

This past weekend, 4900 people were registered for the AWP Conference in Atlanta, GA. AWP is the acronym for the Association of Writers and Writing Programs. Attendance for this conference has doubled over the past several years and the 2007 meeting included approximately 2200 college and graduate level students. I had made the decision to attend this conference in the latter half of 2006. Atlanta is driving distance from Beaufort and I ended up combining my trip with work and personal business as I traveled from Beaufort to Columbia to Greer, eventually landing in Atlanta.



Thousands of attendees to a writers conference are a sure sign of significant numbers of people in this world striving to have their voices heard. Hopefully the supply of writers doesn't exceed the demand by readers but the challenge of actually getting published suggests that it might.

One of the conference sessions I attended centered on the idea that joy may be a taboo notion in the art of writing memoir – the telling of your personal story. It has been my experience that many people write because they want to capture who they are and share it with others. Often times, a person needs the therapeutic benefits of putting pen to paper to spit out in writing what they can't say out loud. Of course there is fiction and poetry available to give voice to our imagination, but remembering our personal past and reliving our experiences through writing is incredibly popular as is evidenced on bookshelves everywhere.

Let's return to the question of joy in our lives. Is it present for us whether we write or not? So often we are mired down in our defeats and guilt ridden by our mistakes that we fail to look for and find joy in our past and present lives. During the conference, Joe Mackall, a professor and author, spoke of a winter evening when he was outside cutting firewood looking inside the kitchen window of his Ohio home. He caught a glimpse of his wife smiling and for an instant his happy heart swelled underneath his winter coat behind arms weighted down with newly cut logs. For just a moment, he turned his head away from the house and when he looked back, he lost sight of his wife through the window. The moment of joy vanished like his white smoke breath rising into the frozen night. He had "turned from a moment of joy" and it was gone.

In this recent road trip, moments of joy were mine when I was aware enough to take notice. I received warm hugs from my niece and nephew. The wagging tails of my brother's yellow labs as they circled me in the kitchen for treats and pats on the head, made me smile. Sinking a hole-in-one at Frankie's putt-putt golf course as my nephew Luke, my mom and I enjoyed the warmth of the last days of February's winter sun was a happy moment in time.

Joy can be found in the discovery of simple things like the realization that a cold I had been fighting for three weeks is certainly gone. Joy is in the anticipation of seeing my husband's green eyes looking directly into mine with the accompanying flashes of intimacy that only years of a life together can bring. Joy is in the doing, the dreams of a life yet to be lived and in the fleeting smile of another as they turn away.

Joy can get lost altogether or for very long periods of time in loss, loneliness and depression. When I drive away from Atlanta today, I leave behind a tragic bus crash that took the lives of four college baseball players as their bus, traveling from Ohio to Florida, plummeted over the side of an overpass into the oncoming traffic on I-75. Tornadoes passed through Alabama and southern Georgia while I visited, and news flashing across hundreds of television screens on the CNN Tour my mom and I took, showed the anguished faces of our nation's neighbors who had lost loved ones in the natural disaster.

But then there was the little girl with golden tresses and pink leotards, dancing in front of a two-foot pane of glass, in tune with four Beluga whales that twirled and flexed as they elegantly swam at the Georgia Aquarium. There was a priest singing the words of George Harrison's song "My Sweet Lord" dancing a little jig in front of his congregation as he challenged parishioners to find love and fulfillment in their lives by reaching out to our hungry and poor. In these early morning hours at the Best Western Hotel, there are the gentle snores of my mom in the double bed next to mine. The rhythmic sounds bring me a kind of quiet joy in my knowing she has enjoyed a trip to a new city, seeing her grandchildren again, and dining with my friend in the warmth and hospitality of her cozy condo.

Joy is fleeting. One minute we are smiling, a drifting twinkle lights up our eyes and then we turn away and a new reality, maybe one not so pretty, fills us. Look for joy and create it for the people in your life. Tragedy and trials are the stuff of captivating writing but we always hope for the hero's redemption, always root for the underdog to triumph. Joy isn't taboo. Readers hunger for it. Maybe some of the next notable writers leaving the Atlanta AWP Conference will be the ones that remember their joys and share them, pulling us out of our darkness and lighting our imagination.