

*Voices From
The New Orleans Writing Marathon*

*Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project
Advanced Writing Institute
2003*

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Prologue

For my sabbatical in Fall 2002, I moved to the French Quarter with the sole purpose of writing every day. Each day I wandered, filling five journals with my writing at coffeehouses, bars, parks, benches, the river. During that journey, I met many people who influenced my thinking and writing, one of whom was “Bucket Man.” I met Bucket Man one midnight on a dark French Quarter street. He was swinging an industrial-sized plastic bucket by his side, and when he saw me, he pulled the bucket over his head and began singing. Sound poured out of the bucket like a symphony. When he removed the bucket, he looked me in the eye and asked me who I was and what I was doing there. Imagine being asked that question on a dark city street by a man who sings in a bucket and wears a chain of keys around his neck.

I told him I was a writer and a teacher. He looked me up and down, then asked me three questions: “What do you think?” “What have you learned?” “Have you put yourself in danger?”

I have come to believe that these are the essential questions for a teacher and writer to ponder, and I have passed them on to teachers in our Summer Institute. These questions have led us to talk about how we may be called to account for our thinking when we least expect it; about how we need to talk to students about what and how we have learned; and about how we need to take risks and seek dangers that are intellectual, emotional, existential, and sometimes even physical in our jobs. Otherwise, what do teachers really have to say to a world that has enough on its mind already?

As one Summer Fellow in our writing project said today, “Teachers are heroes.” I agree. Like Odysseus, the job of each teacher is to plunge to the depths and to bring experience and learning back to the world. Nothing less will do. Teachers in the Writing Project are a special type of hero. Like Odysseus, whose name translates as “Trouble,” they know that they are putting themselves in trouble every day. Daily they must take risks in the Summer Institute and in their classes. Daily they are called on to account for their thinking and learning. The challenges that defined Odysseus’ troubled existence included a Cyclops, Sirens, gods, and goddesses. Instead of mythical monsters, our teachers encounter other challenges: parents, administrators, colleagues, students, standardized tests, writer’s block, the five-paragraph theme, English grammar, and 100 other perils. Still, like Odysseus, our writing teachers persist. Like Odysseus, they survive through a combination of intelligence, experience, values, and vision. They grow, they change, they adapt, they learn, and they seek knowledge and danger. They do it because that is their calling.

It has been glorious working with the teachers whose writing fills this anthology. Heroes infused with the spirit of Bucket Man, their mission is to think “out of the bucket.” Because they can, because they do, their students will be forever changed.

—Richard Louth, Director, Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project

Introduction: The N.O. Writing Marathon

From July 21-23, the Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project held its eighth “New Orleans Writing Marathon.” Below I describe the concept and structure of the “New Orleans Writing Marathon” as well as what made this latest one special.

The Marathon Concept

The New Orleans Writing Marathon springs from the work of two authors, Natalie Goldberg and Ernest Hemingway. In *Writing Down the Bones*, Natalie Goldberg defines “writing marathon” and provides a model for a writing community:

Everyone in the group agrees to commit himself or herself for the full time. Then we make up a schedule. For example, a ten minute writing session, another ten minute session, a fifteen minute session, two twenty minute sessions, and then we finish with a half-hour round of writing. So for the first session we all write for ten minutes and then go around the room and read what we’ve written with no comments by anyone. . . . A pause naturally happens after each reader, but we do not say ‘That was great’ or even ‘I know what you mean.’ There is no good or bad, no praise or criticism. We read what we have written and go on to the next person. People are allowed to pass and not read twice during the marathon. Naturally there should be some flexibility. If someone feels the need to pass more often or less often, that is fine. What usually happens is you stop thinking: you write; you become less and less self-conscious. Everyone is in the same boat, and because no comments are made, you feel freer and freer to write anything you want. (150)

Hemingway helped us connect Goldberg’s model with our own locale by showing us how food, drink, and a sense of place can contribute to the individual writer’s experience. In *A Moveable Feast*, he describes writing a story about Michigan while consuming *café au lait*, rum, and oysters in a Paris cafe:

The story was writing itself and I was having a hard time keeping up with it. I ordered another rum St. James and I watched the girl whenever I looked up, or when I sharpened the pencil with a pencil sharpener with the shavings curling into the saucer under my drink. I’ve seen you, beauty, and you belong to me now, whoever you are waiting for and if I never see you again, I thought. You belong to me and all Paris belongs to me and I belong to this notebook and pen. (6)

The New Orleans Writing Marathon attempts to combine Goldberg’s sense of community and her structure for response with Hemingway’s reliance on place and sustenance for inspiration.

The New Orleans Marathon Model

In New Orleans, we split into small groups to go to restaurants, coffeehouses, bars, parks, streetcars, churches, the river, etc., where we eat, drink, write, and share our way across the city. We spend about an hour in each place, then move on. We follow Goldberg’s basic rule of

balancing uninterrupted writing with responses limited to a simple “Thank you” after each reading. Then, we eat, drink, and socialize before moving on to a new writing spot. Our marathons are not about sightseeing, nor are they about publication. The emphasis remains on the writing, and doing it for oneself.

The Advanced Marathon

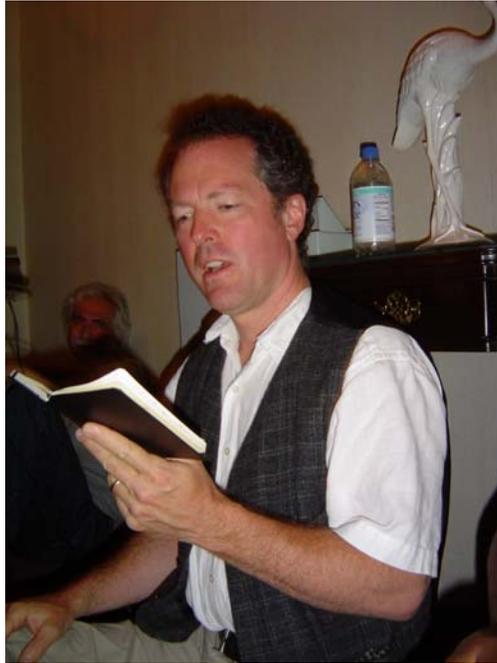
The Advanced Marathon differed from others in its size, length, and purpose. It involved close to 30 writers from across the country, and required two nights lodging in a hotel. About half the participants were not part of the Advanced Institute itself, and these included National Writing Project and Louisiana Writing Project representatives, a guest speaker, a musician, and a radio producer. The structure of each day was tighter than usual. Each morning began with a general gathering in the living room of Le Richelieu Hotel’s Paul McCartney Suite. Inspired by Kim Stafford’s words and Spike Harris’s music, participants wrote together before splitting into small groups, coming back each evening for a read-around and celebration. Writers took the last morning to review their journals. We ended with a read-around recorded by Todd Delaney, a KSLU radio producer who followed us each day while working on a show about the marathon.

From the beginning, this marathon seemed less “private” and more “public” than others. As well, members of the Advanced Institute were determined from the outset to publish the story of this event. Without compromising the essence of a marathon—an emphasis on individuals writing solely for themselves—we hoped to showcase some of the work generated during the marathon as well as reflections about it. We wished to feature, connect, and explain some of the “raw” writing of the marathon for those attending as well as for those unfamiliar with marathons.

When members of the Advanced Institute returned to campus, they spent a week discussing their collective experiences, reflecting on the marathon in new pieces of writing, and creating this collection of works. “Going public” in this book (and in an upcoming radio show) with an event so focused on private writing was a challenge. But we think that the writing produced in this marathon will speak to everyone who reads it, and that the story of this marathon is worth telling.

—Richard Louth, Director, Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project

Two Marathon Moments



Kim Stafford reads to us



Richard and Melanie writing at Molly's

At Peace with the Marathon

Tracy Amond

I set out for the New Orleans Writing Marathon on a simple quest: to write. Not to write anything in particular. Just to write. To allow the city to peel back the layers of my “normal life” so I can just write whatever comes to me. This is not my first marathon and I’m beginning to understand what works for me, so I give myself one guideline: to clear out any sort of voice that might take over and simply narrate my day. I want to get past that stage early on, get past the urge to merely report what’s around me and get to what I consider to be “real” writing.

I depart with Ann, Melanie, Holly, and Connie. We agree that coffee is the first order of the morning and find a P.J.’s Coffee Shop on Frenchmen Street. We order our drinks and get right down to the first writing of the day. I am a little disappointed. P.J.’s doesn’t really do it for me. The inside looks like any coffee shop in any town. I’m in New Orleans. I don’t want to sit in a chain coffee shop. I want something unique. As I write, I discover that this uniqueness is what brings me to the marathon.

Why am I in the heat, in the sun, with trucks rattling by when I could be in the cool interior of this coffee shop with its comforting aroma of mysterious coffee blends? Because I want to get this marathon rocking. I want to wake myself up on the inside and do some really great writing and what the marathon does for me is to wake me up on the outside first. A strange place, out of my comfort zone, new sights and smells, the unpredictability of it all makes me feel alive on the outside. After an hour or two, that feeling soaks in and my writing self stretches, yawns, looks around, and says, “Hey where are we?”

I get engrossed in my writing and write several pages, but I realize that I am still writing *about* the marathon instead of really writing. As we gather around a table to read aloud, I find that I have missed some sights that make me regret what I said about P.J.’s writing value. A vagrant settled in at Holly’s table while we were writing, content to just sit there, watching her write, and she just continued on. Melanie kept a woman from getting a parking ticket. Connie saw the wind carry away a table umbrella. I missed these episodes because I was so fixed on my preconceived idea of what sort of spot would provide me with the best material. This marathon was already teaching me lessons about place and that the writer has some responsibility in connecting to that place.

After a lunch break, our next writing stop is Molly’s Bar. I’ve never been to Molly’s, but the more experienced marathoners highly recommend it. There is room enough for us all to have tables to ourselves, and the waitress doesn’t seem surprised to see a group of writers. I order a Corona and look around a bit trying to find some inspiration. There is plenty of it around, but I haven’t fully let go yet. Even after three hours, I haven’t given over my control to the city. I can’t decide where to start and don’t even realize that I’m pressuring myself to write something, something big, something good. I allow myself about five minutes of idle time, then I am struck by an idea that fits in with a piece that I started in January. I brought some unfinished pieces along in case I needed a jumpstart. I feel a little like I’m cheating, but Richard suggested that we bring existing pieces with us, and now I’m glad I did.

I revise the few pages I've already typed, then continue the piece with fresh thoughts. It takes on a rhythm, an achingly familiar feeling that comes when I can cut through all of the inhibitions, all of the self-censoring and editing, and just let the writing flow out of me. I look around periodically at the dark amber atmosphere of Molly's, at the strangers walking by or sitting at the bar, and I wonder again if I'm cheating myself by finishing this piece instead of starting a new one.

By the end I have completed the piece, this piece that I thought I couldn't write, that I didn't know what to do with, and I've learned that the marathon can be useful for generating new twists on old writing. We hold another small group read-around, discuss our pieces, visit for a while and then have some free time until our whole group meeting. I feel like I have shed my prewriting stage and am firmly ensconced in the marathon magic.

That night, as nearly thirty of us cram into the Paul McCartney Suite to read our pieces, it is obvious to me that others are in a writing groove as well. These read-arounds – where we hear the unique perspectives and the variety of writing styles and genres – are part of the power of the marathon. I volunteer to read first and read the piece that I wrote in Molly's. As I am reading, I am afraid that it is too long, too personal, too detailed. Several times I think I will stop, thinking that the group is getting tired of my piece or that they are bored by it, but I just keep going. I am surprised that when I finish my words just seem to hang in the air and everybody is still. I think I've broken the good mood of the group, spoiled the party, but they are moved by my reading and don't know what to say. I am humbled by this and am thankful that I "cheated" in Molly's so I could write a piece that is so important to me and that I had been struggling to finish.

The next morning I shower early and go sit by the pool to write. It is quiet with only a few kitchen staff milling about. I sit there with my hair still wet and no make-up hoping I won't see anyone. I reflect on what someone said about what I read the night before and am soon riding along on a piece about how I treat my writer self as a separate entity.

I think of her as a shadow following me around, always writing (because I am always writing in my head). She tries desperately to keep up with me and periodically I stop and let her melt into me for a short while, allow myself to be writerly for a bit, then something says, "Okay, enough of that. Now get back to your real life."

The piece takes a humorous twist as Writer Me struggles for power with Regular Me. I feel productive. I feel alive. The marathon magic has not worn off during the night.

After breakfast we gather again as a whole group. Spike starts us off appropriately with a Beatles tune, and then I am brought to tears by the simple truths in his song, "When I Grow Up I'm Gonna Be a Tree." He personifies the tree, and I am reminded of the painful episode of losing one of our beloved old oak trees last summer. Kim Stafford inspires us with a reading and gives us some suggestions for writing. I depart with Lynne, Trish, Holly, and Karen. We all have the same idea: We want to be a group, but we want to be alone. It's one of the great tenets of the marathon: do whatever you have to do to get the writing done.

We agree to meet in front of St. Louis Cathedral at 1:00 and plan to have lunch together and read our pieces from the morning. I don't know what I want to write, but I know that there will be something waiting for me in the French Quarter. I stop in what I think is an antique shop, but is really a store that makes and sells wooden toys, novelties, and decorative items. Some of the objects are kinetic and seem to be keeping time with the gentle classical music playing in the

background. I am thinking about a story dealing with all of the hands who touch one of these wooden pieces, from the treecutter, to the logtruck driver, to the lumberyard worker. I can see the purchase of the wood, the delivery, then the carver shaping it into a piece of art. Finally there is the clerk, then customers, and then a buyer who gives it as a gift to someone else. I am reminded of the song Spike sang for us when we gathered this morning, “When I Grow Up I’m Gonna Be a Tree,” where the tree wants to be turned into a Louisville Slugger. I need a place to sit and write. Stories themselves are like the wooden object – they begin with the writer’s idea inspired by something else, get tossed around by the writer, reacted to in response groups, revised by the writer, cleaned up by an editor, and eventually interpreted by the reader.

I keep walking toward Jackson Square and then understand that my destination is St. Louis Cathedral. It’s safe and quiet and, unlike a café or bar, there’s no food to order. I won’t feel the pressure of using up a table or have to deal with waiters. There are interesting people going in and out of the Cathedral, and the place itself inspires me with its beauty. This seems to be the spot. I start writing immediately and a piece on sacred places and ritual develops. It answers some of the questions I have about my desire to become a Catholic after years as a Methodist. I had intended to start some fiction, but this piece just came out of nowhere. I thought I would find characters that I could make my own and use in a story. What I found instead were glimpses into my own character and answers to my life’s questions.

The piece doesn’t seem like something I would send off to a publisher, but I’m learning that the marathon is not about finished products. It’s about the act of writing itself, and about sharing that writing through the spoken word right there in the moment. There’s an element of immediacy in the marathon that you can’t find in other writing situations. A community of writers gathers in one location, all seeing the same things, yet we all walk away with our own different versions of what occurred. You walk into a place thinking you’ll write fiction and end up with a poem or a memoir.

Each marathon teaches me new things. Although I thought I was going with a relaxed attitude, I had really started out with an agenda and with self-imposed rules and pressures. To be at peace with the marathon and the writing that will result, you really can’t plan the writing. You just have to have faith that you’ll walk into a place and some writing will happen. I suppose it’s true what Goethe said: “One never goes so far as when one doesn’t know where one is going.” Maybe it’s the influence of writing in New Orleans, where the Mississippi cradles the city in the shape of a crescent, but I see the marathon itself as a river. You can stand on the banks and merely record what you see or you can wade in and let the currents carry you – the currents of the city and her people, and the currents of the writing.

On Ritual

New Orleans is a city of complex dichotomies, where vagrants mix with the rich and famous, where austere convents reside near lush hotels, where hot, spicy food is washed down with cold beer, and, especially, where the sinful and the sacred weave a delicate, provocative web around the French Quarter. Where else in the world can you be more sinful than you could have ever imagined, or by choosing to walk a couple of blocks in the opposite direction, experience sublime holiness?

My center of gravity in the French Quarter is Jackson Square. Each time I visit, I am drawn to St. Louis Cathedral. Its spires rise gracefully above the skyline – above the ornate wrought iron, the beautiful old buildings, above even the scent of beignets, dark coffee, and fried oysters.

A sign at the entrance reads, “Please do not go about the church without a tour guide.” I suppose you can’t just go wandering about in a sacred place without someone along who knows the customs and rules. A man offers a tour to all of us gawkers who are gathered at the back of the nave, but it’s not the architecture I want to hear about. I love history, but when I’m in this place I don’t want to hear about dates and additions and plaster. I need a spiritual tour guide to explain the dark mysteries and the blinding white joys of the church – not the physical place, but the church within us.

I will soon be trading in forty years of Protestantism to become a Catholic. I’m not getting enough out of being a Methodist. It’s not their fault. My soul just thirsts for more – more ritual, more sacraments, more prayers, more customs. I want to worship with all of my senses. I long to use my hands, my legs. I want a religion with hand motions and words to repeat. I want to smell incense and hear bells jingling and feel tiny drops of water on my cheek splashed on me by a man in beautiful robes. I want a multi-sensory experience. I feel like I’ve been going to the salad bar when all along there was an entire buffet waiting for me.

So at 40 I’m entering the catechumenate. I love saying it. I’m not just moving my letter or joining a church. I’m entering the catechumenate. What a beautiful, fun word. And it has sisters: catechism, catechuministic, catechetical. It’s worth converting just to be able to say catechetical.

Methodism didn’t leave me empty or disappointed. I enjoyed it, found it comforting, and basically got as much out of it as I brought to it. But Catholicism resonates in a deep primal place for me, a region of my heart and soul that craves the comfort of ritual. It is ritual we turn to for all of the emotional events in our lives, events too heart-wrenching or too beautiful for us to attempt on our own. A wedding, a new baby, a death – these all call for a ritual of some sort, a ceremony, communal words spoken aloud, symbolic gestures. These formal, traditional acts bring dignity to poignant events and give us a particular method of acting out those emotions in an organized manner. Ritual provides a structure to house emotions that are too big for us to process on our own.

Someone asked me if I didn’t think I would be bored by the repetition of the Mass. She said it was so predictable and could easily become a rote, meaningless exercise. But the ritual is what I’ve found most comforting. There was always a sense of anxiety associated with going to church for me; the more open and loose the service, the worse my anxiety was and the crankier I felt after attending a service. While I have friends who thrive on that unpredictability, that energetic spontaneity, I dread it. I crave comfort, repetition, ritual, and tradition from my church experience and long for a deeper spiritual life that is less dependent on who’s in the pulpit.

It is no coincidence that the more unpredictable my world has become, the more I long for the comfort of ritual and the dignity of the sacred. I teach in a post-Columbine classroom where there is the possibility of danger for me and my students; I live in a post-September 11th America, where the unthinkable can happen in our own cities; my own community recently caught a serial killer who terrorized our city for months and who made me feel unsafe in my own home. It is no surprise that I have sought the comfort of a place where I have some things on which I can depend: a movement of hands, a murmuring of words, a hint of incense.

The Writing Marathon has elevated itself to the level of ritual. It is comforting to count on certain elements of this writing trip. What potentially could be chaos – a bunch of writers turned loose in a really fun city – is strangely predictable. We gather and review our purpose by reading Natalie Goldberg’s marathon guidelines. We renew our spirits by reading an excerpt from Hemingway’s “A Moveable Feast.” Our directors give us instructions, maps, and inspiration, and then send us forth to roam, write, read, eat, drink, write some more, and share. It is an experience that can be repeated in any city with any group of writers if you remember to follow the sacred ritual:

Write your piece.

Say the words.

Smell the incense that the city offers.

Hear the jazz.

Taste the French bread.

Drink a Turbo Dog.

The Marathon has ended.

Go in peace.

Writing in the Zone

Andree Cosby

I am not a runner — I am a writer — yet as I ponder the idea of a marathon, I see the similarities between the two disciplines. I've always heard that at some point when a person is jogging it becomes effortless — the foot hits the pavement (or the grass, or the track) moving automatically, and the outside world and its problems evaporate for a time. The runner is wholly in the present and moving with maximum efficiency. During the New Orleans Writing Marathon I learned just a little how to get into that zone.

When I arrived in the Quarter, I decided to forget about the overwhelming task of revising my novel and to put aside any other obsessions. I wanted the particular place, the French Quarter, to work on my psyche with hopes of receiving personal insight and/or producing a new piece of writing. Since I have had a life-long relationship with the Quarter, I thought it would be hard to see it in a fresh way. In recent years I have grown to loath its degeneration and wish that it was the unique place it used to be ten, twenty, thirty years ago. I needed to overcome the psychological stagnation I was experiencing in relation to it before I could confront it directly. Basically I had erected a wall of disgust because of what I felt it had become.

My writing mates on day one were people with whom I was very familiar and comfortable — George, Patricia and Karen. They didn't mind me purging my personal thoughts and venom when we shared after each of our freewrites. I tried to encounter our first location — Croissant d'Or, but to me it was the old Brocato's Ice-cream Parlor invaded and taken over by this new coffee shop — it seems in New Orleans there's a coffee house at every corner. Even though the atmosphere was certainly delicious, I couldn't stop the thoughts that had filled my mind the week before — they had to do with the idea of reflection, as in light. I had been trying to compose a poem. Fortunately by pondering light in that particular place and writing about it, I was able to rid myself of the obsession and begin to connect with both the Quarter and my group members. It was as if by the act of writing I was becoming involved in the moment.

The shop has a quaint, yet art-deco feel to it — strange curves and arches; heavy, stained glass cabinets glowing darkly; triangular mirrors — upside down, overlapping, pointing brilliantly to the shining marble floor which reflects Karen's crossed leg kicking. Everything in the world seems to be so much about reflection — everything reflecting something else — everything reacting to everything else — even the white coffee cup vibrating its sweet black liquid with the motion of our writing, a tiny mirror for the spinning ceiling fan.

It occurs to me that by allowing ourselves and each other to come as we are, to interact as we are, to write what comes naturally, we are gaining a rhythm much like one achieved in running. At first it seems a little forced, but the longer we do it, the more engaged we are in the present.

A similar thing happened at our second stop — Molly's Irish Pub at the Market. It's a dark little bar frequented by locals with seating that looks out on busy Decatur St. A local newscaster is sitting at the bar in front of a portrait of Yeats. He carries his drink to the jukebox and selects several Led Zeppelin songs. "Stairway to Heaven" begins to dominate my thought patterns, and it pulls me from the moment because it relates to both my past and present. I probably listened to this song a thousand times when I lived in the French Quarter; I also listened to all of my adolescent friends learning to play it on guitar and then to both my sons who are a decade apart.

I'm tempted to get off course because I see the song as a distraction, but instead I let my thoughts surround it and begin writing:

Not "Stairway to Heaven" again!!! The multi-generational guitar tune tugging at the pseudo-depths of all our psyches forever and ever and ever...What is the appeal? Just simple chords? Something to satisfy the soul without any demands beyond the full emotional engagement of six minutes duration?

The next day of the marathon I am in a different group — Melanie, Richard and our guest, Kim Stafford and our radio guy, Todd. Our first stop is Melanie's house — she has just moved next to the Quarter in a neighborhood called Faubourg Marigny from nearby St. Tammany Parish, a very different and more conservative community. Since I've known her, Melanie has gone from living in the country in a round house, to the suburbs and now to the heart of the city. I observe Melanie's unpacked boxes and write a piece about moving and the effect of place on people. It makes me think of when I lived in the Quarter — how alive it was for me, how I experienced it with no walls, no preconceptions; but when I moved away, it seemed to lose its allure. Perhaps it had changed, or I had, or maybe both of us. I wonder why I can't let it seep in my pores like it once did. Part of me knows the answer; I know to experience it I have to be still.

After lunch at Port o' Call, we all decide to stroll along the Mississippi River and look for Spike, a guitarist who is part of the marathon. It begins to rain; I watch as Melanie breaks off to watch a calliope player in a yellow raincoat on top of one of the city's huge paddleboats. Todd and I are behind Richard and Kim and suddenly are following a brick walkway that leads us in a circle back the way we came. Todd must think it rude when I tell him suddenly, "I've got to go this way."

I decide to experience the city on my own terms. For the past two decades, whenever I have visited, it was with children or friends. I need to encounter it alone. I start in the Central Business District that borders the Quarter, wanting to find familiar buildings from my childhood and to admire the architectural magnificence. The hugeness of the structures always makes me feel so dwarfed and ego-less, such a transient creature; and I think that sort of attitude makes for openness; I become more of a conduit ready to receive what the world has to offer.

In my altered state, I then make my way back to the Quarter and arrive at Jackson Square, my final writing destination of the day. At first I think I won't be able to write, that I'm sick of this place in its current incarnation; but I write anyway, just recording; and somehow in the practice of openness, pen to paper, I find my stride:

In my mind I hold an image of the French Quarter past when I lived here in the late '60s and early '70s. This is the place I truly know and lament the loss of. I think of a time here when every other open door did not reveal a t-shirt establishment but instead an artist's studio, a handcrafted jewelry shop, a room stocked with Indian imports or an all-cotton thrift store. The drag queen at the corner of St. Anne and Bourbon wasn't a garish clown at which to marvel but my neighbor; and so were the heroin addicts, barkers, strippers, drunks, preachers and lost children. I knew them, loved them, and was not afraid.

