

Finding Our People in a Ceremonial Village Disguised as a Conference: A Short History of the Power of Words Conference

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Finding Our People:

A Short History of the Power of Words Conference

“I have found my people here.” Over the years, dozens of people have told me this at the end of their first Power of Words conference. Bringing together our people is what this conference is all about, but starting and sustaining an annual conference requires a group of people willing to journey through uncertainty, confusion, financial losses, awkward moments, surprisingly bad timing, and a whole lot of work to create and hold a place where our people can gather.

That's what I always envisioned the Power of Words (POW) conference as: a clearing in the woods, a gathering place on the prairie, a shelter in the storm. TLA, unlike anything you can spin into a sound bite or put on a fortune cookie's slim piece of paper, is both basic and complex. Explaining to people how it's all about “social and personal transformation through the spoken, written and sung word”—as we do for the MA in TLA at Goddard College—is like pointing to your friend and proclaiming, “Good person who will change your life!” The specific is the way to the universal in any strong poem: describe a gingko tree as “billowing fans of dark tree tripping up the sky,” and your reader can enter into the moment with you and find a new way to relate to many manner of tree. Invite someone to sit at a picnic table with you and six others on a dewy September morning, talking about what matters most in our lives, and that someone can land on innate resonance in his/her/their body and soul. In this way, TLA invites us to use the language arts—whatever we create alone and together with words—to convey, explore, question, and deepen what we know of ourselves, our communities, and the world.

Unless people have experienced with TLA coalescing community and meaning, it's hard to fully comprehend the full possibilities of TLA as a profession, community, field of study, and calling. The conference, in a nutshell, is a kind of ceremony village where we can do and live TLA,

drawing from writing, storytelling, theater and other forms of TLA both in planning and holding the event, and at the event, investigate, question, discover, and celebrate many forms of TLA for many peoples.

Bioregional Roots, and One of the Biggest Blackouts in History

After the Transformative Language Arts MA program began in 2000, I began to see the need for some kind of TLA gathering, one in which people who are studying, practicing, exploring or otherwise living TLA could find each other for greater inspiration and information, but also to grow TLA beyond one small college program. While there are many events—conference, symposiums, workshops—in related expressive arts, movements, and practices, there were none that I could find that brought together people drawn to language as a transformative art across the spectrum of individual and cultural change.

From my decades organizing and participating in Continental Bioregional Congresses, I came to this task somewhat hard-wired to seek structures and supports that helped make the conference more like a ceremony village in which we live out TLA, finding ways to integrate along the way what we're discovering. In the bioregional movement, we adapted the term “ceremonial village” to connote a gathering in which making a transformational and communal space—through ritual, art, and community-building. In such a space, the emphasis shifts from only networking and information-sharing to encompass helping participants find their own best truth, practical wisdom, and language for how to live in greater balance with the earth.

Translated into the Power of Words conference, this ceremonial village shifted us away from an event focused on participants receiving knowledge and toward greater possibilities for participants integrating, questioning, and revising what they're learning to construct their own deeper knowledge. To move this direction, I knew such an event would do well by adopting some of what we do at the week-long bioregional congresses, such as talking circles (sometimes called clans), in which a small group, no more than seven people, gather each morning to share what we're experiencing, and the questions haunting or holding us without others interrupting or trying to fix us. I also imported the congress's structure to some extent with space for interest groups, open time for readings or performance, and integrating what we believe in--the power of words aloud and on the page--into how we organize the event.

In 2002, I took my ideas to Goddard College, which happily agreed to host the conference and support my time doing the organizing for a conference in the summer of 2003. It was clear to me then that it would be ideal to start the conference at the college, where we had the advantage of a physical place where we could host the event and an academic program (the MA in TLA), but eventually it needed to be the project of a TLA not-for-profit organization so that the conference could eventually bring together many organizations, institutions and individuals focused on TLA to cross-pollinate. In turn, the conference, with somewhere over 60 people attending regularly, could also help fund a not-for-profit TLA organization.

