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# Building Bridges: Notes on the 2009 MRA Conference

BY SCOTT PETERSON

Early on a Saturday in mid-March, with the sun shining brightly off the Grand River and the morning light pouring through the huge windows of the DeVos Conference Center, a thousand or so teachers gathered in a dark hall to hear Katherine Paterson's opening keynote address. While listening to the introductions, announcements, and the justly deserved acknowledgments of those who work so hard to make this conference the wonderful and inspiring event it is, one of the speakers tossed this fact to us:

*The number of children who fail to learn how to read by the end of third grade is being used today to determine how many prisons to build in the future.*

This piece of information moved like a whispered secret through the crowd and stilled our restless movements. Together we stopped sipping our coffee, thumbing through our conference programs, talking to our colleagues, and shuffling our feet and, as one collective body, let out a soft, sad sigh.

We sighed not because the statement surprised us or seemed implausible. In this day of high stakes testing and No Child Left Behind, it seemed all too plausible. No, we sighed because we simply could not grasp why this precious nugget of information would be used to build, of all things, prisons. Social programs that deal with poverty and the other systemic problems of our society that eat our students alive before they even walk through our doors, yes; a highly qualified and talented cadre of teachers specifically trained to meet the problem head on, of course; researched based, state-of-the-art programs and instructional strategies that actually address the issue, sure.

But prisons? My, oh my, oh my.

The gods may have been smiling on the planners of this year's convention, for the first of many fine keynote speakers and presenters was none other than the novelist Katherine Paterson. I have to admit, I have a special place in my heart for this well-known

children's author. Many years ago, just as my career was budding and taking root, she transformed my life and sent me down a whole new teaching path. Reading *Bridge to Terabithia* with my class, peeling back the layers of this deeply textured book to see what was beneath the surface, transformed me from someone who ran off dittos and plowed through workbooks and basal readers at an impressive rate of speed into a true teacher. It opened a whole new world for me. Instead of giving dull, unresponsive answers to the brilliantly incisive and nuanced questions I asked straight out of the teacher's manual, my students became deeply involved with the ideas in the book. They responded strongly to the characters, began to live and breathe along with them and to form strong opinions about the issues raised in this deeply moving book. Our discussions began to crackle with intensity, and instead of word-decoders, we became meaning-makers. This nearly perfectly written book, coupled with an open, inquiring classroom atmosphere, created a heady brew of words and ideas that fostered a wonderful attitude toward books. Together we learned that a book has a life of its own, a personal meaning and relevance to the life of the reader. I crossed a bridge then, followed a delicious new path and never looked back.

Paterson's topic was about building, too, though prisons were not the structures she had in mind. Not surprisingly, the structures she wanted to build were bridges, all kinds of them. Bridges between books

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and readers, between literature and ideas, between minds and meaning. She started with the bridges she built between her lonely childhood in China and the outside world with books like *The Secret Garden*. She described the bridges her own books built between her characters and the students who read them, students who often live on the margins and dark edges of our educational institutions, the ones who could easily get scraped off without the support of the bridges she builds. And she told us about her colleague who was sent to the attic whenever he displeased his guardians, an attic that just happened to be lined with book shelves. When he discovered the shelves were crammed full with the works of Twain and Cooper and Walt Whitman, he managed to get himself set to the attic on a regular basis. Sitting there in the dark with his smuggled flashlight, he used these books to build a bridge between his bleak childhood and his adulthood as a lifelong learner. Paterson challenged us to consider what would have happened if those shelves were crammed full of workbooks and standardized tests. Soon we weren't thinking of prisons at all, but of building bridges instead, the kind that hold us up, support us, and lead us to better places.

Katherine Paterson wasn't the only speaker to build bridges at this year's conference. There were Rose Capelli and Lynne Dorfman, who showed us how to build bridges between mentor texts and our own writing. They took us backstage, as Donald Murray so eloquently puts it, to watch the pigeons being tucked up the magicians sleeves. They showed us how to read like writers, to look closely at the books we love to discover the tools authors use to breathe life into their words and how to apply those tools to

our own writing. And there was Jeff Anderson, who showed the mechanically disinclined among us how to put our editing skills on the fast track. With style, grace, and a sense of humor that left us with sore ribs, he taught us how to rescue proofreading and editing from the murk of the writing process and to give it the time and attention it deserves.

And finally, there was Katie Wood Ray, who reminded us once again of the importance of building bridges between our own writing and our classroom practice. Writing is not a spectator sport, she sang to us in her lovely lilt of a voice. Only by being active writers ourselves can we understand the process and share its power with our students. This powerful reminder, this powerful piece of advice was worth the price of admission all by itself, and has provided the inspiration for me to be sitting at my desk pecking away on my word processor working on this article at this very moment.

I could go on and on, for this brief summary barely scratches the surface of what went on at this year's conference. It would take a forest of trees and more than one volume of this journal to honor all those teachers who came from Detroit and Rockford and Climax-Scotts and all points north to share their classroom expertise with us. And could any summary be complete without honoring the heavenly voices of the Kent Hill Fifth Grade Honors Choir for their Sunday morning serenade? All I can say is thank you, MRA, for once again putting together this year's collection of talented and inspiring presenters and authors. It is all your work and effort that sends us back to our classrooms with our eyes looking up and our feet moving forward.