When I lived in the Quarter I never thought about its past. I never saw it as historical because it was so alive with the NOW. I do remember gazing at the gray façade of St. Louis Cathedral hovering over the square, and knew that it was somehow "other" — connected to a past that I knew little about except through Louisiana history class in eighth grade and

to a nebulous world I knew little about except through my Catholic upbringing. During the four years I lived here I never went inside, nor did I want to — it seemed like a place of foreboding.

Lately, in the news, there's been much controversy over the state of the Quarter — some say it is losing its unique flavor, that it is so commercialized and filthy, so filled with homeless and tarot card readers that it is beginning to repulse visitors rather than attract them. When I've visited from St. Tammany Parish, across Lake Pontchartrain from New Orleans, I too have noticed that something was amiss — the piss, vomit and panhandlers were getting out of hand. My senses usually felt assaulted, and my visits became less and less frequent. It was true — there was little good art in the square, and with the ghost tours and variety of fortunetellers, it was becoming the perfect setting for a horror movie.

But today I decide to not view it from the outside — to not clutter my mind with old perceptions or even reflections on other things — but to empty myself and receive what the square in fact is. I listen and watch.

Lantana and lariope are in bloom, and beneath the shade of a crepe myrtle tree a group of Goths gather. Though the sun is now shining in a sky of cloudless blue and it is almost 90°, they are all wearing black trench coats. One particular pretty boy with brown hair flowing down his back has dyed part of it, apparently to match the crepe myrtle blossoms. My heart goes out to them, so costume-bound and inappropriate. I long to know their stories.

A group of young, black musicians (and one oriental man) are playing old jazz tunes on the newly divided benches in front of the Cabildo. (Partitioned seating keeps the homeless from setting up comfortable residence. I wonder where they've migrated.) There is a trombone player with dreadlocks, a saxophone player with long complicated braids, the others in the group playing a guitar, a washboard and a snare drum. The singer wails Louis Armstrong's "When You're Smiling," and it makes me smile because it is such a silly song and pigeons are second-lining around my feet, and a little boy on a bicycle is speeding in circles in front of the cathedral with his little sister balanced on the handlebars. Tourists roam past the art hung on the square's black iron fence, and some bravely opt for a self-portrait.

I am beginning to feel drunk on the teeming life around me — I think — THIS IS IT — life is a God-infused carnival. The musicians begin to play "Everybody Want to Know Who Jesus Really Is." I am pulled from my revelry on God's immanence by this topic of Jesus introduced into the swarm of humanity. "He's the Lily of the Valley; he's the bright and morning star..." And then the bells of St. Louis Cathedral ring — the Angelus, my Catholic school upbringing tells me — one of daily calls to prayer and meditation. The cathedral is gray and imposing — in your face — built smack up against the edge of the square, residing over the carnival. I strain my neck and look up at its steeple — it is magnificent and clearly meant to be the center and most important building in the Quarter. I remember Joseph Campbell saying that the cathedral was the archetypal symbol of the Middle Ages. Once upon a time it took Christianity to raise a village and a child. I imagine New Orleanians of the 18th and 19th centuries and even part of the 20th taking pause to ponder the divine whenever they hear the church bells ring.

But the god of the cathedral is not the god of immanence that I reveled in a few moments before. This is the God of transcendence who demands more than just being in the moment, going with the flow. This is the god of sacrifice and blood, who gives prescriptions for living. Was it also Campbell who said that the symbol of the 20th c is the skyscraper? But it's not my

symbol, and it never will be. Ironic how humanity destroys its own symbols. Maybe the symbol for the 21st c is a bomb exploding. I think of Yeats' "The Second Coming"—"Things fall apart;/the center cannot hold."

It seems humanity has rejected both immanence and transcendence and has thereby set itself on a path of self-destruction. What is true? Is God in all things in an animate, pantheistic sort of way? If so, shouldn't we be consciously respecting nature and each other? And if God is wholly transcendent and has given us directives, shouldn't we be mindful of them?

Here in the square in the shadow of the cathedral I see a microcosm of life and of the great questions of life. I feel the difference in observing something and becoming part of it, how opening one's self to something changes the perception of it.

Just as when a marathon runner reaches his/her zone, continuing to write until the writing flows has pushed me into a state where both emotions and intellect are engaged, boundaries are stripped away between me and the world, and compassion emerges.

My Fourth New Orleans Writing Marathon

George Dorrill

Kim Stafford quotes Carol Bly as saying “An essay is asking a question and then writing a story.” My question comes from something Shunryu Suzuki says in *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*: “In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities; in the expert’s mind there are few.” Suzuki is encouraging us to keep beginner’s mind as we continue in our practice. My question is, “How do you keep beginner’s mind after participating in a number of writing marathons?” I have participated in four New Orleans Writing Marathons: July 2001, July 2002, and two in July 2003. After the fourth marathon I felt let down; I felt it was the least successful of the four. In this essay, I will try to tell the story of what happened to me in the fourth marathon, warts and all, and try to figure out why I had that feeling, and if I had lost beginner’s mind.

The writing marathon for me began on the evening of Monday, July 21, when my wife Masako and I checked into the Le Richelieu Hotel. When we got there about nine o’clock, Richard Louth and his wife Dori were in the lobby, and we saw Laura Paradise from the NWP staff in Berkeley there too. We hadn’t eaten, so we left our bags in the room and walked over to Mona’s on Frenchmen Street in the Faubourg Marigny, about three blocks from the hotel. We both like Middle Eastern food, and I knew it would be open until ten o’clock. After eating, we went back to the hotel, finished unpacking the car, and went to sleep.

I am an early riser: I woke up at five o’clock, listened to *Morning Edition* on National Public Radio until seven, and then went for a walk in the Quarter. I try to walk an hour a day, and early morning is a great time to walk in the Quarter. I walked down to the French Market, walked through the French Market up to Decatur Street, up Decatur Street to Canal, up Canal to Royal, down Royal back to the hotel. I took a shower and went down to room 227, the Paul McCartney Suite, at 10. Masako went with me to check out the table situation – we had brought food for the reception at 6:30, and she needed to get plates from her apartment to serve it on and wanted to see how big the tables were – and then she left to go back to her apartment in Gentilly to do school work at Dillard. She would come back in time for the reception at 6:30.

There was a big crowd in the sitting room at the Paul McCartney Suite. Richard called us to order at 10:10 and introduced Laura Paradise, Kim Stafford from Oregon, Liz Mandrell from Kentucky, who had driven down from West Virginia with Laura, and Todd Delaney from KSLU, who would be making a radio documentary on the marathon. He then asked us to introduce ourselves. We went around the room giving our names, what writing project we were from, and what year we had been initiated. Diane Dempsey, from the Acadiana Writing Project in Lafayette (1991) was first. Then followed Harriet Maier (Acadiana 1989), Karen Maceira (SLWP 1997), Lynne Vance (SLWP 1995), Patricia Benit (SLWP 2001), Andrée Cosby (SLWP 2002), Ann Dobie, director of the Louisiana State Writing Project network, Margaret Simon (Acadiana 1995), Kathleen O’Shaughnessy (Acadiana 1992ish), Clarice Gautreaux (SLWP 2002), Margaret Westmoreland (SLWP 2002), Mary Koepp (SLWP 2002), Nancy Nungesser (UNO 2003), Melanie Plesh (SLWP 1992), Doris Louth (SLWP 1992 – by marriage), Masako Dorrill (SLWP 2001 – by marriage), Holly James (SLWP 2000), Mike Maier (Harriet Maier’s husband), Charles Rock (Acadiana 1991), Kevin Maier (Mike and Harriet Maier’s son), and Eva Guillot (Acadiana 1994).

Richard then went through his handout explaining the rationale and nitty-gritty of the New Orleans Writing Marathon and turned the session over to Kim. Kim talked about two places as metaphors – Marathon in Greece, the site of the battle between the Greeks and the Persians, from

which Pheidippides ran nearly 27 miles over the mountain to Athens to inform the Athenians of the Greek victory and thereupon died, and the Meander River in Turkey, which moves back and forth across the plain but always heads to the sea. He wanted us to meander in our writing, moving back and forth, but always heading in a direction. Kim then gave us a list of Jack Kerouac's 30 essentials for writing, and then talked about Dag Hammarskjöld's *Markings* and read a review written of the book, by his father, William Stafford, noting that it was a religious book, binding the literary with the biographical, and asked us to go out and do 27 markings, marking the boundaries of the outer world and the inner world. He completed his presentation by saying, "Do this workshop by rumor."

We were then left to form up groups and to go out and write. I waited until the room cleared out a bit, and I saw three women talking to each other. I went up and asked if I could join them. They said sure. They were Trish Benit, whom I had written with in the 2001 Marathon, Karen Maceira, whom I had written with in the Sabino Canyon Writing Marathon at the Tucson Rural Sites Retreat in March, and Andrée Cosby, who is a colleague of mine at SLU and who was in the writing group of Melanie Plesh, Tracy Amond, Karen, and myself that had been meeting in the fall of 2002 leading up the Tucson retreat. Andrée said she was hungry, so I suggested we go to the Croissant d'Or, which was two and a half blocks away and had good food and was a good place to write.

On our way there we ran into Mary Koepp, Margaret Westmoreland, and Clarice Gautreaux, who were also headed to the Croissant d'Or. Nancy Nungesser from UNO was to join them there. When we got there, I found a table and sat down and started to write, because there was a big line at the counter and I wanted to wait to order until the line had gone down a little. I wrote this:

10:52 a.m. Tuesday, 22 July 2003, at Croissant d'Or. Official first words of our first "advanced" writing marathon. Big crowd in Paul McCartney suite this morning. 27 or so. 27 was the number Kim Stafford gave us for our jottings today. He thought of two places – Marathon in Greece and Meander. He said our writings should meander, and we should meander too. I'm going to order something to eat and drink. The line has gone down. Our group is Andrée, Karen, Trish, and me. There's another group in here as well – Mary Koepp, Clarice, and Margaret. A woman from the UNO group is going to join them later. They're sitting at the table behind us.

I went up to order after the line went down and got lentil soup. The four of us chitchatted for about a half-hour as we ate and then started to write at 11:25. I have a hard time getting started, so I usually write what's around me or what has just happened. That's what I did. After I had written about my lentil soup and what the others had talked about, I couldn't think of anything else to write, so I copied Jack Kerouac's 30 Essentials into my notebook. We wrote maybe ten minutes. Here's what I wrote:

11:25 – I feel much better now. I was feeling good before, but I just had a bowl of lentil soup, excellent lentil soup, for \$2.52. And excellent conversation. Andrée is reading Paul Elie's book, The Life You Save May Be Your Own, a multiple biography of four American Catholic writers – Walker Percy, Dorothy Day, Flannery O'Connor, and Thomas Merton. Karen grew up in the lower ninth ward, below the industrial canal. Trish and her boyfriend looked at a house in the Irish channel, a small house, that was listed at

\$315,000 (I think). We talked about the Vietnamese village off Chef Menteur Highway. Andrée told a story about her son killing their next-to-last rooster in a teenage initiatory ritual. I've been reading Jack Kerouac's list of essentials: 1. Scribbled secret notebooks, and wild typewritten pages, for yr own joy 2. Submissive to everything, open, listening 3. Try never get drunk outside yr own house 4. Be in love with yr life 5. Something that you feel will find its own form 6. Be crazy dumb saint of the mind 7. Blow as deep as you want to blow 8. Write what you want bottomless from bottom of the mind 9. The unspeakable visions of the individual 10. No time for poetry but exactly what is 11. Visionary tics shivering in the chest 12. In tranced fixation dreaming upon object before you 13. Remove literary, grammatical and syntactical inhibition 14. Like Proust be an old teahead of time 15. Telling the true story of the world in interior monolog 16. The jewel center of interest is the eye within the eye. 17. Write in recollection and amazement for yourself 18. Work from pithy middle eye out, swimming in language sea 19. Accept loss forever 20. Believe in the holy contour of life 21. Struggle to sketch the flow that already exists intact in mind 22. Don't think of words when you stop but to see picture better 23. Keep track of every day the date emblazoned in yr morning 24. No fear or shame in the dignity of yr experience, language & knowledge 25. Write for the world to read and see yr exact pictures of it 26. Bookmovie is the movie in words, the visual American form 27. In Praise of Character in the Bleak inhuman Loneliness 28. Composing wild, undisciplined, pure, coming in from under, crazier the better 29. You're a Genius all the time 30. Written-Director of Earthly movies Sponsored & Angeled in Heaven

As ever, Jack

We read what we wrote to each other and then talked about where to go next. It was around noon. I said, "Why don't we go to lunch?" I wanted to go to Bennachin, a nearby African restaurant that I hadn't been able to eat at at the last marathon. Nobody else was hungry, and Trish suggested we walk down to the French Market and go to lunch later. So we walked down Ursulines towards the French Market. When we got to the corner of Decatur and Ursulines, we saw the sign for Molly's at the Market, and someone said, "Why don't we take a peek inside?" So we looked in. The place was nearly deserted. There were no marathoners there, and it was very cool and dark. Someone said, "Why don't we stop here, have a drink, and write a while?" We all agreed that was a good idea and so we went in.

I bought drinks for everybody, and we each found our places to write. Trish went to the window seat. I went to the first table in front of the door under the fan, and Karen and Andrée sat behind me at the second table. Molly's is kind of the unofficial headquarters of the New Orleans Writing Marathon. It is one of Richard's favorite places to write. I did my best writing in the 2001 marathon there, part of which was excerpted for Richard's *Quarterly* article on the New Orleans Writing Marathon. In 2002 our men's group consisting of Richard, Gary Porter, Dion Norman, and me spent the afternoon there, and I wrote about India, and at the earlier marathon this year, we had spent an afternoon there while taping a segment for the *Elimidate* program.

I like writing to music, especially fast music. I like to keep up with the rhythm. Molly's has a jukebox with 1000 selections, many of them very interesting, and the jukebox was playing. I was getting into the writing groove now and was writing some good stuff, I thought. Todd from KSLU had walked in, and I figured we would be recorded and interviewed. We wrote for maybe half an hour. Here is what I wrote:

12:35 – At Molly’s at the Market. Too much to write about. Trish’s writing about home made me want to write about home. Stairway to Heaven is playing on the jukebox. Saturday morning on weekend edition on the annoying music segment they played a bluegrass version of Pink Floyd’s The Wall by Luke Wright and the Wrongs, a Canadian bluegrass group. I love it when Robin and Linda Williams come on Prairie Home Companion and appear as Marvin and Mavis Smiley and do showtunes, for example, as bluegrass – all the same tempo, all the same key. Todd just walked in. I think he may want to record us. We just got here and started writing. The music makes it easy to write fast – try to keep up with the music. I’m sitting in my favorite spot, at the front table facing the door under the fan. We didn’t come here on purpose – I said I would like to go to Bennachin for lunch and Andrée said she thought she had a coupon for it and so we were walking in the direction of the French Market, planning to go back by the hotel and picking up the coupon and we walked past Molly’s and someone said shall we go in and we said why not and nobody from the marathon was here and it’s a cool place to write, a good place to write, and it’s not time for lunch yet and I’m drinking Blue Moon, Belgian beer with a lemon in it. Not too many, not four like two weeks ago. Watching the pigeons walk across the street. Watching the street traffic. Home. Where is home? Trish is thinking about buying property. I’ve never been able to think seriously about buying a house – that’s too much of a grown-up thing to do. Trish just walked by and said, “The Eiffel Tower’s on fire.” And indeed it is. There’s a TV playing CNN behind us and it says the Eiffel Tower is on fire. Andrée is checking out the selections on the jukebox – not an easy task. 100 CDs, about 1000 selections, but no Beatles. Now they’re playing “I’ll Never Leave This World Alive.” Probably an Irish group. Lots of Irish music on the jukebox. Trish bought a tanktop. She found out about the Eiffel Tower fire by calling her boyfriend Ron, who is in Alabama, to tell him about the property she had been eyeing. Trish is very grown-up, but she flew for the first time recently, to St. Martin’s in the West Indies. She still has the MSY tag on her backpack. Some lovely photos of clouds from the plane. She’s sitting at the window seat. I gave her and Andrée a copy of “My Dinner at Bacco” to read yesterday. That seems like years ago. I am so glad I finished my review of the article and gave it to Masako to email this morning. I feel I am very lucky to be in this group. Three strong women, three beautiful women, three grown-up women. They’ve all three lived much more life than I have, even though I’m older than all of them. But no comparisons. Jack Kerouac says “No fear or shame in the dignity of yr experience, language & knowledge” and I believe that truly. Each of us is a precious jewel shining like the sun. Richard is calling around to find – Rock and roll is here to stay, Neil Young now singing – out where Tracy and the other girl – I forget her name – Holly – are – their car is blocking somebody. Poor Richard – he can’t write, he must manage, he must administer. He would love to be here now in Molly’s, listening to Neil Young, sitting at the window, writing. He just called Andrée. I think I’m the only one in the whole group that doesn’t have a cell phone. I’m going to get another Blue Moon. Rock and roll will never die – there’s more to the picture than meets the eye – hey hey my my, rock and roll can never die.

When we read to each other, Todd came over to listen and record, and then he interviewed us about the writing marathon. After he finished, it was getting on towards 1:30, so we walked

back to the hotel to pick up Andrée's coupon for Bennachin from her car. It turned out to be for dinner, but we went there anyway. They had ten lunch entrées for under \$6 each. It has just opened in the Quarter recently, having been on Carrollton previously, and it is in the Lower Quarter, so there is not a lot of tourist traffic. When we got there, there was a big family gathering in the middle of the restaurant, and the window table was open. We sat there on comfy chairs and ordered. I had red beans and sausage and rice, which I always order at restaurants, Andrée had stewed chicken, yams, and rice, and Karen and Trish had jama-jama (spinach) and rice. It was a good meal. We talked a lot, but we didn't do any writing there. It was getting on towards three o'clock, so we decided to go back to the hotel, swim a little, and sit around the pool and write. Trish and I swam and the others didn't. We wrote and read, and eventually all of us fell asleep. I wasn't doing very good writing. We were all lethargic, and my writing was lethargic too. This is what I wrote at the pool:

3:37 p.m., at the pool at Le Richelieu. After Molly's, we went back to the hotel to get Andrée's coupon, which turned out to be for dinner. We went to Bennachin anyway, and got the table by the front window. Karen and Trish got jama-jama (spinach) and rice, Andrée got chicken and yams and rice, and I got red beans and sausage and rice. The red beans were very good, much spicier than is usual in New Orleans. Just as we were coming out of Bennachin and heading back to the hotel, it started raining, but by the time I got down to the pool, the sun had come out again. I went in for a brief swim, and Trish and Karen came down and Trish went in for a swim too. I'm drinking a gin and tonic. We had our interview with Todd and then Melanie and Ann Dobie came in. They were in a group with Tracy and Holly and Connie Magee. Tracy and Holly had to go back to move their car. They were just coming in when we left. It seems the place where I'm writing affects my writing. I was able to write something better at Molly's because of the music and atmosphere. There's no music here. I don't know what to write about, really. Maybe if I just keep writing something will turn up. At the restaurant, there was a lot of talk about family. Karen's son has moved back in with them, Andrée's mother used to stick her long red-lacquered fingernails into food and say "What's this?" A relative of Trish's – her mom, maybe, at a restaurant on Metairie road – a Greek restaurant at the place where Byblos is now – was going on about immigrants. What I would really like to do is take a nap.

I'll write some more about home. Where is my home? I'm thinking about moving back to South Carolina when I retire. That's where I grew up. I don't know if it will be a good idea. Nearly all my relatives are dead and I have few friends there. It would mean starting over. But I grew up there, spent the first eighteen years of my life there, and somehow it draws me. At the Summer Institute recently concluded, I wrote a long piece about a picture of the house I grew up in. I could have made it even longer, for I have many memories of the place. I've been thinking a lot about memory lately. I can remember long-off things, but I forget what just happened. I rode up to the fourth floor with Karen and Trish and realized when I got up there that I had forgotten to get my key, so I had to ride back down again. I do things like that all the time.

Does having kids make you a grown-up? Karen, Trish, and Andrée all have children. I don't have any children. I feel they are all more grown-up than me. Trish said she has always been grown-up.

All four girls were asleep. Trish moved over to the last remaining couch. There's an

old woman at the fourth one reading, but I'm afraid to throw her in the pool and take over her couch. All the women have painted toenails. None of the women are snoring. I think I'll have another drink.

Dolce far niente. That's what the Italians say. Sweet doing nothing. We were just talking about the news. There's a lot of news going on today, but we can't bring ourselves to be interested in it. This is our little respite from the world. I'd rather speculate about the blonde in the blue bathing suit. She has this little chiffon wrap around the bottom half. I'm sure there's a name for it. She has these shoes on. I think they may be called mules – backless – with some height to them. She's with this old guy in a T-shirt. I'm an old guy in a T-shirt, but he's wearing glasses. I think she's the same woman who had red pants on and who looked at me through the door. He has a pink drink; she has a lemonade colored one. I thought the same bartender would be at the bar, so I didn't take tip money when I went to get my drink. But it was another bartender – so I felt bad not giving him a tip. Trish asked me what was an exotic drink. I don't know any exotic drinks, so I told her to ask the guy what he was drinking. He said a mai-tai. The blonde is in the pool. Another group has returned. It was Lynne and Beth. The blonde took off her little wrap-around to go in the pool. She just looked at me. I like my new position. The old woman got up so I grabbed her chaise longue, or as I would call it, chaise lounge. I remember laughing so hard reading "Pogo" that I fell off the chaise lounge. Maybe it was the "Ask him how do he smell" episode. Or the "He sho do hog a mess of ground" episode, or the "mess of baby spiders" episode. The blonde emerged from the pool, tugging at her bottom on both sides – to let water out? – I don't know. I can see another woman reflected in the glass French doors of the terrace bar. She has a child in the pool. She is sitting with another guy on a T-shirt. She has on a light blue bathing suit. I wonder what time it is. I wonder if Lynne and co. are coming to the pool. I wonder where we'll eat tonight. The blonde is reading a book. The guy is listening to stuff on headphones. Trish is writing; Karen and Andrée aren't. The child is a boy. This is sloppy writing. I don't think I'll get a chance to read it. Karen wrote about the difficulty of finding topics to write about; Trish wrote more about her house-to-be; Andrée wrote about the relationship between sleep and death.

We were at the pool one-and-a-half or two hours. We were supposed to meet at Richard's room at 5:30 for a read-around and then there would be a reception from 6:30 to 8:30, sponsored by Ann Dobie. I didn't take notes at the read-around, so my memories are vague. I remember I read the piece I wrote at Molly's. I remember that Tracy read first, a tremendous piece about having to buy a gun. Nobody wanted to read after her. I remember that everyone from our group read, and I was very proud of our group. I remember the reading took longer than an hour, and I was on the sofa eating cheese and pistachios and drinking wine whenever a bottle was passed around. I remember Masako got back very late. When the reading finally stopped, people hung around eating snacks and drinking wine and drifting out to eat. Masako and I hooked on to a group led by Mary Koepp that was going to Fiorello's.

The Fiorello dinner was kind of a mirror image of my dinner at Bacco in the 2002 marathon. There were ten people in the group, as there were in 2002, but everything else was different. The place was only two blocks away from the hotel, we walked in and were seated immediately, people could talk to each other and be heard. I was at one end of the table and Kim Stafford was at the other end. Kim ordered red beans and rice; I ordered liver and onions. There were eight

women between us: Masako, Holly James, April Schmidt and Diana Phillips from the 2003 Summer Institute to my left; Connie Magee, Clarice Gautreaux, Mary Koepp, and Margaret Westmoreland to my right. The food was good, not overly expensive, and we were able to settle the bill without any hassle or argument.

After the meal, most people were heading back to the hotel, but Diana wanted to go to Bourbon Street to do research for a story she was writing about a stripper who kills her former lover. April, Masako, and I went with her. We had planned to do that during the earlier marathon, but they had gotten back too late from dinner to go out. We walked up to Bourbon Street, which was a different world from where we had been. Richard had said that Tuesday night was amateur night, and that there was a coupon for free entrance to Larry Flynt's Hustler club in *Gambit*, so we stopped at the CC's Coffee House on Royal to pick up some copies. Diana needed a notebook to take notes on her research, so we stopped in a T-shirt shop. The young man working there didn't have any notebooks, but he gave Diana and April each a 4x6 file-card. Diana interviewed several barkers. One told her that the Hustler Club was the most expensive, because it charged women, whereas most clubs didn't, and that all the clubs charged pretty much the same: \$10 cover and \$7-\$10 a drink. We went up to the Hustler Club, but the lady didn't know anything about a coupon, and we couldn't find one in *Gambit*, and it would be \$40 to get in the club, so we went back down the street to another strip club we had passed earlier – I didn't get the name. I paid \$10 at the door, and we went in. It was a big place, very loud, with flashing lights. We sat at a table near a stage. I sat facing the stage, April sat to my left, and Diana and Masako sat across from us. They could see another stage behind us, and an area where women were doing individual dances. When the waitress came over to take an order, April asked her about a stripper that she knew. The girl was very nice, but she didn't know the girl April was talking about. April and Diana were taking copious notes. I found the atmosphere very unerotic. The women doing the dancing were psychologically very distant. I was impressed by their flexibility and excellent body tone. There was no pole at the stage I could see. I had expected total nudity but there was none – all the women wore G-strings.

