

San Francisco Writing Marathon

by Linda De La Ysla, T-C '94
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I was the world in which I walked.
-Wallace Stevens

Café de la Presse, Grant Street, San Francisco 9:55 am

To journey in full awareness through life or on the page is wonderful and frightening at the same time. Being in an unfamiliar place with people you do not know provokes anxiety, just as it does to venture forth on the blank page. Both take courage.

On a sunny day in November, I am sitting with two T-Cs from North Dakota at Café de la Presse, just south of the gate to Chinatown. We are “doing” the San Francisco Writing Marathon, a Saturday event offered up by the National Writing Project during the annual meeting. About a half hour earlier, we had introduced ourselves rather awkwardly at the Argent Hotel. Then we just began walking and ended up at this café, which I’d discovered the day before.

The Café de la Presse has copies of *Du Monde* and *Paris Match* in the stands. Some of the servers are French – I can tell from their accents. They wear dark slacks, long-sleeved white blouses and black aprons that reach to their knees. Our own waiter sounds as if he’s from Queens. Fat croissants are heaped in a plastic case, rich cakes under glass line the counter. The tables are small and round, surfaced with black and white faux marble with a wrought iron base. The wicker chairs have zebra-striped seats and backs. Glasses clink against the sound of coffee grounds being tapped out as the person making cappuccinos empties the brewing basket.

Nearby sit the other patrons. The man to my right is in his 50’s; he wears an expensive dark green Italian knit shirt, dark slacks and black loafers. He has a neat gray beard and longish hair receding from a high forehead. He’s reading *The New York Times* and sipping juice. Next to him sits an older woman with well-coiffed red hair. She is wearing a red raincoat and has a leopard print scarf draped around her neck. The men to our immediate right must be academics: “the book,” “committees,” “I’m a hermit, so tell me about it.” Large words and the slow, precise voice of the man behind me suggest that he is someone used to enunciating wisdom and being heeded.

Yesterday, I noticed homeless people everywhere on Market Street. There was a large, gray-haired woman knitting with lemon yellow yarn while she sat cross-legged on a blanket at the corner of 4th Street. Around her was a heap of clothing and other belongings. Although there was a small sign beside her announcing her plight in life, I forgot to read it. A dark-hooded man in rusty clothes stood at the corner and mutely held out a super-sized drink cup with the McDonald’s logo. I skirted him and avoided eye contact, rendering invisible that which was too painful to see. Then, walking up O’Farrell, I came up behind a woman bulky with several layers of clothing. She was pushing a shopping cart four feet across and as many feet high, piled with her life. A few blocks up at Powell and Market, tourists queued up to get on the cable car that would carry them up the hill and over to either Chinatown or Fisherman’s Wharf. Macy’s advertised a pre-Christmas sale: cotton sweaters for \$39.

City Lights Bookstore – North Beach, 11:30 am

Here amidst stacks of literary journals and novels, we sit. Framed black and white photos of Allen Ginsberg and Laurence Ferlinghetti hang on the walls. After a short interval of sharing what we’ve written before, we set to writing. Effortlessly. What an irony to call this a “marathon!” Unlike in ancient Greece where Marathon is the runner’s destination, our meandering through the city has less to do with “end” than process. And while a marathon requires perseverance and stamina on the part of the participants, we are only called to be present. Still, being fully present to the world is hard. Our pace is so frenzied. During the half hour drive between my house and the university, I frequently don’t remember anything about the trip, so focused am I on events and problems from the past, and future events and anticipated problems. Who knows what I missed during that half hour? A flock of 50 Canadian geese grazing on a knoll beside an office complex?

The liquid violin of Bach playing on the radio?

In *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World*, Edward Casey contrasts the way in which Henry

David Thoreau walked the woods near Walden Pond, as compared to the walking of naturalist John Muir:

Thoreau opts for sauntering in his earnest effort to determine “the art of Walking, that is, of taking walks,” and he discusses two somewhat fanciful origins of the verb to saunter: the word stems either from *sans terre*, landless but “at home everywhere” (which is said to be ‘the secret of successful sauntering’) or from Sainte-Terrer, someone who walks to the Holy Land or at least pretends to do so ... Sauntering implies a certain leisurely insouciance that allows the walker to be more thoughtful and open to the land than if he or she were to rush over it with a Muirian eye to discovery or exploration ...”(p. 248).

