



Not Just Somebody Standing in Line

The Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen Writing Workshop

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THE ROOM ISN'T AN ACTUAL ROOM, just a space that has been partitioned off with a temporary wall from the rest of the meeting area. On the other side of the partition, the daily meal served by the Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen, in New York's Chelsea neighborhood, has just ended and the sounds of staff cleaning can still be heard. As the lunchtime crowd disperses into the mild April afternoon, about ten diners linger, making their way to the other side of the partition and taking seats at the four tables set up to form a square. And with no more fanfare than that, the Wednesday afternoon meeting of the Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen Writing Workshop is in session.

It's organized chaos. Multiple conversations overlap as people settle themselves in folding chairs at the tables. One of the volunteers brings out a cardboard box filled with three-ring binders with work from previous writing sessions and calls out the names written on the covers. Another volunteer distributes the writing from the most recent session, typed up and neatly stapled together.

By 12:30 PM, all the participants have their binders, writing paper, and pens. Alice Phillips, who leads the workshop, starts off the session by asking, "Does

anyone have suggestions for today's topics?"

"Sugar wallets," someone calls out.

"Okay, anything else?"

There are no other suggestions, so Phillips offers a few more ideas. After a few minutes of discussion, the chosen writing topics for the day are "sugar wallets," as suggested, as well as "I've got my way," "love of my life," and "wishing on a star."

Everyone immediately starts writing. The noise of tables and chairs being moved around can still be heard from the main eating area, but the group is quiet. The writers are all concentrating on their papers.

After forty-five minutes, it's time for the participants to take turns reading their writing aloud. No one is shy; everyone wants to share. There are poems and stories about former loves, about how lives are led with confidence and positivity, and one story about a magic wallet that contains everything you would need to get through a rough day. Listeners give positive comments, encouraging and complimenting each other on the writing topics chosen and on the strength of the voices in the stories.

The session ends at 2:00 PM, but some writers linger to chat or welcome newcomers. The sense of warmth and community in the group is palpable, and is one of the reasons many writers come back to the workshop week after week, and often year after year.

Though the space is makeshift and the members of the group come and go, the Holy Apostles Soup

Jane Moon, a 2011–2012 T&W intern, is pursuing an MFA in creative writing with a concentration in writing for children at The New School. She is currently working on her first young adult novel. She lives in New York City.

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Kitchen Writing Workshop is almost an institution now, celebrating its twentieth anniversary this year. The workshop, which meets weekly each spring, was started by the writer Ian Frazier, with a grant from the Lila Wallace Reader’s Digest Foundation to set up a community-based arts program. “I knew about the soup kitchen because I had given money to it and it seemed that it would be a good place to run a workshop,” says Frazier. “I sat by the exit for a couple days and just asked people if they would be interested in a writing workshop. I had, maybe, fifty or sixty people who said they would be interested. So I went ahead and did it.”

The Soup Kitchen serves 1,200 to 1,500 meals to the community every day from 10:00 AM to 2:30 PM. Each Wednesday, the writers meet at 12:30 PM for the workshop. When asked why she thought people attend the sessions, Phillips said, “Everybody needs to be heard, but these are people who have been heard less than other people. So they come to the Kitchen and they’re made to feel welcome—they’re called guests and they’re greeted, and they’re also fed, so that gives them food for the body. And then they come to us.”

“I think New York attracts interesting people and talented people,” says Frazier. “And you can be sure that out of all the people who come to the soup kitchen each day, you’re going to have some good musicians, you’re going to have some good basketball players, good athletes, good scholars. You’re going to have people of all kinds of backgrounds. You wouldn’t expect it maybe, just looking at the people standing in line. But, in fact, there is a wide range of people who come here, and some of them are naturally good writers. They have a talent and a story to tell, and they like the community of the workshop.”

