivated to develop trust. Faith isn't something outside ourselves that transforms us; rather it is something deep within ourselves. I long to possess that kind of faith; the kind that converts the storm of uncertainty and doubt into a calm affirmation of peace. I must confess that I have never traveled that deeply into the fathoms of my being. Perhaps I've never been tested to that extreme. I see faith as an ocean, something vast and fluid to keep me afloat. I am scared that if I dive down too deeply beneath the surface, I won't be able to breathe. I imagine myself trying to touch the bottom of an ocean floor, fear expands inside of me as I go deeper and deeper, the weight of the water crushes the inside of my chest, I fear I will drown and I race back to the surface, gasping for air. I know instinctively that if I could relinquish my fear, if I could let go, if I could trust, I would be delivered to the place I want to be.

The journey I began seemed cyclic, as another thread looped inside of it to begin a new link in the chain of my existence. While I know I that I have not arrived, I feel one step closer to finding the spiritual sustenance I need to survive on my journey. Perhaps we are all ships at sea awaiting a life-altering event that will demand that we drop our anchor, release our control, and find a steadfast faith secured to the ocean floor.

Returning to Goldberg's chapter on Marathons in *Writing Down the Bones*, I am struck by her words, "Marathons are very opening experiences. Right after one there is a tendency to feel naked, out of control." Little did I know that my marathon experience would indeed open me, strip me and advise me to surrender to an abyss inside of myself that knows more that I can comprehend.

***About the Author:***

*See p. 69.*



***A WRITER'S SECRETS:***  
***FOR GRIFFIN (7) AND RILEY (5)***  
**JEFF WIEMELT**  
**SOUTHEASTERN LOUISIANA UNIVERSITY**

Ok, guys. I promised when I was leaving yesterday that I was gonna write something for you two while I was on this trip to the Quarter. I didn't really think you understood what that even meant, so Griff, you surprised me this morning when you woke to ask first thing off what I'd written. I felt a little embarrassed to say I hadn't written anything yet, so maybe I stretched the truth some to tell you it just wasn't ready. Well anyway, I'm back in the Quarter again today. I'm getting started a bit late, but the afternoon's all yours. I'm writing just for you guys today.

So, what should I write about? Hmm. You know, writing always takes me to the most interesting places, so let me tell you some things about this place to start. It's always good to write about the Quarter. Right now I'm sitting alone in the back courtyard of a little coffee house called La Marquise. You've been here once before, I think, and liked the place. It's hidden away, like all the best places in the Quarter, so not too many folks seem to find their way in. I guess that's partly why I like this place so much. It's a *secret*, and when I sit here I feel like I'm part of the secret, maybe a little mysterious too. You guys are part of that

secret today. My writing brought you here. You're with me now at this table, as I write, and we're holding hands as we let the place wrap us in its mysteries.

This is a really special place to write, isn't it? I've written here once before, about a year ago, and I wrote the best stuff ever. Not just the best stuff I'd ever written, either. I mean *the BEST stuff anyone's ever written!* Period. Did you know we can do that when we write? Well we can, and we can do it over and over again, each time we sit down to write. That's one of the mysteries this place has taught me. Anyway, that time last year I made people cry when I read what I'd written here. I think I cried a little bit that day too. But it was the kind of crying we do when we feel really good about something, I mean *really, really good*, when something's touched us really deep down inside. You guys probably don't know this yet, but writing can do that. Writing can reach way down inside us to find places so secret we don't even know they're there. Or if we do know, we're usually just a little too scared to open our eyes and see.



So this place we're at today is special because it's my writer's place, and writing here about this place helps me unlock some of those deep secrets. You know, I have a lot of help when I write here. This probably sounds silly to you, but this place "talks" to me. As I write, I watch little sparrows crowd to gather crumbs at my

feet, then join me at my table to whisper soft tales of their collected memory. I see all shades of green and brown lizards cross the crumbling walls to show me dark passages back to other times and secrets of a forgotten past. Even the walls speak here to those of us who'll listen. These are ancient walls, like the walls we've read about this past year in the *Lord of the Rings* books, walls that tell



me a history, each brick holding the weight of some special place in time. I wonder if you remember the little wood door that stands broken in the corner of the old brick wall at the back of this courtyard? Most people probably think that door's there to keep folks out. But I know it's there to guard the secrets of this special place, keep them in jealously, protect them until the next time we come to share in the mystery.

Guys, one thing I really wanted to tell you about today is the people I'm with. I don't think you know that I'm here with about 30 teachers, all writing teachers actually. About half these folks are from around where we live too. And we're all here to write. Just write.

Now, you guys'll be surprised to hear that these teachers have secrets too. And when we all get together to write like this, well, the secrets start to come out. Like I said before, writing does that to a person, reaches deep down and pulls out all the secrets and mysteries we carry inside.

