

Crossing the Finish Line

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Ah, summer. It's the time to relax and rejuvenate for teachers. Looking back on a hectic year of teaching language arts to sixth graders, I've had a happy reflection on good kids and the literature and writing techniques I shared with them, especially at the end of the year. At a time of year that usually sees me barely and painfully crawling over the finish line, two events sponsored by the MWP gave me the necessary boosts, not only to make it to the end, but also to cross the finish line with joy.

In May, with four weeks remaining in the school year, I experienced the amazing Georgia Heard share her love of writing and life with a banquet room filled with teachers from all over the state. I had first learned of Heard at a book talk given at the Summer Institute years ago and have used her ideas for teaching poetry every year since that time. Her warmth, joy and humility infused the atmosphere at Towson University on that warm spring Saturday, and I floated home to make time for more poetry



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and memoir writing in my final lessons for students.

I wanted to give them something they would remember for a long

time, and it worked. My sixth graders wrote about their favorite childhood toys in two different genres, and we all felt good about those last projects.

The Heard conference came on the heels of the most rejuvenating weekend of the year—the annual writers' retreat. This past year, nine of us gathered in the Shaker-plain lodge at Shepherd Springs, located on the C & O Canal near Sharpsburg, Md. The weather was brisk, the food was appetizing and the company was stimulating and friendly.

By day and night, we writers disappeared to our assigned rooms or to the conference areas, lounges and benches at the retreat center, which we had to ourselves. We broke for three meals a day, didn't count calories, and shared our perspectives, peeves and passions about teaching—with trust and enthusiasm. At the end of the school year, with all the pressures mounting and the uncertainty of MSA test scores looming in the distance, it was uplifting to be in the company of creative and dedicated people who loved and believed in what they were doing every day.

As writers, we were at the retreat for different reasons. On a chilly Saturday night, for example, Melissa was curled up in a wing chair in the lounge, writing poetry. Sheila and Katie were



Writing discussions continued over meals at the May writing retreat

holed up in their rooms, on a roll with fiction and memoir. Ann was in the main lodge, pounding out memories on a laptop to share with her students, for whom she'd assigned the same task. Kathy was working on a grant proposal, Linda was exploring all the full circles in her life, Lisa was plotting how to kill someone in a murder mystery, and Silesbi was editing a piece for his upcoming participation in the National Writing Project's retreat. Not a cell phone rang; there was no drone of television or traffic. It was the perfect atmosphere for writing. (The next day at breakfast, though, we talked about the unfamiliar sounds we'd heard the night before: owls and bobcats.)

We also discussed the value of this retreat: was it luxury or necessity? There was no debate: we agreed it was essential to our wellbeing as teachers, writers and human beings. The weekend was a reminder that writing has value all by itself. It reminded us (in the words of Julia Cameron in *The Right to Write*): "We should write because writing brings clarity and passion to the act of living. Writing is sensual, experiential, grounding. We should write because writing is good for the soul."

To take a break from daily household chores and the demands of teaching in order to concentrate on writing gave us renewed purpose and spirit, which we took back home to our families and students. We were all better for it.



Participants at the MWP Writing Retreat at Shepherd Springs included (back row) Ann Brown, Judith Reilly, Linda Wharton, Melissa Petersen, Kathy Jenkins, and Silesbi Shewanah and (front row) Sheila Cunningham, Lisa Kellert and Katie Hearn