

# Minnesota Writing Project

Spring 2008

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## “Be the Change, Be the Writer, Be the \_\_\_\_\_ you want to see in the World”: a reflection on my experience within and beyond the Minnesota Writing Project

by Melissa Borgmann

We all know the Mahatma Gandhi mantra, “Be the change you want to see in the world,” right? It’s on bumper stickers and little refrigerator magnets. I’ve seen it on placards in non-profit arts and community organizations, and these words line the bottom of every one of my friend Colette DeHarpporte’s emails.



*Maureen Dabula and Melissa Borgmann reunite at the Center for Writing after Melissa’s trip to Africa.*

Be the change you want to see in the world.

For me, this slogan goes hand in hand with how I’ve come to understand the Writing Project work and philosophy: Be the writer you want to see in the world.

Revolutionary practices we employ here at the Minnesota Writing Project and in the larger network, don’t you think? In order to be a teacher of writing, you must first be a writer yourself. You must live words, live questions, practice slow and intentional observation, reflect and contemplate. Write, revise, publish, share. You must live the process. (It’s like good religion to me.) This process, philosophy, way

of being, is at the heart of our best practices as educators and as humans.

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So Candance Doerr asked me to write something for the newsletter that was a reflection on my time and experience at MWP, prior to my departure from St. Paul and journey east to get an MFA in Creative Writing.

My reflection goes something like this:

This work at the Minnesota Writing Project has been life-changing and life-sustaining. Since my participation in the Summer Institute in June, 2001, I’ve been on a wild ride. Born that summer were some powerful relationships and questions and work that took me into strange, but provocative spaces as a teacher, writer, performer, collaborator, human. (These were questions and relationships that called me into Gandhi’s kind of change, and the Writing Project kind of transformation we know as teacher-writers).

For example, the questions that first summer sounded something like this:

“What would it look like to do a student exchange with urban and suburban students who were all reading the same book, and writing about it? What would happen if my North Minneapolis students read Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* with Joy Hanson’s Eastview Apple Valley students and spent the day in each other’s schools? What might happen? What’s the value of experience outside our immediate comfort zones?”  
haha!

And the questions continued:

“What if I take myself more seriously as a writer?”

“I wonder what other teacher-writers at other Writing Projects experience?”

“Does this network exist beyond the United States? What about a ‘Global Writing Project’?”

“What is transformative for teachers as writers in the summer time should be revolutionary for students, too, yes? What would a summer writing camp for youth be like?”

“What am I really called to do as a teacher and writer?”

“What is the role of voice in education? In reform? Whose voices are heard the loudest?”

*“In and through it all, I can say that not only has my practice as educator been transformed, but my heart and spirit as well.”*

“What have I experienced that is worthy of sharing?”

“Should I write a book? Who am I?”

“What am I called to do and be in this realm of words and relationships and experiences?”

Be the change you want to see in the world. Be the writer you want to see in the world.

MWP has taken me from North Minneapolis to Apple Valley; from Muncie, Indiana, on a National Writing Project Teacher Exchange Fellowship, to Soweto, Mdantsane, and Durban, South Africa and back again: working with Ikwehlo Literacy Project people and creating our own kind of “International Writing Project.” I’ve traveled to Philadelphia and St. Louis for the Urban Sites network conferences, and been present locally in numerous Minnesota

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Schools. I’ve been called to leave the classroom altogether and work in partnership with several of my urban spoken word students and arts partners to create “The Juno Collective” — an organization centered on literacy and leadership in and through the arts, and modeling assessment strategies outside of the deficit methods provided in standardized testing. Most recently, I’ve been invited to co-author a literacy book for teachers with Richard Beach from the University of Minnesota, and Gerald Campano at Indiana University.

In and through it all, I can say that not only has my practice as an educator been transformed, but my heart and spirit as well. The experience building relationships with my students at North High, young and old colleagues in Post-Apartheid South African townships, to the

urban and rural educators in the vast Writing Project Network here, has stirred within me the potent resonance of story - and what it means for all of us to DO and BE this work.

