

Island Reflections

Interview April 28, 2007

Interviewer: Evelyn Battell

Interviewee: Kate Nonesuch

Island Reflections is a project run in spring '06 for the first time, resulting in the book *New Beginnings*, posted on this website.

EB: First of all Kate, can you give us a one-paragraph outline of what the project was and how it worked?

KN: I worked with a group of 12-15 women from the local Transition House and we met Friday afternoons for ten weeks to do a writing group. They wrote and we read each other's writing. A small group of those women worked with me to set up a three-day residential writing retreat where we invited women from Transition House programs around the Central Island to come to Duncan for that writing retreat. After the retreat, I met once or twice more with the local group to decide which writings would go in the book and what order they would go in, to come up with names for sections of the book, a title for the book and to get some input from them on the design of the book. Then we had a book launch. Nearly everybody came.

EB: In those ten weeks, what kind of work did you do with those women?

KN: I used the never fail writing method – which I developed and have been using for twenty-five odd years to work on writing. I used a lot of ideas that I got from a book by Pat Schneider (see references). There was always lunch so people came about noon and then about $\frac{3}{4}$ of an hour later we would get started on the writing group. Usually we started with a five-minute free write. People could share something from that free write if they had caught something they wanted to share, otherwise they just scrapped them. Then I usually would introduce a topic. Always, I said, "If you have something in your head that you came with today that you want to write about, that's the most important topic for you to write about so do that. I'm suggesting these writing starters for people who came with nothing in their head to write about. If you came with something, that's what you should do."

EB: What kind of things did you use as starters and what kind of things did they come with in their heads?

KN: The things I used as starters were some I had used successfully before. I think we started on the very first day, with three things you're grateful for, because it doesn't

*Kate on Island Reflections
April, 2007*

take much writing and I'm happy to give people a chance to show me what they can do in a short piece. Another time I used a box of items. It's full of things like a baseball glove and a piece of snazzy jewelry and a whiskey bottle and a baby diaper and, a little cedar basket and a carving and some tools – you know, just sort of common things. I asked people to pick one and write about it.

Once I borrowed from a colleague a set of keys that she had - skeleton keys and the keys to a Mustang and to a suitcase and a door and a diary, etc. all kinds of keys. I asked them to pick a key and asked them to write about what that key opened.

One day I asked them to think of somebody they'd like to invite to dinner and write them a letter of invitation – a fictional person, dead or alive, somebody famous or somebody you know personally.

EB: And when they came with stuff in their head to write about?

KN: Sometimes they came thinking that they wanted to tell the story of their life. Once somebody came wanting to write a story about the death of somebody in her family that had been quite recent. Once somebody came after having heard a news story that made her want to express her opinion, so she wrote a little piece about how she thought the world should be run better

EB: Let's just go back a bit. How did women find out about this group and what are they expecting when they come?

KN: They find out about the group from the Cowichan Valley Women Against Violence Society. I made up a flyer and the first year I went around and I talked to some of the groups that meet there. Sometimes people come to the writing group just because they have a connection with a counselor who suggested it....

EB: Are they living in the Transition House?

KN: No. None of them are living in the Transition House, mostly because women who are in the House are in a crisis period and aren't in any position to commit to a ten-week writing program, for example.

These are women who are past that immediate crisis stage, although they always have crises going on their lives, but we work around that.

EB: What are the women expecting and what are they told?

KN: I tell them that this is a group for improving their writing. If they want to write, they

should come. I was hoping and expecting that I would get people that are really basic, literacy level writing, so I made the brochure really friendly. I said if you have something in your head but you can't figure out how to put it down, come and we'll work it out with you. If you need somebody to write for you while you talk come and we'll do that for you. I tried to make it as clear – both in the brochure and when I spoke to the groups – that I was really willing to work with people who found writing really difficult, who couldn't write at all.

What I got was something entirely different, which was a surprise. I got – in both years that we've done it – women who were writers, sometimes women who had already some university classes, women who wrote. Lots had kept journals. So that was really a surprise for me that if you asked people to come to a writing group to write, then you get people who are writers.

The people I was used to working with were in classes, in ABE classes or literacy classes where people had come back to school because they wanted to get a better job or they wanted to get their Grade 12 or whatever, and in order to accomplish that goal they had to come to my writing class. So it was quite a different group that I got by saying we're having a writing group without it being attached to any other kind of educational goal.