Our goals that first year at Goddard were modest. We hoped for 30 people to come learn about and experience TLA, and I invited Gail Johnson, the first TLA graduate, and an astonishing playwright who used her art to bring her Washington Island community (off the north shore of Wisconsin) together to tell its story and history in poetic monologues. Sherry Reiter, poetry therapy pioneer, was also one of our keynoters. We set the conference for mid-August, 2003, just as the Goddard residency for the Individualized MA program, which TLA is part of, was ending so that students could stay for the conference, and we had others interested in TLA coming, mostly from the northeast.

You could say the inaugural conference was both charmed and cursed. Our timing coincided perfectly with the blackout of 2003, which wiped out electricity in seven northeastern states and Ontario, precisely all the places most of our participants were traveling from to come to us. Vermont was charmed electricity-wise, and Gail was still able to get here (she had landed before the blackout, which affected hundreds of flights), but Sherry was stuck in Brooklyn. We still had a spectacularly-TLA time together writing, telling stories, sharing vignettes and skits, and in general, finding there was a hunger among and beyond us for this kind of gathering, even and especially as darkness surrounded our light.

Finding Grace and Holding the Space

By 2005, the conference had picked up steam and participants, including a curious young man, Callid Keefe, and his fiancée, Kristina Perry, both Quaker traveling ministers who approached us before the conference to offer their services in “holding the space” as a work-study offering. They wrote me one of the most moving and articulate letters I’ve ever received about the power

of sitting in silence on the edge of a room while big groups meet, and helping hold the sacredness of the space we make together. Not being a fool, I said yes and couldn't wait to meet them.

Callid and Kristina did indeed do this magical work for us for a number of years, introducing themselves at the opening session, then sitting quietly, eyes closed, breathing in the psychic and physical space we inhabited for opening and closing sessions, presentations by keynoters, and important meetings. Their work was remarkable: just having them there brought many of us a sense of peace, a feeling that we were being cared for collectively.

Callid went on to be our coordinator for four years after initially sharing the position with Kristina, and for the last two years, he's serves as chair of the TLA Network's governing council.

We didn't just find Callid and the grace of holding the space; we also found grace, or Grace Paley to be more precise. In 2005 Grace, one of our foremost American writers and activists, was to be our keynote speaker. Since she lived down the road, it seemed like an easy deal to get her to the conference, but making the arrangements was complex. The first time I called, I spoke with her husband, Bob (Robert Nichols): "Is Grace there?"

"No!"

"Do you expect her back soon?"

"No!"

"I wanted to ask her to be the keynote speaker for our conference."

"She won't do it," he told me, but he also said I should call back on Sunday night.

I did. She wasn't there. I called again, and this time left a phone message. A week later, I tried again. Bob answered, "Wait, she's in the tub, I'll hand her the phone." I ended up called back later that evening, and for the first time, spoke to her.

"I would like to go back to Goddard," she told me. "It's been a while. But I don't know if I'm going to be on the Cape with my daughter and grandson that weekend. Call back in a month." I

did. She still didn't know. Call back in another month. By this time, I had her number just about memorized. She still didn't know.

About six weeks later, just as I needed to finalize the program, she told me that she knew she had to give me an answer, but what should it be? She said she felt terrible about putting me off. In the background, I heard Bob yelling, "Just say no, Grace! Say No." Grace paused, then said, "You know what? I'm going to do it."

From that point on, I called her about once a month just to visit a little, see how she was faring with her wild schedule that brought her all over the country and beyond to give readings, speak against the war or meet with students even though she was well over 80 and was dealing with a recurrence of breast cancer. At one point, I mentioned to her that I also was a breast cancer survivor, and although she was actively going through treatment and tests, she instead focused her voice on me, "Oh, Sweetheart," she said, "what did they do to you?"

The night before she was to speak, I figured it might be good idea to make sure she had the details handy. So I called. Bob answered and said she was out of town and couldn't do our conference.