After a while, we left. We stopped at the Walgreen's on Royal on the way back so Diana could buy a notebook. I think we went straight to bed when we got back to the hotel. I don't remember walking on Wednesday morning. I remember there was great uncertainty about Masako's schedule. There were plans for Dori and her to have lunch, and Dori would be leaving some time around 10:30 from Hammond with her son Kevin and would be bringing T-shirts with her, but only the gray ones, because there was trouble with printing the blue ones.

We had a ten o'clock meeting at Richard's room. Kim gave us some more writing suggestions. He started out by talking about two kinds of writing: whole-wheat and white flour. Whole-wheat writing is for local use from local products; white-flour writing is more refined, for a more distant audience. A whole-wheat version of teaching would be for students to use writing to teach the teacher what they are learning.

Some of Kim's suggestions:

1. Write about a place for a place. Example: write a poem about a coffee shop you've been in and give it to them.
2. Find a line and write some riffs on it. Example: (overheard line) "I don't care. I'm in the Quarter."
3. Pose a question from your life and seek clues from your location.

4. Carol Bly says an essay is asking a question and then writing a story.
5. The lost good thing – by writing bring it back in your life.
6. What have you been carrying? Something you want to write about someday, start it now.
7. Take the lid off. Begin to put down...
8. The best writing results from assignments poorly understood.

Kim then read a poem from *New Yorker* written after 9/11 – “How to praise the world badly mutilated” – you must praise the mutilated world. He talked about writing being like the beignets and coffee at Café du Monde – mounds of powdered sugar and some bitterness. He then read a poem consisting of excuses for not writing a poem. Then he talked about three of the watchwords for writing from the NWP Head Office – voice, warts, and detail – and mentioned the other three – change, focus, and benefit. Kathleen said Art Peterson had added a seventh – complexity. We ended with a song by Spike, who had joined the marathon from the Mississippi Writing and Thinking Project. Spike sang a song about becoming a tree: “When I grow up, I’m gonna be a tree.”

We then broke up into groups and were told to meet back at the room at 5:30. Everyone had left, so I went back up to my room. I messed around in the room, trying to figure out who had ordered gray T-shirts, and didn’t do any writing. It was raining. Masako came back from school about noon, but she couldn’t get in touch with Dori. I told her to leave a message on their phone and suggested we go to lunch. We went to the Praline Connection on Frenchmen Street and shared our meals – smothered pork chop with crowder peas and okra and rice; stewed chicken with lima beans and rice. When we got back to the hotel at two, I wanted to take a nap and Masako had to go back to Dillard. I slept until three, when Dori called from downstairs. She brought the T-shirts up and explained that she had left late from Hammond because they had a terrific storm up there. She also said she had been doing some writing, based on one of Kim’s prompts.

When she and Kevin left, I sat down and wrote a piece about food to read at the 5:30 read-around. Here is that piece:

3:30 Wednesday, 23 July 2003, Room 421, Le Richelieu Hotel, New Orleans.

I’m finally getting around to write today. Just had a visit from Dori, who brought the T-shirts up for me to look at. I’ve been thinking a lot about food lately. That’s not difficult to do in the quarter, where the main question seems to be “Where do we eat?” When I was in Iran, an Iranian friend of mine used to call me a “sabzi-shenās” which could be translated as “greensologist.” An important part of Iranian cuisine is sabzi, which literally means something like “green things,” and refers to the fresh herbs that were served to accompany the main dish of rice and whatever was served with it – tarragon, leek tops, coriander, parsley, radishes with their tops, etc. We weren’t supposed to eat them, because of the danger of parasites and other nasty things, but I loved to eat them and tried to learn as much as I could about the different varieties – that’s how I got to be known as a sabzi-shenās. In Greece, one of the delights of the cuisine is called “xorta,” which I suppose could be translated “weeds.” You see the old women on the roadside gathering xorta – they know which plants are edible – dandelions, wild chicory, other things, and they boil them down and serve them with lemon and olive oil. In Iran, my favorite xoresht – the thing you serve with rice – was called qorme-sabzi. It was a mixture of black-eyed peas, called very poetically in Iran nightingale-eyed peas – lubya

cheshme-bolbol – and various boiled greens – mostly parsley, but carrot tops and other greens as well. When I was in Anaheim several years ago, I went to an Iranian restaurant and ate qorme-sabzi and munched on raw onions. In south Louisiana, there is a kind of gumbo called gumbo zerbes, served during lent, which consists of a mixture of greens – mustard, turnip, collard, etc. – and no meat or fat from meat. It is delicious. I love greens, especially collards the way my wife fixes them, with soy sauce and sesame oil. I love beans, too. Last November, in Covington, when we had our day-long writing and dinner on the ground, I wrote about beans and Mary Koepp still remembers that. I didn't remember what I wrote, but I think it was about the variety of beans there are in the world.

All this comes to mind because yesterday when we were having lunch in Bennachin and eating African versions of red beans and rice and spinach and rice, someone remarked how similar the dishes were to some Louisiana dishes – of course, this is no accident, for there is a strong African substrate in south Louisiana culture, and I said something about the food of the poor people of the world being very similar the world over – rice and beans and greens and bread from whatever local grain and little bits of meat, especially chicken.

I was thinking about this today when we had lunch at the Praline Connection. The sign says “New Orleans Cooking” or something like that, but most people think of it as a soul food restaurant. Yet I was eating what I grew up eating in South Carolina. We didn't call it soul food. It was just food. We ate rice every day. My mother had a little pan she cooked only rice in. We had rice and butter beans (what we called the little green lima beans), rice and black-eyed peas – hoppin' John, we called it, and you had to eat it on New Year's day – rice and milk gravy, made from what was left in the pan after frying chicken, rice and beef stew, rice and rutabagas, and the list goes on. I loved that food.

I still love that food, even though I know it's not good for me. I would have ordered fried chicken livers today, except for the fact I got violently ill the last time I ate them. Instead, my wife and I shared smothered pork chops and stewed chicken, lima beans and crowder peas and okra and rice. It reminded me of home cooking.

Last night, at Fiorello's, I ordered liver and onions. I order liver and onions every time I see them on a restaurant menu, which is not too often these days. Liver is poor people's food. In America, we use the euphemism “variety meats” for this kind of meat; in Great Britain they use a more direct term: offal.

I don't know how to finish this reflection, but that's okay. Kim Stafford said we could write beginnings today, like half a poem. This maybe is half an essay.

We started the read-around at six. Eva from Lafayette read about Père Antoine's and the Napoleon House. Margaret Westmoreland read a very funny piece – a tour de force – about making noises at night and many other things. Holly James read a piece about her life jewelry. I read my piece about food. Clarice read. Diane Dempsey from Lafayette read a snapshot about observing bodies at Napoleon House. Harriet Maier read a piece about their family trip to here and how her plans for the marathon had changed. April read two poems by Diana, who had already left, and a love-letter to her boyfriend, alternatively titled “You Pissed Me Off This Morning.” Doris read her piece “Rumors of Elephants,” and Richard read a piece about Doris. Lynne Vance read about the connection between rural voices and place-based writing and being in St. Mary's church. Mike Maier read from a play he was working on about a werewolf. Charles

from Acadiana, using Kerouac's prompt, "Accept loss forever," wrote short memories of his grandmother and looking for her grave. Connie Magee wrote about Tony at the House of Blues. Tracy Amond read a piece called "Who Am I?" Kim ended the soiree by reading "Marathon Beast."

Again, people hung around eating and drinking. Masako had brought down chips and dip, cheese and crackers, and cantaloupes and cherries. When we got finished cleaning up, we were the only ones left. Doris was driving back to Hammond to be there when her other son got home. After some discussion, Masako and I decided to go to a sushi place called Wasabi on Frenchmen and Burgundy. Even though it was only about seven blocks away, we took a cab since it was after nine and they were closing at ten. One thing Masako says she likes about me as a husband is that I am always willing to eat sushi. We had shumai appetizers and Masako had chirashizushi (scattered sushi) and I had the sushi dinner. She had ginger ice cream. We walked back to the hotel and went to sleep.

I woke up at four and couldn't go back to sleep, so I went down to the lobby to write something for the read-around at 9:30. I had decided to write something about the ethnic diversity in New Orleans as shown by the restaurants, but it turned into a sort of restaurant guide for Frenchmen Street. I was not satisfied with the results. Here is what I wrote:

4:10 am, Thursday, July 24, 2003, in the lobby of the Le Richelieu Hotel, New Orleans.

The night manager is asleep on a chair near the front desk. A classical piano piece is playing on the speakers. I am sitting in front of the portrait of Cardinal Richelieu. Richelieu – rich place. This is a rich place. I think every city is a rich place, rich in the experiences of the many people who live and work and pass through it. A big black man who was mopping the floor answered the phone for the sleeping night manager. This is a place rich in things to write about. This morning I'm going to write about the richness of ethnic life in this city, and in every city, I suppose, but I'm going to write about this city, a street in this city, a place on the street in this city.

Frenchmen Street is two blocks away from this hotel. It dead-ends at Decatur Street and runs up in the direction of the lake through the center of the Faubourg Marigny. Still mainly a place where the locals hang out. Frenchmen Street is a microcosm of the diversity of life in this city. I'm going to take you on a little tour up five or six blocks of Frenchmen Street. This is not a new idea: there was a piece in the Dining Out section of the Lagniappe magazine of the Times-Picayune a couple of years ago that did the same thing. And I'm not writing as an insider; Richard Louth could give you a lot more information about the places on Frenchmen Street, especially the places that feature music. I'm just going to talk about some of the places that serve food, starting at Decatur and ending at Burgundy.

Near the dead end at Decatur – Kim Stafford has just come down to check out – it's 4:35 – is Mona's Café. Mona's is a Middle Eastern restaurant, serving the fare typical of American Middle Eastern restaurants, often focusing on Lebanese cuisine but serving Greek salads, for example – hummus bi tahini, baba ganoush, labna, stuffed vine leaves, kibbe, that cracked-wheat, parsley salad that I can't remember the name of right now, lentil soup, kebab, etc. I believe it is run by Palestinians, and has a mural of the holy city Jerusalem – al Quds – and a shop where you can buy sumac, Vietnamese chili sauce, and Japanese wasabi-coated peas – more about wasabi later.

Up from Mona's, at the intersection of Chartres – I'm skipping a lot of places – is the

Praline Connection, a place I've written about before. Across the street is the Café Brasil. I've never been there, but I imagine it serves Brazilian food.

Between Chartres and Royal is Café Negril, Cecil Palmer's Jamaican restaurant. There are a number of places for music on that block, including DBA, very popular it seems – it was packed last night – and Snug Harbor, a jazz place, where you can get what some say is the best hamburger in New Orleans, the same hamburger that is served at Port of Call on Esplanade, which is owned by the same people who own Snug Harbor. On the other side of the street is a music place that was playing rhythm and blues, and Adolpho's, an Italian/seafood place that Richard says is excellent.

There is also a little Korean grocery/news/whatever store on that block. At the corner of Royal is Marigny Brasserie, very good looking inside and full of people, but I don't know anything about the food.

I'm going to skip up to Burgundy Street and write about Wasabi, where my wife and I ate last night. It's a combination bar/sushi restaurant. I think it is run by a Vietnamese. There are many Vietnamese restaurants in New Orleans, but none yet on Frenchmen Street.

I wanted to read something at the final read-around, but I did not want to read this, so I went back to the piece I had written on Wednesday morning at La Marquise in the earlier marathon this summer. It was a meditation on memory and loss and death and life, and I had read it at the final read-around. I liked it a lot. I had embarrassed myself by getting emotional when I read it before, but I thought I could read it without choking up this time. I knew that Richard, Melanie, and Mary had heard it before, but I didn't think they would mind, and it would be new to everybody else. Here is the piece:

Does it matter that you forget your strutting-out clothes if you remember a line from a letter that was written over forty years ago? William Faulkner, in a wonderful sentence from "A Rose for Emily," talks about the memory of the very old, for whom the past is a vast meadow – I can't remember the details of the sentence now – but the jist of it is that they remember incidents from many years ago very clearly while memories of more recent years are hazy or obscured. I am becoming like that. I don't want to live in the past, but I believe there is power in memory. Walking down Chartres, I passed Muriel's at Jackson Square. I have never been in Muriel's, but I have been in the building – I don't remember the name of the establishment formerly there – and have sat on that balcony overlooking Jackson Square drinking beer with John Coumes and Richard Louth on a late Friday afternoon. Walking down Frenchmen Street yesterday, Richard pointed out the second floor of the Blue Nile. He asked me if I remembered it. He then told me that that was where he, Mike Fanning, and I had eaten years ago when it was Café Istanbul. Mike Fanning is dead, Café Istanbul is dead, but they still live on somehow. John Coumes, dead now eight years, and I sat in a now-defunct rooftop beer garden at Jax Brewery drinking beer and flirting with the barmaid. I impressed her by reciting the first stanza of "Jabberwocky" and impressed him by reciting the lyrics of "Surfin' Bird" by the Trashmen. This morning, walking down Chartres, I was thinking of Thomas Merton's Fourth and Walnut experience in Louisville. My eyes are welling with tears as I write this. I by no means want to compare myself with Thomas Merton, but when he saw the people around him shining like the sun, I felt something like that seeing the old guy

sipping coffee and working the crossword puzzle sitting at an open window at Harry's Corner (croisement d'Harry) Bar at Chartres and Dumaine. Fourth and Walnut doesn't exist any more, one of the two streets' names having been changed to Martin Luther King, but it exists for every one who has read about it or heard someone talk about it. So I'm not going to worry whether this is bad writing or good writing; I'm just going to write it down. I am very happy to be alive and have the memories that I have. Our memories are precious, our lives are precious. I need to stop writing awhile and just sit here.

We started the read-around at 9:50. Richard read from his journal about the marathon and then asked us to write a metaphor for or a vignette about the marathon. This is what I wrote.

I had a moment this morning. Masako and I were on board the Thomas Jefferson, an Algiers ferry. We were coming back to the Canal Street dock, and we were standing at the bow of the ship. I don't know the nautical terms, but as the ferry was nearing the dock, a worker walked over at the exact right moment and looped the big rope around the stump on the dock and began to make figure-of-eight loops on the double-horned thing on the ferry. Not a wasted movement, each movement the exact right one. How many times a day must he do this? Four times an hour, eight hours a day, five days a week? My word for the marathon is practice. Just keep at it; the grace will come.

People read their pieces about their metaphors and then Spike sang his tree song. For the read-around, we all had to go up to a microphone where Todd was recording for his radio documentary. Four writers from the Acadiana Writing Project started. Margaret Simon read pieces about pretending to be a writer and her father and a poem about the marathon. Kathleen O'Shaughnessy read a long piece about losing her wallet on her birthday. Diane Dempsey read a piece about a plumber coming to fix her commode: Ann Dobie read about Big Spring, Texas. Two members of the SLWP read. Karen Maceira read four journal extracts dealing with her coming to terms with herself and her history. Connie Magee read about the death of her daughter. Eva from the Acadiana WP read a piece about why she carries a big purse. Margaret read a funny piece about the desperate state of her 30-year-old body. I read my piece about memory and death. Holly read about her grandsons' photographs. Richard read a monologue overheard in Croissant d'Or, a policeman's diatribe about meter maids. Tracy, who had been first to read Tuesday evening, was last to read on Thursday. She read about the importance of ritual.

The New Orleans Writing Marathon ended with Spike singing the song he wrote at Molly's: "God will be with us/and not up above." After the marathon, Tracy and I went over to Melanie's new house to pick up her cat carrier so that Trish could pick up her new cat Dori. The cat couldn't be found, so we went back over to Melanie's house so that we could pet her cat and Masako could pick me up.

So what have I figured out about my feelings after the marathon? Reading back over the story and the pieces I wrote, I now realize they weren't that different from the other marathons. Perhaps my expectations were too high; perhaps I was a little worn out from the marathon two weeks before. Reading *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* after I had found the quotation that began this essay, I found this passage that helped explain my feelings to me. Shunryu Suzuki is much more eloquent than I am; I would like to close my essay with his words:

When I was at Eihei-ji monastery in Japan, everyone was just doing what he should do. That is all. It is the same as waking up in the morning; we have to get up. At Eihei-ji monastery, when we had to sit, we sat; when we had to bow to Buddha, we bowed to Buddha. That is all. And when we were practicing, we did not feel anything special. We did not even feel that we were leading a monastic life. For us, the monastic life was the usual life, and the people who came from the city were unusual people.

But once I had left Eihei-ji and been away for some time, coming back was different. I heard the various sounds of practice – the bells and the monks reciting the sutra – and I had a deep feeling. There were tears flowing out of my eyes, nose, and mouth! It is the people who are outside of the monastery who feel its atmosphere. Those who are practicing actually do not feel anything. I think this is true for everything. When we hear the sound of the pine trees on a windy day, perhaps the wind is just blowing, and the pine tree is just standing in the wind. That is all that they are doing. But the people who listen to the wind in the tree will write a poem, or will feel something unusual. That is, I think, the way everything is.

Fight Naked

Clarice Gautreaux

We all came to the marathon with different needs and needing to get different things from the experience. I came to the marathon with the need to "Fight Naked!" Yes, you heard me, I wanted to let my guard down and *expose* my thoughts and feelings through pen on paper. Before the marathon, I never considered myself a writer or even placed my name in the same sentence as the word writer. I considered myself a wife, sister, mentor, teacher, leader, and friend but writer was not one of the labels I gave myself. As we began the writing marathon at the Croissant d'or café on Tuesday, I was excited and could feel my adrenaline pumping as I opened my journal and watched my pen fly across the page. I was not concerned about how my writing would affect others, but whether or not it would affect me and how I felt about myself. At first, the writing took on a superficial note where I shamelessly addressed problems that could not be expressed orally; but as the day continued to unfold before me, my writing took on a more introverted nature. I felt like a stranger meeting myself for the first time. I began to take note of the people around me and imagined what their life was like and if we were similar in any way other than people seeking companionship from the French Quarter and its inhabitants. As we traveled to another local hangout, Pat O'Brien's Bar and Grill, I felt as if New Orleans was starting to be exposed to me and I was being allowed to not only see the beauty, but also the tragedy of the city. I entered the damp cool bar and instantly the mood changed. The somber setting encouraged me to write a journal piece that was completely different from any other written journal entries, as if a different person or my alter ego had written them. At this time, I realized I was finally letting my guard down and expressing my true feelings and thoughts through my writing.

Once we gathered that evening in Richard's suite, I listened to other writers and their account of their first day of the marathon. During the evening, I decided writing was like a piece of art in the sense that everyone perceived the world around them differently and within their own writing they were able to express their views and allow me to see a different perspective on the city through their writers' eyes.

We started Thursday morning with a new member in our group, which gave us a fresh change we needed. Our writing entourage consisted of four ladies who had never written collectively before and it was exciting to see the energy between us flow as we wrote through the day. Normally, if I were alone, I would not have been as adventurous as I was with these "wild ladies," but with their help, I was able to discover a different perspective of the city. At one time during the day, Margaret and Connie flirted shamelessly with the bouncer at the House of Blues and were able to get us our own personal tour of the jazz club. I was excited because I had only seen the bar area during an earlier excursion to New Orleans and now was able to view the club from a different angle, which included the second floor balcony. Next, we interviewed a fireman and paramedic at the local fire station #29, who allowed us to enter their world if only for a brief time, and through their stories, we were able to get an insight on what their daily life was like in New Orleans. The following sentences were an excerpt from my journal.

The phrase, "The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly" crossed my mind several times as I listened to the paramedic's stories of the different people he encountered over his 14 years of service to Orleans Parish. He even gave us explicit details of a murder scene he was called to one night in order to pronounce the victim dead. Unfortunately the task was not easily

accomplished since the body was crammed in a Rubbermaid storage container. Even though the paramedic portrayed the scene as if it were a comedy of errors, I could only begin to imagine what was really running through his mind before and after the incident and even wondered if he had nightmares for months after viewing the ghastly body.

I remember walking out of the fire station and thinking to myself, this is what makes the marathon an awesome experience — the privilege to hear a person’s story and then putting it down on paper to make it a permanent fixture in my mind as well as the minds of my readers. Even though the paramedic had seen some horrifying scenes that will probably haunt him for the rest of his life, he had no regrets about his job and if given the opportunity to choose another path for his life, he would probably choose the same road again. As I reviewed my interview with him in my head, I began to reflect on my own life and wondered if given the opportunity to do it again, would I have changed anything. I realized that I, like the paramedic, would probably have taken the same road and would have no regrets as I traveled along the path of life I had chosen.

We concluded the day with another group session in Richard’s suite called the Paul McCartney’s Suite, which by the way, I will never be able to look at it again without thinking of Richard and his wife. Yes, I know this is too much information! As the group of writers settled into the comfortable couch and chairs adorning the 60’s style suite, I felt a slight tension hovering over the room. Everyone seemed hesitant to share his or her journal writings as if it were the last present on Christmas day. As the group began to unwind and become more comfortable with each other, we started to open up and share pieces of writing from the heart. We sat with each other for over two hours not wanting to be anywhere else but in that room listening to stories of New Orleans and learning about their lives as well.

As I drove over the causeway towards my hometown of Mandeville, I remember feeling renewed and excited that through my journal writing I discovered a new label for myself: a writer. I had let down my guard and truly exposed my thoughts and feelings in my writing and was fighting naked without a care in the world.

Window Watching

Sometimes when we come to a place in life where we think the true reasons of why we were put on Earth by God seem to have disappeared, a small gift from him will appear from out of nowhere to remind us of how precious our lives are on Earth. Today, I truly think I had the opportunity to view one of these gifts in the form of four human beings standing in the rain on the sidewalk outside a small coffee shop I was visiting. I'm not saying an immense miracle took place like someone surviving a plane crash or a person cured of cancer when medication was not successful. This was truly a small gift or miracle, but as we all know, great gifts come in small packages.

It was an odd combination of people placed in this group before me. The group consisted of a middle-aged couple, an older woman close to my grandmother's age, and a young boy who probably was the grandchild of the older woman. You are probably wondering at this time why this scene outside the window looked unusual to me. Well, the couple was Caucasians while the older woman and her grandchild were African Americans. The group seemed to have created a strong bond between them, and at that moment were hugging and shaking hands as if to say farewell. I assumed this was what they were doing since I was viewing them as an outsider from my comfortable position in a lounge chair, while looking out through the window of the coffee shop. Maybe they were friends or maybe they had only met a few minutes before due to unusual circumstances like having to share a horse drawn carriage ride because the coachman wanted more occupants for the ride around Jackson Square. Whatever the reason that fate brought these four individuals together, I think the important point was that the warm feelings and caring physical gestures that crossed between them were genuine and could be seen even from a distance. Even though there was definitely an age and cultural difference between the four individuals, these barriers seemed to disappear and the feelings of love and compassion took their place. Other bystanders who passed these four on the street craved the same need as I did to be a part of the "foursome" instead of being an outsider.

Once the group started to depart from each other's company, the couple grasped hands and continued their journey down the street, while the young boy gently wrapped his arm around the older woman's shoulder and at the same time, she demonstrated the same affectionate gesture towards him. I wanted to follow this group so I could stay close to the love and warmth that exude from their hearts. I know my imagination may have run wild for a moment, but for those few minutes in time, I wanted to dream that people from different backgrounds and generations were able to come together and view each other as simple humans living in the same world. We are all created equal and deserve the same compassion, love, and understanding as anyone else put on this Earth. I was given a rare chance to see these signs of humanity in the anonymous strangers outside the window of the coffee shop.

Jackson Square

The sky is crisp and blue
complementing the lush grass, whispering trees,
and full bushes that surround the park
in Jackson Square.

I see the Cathedral in the background
with its glorious tower and charming bells
that beckons people from all over to enter the streets
in Jackson Square.

The Asian gardener takes pride in the stunning flowers
she has nurtured, and frowns when someone does not stop
to appreciate her dedication to the gardens
in Jackson Square.

As I leave my perch from the cast iron benches,
I realize during future excursions to New Orleans
I will have the same desire again
to walk along
in Jackson Square.