Anyway, last night, I learned a lot of good secrets about these teachers. I learned that one teacher, Mr. Richard, who's really a very important teacher and the leader of our group, has an alter-ego. Turns out he's really some sort of bizarre nightmarish creature who calls himself—get this—*Crabman!* So a group of us are gathered at the hotel pool last night, and all of a sudden Mr. Richard bends down at the waist and begins twisting his body in the most unbelievable, almost inhuman directions, kinda pretzel like, until his arms wrapped round his legs, leaving his hands to hang out loose, almost disembodied at opposite ankles, as some sort of crab-like victim of an evil scientist's experiment gone wrong—so horribly, horribly wrong. Then he begins to actually walk like this—*pathetic, misshapen thing!*—croaking his way around the pool, sending good women off sobbing into the night and leaving grown men to swoon in the frightened panic of the darkening moment. I think Mr. Richard might have been drinking a little beer last night too. Teachers will do that sometimes.

Now kids, I have to tell you, as I write these very words, other strange images intrude upon my mind. New secrets are opening before me, imposing their will upon my yielding vision. Yes, I remember now. But I remember reluctantly. For last night I saw other strange things happen among this group too. And children, forgive me now for what I'm about to tell you. It may be that there exist secrets too dark and horrifying to tell. But this secret I neither possess nor control. No, it possesses me, tears at me, scratching its way like some evil beast to escape my feeble grip. The secret moves my hand across the page. I struggle. But I am weak, and weakening. *Out, then, foul beast!*

A moment. Let me settle myself. . . . Yes, better. . . . I'll continue.

So children, imagine. Here I was, changed into a proper swimsuit, down at the pool and taking a little night-time dip to relax before driving home last night. (This was moments after Crabman's bizarre appearance, I think, but I'm having trouble sorting out the events after all that.) Anyway, out from the hotel walks this cluster of four or five women from my group, all very highly respected and important teachers from around our area, all roughly your mom's age. I offer a pleasant "hello," as gentlemen will, when to my dismay, Miss Mary—now it's important to remember, guys, you may have Miss Mary for a teacher in a few years, so please, let's keep an open mind about all this—well, Miss Mary just up and jumps right into the pool—*yes, that's right, she was indeed quite fully dressed!* Well, Miss Mary being a proper lady and respected teacher and all, I quickly determine not to notice this strange behavior so as not to embarrass her.

Lordy, what a fool was I! Within seconds, in jump Miss Karen and Miss Connie and Miss Tammy and I don't know how many more of our fine teachers—and yes, all fully clothed, just like Miss Mary before them. Well I'm sure I don't need to tell you how disturbing all this was to me. But still, a gentleman is what a gentleman does. (Or is mine a simple coward's excuse?) So again I determine to bide my time and do nothing. (Thank god I've had the

good diligence to practice my secretive toe stroke this summer, guys, thus allowing me to reposition myself ever-so-slowly to a more guarded corner of the pool, and pray, out of any direct line of sight of this frenzied group.)

. . . What? Shall I stop this sordid tale then? Children, I must not. I cannot. My pen compels me.

Yes, still more I remember. I watch strange transformations in the night. A pale moon peaks timidly from behind the safety of thickening clouds to cast a cold, unearthly glimmer across the still waters. No more Miss Mary do I see, but some *vile* thing in her stead, *hideous* to behold. Miss Karen—*our poor sweet Karen!*—has gone now too, become some hoary temptress of my trembling soul. And Miss Connie and Miss Tammy. Gone. In their places, dark shades of gyrating creatures too frightening to name. The orgy quickens. I see the beasts assemble, begin to turn, to spin. Faster. Faster. Their twisted backs arching impossibly, their ghastly arms rising out from the waters, a shrill calling forth of some who-knows-what hideous spirit of the night. *A horrid dance of sinful precision!*

My children, what madness must beset these otherwise fine and respectable ladies and teachers—stout pillars of our world, guardians of our youth, the very sculptors of our now-too-uncertain futures—once dark night falls? I wonder, and I sink deeper into the uncertain waters of my dark corner. Do I dare try to escape?

But wait! What new madness descends? *Oh help! Oh help!* Our good earth shudders at the weight of her step. The pool that holds me belches hot steam at her approach. A terrible trumpeting of shrieks are called to mark her way. She comes to join her assembled hags, and I fear for all that our fragile world is broken, evermore. My sons, with clearing head I now can write freely what last night I could but whisper in tightly drawn breaths. *Most foul corruption, I name you Miss Vicky!* In queenly dress she strides to water's edge—nay, she floats and our world but bows before her, bound by the hopeless fears grown of this madness. And I watch helpless, amazed, terrified as the waters themselves part in the

most servile posture of abject obedience, yielding helplessly to accept this *unholy shape of terror itself!*

I ran screaming into the dark night. . . .

Ok guys, enough. All this fun and kidding aside, what is it I really want to tell you today? I want to tell you something about writing. Writing can take us places. It brought me here to the Quarter these last couple days, led me for each of the 758 steps it took me to walk from my hotel to the courtyard at the back of La Marquise. It took me to a place where the birds and lizards and the walls themselves tell the secrets of a world now lost in time. It took me to that pool last night, and into the dark excitements of the dreams I've just imagined. I hope someday you'll find your writing taking you places too. Places only writers like us are allowed to visit.

