

Teacher Therapy: The Professional Writing Retreat

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When I decided to participate in the Summer Institute, I thought that I was only taking the class towards my Masters Degree. Several people told me that it was going to be a good class and that was all of the incentive I needed to apply. They were right. It was a good class. And I liked meeting new people and walking out with twenty fantastic lessons to use in my classroom.

I did not realize then that becoming a Teacher-Consultant would provide cheap therapy, a means of surrounding yourself with several positive people to make you excited about teaching again. This past year provided better therapy than Dr. Phil could ever offer. It is called the Professional Writing Retreat.

Let me be honest here. I hate to write and hate to share. It was the worst part of the Summer Institute for me. The written word to me is like being naked and letting everyone see my split infinitives. Now I am writing about going on Professional Writing Retreats, a time that you spend just writing, eating, and sharing for an entire weekend. No one ever said therapy is easy, but the benefits are extraordinary.

Our local MWP retreat in Western Maryland in April can only be described as magical. We were given large amounts of time to write with no distractions. No phone, no television, or in my case, no bathroom to clean. Yes, yes, my bathroom is immaculate. I did not realize how much I need to write. Even though I hate it, I need it, so much so, that when I returned, Linda De La Ysla commented that I was glowing. Colleagues looked at me in envy when I said that I spent the weekend writing, writing, and writing even more. I was given a wonderful gift and I could not keep it a secret.

Unfortunately, our local retreat only whetted my appetite for more. More time to write. More time to collaborate. More time to share. Luckily, two days before I left for our local retreat, I received an acceptance letter from the National Writing Project saying that I was accepted to attend their Professional Writing Retreat. That really helped with my glowing.

In June, I arrived in New Mexico a few days early because I knew I would have to do some sightseeing. I've read about Taos, Santa Fe, and Albuquerque but had never had the chance to

experience them first hand. I also thought that evenings in a hotel room by myself would afford me a chance to write and give me a head start on the retreat.

I was wrong. My days were filled with Bandelier National Monument, the sacred soil of Chimayo, horseback riding through the mountains of Taos, and relaxing in hot springs. I did not have time to write. I could only quickly jot down my experiences in my journal at the end of the day before falling asleep at night. But by the time Thursday came, my wanderlust was satisfied enough that I looked forward to settling into Sunrise Springs and to begin writing.

The one thing that always strikes me about the Writing Project is its ability to make you feel like a professional. Well, OK, this time I felt like royalty. Sunrise Springs is a beautiful setting that is filled with spaces for writers to write and be inspired. And, as always, the food is fantastic. We were promised the luxury of time to write, something that teachers sorely lack. But that is what I was expecting.

To be honest, NWP's Retreat did not afford me as much time to write as our local retreat. But I learned something more valuable. From day one, the goal of the retreat is to get teachers published and to get our voices heard. No one knows better as to what is going on in our classrooms. Judging from what politicians legislate, they definitely do not understand our

needs. It is up to us to write about our experiences and tell our stories. We cannot let our classrooms be black holes where we are the only ones doing exceptional work in the field of writing instruction. We must put our fingers on the keyboard and start writing.

No longer will I tell my colleagues that the Summer Institute will be the best six credits that you will earn because it is the only class that you leave with twenty excellent writing lessons to use in your classroom. I won't tell them that it opens up a network of other teachers who care about teaching and leave you exhausted, but rejuvenated at the end of the summer. Instead, I will tell them that the National Writing Project opens doors, the door to your career as a professional.



Cheryl North-Coleman (Right) and writing partners