EB: You got some who were literacy level writers?

KN: I would say that I got a few who were literacy level writers. Both years that we did it I got a few.

EB: One I encountered, when I was helping, was a literacy level writer in that her grammar was all messed up and she would use the wrong tenses and spell things wrong and so on.

KN: Yes. And they would generally write short pieces because they weren't used to developing their ideas at any length in writing and they didn't really have much of a sense of revising or editing. They would write and then they would be done.

EB: What kind of writing did you get?

KN: I got great writing. I was amazed what good writing I got.

EB: Good in what sense?

KN: Good in a sense that it made me cry sometimes, it made me laugh and it made everybody – when the author read it out loud – in the group, cry or laugh or think, which is what good writing does. It makes you cry or laugh or think. It made me

reflect on myself or my own situation. So in that sense it was good. It was moving writing. It was honest writing. So when it was unsophisticated maybe, the honesty of the voice really made it strong. People who had more technical skills in the sense of being able to write more complicated sentences or who knew more about transitions or parallel structure or that kind of thing, they used those things in a very natural way. Most of them didn't have words for those technical terms. They started from a place of honesty in their writing that really came through.

EB: And what were some of the arrangements? Were they paid to come? What were they being paid for?

KN: No. Nobody was paid to come. It was all free and the lunch was free. At the Residential Writing School if they stayed at the hotel, that was free. All of the food was free. There were no fees. But they weren't paid at all. They got five copies of the book when it was published.

There was money for daycare for the Residential Writing School but not for the ten-week local writing group program. It was a partnership between the Cowichan Valley Women Against Violence and Malaspina College, funded by the provincial Ministry of Advanced Education.

EB: Was the work all done on computers?

KN: Yes.

EB: During the ten weeks as well?

KN: During the ten weeks as well. Some people, of course, came already able to write on computers. Most people, at the beginning, would start in long-hand. I encouraged people by saying that I always started on computer, that I couldn't start in long-hand. So some people started to just write directly on the computer. Other people always started on long-hand and then typed it up, usually editing as they typed. A couple of volunteer tutors were there and helped people with computer technology or sometimes typed. Sometimes I would say to somebody, "Will you read your story while I type it in for you?" if I knew they weren't a good typist or if they were frustrated by the technicalities of computer work. The volunteers would make the same kind of offers. Once or twice somebody would just finish their long-hand piece at the end of the class and there wouldn't be time for them to type it, so a secretary at the college would type it up for me. Every piece got typed but it wasn't always a student who did the typing.

EB: Tell me more about the Never-Fail Writing Method.

KN: The never-fail writing method is this: people write whatever they write from whatever writing prompt or whatever moves them. Then they read it to the group. Everybody in the group gets a copy and the author reads it out loud.

EB: Is there any correcting that goes on before that?

KN: Whatever the writer does, she does.

EB: Okay.

KN: But no, it doesn't get corrected by the teacher. So the writer reads it out loud and, at the beginning, I say what I think is good about it. So I talk about beginnings and endings and organization and details and I talk about those things very specifically. So I might say, "This is a really good beginning because it asks a question and when it asks a question it makes me think of what my answer would be and that engages me in the whole process and makes me want to read further. So this piece, starting with this question, really grabs my attention."

I talk in that kind of specific detail about what I think is good. I say two or three things that I think are good about the piece, and then I ask each person to highlight or underline their favourite sentence and we go around the circle and everybody reads out their favourite sentence. The author gets to hear what people liked about their work. Then we're done with that piece and we go onto the next piece.

I don't correct, but I do use what they write as a model for saying what's good. Often, of course, nobody has ever told them what's good before. They've only told them what mistakes they make. Everybody is really on a level footing that way because people who write shorter pieces or less polished pieces have two or three things that are good pointed out, the same as someone who writes a longer piece and a more polished piece. Everybody knows that they can learn from every person in the group. Everybody has something to contribute to the learning of others in the group.

EB: Other than telling people what's good—beginnings, endings, etc.—do you do any other teaching in the course of the ten weeks and three days?

