

LITERACY LEADS

Karen Haag
September 11, 2006

The more I talk with writers, the more I see the need to integrate reading and writing for students in my classes. Lucy Calkins research shows us that first graders re-read their writing an average of 23 times in the process of writing a story. Robert Marzano says we write to understand. In fact, if we can't write it, we can't understand it. As my first Literacy Lead this year I offer you a writer friends' Hopefloats for reflection. How powerful a statement will we make to our students if we model that we write. John says, "Imagine the possibility of being the catalyst to change the culture."

Sometimes in the race against time we don't recognize the importance of the journey along the way because we are focused on the brand new sneakers on our feet; the pavement below the rubber; or the tape right before the finish line. I choose to argue that it isn't the one through the tape first that is the victor, but the ones along the way who take fleeting moments of time to hear the wind whistle on their backs; the ones who look up to see the soaring eagle fly in circles in the sky; and the ones who stop to breathe along the way to wander off the path for a time to sit on a rock and listen to the sound the river makes.

If given time we also will find ourselves at the threshold of the finish line, and instead of racing with all our breathe, we will be able to create those moments that take our breathe away. In the end, I believe, we will all be the better for it, because we were given the chance to create memories that will provide for each of us the opportunity to think deeper, wonder more and understand better, because then and only then will we have the experiences and the know how to build bridges as well as mend hearts.

HOPEFLOATS

Chocolate Sundaes, Banana Splits
and Root Beer Floats
John Patrick Anthony Moran
Copyright 2006

Recently, the image of my Aunt Esther came to mind when I was thinking about "launching the writing workshop" and creating a culture where authentic writing engagements are valued, nurtured and sustained. That is the way my mind works. Some things don't need to be questioned, it just is and that is enough.

When I was a kid visiting my cousins, my Aunt Esther would take the 15 of us down by the river to the HOPEFLOAT ICE CREAM SHOP where, on those hot summer nights, the lines backed up all the way to the highway. However, what was in store for us was well worth the wait. My Aunt made her way up the line talking to everyone and everybody as we ran to the edge of the river, throwing stones and watching as they rippled across the water.

In the meantime, the line dwindled down and we raced back to the open window and placed our order. Inevitably, there was a variety of favorites among us all: chocolate sundaes, banana splits and root beer floats.

This image developed further when a picture came to my mind of fifteen sproutin' nieces and nephews crowded around that one picnic table getting all messy and such until we couldn't eat no more. We didn't need to worry though, because my Aunt Esther never ordered anything for herself because when we were full, she took her plastic spoon and dived right in. And we let her. It was our way of showing our appreciation for doling out all that cash. It was our way of celebrating our lives as an extended family, and though, I didn't know it at the time, one of those small moments that would one day find itself on the page.

As happens in life, the cousins, we grew older. And my Aunt Esther, she did as well. And through the years when the chance gathering happened, it never failed that one or more of us would mention that moment and visually we would find our way back to the HOPEFLOAT ICE CREAM SHOP when Aunt Esther showed us her passion for living even if it was by demonstrating the simple act of eating chocolate sundaes, banana splits and slurping root beer floats.

Looking back I realize that life is filled with those ordinary acts of celebration. Those small moments that we remember and even though not known at the time, have the possibility to bring a smile to our face, a tear to our eye or even better, later allowing further possibility to unfold by writing it down on the page.

With that said, we are the HOPE BUILDERS. We are the ones who must believe this “launching venture” with the writer’s notebook as the means is not a passing phase, but one that is worth doing. However, if I may, use the paraphrased words of Dr. Gorman in another context: “We must do more than believe, we must have faith,” We must through demonstration and by example, make the notebook itself live.

The other day, I met with teachers about “launching...,” and as a collective group, we began taking the first step in changing our school culture with the simple act of gathering and celebrating our lives with the sharing of our own notebooks.

If walls could sing.
If walls could talk.

Our school house rocked and resonated with story.

It wasn’t all rhythmic or brilliant. There were moments when chords were broken. However, hope was able to float when later; the PE teacher came up to me after and told me about how she shared stories with the children about her two cats: Tucker and Scottie. Later, when I met with the special area team, I extended her thinking by saying: “Coach, what if in addition to telling the story, you pulled out your writer’s notebook and read a few lines from the page. If all you do,” I continued, “in that one simple act throughout the week, imagine the possibility of being the catalyst to change the culture. With that one simple act, followed by others, imagine the potential it would provide for those who happened to witness this seemingly ordinary act of sharing and, by doing so; you have the means to turn it into something far from ordinary.”

I could have hammered the showing of the evidence within the special area lesson plan, but I didn’t. Instead, I realized I needed to start small just as I want our students to think in small

moments; they too, needed a context in which to build. If I acted too quickly, I could foresee the potential to create something good and make it bad; I could see the potential of making it an exercise of “having to” rather than a transformative process of “wanting to.” Those simple acts of conversation with faculty are the threads needed if we are to weave all the stories within a school and within our district.

I told you that sometimes it wasn’t all brilliant and wonderful because there will be choppy waters ahead. Sometimes it will seem as if that boat don’t float. Sometimes the oar will crack and as you make your way closer to the waterfall, don’t bail out: remember that hope is alive in those unexpected places; in those unexpected faces.

Writing is hard work and I have a lifetime of filled pages to attest to that fact. Ninety percent of what I produce is messy like the chocolate sundaes and banana splits of my past. Ninety percent of the time, I’m not perfect, don’t get it right and the writing within the notebook is choppy. Writing is a mucky enterprise. However, I have to say, the other ten percent is well worth the wait if it returns me to memories like the ones held within the HOPEFLOAT ICE CREAM SHOP.

Still, that ninety percent of ordinary has to be written so I can go to the place where the magic happens. So I can find the threads of possibility within those ten percent spirit-lines; those magical ten percent spirit-lines that seem so small they are invisible: those magical ten percent spirit-lines that don’t allow me to see them until I re-envision possibility and the memories they hold. I find them by “mucking my way” through the messiness of chocolate sundaes and banana splits until I realize that it is the root beer float, layered with promise, that I have been searching for all along.

And as I open up my notebook, sit down beside me so that together, we can create a shared endeavor of sitting on the river’s edge in back of the HOPEFLOAT ICE CREAM SHOP watching the ripple in the water, so once again, we may choose to sail to other shores.

My notebook is a lifetime labor of love and yours can be as well.