Conformity Meets Creativity

by Kathy Woods

Conformity motivated every move. Acceptance to an eighth grade girl in Norman, Oklahoma, in 1985 meant shoulder-length bobbed hair topped by bangs teased to attention for hours in front of the mirror with a can of hair spray. Melanie epitomized the girls’ quest for popularity. From her lovely mouth issued the most hateful comments, about Monica or Todd or Kimberly—whoever was out of the room at the moment. Framed by the requisite bob, her face was a mask of harshness, eyes artfully painted and redone at lunch in the bathroom, only to roll the more swiftly when called upon to answer a question. Teachers were a mere nuisance to be tolerated in their interference with the real business of making friends and eliminating the competition in her climb to the top of the clique. The conforming boys could be friendlier, but their chosen dress code was strict: polo shirts neatly tucked into khaki pants or narrow jeans, and short, neat hair.

Teachers were a mere nuisance to be tolerated in their interference with the real business of making friends and eliminating the competition in the climb to the top of the clique.

To an idealistic student teacher, the sameness was disheartening, and I was intimidated by these eighth-graders. Still, I loved every minute in the classroom with “my” students (their rolling eyes and all), fulfilled with the assurance of having arrived home after a tiring trip. Although I never wavered in my sincerity, in my passion for literature, in my desire to teach, I felt alienated from these adolescents whose sneers had replaced innocent childhood smiles, whose apathy squelched the natural eagerness to learn and express. I, an outsider, taught them and was appalled by their quirkiness, their frequent changes of friends, their cruel offhand remarks characterized by “Can you believe that outfit Tiffany’s wearing?” or, facing their assigned group of three classmates, “Why do I have to be in a group with nobody?”

One afternoon, we began a unit of study in collaboration with the science department. The topic was conservation. In our language arts class, we read stories about animals and their struggle for survival and began the process of creative writing. Each teenager was to write a story about an animal. I observed the skill and enthusiasm of my mentor-teacher as she smiled in her guidance of the adolescents. I did not understand. She made suggestions while they did as asked and wrote down their ideas on the short story plan sheet. After many steps, the stories were finished and turned in to me to be evaluated.

Sitting at my table on the periphery of the classroom, I read their final products in amazement. One story after another revealed the sweet innocence of its author. My mouth hanging open, I read my nemesis Melanie’s piece about a bunny who had to find a new home for her family. With Melanie’s cuddly protagonist in my heart, I glanced up at a class transformed to children I could reach.

Never again have I been fooled by a facade of indifference, conformity, or apathy worn by teenagers like proud warriors’ shields. Every teenager is at heart a young child yearning for acceptance, love, and self-expression. My understanding extends to students a peace treaty. Evoking creativity continues the truce, and we learn together—I, ignoring the adolescent defense mechanisms that intimidated me 16 years ago; they, welcoming the comfort and fulfillment of expressing themselves while learning, through stories, essays, class discussion, and informal sharing.

I offer this peace treaty every day I teach, with smiles, acceptance, and activities requiring students to look into their hearts. In a thematic literature unit on identity, students begin by defining identity and individuality. They discuss conformity and its benefits and price. We read a story called “Fan Club,” about a girl ostracized by her classmates because of her dress clothes and unorthodox address. In their discussion, students allow themselves to reveal their compassion, having quickly recognized their toughness is ineffective with me.

The styles have changed. I’ve been confronted by conforming teenagers with baggy pants that must be held up as they walk, with eyes watering from the heavy rim of black eyeliner, with gelled spiky hair, and green hair and purple hair. Sometimes the goal is conformity, as it was with Melanie, sometimes individual expression, yet the outer shell intimidates the initiated. On the first day of school when I encounter the “don’t try to move me” insolence of a modern Melanie, I smile, and ask students to define courage, to share their most courageous experience. And they do—they’ve been waiting for the chance.

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Visioning Retreat

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with the Delta Area Writing Project. Richard Louth and Mary Beth Crovatta from the Louisiana state network contributed to the work of the Foundation for the Mid-South task group, with Mary Beth becoming a presenter for two of the Louisiana middle schools served by the grant.

Before saying our goodbyes on Sunday, seven task groups had shared the results of their weekend work—which included timelines and plans for continued work throughout the year. The goodbye itself was prolonged, all of us in a circle, arms around each other, listening to the new NWP CD release, Rural Voices Radio II, laughing and crying, and being grateful for the opportunity to work together for the students and teachers in our state.

Writing projects in Mississippi, and everywhere, are like rivers—we flow into every accessible space, making our marks on local and state education agendas, like flood levels carved into pilings. Our state network Visioning Retreat is one of the ways we make our mark.

Sherry Swain is director of the Mississippi Writing/Thinking Institute state network and national chair of NWP state networks.