



DOUBLE PINWHEELS AT THE WORLD'S
FAIR: THE POSSIBILITIES FOR JOY
IN THE WRITING CENTER

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Faith quilts her art. Anne
believes she is struggling
with words to describe
each square of fabric
because words are tapestried
to Anne, Haitian lyrics
and American jazz and everything
in between. She stitches
word after word, draft
to draft until she begins
to believe in the progress
she's making: patterns like Double
Pinwheels and World's Fair, art
Anne now knows like Faith.

This is a poem about a writing center, about what can happen in one session, in one center. It didn't happen at Evergreen, but it could have.

Eight springs ago I was fresh out of graduate school working as a professional writing specialist in a university in upstate New York. When I first met Anne, I used every ounce of my being to block out the words of my boss and mentor as she described her frustrations with working with Anne. She said, "Sandy, you are Anne's last resort."

While I've thought many times about that statement in the context of my sessions with Anne, I have never committed my muddled thoughts to paper until last spring while attending a writing center conference. The focus of the gathering was to discuss the possibilities and necessities for fun.

In one auspicious session, I sat mesmerized, slack-jawed and wide-eyed in the non-descript classroom as Bob and Ray, two professional tutors from Eastern Washington University, suggested that the best way they've learned to evoke the truth of a session is to commit that experience to paper in the form of a poem. I felt giddy, almost dizzy, as Bob and Ray read their poems, my chosen language, to share their insights from tutoring.

Then, they invited each of us to craft a poem from one of our own tutoring experiences.

I've been asking myself for weeks now, of the hundreds of sessions I've had in my career, why did the session with Anne come to mind so freely that day with Bob and Ray?

I found my answer in the words of poet, essayist, and political activist, Muriel Rukeyser: because "[a] poem invites you to feel. More than that: it invites you to respond. And better than that: a poem invites a total response."¹

I have long wanted to capture the deep sense of satisfaction I felt for and with Anne when she shared the news that her professor had praised her paper on the folk-art quilts of Faith Ringgold. I have long wanted to tell the story of how for three grueling semesters Anne's frustrations with the English language and my fears of becoming her last resort persisted through each one of her political science papers. I have wanted to find a way to share the total response of our joy of working together that peaked during our discussion of Anne's ideas about art.

There's a great Harry Nilsson song, "One," revived by Aimee Mann, "One is the loneliest number that you'll ever know." One is a number often associated with writing: the image of Emily Dickinson writing alone in her attic-like room in Amherst; Henry David Thoreau writing alone at Walden Pond; the college student writing alone under lamplight in the middle of the night.

Despite Nilsson's song, most writers find a time where they defy solitude and desire community. Despite popular myth, Emily Dickinson survived in Amherst, Massachusetts during the 1800s by corresponding daily with others, including her editor and friend, T. H. Higginson. She begins one such letter commenting on the significance of their practice: "A Letter always feels to me like Immortality because it is the mind alone without corporeal friend. . . . I am sure that you speak the truth, because the noble do, but our letters always surprise me."² Thoreau often eschewed the solitude he is known for, preferring community with other writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson. Anne, too, ultimately chose community. And so, too, do writers at Evergreen who seek out conversations with others at the Writing Center.

With every meeting, Evergreen writers and tutors together defy the image of the writer suffering alone. The Writing Center is not a culture of one. It's not about one paper, one visit, one writer, one tutor. It's not about playing solitaire with words. It's not even one story. It's about how day after day,

1. Muriel Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry* (Ashfield, MA: Paris Press, 1996), 11.

2. Emily Dickinson, *Emily Dickinson: Selected Letters*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1971), 196.

week after week, quarter after quarter, year after year, writers gather to share stories about their writing and about themselves.

In an essay about finding her literary mentor, poet Jenny Factor responds with insights that seem true of the work/play that I experienced with Anne and others equally memorable: “The chosen community in which writers grow and work are by nature . . . redirecting the stream of what it is possible to say. Sometimes it takes the surprise questions and risks of a mind outside one’s own to broaden one’s sense of those linguistic possibilities.”³

Every few years I receive an email from Anne like a gift from a faraway place. She’s working at the United Nations or some other global agency in New York City. Reading her message, I can hear her melodic rendition of my name and her lilting, lyrical laugh.

I now know that I was not Anne’s last resort. No tutor holds that much responsibility over the well-being of another writer. Anne remained and remains her own best resort wherever she is in the world, and I know this because I am here, finally, responding to my own surprise questions and broadening my story with Anne, with you.

WORKS CITED

Dickinson, Emily. *Emily Dickinson: Selected Letters*. Edited by Thomas H. Johnson. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1971.

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Rukeyser, Muriel. *The Life of Poetry*. Ashfield, MA: Paris Press, 1996.

3 Jenny Factor, “Jenny Factor on Marilyn Hacker,” ed. Arielle Greenberg and Rachel Zucker, *Women Poets on Mentorship: Efforts and Affections* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2008), 4.