

ENJOY THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION WRITING RETREAT SILENCE

by Becky De Oliveira

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Most people who fail to complete their PhDs get stuck writing the dissertation, a massive piece of work requiring a great deal of time and creative energy—two things that are often in short supply in most of our lives. This is particularly true for students in the PhD Leadership Program at Andrews University. The program is job-embedded and actually requires participants to remain in full-time employment throughout their studies—using their jobs as platforms for research and development of leadership skills. This is a tremendous advantage and makes the program attractive to working professionals, but the downside is that full-time work leaves even less time and energy for research and writing.

In an attempt to help students gain some creative momentum, the department sponsored the first of three writing retreats during 2009 at The Hermitage, a Mennonite-run retreat center near Three Rivers, just about an hour east of Berrien Springs, Mich. While there are three rustic cabins in the forest on the grounds—one of them named “Thoreau” and overlooking a pond—we stayed together in St Joseph’s Barn. The barn has nine bedrooms situated on three levels, as well as a kitchen, dining room, bathrooms on each level, a prayer room, a communal sitting room, and a variety of quiet nooks and study areas for use during the day. The Hermitage property sits on 60 acres and is adjacent to that of two other spiritual retreat centers—GilChrist, owned by the Fetzer Institute, and St. Gregory’s Abby, a Benedictine monastery. Trails through the forest connect the properties and guests can wander freely between them, enjoying the quiet sounds of the forest and the unexpected sightings of deer, wild turkeys, woodpeckers and hawks. The Mennonites put a great value on silence and tranquility and this makes The Hermitage stand in very striking contrast to the busy, noisy, chaotic quality of most of our lives.

Upon arrival, the nine participants and I immediately settled into a routine focused heavily on providing large blocks of time for writing while also making sure to get proper food, exercise and social interaction. We were welcomed each morning at Morning Prayer, conducted by the Mennonites, and most of us found their style of worship—so different from ours—to be a refreshing experience that helped prepare our minds for the day ahead. While the Mennonites practice silence





Opposite top: St. Joseph's Barn at The Hermitage in Three Rivers, Mich.

Opposite bottom: Students who attended the retreat experienced renewal and gained perspective on their writing projects

Above: The group takes a break to stretch their legs in the forest

Right: The rustic nature of the retreat provided an atmosphere conducive to peaceful contemplation

during meals, we were allowed to break that tradition, laughing and sharing stories each mealtime over delicious vegetarian food prepared by the retreat center. On two of the evenings, special guests Rick Kosinski and Bruce Closser, respectively, joined the group to share some thoughts about the dissertation-writing process. Kosinski, a counseling psychologist and faculty member of the Department of Educational & Counseling Psychology, spoke about some of the blocks to achievement, focusing particularly on what is known as “low frustration tolerance.” Closser, associate professor of English, shared his own experience of writing his dissertation while working full-time and managing a family, and offered tips to help maintain creativity and momentum. I gave writing tips one evening and worked individually with participants who wanted guidance and feedback, but otherwise spent my time planning short hikes I could take the participants on after lunch to help them clear their minds for the work ahead. We visited a tiny stone chapel at neighboring GilChrist and I managed to terrify a couple of women by getting momentarily lost in the forest on our way to St. Gregory's Abbey.

At the end of the retreat, we all agreed that the experience had had a profound effect on our lives and our writing. We felt renewed and “unstuck.” Tracie Jacobs, a Leadership student, said, “God has shown me I need to focus and let go of other responsibilities that are weighing me down. I truly have been blessed to have had this experience!” Zachary Mngo, a Higher Education Administration student, said, “The retreat helped me get a clearer understanding of how to get focused, and manage my time and energy.”

Retreat participants were: Alyssia Coates, Kwame De Jonge-Moore, Tracie Jacobs, Deatrice Johnson, Zachary Mngo, Vince Montoro, Lisa Mwesigwa, Vivienne Quarrie and Natasha Smith. All are students in either Leadership or Higher Education Administration with the exception of Kwame De Jonge-Moore, who is working toward her PhD in Curriculum & Instruction. ■

Becky De Oliveira teaches graduate-level writing for the School of Education at Andrews University. She is also editor of the UK-based Christian lifestyle magazine *LIFE.info*, published five times per year, and the author of two children's books.

