

SPARKS & THE HOT SEAT WITH JAY O'CALLAHAN

An Event Review by Mary Brugh

It was a rare treat to attend Jay O'Callahan's Workshop at the Forest Festival this year. After some warm-up exercises, Jay described his process of starting work on a story. Most of his stories are either about people he has known or people he has met through the memories of others. He went into some detail about using movement, place and images to bring to life a character named Edna Robinson, one of several individuals he learned about from interviewing the elders of a small town. By the end of that part of the workshop we were all eager to hear the rest of that story (I guess we'll have to buy the CD).

Then we did three "story sparks." Working each time with a different partner, Jay said "think of a person from your childhood," "think of a time you danced," and last, "think of a time you felt totally free." With each of these sparks we had a little time to think of the person or event, remembering with all the senses, everything we could. Then we had 2 minutes to tell it to our partner, followed by the partner having 30 seconds to give appreciations; the partners then switched roles. Then a couple pairs were chosen to show the entire group what they had remembered. And it was true; a spark like that could bring up memories worthy of a story.



Jill Johnson has worked with Jay before and they did an interesting exercise that Jill had not done before. Jill told a piece from her story "Little, But Oh My!" Then Jay did an exercise with her that he called "The Hot Seat." He interviewed Jill as Berta, the first woman ferryboat captain on Puget Sound, and the main character in Jill's story. As Berta, Jill answered, sounding very Norwegian. The questions went beyond the scope of the actual story but Jill/Berta was able to answer them because through research, interviews, and developing this piece, she really knew Berta and her story. It was a fascinating exercise.

Jay concluded the workshop by once again quoting Flannery O'Connor, "If you go through childhood, you have enough stories inside of you."