I leave for Lesley University’s Low-Residency MFA Program in Creative Writing – with these MWP experiences grounding me, and these words guiding:

Be the change you want to see in the world.  
Be the writer you want to see in the world.

# Annual Young Writers' Conference

This year, for our Annual Young Writers' Conference, sixty middle school students from St. Paul Public Schools and their accompanying teachers were invited to participate in a cross-disciplinary writing experience at the Weisman Museum on the University of Minnesota campus. Over a period of three days, students and teachers viewed, learned, and wrote about the photography exhibit, *Paul Shambroom: Picturing Power*.

To kick off this year's event, we invited Nate Howard, chief photographer for the *Rochester Post-Bulletin*, to share some of his photos and speak about how he captures and frames power within a photo. The students worked in writing groups led by graduate students in education and other university staff volunteers. In addition to writing about power, students also had the opportunity to take photos of power as they saw it materialized in the world around them.

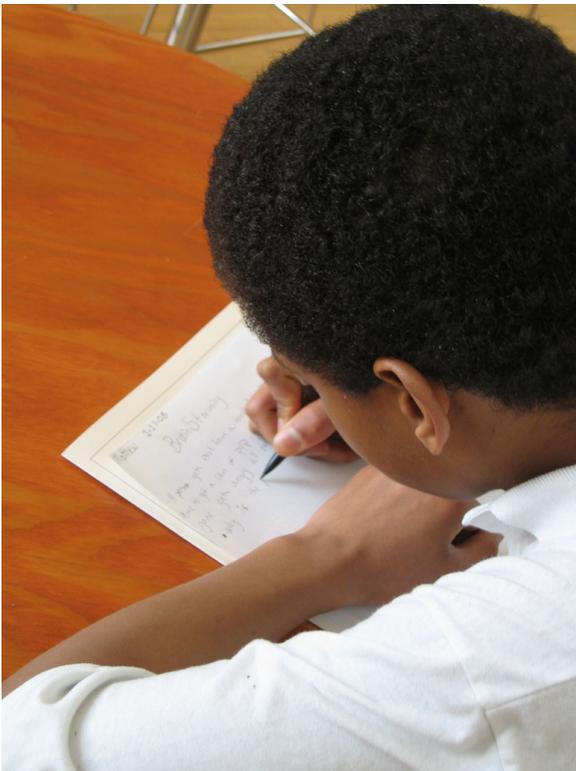
The theme of power was in coordination with the St. Paul Public School curriculum, wherein students read and write around the issue of "Power in Our World" during their eighth grade year. The units begin with individual power and its use as a theme in narrative fiction. Community power is explored through drama and various texts. Research is the focus of the third, political power, unit in which students explore the use and abuse of po-

## Headed for Greatness

By Jasmine Eltawely  
Ramsey Junior High School

What's the next stage that we can climb? We've come into another land but we don't know why. Looking around to see other people so concerned with their own lives. But as one of us, we have no clue. No ideas or answers as to what we're headed into. The clouds of life are beginning to come together, but my mind's still in yesterday's sun. I'm not ready for the storm that's just up ahead. I stick out, everywhere I go, I stick out. Everyone knows I'm different; I can tell by the expressions on their faces. But I still have hope; no matter what, I still have hope. Hope to get started on this new life and make a better life for my young. So they can follow the path to greatness, their own way.

litical influence in the world both historically and in the present day. The final unit requires students to explore the power of the written word and the way it is used in persuasive texts to create an awareness of or need for change in our communities.



# Minnesota Writing Project Embarks on a New Journey

Upon entry into our eighteenth year at the University of Minnesota, MWP recently invited directors, co-directors, and teacher-leaders to gather for a visionary retreat. The showing for the event this past March was very encouraging. Teacher consultants representing several different cohorts, some dating back to the early 1990s, attended.

During the afternoon retreat, we took stock of our current work, and in light of that, envisioned the road to future growth and development. The discussions related to leadership and organizational structure were lively and generative as we participated in a carousel activity with these questions:

- How can we motivate TCs to stay involved?
- How do we fairly delegate responsibility — and provide remuneration — to leaders?
- How can we grow new leaders at our site?
- How can we encourage awareness of — and conversations about — issues of diversity, equity, and privilege in our site?
- How can we create greater commitment/ dialogue between our site and our TCs?