"She's old, she's not feeling well. How can you think she's going to be there?" he said. He told me that I was a little crazy for thinking she was my keynote speaker.

We ended up doing a tribute to Grace—planned in a hurry by novelist Katherine Towler, journal therapy pioneer Kay Adams, and storyteller Meg Gilman—but right before we were starting the tribute, Grace called me and said, "'I can't believe I fucked this up.'" At the end of the tribute, during which time we read some of her stories and poems, and told stories about her, one of the conference participants stood up and said, "I didn't know Grace Paley before this, but now I realize we are all Grace."

A few hours later, Goddard faculty Sara Norton and her husband Joseph Ganza, who had shown up for the tribute and were also close friends of Grace and Bob's, left us this message: "We have Grace and Bob, and we're coming to the conference." With 20 minutes, we gathered everyone in the haybarn theater, and soon Grace came in. Everyone sprang to their feet, some of us rushed up and hugged her, and people clapped, called out her name, and cheered as she sat down.

She glowed and yet was so utterly down to earth, a small woman on a folding chair who said in a Brooklyn accent untempered by years of living in Vermont that she could answer a few questions. Someone asked her about the war, and she told her of her hope for the world because people came out all over the world and protested the Iraq invasion before it happened. The first time, she reminded us, there's ever been this kind of response to try to stop a war before it started.

Patricia Fontaine, a student and Vermonter, stood up and reminded Grace that recently in a speech she gave, she said her favorite word was "then."

"It still is," Grace told us, demonstrating through her presence (as well as her previous absence) how a story can seem to be over, but then – just like in Grace's stories, just like in real life – something else happens.

Reaching Out to People of Color

I've been in many rooms over the years where everyone was white except one or two people of color who were often cajoled into participating so the group could tell itself it was diverse. I've been part of organizations in which an African-American woman or Latino man is recruited to head up the diversity committee as if engaging with a wider spectrum of ethnicities, races, and nationalities is the work of whoever isn't in the mainstream ethnicity, race, and nationality. I've also been schooled on what's wrong with this picture: how it's pretty much inherently racist to bring in a person of color to fill a slot or solely burden the work of recruiting more people of color. Such actions, even if they come from a place of truly wanting to address racism in our culture, can easily result in the organization only giving lip service to overcoming oppression.

Having people of color so visibly part of our conference is a foundational way to communicate that TLA comes from a long history in many cultures—the oral tradition in the African-American community, poetry as path to spirituality and community in many Latino cultures, mythology and songs in many Native American traditions. It's inherently multi-cultural, and for us to be true to TLA, we must be true to engaging diversity.

Shortly after the first Power of Words conference, I consulted Yvette Angelique Hyater-Adams --president and CEO of a culture change management consulting firm, and a writer and

facilitator who earned her MA in TLA at Goddard College. Yvette had tremendous experience in helping organizations and businesses seriously start walking their diversity talk. Looking back on our many discussions over a decade ago as we forged a diversity plan for the conference, Yvette recently wrote me,

I'm always thinking systemic change when I work with people wanting to create diverse and inclusive communities, institutions and groups. Changing the status quo requires strategic thinking and deliberate action. Reach out and pull in the right people to 'sit at the table' to build a plan and learn together. Pay attention to the power dynamics. Make sure silenced voices are present. People of Color and women need to be in leadership roles and not just be the "teachers to others" on the ways they are silenced in social systems. Historically dominant voices need to be at the table too—Whites, Men, Straight, and Abled-Bodied people. Take a look around the community and notice who is there—and notice who is not there. Invite them all to co-create, heal, and grow as individuals. Yes, let us use the written, spoken, and visual word to do this! This is work of TLA. It begins with individuals who have the audacity to be vulnerable with each other, learn something, take collaborative action, and end up changing their part of the world.

