



Kelly Lock-McMillen

## Journey to the Center of a Writer's Block

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In 2010, my muse packed her writing prompts and left. I can't blame her. I was drowning in lesson plans, grading, and data collection, which left little time to write. To tempt my muse's return, I christened a room of my house "The Virginia Woolf," hoping that having a room of my own would break my writer's block. I even took a job as Library Media Specialist but continued to teach one section of Dual Credit English, hoping that I would have more time for inspiration, but nothing worked. For years, writing had been my lifeline; however, the duties of teaching took their toll, and I slowly stopped putting pen to page. When negativity moved into the space where my muse once lived, I acquiesced to the voice saying maybe it was time to admit I wasn't a writer. For a year, I didn't attempt to write a single word for myself, but when Dr. Susan Martens, the Director of the Prairie Lands Writing Project, sent an invitation to attend the New Orleans Writing Marathon, aptly titled "Finding Your Muse in New Orleans," I knew I had to go, find my muse, and bring her home.

The New Orleans Writing Marathon, headed by Dr. Richard Louth, offered a new location to explore, a group of passionate teachers and writers with whom I could write, and daily inspirational lessons from Kim Stafford, and all were perfectly organized so we had time for solitude and community, both essential for a writer. Each morning after Stafford's lesson, we ventured out in small groups as writers and introduced ourselves to those we met in that way. Our mantra, "I am a writer," changed the negative voice in my head. Being a writer wasn't something to prove but something we were. All we had to do was capture the ordinary movements of life, awaken our imaginations, and find the beauty in the simplest

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movement, color, or sound. Thus, the ivy hanging from iron balconies, and the Spanish moss draped over the limb of an old tree became the strands of my muse's hair; the humid air became her breath hot against my ear as she whispered words I wrote in my journal. After each of us shared the writing we had written at that location, our response was simply, "Thank you," and the muse's hand gently pushed us to a new location. We saw the beauty of the muse's face in alleyways, felt her heartbeat in the jazz vibrating through the air, and noticed the nuances of an unknown street through our feet.

This archetypal journey fills ancient and modern literature: a woman sets out on a journey, finds herself alone in a new land, meets people along the way, listens to their stories, tells her own, and learns something about herself, which allows her to see with new eyes. As a result, if I was to break the writer's block, I had to let go of mundane experiences and venture down into the belly of my writer's block so that I might reemerge the writer I wanted to be.

Because of the marathon, I filled a 70-page spiral notebook, and for the first time in years I was able to write more than just diary-like entries. I wholeheartedly believe in the power of daily writing. I ask my students to write everyday, but for some reason I diminished my daily writings. When Stafford discussed his father's daily ritual of waking early, writing his schedule and daily ideas, then letting the pen roll on the page until the profound emerged, I remembered what I tell my students, "Sometimes you don't know what you have to say until you've written your way to the end." Despite teaching my students this lesson, I had forgotten it. At some point, I succumbed to the idea that I had to be struck with inspiration before I could write. I release my students of this burden because they are still learning; New Orleans reminded me I am still learning, too. As I began to climb deeper into my writer's block, I realized that writing about the places we saw in New Orleans allowed me to connect with my own stories long forgotten but were worthy of being told. Inspiration must be born from writing daily: begin with the simplest notion until a truth is revealed, then meditate about that truth through writing.

During a morning session, Stafford told us that Buddha believed there were two kinds of suffering: the kind that leads to more suffering and the kind that ends it. The first pain comes from trying to grasp what we cannot hold or pushing away the unpleasant; the second is the suffering that happens when you allow yourself to feel an experience. On one of our last days, I saw placards with the names of the muses sitting on the counter of a cafe. I wanted to grab Calliope, stick her in my bag, and rejoice that my suffering would now be over, but I had learned that naming my writing space "The Virginia Woolf" had solved nothing, so a placard with a muse's name would not elicit a triumphant return of my muse, either.

We had lunch and went to the séance room at Muriel's where the spirits of writers and believers ran their fingers along my bare arms, filling me with an energy I had felt at each of our morning and evening marathon meetings. I had also felt that energy on the Chalmette Battlefield during one of my group's writing stops. It was there, I opened myself to feel the experience of the Writing Marathon. I imagined War of 1812 soldiers fighting for their freedoms and recalled the stories of my great-grandfather fighting in World War I. The juxtaposition of two wars, two experiences against my own pulled me further into the abyss of my emotions, and I was finally able to feel my muse; she hadn't packed up and left me at all. She is my voice, and I simply wasn't taking the time to nurture her or listen when she spoke.

Although this journey had a profound change on my personal writing, it also rejuvenated the passion I have for teaching writing. The Writing Marathon reiterated the importance of daily writing and building a community of writers—not test takers. It provided the proof that my students should not be confined to the four walls of a classroom or the pages of a textbook. A new location allows us to see our lives and experiences contrasted against a new backdrop and writing about that contrast opens the door to journey further into the unseen recesses of memory, where a writer can transcribe the words of her inner voice, and emerge triumphantly with new understanding—a gift that would never have been given had I not taken the time to write among a group of people brought together for the sole purpose of discovering

that the muse isn't external or ethereal; the muse resides within each of us. The writing marathon allowed me meet new people who helped create a synergy that forced me to journey through my writer's block where I had to face my own doubt and fear of failure. In the end, the New Orleans Writing Marathon wasn't about some finish line but about the journey of discovering that when I boarded the plane home I wasn't bringing back my muse but, instead, turning up the volume on my own voice. This is what I hope to teach my students each day I step foot in the classroom, but the marathon reminded me that leaving the classroom can revitalize the writing—and teaching of writing—made stale by an educational system that breeds the mundane.