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A chance to nurture creativity, alone or with fellow authors

The paradox of the writers' retreat: Isolation and fellowship

By *JoANN BALINGIT*
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Wilmington poet/writer Amanda Kimball in her room at the Cape Henlopen Retreat.
photo by JoAnn Balingit

"As I focused on the world I was trying to create, the demands and obligations of real life fell away. For two and a half days, fiction became real life."

That kind of intense focus, adds local writer Ramona Long, can't really happen in your office or in your home: "It can only happen when you are alone with your writing."

But as writers also realize, feedback is vital: A writers' retreat is an energizing experience, agrees

beginning novelist Eric Britt.

"The group's comments made me able to see my own potential to produce something of real value," he said.

Writers are an idiosyncratic bunch, to be sure. But when it comes to basic needs, most writers carry that same mixed bag -- they crave both solitude and community.

They want time away from their busy workplaces and households, time away from their loving family and friends. They may require respite from the very day-to-day activities that fuel their best work.

Writers desire a getaway. They dream of the silent, sparsely-appointed room in which to submit wholly to the wonderful and excruciating demands of that latest novel, story, memoir or poem.

Still, no writer does it alone. Writers need camaraderie, too -- especially from other writers, those who understand that strange enterprise of toiling over words.

So, to be, or not to be, alone?

Writers' retreats are designed to offer both isolation and fellowship. They nurture a writer's identity. The risky business of writing seems less stressful in a supportive environment.

Add to this support no worry over what's for breakfast, lunch and dinner. No TV, BlackBerry, cell phone or mailman for that matter. (You'll need to exert your own stamina to leave portable technology behind.) At a workshop-based retreat, you'll benefit from the feedback of a talented guide in your chosen genre and useful advice from fellow writers.

But most of the time -- you're so alone. Beautifully alone.

Retreat surroundings are often bucolic. Walk. Stare out the window.

The familiar surroundings of home often lead writers into a rut. A retreat's unfamiliar physical space can transform one's state of mind-and trigger the imagination.

The goal, the great treasure, is solitude -- in the acute presence of your hard-won words. Unless you have had the experience, there is not much you can compare it to.

The well-turned phrase, revised plot, ornery character or surprising line become your landscape, your world. Your imagination becomes a tapestry you can walk around in. You become changed.

"Solitude is essential and was especially necessary when I was an emerging writer," says poet and novelist Julianna Baggott, formerly of Newark. "How else does one build the architecture of an entire novel in the head for the first time, except if given solitude and time?"

Retreats aren't for everyone. It takes a while to adjust, to give yourself permission to sit and think. Distractions, even if desired, are hard to come by. Solitude can be remarkable and, initially, disturbing.

But consider this quotation from Franz Kafka's journals, found by one retreat-goer in his room's "communal" notebook.

"You need not leave your room. Remain sitting at the table and listen. You need not even listen,

simply wait, just learn to become quiet, and still and solitary. The world will freely open itself to you to be unmasked. It has no choice, it will roll in ecstasy at your feet."

Ultimately, the most valuable lesson a writer may learn from the retreat experience is that there exists a community of like-minded people. Somewhere out there, they work along while you work "alone."

Says fiction writer Russell Reece of the retreat at Cape Henlopen in 2005, "The key benefit for me was getting to know so many people in the Delaware writing community."

Retreats are important for the affirmation they give emerging writers, who are able perhaps for the first time to see their work appreciated and valued. Such respect can be difficult to come by in our material culture.

But for the real significance of writing retreats, it's best to listen to those who've been there.

Poet and writer Maggie Rowe, of Newark, on the Writers' Retreat at Cape Henlopen: "After 31 years of daily meal preparation, I was able to drop into the magical realm of my poems and stories, which I've always felt is my 'real' work on this earth."

Denise Clemons, a fiction writer, on Cape Henlopen: "I was energized and inspired as never before. When we reached the end of the remarkable weekend, no one wanted to leave."