In seeing who was at the table—largely middle-aged white women, although we always drew good representation from the LGBTQ community— and who wasn't, we explored how to invite in more than the usual suspects while, at the same time, working first through Goddard College, and later the TLA Network, to facilitate the organizing committee as a whole working on this issue. Our plan included four main components, which we've worked to realized over the years:

- Ensure that at least half of our keynoters be people of color,
- Provide scholarships for people of color who need financial assistance (which Yvette ended up funding for many years with the Roxanne-Florence fund, named for her grandmothers),
- Reach out to communities of color to invite them to propose workshops and attend the conference, and
- Invite people of color to participate on the organizing committee.

In recent years, we've seen a more diverse conference come into being. For our 2010 conference, S. Pearl Sharp —a dazzling poet, actress, and multi-genre performer — was able to access an

additional fund for people for color, and between our outreach to many organizations and individuals, and the Roxanne-Florence fund, people of color composed over a third of conference participants.

Five years later, the 2015 conference will feature many people of color as presenters and keynoters (in fact, all the keynoters in this case), and we can see the effect of a more diverse community spilling over to other parts of the TLA Network. The new certification the TLA Network offers, an introduction to TLA, has attracted a good balance of people of many races, ethnicities and ranges of life circumstances. The council, the governing body of the TLA Network, has several people of color intimately involved in the organization. Our online classes are drawing in diverse audiences although we do tend to draw an overwhelming amount of women (Men, come on over! We welcome you!).

Yet we still have a long way to go in some respects. Our conference organizing committees have tended to be mostly white. Most of the online classes the TLA Network offers are, thus far, taught by white women. Some of our conferences could have done much more to extend invitations and make connections with communities of color. It's a complex deal to figure out how to reach out, who to reach out to, and how to best bring together diverse communities, especially when many of us doing the outreach have the privilege of not facing frequent racial or ethnicity discrimination, and may, at times, be blind to our own blindnesses.

Speaking for myself, it takes vigilance to not fall into complicity or quota-filling, but to keep returning to the mysterious ground of listening to people who experience culture differently than I do. I know I've stumbled at times, not done enough, or wasn't clean enough with my motives, but TLA is also about immersing ourselves in difficult dialogues, ones in which we don't always know what to say and need to learn to listen in new ways.

The Magic of TLA in Performance and Conversation

We've had a commitment from the get-go to not only invite in presenters of color, but also a broad spectrum of people who write, tell stories, do spoken word, create plays and collaborative performances, sing and make music, and do any number of things with words to catalyze enduring change and healing. We also aim for a mix of keynoters—at least one person who's

relatively well-known enough to draw in participants along with others who should be recognized. For instance, in 2007, David Abram, award-winning author of the life-changing *The Spell of the Sensuous*; Allison Adele Hedge Coke, Native American poet, writer and storyteller; Nehassaiu deGannes, playwright and actress; Taina Asili, activist singer-songwriter; and Devora Neumark, installation artist who, at the time, was hauling her entire living room set out to a public plaza in Montreal to invite people to sit and have conversations with her in public. Here are some moments from the years that broke my heart wide open for the better:

- Rhythm and blues singer-songwriter Kelley Hunt, at the end of her performance at Goddard College in 2010, left the stage, still singing with all her heart, as she backed up through the audience that was giving her a standing ovation.
- When I was introducing David Abram, I explained how, when he moved to Lawrence, KS, I wanted to get to know this extraordinary writer of what it means to be wildly part of the earth so when I heard he was sick, I would go to his house, leave a container of soup and bag of crackers at the door, ring the bell, and back away slowly, just like I would when trying to befriend a wild animal. Before I could finish the story, David emerged from the back of the packed haybarn theater, stepping out of the shadows to wild applause. He then talked from his heart, integrating the sleight of hand he used to befriend shamans around the world in a commons of magic.
- Gail Rosen, a fabled storyteller and founder of the Healing Story Alliance, told riveting stories of finding meaning after surviving the Holocaust through sharing the life of Hilda Stern Cohen, a story she went on to publish as a book, integrating into it her own stories of seeking healing through the spoken word.
- Tom Janisse, editor of Kaiser's *Permante Journal on Narrative Medicine*, brought himself along with four physicians to present extensive workshops on how writing, for healing professionals and people living with serious illness, is its own enduring medicine.
- Gregory Orr, poet and writer, read from his then new collection of poems, *Concerning the Book Which is the Body of the Beloved*, while reflecting on how poetry saved his life after, as a child, he accidentally killed his brother in a hunting accident.
- Kao Kue, a Hmong poet, singer, and spoken word artist, sang, spoke poems, and told stories while using the Hmong flower cloth making tradition to reveal how layers of stories are stitched together to create a community story of her people re-inventing their lives after escaping to the U.S. from Laos during the Vietnam War.
- Jen Cross, who leads writing workshops for people reclaiming their sexuality, particularly people in the queer community recovering from sexual assault, at the 2014 conference spoke to a packed room about self-care, inviting us to write our way into radical self-care as part of how we change the world.
- Scott Youmans ignited such a passion for right livelihood at the 2010 conference at Goddard College that the small group that attended his workshop demanded that the

workshop go on, so Scott soon offered one of our first online classes on the topic of “Making the Leap and Knowing When You Are Ready.”

- Taina Asili, solo and with her band, exploded onto the stage with songs of freedom and justice, harkening back to her Puerto Rican roots and weaving into her performances stunning poems that speak to the generations lost and the generations to come.
- Dick Allen, poet laureate of Connecticut, came with his marvelous poet wife Laurie to our 2013 conference to share his wondrous poetry. When I told him of the oldest beech tree in Pennsylvania, he wanted to see it, so we trekked through the woods to behold the splendor of this ancient beech tree.
- Greg Greenway, a kick-ass singer-songwriter in the tradition of folk, blues, gospel and more, not only performed breathlessly powerful shows at two of our conferences, but he jumped into helping run sound for other performers, and helped with whatever needed heavy or light lifting.
- Jimmy Santiago Baca not only keynoted at our 2012 conference (and he'll be back for 2015), but he participated fully in every session, cheering on especially the writers and storytellers who publicly shared their work for the first time. Every meal, I saw him talking passionately and listening deeply to conference-goers in the wonderful dining hall of Pendle Hill, the retreat center where we met in 2012 and 2013.
- Julia Alvarez was who I called when, two weeks before the 2008 conference, our main keynoter backed out on a whim. I knew she lived in Vermont, and it turned out she could not only come but was willing, based on our budget and more based on what we were about and how much it meant to her, to show up for far less than her fee. Introduced by fellow Dominican Republic poet Marianela Madrona, she presented one of the most stunning talks I've ever heard on the power of words.

From a Conference to a Network

By 2004, there were enough people interested in creating a not-for-profit organization that we began figuring out what to call ourselves, eventually settling on the TLA Network because our mission entailed helping people find each other, enhance our mutual ways of practicing TLA, make a living doing TLA in our community, and grow TLA in our individual and collective lives. Angels emerged out of thin air: Bill Beardslee, a minister and educator from New Hampshire, stepped in to draft by-laws. Scott Youmans, one of our early TLA graduates from Goddard, helped design a website, and went on to serve as our coordinator for a year and then as our council chair. Alexandra Porsi, a gifted designer and TLA graduate, made her a logo and a lot of the art for the first incarnation of the website. Deborah Seidman and Nehassaiu deGanges co-chaired the first wave of the organization. Lynn O'Connell led us through the maze of incorporating as a not-for-profit organization, and by 2005, we had our non-profit status.

The conference was still part of Goddard until 2007 while the TLA Network developed a council model of governance in which we make our best decisions out of our highest collective wisdom, and always hold a no-shame/no-blame policy without lessening a commitment to accountability and communication.

