ABL: Summer 2008

A Wednesday morning in July

The weather is not just hot; it is a moist heat similar to that of a forest near the ocean or sauna. I sit in a small, uncomfortable folding chair in a dimly lit room filled to capacity. I look around and see that I am easily the oldest. Most are teens. These young, soon to be adult students sit quietly huddled over journals. The sound of their pencils scratching across the page lets you know they are writing. At this point, in order to begin the day, they are writing a response to a prompt. The prompt as it suggests is meant to prompt their thinking, even on a hot summer day. Within ten or fifteen minutes the writers are asked to finish up their thoughts and share what they have written with their peers. Oddly enough, remember the dimly lit room, and the heat, these young writers hang on each other’s words as if those words were keys to the universe. I look around in wonder; I would almost assume that it is in those words that their hearts and heads find life. And the prompt is simple, truly simple; I seem to be… but really am… Through this prompt there is this chance in the writing to let go of the perceptions, to let go of the appearances and to discover something about ourselves and others that we, as writers and narrators, did not know. Sara Porter in her prize winning essay, “The Pen Has Become the Character” wrote the following, “To be a writer means, perhaps, exactly this: surrendering the defined, expressible self to the wider possibilities of the page. It means giving up the belief that you know who you are, in exchange for a chance at discovering who you are, again and again; after all, the self that jumps up at you from your writing might exceed anything you had previously imagined.”

And this is what students do for three weeks; they transform blank pages into life, or their own particular meaning of life which in turn speaks to themselves and each other as a community. The momentum builds as they hear their own voices and the voices of their peers. They come to recognize the power of their words. Each day, over 100 participants, students and student writing leaders, meet at 9:00 am. They arrive in buses excited about what the day has to offer. Many times if a student has missed the bus the sense of belonging and meaning making is so great that the student walks over five miles to the writing workshop instead of staying home bored and anonymous in front of the television. The structure of the day is simple. Everything revolves around writing and expression. They write in a large group; they meet with world famous writers and activists; they write in small groups; they share food; and they participate in activities such as drama, chorus or media.

Basically, students attempt with their older peers to wrestle with meaning, to explore identity, and to think about themselves and others through the writing itself. Let’s face it, the act of writing, like any act of creating, is personally,
culturally, socially and politically charged only when the students themselves, such as these, are given the liberty and capacity to make decisions about their writing. This is not a formula. The students must have enough freedom so that they can begin to explore their lives through the writing. Michael Armstrong in the essay Impassioned Experience writes, “What then pedagogy? I would simply argue that it is the teacher’s privilege and responsibility to ally herself, himself, to the child’s search for meaning. Such an alliance places the act of interpretation at the center of teaching and learning.” The ABL workshop is about interpretation and it is the writing leaders role to ally themselves with the students in the very essential human need to make meaning.

Here are what a few writers and a writing leader wrote:

Sheila- 9th grade (2nd year): “I think Breadloaf is a program that can help kids get out of trouble in the summer. Instead of chilling at my house and sleeping in, I’m actually doing something productive. Breadloaf is the only place where I can share my writing and not have it criticized.”

Cathleen- 6th grade (1st year): “Breadloaf is a wonderful place to make new friends, you write a lot and you get the experience of a real poet. It gave me the experience to sing in front of over a 100 people.”

Chery David- 11th grade (2nd year): “Breadloaf is without a doubt a sick program. Its my motivation to write every summer as well as stay out of trouble. Breadloaf is also a great place to meet friends and strive in many ways, including writing, confidence, and activities. You definitely know its an awesome program because familiar faces come back all the time.

Edwin (6th year): "Breadloaf has changed my life in many perspectives. From experience 3 years of participating as a student, as well as 3 years participating as a writing leader, it was a motivation to come back every year. The most amazing thing about this program is not only watching the students grow, but experiencing personal growth. Being able to change the lives of students from every race, age, and color is a goal that we all strive for. I’m proud to be part of this program.”
Photo 1 Students visit their community and work together to document the community through images and words.

Photo 2 Students preparing for activities.
Photo 3 Students create clay figures during the art activity in the afternoon.

Photo 4 Students walk around their community to photograph and write.
Photo 5 Students keep journals of their thoughts and observations.

Photo 6 Students write most of the time on their own wherever and whenever.
Photo 7 Students build their confidence and choose to share their thoughts.

Photo 8 Students and writing leaders work together to observe and write about the world.
During these three weeks, I found that instead of working in the role of teacher always trying to inspire others to think I often found myself being the one inspired by the students. Each day I had the opportunity to attend a different writing group in the afternoon. And each day I was surprised to hear the level of thought put into the writing. I remember, in particular, one day. I had been rereading Poetics of Space by Gaston Bachelard, a theory about the impact of our first home on sense of space. At this particular session I heard a very talented writer share the following poem:

**The 14th House**

**My House? My Home? My Comfort?**

1. Being loved, being hugged, being told what to do for my benefit. Is that a house, a home, comfort? This as a house is a shelter from hatred. This as a home is where my comfort it.