I also want you guys to know from this that our writing is so very much about the people of our lives, especially our readers. What I've written today is about the two of you, of course. In writing this for you, you've become a part of my story—my writing partners, voices for my words. Each word here I've written *to you* and *through you*. These are your words now, and I'm so very grateful that you've opened your arms to hold them for a time.

Lastly, I want to tell you that our writing is very much about the writing teachers in our lives. I've had some good fun today in writing about the teachers in my group, made them out as the horrifying monsters of our darkest dreams. But listen, guys, writing teachers *can* be monsters, if you let them. I know teachers who'll *rip your throats out* to rob you of your writers' voices. Too many teachers don't want to hear your voices. They just want to hear themselves. These can be dangerous, scary people, the monsters of my little story. But I also know lots of writing teachers who'll teach you *to sing!* I think these people I'm here with this week are like that. The very best kind of teachers. Teachers who'll help you look deep inside yourselves to find your own *desires* to write.

Teachers who'll *trust* in that desire, help you shape and mold it into *a voice of your own*, and then celebrate the *joy* you'll find when you hear that voice and see it, some pleasant day like this one, folded softly in the trusting arms of your own precious children.

***About the Author:***

*See p. 86.*



# ***GUEST ALEMBICS***

***(OUR MARATHON PARTNERS)***



# ***BONES***

**AMY GILLIAM**

**MOREHEAD WRITING PROJECT**

I wrote down the bones  
in the city of voodoo;  
Read down my bones  
in the garden.

“Pray at the river,”  
he tells me,  
“Great blessings come your way.”

I pray at the altar of Father Seelos  
his bones tucked away nearby  
inside a gingerbread shrine,  
and light a candle,  
the flame to carry a prayer  
to be decided later.  
The holy water has evaporated  
in the holy heat of the cathedral.  
The Irish Channel surges past.

Shaken by power,  
Sweating salt back into the air,  
I retreat.

Sitting on a shaky barstool  
at a wobbly table  
with my honky tonk heritage  
on the radio,

and my future on the wind  
over a river,  
and my prayers burning  
on an altar at St. Mary's,  
Bones rattle in my mind.

***About the Author:***

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***A WOMAN, A DAY: FOUR SNAPSHOTS***  
**EVA GUILLOT**  
**NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT OF**  
**ACADIANA**

***MORNING***

Running the water over the mason jar,  
over and over, just enough heat to  
wash away the red currant jam stuck  
to the bottom.

Running the water, sloshing over the sides,  
dazed by the rising smoke, clumps of red  
washing down the drain and all she can  
think of is how much longer must she wait.

***A WALK***

Tearing off a piece of fresh French bread, she  
makes her way through the dense curtain of  
greenery, searching the woods for just the right  
spot to perch. Hesitating, warding off that  
instinctual flinch to turn around at every  
crackle in nature's home, she trudges on.  
She seeks the place of solitude that will allow  
her to recapture a moment of truth.  
looking and searching, peeping through God's  
curtain of greens, leaving crust and crumbs

for others to follow.

### ***The Longing***

The altar is still there, a shrine to a time when he was there. Unspoken, he still embodies every broken brick, every mold-encrusted inch. Rain trickles down the sides, over the white-washed cross. She combs her hand across his name and whispers the words inscribed, “as we go one, we go all.” Words left unspoken. Her tears wash away the hurt and the rain renews.

### ***AFTERNOON***

The smoke rose from the dishwasher fogging her reflection in the window—she could not see the lines of sorrow etched into her eyes and she was glad. Plunging her hands into the soapy heat, turning over cup and saucer, she sang softly a tune until her hands were soggy wrinkles, spotted brown and red, a bit like strong tea.

### ***About the Author:***

*Eva Guillot teaches 10<sup>th</sup> grade English at Comeaux High School in Lafayette, LA. Eva can be contacted at [guillote@bellsouth.net](mailto:guillote@bellsouth.net).*

***TRAVEL DAY—QUILTING MY STORY***  
**EVA GUILLOT**  
**NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT OF**  
**ACADIANA**

We drove to New Orleans under a rising red sun, hanging limber and soft over the Basin, talking about writing and our students and now we are writing, trying to limber up our hands and words, to free them from our minds so that they will flow lazily and smoothly onto our pages like the Mississippi crawls. I gaze about the room, ready to spring forth, out the door and onto the yet-to-be busy streets of New Orleans, free like Paul's Blackbird echoing in my ears.

The ferry ride rocked us across the river and back, as if in a slow Cajun waltz, mimicking the sluggishness of the river and I can see how the curve and bend can get you lost if you don't know how to follow the river. But three men, wise to the rhythm, sit sleeping upright, swaying ever so gently. The fearless pigeons greet us when we land, where we meet Karley, contestant #14, age two, who bellows with joy when the Creole Queen toots her horn.

