

Following is a reflection on the 2002 NWP Writing Retreat from participant-writer Bill Connolly.

Wherever You Go, Writing Is Hard Work

by Bill Connolly

I am in a place of exquisite beauty, surrounded by a group of inspirational colleagues—all serious about the need and desire to write—and it's still so damn hard for me to write. I am sitting on a shaded patio, typing away on my laptop, with the lilting sounds of a distant musical troupe blending with the bubbling of nearby fountains . . . and yet I'm playing Space Invaders with my backspace key, trying to figure out how to end this very paragraph.

So I guess you can take a writer from the sea-level beauty of New Jersey and raise him 6,200 feet to this land of red rocks and dry heat, but you cannot necessarily elevate him to the mountains of writing ease. I lost myself in the desert grandeur of Santa Fe, but I could not hide from the truth: wherever you go, writing is hard work.

There is an odd comfort in that realization. It's affirming to know that the people with whom you work at the retreat—some who have published books, others who are embarking on projects of impressive depth and relevance—have their bad days. They, too, have their doubts about writing anything that anyone would ever *want* to read.

Do our students ever enjoy the affirming misery of that company? Just as some of us came here convinced that some clerical error or oversight had somehow landed us here among these more worthy, talented writers, how many of our students sit in their seats, thinking, "I'm the worst writer in the room"?

In the end, it's not really a question of competence. It's about the mythology of writing and, more often, the perfectionism of the writer. Myths are often based on elementary ideas, and so I say to my students with Forrest Gump-like simplicity, "A writer is someone who writes." This conflicts with their notion that writers are god-like figures who sit at long tables in the fronts of bookstores signing their latest best seller.

The myth that is harder to dispel is that any "real" writer does so effortlessly. Her pen is a fluent paintbrush of compositional brilliance; his nimble fingers dance across the keyboard like those of a piano virtuoso. It is the sad fate of the rest of us to slog

through the muck and murkiness of our writing, hitting the save button with a sense of desperate futility. "What's the point?" we wonder.

The point is simply to write. If I measure my success here at the retreat in number of articles accepted, book prospecti completed, or number of compliments from writing group members received, I should have stayed in the humidity and summer haze of South Jersey. What I must reflect upon proudly is the fact that I kept writing. I realized that the people around me were in the same wretched boat as I; all were rowing furiously, some were cresting waves and others were taking on water. Still, we kept rowing.

That's all I want my students to do, and that's all the leaders at Sunrise Springs asked of us. We eventually left our inner critics down by the meditation pool or back in our rooms, and we sat with our fellow writers who had come from north, south, east, and west. We listened, we wrote, and then we listened some more.

I came to Sunrise Springs with pieces of a book, and I return home with even more pieces but no whole. I do, however, have a greater sense of what that whole may be one day and a plan to continue my self-discovery as a writer. My writing group and Joe Check helped me realize that what was holding me back were issues for another time. For now, my job was to write.

In a little over a week, I will begin my leadership of one of our site's summer institutes; in a few months, I will be back in my classroom with new groups of young writers. My Santa Fe experiences will be a part of who I am and how I work with our participants and my students. In both groups, it is likely that few will have been to Santa Fe and none will have attended a summer writing retreat. As writers, though, they have all been there. No matter where you are, I will tell them, writing is just damn hard.

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