The Hurricane Bar

It is amazing to think this bar and restaurant known as Pat O'Brien's has been open for years and years and the stool I am sitting on has been decorated with a variety of "buttocks" from wide to narrow and from flat to full. I wonder if someone famous has sat on this stool like Dan Ackroyd, who may have dropped by before heading to the House of Blues to perform a music set with his jazz band. Maybe Brittany Spears entered this swanky bar during her early twenties before making it big in the entertainment business. As I scanned the room, I noticed the pictures lining each dark wood wall with faces I personally don't recognize, but still feel camaraderie with since we all have enjoyed the good food and spirits this establishment provides. I keep looking at the black and white pictures as if I am going to recognize someone from my personal life, but to my disappointment, no one's face in the photos trigger a happy moment from my past.

I remember my first visit to this establishment when my sister was having her bachelorette party before walking down the aisle a week later. We were all feeling giddy and excited to be free of our boyfriends and mates, pretending we were single again and still in college. Earlier in the evening, one of our ex-college mates presented my sister, Camille, with a list of requests and items she must collect or complete before the stroke of midnight. The list included the following: asking a man for a pair of men's underwear, persuading a man to buy her a drink, buying a condom from a guy, and asking a man to dance with her for at least one song. The list was quite lengthy, but Camille was determined to complete it by midnight.

We started off at Pat O'Brien's in hopes of finding a gullible male who would fall for our trap. As our entourage of girls positioned themselves around a dark wooden table in the piano bar, we spotted two middle-aged men sitting at a small table directly in front of the piano. One of the girls in our group had an idea of Camille sending both men a beer in hopes they would return the gesture. I flagged the closest waiter and requested she send them each a beer from my sister. A few minutes later the waiter approached the small table and placed the beers in front of them. At first, we could see their confused looks on their faces, but as the waiter began to explain, huge smiles replaced their looks of confusion and they quickly began to scan the room to see who had sent the drinks. You could tell they were from out of town because of their matching work shirts and were probably in New Orleans for some type of convention. The two men raised their beers to us and mouthed, "thank you" over the loud music filtering from the speakers lining the stage. We all sat for a while enjoying the music and our drinks when out of nowhere the same waiter appeared with a tray full of Hurricane drinks. She had told the two men we were having a bachelor party and they decided to send over drinks for every girl instead of only the bride to be. We were surprised and pleased at the generous gesture and later on thanked the men in person outside the bar where they tried to persuade us to follow them to their next stop in the French Quarter. We thanked them kindly and said we had our own agenda and continued on our quest down the street to find a condom.

Gems—The Marathon Continues

Holly James

So, what is this writing thing? What makes it so special? The writing marathon for me is time, time to let it happen. It is time to have a revelation while reveling in the city, time to be surrounded and immersed in sights, people, words, while examining memories of the old and making discoveries of the new. It is not about being a tourist in an unusual locale. It is about being a writer.

The marathon is a journey of self. Whether the choice is to chronicle the sights of the city or to use the city as a backdrop to go within myself, it is a place to be where there are no everyday tasks waiting to be done—no phone calls to answer, no bills to pay, no syllabus or lesson plans to write, no dogs to feed or dishes to wash, children to coddle, or spouse to pacify. There is nothing to pull me away from listening to the voice within that needs to be heard.

A city marathon, especially a New Orleans marathon, is vital because it is not some retreat or commune with nature. I am not on some grand experiment as Thoreau on Walden Pond. I am in a comfortable hotel with colleagues in a city that is familiar, surrounded by good music, good service, great meals, and the flow of life; and from this comes the flow of words.

It is the first morning of the marathon, and I am impatient, tense, full of anticipation. Like a racehorse in the gate, I am nervous—afraid that when the starting bell sounds, I will not be able to get out of the gate. I am politely quiet, but I feel like I do at the checkout line behind the elderly lady who takes forever to write her check. I do not want to lose a precious moment.

We take care of introductions and logistics and finally break into groups. I head out with four other writers and the radio producer; we land at P.J.'s Coffee Shop on Frenchmen Street in Faubourg Marigny at the edge of the French Quarter.

I write about the years that I lived in New Orleans when my husband was in medical school. Those are great memories, but I realize during response group, as we share our reading with one another, that I am telling Mark's stories, not my own. I am trying too hard instead of being in the moment.

The most interesting event of that morning is the man who joins me at my table outside P.J.'s. He is a dark-haired disheveled man who appears to be in his late forties. He has a hunched back and a measured gait. He sits down. I am not frightened, but I do slowly move my purse and camera closer to the building side of the table rather than the street side. I think to myself, "schizophrenic," and I wonder about what his inner voices are saying. His gaze seems far away most of the time, but he shows interest in what I am doing and seems to be straining to read what I am writing. Regretfully, we do not speak, and after a short time, he moves on.

Following a soul food lunch of mustard greens and stewed chicken at Praline Connection, my group and I end our afternoon at Molly's Bar, an Irish pub and favorite watering hole of our mentor, Richard Louth. Maybe it is the darkness or William Butler Yeats' epitaph on the wall, but I begin to write about my mother's death and the tears begin to fall.

You died before I knew you. You left me alone at 16, full of anger and apologies unspoken—never to be spoken.

It is not good writing or finished writing or anything I want to share at author's chair, but I do read it to my roommate, Tracy Amond, that evening in the safety of our room. She suggests that some things are easier to talk about than to write. I realize that she is correct. My mother's death has left me with what I journal as unfinished business, but I will leave this marathon knowing that I will write about her one day.

The second morning begins with breakfast by the pool, and then we gather in the Paul McCartney Suite for some rallying words by writer Kim Stafford. He leaves us with what he calls "notions."

Write about a place for a place. Pose a question in your life and seek clues. Take the lid off something that you have been carrying. Try to praise something that has been damaged. Write about life jewelry—scars, birthmarks, tattoos. Make a gift of writing to someone.

I leave the hotel that morning alone, making plans with others to meet for lunch and to share our morning's work. I wander down Decatur Street and land at The Market Café, ordering a Bloody Mary, my liquid courage. I survey the darkening clouds, smile at the waitress who is longing for the cooling rain, and then I begin to write.

I write some personal pieces about my marriage, my children, my grandsons. I write and I think. I people-watch. Their images flood my brain: the teenaged gay couple holding hands, stealing a kiss before turning the corner, and dropping hands as they move into the flow of others; the lost eyes of the hunched man at P.J.'s; the tattoo-covered body of a young woman in the flea market. As Hemingway recognized in his memoir *A Moveable Feast*, these are all mine to use if I want.

The waitress brings me water and a smile, unsolicited, and I warm to her reaction to me. She respects the fact that I am writing. I write a poem for her and this place as the rain begins to fall.

French Quarter
The Market Café
The waitress's mantra
"Come on, rain! Come on."
Winds whip—patrons sip
Water washes it all away

I move inside the café until the torrents pass, and I continue writing. I write a poem about Paris, the Eiffel Tower, and the Seine, prompted I am sure by the fire in the tower the day before, the French Quarter, and another mighty river I am sitting so near. I smile at its simple lyrics, knowing that if I were not on a marathon, this poem would not exist.

April in Paris
Full moon shining on the Seine
Sitting by my only love—once again.
Eiffel Tower in the distance
Sacre Coeur on the hill
My mind races on agendas
My heart cries out – be still

Lunchtime nears and I head for St. Louis Cathedral, our meeting spot. I sit quietly in the church for a while, recalling all of the magnificent churches across Europe that I visited in the spring. I jot in my journal that the church seems *less imposing after St. Paul's, Notre Dame, Canterbury, and St. Peter's*. Tracy's tap on my shoulder signals lunch, and so we head with three others for Pontalba Café for a response group. I love hearing these women's voices, all bringing a different twist to this city.

I share my piece on life jewelry with the group, not thinking I will read it that evening in read-around, but these women encourage me. This is why the marathon works. We validate one another. We are writers.

I spend the remainder of the afternoon jotting images and ideas.

I love this city, rich with history, fraught with problems, poverty, and politics. It draws me in as seductively as a hooker in the Storyville District of old, as sensually as the saxophone tunes spilling from its jazz clubs. It calls to me and I listen. I allow it to pull me.

The evening ends with the read-around, dinner at NOLA, and a swim, but in between these activities, I am writing. This continues into the next morning. As I sit down for breakfast at the hotel, I can see my fellow writers in small groups about the pool, at other tables, making their own markings. It is the spell of the marathon. We do not want it to end.

We gather for our final readings at author's chair. We laugh, we cry, and we listen to the varied muses of the city. We gather our belongings, say our goodbyes, and make our journeys home.

For me, the most important author's chair occurs at home. I read my piece about life jewelry to my husband. This is something I always hesitate to do. His reaction is the most critical to me, because writing is an integral part of who I am. I want my life partner to understand. Therefore, I wait; and he laughs, just the right response. He likes it; it is not dark, just true. I smile, walk to my computer, and begin to write. The marathon continues.

Life Jewelry

My life jewelry, a collection of gems, becomes more varied and unusual each year. My first piece, my birthmark, is a cocoa brown spot on my arm that resembles Louisiana with marked coastal erosion. When I was seven or eight years old, additional brown skin patches, known as café au lait spots, became pronounced. My mother tried in vain to scrub one from my leg until I finally convinced her that it was not dirt. They fade in winter and reappear with summer's sun. Years after they arrived, I discovered that numerous café au lait spots are an indicator of neurofibromatosis, commonly known as elephant man's disease. Luckily, I only have four of these ornaments.

Other jewels include the classic kid's scar under the chin. I purchased mine in a bicycle crash that left a chipped tooth and a gouge in the knee. Another adornment rests in the crease between my lower lip and chin where I fell and crashed my teeth through that fleshy tissue at the age of sixteen. That was the extent of my jewelry collection for many years. There were no stitches, no broken bones. Mine was a relatively benign childhood.

Then I had children, and my jewels became more numerous: cottage cheese thighs, stretch marks that formed deep trenches up and down my belly, ski slope breasts, and an episiotomy scar. Looking back, these were not costly acquisitions. The children I acquired with these birthstones were worth the expensive purchase.

Again, there was a lull in procurement. Then I reached the age of thirty-six and my most expensive life jewelry arrived. These are neat little jewels that demand the eye when I stand in the nude: a lumpectomy incision, an axillary node dissection scar, and radiation burns that leave a permanent tan. A year later three small pelvic incisions and an enlarged navel from a laparoscopic hysterectomy joined them. Now I add my latest gems: graying hair, crow's feet, and a special charm—laugh lines. The passage of time has given me many embellishments just as surely as it has removed another—my vanity. I do not view these marks as battle scars or disfigurements, but as the precious stones of life.

Young people with numerous tattoos and body piercings make me stop in wonder. They do not realize that life will give them jewelry, the permanent kind. Instead, they rush to make costume jewelry purchases: fake breasts, false eyelashes, artificial nails, imitation hair. Be patient, I say—Life will give you gems enough.

Safety and Danger on the Streets of New Orleans

Mary Koeppe

It's strange how a woman can leave her home, travel to the mean streets of New Orleans, and feel safe to explore places, ideas, and events that she has guarded herself from for many years. Who would equate New Orleans with safety? There's just something that happens when we go on a writing marathon. Some have used the word *retreat* to describe the atmosphere that surrounds us, the thinking that influences our actions and words. Maybe it's just being away from life, one's day-to-day chores and stress—laundry, cooking, bills, diapers, carpool, the evening news. For three days in July, we writers walked the streets of the New Orleans French Quarter, finding inspiration in the food, the people, the sights and smells. We let ourselves get lost in the moment, freeing our minds and allowing ourselves to go places we might otherwise avoid for fear of retribution and danger.

The women in my writing group felt safe in each other's company. We let down our defenses. Margaret noticed the beauty and power of the state of realness that surfaces when people stop "sizing up the competition" and allow others to see us for who we really are, something that can only happen in the company of friends. In this space, Clarice was free to notice four people on the sidewalk outside a coffee house. With her writer's eye free from clutter, she observed, speculated, and chronicled their appearance, their actions, their supposed relationship to one another. She felt free to spy on them through the window and record their interactions, and vicariously she felt what they felt.

And without the buffer zone created by the very nature of time in the city, seeing, feeling, writing, Connie wouldn't have felt safe enough to tell us about her youngest daughter's death—the days that preceded it, the hours, the minutes just before her passing. How she got through it just knowing that her beautiful Carlee was in the safety of God's arms, working to keep her safe here on Earth. She was able to tell it (and later write about it), and we all were able to hear it while our tears rolled down our cheeks and into the remains of country fried steak and potatoes on Styrofoam plates in the middle of a crowded restaurant.

Because I was safe with my group, I was able to revisit my past, knowing that the words on the paper were just words, only as powerful as I allow them to be.

Excerpt from journal:

Pat O'Brien's

Inside bar—much cooler! I wish I could see outside a little better, watch the people, but there are bars across the glass obscuring my view. I feel like I have to look too hard, for something in particular, rather than allowing something to be seen. Across the hall is the piano bar. I haven't been in there in probably 10 years. Oddly enough, I ran across a picture from that night recently in a box of stuff from my high school and college years that I'd been storing at my mother's house. Looking through the box, especially the things about him, was bittersweet. I laughed and cried. I know why I laughed, but I don't know exactly why I cried. Maybe I do know, but I just don't want to face it... I've had a poem swirling around in my brain entitled "What Would I Do if He Walked In." I think part of why I haven't written it down is because I don't really want to be so truthful. As long as it stays in my brain, it's safe. But safe from whom? When Beth was talking

yesterday about the safety of her writing group, the safety that allowed her to be honest, I was excited but scared. What will happen if I write this? Sure, it's just paper, and I can throw the paper away. But I can't destroy the aftermath of the words on the paper. And what if I don't want to throw it away? Maybe throwing it away will feel too much like throwing him away, something I obviously haven't allowed myself to do after all these years. And as I sit here writing this, I feel a little foolish. I mean he's off living his life, a life that I know in my heart wasn't meant for me. We want such different things. He wants something he'll never find, and I'm living what I want—family, teaching, writing. So maybe the poem doesn't need to be written. I know what I'd do. The passion, the realness of our connection will live in the past, and I will look ahead to the endless possibilities of my future.

Now that I've been there, it's not so dark and scary. I don't have to live in fear of the *what ifs*. The monsters, once giant beasts that lurked in the abstract of thought, are just words on a page.

Most people who know me would not believe it if I told them that I, a woman who worries too much about too many things, willingly put myself in danger by walking the crime-ridden streets of New Orleans. They might believe it, but they wouldn't understand the sanctity I felt during those three days in the company of my writing friends, facing demons and winning once insurmountable battles, with the power of my pen.

My three days in New Orleans produced thirty or so pages in my journal, and I have at least that much still to write from our time in the city. Being there, away from my other life, surrounded by writers helped me tap into a part of my brain that I probably wouldn't have gotten to on my own. Everyone has a story to tell, and many people willingly told their stories to us as long as we were willing to listen. When will I write these things? Who knows? There is no deadline. The sights, sounds, and smells of the city are with me—in my journal and in my head. And they're in the stories of my fellow writers.

2003 Advanced Marathon

Day 1 – Croissant d’Or

George, Andree’, Karen, and Trish are sitting at the next table. That looks like a great group for writing. I hope to get a chance to write with them before this marathon is over. I need to remember to pace myself — there is no destination; it’s the journey that matters. That’s a philosophy I’d like to apply to my life more. I’m always thinking and planning for tomorrow, next week, next year. But am I living today? Because I might not be living tomorrow.

Becoming a mother really puts life and mortality into perspective! As aware as I have become of my mortality, I also have such a strong need for immortality. The desire to leave something behind is greater than I’ve even known. I guess it’s vanity. I know the world will go on once I’m gone whether or not I am remembered by anyone. But I want to be remembered! I don’t look for fame, but I want my family to feel my spirit, to hear my words long after they’re spoken by me.

A lady named Nancy has joined our writing group today. She’s from the New Orleans Writing Project. She’s a lawyer turned educator. Good for her! I’ve always felt that teaching is a calling.

I remember when I started hearing the call. I tried to ignore it, talk myself out of it for a while. Then there was the Psychology Statistics final that forced me to listen to that voice. I was standing in the quad at USL after walking out of what I knew would result in disaster. I remember it like a scene from a movie, where I was the only character in focus; everything and everyone else was in a sort of blurred haze around me. I stood there while the thoughts in my head became audible to those on the outside watching the scene. Then I cried. I really did cry.

At the time I thought I was crying because of the admission to myself of defeat. It was like I couldn’t hack it in the psychology program, so I backed into the education field. What a crock! I see it now but I didn’t then. I know how important my job is, even if teachers don’t get the respect we deserve. I’ve touched more people, helped more people in the roles a teacher takes on than I ever would have come into contact with as a therapist.

Now I’m here as a member of this phenomenal group! I have been transformed by the Writing Project! I am able to take so much of what I experience back to my students, and I am excited by the numerous possibilities through Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project and the National Writing Project to expand my professional opportunities. Most of all, I love that I am encouraged to write again. This is great for me as a teacher being able to relate to my students as a writer, writing with them regularly. But even more, it helps me as a person, a human being who thinks and feels.

Writing helps me sort things out, even if I don’t actually do anything with it. Before I write something down, it’s jumbled up ideas, a fog between my ears and my eyes. But once I write it down, it has shape and meaning.

Writing helps me cry sometimes, and that feels good!

Marathon as Accidental Muse

Richard Louth

I've been wondering when this marathon began for me. Did it begin last February when I mailed a flyer to TC's announcing an "Advanced Institute/Ultimate Marathon" in New Orleans? In May, when Kim Stafford accepted our invitation to attend? In early June when writers from the Acadiana Writing Project decided to join us? Did it begin two weeks ago when I contacted our Advanced Institute with announcements or last week when I sent the hotel a tentative guest list? Was it last Monday when our Advanced Institute met at the university to write, talk, and plan logistics; or was it later that night in New Orleans when my wife and I ran into early arrivals at the hotel bar? Was it Tuesday morning, at 9:00 A.M., when most participants arrived in New Orleans, or an hour later when they filled the Paul McCartney Suite, our home base for the next three days, to hear my opening talk? I like to think it began the moment that I asked everyone in the room to turn to another and say, "I am a writer."

For some participants, it probably began at that moment, but mine did not really begin until the second day, when I hit my stride. Our marathons have kept getting longer: the first was five hours long; last year's lasted two days; this year's, almost three days. We continue to expand the marathon because we've learned from experience that more than anything else, writers need time. On the first day, the world was too much with me. I was worrying about roommates, cell phones, parking problems, latecomers, special guests, and dinner parties while simultaneously trying to plan each day and to write.

Even though the first piece of writing that I produced pleased me, I still felt outside of the process, and was "purging" until the second day. Because I'd been through 20 previous marathons, I knew that if I were willing to wait, the ordinary world would fade and an extraordinary one take its place.

Over the course of two and one-half days, I composed 10 journal entries. While my freewriting process remained essentially the same, my writing situation varied as I traveled from bar to river to café, sometimes alone, sometimes with different partners. Also, my products varied in quality and in type. Some pieces were junk, such as the piece written while waiting for an oyster poboy at the Acme Oyster house and another while waiting for a ferry across the Mississippi. Both were short and forced, and I was glad to put them aside. Others, however, were hard to let go because I so enjoyed the act of writing itself, the company I kept, or the fact that they captured something about my past, myself, or the moment that otherwise would have been lost.

How could I know when I sat down with Kim Stafford and Charles Larroque in the courtyard of Pat O'Brien's that I would forget about them and be transported back 25 years to this same spot? Or that, sitting at Melanie Plesh's kitchen table in a shotgun house near the French Quarter, I would be moved to write about my love for my wife and a place by the river that had become our own? Who could predict that while grabbing a quick cup of coffee on the final morning of the marathon, I would record an overheard conversation and make time stand still?

To the uninitiated, a writing marathon may sound like a redundant series of freewrites and spontaneous emotional outpourings. However, I've noticed a surprising range in the types of writing produced. To illustrate, I've included pieces I wrote on three successive days: a memory, a meditation, and an observation. None of these was planned; before I wrote them, I did not know I had them in me. I think that there is something rich in the differences. Was their variety

caused by companions, jukebox, city, hour, food, drink, and talk? Or instead by some combination of accident, a muse, and my soul?

So, besides a journal full of musings, what do I get out of the marathon? Why do I need it? I need it to immerse myself in the world and in my own writing, neither of which I seem able to do in my everyday life. I need the sense of adventure, of not knowing, and of being in a community of writers who face the same challenge. I need to be able to write without a specific purpose or publication in mind, and to produce whatever comes. On a marathon, I feel as if I am exercising a whole new set of writer's muscles. Even if what I produce is never shared, reread, or revised, I feel that I have "really written." For me a marathon is "experiment," not "recreation." In a spirit of inquiry, it imposes a set of conditions-the extended length of time, repeated writings, varied settings, and sharing without response-under which I can study the world, my writing, and myself.

Unadulterated by performance, evaluation, revision, publication, and the other terms so often used to define "writing," the marathon, to me, is writing in its purest form.

The Waiter

The last time I was at Pat O'Brien's, 25 years ago with my pregnant wife and her sister, something happened that has just come back to me. It was a day unlike this, crowded with tourists. At the table beside ours was a group-two men and some women they'd obviously picked up recently-and their table was crowded with Hurricane glasses. They were very drunk, had come off the oil rigs for 48 hours, and had been drinking, right there at that table, through the night, maybe for 12 hours. I remember a waiter going to a table next to theirs and picking up his tip from another group of tourists. They had not left him much-mostly quarters, a real insult to this waiter. The waiters at Patty O's like the tourists, like to pressure them into big tips, like to swag and sway and appear polished, and they want their reward.

So these tourists doled out a few quarters. A few quarters for the Quarter. And the waiter picked up one quarter and looked at it, then turned it around in his hand. He had on a clean white shirt, the characteristic green apron, sharply shined shoes, and a bow tie. Just like our waiter today. He turned the quarter over and over in his right hand.

He carried a large round tray in his left. The tourists watched. We watched. The men from the oil rig and their girls spoke loudly, clashed glasses, asked for another round, but the waiter, absorbed in this quarter, ignored them. He had everyone's attention now, and as he rolled it over and between his fingers, more and more people seemed to pause in their talk and drinks to look his way. And without looking at anyone, he grasped the quarter between his thumb and index finger and threw it straight down at the flagstone patio floor, hitting square on the corrugated edge, and it bounced straight back up to his hand. He caught it without emotion, slapped it back on the table, and moved on. I realized at this moment that he had done this same thing 1000 times. Or maybe 10,000 times before he got it right. If it had not bounced straight back into his hand, something would have been lost in this world. But his calm anger, pride, dignity were preserved. And he moved on, a gentleman, not caring to say a word.

The slap of that quarter on the glass table still hangs in the air for me 25 years later. The slap was for the drunken oilmen, their hustling dates, the cheap tippers, the crowded tables that failed to witness it all, and for me, too, sitting with a pregnant wife and sister-in-law who scanned every receipt to see if they'd been had. It was a gesture for all of us who had cheated him and his in some way.

A Rumor of Elephants

How strange the twists and turns we take. One hour ago, at 9:55, I arrived at the corridor of the Paul McCartney Suite after spending the morning sitting by the river and having a breakfast of waffle, bacon, orange juice, and coffee at Café au Lait on Chartres. I arrived as unconcerned as could be about the others, a change from the last few days.

I had talked to Doris from my cell phone by the river. She was chipper. So was I. I had returned to the spot where we had sat together yesterday when she was here. I wonder how many times I will do that. How many times she will do that. Will one of us, eventually, return alone and remember this spot when the other is gone? Which one of us? Does it matter? No. I think not. What matters is that we have created a spot in New Orleans. Not the Monteleone Hotel, where we have slept together so many times, nor the Richelieu, where we have tested the resilience of the Paul McCartney Suite. Not the Café du Monde, Galatoire's, Mr. B's, or even

my apartment on Royal. After all the time, the food, the love, the place that now is more ours than any other in the city is a curved, black iron bench by the river, overlooking the Governor Nicholls Street Wharf, where we sat long enough last week to see the lights light up the Crescent City Connection at 8:12 P.M., and where we sat again yesterday to see the river in the morning. She had asked to go to the river. It was out of the way, the opposite direction from the hotel, and I needed to be back there to greet the others in 15 minutes. At first, leaving the Croissant D'Or, I hemmed and hawed and looked at my watch once, twice, as if in the looking I'd make time stand still. I said, "Well, maybe we should go back," but still we headed forward. Then we got to Decatur Street, where one direction led to the hotel, the other to the river. One of life's moments, though of course you never realize it at the time. And that's a reason for writing, because I really didn't realize it until I wrote it down just now. And we turned right, towards the river, because I knew she wanted to go there, and I knew I wanted to go there too, and I also wanted her to have what she wanted.

