Youth

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Terry Mobley ,'91, and Jen Goulston '02, re-energize at the Atlanta NCTE Convention.

"Have I mentioned how excited I am to be here?"

She's young, in her early twenties. I'm older, counting the years to retirement. This is her first National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Convention. The National Writing Project (NWP) has given it to her, part of a grant for a New Teachers Initiative: a gift, an all-expenses paid trip to this third year teacher's version of Disneyworld.

She's chomping at the bit. She's chosen before-, during-, and after-convention strategies, and she is poised to put them into practice. She has devoured the 339-page Convention Guide, created a spread-sheet for all four days of the convention and penciled in the codes, titles and room locations for each of the sessions she plans to attend. Every space of her spread-sheet is filled. Every session has been carefully chosen.

I, on the other hand, am looking forward to socializing with writing project friends. I join her as she walks toward the NCTE registration desk, but I'm looking forward to the time I will get to write this weekend. I picture myself exploring the sights of Atlanta. I have pre-registered for Thursday's NWP sessions, and I plan to catch an NCTE session here and there, but I've stolen so many wonderful ideas from NWP presentations since 1991 that I don't expect to be revitalized by NCTE sessions. While Jen Goulston is rushing to be first in line to get her name tag, turning every few minutes to the bald man behind her to repeat her mantra, "Have I told you how excited I am to be here," I am secretly plotting ways to avoid as many presentations, round tables and panel discussions as possible.

My plan is to immerse myself in the guilty pleasure of playing hooky while my colleagues back in Baltimore are covering my lunch duties and admonishing sixth graders for running in the halls. Hers is to ride every roller coaster in this English-teachers'-think-tank park until she either drops from exhaustion or the management turns off all the lights. Jen is focused, on a mission. I am just chillin'.

But the bubbles of enthusiasm that fill the air around Jen keep floating in my direction, and I can't help but catch some of her energy. "Have you read *Seeking Diversity*? Did you know that Linda Reif is going to be here? I just have to get to her session, even if I have to camp out outside the door to get a seat. Linda Reif is my hero."

I smile and remember the spring of 1992. That was the year I attended my first NCTE Convention. I was a new TC and I had just been accepted as a co-coordinator for the upcoming Summer Teacher Institute. I had been teaching for at least fifteen years, but I was "born-again" (in the Writing Project sense of that term) thanks to my experiences the previous summer. Everything was new, wonderful, exciting and scary. I don't believe I was ever, even then, as eager to soak it all in as Jen Goulston is as she waits for her first session to begin. Still, I remember how excited I was to be in the same room with Nancie Atwell even if I had to share her with the 500 other English teachers who filled the auditorium.

Jen and I decide to split up, attend separate sessions and meet afterwards to share gems. At my first session, I am listening for ideas to share with Jen. By my second session, I am listening for me. Now, I am on a mission. Her mission? Mine? Who cares? It's 1992 again, and I'm having fun.

I did not attend as many sessions as Jen did. I still broke away to shop a little, visit the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Museum and walk the streets of Atlanta. But thanks to Jen Goulston and her insatiable hunger for ideas that she could carry back to Booker T. Washington Middle School in Baltimore City, I was transformed from apathetic conventioneer to the reflective educator I used to be.

Three years ago a teacher who was about to retire informed me that I had played a part in his decision to leave the profession. He said that seeing me teach, he realized that he had lost something that I still possessed.

Attending NCTE in the company of the young, enthusiastic Jen Goulston reminded me that there is a very real danger that I will face as I pass through the final five or six years of my career. I may lose the one thing that made me a teacher in the first place, the one thing that matters more than expertise, knowledge or pedagogy. That one thing is the joy of teaching. It can't be taught in pre-service college classes, but it can be lost as teachers get older. That joy is the one thing I hope my grandchildren are exposed to as they travel through whatever school system they are forced to negotiate. Jennifer Goulston's students are blessed because Jen has a tremendous amount of that joy, and I thank her for reminding me that I still have some of it too.

Writing projects bring together elementary and secondary educators, public and private school teachers, teachers of color and their paler colleagues, and those are all good things. I was reminded this year at the annual NWP meeting that writing projects also bring together enthusiastic youngsters and at-risk oldsters, and that's a good thing too.