Kathleen gets to be 47 all over again since she's not so good with numbers. And when we duck into the Sheraton to take a restroom break, I read the sign in the ladies room as "The Hair of the Day," thinking of a new hairstyle each day and beauty salons, but it was really "The Hair of the Dog," an ad for the lobby bar.

"Wisdom comes from knowing which signs to ignore," pronounces Kathleen.

Then the sights and sounds of the St. Charles streetcar driver welcomed us aboard with “slide and drop,” but I thought he said, “slide and drive.” I looked for the Pink Flamingo Restaurant among the bridal shops but couldn’t find it. I did find Emeril’s Delmonico, little pink houses, oleander blossoms and angled houses that said, “Stay out!” They were filming at Tulane. I wondered what it would be like to live in one of those mansions behind white columns, Roman shades, and beveled glass doors.

We ventured to the Maple Street Bookstore whose mantra is Fight the Stupids! I promised myself I wouldn’t overload on books. The Book Fanatic felt lucky to depart with only Vermeer postcards and two books: Natalie Goldberg’s *Top of My Lungs*, featuring her poems and paintings and *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter* by Sue Monk Kidd. I passed up Anne Lamott’s novels, *Rosie*, *All New People*, and *Crooked Little Heart*. I felt lucky to pass up the book that certainly was a bargain—John Edgar Wideman’s *My Soul Has Grown Deep* at \$9.98 for four inches and two pounds of book. And certainly I felt lucky not to have purchased Lance Armstrong’s *It’s Not About the Bike: My Journey Back to Life*. It was defective, the note said—no glue.

Our journey did lead us luckily to the Fresco Café where we enjoyed a Sampler Selection of dips and pita bread. The Klimt reproduction on the wall captures our attention—the woman feels captured and blanketed by rectangles of black and yellow, circled by spirals of red and white. She struggles away from her lover’s kisses, pursed red lips turned away, eyes closed; she breathes and sighs and thinks, “Not again.” He strokes her face tenderly. He rubs the back of her neck until the red ringlets of hair tangle in his fingers. More kisses, more sighs, less struggling, more inviting, kneeling and pulling him down into her needs, wanting just a bit more time to ready herself for the love to come.

And on the other yellow wall there is a photo from the Bergen County Sheriff’s Office. A mug shot of Frank Sinatra, age 22. Apparently, ol’ blue eyes was arrested on November 27, 1938, in Hoboken, New Jersey, for seduction. Was he crooning one of

his love songs to a young woman and she fell over in a swoon, her heart pounding out of her chest like those chickens in the cartoon? His hair falls in his face like Johnny Depp, rugged and sweet.

Back to the streetcar and we know we'll be late 'cause driver #1 won't pick us up cause she has to "meet her time" and driver #2 will only go to Lee Circle, no transfers. Slide and drop. The car fills up. Stop after stop.

Wisdom tells us to pay attention to the sign that warns us to keep our hands and heads inside before some oak branch reaches in to grab our faces. They are still filming at Tulane. A lady all dressed up in green tights walks her giant poodle. A tourist photographer on the street yells at us, "Smile!" snapping the postcard picture.

The oaks drop their limbs to the sidewalk, offering a seat to passersby. The smart painter works beneath a blue tarp. No leaves fall on his freshly painted white steps. The black woman from the Jewish Community Center across the street waits for another car. Diligently wiping her sunglasses, she mumbles to herself, "Damn tourists."

More angled houses, some with seemingly inviting sidewalks that curve and glide to glass beveled doors still saying, "Stay out!" The public library with the grassy knoll invites children to play tag while mom reads. And the next time I look up, his t-shirt reads, "Earthquake Relief—its everybody's fault." And then I notice a woman jogging behind a stroller but there's no baby inside. And the house named Monterey is for rent and the miracle healing service is set for 6:00 p.m., each Sunday.

An ice cream trunk sings. The Bon Appetite lunchbox steps down. The Florist Shop is closed. Thousands of Mardi Gras beads gracefully hang down from oak limbs reminding me of carnivals past.

Travel Day ends as it began. Readings and smiles, add sore feet, some wine and another Marathon has found its way.

***About the Author:***  
*See p. 149.*

***NAMELY***  
**HARRIET MAHER**  
**NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT OF**  
**ACADIANA**

My parents misnamed me. It happens sometimes. They think they see a name imprinted in pink wrinkles, squints, and pulsing mouth—and they pronounce it—but they’re lip reading the wrong language. Or else they work from the imagination, projecting their zygote into the future, extrapolating character and a life map from the shards of their own and speak aloud a name they see unwinding from their movie reel of the It-Will-Be.

Either way, I was obviously a Julie. They just misheard the tape at my birth. They surely wouldn’t have wished on me eight years of grade school jokes about Ozzie, Rick, and Dave, much less the lifted eyebrows and craning necks during read alouds where the maiden aunts, cruel stepmothers, and witches all shared my moniker. Did they ever wonder what it would be like to skip through life encountering only three or four others with the same name? Okay, so that’s better than being the fifth Jennifer or Ashley in the room and certainly better than Moonbeam, Oasis, or Merlot—but how much better?

