

“Writing and the Spirit of Community”
October 17 - 19, 2003 -- Esalen, Big Sur, California
The Sun Magazine Conference:
Notes by Gail Grenier Sweet ©2003

All English majors know the definition of literature: “writing that delights and surprises.” That book learnin’ came to life at *The Sun* conference when I heard other people read their work, most of it written in freewriting sessions lasting three to seven minutes.

I felt somehow *changed* after I heard many of the pieces read. I perceived a sort of *change-of-reality* happening while I listened. How can one perceive a change of reality? Can we watch skin become tan under the sun? Yet the process was real to me. It’s as difficult to describe as meditation.

I think Kerouac tried to get at it when he wrote in *Essentials of Spontaneous Prose*: “Blow as deep as you want — write as deeply, fish as far down as you want, satisfy yourself first, then reader cannot fail to receive telepathic shock and meaning-excitement by same laws operating in his own human mind.”

Many conference participants described themselves as wannabe writers or “not a writer.” I was amazed at the raw power of the writing in my first session, led by Genie Zeiger (“Where are you from?” on regional/personal writing). She gave us some freewriting assignments: timed writings on “I’m from...”, “My father said...”, “My mother said...”, and “I said.” She had us list four or five fast thoughts under the headings of smell, sight, touch, taste, and hearing.

People read, usually their seven-minute essays on where they were from. The writing was **honest, personal, passionate and brimming with love of language** — qualities editor Sy Safranski looks for in writing for *The Sun*. (This he told me in person.) Here were a bunch of folks who described themselves as rookie writers, yet their work was as fresh and gripping as you’d find in any issue of *The Sun*! Wow. No wonder it’s hard to break into that mag.

I wrote my brains out all weekend, in planned sessions and during free time. I like most of the stuff I wrote. It’s raw meat of what may become some essays or poems.

What I learned and re-learned at the conference:

- (1) Freewriting is powerful. It loosens the hand and the subconscious.
- (2) I need a writing pal to critique my writing.
- (3) Show, don’t tell.
- (4) Deep, developed thoughts are more powerful than lists that only skim over the top.

Esalen was a paradise place. I ate every delicious meal next to the pounding sea. I strolled to workshops through a Garden of Eden. I sat in the sun and wrote, wrote, wrote.

The other *Sun* writers were also helpful, especially Gillian Kendall, who actually critiqued manuscripts ahead of time. Her critique for my essay was invaluable. In her workshop, she had us go through a Progoff Intensive Journal-type experience to find deep connections and themes in our experiences. Genie Zieger, my favorite *Sun* writer, also gave a workshop called “Our Essays, Ourselves.” She asked us to list what we obsess about and what we must never write about. Then she had us write on our choice of those topics.

During the closing session, Sy challenged us to write about how we can keep our hearts open to the source of compassion so we can live and write the way we want and not get burned out. What do we do to nurture ourselves?

In writing my answer to Sy’s challenge, I realized something awesome, something I’ve never put into words: I love my life. It’s not all easy or “perfect,” but I love it.

And I remembered, with a smile, Number Four in Kerouac’s “Belief and Technique for Modern Prose.” It’s this: “Be in love with yr life.”

The End