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Bringing It Back Home: The NOWM in My Classroom

Omaha

My plans for taking my eighteen high school creative writing students on a mini-writing marathon seemed to be dashed by the cold weather that heralded the beginning of winter on a November day in Nebraska. Before the cold set in, I had visions of them walking across the street to the local coffee shop, or even through the beautiful neighborhoods that surround our urban school district.

In my second year as a creative writing teacher, I constantly searched for new ways to challenge students and transform my classroom into a safe writing space, so I had taken a page out of the National Writing Project's summer institute model and used that to inform my classroom. Students were allowed time to write about anything, and then they shared their writing in groups each week. But after writing in the same place week in and week out, I wanted to give them a new experience. I should have known that the long, mild autumn wouldn't last, and my lesson plans would have to be rewritten. Then my mind drifted back to summer when I'd walked the streets of New Orleans on my own writing marathon.

In July of 2014, I was invited to travel to New Orleans for the annual New Orleans Writing Marathon hosted by Richard Louth and the Southeast Louisiana Writing Project. My first day of marathoning began on Wednesday, a day later than the other members of the marathon, due to scheduling conflicts. I felt out of place, and out of time, but I found my old friend Susan Martens, she introduced me to many other writers, and that discomfort disappeared. The writing marathon

began in the morning with an almost spiritual reading and prompting by our guest guide, Kim Stafford, which led us into the city with new eyes and a writing focus. He told us to write *for* someone, to go out into the world and write for one specific person. I considered his words and began walking through the streets of New Orleans with my fellow writers seeking a subject, someone to write *for*.

Omaha

My eighteen junior and senior students walked into our classroom, which is a large auditorium with a capacity for two-hundred. I stood on the floor below and delivered an impassioned speech that I hoped echoed Kim Stafford: I told them that I had planned on taking them on a writing marathon, but the weather had not cooperated. Then, I shared my inspiration with them: “But if you still want to go on a writing marathon, we can do it inside. I know what you’re thinking... *what is there to write about in this building where we sit for hours every day?* However, I think you’ll find that when you go to a place, even a familiar place, and look at it with writerly eyes, you will see it in a new way and find inspiration.” My previous experience with New Orleans had been in 2009, for my wedding and honeymoon, so it was a city full of memories for me; what I discovered during my writing marathon was that visiting a place is not the same as writing within a place. Maybe I could use that difference to get my students writing. Going to school in a place would not be the same as writing within that place. So, I gave them a choice of going on the marathon or staying here and working in groups. They all chose to marathon.

At the beginning of the school year, I had been so inspired by New Orleans that I took them on a make-shift marathon on the first day of class, so this wasn’t a completely new concept for them, but this was the first time they would go on their own into the world as writers. We gathered in a small circle on the floor of the auditorium and I handed out a sheet of paper with the rules of the marathon. We read the rules together, and I stressed that there were to be no

comments made on writing. “Just say, ‘thank you’ after each reading. No comments.” Each of us went around the circle and introduced ourselves as writers. Then I let them huddle up in their small groups to choose three locations in the school that would be good places to write in, with the number one rule being DO NOT DISTURB classes in session. Each group gave me their list and then I let them go out into the world (school building) as writers. The groups were lively and energetic. They shouted out places that they wanted to go, and other group members would echo approval or shout out vetoes. In what seemed like no time at all, groups of four or five were lining up at the door to leave handing me a list of stops within the building.

As they left, I hoped that they would see places within this familiar dull institution with fresh writer’s eyes. I knew that this wasn’t the French Quarter, and a transformation couldn’t take place in less than two hours, but I still had my hopes of shaking off some of the mildew of the familiar space, and unearthing some inspiration.

New Orleans

There we were on the streets of New Orleans, and after lunch, Susan suggested that we go to a bar for a drink. She had a list of “must see” stops in the French Quarter, and the closest one was the Good Friends bar just up Dauphine St. This is where I met my muse, J. J. the bartender, who would become the subject of my ode.