In eighth grade after seeing *Dr. Zhivago*, I became Julie (for Julie Christie, my newest favorite actress) at summer leadership camp. I effected the change by writing Julie on my name tag and Julie on my dorm room door. For a week I didn’t have to repeat my name or laugh at lame riffs. When I returned home, I told my folks I wanted to make it legal.

“Let’s go to court,” I said.

“I’m surprised,” Dad countered. “I thought you liked being named after me. Your mother wanted to name you after your grandmother, but I saved you. I wouldn’t have it.”

I went blank.

“Mom wanted to name me Zoobie?”

“No. That’s your grandmother’s nickname. Her real name is Edmonia. I thought you’d prefer Harriet.”





**(*UNTITLED*)**  
**MIKE MAHER**  
**NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT OF**  
**ACADIANA**

When the huge asphalt-eating vehicle grinds its way down Decatur past Jackson Square, the earth trembles beneath our table. A mini-earthquake in the Café du Monde.

But earthquakes are perhaps the only disaster that does not imminently threaten this city. In September 2003 I chaired a panel at the Society of Environmental Journalists national convention, which met in New Orleans. The SEJ program included an opening session that was titled, “LA., not L.A., is the nation’s new disaster capital.”

Le Monde beneath its namesake Café is so trembly and plastic because 200 yards away is the Earth’s third-ranking river. Our table top is barely above sea and well below river level, yet the river, as I write in July, is at its tameest.

As John McPhee once noted in *The Control of Nature*, the bottoms of tanker ships in the Mississippi are above the level of the Astroturf in the Superdome. And the French Quarter is one of the city’s highest points. Parts of Metairie are two fathoms below sea level.

Experts say it’s inevitable that Big Muddy will wander. The Corps of Engineers has leveed the river to its mouth, which lowers the gradient of river water and makes it want to escape its levees at some future flood stage. It could escape down Canal Street.

However, the Mississippi threatens New Orleans less with flooding and more with abandonment. It would have “captured” the Atchafalaya in the flood of 1973, and taken this shorter path to the Gulf, had the Old River Control Structure not held. The Mississippi has changed course every thousand years or so throughout geologic history. When the Father of Waters sires a new river bed, New Orleans will be left to preside over a tidal mud flat that wouldn’t float a barge, let alone this city’s riverine economy.

A flood of Biblical proportions is inevitable here, but it’s less likely to come from the river as from Lake Ponchartrain. A Camille-strength Class IV hurricane will eventually push the lake over the levees. The pumps that currently drain rainwater will be overmatched and the levees will circumscribe a huge lake, Lake New Orleans. Experts predict the water will remain for six weeks or longer.

Then there’s termites. A plague of Formosan termites is gnawing much of the city, eating even the big oaks in Audubon Park, swarming so thick in the spring that evening youth baseball games have to be stopped because termite swarms have eclipsed the lights.

Out in the nearby marshes, a plague of nutrias is eating out the marsh grass, and without this protective vegetation the fragile marsh soil just washes away. And the soil itself is sinking, sinking. Louisiana has already lost an area of marsh larger than Rhode Island, and every year about 30 more square miles quietly submerges. This is basic geology; much of southeast Louisiana is recently deposited Mississippi silt, and over time gravity compacts the soil and it sinks.

These natural disasters are more than matched by Louisiana demography, a disaster in itself. In every ranking, Louisiana is at or near the bottom of any positive social indicator (e.g., education, income, birth weight, life expectancy) and at or near the top of any negative social index (teen pregnancy, crime, pollution, welfare dependency). Amazingly, if you visit the Louisiana State Museum

in the Cabildo, you find that depravity has always been the Louisiana condition.

“The Devil here has a very large empire,” Marie Madeleine Hachard, an Ursuline nun, wrote of New Orleans in the 1720s. Antebellum New Orleans had the highest death rate of any U.S. city, and the state enjoyed the worst slave rebellion and the worst Yellow Fever outbreak in American history. Louisiana’s only native-born president, Zachary Taylor, was recently voted by a panel of historians as the most inarticulate president in American history, even more syntax-challenged than George W.

To this contagion of environmental and human disaster we can add West Nile Virus, AIDS, Al-Qaeda and the Louisiana Legislature.

But life goes on. Along Bourbon Street every morning, they hose down the vomit, the urine and the broken glass and start a new day. People are happy here. Flowers bloom everywhere in this doomed city. There’s always a party going on somewhere.

New Orleans is known both as the City That Care Forgot and the City That Forgot to Care. I used to think that forgetting to care was Nero-style sybaritism. But after visiting here for 40 years, I’ve come to think that New Orleanians are like those players in Yeats’ poem “Lapis Lazuli,” who do not break up their lines to weep their tragic fates; rather, they transfer dread to gaiety.

Damn the sinking earth, let’s drink a hurricane before the next hurricane!