Eric Britt, fiction writer, on Cape Henlopen: "I was able to see my own potential to produce something of real value. It was an energizing experience."

Short-story writer and poet Liz Dolan, of Rehoboth Beach, on Atlantic Center for the Arts: "[Workshop leader] Sharon Olds was organizing a book of poems: Poems lined her couch, the tables and the carpets of her cottage. It was energizing and invigorating."

Retreats may be as brief as the weekend Writer's Retreat at Cape Henlopen or as lengthy as several months at such artists' colonies as the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts or Yaddo. Acceptance is usually based on a writing sample; and, although most charge fees, the cost is minimal and heavily subsidized.

"I owe my career, in part, to artists' colonies," says Julianna Baggott about the Ragdale Colony and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. "There is a time in every writer's life -- often recurring -- when he or she needs to go deep into a project and not come up for a while."

SOME NEAR-BY RETREATS FOR WRITERS:

- Writers' Retreat at Cape Henlopen: Sponsored by the Delaware Division of the Arts, the next retreat begins Thursday evening, Oct. 24 and concludes Sunday afternoon, Oct. 26, and can accommodate 16 writers. Led by Poet Laureate JoAnn Balingit and novelist Cruce Stark, this biennial retreat offers uninterrupted work time and workshops. Contact the Delaware Division of the Arts for more information. www.delarts.org
- The Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, Mount San Angelo, Box VCCA, Sweet Briar, VA 24595 (804) 946-7236. Up to 22 artists at a time; fees charged, some scholarships; residents get full use of Sweet Briar College library, recreational facilities; on a former dairy farm; year-round (visual, literary, performing arts) www.vcca.com

- The Edward F. Albee Foundation Inc., 14 Harrison St., New York, NY 10013 (212) 226-2020. Runs the William Flanagan Memorial Creative Persons Center in Montauk, NY (aka "The Barn"); residencies for up to 6 people at a time; one month residencies from June 1 to Oct. 1; no fees; residents responsible for own meals, transportation. (visual, literary, performing arts) www.albeefoundation.org
 - The Millay Colony for the Arts, Steepletop, Box 3, 444 East Hill Road, Austerlitz, NY 12017 (518) 392-3103. 600 acre estate; 1 month residencies; no fees; 6 artists at a time (visual, literary, and performing arts). www.millaycolony.org
 - MacDowell Colony Inc., 100 High St., Peterborough, NH 03458 (603) 924-3886. On 450 acres of woodlands and fields near Mount. Monadnock; 33 studios; residencies of no more than 8 weeks; 31 artists in residence in the summer and 22 in winter; fees are voluntary; darkrooms, 16mm editing suite, printmaking equipment available. (visual, literary, performing arts, architecture and design) www.macdowellcolony.org
 - Yaddo, Box 395, Union Ave., Saratoga Springs, NY 12866 (518) 584-0746. No fees; artists housed in 55-room historic mansion on a 400 acre estate; residencies of 2 weeks to 2 months. Can accommodate up to 35 artists at a time. (visual, performing, literary arts). www.yaddo.org
 - The Vermont Studio Center, Box 613, Johnson, VT 05656, (802) 635-2727. Application fee; full fellowships available. Founded by artists in 1984, the largest artists' and writers' Residency Program in the US, hosting 50 artists and writers a month from across the country and around the world. 4-12 week studio residencies on an historic 30-building campus along the Gihon River in heart of the Green Mountains. www.vermontstudiocenter.org
- For a more complete listing, check out <http://washingtonart.com/beltway/resid1.html>
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JoAnn Balingit is Delaware's poet laureate. In May she graduated from the University of Delaware with a doctorate in educational leadership. Upcoming presentations include workshops at the Lewes Library in August, the Diamond State Reading Association's annual fall conference, and the Delaware Book Festival in November. See artsdel.org for more information on the poet laureate program, or contact her at jbaling@udel.edu.