KN: I teach that there are four stages – think – write – edit – proofread—that they should be aware of what stage they are in and not, for example, get hung up on proofreading while they are in the first two steps. Aside from that I do the teaching based on what comes up. So, for example, if somebody uses conversation in their story—of course, somebody always does—then I take a couple of minutes to say what putting in a piece of conversation does in your writing. It slows down the writing, gives the reader a chance to take in things at a slower pace, provides a

different voice—that kind of thing. I just do that as it comes up, mostly.

EB: Were there any other supports around the program other than you and a couple of tutors.?

KN: There was the support of the “lunch”, which the first year got delivered to our door every Friday. That was a lovely piece of support. My administrator at the college and the secretary at the college did some support particularly around the Residential Writing School. My administrator found us a hotel, got us a deal, that kind of thing. The woman who was head of the Transition House got us a good deal for dinners and a trip to the theatre during the Residential Writing School. Both of them came and met the women at the writing school, came to the book launch, and so on.

EB: What about counseling support? Is that needed at all?

KN: Everybody who was in the course was connected with a counselor. That was part of my deal with Cowichan Valley Women Against Violence. Then, during the Residential Writing Retreat, we had a counselor on-call all the time. In fact, we never called her, but that support was there.

EB: So what do you do when people cry when they're reading their work?

KN: It's pretty normal. When I give them the writing prompt, I say: “When you hear a suggestion for writing, some idea is going to pop into your head and you know right away if it will take you down a road that leads to tears and memories of horrible things or if it's going to take you down a road that leads to a happier place. You decide. When that idea pops into your head, do you want to follow it down to that ugly place or not? If you do, good. If you don't, good.” I trust that people will take care of themselves. If they write about something that makes them cry, then I think that they've chosen to go to that place. If they take us all there, then we all go there.

EB: Have you ever been in a situation where you needed to do some counseling on the spot?

KN: Well, once at the Residential Writing School I went off and spent half an hour talking to one of the people who was there.

EB: In the middle of a writing session?

KN: In the middle of a writing session, yeah.

EB: That holds no fear for you? You're not worried about becoming a counselor?

KN: I'm happy doing what I do. I'm not a counselor. I don't think of what I do as counseling. In fact, during this writing group it happens less than during my regular work as an ABE teacher that somebody wants to talk to me about what problems they're having or disclose their past to me. I wanted to make sure that people had regular qualified counselors and I wanted to make sure that I had a counselor on-call if I needed one. Given that I had back-up, I wasn't worried about talking to somebody for half an hour about what she wanted to talk about. And I did, during that session, offer her the back-up counselors that we have.

EB: You said that it's less often that women disclose about their past and so on?

KN: Maybe I don't mean they disclose less often, but the disclosures they make are appropriate to the content of their writing.

EB: Give us an example of when somebody disclosed in their writing?

KN: A woman wrote about her history of having still-births or miscarriages. It was in response to an object from the box, a diaper. She picked up the diaper and then she started writing about her experience. So that was an appropriate thing. It was different from being in an ordinary ABE classroom and you're talking about math or you're talking about a novel you're reading and you're really concentrating on the novel and somebody gets triggered by it and then they want to tell you their story. You don't really have any place for their story in that classroom. You have to make space for it somehow.

Whereas this, the whole thing was a place for their stories. So whatever they wrote didn't seem to be disclosures that I had to deal with. They were simply writing. What they wrote was what came out of their own experience or their own thinking. It all it was all easier to deal with because it all had a place.

EB: So they didn't all write about the trauma that had taken them to the Transition House?

KN: Not usually. I didn't ask them to write about that. I never ask them to write about that. I ask them to write to invite somebody to dinner. I ask them to write what door the key would happen. Or I give them the sentence, I used to be "da-da" and now I am "da-da", you know? I used to be happy, now I am sad. I used to be shy, now I am outgoing. I used to be a drunk, now I am a sober person. So the assignment was "I used to be ---, but now I am ---" and people put in whatever they want. They tell the stories they came to tell.

EB: What age were the women?

KN: We did have a very young one who was probably around 19. But most of them were, I would say, around 25-40 and then we had several who were over 50.

EB: Was the writing a healing process?