So we crossed the tracks, walked up the same steps we'd walked up the week before, sat on the same bench, and talked. I can't recall now what we had talked about the week before or even what we'd talked about yesterday, but she would, of course. And then it was time to return. So, today, finding myself walking the vacant streets at 8 A.M., my stomach queasy from last night, my head a bit faint, I wondered where to go. Silently, I passed Tracy by the pool, immersed in her writing. Out to Decatur, where Laura and Liz, walking towards me on the other side of the street, pointed and said as if spotting some strange species of bird in the jungle, "There's a writer." I waved my composition notebook at them, passed them too in silence, still not knowing where I was going, simply pulled or pushed forward. I paused by an adult toy store to study a purple plastic vibrator called "The Bullet" and a device that claimed to be inflatable buttocks. I moved on past the mannequins in chains, leather, and motorcycle caps, passed three or four closed bars. Even Angelli was closed, though its door said "Open 24 hours." Only the Abbey was open, and through the hanging columns of transparent plastic that served as a door, I glimpsed pieces of people around the bar and heard the grunts and sounds of morning drinkers. Past Molly's closed window. Without thinking, crossing the street at the place I must have known my feet would take me, then over the tracks and up the stairs to the river.

When I sat at our bench, I knew it was our bench. A pigeon swooped from the sky and landed like an ink blot before me, looked at me with his red eye, and did his fancy pigeon strut on red claws, the back of his neck ruffled. Then a man in yellow approached from upriver, one of those silly walking joggers, arms akimbo, hips moving more than legs, walking just like a pigeon.

I have tried to walk like a pigeon a few times and never have been able to do it, that simultaneous forward movement of the feet and backward movement of the head. That forward/backward movement. That forward/backward movement. And it occurs to me now that this is what my walk today actually was. I may not have looked like a pigeon, but coming again to this seat was my own forward/backward movement.

So I called Doris and caught her in a good mood, and she told me about the news – Saddam's sons shot dead, the Eiffel Tower afire, and the news that she relished most – that the circus had been to New Orleans yesterday and that she'd seen them washing the elephants near the Arena and that she had followed Kim's advice to seek rumors, and had gone yesterday from store to store asking, "Do you know about the elephants? Do you know where they are?" and each storekeeper said, "No," but wanted to know more, and she envisioned them calling their friends and neighbors and asking these same questions, and so as she walked through the

Quarter yesterday asking strangers if they knew about the elephants, she suddenly realized that she had been an agent of sorts. She had created a rumor of elephants throughout the Quarter. I remember from Greek literature how Homer would describe fleet-footed Rumor flying above the heads of crowds, and I see in my mind's eye Doris, in her straw hat and white dress, walking down Chartres, behind her floating in the air the giant, fleet-footed elephant of her imagination.

As I sat on the bench this morning, she told me she had gone home and begun a short story. It was her first, and she'd written only one paragraph, but she had a title, "Rumor of Elephants."

Police Monologue

This is from a conversation about meter maids ("Meter Nazis") between a young cop and the older woman working behind the counter of a cafe. "I can't stand 'em either. No, they're not like police officers. They don't carry guns and don't have the power to arrest. They're disgusting. Every one of them weighs about 600 pounds. A few years ago, one was putting a ticket on a police car right in front of the station. An officer came out, told her it was a police car, and she continued writing the ticket. They got into an argument, and she stabbed him in the neck with her pen and he pepper-sprayed her. And he got suspended. Why? Because he was obstructing her from doing her job. What I don't understand is how they're all 300 pounds. All they do is walk around all day long, every day, and sweat, and you'd think they'd lose weight. But they are all 300 pounds. I can't figure that out."

Irresistible Invitations

Karen Maceira

On the first morning of our New Orleans marathon, when I got to Andree's house to join our carpool to the city, I admitted to her what I'd been thinking for the last couple of days: "I don't feel like doing a marathon in the Quarter. Why can't we go out in nature somewhere?" A native New Orleanian, I had been to the Quarter too many times to count and had even lived there for a while years ago. In the summer, the heat, the loud music, and the stench coming from sidewalks in front of the bars can seem overwhelming.

I had a more troubling misgiving I did not voice then. I wasn't sure I understood the purpose of a writing marathon. This fact had been brought home to me the day before, the first day of the Advanced Institute, when Richard invited us to share our impressions of what a marathon did for us with Todd, Program Director for KSLU radio. To my chagrin, I found I had nothing to say. I'm some kind of impostor, I thought. I had participated in an overnight marathon during the summer of 1997 when I went through the regular institute and had gone on a couple of one-day marathons earlier this year. The writing I had produced in 1997 was fun. My group had gotten caught up in word play and had stayed up half the night making up nonsense poems, and though the whole experience was pleasurable, I did not seem to take away anything new from it. The one-day marathon in Tucson at the end of February, part of NWP's Rural Sites Retreat, and the one our site held in a nearby town in April were different. I knew those experiences had been valuable to me as a person and a writer, but I would not realize how until this current marathon was finished.

Andree and I picked up Patricia and we drove across the Causeway to Le Richelieu Hotel. After checking in, we went to Richard's second-floor suite to meet the larger group. We introduced ourselves round-robin, and Richard gave some brief opening remarks and instructions. He mentioned Hemingway's *Moveable Feast* as one of the inspirations for the concept of a writing marathon. George remarked that the day before, July 21, had been Hemingway's birthday. That simple reference touched off something deep in my psyche. Already, the place was beginning to have an unexpected and profound effect on me. Richard dismissed us, telling us to go in groups of four or five.

Nervous about the loose process of forming groups, I was relieved to end up with at least two people I knew well, George and Andree, and with Patricia, whom I had begun to know during the April marathon. George and I had participated in several Writing Project activities since the 2001 Advanced Institute, most importantly the presentation that we gave, along with another member of our SLWP group, Tracy Amond, in Tucson. Andree and I have been part of a different writing group for several years.

If I shared a recent history with the people in my group, I shared what felt like an ancient past with the Quarter itself, beginning with our hotel, a place my husband, deceased now many years, and I had visited often for drinks as well as lodging after we'd moved away from the city. Though I had not expected to be seduced by its charm on this trip, as soon as we arrived, I was taken again with the beauty of the French Quarter, the human scale and symmetry of its architecture.

As soon as we settled at a table in the Croissant d'Or, our first writing stop, the complex associations that George's mention of Hemingway's birthday had called up in me took over, and I was off writing. The writing I had done in Tucson, interestingly, was a prelude to the writing I did now, though I was not aware of this until I went back to read both. The connection had to do

with home and not home and with past and present. Here is an excerpt from marathon writing at Sabino Canyon, the place near Tucson where our one-day marathon was held:

This landscape says there is another way to live. You do not need those tangled forests you left behind. Faulkner isn't right about the past — you can walk away. You can resist its ancient voice enumerating the sins of seven generations.

I had come rather irritably to this marathon because I wanted, at least unconsciously, to push away home and past. I wanted safe topics, but the minute I was present in that place, place began its work on me.

July 22, 1st morning of the SLWP Advanced Institute Writing Marathon, French Quarter
“Yesterday was Hemingway’s birthday.” This statement by George started the day off for me. The Quarter is so allied in my mind, my life, with my husband, my last love, and with Marcel, my first love. They both, as I, loved Hemingway. When I was in high school (the early 60’s), we all wanted to write like Hemingway, and I think Marcel wanted to be Hemingway.

But is there anything here besides nostalgia? Nostalgia’s not enough — it can feel pleasant — pleasantly sad, wistful — but it’s not enough. Thinking about Marcel -- the most striking thing about Marcel for me — that it was in his apartment here in the Quarter that I cut my wrists. I was 22, I think, just divorced from my first husband after a brief, disastrous 18-month marriage and visiting my old high school boyfriend.

I don’t want to talk about this...

I was a lost girl who easily could have ended up dead. Instead, here I am, amazingly, with a group of people from all over the country, 34 years later, still alive and still loving Hemingway, Hemingway who ended his own life...

Surprised at what I had written, I hesitated to read it to my group, but only for a few seconds. For one thing, I knew that sharing was essential to the marathon process, and I felt a responsibility, if not to myself, to my group. I remember saying aloud when I was finished reading, “That’s why I didn’t want to come here.” Perhaps if I had not already felt a sense of collegiality and friendship with my group, I would have ignored my responsibility. I don’t know that for sure. I can only say that I am grateful that I did feel that sense of trust, for I know that their accepting response was an affirmation that allowed me to go even further into a past experience I thought I had “dealt with” long ago.

We went to Molly’s next, where I learned from George how to drink Blue Moon beer with lemon and where I wrote, *A person should be proud of her history, her past life, whatever that is*, where I questioned, *Why can’t nostalgia be enough? Why am I trying so hard to prescribe what I should write?*

We went back to the hotel and sat around the pool and wrote again, and there, reclining on a chaise, I felt more relaxed than I had in weeks. I was still trying to push away the past, however, and wrote about wanting topics with the *texture and fragrance of the present*. And when we had reading time with the whole group that afternoon, I read, but I read something much more generic, much safer. I did touch on what I was discovering about a writing marathon. In an attempt to answer Todd’s question, “What do you want to get out of this experience,” I wrote

...a deeper ability to be who I truly am with other people — authenticity of being within a community, which is a huge and precious thing, I think, and all too rare. The other thing I want is writing which reflects that, authentic writing. And both of these outcomes have a large capacity to affect our teaching.

The next morning, Kim Stafford presented to us several suggestions for directions our writing may take, which I dutifully wrote down. As soon as he mentioned the one about writing to a building (“You might write a piece for the Café du Monde, for instance,” he said.), I knew what I would do. And I knew this would be my time to go off alone — Richard had assured us that that was fine whenever we had to do that — and seek out that exact building where I had acted on the despair I felt all those years ago. My ambivalence about engaging with the past was gone. I walked until I recognized the house, walked around it for a few minutes, and then unselfconsciously sat on the sidewalk across the street, opened my notebook and began writing.

July 23, 1139 Bourbon Street, corner Governor Nicholls

Incredible how long we can look past our very own being. How many times have I come back to New Orleans, my hometown, and to the French Quarter and not sought out and stopped before this house?

In my memory it is much larger and gray — dark, foreboding. The present reality finds it in good shape, pinkish-tan with gray shutters, deep cream trim, second floor balcony, ivy flowing over the black wrought iron railings.

It's the downstairs I'm intimate with, two front rooms with a small kitchen and bath towards the rear. I go around to the side — see that second harmless looking window. Right inside there was a bed. And on that bed one night I lay, a desperate girl, and raised my hand against my own life with the machine of a blade.

Now, today, I sit on the sidewalk across Bourbon Street because I want to face the front of the house, to look at it carefully, directly, and in this same place raise my hand for my life with the machine of my pen.

This last line is a phrase that Kim said to us that morning, I think — I can't remember the exact context, but it became the mental image I needed to revisit the house on Bourbon Street.

Looking back over my journal entries later, ones from earlier in the year as well, I realized that a revelation I had had in Tucson directly impacted everything that had come after it.

March 2, Sunday morning final session in Tucson, a revelation

What matters? Bringing our own small (huge) concerns before others, hearing others' voices (such eloquent voices), surviving the presentation... Why do I have to approach such an opportunity with such mixed emotion — why do I always have to bring, no drag, no invite?! complexity into what should be simpler — like bringing or dragging or inviting that small, scared child who sits beside me. We are two people in one, she and I, and I, the grown-up, have to constantly reassure her that we can manage to talk to people and things will turn out all right. I have never given up on her — no, that's backwards, I realize it suddenly! She has never given up on me!

She is the one who, despite my attempts to push away home and past, responded so readily to place, to George's mention of Hemingway's birthday and to Kim's suggestion of writing to a

building, all of which were, to her, irresistible invitations to self.

A week after I returned from Tucson, I had a dream about that girl who has never given up on me. I wrote in my journal that morning, *It makes me want to live up to my responsibilities to her, and that leads to my responsibilities to my students as well! It's all one thing.*

It's all one thing — the kind of writing we do for ourselves, whether personal or professional, the kinds of writing communities we create, and the kinds of irresistible invitations we find.

Refuge of Writing

Connie Magee

As I drive into the city with Holly, a fellow writer and life-long friend, I could feel the excitement as I recall last year's marathon. There, I was lost in a group of newfound friends that melded so beautifully together, young, old, conservative, and outlandish; each one added a flavor to the mix.

The smile vanishes from my face as I wonder how this marathon will work. Last year's group spent the summer together writing, sharing, and bonding before the two-day retreat into the Quarter. The high of the experience is still fresh in my mind. But how will this marathon work when not only have we not bonded, but most of us have never even met? I begin to feel a bit uncomfortable and somewhat intimidated. I tell myself, "You will get through this," and as always, "This will build character." I do get through it, and once more the experience proves to be life-changing.

Even Richard says that each year he can't help but worry if the group will come together and if the formula work one more time. It always does. I thought the success of last year's marathon was a result of the many weeks of laughing and sharing. Now I understand the faith. It works; it just works. I can trust in the future even when I feel uncomfortable. I can replace the fear with a relaxing smile and a sigh of relief because I have faith in the process. Once more I have come and once more I am blessed -- intellectually, physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

I recall the first meeting in Richard's suite. Our group has more than doubled in number as writers from throughout the United States join us. We even have published writers among us. Again, I fight back the feelings of intimidation. After a brief explanation of the process and some words of motivation, we are released into the belly of the city to explore these unique surroundings and live it through our words.

Not feeling very adventurous or confident to just walk out the door and allow fate to choose my writing partners, I quickly hook up with Holly and her group. I find myself in the midst of serious and talented writers including Melanie, Tracy and Ann. There is a buzz, a sense of urgency to purge, to find that place or voice that holds the "perfect piece". I understand that need, but cannot relate, which leads me into my first journal entry.

Journal Entry

July 22, 2003 Molly's

I am so fortunate to have this refuge of writing. I am really not concerned with finding or writing that perfect piece because it has been captured so many times in my daily writing and will always happen again. It is the writing itself. As I read my own words of days and years gone by, I have the tragedy and glory of reliving that which the memory cannot preserve. The death of my father... standing at his bedside with my mom and my sisters as he quietly whispered, "I am going home." I have it all in my words to treasure the most profound experience of my life, holding my father's hand as he passed from this world. Knowing that one second he was with me and the next he was standing in the presence of God. The pain and the joy, his suffering was over and I embraced the moment. The raw emotion that reveals itself in the written word.

I am not a frustrated writer, just a writer, not one that aims to please, but to be pleased. If I can capture the true essence of an experience, it is good. I think one of my favorite lines

from John Lennon is "Life is what's happening while you are busy making other plans." Live in the moment, capture the moment and it is yours forever. It is about the truth, connecting and revealing what is authentic, taking the time and opportunity to step outside the mind to visit the soul. It is a journey, my journey, and it is all worth capturing in words.

Back in the suite, crowded with writers, we gather to share. As I listen to the pieces as varied as those who fill the room, I become more uncomfortable with my meager work. I am sure that I do not want to read aloud, but Clinton, sitting on my left, nudges me with a smile of encouragement between readings. "Go ahead, read. I want to hear what you have to say." As the time of sharing comes to a close, my mouth opens. With a shaky voice and a hot face, I begin to read. The vulnerability of allowing others to hear "my voice" and to be open for opinion gives me strength. Overcoming the fear of judgment and exposure is empowering and frees me to further explore that which can often be uncomfortable.

The following morning we are released once more to descend upon the city. Mary asked, "Who are you writing with today?" "You," I say, knowing that I am allowing fate to take its course. Out on the streets with Mary, Margaret, and Clarice, I have no idea what was in store. I do know that God has placed me with some special women.

Journal Entry

July 23, 2003, Johnny's Po Boys

As we sat in a crowded diner, Mary hesitantly asked me about the death of my daughter. I did not mind at all. When you lose a child, there are not too many opportunities to share the experience. It is hard to live in a world where people would prefer that you pretend that it did not happen, that she did not exist, that I did not witness her first step, her first words, or her last breath. Why can't I say I have three children instead of two? Because I have been taught by the reactions of the world: the silence, the awkwardness, the quick change of the subject. But not today, a friend bravely and sincerely asked about my child. As I told my story without emotion as I have learned to do so well, I looked up into the kindred eyes and tear-streaked faces of these mothers and knew they shared my joy and my pain. Their tears allowed me to shed my own. I was safe to show the emotion that I have buried so deeply. These beautiful women graciously gave me permission to be authentic and to write a piece about Carlee.

A Mother's Pain

*time without children
relaxing on the beach
my instinct as a mother
something is very wrong*

*I must go home
late night hour
knowing in my heart
something is very wrong*

*holding her close
heart pounding in my throat
denying what I know
something is very wrong*

*waiting for a doctor
no one seems concerned
dying in my arms
something is very wrong*

*vomiting with convulsions
ripped from my arms
bargaining with God
what do You want*

*eyes of my doctor
speak without words
God, no
she can't be gone*

*night turns to day
I find myself
face down on the floor
hoping, praying*

*it's a terrible dream
a nightmare, not real
truth painfully seeps
through my skin*

*my angel is gone
how can I live
I close my eyes
God help me breathe*

*the silence of dawn
a gentle voice whispers
in my soul
she is perfect, she is whole*

Assignments Misunderstood

Patricia Maus-Benit

Kim Stafford, the author, told us, “The best writing results from assignments misunderstood.” Then he offered us some writing prompts to voluntarily abide by. It was day two of the Writing Marathon and I was on a roll. I’ve run a 5K race before and I know what it means to “hit the wall.” Well, in a Writing Marathon, we does the exact same thing: not by writing on a prethink idea. Not by planning to revise or edit. Just by writing and sharing over and over and over until we get past the wall, the hump, which is the constant thinking the mind does while writing, judging, and speculating instead of observing and recording. His inspiration was good and interesting; I wrote it down to use in my classroom, and I may have used it on day one as a way to get past the wall. However, by day two, I felt there was not enough time to get all the words in my head on the paper. So I set out on my own to write and ignore the interesting pep talk.

My first day was spent writing about finding home. I knew in the beginning I was not looking for the physical, but I just kept writing about my recent experiences looking for homes in addition to relaxing and recording the observations of each place visited and any thoughts that I had as we went along. Suddenly, at the end of day one, after sharing my writing with my small group for the day, George, Andrée, and Karen, then in the large group of members of the Advanced Institute and many out of town guests, I did not know, I hit the wall, ready to leap and write about not what I set out to write about, but to write about what matters to me which was deep in my mind below the periphery of being. Beyond the world of daily chores and constant needs and wants from my children and my students. Beyond assigned writing. Memories and connections I needed to make, stories I wanted to tell, finding the little things that make life bearable, enjoying the moment of an unexpected happening. These are the entries from my three-day Writing Marathon experience I chose to include. The irony is, in the end I organized my chosen pieces based on Kim’s suggestions.

The first piece was written in the early morning hours of day two. I put it first because it is the product of my search to create a sense of home in my life. Kim’s prompt was, “What have you been carrying? Something you want to write about someday, start it now.” Recently, my middle child was brought to the hospital. Six months before was my birthday. Two years ago I divorced.

To Ronnie – A Message Carried

*That night at the hospital
Appearing calm
Inside I was anxious.
How long would it take?
How much will it hurt?
Is anything broken?
How long will it take to heal?
I realized
As I looked at you
I was just sitting
Tensely, hands gripping the Patient’s Rights brochure.*

*Lovingly, you put your arm around him
Stroked his hair to the side
Sure he was comfortable after carrying him in.
I just sat.
And I'm his mother.
Twelve years of an alcoholic marriage turned me cold.
Through you
I'm learning to touch again.
To feel again.
To accept considerate actions.
To trust.
Seeing you nurture my son like a father
Kept me in awe for days, like I didn't deserve you.
But Wyatt does
My child most like me
Yearns for the presence of a father
Not able to voice it ...
You have a connection
Without words
An unspoken exchange between a child and a nurturing adult.
Thinking back to my birthday—
Riding back Uptown on the streetcar
Wyatt snuggled up in your right arm,
You holding his hand—
An image burned in my memory.
I knew then I could trust again.*

The next piece came as a result of climbing over the wall by continuing to write through the junk and get to a truth I didn't realized on day one. I did not know I'd be alone for the first part of that day, so I had set out to get breakfast alone and get a chance to write what kept me up that morning. After I wrote this piece, I returned to the hotel to meet with the fellows as a group when Kim spoke to us, but it falls under his third suggestion for writing, "Pose a question from your life and seek clues from your location."

The Table – Pose a Question in Your Life and Seek Clues

It's oppressively humid. After swimming early this morning, ending my exercise with a lazy backstroke, I looked up, watching as the partly sunny sky clouded up. I dressed in a linen shirt over a tank thinking it would not be so hot on this second day of the Writing Marathon. No breeze, humidity stifling, I walked in a direction unknown to get coffee, a pastry, and aloneness. A reprieve to recollect. I was up at 4:30 a.m.: no reason, I just awoke and my mind was racing, wanting to write, but not wanting to awake my roommate, Karen. Walking out of the hotel, I started to the Croissant d'Or, but was open to anything. I heard the Cathedral bells ring once, 8:30, and I kept going past the street to turn for the Croissant d'Or. I decided I'd go to the La Marquise Café, a familiar place where I spent many a morning with my boyfriend on weekends escaping the reality of suburbia in his apartment a block away from the cafe in the Pontalba building.

Even as oppressive as the humidity was, I longed for the courtyard and after getting my coffee and Danish, I headed there to find it completely empty, quiet. I sat and ate then suddenly, a breeze. It felt wonderful. A moment presaging of rain coming.

Settled and stomach full, I could write. Thinking back to 4:30, I recalled my reading I shared about Sunday dinner at my Granny's house. I realized I had not taken the time to really describe the feeling of the moment. I had whizzed past all the details, not intending on writing about that. The details were skipped because my head was writing ahead of my hand and I was writing about finding home, a piece inspired by the mere presence of the city I grew up in and love and yearn to return to live in and be in touch with the many cultural activities awaiting the public at all times. I had no idea that my grandmother's kitchen table had anything to do with finding home. But it does, and, after hearing myself read it aloud, I knew each and every person probably had a different vision of how it looked. And how it looked is important. As I think about the most important element of the whole scene, I'd say that it was the kitchen table. Yes, a table. Not because it was beautiful or ornate. We were no Woody Allen movie with a fancy dining room complete with fresh cut flowers and servants. The table was functional. Not wooden but of the late forties or early fifties with its white Formica top flecked with gold specks. The edge was encased in a metal surrounding of no discrete color and the legs, in each of the four corners, were of the same colorless metal and went down in a thin double line to loop together at the floor. The chairs were like some roadside diner with their vinyl covering and the same metal frames. It was nothing to speak of. But that's my point. With both leaves in to extend the table, at the head, my Granny sat with her back about an inch from the stove. To her left sat any one of her three living daughters and son-in-laws, backed up to the sink. And to her right, the same, but backed up to the wall dividing the kitchen from the living room. The only person with enough space to get up and down was at the foot. The children of whoever's family was there that day would sit at card tables set up in the one car garage with the garage door open to the street to catch a breeze and view whatever was passing by.

A typical dinner at Granny's would be a big pork roast stuffed with garlic and bell peppers and coated in salt that would form a crust and keep the inside moist and juicy. This roast was always carved by one of the men in the family using an electric knife, scaring off the thieves yearning to snatch a little taste. Ten pounds of mashed potatoes accompanied this dinner with a pot of gravy half the size. Creamed corn, spinach, and always, applesauce. I don't know why, but Granny always had a huge bowl of sweet, ice-cold applesauce. Oh, and little plates with stacks of bread on each end of the adult's table and one on the kid's table. Real butter used, an expensive treat for my family.

After dinner, it was always like organized chaos, much like preparing for it. If there was no place to help and you weren't barked orders at, you usually made yourself scarce so that you wouldn't be made to clean. Usually the women would gather in the kitchen to clean, dry, and put away the necessities of the meal. As I got older, it was a time of memorable conversations and a feeling of belonging to something bigger than my immediate family.

We often speculated that the reason Granny had this crazy Sunday dinner on her only day off was to get everyone over to cook and clean for her. Having lived alone, I now think it was to pass a day that is difficult when I'm by myself. Maybe because I miss the company of extended family, frank conversations about life, and an ability to vent frustrations about children and husbands.

And now as I sit in the café, I wonder where that table went after her death twelve years

ago? I think about that simple table and how we gathered around it not only to share meals, but to visit over a cold drink or to play games like cards or Scrabble. As I search for the meaning of home, I have thought often about buying a table. Not a brand-new table I'd be too afraid of denting or scratching. And not an antique. Just a table used enough to allow more scratches and dings and big enough to fit everyone to join us for a Sunday dinner. This is home to me.

Following Kim's talk, and sure I was going to ignore his advice, I left the hotel alone for many people decided to write alone until meeting up again at 1:00. This is what happened next. It falls under Kim's fifth prompt, "The lost good thing – by writing, bring it back in your life," which I translated to "The found good thing – by writing, bring it into your life."