In 2009, we moved the conference from under Goddard's auspices to TLAN's for several reasons. One was that the college was not set up organizationally to support an annual conference as much as a smaller, more nimble organization could do the work. Another was that I was simply wiped out from seven year's organizing the conference, supervising staff people at the college from far away, and all on top of my other Goddard and community work. Mostly, we moved the conference to be part of TLAN because the timing was right. TLAN had enough of a financial base to hire a coordinator to help with the conference, and the conference had enough of a participant base to support that hire. One of the coordinator's main jobs is to hold and organize, with a strong local organizing committee, the conference, and to devote her/himself to helping us get out the word on TLA, the conference, and the TLAN, mostly through word-of-mouth, social media, and occasional ads, printed materials, presentations, and media contact.

Over the years, our organization has grown, hit some walls, worked our ways through, learned a great deal about how to work together from a distance, and landed on this realization: any organization worth its salt must be in a state of continual experimentation to figure out the best way to proceed, improve its processes and offerings, and seek resilience and innovation. To this end, we're now immersed in strategic planning led by storyteller and organizational consultant Laura Packer, and we're still learning how to make community together, using TLA to grow TLA in the world.

Going Upside Down and Right-Side Up Again

Early on, organizational consultant Lynn O'Connell, who we had the good pleasure of having on the council for some years, told us that small organizations can be wily and flexible enough to survive economic downturns if they have multiple streams of revenue. We took her advice seriously, and also, because we knew TLA needed more than just a conference, we planned for

on-line classes, membership, and some grant-writing. We just weren't able to implement all these ideas quite in time for a bit of big-economy collapse.

Largely dependent on volunteers and only on a staff for less than 10 hours/week, we weren't in a strong enough place to weather the economic downturn of 2010. Our last conference at Goddard in 2010 showed us that people just didn't have the moolah to trek to Vermont, and our attendance went from a high of over 100 or about 50. After our soul searching in person and on the phone, and thanks to the expert financial planning of our treasurer at the time, Suzanne Adams, we found our way out through fundraising among those drawn to TLA, launching our first on-line classes, and cutting back on coordinator hours to less than five hours/week for a year. We also decided that perhaps we needed to do the conference every other year, and started the One City One Prompt project, which supports transformative language artists leading a workshop, class, discussion, performance or storytelling session in their home communities on a common theme, then sharing video, audio, and writing from that session through a collaborative website. One City One Prompt seemed at the time like a good substitute activity for a conference, one that could foster more local events.

Around the time we would have had a conference, we realized that sheesh, we really needed a conference! There's no substitute for face-to-face contact, so we started organizing for the 2012 conference, and decided to try holding the conference near an easier-to-fly-to-location, Philadelphia. We booked the 2012 and 2013 conferences at the serenely beautifully Pendle Hill, a Quaker retreat center just outside of the city. Because Callid and Kristina had worked there in the past, we had a very smooth transition to this sacred wonderland of lushness and peace (yet close to the Philadelphia airport).

Then we found out that being around a big urban center, plus some wild weather, didn't necessarily make for a well-attended conference. In 2012, our conference turned out to be the same weekend as Hurricane Sandy, which translated into 20 or more people not being able to attend, hardly any "walk-ins" from the surrounding urban area, and a bunch of us needing to fly out early. Four people who stayed Sunday found they had to continue on at Pendle Hill for four more days until air travel was fully resumed, but by all accounts, they had a beautiful time writing, wandering, and watching the news with the Pendle Hill staff.

In 2013, our conference numbers dwindled even more because we set the conference on Columbus Day weekend, unbeknownst to those of us on the organizing committee as a major holiday in Philadelphia. There's also so much going on in that city, and without people who lived there organizing actively for the conference, it was hard to get out the word on why this conference matters. We realized at that moment that we needed people on the ground, who lived in the area where the conference was to be, for all future conferences.

A few weeks before the 2013 conference, knowing we were going to be deep in the red, Callid, who was finishing his time as coordinator; Deb Hensley, who was beginning her year in the role; and I talked about what to do. I proposed that we moved the 2014 and 2015 conferences to Kansas City, a good-sized urban center, obviously centrally located, and close to many people in the Midwest who wanted to participate in the conference for years. We agreed on the leap, and put together a plan to fundraise up one side and down the other while also enjoying the 2013 conference thoroughly and finding great meaning with whoever came.

