

Minnesota Writing Project

Winter 2009

Vol. 18 No. 2

Elemental Forces at Work in the Montana Mountains

by Kirsten Jamsen



Smoke clouds obscuring the sun in Red Lodge, MT

In the days leading up to the National Writing Project (NWP) Directors Retreat, Muriel Thompson and I began receiving emails about the fires burning west of Red Lodge, Montana, where we were to gather with other NWP site directors for four days, 30 July – 3 August 2008. These missives assured us that forest fires are a normal part of life in the West and that retreat events were going ahead as scheduled, but that we should consider our own tolerance for risk and smoky air.

The clouds of smoke we would soon see in the sky above the mountains were only part of the elemental forces at work in this powerful place. Audible from everywhere we read, wrote, thought, and discussed our Writing Project work was the rushing sound of Rock Creek. Fire and water—what better elements to inspire inquiry into how the Minnesota Writing Project (MWP) and other NWP sites are continually evolving due to internal and external forces.

This Directors Retreat was a unique opportunity to step away from our local distractions and look holistically at our Writing Project sites in a setting both peaceful and risky. I suspect the daily fire reports created a greater sense of urgency and immediate connection among our group of 15 NWP leaders and 34 fellow site directors from across the country. Together, we read about the history and philosophy of NWP (made even more real by the presence of the founding site, Bay Area Writing Project, directors), shared how we do “the work” in our different contexts, and challenged each other with questions and suggestions.

More holistic and strategic than national meetings,

I N S I D E

page 3

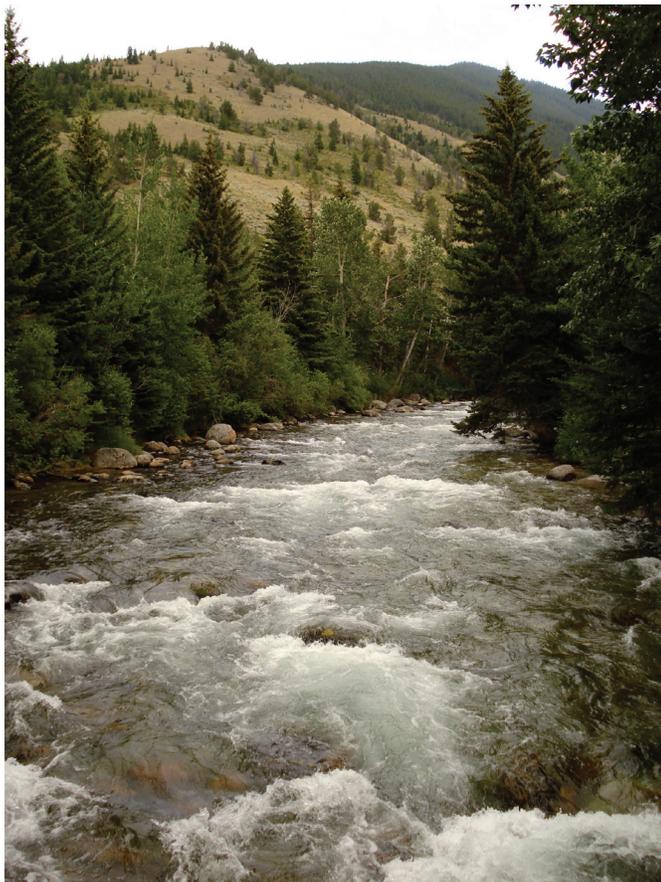
**MWP Wiki takes shape
2nd Annual Reunion/Retreat**

page 4 & 5

**TC's on a Professional Writing Retreat
in New Mexico**

page 6

**Nominate your colleague for Summer
Institute
New Ways to give
Envisioning Committee**



Rock Creek rushing powerfully behind the Rock Creek Resort

concrete models and ideas convinced me that we can co-create a shared leadership structure in MWP and that we can loop that leadership development back to sustain and integrate our Summer Institute, continuity, and inservice programs more richly.

As I wrote in the final morning's prompts: "I feel much more a "part of NWP," having worked so closely with my colleagues across the country.... I affirmed my pride in our site and the ways we've grown and developed over the past 18 years. Seeing younger sites, I can imagine now what our early years were like and how we've journeyed together. Working so deeply with Muriel was a joy and a privilege since we rarely get such focused time together.... I still wonder about many, many things!"