KN: They often said that the writing was healing or therapeutic. Of course, sometimes it is. But I didn't offer them therapy and I didn't offer them healing. That wasn't what the program was about. The program was about learning to be a better writer. So I really concentrated on talking about the writing. When they were writing, I might ask a question "So what did you do next?" or "How did this...?" that would prompt the writer to tell more of her story, but I didn't listen to the answer—I asked her to keep writing. Sometimes when we read the writing out loud, somebody would say, "Yeah, something like that happened to me," and then start telling her story.

I would say, "We're not here to tell stories out loud. We're not here to talk. We're here to write and we're here to learn about how to be better writers. So what was it in her writing that made you think of your own story?"

"Well, it was the way she talked about her daughter there. That reminded me of my daughter."

"So how did she talk about her daughter?"

"Well, she's got that thing there where her daughter was laughing and running around in the lawn without any clothes on."

Then I would say, "So that was the detail. Those specific details—the little girl running around bare feet, no clothes, laughing, sun shining, grass green—that kind of attention to detail in her writing was what made you think of your own situation. That's what makes the writing good."

They do go to other programs at CWAV to get therapy, but the writing group was not part of that therapy. That's partly also an answer to your other question about whether I worry about not being a counselor. That's how I manage to stay out of situations where I'm suddenly put in a counselor role.

EB: Did these women know each other before they came together?

KN: Some of them did. Two or three of them came from one program inside of Cowichan Women Against Violence and they knew each other well. Two or three of them came from another program and they knew each other, although not so

well because they hadn't been together for as long. Some others just came and didn't know any of the others. It was a mix.

EB: What happened when women joined you from the rest of the Island for the three-day writing retreat? By that time, the 12 women had heard each others' writing and cried and laughed together and so on.

KN: The small group of women who were working with me to plan the writing group talked about that as an issue. How were we going to make the new women comfortable? Everybody was aware of that and they took care of each other. Especially the women on the committee. We put together a little kit with nice pens, a nice little folder and one of the women made a cover for the kit that was computer art. We put a fair amount of care and attention into figuring out how to make those people welcome. Then people just did it.

EB: They just took care of each other?

KN: Yes. But I think that the whole thing about the never fail writing method is that nobody gets to criticize anybody's writing. That really invokes a spirit of generosity.

EB: So what are the benefits or long-term results of running this kind of a program?

KN: I know that the writing that we did has gone out. I've heard back from many people in the world who have read it, who have been moved by it. People that I've given it to have read it out loud to their mothers on the phone and sent it to their mothers for presents, and it's gone to Alberta and Ontario and a prison in the States. We gave several copies to every transition house in BC and to many ABE/Literacy programs. People have been moved by the writing. So I would consider that a long-term ripple effect. Women in the group often say one of their motives in writing is the hope that putting their experiences on paper can help other women in similar situations.

One of the women has gone into journalism and creative writing courses. She says being in this group really helped her to have the confidence to do that. I don't know what it's done for all the writers.

EB: Do they have an ongoing relation with you?

KN: I get e-mails from some of them. I found out this year that some of the women from last year are still in touch by e-mail and phone with the women who came from other parts of the Island to the writing retreat. I was very glad to hear that.

EB: So if you were running the same group again, what would you do differently?

*Kate on Island Reflections
April, 2007*

KN: This is probably my own wanting to make it different for my own interest rather than wanting to make it different for theirs. But I might want to work more on the editing process.

EB: Talk about that. Talk about how you teach editing or do you?

KN: Well, I don't teach editing very much although I do say there are the four steps: think, write, edit and proofread. I teach all those things about what makes good writing, and encourage people to think about them when they are editing their work.

EB: I've heard you, with students, say "That's proofreading. You don't do proofreading yet." Say some more about that.

KN: Well, I don't want people to get stuck. You know, I can't write this because.... I don't want them to get stuck in doing their writing, telling the stories or whatever they have to say. I don't want them to get stuck because they don't know where to put the periods. I do encourage them to do three or four steps and to be aware of which stage they're in and not to do the work of a later stage when they're actually working at an earlier stage.

EB: You said you'd teach more about editing.

KN: The women who come to the group are interested in editing because they feel somewhat confident about their ability to write. They certainly produce easily. A couple of them towards the end of this term said they would be interested in learning more about how to make their writing better and they were looking for help with their editing as opposed to their writing. That would be an interesting thing for me to think about how to do in a positive way.

