When Sparrows Speak

BY PHILIP IRELAND

I sat sleepy-eyed before my computer. The heat of the afternoon, the helter-skelter twittering of the sparrows, and the constant splash of the fountain lulled me. I fingered back and forth from one document to the other, getting nowhere with either. I ought to give in to the nap and be done with it.

The wind, up now in the late afternoon, chased the heat. The sun dipped behind the tops of the slender cottonwoods that shaded this drowsy dell outside Santa Fe. I sat hypnotized by the cottonwood seeds as they swirled in lazy corkscrews across the pond. The seeds, about the size of a flea encased in a dozen wispy filaments, resembled a large snowflake or tiny fluff of cotton. Like fireflies, the seeds exploded in radiance, backlit by the sun as they flew through shafts of hot white light.

Everywhere, the seeds gathered in drifts: under bushes, in corners, along walkways. The overall scene captivated me: a snowstorm lit by the sun that dusted the landscape and drifted in banks, all in July and about 90 degrees. A wondrous warm, drowsy dreamland, and I'm here as a witness. I struggled to return myself to my writing task but soon gave up. Be where you are, a friend said once. When sleepy, sleep. How Zen.

The next morning, the vision of the cottonwood seedstorm still fresh, I rounded the corner, head down, walking to breakfast at the Blue Heron restaurant. There on the red-and-gray granite patio amid a raucous twittering flitting maze of coming and going, hopped a sparrow. I stopped cold. A single gray feather jackknifed out of its beak like a contraband Cubano.

"How odd," I thought. "This tiny bird clutching a six-inch tail feather. Why? What would this bird do with its prize? How did it get it?"

For a just a few seconds the bird hopped about, wary and fearful that something might come along and rob it of its Saturday morning treasure.

The instant I moved again, the sparrow fled, darting headlong into a wall of cottonwood fluff. That bank of Santa Fe snow opened momentarily to engulf the bird and then closed again, hiding all signs of passage. The spell broken, I walked on, happy to have been privy to such a curious quirky moment. As I climbed the steps to our breakfast alcove, the scene remained, blending with a vision of those cottonwood seeds swirling toward me.

I told the story at breakfast to fellow writers.

"There's a metaphor in there somewhere," Kathleen said. "I do it all the time. I collect stuff like that, like that feather."

"A metaphor," I thought. We ate and then walked to the morning meeting. I walked in the atrium door as writers gathered their tools and minds and plans. I should work on the proposal, my head said, but my feet disagreed. I walked out the other side into the sun and back toward my sparrow's home. There I sat on a rock wall to put these two ideas together in a poem, feeling only slightly guilty for frittering away project time.

Unfinished, I folded up my laptop and walked toward the scheduled meeting with my response group. As I walked, I thought. The seeds of the cottonwoods, those tiny wisps of enormous potential, falling like snow; the bank of cottonwood seeds providing a vapidous wall for the sparrow's home; this tiny bird hefting an enormous feather for who-knows-what purpose.

We are all seeds of great potential. We blow about or fly by design, taking with us those things we value for purposes as yet unknown.

I smiled, realizing I now had the end of my poem—and something more, too.

Kathleen sat with Bob discussing someone's work. They looked up when I approached. "That metaphor," I said. "The feather. We are all collecting feathers. We just don't know why sometimes, for what purpose."

Kathleen smiled.

Walking past the pond later, through another swirling snowstorm of seeds, I found a feather in my path; this one brown and white. I smiled and carried it about as I walked through wind and seeds and raw, close-to-the-skin thoughts.

Later still as we wrapped up the weekend with last thoughts, Kathleen mentioned the feather again. I dug into my knapsack.

"This must be yours," I thought. I handed it to her. She took it and tucked it away in her journal.

PHILIP IRELAND, a recovering print journalist, teaches seventh grade language arts and social science at San Marcos Middle School, California. He is a teacher-consultant with the San Marcos Writing Project. He is currently working on a book of activity-based best practices in grammar based on the work of Howard Gardner.

NWP Directors Retreat

continued from page 11

customized "to-do" lists that will allow them to better advance the work of their sites and the mission of NWP.

As Mary Ann Smith confirmed, the directors retreat has become an institution. Since Sherry Swain conceived of and implemented the idea in 1996, the directors retreat has become a place for leaders of sites to envision needs and to grow by more fully understanding their roles. Since my experience in 1997, I have seen Sherry and the leadership team refine the retreat to meet the needs of site leaders by providing the compost for understanding how each site develops organically—just as NWP leaders, over the past thirty years, have continued to flesh out the writing project journey, while holding firm to the values of the model.

The retreat's intense agenda was soothed by the drenching rain, the scenic Catskills, the sumptuous family-style feasts, occasional walks with Sam and Paco, an afternoon writing marathon, and evenings of song and dance to the guitar melodies of Spike Harris and Nick Coles. But despite that agenda, I am still thinking about the insights I gained from the retreat a month afterward. I understand that for a site to flourish, its leaders must develop and continually nurture a vision. This growth is the opportunity the directors retreat provides.

References


NOUGHELA FESPERMAN, the director of the UNC Charlotte Writing Project, has associated with the writing project since 1982. She currently teaches freshman composition at UNC Charlotte. Before this, she taught high school English, drama, and journalism for 32 years.