Re-reading these words pushes me to think more about how to cultivate "retreat mind" here at home—how to create time and space to read, write, think, and talk with others. Having learned so much from this experience, I hope to do more to strengthen our regional and national connections and to engage our MWP teacher consultants with this supportive professional network.

the Directors Retreat was process-based and visionary. Daily, Muriel and I participated in whole group writing and discussions, dug deeper into the nuances of site leadership in our cross-site working group (with the Middle Tennessee and Swamp Fox Writing Projects), consulted one-to-one with the NWP leaders, and still had time just the two of us to work together and begin applying what we were learning.

This experience reinforced our commitment this year's MWP re-envisioning process. Hearing the stories of other sites in transition and gathering



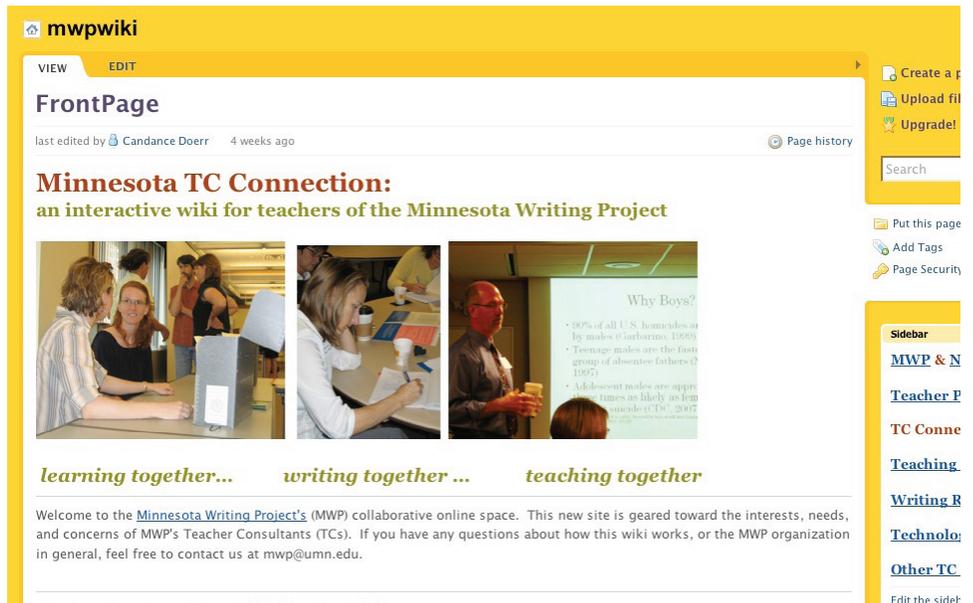
Montana mountains viewed from the Beartooth Highway outside of Red Lodge

MWP Wiki Takes Shape

The Friends of the Wiki Committee met in early October to brainstorm and decide which features to include on the MWP wiki. Our discussion focused mainly on the purpose of the wiki and how to design it to best serve the needs of Minnesota TCs. Among many of the purposes we hope this wiki will serve, we have focused our initial efforts on creating the wiki space as a resource of teaching ideas, support, and writing inspiration from other TCs. As wiki committee member Ann Lindsey described the site, “We want teachers to view the site as a trusted network.”

To visit the MWP wiki as it takes shape visit the link below. Also, let us know if you too would like to start contributing resources or teacher pages to the space. Please feel free to send any additional ideas or contributions you’d like to make to the wiki to Candance Doerr-Stevens at doer0026@umn.edu.

The Minnesota TC Connection:
<http://mwpwiki.pbwiki.com/>



Second Annual MWP Reunion/Renewal Workshop Day October 1st, 2008

Last year we began our Annual MWP Reunion/Renewal Workshop Day as one of the SI follow-up days and invited all interested TCs to attend. This fall in response to our site’s concern about meeting the needs of diverse learners, our day focused on this theme: “Improving Student Writing: Closing the Achievement Gap.” The morning featured presentations by three MWP TCs. The slides of each session can be viewed by visiting the corresponding links below:

“Creative Writing Greatest Hits” by Sherri Larson:

“Writing Towards Justice” by Sean Fleming

“Using Art and Design to Engage and Assess Alternative Students” by Jen Budenski

Our afternoon included a talk by Julie Landsman, author of several books and articles related to race, poverty, and the achievement gap. Landsman spoke on “Making Student Voices the Center of the Classroom.”