EB: Did you teach commas?

KN: I don't teach commas, no. I don't teach commas, semi-colons or colons or anything.

EB: You teach periods?

KN: I teach periods, but I didn't have to teach periods to this group really. And I did teach semi-colons because some people used them wrong and some people used them right so I found some examples of when it was done correctly and pointed them out. So, it's true. I do. I'm less interested in punctuation and more interested in things like rhythm and parallel structure of any kind or repetition and things that help the reader follow, like transitions and examples...Dialogue, those kinds of

things.

EB: What do you like about teaching writing to this group?

KN: Well, what I like about teaching writing using the never fail writing method is that it is so successful and I'm so successful. I love it!

EB: And you get all this good feedback from the students.

KN: I get all this good feedback from the students. They get much better at their writing. They get much more confident about their writing and it is, in fact, very easy. Mostly it is successful and so I love to do it. I get to be myself. With this group, in particular, I like to do it because I like to work with a group of all women because then I don't have to worry about women taking care of men in the class instead of working on their own writing, for example. I like working with a group of women and I like working with women who have pasts. I often say that the women who were 'bad girls' are my favorite students and I usually get lots of former bad girls in this group.

EB: You get lots of former bad girls in this group?

KN: Yup. Another thing I like about it is that anybody who writes—even if it is somebody who is at a very beginning level writing and only writes one sentence—everybody who writes has something there that is good technique. It is amazing to people to learn that they did something all unawares, that is a technique that Shakespeare used, for example. Or, it is amazing to them to learn that things have names, like the three dots is called an ellipsis. They don't know that there is a whole world of technical jargon out there about writing or about rhetoric. It's fascinating to them. So I enjoy teaching them, say, the word for when you say "next" at the beginning or "the next morning" or "the day after" that that's called a transition. They love that that there's a word for that. I like their enthusiasm.

I love working with the committee on setting up the retreat because they have all kinds of strengths that I don't have. The first year we did it, two or three of them were friends with the woman who managed the hotel. So they just took over liaising with the hotel. I didn't have to do anything. Since it's definitely not a job I like to do, I was really happy to say ok – go to it! They're most of them women who have managed their lives and have kids or family. They are competent at many things. So when it's clear to them that I really am offering them as much responsibility for the writing and the writing retreat that they want to take then, in fact, they take on whatever they want to take on and do it really, really well. This term we budgeted \$400 for breakfast and lunch for the three-day writing retreat. So, at our last meeting, two or three days before the retreat, I gave somebody \$400

*Kate on Island Reflections
April, 2007*

and said, "Show up with the food." I was thinking, "Oh my God. The people at the College in charge of receipts and so on would be shocked at me." But, of course the women showed up with the food for the three days, and with a little envelope full of receipts that were much better organized than I ever organize them. People don't—at least in my experience—say that they'll do jobs that they can't do, and they're happy to take ownership by doing things they know they can do and have time or energy to do.

EB: What's difficult in doing it?

KN: The difficult thing is the residential writing retreat because there are so many parts to it. I think that I need more help. I just say oh yeah, I can do that, and I go ahead and do it. Of course I can do it, but it's hard to do it.

EB: What do you mean when you say 'so many parts'? What part?

KN: There's the worry part because you don't know who is coming. So what happens if one of the people from out of town just has a freak-out or a breakdown or whatever? Just a kind of a worry. What happens? What happens if the arrangements don't work out the way you're hoping that they'll work out? That kind of thing. Then long, intense days of writing and reading people's writing and lots of emotional stuff. People wanting, needing, whatever. Not that they want or need anything outrageous. It's just that there's fifteen or seventeen of them wanting and needing things from 8:00 in the morning until 10:00 at night.

EB: From each other as well as from you?

KN: Well I feel what they want from me. I don't know exactly what they want and need from each other. They tell me that they like to talk to each other and they like time to socialize so that's fine. Of course, they also do take care of me and they pay attention to me in a way that is very kind and loving and that supports me. At the same time, I do kind of feel responsible for the whole show for the three days and it's a big responsibility. I'm the one who thought up the idea and who runs with it.

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Video *Tell Me Something I Can't Forget*. Amherst Writers and Artists (413) 253 2694.
www.amherstwriters.com