***About the Author:***

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# ***POEMS***

**NETTIE MCDANIEL**

## **NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT OF ACADIANA**

### **Rambling on the New Orleans Street Car**

#### *STOP 1*

The street car rumbles down Washington Avenue  
in a slow, slow, quick, quick rhythmic foxtrot.  
Oaks shade us and I am tempted to put  
my arm out of the open window. This,  
they do not teach you in T-Mamou. Here,  
the streetlamps and trees, here, they grow  
an arm's length, *un gro babine*, from the open  
window. Here I could get in trouble.

The muscular tree trunks, the black barked oaks,  
the plumbagoes become the forest. And  
my street car roars like the donkey—  
resisting the plow. Here are the limestone homes  
the paned windows, with lace curtains behind  
beveled glass, behind wrought-iron lattice,  
behind glass poured before . . . before some time  
way before when . . . just when . . . we are all  
circling the wagons and . . . oh no . . . sometime before  
even then. It may be sometime in the  
future when we, like the multi-trunked  
ligustrum, hold the hedge of the world

up by our joined arms. The roaring monster's  
heart beats when idle. Must we offer  
up our sons, must we? Must we bare  
our hearts and hold our hands aloft and pray  
to our mother as we ford the city's moats.

*Transfer*

The streetcar driver stops and then  
refuses to let us on. She says she is  
going to meet her time. The next driver  
stops and drives away. I do not hear  
his story. Still we stand with our coins in our hands  
talking about how to get on, get off,  
get down, get lost, and get on with it.

*Another stop*

Columns of the buildings descend in this column of time.  
The columns are square, solid wood. They are  
cement. They are brick, and they are oak. They  
light up on the corners. They shade us from  
the sun. Here on St. Charles, the columns are ridged;  
they are pitted. The ride is measured by  
them. Like frames in a movie which starts and  
stops connecting with darkened trunks the casual  
conversations. This slender railed path  
essential as the pregnant lady's belly  
beating as she presses her legs against the black  
ridged mat on the street car at five o'clock.  
Time for the columns of street lights, the racing  
heart beat, the swollen feet, the rest.

*Another stop*

And they are so tired and the wraparound porches  
are so wide. And they have feet which swell  
heartily. And rocking chairs are empty,

and the shade is deep, and the lawns  
and hedges are trimmed with such care.

*Last stop*

Bosoms like heavy melons move like  
they're swinging toward me, and suddenly  
I know how far back my mind drifts when  
I am tired, tired on a city bus  
with its pumping heart. And women board in gold  
earrings or braided silver ones clasped  
onto their ears. When a black and gold soft blouse,  
a crushed soft blouse still looks cool at the end  
of the day and a creamy brown woman with short  
white curls sits, twists of a black scarf about  
her head, my eyes close sweetly; I smile,  
too tired to ramble further in my thoughts.

**One million untitled portraits**

*Inspired by a collection of photographs taken by Alfred Steiglitz  
1902-1917 housed at the Fine Arts Gallery of New Orleans*

Will you take the twist of hair  
which stands upright at the back of your head,  
will you let it stand and speak  
your piece? Did no one tell you how  
to be, how to walk behind the  
dapple grey horse, rather  
than the dark, who pulls the plow?  
—how to walk from east to west?  
—how to curve the rows away  
from the wind? —how late afternoon  
light is the best in Venice villas?  
Who told you how to stand  
before the chaise? How to drape  
the fur edged wrap from your hand

which rests curled below your chin?  
Who sat the man with legs wide  
about the back of the cushioned chair  
and pulled his tie in a narrow knot?  
Who taught us to sit beneath  
the barest of winter branches  
spread over a still brook?

### **Halleluiah**

*Inspired by the photograph, Sunday School, Holiness Church  
1935, taken by Eudora Welty located in the Ogden Museum in New  
Orleans*

Of the seven young girls in print dresses  
with knitted socks tied above the knee  
who surround the wizened grandmother  
with a veiled hat on her head  
a veiled halleluiah just  
behind lips which are pressed tightly together  
. . . of the seven girls with dark eyes shining,  
large liquid white eyes, only  
one sits in a chair clasping the hand  
of this Sunday School head mistress.  
Three sit on the first step of the stage  
where the holy ghost will holler down.  
One child is watching the throat of her teacher;  
sure the time is near. Three older girls  
stand patient in their knowledge. Sincere.  
Lacking any challenge in those open eyes.