It occurs to me that our writing marathon is Thoreau-like in nature. Not only has leisurely walking carried us across a cityscape, but I have found myself to be more attentive. When senses can linger, details leap out: There is a special quality of light here in San Francisco: the sky is a bright porcelain blue against which tower the Transamerica Building and ornate carvings of the Chinese Cultural Association—blue, green, red. The light is nearly a presence, it is so piercingly clear. I remember this as distinctively San Francisco, from the time I lived here. On opposite sides of the street: one shaded and chill, one sunny and bright, the walker chooses, depending on how he or she is dressed. I seek the sunny side. Sun is full in my face, zapping me with energy, like a double shot of espresso. I feel well, replete with possibility, in synch with the cool bright air. In Chinatown, men and women in short, padded windbreakers, baseball caps and loose brown trousers crowd the vegetable stand. Piles of bok choy, leeks, scallions, plump bean sprouts, spinach, chard, several



Linda De La Ysla



Participants in San Francisco Writing Marathon

Neubert Recipient of Teaching Award

Gloria Neubert T-C '81, one of the “founding mothers” of the MWP, has been selected as the recipient of the 2004 USM Board of Regents’ Faculty Award for Excellence in Teaching, the highest honor that the BOR bestows to recognize outstanding faculty achievement in teaching/mentoring. Dr. Neubert is a teaching exemplar, respected by her students and peers as an outstanding model of a college professor and professional educator. A national expert on reading in the secondary content areas and coaching, she conducts workshops for Maryland’s public school systems and has taught

twenty different undergraduate and graduate courses at Towson University. She engages in the study of effective teaching practices, incorporates her findings into her teaching repertoire, and continuously assesses the impact of practices on student mastery and classroom environment.



Gloria Neubert

San Francisco Writing Marathon

(continued)

varieties of tofu, apples—both Golden and Red Delicious. Ginseng and teas are displayed in shop windows wedged between the Far East Emporium selling bamboo wind chimes, “happi coats” and Alcatraz tee shirts. Elegant amber jewelry and jade the color of pale celery, rose and deep green catch my eye. The aroma of noodles cooked in soy sauce and freshly fried dim sum make me hungry.

Yes, the “sauntering” life, both on and off the page, has its merits. Sometimes we are caught off guard. Yet the gain is, I believe, immense. As a writer, I need to take that risk; as a teacher of writing, I want to encourage my students to take their time on the page—like Henry David, “to be more thoughtful and open to the land.”

Opportunities

MWP needs your help to develop and present professional development workshops and/or in-services. These dates and locations are currently available:

- The Calverton School-Calvert County will be offering a 3-day MWP in-service on writing in the content areas and/or writing process during the summer. Dates have not been confirmed yet, but they are discussing June 15, 16, and 17; or June 22, 23, 24.
- Northeast Middle School, Baltimore City, is developing the scope and dates of workshops.

If you are interested in these opportunities for both teaching and learning, contact Linda De La Ysla at delaysla@towson.edu

Excellent Student writing desperately needed! *The Baltimore Sun*’s “Sun Scoop” education supplement comes out weekly and wants to receive student submissions on an ongoing basis—stories, non-fiction, poems, and artwork. If published, the student receives a gift certificate to an area bookstore. The primary audience is elementary school-aged youngsters. Material may be submitted to “Sun Scoop,” *Baltimore Sun*, 501 N. Calvert Street, Baltimore, Md. 21278.

Visit the NWP website www.writingproject.org to find postings of the complete contents of all NWP publications, including *The Voice* and *The Quarterly*.

Poem

by David Wolinsky
T-C '95

The birth of the poem, the early making of wordways—as any infant’s offered smile—repairs all things.
And this is terrible for mortals who have seen the innocents slain and helpless words devoured by general doom.



Correction



In the last issue, we misidentified Annette Crawford, one of the winners in the summer vacation contest. Here she is: please accept our apologies, Annette.