The workshops follow a simple structure. Writing

topics are chosen at the beginning of each session and then the participants are given time to write. Writer Susan Shapiro, who led workshops at the soup kitchen for thirteen years and is now an adjunct professor at The New School, and author,

with Frederick Woolverton, of *Unhooked: How to Quit Anything*, remembers suggesting topics like “when one door closes, another opens,” “my first love,” and “my worst night.” Other successful writing prompts over the years include such topics as “my best mistake” or “how I came to New York.” Phillips says one workshop leader even brought in a tape of the Johnny Cash song “A Boy Named Sue.” “That prompted some interesting writing,” she says, “because it’s about a guy who’s effeminate or bullied. I think a lot of people identified with that.”

Almost always, the focus is on personal stories, says Frazier. “The fact that someone is in a soup kitchen means that there’s a story there. And usually it’s a story with some downturns in it. And maybe there’s also some beauty that can be found or something interesting to focus on. There almost always is.”

“I’ve been in writing workshops in high school and college and at Columbia getting my MFA,” says Phillips, “and this is very different, and better. There’s an incredible mix of educational levels, socioeconomic levels, ages, and races, and the creativity is off the wall. And I guess it’s a little bit of therapy for all of us. But some of the writing is very beautiful too.”

Each year, at the end of the series of workshops, all the participants are invited to have their writing in a final anthology, and to participate in a reading, where, says Frazier, “the church puts out refreshments and the people get dressed up and we all have a nice time.”

Several of the writers in the workshop have gone on to have their work published in larger venues as well, including two whose work made it into *The New York Times*. “That was a thrill for everyone!” says Shapiro. One participant—who used to be a profes-

sional backup singer—currently has a book contract for a memoir she’s writing, and a number of workshop writers were also published in a collection called *Food for the Soul: Selections from The Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen Writing Workshop*, edited by Elizabeth Maxwell and Susan Shapiro (Seabury Books, 2004).

But just because a story wasn’t published doesn’t make it unmemorable. “We once had a guy who was a hobo, who had ridden freight trains all over the country,” recalls Frazier. “And he would describe how he did that and where he got the trains, how to hop a freight, the etiquette of hobo camps, and stuff like that. We had a guy who was on a homeless soccer team. There’s a soccer team for homeless people and he talked about the homeless soccer team tournament. That was pretty good!”

Along with the workshop’s successes, there have also been challenges. Shapiro recalls that when she taught, “Many of the writers didn’t have homes or phone numbers so you’d never know if they would show up or not. Or they’d get evicted or wind up in jail or in the hospital. A few died.”

“The people in the workshop sometimes have pretty chaotic lives,” says Frazier. “Sessions can be very exhausting. We’ve had people show up late, show up high. We’ve had people have breakdowns. So things could get pretty chaotic. I can’t say that’s been the rule, more the exception, but when you get those exceptions, it can be difficult.”

“You have to be flexible and keep it simple,” added Phillips. “Very occasionally we have a problem with someone whose life is in tatters and who acts out a little bit. But in general, there’s great stability.”

Despite the challenges, all of those involved with the workshop say they appreciate what it has given them. “It makes the city more civilized and it makes you feel more civilized. I see people from the workshop all over town, and when I do, we have something to talk about,” says Frazier. “They’re not just

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somebody standing in line. The thing that you know as a writer,” he added, “is that if you are really doing it right, you are going to be poor at some point. If you look at the biography of any writer, there’s a moment where they are bound to nothing—anybody can get there. So you want to be sure that you know that that level of nothing has kindness in it, because you’ll probably be there and people you know will be there.”

The workshop leaders say their work at the soup kitchen has made a difference not just for the participants, but in their own writing as well. “We’re kind of in it together,” says Phillips. “We feel that we’re peers with the writers in the workshop, and often they know more about a lot of things than we do. And, yeah, it’s helped me to see a whole life—many lives—in New York that I wouldn’t have otherwise. So that’s got to feed my writing.”

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When asked if he has advice for anyone who would like to start a similar program, Frazier says, “You need a place that’s somewhat quiet, and you need a regular time. And pencils and paper and pens. Those aren’t expensive resources. The attention is what’s more demanding. Just to pay attention. It’s hard to listen to things that are sad and difficult. You do get a lot of that in a situation like a soup kitchen. But, really, you just search for the same virtues that you look for in any writing, which are persistence and patience and imagination.” ☺

To view a list of writing prompts in the Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen writing workshops, visit us online at twc.org/magazine/.