2. The screaming, the hitting, and all those harsh words. Is that a house, a home, comfort? This as a house is the foundation and location made for fighting. This as a home is just what I’m used to. My comfort is knowing where my family is.
3. The roll-overs, the hogged bed, the snoring in the ear. Is that a house, a home, comfort? This as a house is where I spend the night. This as a home is where I get to wake up in the afternoon. My comfort is being given a place to lay my head and dream.

4. Dog-walking, cleaning his mess and others, filtering the pool. Now how is that a house, a home, comfort? As a house, your work is rewarded. A home will have my help considered. My comfort is that grateful smile I get to see.

5. A clear pool, a panting dog, a clean yard. Is that a house, a home, comfort? This as a house is the satisfied drool from a watered dog. This as a home is the refreshed sigh from under water. My comfort is playing outside – worry free.

6. Trees, blackberries, swift squirrels. Is that a house, a home, comfort? As a house, even the squirrels get to eat. As a home, even the squirrels get to sleep. My comfort is knowing that there must be a God.

7. The leaves, the weeds, the grass. A house, a home, comfort? Their house is the shade from leaves for the ground. My home is its green beauty. My comfort is knowing that there’s life all around me, even though death is close-by.

8. Upstairs, downstairs, the cellar. Is that a house, a home, comfort? This as house is one level of space after another. This as a home is the adventure in four-walled levels. My comfort is being given my “crowded” space.

9. The fans, the air-conditioners, the heat. Is that a house, a home, comfort? This as a house is the appliances keeping us comfortable. As a home, it is the place to go to stay cool or warm and happy. My comfort is knowing I have that place.

10. Neighbors, their little children, their building. Is that a house, a home, comfort? Is that a house, a home, comfort? This as a house is the hang-out area. This as a home is where helping hands are placed. My comfort is having a home away from home.
11. The rain, the clouds, the sunshine and rainbows. A house? A home? Comfort? As a house, it is that perfect ground for a start. This as a home is the change you see when lying in one spot. My comfort is having the chance to see it.

12. The floors, the ceilings, the walls. Is that a house, a home, comfort? This as a house is the regularities of every room. This as a home is the space that holds everything together. My comfort is living in warmth of those floors, ceilings, and walls.

13. The tears, the “I love yous,” the “not fairs.” Is that my house? Is that my home? Is that my comfort? A house is the cause of it. A home is meaning it. The comfort is learning it is fair.

14. My house, my home, my comfort is that 14th house at the “Summit” of this world.

Sydni

Then the next day, I heard a young student read this poem and I was struck by the fact that I would never had assumed that those were the thoughts she had. I wonder where my assumptions come from, or why I don’t expect her to be concerned with the lives of others. Looking back at her poem, I can see that she is trying to grapple with many aspects of our existence.
Here is her poem:
Thankful

Look at these people
They have nothing.
Yet they are only sad
Now because they have
lost what they previously had.
They aren’t even thankful
for the fact that they are still alive

But don’t we all tend to do that
We see everything gone yet
everyone we love still here
but only care that we
don’t have our fancy new
car or that 50” plasma
screen tv

Aren’t we all so selfish
We see the old man trying
to find a way out. The
winds of the tornado are
taking him.
It’s almost too late.
I said, “Please mommy,
Let’s go help him. Please,
We can’t just leave him
here.”
She said, “No sweetie.
We have to go back in
the house and get the…”
The sound of her voice
was drowned out by the
winds. I looked back to
where the man was;
he was gone. Trapped under
all the debris I guessed,
it was too late.

I know that man was
thankful for his life.
He had nothing with him
Just a picture of his
granddaughter that died
of cancer 3 years ago. But
now he will be happier
with his granddaughter in a
place where it doesn’t take
a catastrophic event to
realize the love you have
between a person

Gabriela

Students also wrote narratives and memoirs. They made screenplays and
dramas. They wrote. They had the freedom to write and they used it.

Here, though, is a poem which I think sums up the act of writing.
Writing Can Become

Writing is a part of you it’s who you are
You become one with words
Words that pop out of the page, full of excitement, adventure, danger, consequences, emotions
Writing gives you time to think, putting you in your own little world where you can dream and imagine
Being able to write is being able to let it all out and when reading you’re able to understand
Understand what the author is trying to say and what her or his writing can become
It becomes a story, a brilliant adventure to use your imagination. Stories are different from movies and acting.
Stories are what you want them to be and see whatever you want to see because it’s nothing like reality.
That’s more important than anything – what I want and what you want, nothing else matters.

Alexis