Meanwhile, we ended up having one of our most powerful conference ever with the 39 people who came. There was such intimacy and deep sharing that each moment felt lit up to me and many other participants. As if that wasn't enough, two people—Jaydn McCune and Stan Stewart—fell in love at the conference, got married the next summer, and co-presented at the 2014 conference together.

Crawling out of the economic loss (something like \$9,000, but who's counting?) from the 2013 conference took over a year to fully recover from, and our Campaign For New Stories, that raised over \$6,000 to retire debt and build the basis for TLAN to increase our coordinator hours (not up to 10-15 hours/week) so that the whole organization can grow.

We did, and the 2014 conference, at Lake Doniphan near Kansas City, drew over 110 people, many of whom fell in love with TLA. It also re-invigorated us as an organization, and brought a young woman named Teri Grunthaner to us. A drama therapist in training with extensive organizational, facilitation, and TLA gifts and skills, Teri was the perfect person to bring in as the next TLAN coordinator after Deb's other part-time job went full-time, and she needed to step down from TLAN.

In the last year, Teri has helped us develop all manner of tools and approaches for a better conference, but colorful google forms for people to fill out to find roommates to a streamlined way for our workshop proposal committee to evaluate proposed workshops. We've also found better ways over time to keep our focus on what draws people to the gathering place of the conference, and what we can offer them beyond the conference.

The Path Widens

TLA offers the promise inherent in witnessing each other's stories and being witnesses to anyone who wants to speak, write, sing, perform or otherwise use language to name and claim what this life is and can be. The Power of Words conference continues to broaden its ceremonial village reach. In recent years, we began reaching out to people in the disability community, people living with serious illness, youth, and to some extents, veterans.

At the 2014 conference, I invited some of the Turning Point writers living with serious illness—metastatic cancer, Parkinson's, M.S., fibromyalgia—to give a workshop on writing through debilitating and sometimes deadly disease. Turning Point, where I've facilitated writing retreats since 2003, is a balm in the desert and not-for-profit organization that offers people ways to foster the healing, wisdom, and community that can help them, their families and communities through times of serious physical illness. For some in this group as well as several other conference participants who navigated disability or illness, just coming to a conference like ours was an opportunity that usually, because of health or lack of income, passed them by. Thanks to scholarships and support people, our conference included people who rolled as well as walked.

Something else happened at the 2014 conference that grabbed my attention too: we have a handful of teenagers who moved many of us, including an 18-year-old young man who sang us the Beatle's "Blackbird" as he strummed and we sang along, and the next year, in the closing circle, said he loved the conference and everyone here. Our organizing committee for the 2015 conference—about 20 of us who live in Lawrence, KS and the Kansas City metro area—started talking about how to open the door wider for youth. One of our people, Kelly Hams-Pearson, did a lot more than talk: she wrote a grant that was funded by Jackson County Family Court Children's Emergency Fund. Over dozen Kansas City teens ages 14-17 are coming to the 2015

conference; some are in the foster care system, diversion or treatment programs, but all have one thing in common: they love writing.

We also are beginning to make greater inroads in reaching out to people with disabilities and serious illness. There are other populations we will lean toward in the future as we continue to widen the path we make by going forward, one conference after another.

One of the most powerful passages in the old testament's Book of Ruth in which Ruth tells her mother-in-law Naomi, "You are my people." In the wild weather of our climate—the earth, the world, the political, economic, sociological, psychological and all other manner of climates—the Power of Words conference offers people who resonate with the power of the word (out loud, on the page, sung, whispered, shouted or told) a place to belong, and good company for the ride our work, art, activism and lives.

Reprinted from *Chrysalis: A Journal of Transformative Language Arts*, 2015 (journal