Speaking of Feathers . . . a Reflection on the NWP Writing Retreat in Santa Fe

by Kathleen O'Shaughnessy

I'm taking home a feather from Santa Fe. My friend Phil gave it to me, and I pressed it in my journal. My friend Phil was a total stranger to me three days ago—almost total. I had read his name and a little professional information on his application for this year's "Writing About Our Practice" retreat—the National Writing Project Writing Retreat held at Sunrise Springs near Santa Fe—but after working with my fellow facilitators to select this year's participants, I'd filed the applications and forgotten most of the names. At this year's retreat, as at the previous four, polite strangers arrived on a Thursday afternoon and became cordial colleagues by bedtime, jovial acquaintances by Friday's lunch, and respectful friends by the time we all went off to bed too late on Saturday night—reluctant to part on Sunday morning.

Every year, at this retreat and in other places where writing project colleagues have gathered, I've found myself engaged in conversations about how to strike the right balance between personal and professional writing. How much professional writing should be done in a summer institute? How do you handle a participant who's been selected for a professional writing retreat but only wants to write poems? At this year's retreat, I didn't have to go looking for balance; it appeared right in front of me.

In blocks of time from two to four hours long, the 17 participants worked on and wrestled with pieces of writing about their practice. They worked alone and in writing groups, sitting at computers or perched on rocks, stopping only for "check-ins" with the whole group and to eat. But even as we ate, even as we laughed and traded stories, their minds were working out ways to show us the dilemmas and the triumphs in their professional lives.

Betty Jo wrangled with a bear—the research paper—and Brendan sought to propitiate the titans who guard the cave of change at his school. Harriet clutched her favorite book—the book she loves too much to share even with her own child—but she shared it with us in her story about its lessons in her personal and teaching lives. Kirsty relearned science, and Andy reexamined American literature to redress the wrongs done to their students by a dismissive dominant culture. Sherri and Greg sought writing instruction in art experiences, and Cathie recounted the value of NWP's online interactive network.

Teachers brought more than laptops to Santa Fe; in their writings, they brought their students. Laurie brought Travis, a victim of the conflicting mandates of new federal laws, and Lisa showed us, with Tamara's story, the importance of collaboration among teachers trying to help a struggling student. Gwen brought four teachers' stories, the same stories she's been carrying with her since her first trip to Sunrise Springs in 1999. There's more she wants to learn from their journeys into leadership. Christine's student Damien ran ADHD-induced circles around her as she deplored budget-cuts that ignore his needs, and Alice's ten-dollar bills disappeared into the enviable problem of too many "top-reader" awards.

Their writing is professional; it "renders experience" as Tom Romano describes. It has voice and benefit for the reader, "warts and all." But it's also intensely personal. Phil read, in the "official" read-aloud session, about how his strategy, called a "preposition walk," turned a grammar lesson into a scene from an action-adventure movie. Later the same night, during a spontaneous, no-limits "open mic" session, he read his metaphorical reflection of his first teaching year. He cried about his failure to juggle more balls than one person possibly could, and we cried with him for his failures and for ours. With tears in my eyes, the lines between personal and professional blur. Phil the teacher, Phil the compassionate man—how can I separate the two? How can he?

Before the open mic session ended, our eyes had also filled with tears of laughter as four new friends recounted their adventures, setting out on a quest for bargains in Santa Fe and ending up in a search for a map and their way back home. In their searches, they found a writing activity about point of view and sketched out a proposal to make a conference presentation of it. Neal read about a history class gone awry, and someone asked, "Is that fiction?" Everyone who'd spoken with Neal this weekend answered with him, "There's no such thing as fiction." I think of Tom Romano again: "The writer wears a mask to seek the truth." And I catch a glimpse of a strange new bird, a hybrid, and I start to understand that what's needed between personal and professional writing isn't a balance, but a blending.

The best teachers I know use who they are as professionals. They blend the personal and the professional on all the time in our classrooms, so what better stance to take for writing about our practices there? And if the blending results in a few tears of laughter or of empathy, it doesn't diminish the professional integrity of the work. It only shows how profoundly we respect each other, relate to each other, and understand the issues when our colleagues invest their whole selves in their teaching and in their writing.

On our way to the airport, Bob—a co-director and I talk quietly about professional things and personal things, and I think I see that bird again, but it's only a glimpse. Elusive bird, this hybrid. I can't draw you a picture or provide a concise description like those in my Audubon Society Field Guide. But I have this feather, and that's a start.

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