The Cat at 1208 Chartres – A Found Good Thing

I noticed as I was walking down Chartres Street towards the hotel after having breakfast at the La Marquise Café, a woman and man in front of me stop and look to their right where there was a fence. This was a typical fence of the quarter with its ancient waist-high brick, wild ferns growing out of the cracks, and on top, painted green iron, enough to keep the public about ten feet from the doorway, but inviting the viewer to take in the stately architecture. It's a beautiful building painted in a rich tomato-soup red with white trim, two stories, and four columns with a balcony on top of the porch. The couple seems to be looking through the fence. I am walking closer, but more slowly, a gray Persian cat suddenly appears stepping gracefully through the iron to the outside edge of the waist-high brick, right at chest height of most people, perfect for petting and talking to her. The woman, delighted by the friendliness of the soft grayish-white longhaired cat, began to pet and talk to it. The man appeared impatient. I slowed to think how I wished I had my camera. The composition was so perfect as the sun was shining brightly, causing all the colors of the Quarter to glow. I stopped and watched until they noticed me drinking in the composition. As they looked, I began to walk again, passing them, noticing the bright yellow eyes of the cat. Just as I passed, I also noticed a sign on the iron fence that said, "This part Persian cat needs a new loving home. Call: Greg at 427-4672." I thought, "Wow, she's selling herself!" I think I said it aloud because the man said in a somewhat irritated voice, "Yes. I think she wants to take her home." Feeling uncomfortable with his irritation, I kept walking in the direction of my hotel, but also because it was time for me to meet up with my writing fellows.

Several hours later, I came back out, having forgotten all about the cat and really with no destination in mind. But there she was, once again selling herself to another middle-aged couple on vacation in New Orleans. So I decided this was my destination, to sit and watch the cat and the interaction between animal and man. As I settled across the street and the current couple walked off, the cat noticed me, seeming perplexed by my curious stare. She was so friendly to all passersby, I thought she may come over to me and that was not really what I wanted. I just wanted to watch, like a scientist or anthropologist. And s, she didn't come. She just meandered across the waist high brick fence on the other side of the iron, stretched and settled down right behind the sign on the surface of the bricks. A woman passes and stops to pet and talk to the cat. Once again, the cat greets her, stepping to the outside part of the brick through the fence, and each time the adorer leaves, retreats to the safety of inside the fence. With a lull in pedestrian traffic, she settles in for sleep and as time passes on, falls deeper and deeper into slumber, no longer attracting the attention of all who pass

with a little time to spare to pet and talk to a beautiful and friendly cat. Instead, she sleeps on the cool brick as the sun peeks in and out from behind the clouds on this hot and humid New Orleans July day.

After the Story

Having watched the cat and then discussed it with many of my Writing Project Fellows, I decided that since I had been considering adopting a cat for the last several months, this was the cat for me. Several fellows considered taking the ca, as well and after hearing I wanted her, they encouraged me to call. So I called Greg and set up the arrangements to take her home before leaving the city. But alas, on the day to go home, the cat had moved to an unknown location, and with Greg out of town, it seemed like a lost chance. However, Greg offered to drop her off to me at my home across the lake next week on his way to Mississippi. So considering she is a Writing Project cat, discovered on a Marathon, I named her Doris, or Dori, in honor of the director Richard's wife because I know the load she carries being the wife of a writer and a mother to their children. It's my tribute to her because without her, Richard couldn't do what he does and the Southeastern Writing Project would not be what it is.

The last piece was inspired by a moment in time to truly capture what was the highlight of my day as a writer in the city of New Orleans. Kim's first suggestion was to "write about a place for a place." He intended us to give it to the place, however, I wrote about the place for myself.

Ryan's Pub – A Place

I just walked into a corner bar on my unknown quest towards Canal Street. Traveling alone today on the second day of the Marathon, I have a chance to let destiny work its magic in my writing. Moments ago, as I got closer to the bar, I realized I wanted to check out a used bookstore across from the House of Blues mentioned to some out-of-town participants in our Marathon experience. As the lightning and thunder gets closer, my cell phone rings, startling me. It's my friend calling to deliver a message. I was telling someone earlier in the day how I never use my phone this much but with a vacation to Gulf Shores planned right at the end of the Writing Marathon, there are details to be worked out. So, needing to write something down, I impetuously entered the bar to fish out my notebook and pen, I write down the message and finish my call. Feeling the weight of the humid air and the dampness on my clothes, I decide to stop in the cool air-conditioned ancient bar and take a respite from walking and breathing the stale air. The bar is long on the west wall, booths on the east, and pool tables and gambling machines in the back, empty just before noon. I gather my things and put them in a booth just far enough from the door to feel the air conditioning, but close enough to view the passersby. As I turn and walk towards the empty bar to order a Blue Moon draft beer with lemon, there is a moment of complete quiet and stillness. No birds, no traffic, no people. I give my order to the barmaid then in that moment of silence, the rain falls in big, heavy, loud drops like somebody just turned on the faucet. There was no building up with a little drizzle moving heavier. It just came straight down. Thank goodness. Hopefully it will break the weight of the air.

The beer is ice cold as I wipe the lingering perspiration from my forehead and settle into my chosen booth to relax, prop up my unsaddled feet, write, and enjoy the momentary storm.

One other couple comes in to escape the worsening storm and they sit at the corner of the bar closest to the door. Funny that the man sits on the only bar stool that is of carved wood in the shape of a horse's rear end. I wonder if he noticed that as he sat. I ask if they are from out of town and the wife turns and says they are from Tennessee. I asked if they have a camera and if they'd like me to take their picture. They do, and so I take the photo of them sitting at the bar looking over their shoulder towards the camera, horse's rear in plain view and it looks, from this angle, like the man's bottom is attached to the stool like the mythological creature Centaur, except funny, like the stool is making fun of the person who sits on it. They are happy I took the picture of them together and I momentarily feel guilty not knowing if he realizes he looks like he has the ass of a horse. But then, he looks down and notices the bar stool. At least the picture won't be a complete surprise.

Ahh, the rain stops and the air is cool and light. There is slight movement in the air, but not enough to call it a breeze. Time to leave Ryan's Pub and go onto the used bookstore to find who knows what.

Reflection: A Metaphor

When I sat at the pub, alone, not knowing I'd be there, stopping because of a phone call, because of the approaching storm, because of a thirst and slight hunger from a morning of walking and writing in the stifling heat and humidity and I ordered the beer, so light and refreshing with that wedge of lemon, and in that moment of silence, heavy humid stillness, the rain poured suddenly from the sky. It did not come without warning. The sky had been blackening for an hour or so and lightning was close, thunder was loud. That heavy, fat rain that came not without preface of drizzle, but as if someone switched the tub spigot to the shower and water was coming straight down, hard and heavy, fast, like the words from my head to my hand, unable to keep up. And this writing also did not come without warning. It came as an opportunity to "fight naked," a term mentioned by a Fellow describing the vulnerability this kind of writing creates, or to be unsafe and join other writers to write until we write ourselves honest in this spiritual journey, but not in the religious sense, but the sense of connecting though writing and sharing without comment, judgment, or revision called the Writing Marathon.

Love

Melanie Anne Plesh

I am in possession of the first thing I ever remember writing. It is a black patent leather Barbie diary, on which Barbie, in yellow capris and in her signature open toe high heel mules, is holding a quill and an open, empty notebook. The words “Barbie Diary” are printed at the top of the picture, under which I wrote, “Duh.” I was quite the wit at thirteen.

Inside is mostly a life in code. For example, I wrote, “daddy is sick,” but it meant daddy is drunk and his door’s shut and we all hope he stays asleep, and we’re staying very quiet, and damn the person who telephones, and double damn it when we hear his bedroom door open. Though I didn’t exactly tell the truth, I didn’t completely deny or ignore the situation either, which tells me that even then I knew my life was worth something and had to be noted. I think keeping those diaries was a way to declare myself present. And even though I often deny this, I believe it shows that I treasured my life, and that I had hope.

Diary writing evolved into letter writing, and though I don’t have much evidence of that time, I do have a painting from my friend Dorothy of me sitting on my porch when I was in my early twenties, writing letters to friends about things like the light or the smell of the lake. I felt strange mailing the letters because they weren’t exactly reporting what I thought letters were supposed to report, like news and human affairs. When I sat with paper and a pen on my porch it felt like I could see the world better, that suddenly the rain and the Catalpa tree had to be written about. I remember feeling that the world was too beautiful to ignore or skim. I thought it had to be shouted aloud about.

In December of 1981 I bought and wrote in my first permanent notebook. I was in a crisis, and I remember stopping without a conscious plan at the drug store at the corner of Robert E. Lee and Canal Blvd in New Orleans, where I bought my first black and white composition book, and scribbling in it in the parking lot, in pencil, “It is Christmas. I hate this world.” My two-year old son, Tim, was in the car with me. I didn’t know then what was happening, only that I was troubled, and that somehow writing would help me. I don’t know how I knew.

And now, sitting here in the year 2003, writing this essay, preparing to walk through New Orleans with a pen and paper, I’m beginning to understand why writing matters. It matters because it gives my spirit an avenue to come closer to my flesh. It gives me a way to paint my feelings, to give words to thinking, to see. Writing is a friend to me.

I think the world wants to be noticed, and loved. Through writing I can love the world out loud, and can thank the Stars the Gods the One for my life, and for yours, and for the beautiful complexities.

Writing is an act of love.

Essaying New Orleans

I moved into a French Quarter neighborhood the weekend before the New Orleans writing marathon occurred. The Saturday was a blur of business. But when I awoke on Sunday morning in my new home, New Orleans began for me, and so it is here, on the Sunday, that I begin my marathon. The following are excerpts from my notebooks.

Sunday

This is the first morning of my residence in the Faubourg Marigny, sitting on the sofa I dug out from the chaos of the move. The screen door is hooked. A guy pushing a grocery cart just walked by and as he passed my door he was singing, "How wonderful life is while you're in the world." He didn't see me.

I'm hearing gongs: a few, then nine, then two. Now the sound is so much in my head I don't know what I'm hearing, or even if that's what this phenomenon is.

I look prettier in New Orleans. There's a gleam to the hair on my arms. I have a color I didn't have in Covington. I'm enamored of my house and the environs. And for the record, I believe the bathroom mirror is this house's eye, and through it the house is courting me. And my tub has claws. And every room in the house has three-prong jacks except the one room where I need them, where the computer is.

Vince came over and we ate beans at the Praline Connection. He had red with a smothered pork chop; I had white with two perfect pieces of fried chicken. Tim is here right now, 9:45 PM, playing the piano. I think he had to come over to see that I'd really done it. And so I have.

Monday (at Southeastern Louisiana University)

Morning. Writing with the advanced institute. Mirrors. There's something about seeing as a writer and it's not really about the world. It's about ourselves. Bucket Man for instance is alive in a certain way in Richard's eyes, and not like he'd be alive in another's. But also I think writers animate the world. Bucket Man was just another guy with a bucket, but in Richard's eyes he became a guru, a sage, a seer. Richard could see him because Richard was looking into the world. I think maybe writers don't judge, that writers say what they see. I think the more a person can do that the better a writer she is. Because that leaves it to the reader to interpret. Maybe a writer lends her eyes to another, lets a reader see through a seer's eyes. That is a kind of reflecting, a mirroring, because I see then translate the sight into words and this is what the reader gets. But then I have to think about why anyone should bother reading what I see. Because who am I? But then again, who was Dostoevsky?

Evening. After speaking to thirteen telephone company people in three days I still do not have my internet/email service working. I have been out of touch with cyberspace for three full days, seventy two full hours. I'm mad as a bastard, but am also becoming a martyr. Thirteen people. It's a study in being assertive. But I also can't help but think there's a good reason in the bigger picture for me to be without my email/internet. But I won't tell Bell South that. The bastards.

There are so many issues. The cats: Princess wants to go outside. Orange had his balls cut off. And on top of everything else, I sneezed just now six times.

I feel devastated by the limits of my body. I'm too tired to hold my eyes open. And I have to

be presentable at eight in the morning for the gas man. It's midnight now.

Tuesday

It's so good to have the kitties home. I'm drawing my third cold bath. Hope the gas man can make it today. In any case, come 10 AM, I'm with writers. A cold bath, I hate to admit, is not such a bad thing.

Tracy, Holly, Ann, Connie, Todd and I are writing together. We're at a table outside the Frenchmen Street PJ's. The sun is on my knees. I feel like crying. I remember sitting here just three weeks ago with Tim, drinking café au lait, thinking that every person who passed seemed rare, and that I was too plain and too old to belong here in this city-poem. And now I live here.

But maybe the city will raise me. I saw a meter maiden ticketing a car and went inside to warn the woman I'd seen arrive in it. I said, "Are you seeing?" and I thought, in its roundabout way, the city gave me that policewoman and that opportunity to ask a question I needed to hear. Are you seeing? Are you seeing the stooped man at the table with Holly, looking like the load of bricks he might have carried all his life grew into his back, rendering him crooked, and that he is permanently marked? That's how that goes, too, with emotional and mental loads, that before you know it, it's got you all bent under it. Or maybe your posture is good but your eyes have taken on the weight. Or maybe you just reek of your mortal wound. And I ask Ann next to me what she knows about it all and she says, "I'm trying not to know."

I want to be an eye for the world, an invisible eye. I want to vanquish the thing that keeps me from being invisible, the matter in my head that I cannot see beyond, that matter that keeps me wrapped up.

At Molly's now on Decatur Street. A red-haired man on a low-slung rich-toned hand-made black motorcycle is stopped outside on the street. His arms are tattooed with grids all the way up to inside his shirt sleeves. He raised one gloved hand to shade his eyes and stared into the bar, looking serious about finding someone, like maybe he's stalking someone. He's angry, but not about anything in particular. I think he was born angry. Maybe he never got over his mother making him get born. I don't know if he's friend or foe.

I think the thing I'm trying not to know is that I'm corporeal. I'm trying not to know that I'm not invisible. But that's what I want to be. I want to be an invisible eye that exists to see but cannot be seen. That I am able to be seen makes me a participant in a way, and the whole affair becomes interactive. Performance art. Quantum writing. The red-head, for example. What if I could slip onto the seat of that bike behind him, invisible, and listen to what he mumbles to himself when he stops to look in the window, what he mumbles when he doesn't find what he's looking for? If I could hear unnoticed, and record him, not the him he wants me to know, but his own him? Then I'd be an invisible eye.

It's raining. Big drops puffing up the dust on the street. They look like little volcanoes.

Imagine if Shakespeare were here, sitting at the window of this bar, having a Guinness with me. What would he see in the eyes of the streaming people, in their actions, in their language? What would the marked, the pierced, the dyed, the garish, the painted, the foppish tell him about us? About himself? About his specialty, the human race? Maybe that we mortal creatures are not willing to stay common? That we wish to rise out of the muck with voices and faces and ideas of our own? Would he recognize us as courageous and bold people who step out of our doors into this teeming city to have an experience of being alive? Would he say we're going toward knowing ourselves?

What would he say about the red-head?

Wednesday

I feel the hot breath of New Orleans on the back of my neck, her damp sweet bitter sex, her invitation. She's enticing me, teasing me, asking me to fall in with her, daring me to roll over and kiss her. And if I were to roll over I'd find her smiling with great red lips and danger in her black eyes. And she'd sprout tendrils that would grow toward me, entangle me, root me to her, tendrils that would take me out of this bed and into the elements. And I would not want to be extricated. I would want to be taken.

There are six people in my house, including me, writing. It's a way to bless my house. Last night Gary and Barbara came here and we howled a prayer for this new living of mine, and now six writers are together here, writing, blessing my house again. It is clear what I am. I am a writer. And it's the moment, finally, to start thinking about Penny. No, I want to start with Brendan. I want to speak with Brendan first and give him this story. I want him to know that there are ways to find hope, that there are saviors and that there is salvation for those whose heart is mutilated, whose hope is gone.

When I was thirteen years old, in the year 1965, my father bought Penny for me, a seven year old brown roan with black hair, black legs, and a white star strip and snip on her face. On her chest there was a deep scar where a fair amount of flesh ought to have been. She ran into a tractor, her former owner told my daddy, when she was a filly. I can't imagine how she didn't die.

It was Good Friday when she came. She died in July of 1992. She was everything to me. She was stability, love, safety, power, generosity. She taught me those things. She gave me the opportunity to learn to take care of a life. I couldn't take care of myself or my own life, but I could and did take care of her life. Morning and night, for 27 years, I took care of her life. And the rewards for doing that, the rewards, were that I stayed alive. And I learned what love was. And I still can hardly bear my life without her. When daddy bought Penny for me, that's when my life began. And now I'm here thinking Penny is behind the move.

I'm outside again, now by the river. Walking alone is an important part of the marathon. It gives time for impressions and ideas to sift down and find a sticking place. To be alone with myself. I lost my group when I stopped at the Natchez, transfixed, absolutely hypnotized, by the person standing on the uppermost deck in a yellow hooded raincoat, standing, playing the calliope in the rain. But not terribly well. A puff of smoke per key. And then it began to rain hard, and I stood there in it under my umbrella, letting my feet get wet, staring at that calliopist. That's how I lost my group and began to see the river, the green and white Rivco tugboat, its black enameled engine, and on the levee the monument to immigrants, and the name Romeo Celli acknowledged there.

I keep looking, looking, but I'm not seeing. Because I'm looking in the wrong direction. Or rather perhaps I'm just not catching the entire arc of light. When I look out at the outside world my gaze gets absorbed. I'm not waiting long enough to receive back the reflection. I'm moving too fast. I think that I feel a little hopeless and so don't let my gaze linger. I'm missing the world. I'm letting it slip by me because I just can't sustain. My attention is scattered. I'm looking at the many things and cannot see anything. Penny gave me an identity and a place. She took care of me, though really, I think she equipped me to take care of myself. However, she did have the power of the hoofs which I didn't have.

When my daddy was a kid like I was, and abandoned like I was, he had a horse, Buddy, and I think that's what made him understand I needed Penny, even against Mother's biting objection.

Kim asked if he should put the milk that was in the creamer back into the jug, and he returned the sugar to the kitchen, and he turned the coffee pot off. These are the things that worry me, things that I fear I've forgotten. It's as though he knew what would worry me and erased those worries.

Thursday

It's 7 PM. I'm sitting in the evening, the sun falling behind a gray and white mansion on Royal Street that I see out of my kitchen window. I just heard a ship's blast on the river. I'm in a port city and I'm a port city woman. I hear the train. I was convinced that I couldn't live in a place without church bells, and yet I don't have them here. I have trains and boats, but no churches. Maybe it's a sign that I need to seek them out.

I love this world. It's crazy to love it, but I love it. I love the iniquities and the striving for morality. I love that St. Louis Cathedral is in the center of what people past and present have called an immoral city. I love the noises of the trains and boats that indicate movement, and that remind me that this is a city for travelers. I'm a traveler. I'm not happy enough to read about the world. I have to be in it and touch it. This is not a city to feel stuck in. Maybe my traveling hunger came because of the trains I grew up next to, and the river I always knew about. I wonder why daddy moved here from southern Illinois, a child born in a place far away from the sea, where people don't recognize oars. It occurs to me that my daddy might have lived like Odysseus, except that he fell for the sirens. And maybe I have too.

Disconnecting the Pen and the Brain

Margaret Boyle Westmoreland

I am the class of 2002, not high school or college, but Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project class of 2002. I say this with extreme gratification because the summer I was a Fellow in the writing project was the single best professional development I have experienced, and personally, it wasn't bad either.

I teach junior and senior level English and have never been intimidated by placing a grueling piece of literature in front of my kids and help them to love it. I think this is because I am a reader, and I have studied writers with such passion that this comes to me with ease. It wasn't until my summer as a Fellow when I learned to identify myself as a writer that I could assist my kids in their journeys.

There was no hesitation when I received an invitation to the Advanced Institute. I knew this "stuff" worked. I had seen it. I incorporated it in my class. Students were regularly taking "raw" pieces of writing from their journals and revising them for scholarships, essay contests, and college entrances. I remember when the first scholarship money began to pour in and a quiet girl named Lindsey won the Coca-Cola essay contest. Lindsey's first words were, "I wrote that 'essay' during journal time." If that wasn't validation enough for me, I had a hardworking boy named Owen write a letter of recommendation for a job I was considering. He wrote:

Almost every day the first few minutes of English IV would be reserved for writing in our journals. There were a lot of complaints at the beginning of the year of aching hands and rambling pages, but by the end of the year college worthy essays were produced. On the last day of school, the senior class held a bonfire where we burned our uniform shirts, notebooks, physics projects, and even novels, but no one wanted to burn their English journals. The journals showed a definite change in our writing skills, and we all knew that they would be fun to read in later life.

This might be the greatest compliment I have ever received as a teacher, and that's only a snapshot of what the Writing Project can do.

On July 22, 2003, I set out on the streets of the French Quarter with two women from the 2002 institute, Mary and Clarice. We began at the Croissant d'Or where I settled into an outdoor table with a carefully selected pen and notebook and began writing. I had a lengthy story in my head whose details had kept me up nights, and I would not be able to use New Orleans as my tool until I got this out of my head. So at the first opportunity I had, I began writing.

...We crossed Church Street to find ourselves up to our ears in sugar cane. My students knew the territory well. Every fall the farmers harvested the cane and burned the fields, and the field mice found new homes within the walls of MSHS. Knowing my fear of rodents and my humanitarianism, my kids catch the squeaky little creatures and return them to their original homes ...

But today, there were no mice. We came to write ...

Jordy was known for going for the joke, so when we saw a shoe – a black Brighton sandal with a heel, very similar to a pair I owned, we laughed when he joked how I must have been playing hide and seek in the cane field.

When Jordy turned the corner and shouted, "It's a body" we didn't even turn our

heads. Seconds later, a second kid shouted, slightly more high pitched and anxious, "Hey, Westy, it IS a body!"
I felt dizzy and flushed. I knew I recognized those shoes...

Even though the pages continued, this is about where my story stopped. The story had holes, and the writing was sloppy and redundant. I had seven pages of nothing, but I had written it. Even though it had eaten most of my day, it was out of my head and I was now free to write about other things. Within our group, we have nicknamed this "purging the crap," a place I often find myself when there is junk in my head that is preventing me from finding the good stuff. My students have to do this too in order to remove their lists of things-to-do and the anxiety they feel about just being young and misunderstood. I find I am no different.

The next morning I was up and writing in the hotel and later at CC's coffeehouse trying to capture in writing the night's experiences. This is more my style ... capturing the moment using real dialogues. I have never successfully written a short story (though I attempt it often), but I have always felt confident in my ability to retell a story. As I wrote the following piece, Connie, another 2002 Institute alum, had joined our group, and the four of us sat in leather chairs in the back of the coffeehouse. I laughed aloud for most of the hour that we wrote in silence.

... Something magical occurs when you take a group of women, strip them of their makeup and men, and throw them in a room together for the night. Such is the case of last night. To protect the innocent, as George wrote in an earlier piece, I will call the women of my tale Clara and Marilyn.

It all began with a discussion about gas versus feet and cheese. Yes, women have gas, yes, at times, we discuss it, but more importantly, it is a universal theme that our men discuss, participate in, and torture us with. More humorous than the discussions are the wives' feeble attempts to imitate their husbands' gaseous escapades. To think of Marilyn explaining a "hot turtle" while throwing herself under my covers puts me in a full body laugh. But please, am I a 12-year-old boy impressed with bodily excretions? We had our girlie moments too...when Marilyn shared her new fancy lotion with us, we slathered on enough grease that it looked like we were covered in tanning oil. Clara quickly said, "I feel kinky!"

I should probably mention that Clara and I shared a bed last night. This is something women are capable of doing but is a foreign thought to men. Are men afraid they might touch in the middle of the night? Might they breathe the same funky air? Who knows? I do know that I did wake up once and thought I was in bed with my husband ... but he wants another baby and seeing how I still have 22 vivid hours of labor fresh in my head, I stayed my distance from him - I mean Clara.

Anyway, Clara was greased up and feeling kinky when she slid under the sheets with me. Did I mention Clara was a kindergarten, I mean 1st grade teacher? That made it even more interesting when she popped up from our bed to ask Marilyn across the room if she and her police officer husband ever played games where she was a hooker. "A bad, bad, girl," I said. "I mean, you have all the equipment," Clara added.

Now, we ARE in the Quarter, and you expect to be out late, but as one who was falling asleep at dinner, our plans were for an early night.

So when Marilyn noticed a strange light flickering through our window at about 2:00 AM, we immediately investigated. Was it two guys? A guy and a girl? Was she topless?

We were unsure, but as Clara and I stood spying in the dark window, Marilyn needed to find her glasses. When she threw on the light, Clara and I dropped to the floor as not to be seen.

“Ya think they’re gonna do it in the pool?” Clara asked and it reminded me of how she innocently asked for the definition of “booty call” while we were being recorded by Yummy Radio Boy.

“Probably,” I said and then added, “Yeah, I’ve done it in a pool.” Then I immediately realized that I needed to just stop talking.

The cackling continued...I don’t know when it ended, but I do know that you can only get that kind of make-your-cheeks-hurt laughter with friends, when you stop sizing up the competition and start letting people be themselves, when you stop worrying about offending people or sounding stupid and value the goodness that exists in the individual. I rarely speak of deep theoretical “blah.” This is who I am. I have said before that there is a fine line between sophistication and trash and I walk the fine line often falling onto both sides simultaneously.