### ***About the Author:***

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***A CALIFORNIA YANKEE***  
***IN KING LOUIS' COURT***  
**EVAN NICHOLS**  
**BAY AREA WRITING PROJECT**

I am a Californian  
born near the Mexican border  
raised by the crashing waves and eucalyptus,  
by canyons and 15 minute drives  
everywhere (never walks)

I have known freeways  
freeways that wrap around a city and squeeze it to death,  
swallowing it whole

I am my father's books,  
Orwell and Hemingway in Spain  
Neruda out in the streets  
and Steinbeck's hungry-eyed kids,  
staring silently at a stick of candy

I am my mother's bacon, eggs and grits,  
all mashed together on a Sunday morning  
and her bedside read-alouds  
of giant peaches, wild things and Narnia

I am my father's picket signs  
and black fisherman's cap



in the back of a crowd  
My mother's carpet squares and picture books  
in the back of a Volvo wagon  
My father's groan-producing "We come here just for the halibut"  
My mother's biting, dry wit, often painful, always honest

I am my grandfather's grapefruit and star-gazing  
and his crazy sled-dog races in the mountains above the desert  
I am my grandmother's Jungian archetypes and Easter lamb  
her floral dresses and staggering presence

I am the phone call at age 18  
"Something's happened to your father"  
the silent ride home with my oldest friend  
the squeak of his shoe as my mom stands outside  
and tells me that my Pa has died

I have known rivers and creeks  
In Muir's mountains  
An icy cold that will stop and start your heart  
I have thrown my body into the waterfall current  
and made for the sunny slab of an enormous rock  
I have gawked over and over and over  
at the sheer walls and pounding falls  
of Yosemite Valley  
the clear green Merced winding through snowy banks  
and autumn leaves  
and Japanese cameras  
and a German tourist,  
taking a long drag on his cigarette,  
"You have beautiful landscapes here, but no culture."

I am the towering redwoods  
and sparkling Pacific  
beneath the soccerballs and frisbees

of U.C. Santa Cruz  
I am the banana slugs  
and dorm radios,  
blaring R.E.M.'s  
"It's the end of the world as we know it . . ."  
as the first Bush came along

I am my wife Amy's Sicilian eyes and Irish cheeks,  
her father's father reciting Dangerous Dan McGrew  
her father returning from WWII,  
sailing beneath the Golden Gate Bridge  
and seeing San Francisco for the first time

her mother's mother hanging pasta to dry  
on every chair in the house  
her mother's opera and flowers  
passion and jitterbug

I am Amy's kindness and sense of family,  
our walks through the meadows of Santa Cruz  
and the streets of L.A.  
and now the trails of the Oakland hills

I am the tolerance of California,  
the mixing of colors and creeds,  
the sock that came out pink in the wash,  
the clothes no longer holding back their dyes

Most of all I am my daughter, Maya's,  
two and a half years of existence  
but she is too big and beautiful  
and I am too weak  
to capture that here

I think that a parent's love for a child  
is like the opposite of cancer,  
it grows in you in a strengthening way,  
filling in the holes in your bones,  
revitalizing your organs  
and purifying your flesh,  
but it also hurts like hell

In February of each year,  
invariably on or within a few days  
of my wife Amy's birthday,  
the cherry plum tree in our back yard  
bursts into brilliant white bloom,  
Snowing lightly in the breeze for weeks  
I told Maya that was Mama's tree  
I pointed to the bouquet of white and said "Mama did that."

Now, no matter what date or place,  
whenever we pass a tree in bloom,  
she sticks out her tiny finger  
and cries, "Mama did that!"

I am too much to capture  
as I make a mad dash across New Orleans  
in the back of a cussing grumbling taxi cab  
bumper to bumper on Bourbon Street,  
toiling down Toulouse

I am something new every moment,  
a clipping about the barkeep and the little man  
on the wall of Molly's,  
the guy outside the cathedral  
telling his tarot buddy,  
"My phone's at the bottom of Lake Ponchatrain right now. . . .  
Can I take a message?"

And, finally,  
I am that man on my plane,  
returning home to New Orleans  
who turned to his wife and said,  
“You wait for this trip  
and you wait for this trip  
and you blink your eyes . . .  
and it’s over.”

***About the Author:***

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***THREE CHERRY LUNCH: A  
COLLABORATION***  
**BOBBI ORMISTON AND EVA GUILLOT**  
**NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT OF  
ACADIANA**

Bobbi: Can you believe that guy called us the “Blunt Sisters?”

Eva: Well, I guess I brought it on since I was staring at his bald head and the crucifix hanging from his ear. But he started it when he came on to us.

Bobbi: Was he nosy or what? “I know whenever I see someone writing, they must have interesting lives? What are you writing about? Me?” (speaking like Harry)

Eva: You started it when you found that prophylactic toothbrush at The Royal Pharmacy for 47 cents. I asked that lady what it was used for and she said, “For protection.”

Bobbi: Yeah, protection from what? Dick breath? What else would you use it for? It’s like that Toilet Water. Why would you pay for Toilet Water when you can get it for free?

Eva: Yeah, but it only cost 57 cents for 16 oz. It would have been nice if the soda fountain had worked.

Bobbi: I coulda used one of those triple dip cold fudge sundaes—

Eva: For 25 cents.

Together: Yumm!!

Bobbi: Did you see that sign? 10 cents for a Cherry Smash. . . .