Making Time for Professional Writing

This past June our local site was fortunate enough to have two TCs selected to attend the National Writing Project sponsored writing retreats in Santa Fe, NM. Sherri Larson (TC '07) attended "Retreat A" for writers who have an idea of what they'd like to write but have yet to draft out the piece. Sharon Cormany Ornelas (TC '05) attended "Retreat B" for writers who already have a draft of a piece and are ready to polish and refine. Below the two share their experiences of being surrounded by writers and writing in Santa Fe.

Chipping Away at Revision

by Sharon Cormany Ornelas

At the National Writing Project's Professional Writing Retreat (PWR) last June, the 27 writers were divided into two groups. I arrived with a draft of an article well underway—and maybe just a little bit of a chip on my shoulder. It was somewhere between a microchip and a poker chip in size, but it was a chip nonetheless.

Upon meeting my writing group members, I wasted no time in letting them know how much time I had already invested in this article. "I just need you all to be aware," I declared as we set our group norms, "that I've been working on this article for a year and a half. Just please bear in mind that this is like the tenth draft or something." As soon as the words left my mouth, I wanted to suck them back in. Of course I was there for feedback. I was there to get "unstuck" and move the article toward publication. So why was I suddenly so defensive about it?



Tubac Resort, Santa Fe, NM

As soon as the words left my mouth, I wanted to suck them back in. Of course I was there for feedback. I was there to get "unstuck" and move the article toward publication. So why was I suddenly so defensive about it?

In fact, I had started the article some sixteen months

No Sweat in Santa Fe

by Sherri Larson

I have just returned from the National Writing Project's Professional Writing Retreat in Santa Fe, New Mexico. I am deeply grateful to Muriel Thompson for her encouragement and letter of recommendation, and to the Minnesota Writing Project for its support.

I gathered with 26 other writers from across the nation to work on professional writing in the company of National Writing Project staff and editors of educational publications. My particular writing was focused on how to expand multigenre writing (modeled after Tom

Romano's work) into an overall curricular structure in the secondary Language Arts classroom.

After five days away, Minnesota welcomed me back with a picture perfect Minnesota summer day—79°, clear, and calm. It was gorgeous, and I was so

thankful to be back into my pattern of a morning walk. But the difference between Minnesota and New Mexico was clear within minutes: I sweat here.

The air in New Mexico is so dry. It was easy to feel winded, but nearly impossible to break a sweat. (This is an unscientific statement. Admittedly, I didn't really seek heavy exercise, but on my several short walks, I noticed this phenomenon.)

What does that have to do with writing? So often the idea of sweating is equated with worrying. "Don't sweat the small stuff," we say to encourage others. "No sweat," we say to suggest there will be no difficulty. "Sweat it out," means to gather focus and perseverance for hard work.

earlier, at a MWP PWR at the Minnesota Humanities Center. At that overnight, we analyzed teacher-written articles for effective writing techniques, then had long chunks of time to write on our own, punctuated by check-in discussions with the other TCs. I came with a couple of project ideas and left with a very solid start on an action research project about teacher learning preferences, as well as some inspiration to bring back to my colleagues in Minneapolis who were also engaging in reflective professional writing.

More than a year later, I had collected and analyzed data on the factors and sources that teachers reported as significant to their learning, created multiple graphs and tables, incorporated the work of a number of top scholars on the topic, and had drawn some definite conclusions about teacher learning. But something was not gelling. I had sought feedback from multiple writing groups and colleagues, but could not quite capture the article's fatal flaw. I needed help—professional help.

At the NWP PWR, a small brigade of professional editors and NWP national staff were on hand, selected as coaches for their range of expertise and directness. Any of these coaches could be commandeered by merely signing up for a time, so I talked with most of them. They encouraged me to find the heart of my piece. Was it really a research article, or more of a personal exploration of my own experiences trying to create a teacher professional journal and conference? The editor of *The Journal of Adolescent Literacy* came as a guest speaker, and was available for editing consults as well. After reading my article, he kindly told me, "If you were an assistant professor, you'd be able to get tenure off this article. There's really about five or six possible publishable articles in here." After my ego floated back down to earth, I realized he was diplomatically telling me that I had way too much going on in my article. And he was right.