I had a great night, but I am hungover from the giddiness.

I know it is not Shakespeare, nor is it deep. But it was entertaining to write and even more entertaining to read aloud. In the Writing Project, we often talk about what we are going to do with our writing, especially after a marathon. I believe some pieces, like my failed short story, were meant for the trash and others, like my girls’-night-in saga, are meant to entertain us the way a good joke does...at that moment. I have never been an eloquent writer, but I long for the moments when my hand cannot keep up with my brain and for the times when I am not editing as I write. I find that when I think of what I’m putting on the paper, I edit to make myself look better, nicer, or in most cases, less guilty and more sophisticated.

I love when my students get to this place in their writing. I can tell that they don’t really want the world to know their weaknesses, but when they have such fun writing it, they have to read it to the class. I can remember a beautiful cheerleader named Brittany who read a story she wrote about throwing up on the boy she had a crush on for years. She giggled as she furiously scribbled her uncensored tale in her notebook and when she shared with the class, she had power in her writing to make the entire class roar with so much laughter that the teacher next door had to knock on the wall to quiet us. I love those moments.

The rest of the afternoon, our group participated in “research” where we walked around the Quarter interviewing people looking for great stories. We told the bouncer at the House of Blues, a huge smiling black man named Tony, that we were writers and convinced him to take us to the VIP section overlooking the stage. We tried to convince him to let us sit there for 20 minutes or so and write, but his boss was watching us so we’d have to remember the setting and write about it later. Walking back to the hotel at about 4:00 in the afternoon, we stopped at a fire station.

We walked up to station 29 with the arrogance of star athletes expecting something for nothing. A young Italian guy sat in a lawn chair, smoked a cigarette, and listened to classical music from a record player.

It was Mary’s idea to talk to some firemen. I extended my hand and feeling that telling him I am a writer would not be convincing enough, I said with a flirty smile, “My name is Margaret and these are my friends. We’re writers and I wondered if you could

show us around.”

That was the beginning of an hour and a half conversation with Paul and later Frank of the New Orleans Health EMS.

Their stories were alluring, but it was a lot of information to digest. More notably to me were the stories they were willing to tell us just because we said we were writers.

I feel obligated to tell their stories.

I haven't actually written about their stories yet...understaffed and underpaid...stories of prostitutes and drug addicts...stories of murder and even delivering babies. "I've delivered 24 babies as of Tuesday," Frank proudly responded to a question from Mary. "Mothers ages 12 to 42. But it's never pretty. It's never someone who uses soap and water often." We laughed, but it moved us. This says so much about the locals of the French Quarter.

I have had my students interview people for information, statistics for a research paper or speech to meet some requirement, but I have never sent them out in search of a story. I can only imagine the possibilities and look forward to trying it.

Energized from our experience at the firehouse, we continued on our pilgrimage to the hotel. We stopped at Molly's to write and met up with several other Fellows. My mood was more serious. Molly's does that to you. It is dark and grimy and smells of the French Quarter. A larger woman confidently strolled by my side with her midriff exposed to draw attention to her tattoos and belly button ring. "I would never wear that," I thought. Then I wrote.

I am 30, and my body is in need of desperate repair ... My legs are less toned. My belly is more round and soft. I will never wear the same short skirts of pre-pregnancy that initially attracted my husband. And George is right. I would rather swim in my clothes than bare it all in a swimsuit.

The other day Melanie gave us the prompt "mirrors." I do see what others do not ... But I do not mind growing older. Like a great flea market find with dents, scratches, and history, I wear my fresh stretch marks across my abdomen as a tattoo of motherhood. I have complained about them, but we are becoming friends, and I am learning to appreciate their company. I even love it when my husband slides his fingers over them ... Two doctors and two sonograms predicted I was having a girl, and for months I worried about passing on a poor body image to my daughter the way my mother had to me. My mom was tall and dark and beautiful, and at 44 gave birth to her 4th child. With a newborn in her forties and the rest of her children in and out of college, she never fully regained the look she longed for and for the next 22 years until her death, refused to take pictures. I swore I would not do this to my daughter.

On December 8, 2002 ... I gave birth to a 7lb, 13oz baby BOY to the surprise of everyone. Pregnancy itself is a miracle, but after years of fertility problems, medical issues, and the confirmation that I could not have a baby, the cliché "miracle of life" was no longer cliché with me . . .

I no longer worry about passing on my poor body image to my daughter, but now I feel a sense of responsibility to teach my son the delicate balance of respecting a woman's body...

I am a woman. My body is soft. The wounds of childbirth have only seasoned an already tasty dish. I will not lie about my age. But I cannot say with certainty that there will be another time in my life when I will comfortably strip down to my swimsuit and

dive in.

I did not fully capture my feelings about my body, but I read it to the group. I was surprised when people laughed at parts because I was so serious when I wrote it, but with a group of mostly moms, they understood. What will I do with this? I've done it already...I've written it, I've read it, I've been validated. I can move on now.

That same evening, Connie read her writing, sparked by a discussion we had at Johnny's Po-Boys, on the death of her daughter. I cried during the initial conversation, when she read it to our response group, and when she read it during the read-around. I thought she was brave and wise, and I felt honored to be in the conversation.

I knew this was a time to share. When other writers shared their experiences on divorce, death, suicide, I felt I would not be a full participant if I didn't share something – no matter the quality or subject. Just like in the marathon, in my classroom, I don't force my students to share. Yet others silently encourage them through the writing, the way Connie had silently encouraged me. In the Paul McCartney Suite the next morning, I wrote about it.

...I have spent these days watching others as a writer – talking, observing, eavesdropping, taking notes. I wonder if anyone looked at us in this manner. If so, they would have seen three women, friends, writers at a red-checked table cloth in a loud, bright restaurant, teary-eyed and captivated by the story of the fourth. We all have a story and the marathon allows us to tell it ... Connie's honesty is what I will remember – and the hot tears that stung my cheeks in Johnny's Po boys.

As exhausted as I was, I left New Orleans on a “writing high” and went home where no one fully understood my experience, like I returned from church camp and no one wanted to hear what I was preaching. I was in the process of selling my house, the house we purchased instead of having a big wedding. Within days of my return from New Orleans, I was in foreign territory. The overwhelming feelings of moving from my first home sparked the following poem.

Come Back Yesterday

Purchased because wedding bells did not ring
By giddy lovers who knew nothing
In the empty great room, we loved on the floor
Christening our commitment once more
I glance around this old house and reminisce with a sigh
I know I can never come back yesterday

Scarlet chosen just because
Black-eyed Susan, blazing it was
Kaleidoscope for a baby girl that was not
Windsor Castle, like ice cream of chocolate
With a deep breath and a tear and a smile
I know I can never come back yesterday

Giggling voices from the children in the willow on the lawn

While the two of us whispered till dawn
We learned of deaths and disappointments through sorrowful calls
Fin and feather also knew home within these walls
As I turn out the lights and shut the door to move on
I know I can never come back yesterday

Clarice, Mary and I had dinner on the last night of the marathon at one of Emerald Lagasse's restaurants, NOLA. Ray, our waiter, gave Clarice the wrong menu, and when Mary joked that she wanted to order from that menu, he laughed and said, "Sorry. You'll have to come back yesterday." We were diners viewing the world as writers, and we could find inspiration in anything. A few days later, I was moving out of my first home. My husband and I were cleaning up the house and I started talking about all of the paint choices I'd made and how the Windsor Castle color paint in the dining area looked like melted chocolate ice cream. My husband looked at me puzzled and said, "How do you remember that?" Before I could answer, he shook his head and said, "Well, that was yesterday." I went home that night and wrote the first draft of this poem.

I've worked on this poem for a few days, but it needs to marinate on the paper and in my head. I asked George for suggestions, and although I agree with his concerns, I am unsure of my revisions. As I tell my students, I have the choice to make changes or leave it as I have written it. I know this. George asked me if I wanted people to understand it or did I want it to be a personal piece between husband and wife. Good question. I didn't know the answer.

I ask my students similar questions all the time. What is your purpose? What are you trying to say? Where do you want to go with this? I remember my students' frustrations, and I know there will be a time that I will share this experience with them even if I never share my poem. I imagine I will work on this poem again over time, but I have kept the first draft, just in case.

This is what the writing marathon can do ... inspire you then, inspire you later, inspire you to change your entire teaching style and re-ignite the fire that you may have lost through the years. When I became a writer, I became a better writing teacher.

What will I do now? I will eventually go back to the classroom and encourage my kids to disconnect the pen and the brain and see what can come of it, and of course, I will continue writing.

Other Voices

Beth Calloway
Spike Harris
Nancy Nungesser
Lynne Vance

Kathleen O'Shaughnessy
Dianne Dempsey
Ann Dobie
Eva Guillot
Charles Larroque
Margaret Simon

Other Voices

Part of the magic of the writing marathon is the way it attracts participants. They come because they know that the marathon creates a unique community of writers, even if it's only for a day or two. The marathon is not a convention or a conference; there are no sessions or presentations to attend. The writing is the only item on the agenda. Writers enjoy combing the city for writing ideas, going off with a small group, sharing and commenting on one another's work, gathering at the end of the day for a large read-around, and just generally basking in the feeling of being a writer with writers for the sole purpose of writing.

In addition to members of the Advanced Institute, Fellows from previous Summer Institutes returned to participate as well. We also sent word to nearby Writing Projects about the New Orleans Marathon, but were not sure how many outside participants would attend. To our surprise, our group more than doubled in number, and we even had people from as far as Mississippi, Alabama, Kentucky, and California. Some could only stay for one night, or even for one afternoon, but the flexibility of the marathon accommodated the arrivals and departures of different writers. We also invited Kim Stafford, who was happy to fly in from Oregon to write along beside us and also to provide some inspiration for us in the morning send-off sessions.

In the following pages, we include excerpts from our guest participants, who added much to our marathon experience.

Ode to Le Richelieu

By Beth Calloway, Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project

Walls that once embraced Sir McCartney's
knightly presence,
witness the melodious sounds of
poetry and prose,
as writers come from far and near.
Two days in hot, humid July
partaking in endless writing bounty.

The 1845 Lanata family row house,
at Chartres and Barracks,
dressed in blood-red and wrought iron
viewed by its namesake,
the Cardinal de Richelieu,
whose picture hangs in the lobby.

The power-wielding prime minister of
Louis the Thirteenth.
A reminder that French patriot
blood ran through
the cobbled courtyard stones.
This was La Freneres's reward
in front of "Bloody
O'Reilly's" firing squad.

Now we go forth reveling in
sights and sounds,
and yes even smells
in a city that never sleeps.

Horse drawn carriages,
the driver's singsong voice.
The same tale he's told a thousand times.

The rhythm of jazz and blues,
an unseen shadow following
through the streets.

The scent of mouth-watering gumbo,
pralines that are too-sweet,
companions as we stroll along.
Franklin's first virtue -
"Eat not to Dulness
Drink not to Elevation"
Dismissed out of hand.
Cafe au lait, beignets, po-boys
only prepare the palate.
Wining and dining at
NOLA, Irene's, Molly's, and Galatoire's.
A warning -
don't walk above this line at night.

Other memories wake -
push forward -
Demanding.

Tales of the Big Easy,
Tales of a painful past,
Tales of family and friends,
But tales of something.
Some strummed guitar strings
and sang.

Triple A rates it three diamonds.
Mobil gives it three stars.
The 2003 New Orleans Writing Marathon
agrees
the Richelieu's hospitality
was over the moon.

So we vow to come,
one day,
back again,
soon.

The Words Came First

Spike Harris, Mississippi Writing and Thinking Project

I planned to play the streets of New Orleans most of the day, finish two songs, and make enough silver to get a six pack of Dixie Blackened Voodoo. Unfortunately, it rained and most of the morning was spent under an awning by the aquarium. With a break in the weather, I decided to go to Molly's, have a drink and burrito, and write my unfinished songs. I sat at the back table facing the street with the video poker machines behind me. On the wall to my right was a tombstone. Engraved in the stone was "Margaret Burke – died March 1, 1896". It got me thinking about all these great dead people – famous and not so famous. I started writing Margaret Burke – no music, just words. An hour or so later, I finished a waltz. For the first time, as a songwriter, the music came last.

Margaret Burke (died March 1, 1896)

*Socrates sings
Songs in the kitchen
While Joan Arc lets flies in
Through the screen door
And John and Bobby
And Joe will be talkin'
To Jackie about Camelot
And wonderful things*

*And we won't need a reference book
When we play Scrabble
We won't need to protect ourselves
When we make love
We all will drive cars
That won't shake and won't rattle
And God will be with us
And not up above*

*Mother Theresa
Will strut down the catwalk
While Leonardo DaVinci
Takes Polaroid shots
And Tupac and Biggie
Watch reruns of Matlock
No pawn shops, no crack rock
No bullets, no pot*

*And the ghosts that lay musty
And damp in the shadow
Will smile in the sun
When they're finally free
And my grandma will softly sing
Songs from the burrow
To a child that she loved
But never did see*

A Strand Above

Nancy Nungesser, Greater New Orleans Writing Project

A single strand, stranded
An escaped souvenir
Twisting, wavering on a wire

Exposed orbs, beaten and battered
Lonely twirling, unprotected

Ice, rain, wind, even a hurricane
But mostly heavy heat, scorching

Sun-baked and sun-bleached,
Cracked color, tarnished texture

But still strung, a whole, a one
Ignored, aging, yet surviving

Pearlized tints long ago vanished
Surface dented and mottled,

But finally, clean and clear,
Like diamond or crystal
Tiny prisms now reflect on the parade below.

Authentic Voice

Lynne Vance, Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project

I was glad for the opportunity to have some solitude to reflect and center my thoughts. I wanted to address the topic of the Marathon itself. Many of Art Peterson's watchwords were still fresh in my mind. The pieces I've heard from marathon writing have always appealed to me. I like the fresh, unpolished ring of the author's authentic voice. It has the same feel to me as the radio writings. I realized that it is the spoken word that attracts me. I love listening to someone read their writing aloud. I also love the concept of the marathon being a get-a-way. It is a luxury to go away for two days and have nothing but writing on the agenda. I asked myself the questions of what the benefits and drawbacks of marathon writing were for me.

St. Mary's Catholic Church: Revelation in a House of Prayer

I come to this house of prayer to light a candle, profess my intentions and ask for guidance and inspiration. I don't see an area for candles and offerings, but I notice that before the altar flanked to the right and left are a man and a woman. Each is seated before a prie-dieu. It is Adoration: a special time in the church when the host is exposed for perpetual devotion. The white host, encased in a glass circle is centered at the intersecting lines of a gold cross. A halo radiates golden rays from the cross. Invisible grace permeates the room. I sit quietly for thirty minutes, desperately trying to still my mind. In my struggles to meditate, the voice of Kim Stafford rises above my mantra. He says, Think about the Marathon. What is it and what does it mean . . .

How does a writing marathon fit in with the teaching of writing? What are the benefits? What are the drawbacks? It occurred to me that part of the beauty of a writing marathon is that it is a venue for spoken word. In its pure unedited state, we hear authentic voice. It is place-based writing in motion. It is Zen. It occurs in the now. Even if you are writing about something that occurred in your past – you are connected to place by your very presence in the time and space to write provided by the marathon.

The concept of placing a group of people into a specific geographic area and sending them off to observe, reflect and record creates a new avenue for place-based writing. We see that place-based writing is not always about the places we call home. The marathon becomes a vehicle transporting one to places far from home. Yet our perceptions of place are shaped by our unique perspective formed from our homegrown roots. When marathon writings are shared, our lives are expanded as we envision the same place through the lens of each other's experiences.

The warts or downside to marathon writing is that it sometimes provides over-stimulation. Too many thoughts, words, people, and distractions make it difficult for some to sustain focus. If conversation becomes too intrusive, valuable writing time may be lost. The strong desire to produce something tangible to validate your time and energy and share with a larger group may cause stress and also become an obstacle.

For me, in order to have a positive writing experience in a marathon, I have to allow myself freedom. If something is nagging at me, I have to either write about it or let it go. It is important for me to check mental baggage when embarking on a writing marathon. I also have to free myself from the chains of my internal editor, the critical censor who tries to evaluate my words before I've finished writing. Marathon writing gives me permission to express myself

imperfectly. Publishing through spoken word is gentle, kind and forgiving. The role of an immediate audience, available and ready to listen, provides support for me as a writer. I am encouraged because I have an opportunity to be heard.

As a teacher I feel I benefit from a writing marathon in several ways. One, it encourages me to write. Two, it reinforces the necessity for freedom and security in the classroom. Finally, marathon writing reminds me of the need to allow time and space for spoken word to work its magic. It alleviates the fears that come with written evaluation and creates a writing community through shared experience.

City Fishing

Setting: Walking down Chartres St. on the way to Acme Oyster House for lunch. There were four in our group. Laura Paradise wanted to run into a small shop to check out a dress. I saw two police officers standing in the street and thought they might be filled with strange and wonderful stories. While waiting for Laura I struck up a conversation with a young female officer and her partner.

On the precious banks of the Mississippi River, I met a woman named Precious Banks. Her tall, thin, dark amber body leaned onto the shiny white bumper of the police squad car. A small black triangle emerged beneath her starched blue collar.

“Are you wearing a bullet-proof vest?” I asked with excitement.

“Yes,” she droned. “And it’s hot . . . real hot.”

Visions of CSI began to form in my mind. Instead of CSI Miami, I saw a pilot for a new series of In the Heat of the Night. The star was a 22-year old black woman named Precious Banks. She devoted her life to protecting citizens of the Big Easy.

“Okay, Okay,” I said in the voice of Joe Pesci. “So what is the BEST part of your job?” There was a long pause as she sucked her teeth.

“Nothin,” she replied.

Nothing . . . Nothing! How could this be? I wondered. I was disappointed. It didn’t seem possible that a woman named Precious Banks could have a dead-end job.

“Well,” she said. “I was working down at headquarters as an evidence technician. This isn’t as boring,” she spoke as she wrote a ticket.

Her partner, Louis Labat III had a jump on her. He was also writing. They were standing in the middle of the block. Perched on the street side of their car they scoped out traffic offenders as car after car ran the stop sign at the corner of St. Ann and Chartres Street. They spotted the offender in action, and then got their license plate number as the car passed and slowed at the corner of Dumaine and Chartres.

A stake-out, I thought, as I watched them pulling in funding for the city of New Orleans.

Louis had made it clear. He had no visions of Miami Vice or Highway Patrol in his mind when he chose his profession. When I asked him why he wanted to become a police officer, he curled his well-trimmed mustache into a scowl and said, “It’s a job.” I noticed the hairs of his mustache were honey-colored, short, straight and perfectly groomed. I saw Louis combing his scowl before he went to work.

“No, really,” I asked, “What is the best thing about your job?” He was silent for a long while. Suddenly the scowl began to part, his upper lip rippled and formed the shape of a lower-cased, cursive letter M as his voice enunciated, “V-A-C-A-T-I-O-N.”

He seemed distracted as he flipped the tall, rectangular tablet over in his hand. I could see the colored layers of paper rolled over the top; white, pink, and a darker gray color, probably carbon curled over the top binding of his ticket pad. The darker color reminded me of the gray undercoating of a fillet of fish, the thin, dark membrane beneath the scales. He had a stringer all right, full of the suckers he had pulled in from the corner. Tourists oblivious to the stop sign, looking over their shoulders at the African magician waving his orange cloth hoop, they never saw it coming. These cops were fishing, and they didn't even need bait.

Reflection on our Marathon

Kathleen O'Shaughnessy, National Writing Project of Acadiana

Five women left in two cars for the New Orleans Marathon; one car left from Lafayette and headed down I-10, the other from New Iberia on Highway 90. We arrived within minutes of each other and met in a little circle in the lobby. We were not a group who had traveled together before but from the start we identified ourselves as being there *together*, united in our uncertainty about what to expect from a two-day marathon but game to give it a try and see what happened.

We entered the Paul McCartney suite in a little knot, sat together, and when dismissed to go forth and write, four of us took the easy option, the timid persons' option, and stuck together. I felt, on some level, that we should have mingled, made an attempt to join up with some folks from another site, but, though we didn't discuss it, it seemed that the marathon itself was novelty and uncertainty enough for one day; we weren't up for new people too.

The first day was like a pair of new shoes. We were very pleased to have them, proud to explain to people, "We're writers," but the shoes weren't broken in yet. The identity - writers - the experience, the pacing didn't feel like ours yet. We wandered aimlessly, no one quite willing to pick a direction or a place - lots of "oh, whatever you want is fine." We didn't write much; we shared a little. On the second morning, the fifth member of our traveling party joined us, and our circle was complete. We'd decided the previous night that we needed a better plan, so we'd chosen to head to Royal Street in search of coffee shops and art galleries. Our first stop was Pere Antoine's, and we got the best table in the house - a large round one, situated in an open bow window that took up the whole corner facing Royal and St. Ann Streets. It was a cloudy day, there was a breeze, we were comfortable and ready for our day. We ordered food, we ate and talked, we wrote, and we read. We ordered more, wrote some more, read again, and thought about moving on, but before we could, a thunderstorm had blown up, and we were in the perfect place for watching it. We watched and we wrote and we flirted with our baby-faced waiter. After the storm, we moved on and made two more stops. It was a good day; the shoes felt like ours.

On the final morning, we helped each other choose what we'd each read. We knew each other's pieces well enough to say, "Oh, do the plumber story." We felt we'd passed some sort of test because we each had something - a piece of writing that was less than polished but more than just ink-spilling - to read to the larger group and to take home like Mardi Gras beads, to remind us we'd been to New Orleans and we'd been writers. For me, though, my piece of writing was less significant than the connections I felt at that round table in the window of Pere Antoine's. It was the act of writing, rather than the product of writing, that made the marathon a significant experience for me. The combination of being alone with my journal but together with my friends and their journals at the same time was transformative. Valuing writing together and in public places made each of us value writing more.

We five said our goodbyes in the lobby and split up into our two separate cars again. Margaret and I, in my car, were backing out of the parking lot when we decided lunch before setting out would be a good idea, and why bother looking for another parking place. "We can always go back to Père Antoine's," we said, and did. I could see as we approached that our window table was unoccupied, and that made me smile. Then, inside, we found our three other friends at a small table. We didn't have to talk when we all spotted each other. We just laughed, and the other three got up as one and moved over to the large round table in the window where we closed our circle one more time before heading home with our prizes.

Anger Observed

Dianne Dempsey, National Writing Project of Acadiana

Facing each other
Feet planted wide
Eyes glaring
Hands flying
One steps aside
The other follows

Straight spine
Chest thrust outward
Knife sharp words
Ax cutting motions
Finger pointing blame
Counting off differences

One steps aside
The other follows
Open palm touches heart
Hands hold up a heavy head
Turning, turning
The circular dance

He stops responding
Weary hands beaten down
Stuffed into pockets
She talks talks talks
He focuses on a place
Far beyond her shoulder

One steps forward
The other follows
Turning, Turning
The circular dance
A winne , a loser
Quietly, he walks away.

In Memory of a Friend

Ann B. Dobie, Coordinator, Louisiana Writing Project Network

Like a train that jumps the track,
She had not reached her destination
When her journey ended.
Oh, she had made her mark, all right,
And died as she had lived—
On course, throttle open, whistle blowing.
No meandering.
The tracks belong to others now
Who must stoke their engines
And turn their wheels
To get where she was going.
They are not likely to travel with such style and grace.

Père Antoine's Restaurant

Eva Guillot, National Writing Project of Acadiana

Grab a corner table where the breeze saunters
in through five French doors.

Let Jason take care of all your needs — refills,
extra napkins and a place to write again.

Embrace the welcome atmosphere of Père Antoine's.

Wait for the rain to hold you captured for
another round of coffee, lemonade and words.

Watch the streets — Royal and St. Ann — empty their
Loads — bread delivery men, tourists yelling "Taxi!"
like they're in New York, street performers, and the
female postal carrier — all seeking shelter
under scanty balconies and canopies.

They don't throw writers out even if it's noon
and we've only ordered appetizers.

Stare back at the pearl gray cat across
the street that sits on the floor of a picture frame
shop, patiently awaiting new customers.

Relax and enjoy the beauty of Père Antoine's.

Accept Loss Forever

Charles Larroque, National Writing Project of Acadiana

In the City of the Dead, my great-grandmother is a lost soul. I could not find her grave before the northern-most Caribbean sky, the color purple banana pod, would gush great stringy okra ropes of rain. She must have been in the *faubourg* of the cemetery and I hadn't the address.

She was French and owned La Papétrie Française on Bourbon Street after she came to "l'Amérique" with her newly wed daughter and son-in-law. She could not tolerate the meandered ox-bow *quotidien* on Bayou Teche, but she could the city Creole klan in full Gallic decline as they sought to reconcile *les charmes discrets* of Uptown bourgeoisie. Memère sold French pens, stationary, postcards, and notebooks in the Vieux Carré.

America comes to New Orleans to wake up and smell the chicory. I'm looking for where the stationary shop used to be and I smell urine from beneath my feet and Clorox around the corner. A black man is pressure washing Chris Owens very unconstricted in a roseate boa. He is unabashed and she is about seventy.