- Eva: Don't even go there! Back to Harry. What was his beef with the cop? Was he rude or what?
- Bobbi: Yeah, I had to check to make sure I wasn't at the corner of Blunt and Rude.
- Eva: Can you believe he actually sang for us?
- Bobbi: His voice was beautiful but his face looked like a Picasso painting the way it was all contorted. (Makes facial gestures)
- Eva: Did you get a picture?
- Bobbi: Four of them. Wanna see?
- Eva: Let's get serious. What did you learn about New Orleans this week?
- Bobbi: #1, Ceiling fans are a must!
- Eva: What else?
- Bobbi: #2, You can't drink a Pere Punch through a cherry stem.
- Eva: It only took you six cherries to figure that out?
- Bobbi: Well, I guess I know what a cherry smash is now.
- Eva: Don't go there! What else?
- Bobbi: #3, I heard this ol' boy from Texas say that cows are cleaner than winos.
- Eva: For true?
- Bobbi: And I know that once the smell of tar penetrates your nose, there's not much you can do.
- Eva: Except smoke a cigarette.
- Bobbi: And lastly, never say Dick to a man unless you mean it!
- Eva: And you wonder why he called us the "Blunt Sisters!"
- Bobbi: Can I be Frank?
- Eva: No, you were Frank the last time!

The End

***About the Authors:***

*Bobbi Ormiston teaches photography, videography and TV production for the Lafayette Parish School System at The Career Center in Lafayette, LA. For information about Eva Guillot, see p. 149.*

***LES POISSONS***  
**AUSTEN REILLEY**  
**MOREHEAD WRITING PROJECT**

WE DRINK TO BREATHE IN THIS PLACE—  
scales steamed soft over the sizzling pavement,  
shells conjured open by charlatans and  
two true healers as we  
circle Jackson Square looking for  
a cool place to stand still.

I wash my feet in Cardinal Richelieu's bath  
watching others splash in their clothing,  
awaiting spaghetti a la bicyclist in the garden where  
loaves and fishes translate to  
French bread and crabcakes, but  
wine flows universal red.

My friend goes twice to the river to pray,  
once in a church, a shrine to bones,  
once on the industrial River Styx ferry.  
She finds phosphorescent heat in her hands that night,  
and is adamant she must give it away to bodies with us who need it  
in some example of interdependence in nature.  
She drains herself and stumbles up Bourbon happy,  
sweating for the first time since I've known her.



I feel safe in this circular Square,  
to stop darting and hiding,  
to explore the sunken, forgotten  
wreckage that once was beautiful.  
I dive without fear of the salt in my eyes,  
without fighting against the Cradling Current.  
He will have His way with me.

***About the Author:***

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# ***POEMS***

**MARGARET SIMON**

## **NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT OF ACADIANA**

### **The Ogden Roof**

Up on the roof of art, we look out to the Mississippi River bridge,  
Cars speed by on the loop-d-loop ramps of the highway.  
A gentle breeze reminds us that it is summer.

We sit in plastic Barbie dollhouse sofas and chairs.  
“Let’s pick two pieces to read,” says Nettie.  
“Does anyone *else* have two pieces to read?” questions Dixie.  
“I didn’t even write,” exclaims Harriet  
aghast that she forgot to stop for the assignment.

We’re a circle of friends,  
A family of women  
Who love,  
Grieve,  
Appreciate art  
And words and  
Walk the streets of New Orleans  
Looking for  
Inspiration.

Oh, to delight in poetry as Nettie does,  
To analyze like Kathleen,

To notice colors and details like Harriet,  
Or contemplate the world as Dixie.

I wrap them up in my collection of  
“people who influence me.”  
I’ll take them home in my memory and someday  
Carve them into something new—  
As an artist does.

### **Wanting**

“I had the time of my life and I owe it all to you,”  
echoes in the small La Marquise coffee shop on Chartres.

When we leave  
And go back to our normal lives,  
We will want to be back here,  
Sitting in La Marquise sipping tea  
Listening to old favorites.

We will want  
To walk the streets of the New Orleans Quarter  
And just be.

I’ll wake up tomorrow,  
Feed the dogs,  
Make the coffee,  
Check my e-mail,  
And go to the dentist.

In the chair while Dr. Rougeou pokes  
And drills and suction my teeth  
With plastic gloved hands,  
I will close my eyes,  
Sing, “Na, na, na, na, na, na,”

And dream  
In poems.

## **Inspiration**

Where are you going?  
Where have you been?  
I've been to the mountains of New Mexico,  
The piney hills of Mississippi,  
The littered streets of the Crescent City.

I have collected cottonwood seeds,  
Skipping stones,  
Photographs,  
And words.

Words of songs,  
Words of stories,  
Words of poems,  
a scrapbook  
Sampling of lives.

I am going to the concrete steps  
of the wood framed door  
of my third grade classroom.  
I will open the door,  
Arrange the desks,  
Dust the shelves,  
And buy new fish.

I will greet second graders  
With their mommies  
And show them their places.  
I will tell them my story

listen to theirs.

Here I plant seeds,  
Pray for them to grow  
to harvest into a small print acknowledgment  
In the forward of a novel  
(The page I always skip to get to the story)  
A thank you to  
Mrs. Simon, my third grade teacher,  
Who inspired me  
to be  
a writer.

***About the Author:***

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