

THE GREATER CONVERSATION

by Andrea Beard

I took the photograph on the front cover in February, one day past my birthday. It was an unexpected gift. A constellation of circumstance: a quiet morning on a neighborhood side street with traces of last night's rain collected against the street curbs. I noticed the crystal clear reflection of the treetops and snapped the shot, capturing the ephemeral.

Encountering the unexpected often occurs we do a collective free-write in class. After an initial quiet two-minute sit (to still the mind chatter), I introduce a writing prompt with two caveats: *Write what is true for you and keep your pen moving.* Within a given timeframe (usually ten minutes), what emerges from that process is akin to a creative hologram: A spectrum of associations to a particular theme. For example, the prompt "river," introduced through music and poetry conjures up childhood memories for Louise Martin Brown of her two grandfathers living on separate farms in Georgia with one river cutting across both properties; Leo Pearlman reflected upon the L.A. River before it became a lonely cement channel; for Solomon Grover, it ignited a metaphysical musing on the nature of consciousness. We sit listening attentively to one another read aloud from the free-writes and become enchanted with the diversity of responses. As the room fills with stories, we begin to feel a part of something larger. Before we were tuning in to just our respective memories and imaginings, but listening to one another, we are touched by the quality of the collective experience.

The consistency of our weekly free-write gives everyone in the room the opportunity to do the very thing many claim to want, but can't make time for: Writing. Everyone stays focused: There are no cell phones, no internet, no kids, no bills. We are in a creative lock-step for

those ten minutes. It trains our minds, like a committed athlete, to outrun the censors and the editors. And the results never cease to amaze.

Peter Elbow, in *Writing Without Teachers*, speaks to the value of the free-write:

“ . . .in those portions of your free-writing that are coherent—in those portions where your mind has somehow gotten into high gear and produced a set of words that grows organically out of a thought or feeling or perception—the integration of meanings is at a finer level than you can achieve by conscious planning or arranging In such writing you don't feel mechanical cranking When there are transitions they are smooth, natural, organic. It is as though every word is permeated by the meaning of the whole.”

The breadth of what we do in class expands even further as we read aloud pieces crafted outside of the class. Week after week, snapshots of our lives pour into the room—evoking a rare intimacy. Add candor, vulnerability, and humor to the mix and many of us are a little less intimidated—if just for the moment—by our ever-evolving cultural and global landscape. We come together and feel a part of a greater conversation: Experiencing our own—and each others'—creativity and the “mattering” of our lives as a source of communal nourishment.

Like the picture on the cover that felt like a gift when it opened before me — and now can be shared with a broader audience—so may these stories touch you, entertain you, and inspire you to understand and value what has passed, pay close attention to the present moment, and give you the courage and imagination to dive whole-heartedly into the future.