Going to the Chapel of the Archbishops, I thought about when my brother and I used to "root" through every drawer in my Grandmother's house. That's what she would say, "Charles, what are you rooting for?" She used language like pieces of the jigsaw puzzles she pored over. You could tell by the way she studied each unique shape that she wasn't so concerned that it fit, but instead, she would quietly marvel at the geometric forms. This one resembling a stoic gargoyle, that one a map of the Belgian Congo.

"I'm not rooting for anything," I'd say, but I lied because I plundered those coffers with the unbridled determination of a grave robber searching for the artifacts gleaned from Memère's stationary shop: ornate silver plumes and heavy metal pencils rendered useless over the years. And especially those black leather bound *calepins*, that I would flip through the yellowed virgin pages, wondering what musty thoughts were never to be recorded there. I was rooting for roots.

The sun was back out and I found myself in the Faubourg on Burgundy and Touro. The fever that had been incubating in back of my mind's eye gave off an odor of eucalyptus. I was relieved that I had not entered the Chapel of the Archbishops and a man wearing a backwards bee-bop cap biked past me beckoning me to follow. I walked toward the river stopping to pull on the locked panic door of the Triumph Baptist Church. I sat in the red cypress shade of a camel-back shotgun house, but it was I who was half-cocked. Violated oyster shells were piled in a mass grave so that jazz funeral feet would not be muddied, so that bottle-cap tap shoes would still sting streets, and old ladies in house slippers would shuffle so softly, like the turning of pages in a forgotten manuscript. A man looking at me but talking on a cell phone passed by walking a diminutive short-haired dog whose scrotum was the size of two ripe tongue nuts. I felt the fever subsiding. I smelled onion paper.

Did Faulkner purchase paper at Memère's? Maybe Fitzgerald ink? Anderson, maybe a postcard of Malmaison? Maybe she was just that eccentric woman who obliged the clerks at Maison Blanche to serve her in French. This city of secret courtyards behind locked gates. A man is grinding wrought iron points, his machine providing dissonance to a radio blaring the weird part of Edgar Winter's "Frankenstein."

"Hottest job on the street, man."

"You know it. Thas' a fac'."

Two women from Venus part, letting me pass. "Mine is red and kinda like a ringworm?" Texas drawl, Arkansas inflection.

“Okay,” the other responds, but she is watching tattoos blur by on a skateboard.

Then two visionaries: “This place is lousy with fags!”

The other: “I know. Hey, what’d you have, the shrimp?”

“No, Wanda had the shrimp. I had the Peacemaker.”

Then I think I find the old shop. It is either the place where they sell French lingerie and hurtful toys or the shop with the apron out front that says, “Voodoo You Love?” I think it is the one with the apron. I write down the address and watch the passersby, halfway expecting one to nonchalantly make the sign of the cross as we used to do when passing graveyards. It should be dry now back out in the City of the Dead.

Writes that Bind

Harriet Maher, National Writing Project of Acadiana

I began reading aloud 16 years ago on long family camping vacations. At first, I read to distract myself from my husband's nightmarish negotiations in Houston-Katy traffic. Afterwards, I read to help Mike stay awake on desolate Arizona stretches, then to mask the noise of our two cubs pounding each other in the truck camper behind our seat. Later, I realized I was reading for edification: my own, my spouse's, my sons'.

When the boys were in primary grades, we camped from Austin, Texas to Big Sky, Montana. I selected some titles for the boys and some for us. I remember *Tales From Shakespeare* by Charles and Mary Lamb (to ready them for the Boulder Shakespeare Festival), Daniel Quinn's *Ishmael*, and Beverly Cleary's *Dear Mr. Henshaw*. The summer we fished the San Juan River and rafted the Colorado we read Will Hobbs, Steven J. Meyers, and Ed Abbey. Entwined with black flies, calf-deep mud, and trail-mix overload during our Boundary-Waters-canoe-summer are memories of Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game*, Jacques Barzun's *Teacher in America*, and Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*.

There was bleed-over from vacations when the boys were tractable. One fall and winter we sprawled each night in our bedroom before a fire of oak downfalls while Mike read us *Great Expectations*.

In short, we had a history of reading together. We also wrote, though not as a family. I'd taught language arts to both sons in junior high, and they'd both received honors for their writing. My husband taught print journalism and wrote. I felt all that was convincing evidence we should write together. We would all participate in the New Orleans writing marathon hosted by the Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project in late July. There we would form the ritual of writing with each other.

What I hadn't factored into the evidence was place and time. Place: New Orleans French Quarter, two blocks south of Bourbon Street. Time: adolescence.

Before we'd reached the entrance ramp to I-10 on the day we set out for the marathon, great expectations had dwindled to diminished expectations. I had in mind I'd complete a light, smug piece about family literacy, and I wanted to record what the boys thought a marathon entailed, as well as what they planned to work on, so I interviewed them.

Quoth the 18-year-old: "We'll need to walk around to see the things we're going to write about, but I'm not attending. I just figure I'm going to walk around the Quarter. If we're going to be stuck in a classroom, I'm walking home from here."

Notes from 16-year-old: "We'll go from restaurant to restaurant and cafe to cafe. We're going to write and report back eventually. I'm already regretting going. You're ruining the moment. I want to read."

Luckily, I'd thought ahead and brought reading material to key reflection of our coming experience: a recent memoir by our marathon guide, Kim Stafford, Director of the Northwest Writing Project, and a volume of his essays themed to sense of place. Our two-and-one-half hour trip to New Orleans would be just the right amount of time to initiate all the queen's men. We'd arrive in the Big Easy primed to write in a big way.

Mike wanted to hear Kim's preface to *Having Everything Right* where he explains the premise for the title and the focus for his essays. We hadn't yet reached agreement on how to pronounce "Kwakiutl"; heck, we hadn't attained mile marker four before Jimi Hendrix's "Watchtower" wafted from Brett's earphones in the front seat, and Kevin loudly cracked the

binding of *Lords of Discipline*. Seated behind my husband, I glanced up at the rearview mirror. He was shaking his head at me, and his eyes said, "Give it up." I thought hard for us all and then gave it up.

So for the first time in family memory, we kept our own company on a road trip. By the time we arrived in New Orleans, I'd finished Kim's memoir of his father, William, and I was ready to share some insights on the Staffords.

When I read memoir, just as when I visit big cities, I play the game of possible worlds, possible lives. I put on the most striking aspects of other people's lives and wear them like a Mardi Gras mask for a few days. My first move is to ask "What if?" What if my father had been an accomplished poet, teacher, nonconformist rather than a French-speaking businessman? What if I were conversant with Nietzsche and Wittgenstein and not just the Blue and Brown Books I'd made a muddle of at 20? Would I now impart to Brett and Kev a greater ratio of wisdom to words? Would I speak to my children in Zen koans? Would I be able to tell my sons "all the truth but tell it slant?"

Over grilled shrimp at Muriel's that evening, I began our ritual of book talking by exploring the ache of "What if." Okay, I reasoned, so Brett and Kevin didn't have the energy earlier to listen to the actual reading. I'd catch them up on salient parts by the time we got to *crème brulee* and *cafe au lait*.

The boys put the brakes on my trolley three sentences into profundity.

"That's about all I want to hear, Mom," Kevin said.

"That's more than I wanted to hear," Brett said. "The Staffords are your topic of conversation. Let's talk about ours, the Saints. Who've they signed up so far?"

And so it went.

I am writing this on the Algiers ferry. Mike, Kevin, and I are seated aft in the air-conditioned passenger cabin. It is 85 degrees in the air-conditioned cabin. We dock and load for 10 minutes. The crossing is five minutes. By the time the captain has turned the vessel, we're docking again. For three hours we have been bumping from bank to bank like a pinball caught between flippers. Kevin is sketching the ferry. Brett is cruising Bourbon Street. I think. I read what I've written to Mike who says I'm writing my way into rueful acceptance.

We disembark for lunch at Napoleon House, and Brett shows up for *muffalettas*. Afterwards, Kevin drops from our writing group. The boys shuffle off together in the opposite direction. During the afternoon, Mike and I huddle on a bench, watching the ferry. The Algiers shoreline reminds me of Queens. Black shipping containers like ill-tended teeth line its jaw. A jazz musician staggers to his feet and skips his saxophone through a 15-minute permutation of "Jambalaya, Crawfish Pie, File Gumbo." He jounces and swings his instrument like an elephant's trunk gone rogue. I noticed him on our river walk to the ferry this morning. He was listening to rap on a boom box, hunched over a *Times-Picayune*. I wonder what rap sounds like on a saxophone?

Tomorrow is another writing day. We will meet at 10 for a pep talk from Kim. I will gather whatever children are willing and ride the streetcar all day in wacky loops around St. Charles and Canal streets. Back-and-forth ferry motion today. Round-and-round trolley action tomorrow. Both obsessive patterns ride dark circuits through my notebook.

On the trolley, I will continue to write my way into rueful acceptance, and my husband will nod sympathetically. I will explore the ache of Jack Kerouac's injunction: "Accept loss forever."

Parable for a Mid-life Birthday

Kathleen O'Shaughnessy, National Writing Project of Acadiana

I woke up on the morning of the first day of my 47th year mad as hell, and the hell of it was I could only be mad at myself. The previous evening, a Sunday, my birthday, I had gone grocery shopping as I usually do on Sunday evenings in preparation for a week of brown bag lunches. I also needed to buy corn for the squirrels, black oil sunflower seeds for the cardinals, millet for the doves, chickadees, and titmice, food for the young and able dogs, and chicken soup for the geriatric dog who has to be carried now to her food bowl and who somehow led us to discover that Campbell's Chicken and Rice soup is what she needs to sustain her in her dwindling final days.

That was my first mistake and my first life lesson for my new year. Don't go grocery shopping as usual on your birthday, or iron or dust or weed the garden, unless those things happen to amuse you. Take care of no one except yourself on your birthday.

My next mistake was deciding not to transfer all my purse stuff from my workdays' backpack to my personal life purse. Instead, I just grabbed wallet, car keys, and list and headed out. Mistake number three was not recognizing, as the insidious trap it is, the handy little wire compartment on the handle of the shopping cart, between two cup holders – a flat, rectangular wire basket, exactly the size and shape of a wallet, of my wallet. And finally, the biggie, being so preoccupied with feeling sorry for myself for grocery shopping on my birthday that I loaded up my trunk with heavy bags of creature food, transferred countless plastic bags and a six pack of Guinness to the floor of the front seat, and pushed my cart up onto the nearest curb with my wallet still nestled in the wire basket.

The moment I pulled into my driveway I had a blinding vision of myself in Albertson's parking lot, unloading my cart. The birdseed, check; the soup, the beer, check; and oh-my-god-no, not my wallet. I backed out of the driveway with one hand while conducting a frantic, fruitless search of the plastic bags with the other.

I subdued panic on the five minute drive back to the store by reminding myself that it wasn't just any grocery store; it was Alberston's – my Alberston's. Nearly every bag boy who isn't supplementing his social security is a former student of mine. Norma, the produce manager, is Tyler's mom, and she holds the record for being the mom I called the most times in a single year when he was in my class. Brenda, the cashier on the fifteen items or less express lane, has more dogs than me and knows why I buy so much chicken soup.

My heart rate quickened when I saw the empty spot where my cart and captive wallet had last been seen. Chad was working that evening. I couldn't help but wonder when he'd suddenly gotten so damn efficient; he'd never been that conscientious when portfolios were due. I searched every cart, including the interlocked chain of hundreds, between my car and the customer service counter. No wallet in any cart, and all I got from the new girl behind the customer service counter was a series of commiserating vowel sounds.

"I've lost my wallet."

"Aaaww."

"It was just five minutes ago."

"Ooohh."

"My credit cards, my driver's license..."

"Ooooo."

I cornered Chad and barely restrained myself from grabbing him by his shirt collar and

snarling, “Find my wallet or I’m comin’ after you for the copy of Harris and Me you never returned.”

He admitted to being on “lot duty” but couldn’t remember returning my particular cart to the building. “I move a lot of carts, Ms. O. But hey,” he said, “I still remember that a lot is two words.”

I was too preoccupied with my mental inventory of the contents of my wallet to appreciate his pathetic attempt to cheer me up. I left Chad and started stalking every shopper with a cart in every aisle, surreptitiously peeking between their cup holders. Then I went back outside and discovered, to my dismay, a whole other train of hundreds of carts. In the fading daylight I scanned each one. About two-thirds of the way down the line, I found a wallet. It wasn’t mine. I spotted another cluster of carts near the Coke machines, and one clearly held something in its seductively convenient wallet holder. It was a woman’s Day-timer with a nice Cross pen clipped to its cover. I brought it and the wallet to customer service and drove home, counting my losses.

About \$34 in cash, my ATM card, an American Express and a Mastercard. I knew there was one other major credit card in there, but I hadn’t used it in ages and couldn’t even remember who had issued it. Even the trivial stuff grew more precious. My Albertson’s Preferred Shopper card and the little cardboard one that earned pennies for my school every time I shopped. A fortune cookie fortune that said, “Be prepared to accept a wondrous opportunity in the days ahead.” Even the wallet itself.

I think most women have their own lists of perpetual quests for the perfect something – the perfectly fitting jeans, the perfect purse. For me, the perfect wallet, and the one the shopping cart ate, was it. It was an unconventional, nonconforming, but for me, highly functional wallet. And I had found it on the clearance rack at Target for only \$2.98. It was more than a wallet; it was a physical manifestation of mastery and control of my personal finances.

I grew up terrified of money, or the lack of it. My single mother lived in a constant state of financial disarray – overextended, overdrawn, over her credit card limits. Once, when I was about four, I heard her tell our neighbor she didn’t know where our next meal was coming from, and I sat out on our front step for an hour, looking one way, then the other for our next meal. So I made myself into a penny pincher. I saved the money I got my hands on, and kept it tidy and in order – bills all facing the same way and sorted in denominations in descending order to make it easy to count and recount.

And now I embrace the electronic age of money. I can’t remember the last time I wrote a paper check or stood in line for a bank teller. I pay my bills with a few clicks of a mouse button, use ATM machines for deposits and cash, make purchases with a debit or credit card and meticulously file, in chronological order, the receipts in a just-right compartment of my just-right, lost wallet.

It was irrational, I know, but without it I felt penniless and, therefore, powerless. I couldn’t face the series of toll free calls to automated answering systems, and besides, canceling my cards would be admitting they were gone for good, so I went to bed.

I woke up the next morning feeling bleak, and while the coffee brewed, I called Albertson’s to extinguish my last ray of hope before I set out on my day of tedious tasks. Then began the string of “to report a lost or stolen card, press 3.” It was easier than I thought it would be. American Express even promised a replacement card delivered to me by UPS in two days. Next I had to dig around for my nearly forgotten checkbook so I could get some cash to get a new driver’s license. While digging, I found a VISA card thought I’d canceled, but when I called its 800 number and pressed zero for a customer service representative, I found the account was still

open and got the card reactivated after its years of disuse.

This lightened my mood sufficiently for me to face the bank teller lines and the long wait at the DMV. More good news at the bank. In minutes, I had a temporary ATM card and stepped out of line to get my driver's license cash from the nearby machine. Even the DMV wasn't bad. I got some reading done and had my new license by noon as I drove to Target to look for a new wallet to hold my reduced but rebuilt financial underpinnings.

It was too much to hope for that I'd find another perfect wallet. I had to settle for an it'll-do-for-now version, but as I drove home I was surprised to realize that all traces of my black mood were gone. I don't subscribe to the "everything happens for a reason" belief that sustains many of my friends, but my writing mind can't keep from looking for meaning behind any trivial event, and I found this to console myself for my pre-menopausal absentmindedness: I have to live with the knowledge, like a time bomb, that I have the capacity at any moment to do something monumentally stupid and make a total mess of my tidy and well-ordered life. But at least I know that I also carry the ability to fix, all by myself, what messes I make. And that's not a bad way to face another new year.

A Marathon Escape

Margaret Simon, National Writing Project of Acadiana

My writing marathon was an escape. An escape from the everyday life of wife, mother, and teacher. It was time for me alone. I wrote about the moment. New Orleans for me has always been a place to escape, since my days in college at LSU when we would escape for a night of drinking and fun with friends. Most of what I wrote about was the place, the people, and the writing. I have not been practicing writing. I always find excuses. Laundry, cleaning, reading, calling the plumber . . . to have no excuse not to write and, rather, the permission to write was enough for me. I did not have grand ideas of working on something for publication. I asked the question, "Why am I doing this?" but in the end didn't care about an answer. It was just plain selfish fun. I'm sure from my experience I have gained new confidence as a writer and teacher of writing. I have gained friendships that will serve me well as both, as well as have a better sense of what it is like to be a writer. Writing can be scary and lonely and can feel like climbing up a wall with no footholds. It can also be a downhill slide on a ski slope, frightening and thrilling. The writing marathon gave me the space and place to be a writer . . . with no excuses.

Père Antoine

Light becomes what it touches,*
becomes
lemonade in a glass,
eyes blue as the sky,
rain drops rippling puddles,
white, golden, green, and red
reflections in glass mirrors.
Our lives interconnect.
We become interested
in the waiter named Jason,
the bicyclist wearing tattoos,
the street musician,
a touring family.
Where are they from?
Where are they going?
Are they like me?
Adventurous thoughts of possibilities
draw us together.

We are the universe
dipping chips in spinach cheese
on the corner of Royal and St. Ann
gathered around a table
sipping water, coffee, coke,
and writing
to understand
the light

*borrowed from Lisel Mueller's "Monet Refuses the Operation"

How We Made Our Book

One of the last things Karen said before leaving New Orleans late Thursday morning was, “I’m glad we’re going to all be together next week. It would be terrible to have to stop now.” She said this to Mary right after our last whole-group reading, and Mary agreed. Most, if not all, of us felt the intensity of the last three days we had spent in New Orleans with each other and with NWP members from all over the country. Not only did we expand our writing community within the Advanced Institute, but felt we had become a part of the bigger world.

We were not sure what shape the final week of our Advanced Institute would take. Richard had mentioned the ambitious goal of putting together a book on writing marathons – in four days. We were confident and excited in our ability to work together without knowing exactly where we were headed, and, in hindsight, not fully aware of how little time four days really is.

The book came about organically through writing together and talking around a table. At the end of the marathon, everyone had been asked to type up something from their marathon journals and bring it to school on Monday. When we met on Monday, we began in our usual Institute way, with a prompt for freewriting (“Civilization”) and the opportunity to share. Originally, there had been talk about all the different subjects that a marathon book might address such as place, the self, teaching, etc. However, during the sharing, Richard read a freewrite that described for us a new vision for the book, suggesting that each of us take on a chapter, which we could conceptualize, at least for the present, as “This Was My Marathon.” Our chapter might include, he suggested, a narrative that would form the context for the writing we had created during the marathon itself. It seemed like a simple, natural solution to our problem of organization and focus and also put the emphasis on the writer, where we wanted it. After some discussion, we decided to do a second freewrite about “the book,” concentrating on the chapters we each might write. As we shared these freewrites, Richard took notes, asked questions, and discussed patterns he saw emerging. We had been concerned that everyone’s experience might be too similar and that this would result in a redundant book. But there seemed to be an exciting variety in our experiences of the marathon, and each writer seemed to touch on a different theme. We finished the morning with a third freewrite where everyone tried to tell his/her story in ten minutes. These stories provided the rough drafts for the pieces we would now go home to write. These pieces would serve as “introductions” to contextualize actual excerpts from our marathon journals and to address larger themes. Before we left to write, we also discussed the other sections our book would need, such as a list of contributors, a section of pieces written by some of the others who joined us in New Orleans but were not part of the Advanced Institute, a Table of Contents, photographs, and the radio program that might grow from our writing. We were excited about the thought of writing an entire chapter of a book, but we were also apprehensive. Each of us went home to grapple with our individual chapters.

On Tuesday, we spent the morning around the table talking about what we had written. Was there a central point arising from our piece, and if so, what was it? How many pages was it? What did we need that day? Some spent the afternoon in response groups; others continued writing. It was a writing community at work.

Wednesday began with the writing prompt “Lipstick.” We found we could have easily spent the entire morning on this fascinating topic but couldn’t tell if the resulting hilarity came just from a fruitful topic or from the hysteria we were beginning to feel with only one more day left to produce our book. Were we crazy to think that we could pull off such a monumental task?

Richard asked us each to put our hard copies on the table in front of us so we could see if the

formats matched (we had discussed format the day before). We stated our titles, even if we didn't have one, emerging main ideas, and the length. We had about 80 pages total, including pieces by others not in the Advanced Institute. The rest of the day we found ourselves responding and revising. Several of us remarked that this was a very short period of time to write and revise, that usually we like more time to bring a fresh eye to our work. Nevertheless, it appeared to be the case that we would pull off writing a book in just four days!

On Thursday morning, passersby would have seen a dozen writers on a deadline. "Who read my piece last night?" "How can I correct my ellipses?" "What are we going to do about the dashes?" Todd was a pleasant interruption when he came in one last time to ask us our final thoughts about the marathon.

"Where do we begin?" we all thought. Todd asked us the same tough question that each of us had been desperately seeking to capture in our writing: "How has the marathon affected you?" Melanie held up a draft of her piece she has been struggling with as if she were representing the group, saying, "There's just too much, and it's in the writing." It was universal that we thought we were glad we had the chance to come back after the marathon and write about our experiences. George boldly stated, "This is the hardest I've ever worked in my life." We laughed, but we agreed. This was hard work. As we watched Todd walk out the door, Mary said, "I feel like this is the beginning of the end."

Then the chaos resumed. As we inhaled lunch, we fretted about the order of the chapters and the table of contents. Frantically, Melanie called Richard. His calm answer was simple: "Alphabetize."

That crisis resolved, we moved on to others. "We need a contributing page?" "I can't print!" "Is the title in bold or italics?" "How do you spell NOLA?"

And then the computer screens went black. Tracy ran to the switchbox in the closet down the hall and proclaimed to the electrical workman, "WE'RE WRITING A BOOK!" We were reminded once again, "Save your work." The afternoon was quickly fading away. Tracy edited intently and Mary worked ferociously to insure that all of the chapters were formatted. Amazingly, in the midst of crunch time, Connie completed a poem about her daughter's death, a two-marathon and nine-year process.

We had hoped that the book would be done by our proposed deadline of 3:30 on Thursday, but it was not. Even with Mary's ferocious editing, there was still work to be done. Mary, Tracy, and Richard agreed to return on Monday morning for the "final final" editing. Over the weekend, two authors suggested further revisions and two writers from outside the Advanced Institute submitted late pieces, so the "final final" editing involved more than expected. But by Monday afternoon, one week after the Advanced Institute conceived the book, the final copy was ready for the publisher.

Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project Advanced Institute 2003

Tracy Amond is a teacher-consultant from the 2000 Summer Institute. She teaches English IV, English 101, and Creative Writing I, II, and III at Walker High School in Walker, Louisiana.

Andrée Cosby teaches composition and world literature at Southeastern Louisiana University in Hammond, Louisiana. She is a teacher-consultant from the 2002 Summer Institute.

George Dorrill teaches composition, literature, linguistics, and grammar at Southeastern Louisiana University in Hammond, Louisiana. He is a teacher-consultant from the 2001 Summer Institute and has served as a returning mentor in 2002 and 2003.

Clarice Gautreaux, a 2002 teacher-consultant, is a kindergarten teacher at Mandeville Elementary School in Mandeville, Louisiana.

Holly James teaches English I and III at Bogalusa High School in Bogalusa, Louisiana. She is a teacher-consultant from the 2000 Summer Institute.

Mary Koepp is a teacher-consultant from 2002 and serves as a returning mentor for the 2003 Summer Institute. She teaches English II and English II honors at Covington High School in Covington, Louisiana.

Richard Louth is the Director of the Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project. He teaches technical writing and Southern literature at Southeastern Louisiana University in Hammond, Louisiana.

Karen Maceira is a teacher-consultant from 1997. She teaches English I, II, and III at Pearl River High School in Pearl River, Louisiana.

Connie Magee teaches gifted English at Pine High School in Pine, Louisiana. She is a teacher-consultant from the 2002 Summer Institute.

Patricia Maus-Benit teaches gifted education at Mandeville Elementary School in Mandeville, Louisiana. She is a teacher-consultant from the 2001 Summer Institute.

Melanie Anne Plesh is the Co-director of the Southeastern Louisiana University Writing Project. She teaches English IV at Mandeville High School in Mandeville, Louisiana.

Margaret Boyle Westmoreland is a teacher-consultant from the 2002 summer institute. She has taught English and math at Zachary High School in Zachary, Louisiana.

- We would like to thank Todd Delaney, Program Director of KSLU 90.9 FM, for considering us “airworthy.”

Call for Submissions:
Writings from Marathons

If your site is planning a writing marathon, or if you have marathon writings from the past that you'd like to contribute to our next edition, please contact Richard Louth at rlouth@selu.edu.