

Reflections on the NWP Annual Meeting

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When I got an e-mail from Barbara Bass last fall inviting me to be one of several Maryland Writing Project T-Cs who would travel to Pittsburgh for the National Writing Project's Annual Meeting, I felt like I had hit the jackpot. Six months later, the experience still resonates with me. But what I remember most are not particular sessions or the wealth of ideas I brought home, but the more intangible rewards of the journey.

Over and over again, presenters of workshops, sessions and keynote addresses reminded me why it is so important for us to encourage writing in our classrooms. To put it simply: Writing is more than an academic exercise. It taps into emotional energy and gives our students a way to be heard. It opens up possibilities for our students to feel connected—to us, to each other and to the literature they read. This message also resounded in the words of authors speaking at the conference. Encouraging us to give our students decent young adult literature and the chance to share what is hurting them, Laurie Halse Anderson, author of *Speak*, said, "This saves lives. This preserves souls." Speaking of the need to stop banning young adult books that deal with controversial subjects, Chris Crutcher, author of *Whale Talk*, said,

"When we stop kids from making connections, they hurt—and will hurt themselves." And he shared a note that one of his students had written to him: "When I read about your characters, I am less alone." Isabel Allende, too, spoke of the basic human need for connection: "I have learned that we are all the same," she began, and went on to explain that though we focus on our differences, we all want the same things: love, safety, a community.

In the National Writing Project, and in our local sites, we have a community of writers and teachers who are passionate in their beliefs. The conference reaffirmed for me what we all need to hear from time to time: that I am not alone in my classroom. It is that sense of connectedness that pervades the entry I wrote in my diary the night before going home. Too wound up to sleep, I wandered down to the lobby of the Omni William Penn Hotel and sat in the shadow of its 30-foot Christmas tree. Tuning out the holiday music playing in the background, I wrote:

"WOW. What a weekend! Such a whirlwind of activity in the last few days—the NWP/NCTE conferences did not disappoint. My mind, soul and spirit are renewed, refreshed and reenergized. It's the energy of the

Summer Teacher Institute, of working with teachers who are passionate about and devoted to their trade. It's the buzz of being around writers and hearing them speak about their creations like children, brought into the world through an act of the highest love. It's the emotion and energy of a roomful of people inspired and committed to educating future generations. It's the burning desire to write. To write and never stop writing. To be surrounded by this community, swimming in the conversation on a daily basis. It is my lifeblood. It is what tells me, without a doubt, that I am alive. It is joy. It is openness. It is connection."

So if, between now and November, you find yourself feeling at all disconnected, do yourself a favor—get on Barbara's list for Nashville this fall.

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