Not all of the feedback I got from the coaches and my writing group over the course of those few intense days in Santa Fe was consistent—but it was all consistently respectful, thought-provoking, and ultimately, encouraging. When I left Santa Fe, my draft was four focused pages instead of 19 rambling ones. But more importantly, I left Santa Fe with a sense of confidence as a writer with important contributions to make to the dialogue about teaching and learning. And I left the chip on my shoulder somewhere in the desert.

In New Mexico, we worked. We had long chunks of writing time punctuated by meetings with writing groups and facilitators. We produced drafts, met in writing groups, revised, researched, revised, discussed, and produced more drafts. It was intense. There should have been a lot of sweat.

The hard work, dedication and commitment were there. But the "sweat" that is worry wasn't there. The humidity of apprehension didn't follow me there. The air was clear and my mind was the same. The supportive leadership of the NWP staff and guest facilitators, the camaraderie with fellow writers, and even the great food all elevated the experience to honor each one of us as writers.

I haven't arrived home with a finished draft, ready for publication. In fact, my 17 page draft was trimmed

The hard work, dedication and commitment were there. But the "sweat" that is worry wasn't there. The humidity of apprehension didn't follow me there. The air was clear and my mind was the same.

down to five. But that is a victory, because I know where I am going next.

I know I am not alone in being anxious at times to call myself a writer. Santa Fe changed that. It was an honor to live the writing life for a few days in the dry, hot, clear air of New Mexico. I am able to come back home, where obligations and expectations often make the air of my life heavy, and say, "I AM a writer!"



Cormany Ornelas

Larson

Nominations for 2009 Invitational Summer Institute

We are currently accepting nominations for the upcoming summer institute. Please consider nominating a teacher, from any discipline, K-College that you think would benefit and contribute to the literacy-based leadership experience of the summer institute.

This year's dates for the institute are:

Retreat --- June 24-26, 2009

Institute --- July 13-31, 2009

Nomination forms can be found at <http://mwp.umn.edu/summer/>

Supporting MWP

The Minnesota Writing Project is no longer collecting individual membership fees. Instead we ask that those interested in supporting our efforts donate to our University of Minnesota Foundation Account (Fund #6464). This shift from membership fees to foundation support makes your gift fully tax deductible. For more information visit our website support link:

<http://writing.umn.edu/home/giving.html#mwp>

MWP Envisioning Committee Moves Forward

The MWP Envisioning Committee, a group of twelve individuals involved in re-visioning our site's future, has met twice to generate ideas for building leadership and a sustainable infrastructure. To begin our efforts we have revisited the Minnesota Writing Project's mission statement, asking if the goals of our site are in need of revision, given our expanded reach to teachers and literacy specialists. After revising the mission statement, we plan to discuss various leadership structures and how these new structures will allow for various levels of leadership, ownership and participation.

Envisioning Committee Members:

Bev Alsleben • Mary Beth Blegen • Marsha Besch • Candance Doerr-Stevens • Kirsten Jamsen • Jane Johnson • Joyce Malwitz • Micki St. Sauver • Bev Alsleben • Ann Thompson • Muriel Thompson • Terri Wallace

Minnesota Writing Project Policy Board Members 2008-2009

Lindsey Anderson
Marsha Besch, Outreach Director
Melissa Borgmann
Mike Borka
Jennifer Budenski
Laura Cochlin
Bob Cudahy
Kendrick Davies
Candance Doerr-Stevens, Teaching Assistant
Kristine Earsley
Sandy Hayes
Gretchen Hoven
Kirsten Jamsen, Co-Director
Jane Johnson, Rural Sites Network
Sherri Larson
Ann Lindsey, Urban Sites Network
Anne Lowe, ELL Network
Joyce Malwitz, Assistant Outreach Director
Sandra Nesvig
Mary Cathryn Ricker
Micki St. Sauver, Research Director
Micheal Thompson
Muriel Thompson, Director
Joanne Toft
Mary Verbick
Terri Wallace, Executive Secretary

Minnesota Writing Project Newsletter

Published by the Center for Writing
University of Minnesota
10 Nicholson Hall - 216 Pillsbury Dr. SE
Minneapolis, MN 55455

An Official Site of the National Writing Project
also funded by
the Center for Writing
and the College of Liberal Arts
at the University of Minnesota

Contributing Writers:
Sharon Cormany Ornelas
Candance Doerr-Stevens
Sherri Larson
Kirsten Jamsen

Editing & Layout:
Kati Pederson

The University of Minnesota is an equal
opportunity educator and employer.

<http://mwp.umn.edu>