“Hey, girl, hey!” the bartender called as we walked in. This refrain was J.J.’s calling card, and he would shout it out the windows at men who passed by the bar trying to lure them in to have a drink. I sat down at the bar, and he offered me the bar’s signature ice cream drink which he lovingly called an “ass cheek spreader” but is officially called “The Separator.” We all tried it. The drink was creamy and delicious, but at eight-dollars a glass, we all opted for the happy hour beer

specials. I took my bottle and moved to the window seat, opened my laptop and began to write as I listened to J. J. spout his bartender's wisdom.

He told us about his upbringing in South Carolina, his hatred for Michael Jackson and the time he thwarted a mugger who tried to steal his grandmother's ring off his finger. With a smile he said, "Don't try to take what's mine, or I will go bat shit crazy on you."

Omaha

My students had all left, and I was in the empty auditorium watching Twitter. I told students to share their places using #westsidemarathon, but there were no tweets. So much for technology. However, I did get a few texts from one group who treated the marathon as a mission and felt the need to check-in every now and then.

New Orleans

Had I been a typical New Orleans tourist simply looking for a place to have a drink, I might have only stayed at Good Friends for a beer, and then walked away seeking more experiences. But as a writer, I dug my heels in and began to own the place and the bartender and everyone there through my writing. This place became my place because I wrote it. I tried to capture J. J.'s phrenetic voice through a poem called "Hey Girl, Hey" which will appear in an upcoming issue of the *Louisiana Literature Journal*.

My smile is wide
A grin like Pontchartrain
Southern Swagger when I walk
and Carolina Sugar when I talk

I can mix a cocktail
I can pull a pint of ale
but when the ladies walk in
this is what I say,

Hey girl, hey!
 (How ya doin' JJ?)
 Hey girl, hey!
 (What's the special today?)

Omaha

Back in the present Nebraska November, my students began returning from their own marathons group by group. Writing marathons rely on three basic ingredients: place, motion, and sharing. Each new place leads to new writing, and the motion of going from place to place forces one's mind to engage. Finally, because the writer shares as the marathon continues, the writing becomes more focused and developed for the audience. As my students recongregated, I asked them to share their reflections of their experience while also choosing a brief passage to share with everyone. The reactions were positive, far more positive than I would have thought when I sent them out into such a familiar space to search for inspiration.

One student wrote, "I liked that this got me out and writing in places other than my normal spots. I found things coming very easily to me and my brain was just generally working better."

Another said:

Writing marathons have a positive effect in the essence that you are getting out of areas which you are used to writing in. You see new things, and this inspires new thoughts, new ideas which lead to new stories. For example, we were in the cheer hallway, and the balcony overlooks the athletic hallway. This led to me start a piece of writing with the scenery of a balcony, which isn't usually a location I would have chosen.

The writing that came from the marathon was also reflective of their experience. Here are three excerpts of student writing inspired by places within their own school:

Excerpt 1:

The endless bright light poured through the clear glass windows that fell from the wall was blinding. Noise of countless conversations filled the room like how a plastic bottle is filled with water. The room was large, but felt much more cramped with the bodies of high school kids scattered at each available rounded-table. Although the beginning of winter rose overnight, the warmth of the sun held a soothing atmosphere.

Excerpt 2:

A long hallway stretches out before me. It doesn't seem to have an end, just an eternity of white floor glimmering up against the white ceiling, an inescapable tube. I hear music emanating from a gramophone somewhere in an undisclosed location in the distance.

Excerpt 3:

He sat all alone in the corner in the back room. The lighting was dim and a faint buzz from the lights gave him a headache, but all he could think about was what was going to happen when he walked through the doors in front of him. The walls were stained white bricks and the floor lied (sic) musty brownish red tiles that have not been cleaned for probably months. Nobody knew why he chose to contemplate his thoughts here, but all athletes have their own rituals. The swim race was going to start in less than an hour.

Just as I had found my muse sitting in the window seat of Good Friends in New Orleans some months before, these students had discovered muses within their own familiar hallways and classrooms. This leads me to believe that writing marathons are not dependent on cool places to make the writing cool. When writers go out into their world on a mission to write, the coolness will find them.

In the weeks that followed, a new energy now connected the writing groups in my classroom, and many students returned to pieces they had written on the marathon, revised them, and used them as selections for their final portfolio. Despite the deep frost that had set in outside,

inside we were all writers on a mission, and part of my job as a writing teacher was to challenge my students to see their familiar world in an unfamiliar way as writers.