Thank you to those who were able to join us to reconnect and to share ideas and hopes for MWP's future. This feedback is extremely valuable as we start putting together a planning committee that will begin meeting this fall.

If you were unable to attend, we still welcome your thoughts/feelings on any, or all, of the following important questions: (Email responses to [mwp@umn.edu](mailto:mwp@umn.edu))

1. Are there particular aspects of MWP's programs that you are interested in being a part of? And, in what capacity/role could you imagine yourself?
2. Would you be interested in being part of the planning committee?
3. Would you be interested in serving in a paid position as a committee facilitator/leader?

## Untitled

By Tony Maxam  
Capitol Hill Magnet

They always say they don't endorse it,  
They say it's real bad,  
Though they willingly enforce it,  
It makes me feel sad.  
When the world turns to a ball of flame,  
They will all ask whom to blame.  
Yes, you knew,  
But what did you do?  
The time came,  
But it's a shame  
That you did not do  
What you could  
To stop the spirit  
Of death  
From descending on  
The land.



*Minnesota Writing Project*  
**WRITING RETREAT**

June 19, 2008

Mount Olivet Retreat Center

<http://www.mtolivetretreat.org>

- Write for personal and professional purposes
- Renew acquaintances
- Enjoy the tranquil setting – walk the nature trails

Open to all MWP members, the cost of the Retreat (\$25.00) includes morning and afternoon snacks, lunch and the afternoon presentation of writer **John Coy**. Author of the young adult novel, *Crackback*, John Coy will talk about his writing process and experiences in education.

**The retreat will begin with check-in registration/ refreshments at 10:00 on Thursday morning, June 19, 2008.**

**Reservations: Due by June 6, 2008**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

School \_\_\_\_\_

Summer phone \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City/State/Zip \_\_\_\_\_

e-mail address \_\_\_\_\_

Send completed registration form and payment (check made out to University of Minnesota) to:

Minnesota Writing Project, 10 Nicholson Hall, 216 Pillsbury Drive S.E., Minneapolis, MN 55455

# TCs' big plans for summer

Both **Sherri Larson** and **Sharon Cormany Ornelas** have been selected to attend the National Writing Project Professional Writing Retreat to be held in Santa Fe, New Mexico. While there, they will have time to write and work with other writing project professionals from across the nation, in order to push forward some of their professional writing projects with the hopes of getting them published. Congratulations to both of them for being among 28 TCs from across the nation chosen for this event.

MWP directors **Kirsten Jamsen** and **Muriel Thompson**, will be attending a Directors' Retreat in Red Lodge, Montana, the last week in July. There they will meet with writing project directors from 18 other sites to discuss different ways to organize project leadership.

**Marsha Besch** and **Joyce Malwitz** will co-lead a one-week Advanced Leadership Institute for teachers nearing retirement. Participants of this institute will take part in training in order to be available as presenters and facilitators for our outreach programs.

Stay tuned to the Fall newsletter to read more about these summer experiences.

## - Upcoming Events -

Author **John Coy** of *Crackback*, a young adult novel focusing on the high stakes world of high school football, will talk with us at the 2008 Summer Institute Retreat about his writing career and process. This event, held on **June 19th**, will be open to all MWP TCs. See registration form included in this newsletter, or contact MWP at [mwp@umn.edu](mailto:mwp@umn.edu). To learn more about John Coy, visit his website here: <http://www.johncoy.com/>

This fall **Julie Landsman** will speak at our Second Annual Renewal/Reunion Workshop on Wednesday, **October 1st, 2008**. Julie Landsman, author of *A White Teacher Talks About Race*, has taught at Carleton College and Hamline University and often speaks on issues related to race, poverty and the achievement gap. More information on the October Renewal/Reunion Workshop will be sent out as the day draws near. In the meantime, keep the date open so that you can join us for a day of writing, reconnecting, and sharing of ideas. More about Landsman's work will appear in the Fall 2008 Newsletter.

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