

Acceptance Speech for the Rewey Belle Inglis Award, November 2008

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Thank you to my sisters in WILLA and to all those good women and men in our profession who have made my work in English Education possible for nearly forty years. In accepting the Rewey Belle Inglis Award, I want to share a brief story with you.

Twenty-four years ago, while browsing a used bookstore and avoiding writing my dissertation, I happened upon a battered copy of a book by the late Tillie Olsen. In this wonderful little book, entitled *Silences*, Olsen explores why it is so hard to break into written voice, and why, even having done so successfully once, so few authors venture into print a second time. As a member of the early feminist wave that claimed we could “do it all” without breaking a sweat (or—worse—breaking into tears), I was caught off guard when I found myself, that summer, a published author, a wife and mom, and a pioneering, untenured college Writing Center Director, unable to face the daily writing task I’d earlier set for myself with genuine relish. Tillie Olsen’s was the first voice I heard telling me that in struggling with my own silences I was in very good company—that there were even stronger forces at work in the world than Virginia Woolf’s “angel of the house,” forces that could, and often did, silence women writers like me.

Years later, my dissertation long since finished, and a treasured line of successful English Education advisees graduated, I finally had a chance to meet Tillie Olsen in person. When my turn came in the line after her talk, I put out my hand to her and said, “Thank you, Tillie. You saved my life.” She drew me in close to her and answered me with the kindest of eyes, “Well, that’s what we do, isn’t it. We save each other’s lives.”

I believe this is the true mission that guides our work as English Educators, and today I am confident

that my brilliant, passionate younger colleagues will continue to tend that mission fiercely. This will mean speaking up at awkward times—that’s what it has often meant for me. It will mean, for example, objecting when educational leaders at home here in NCTE, as in the most recent issue of the *Council Chronicle* (November 2006), proclaim along with The Alliance for Excellent Education (AEE, 2002) that our chief mission as educators is fostering “prosperity in the global economy,” and that thus our chief reform in Middle Schools should be greater focus on “College Prep.” When the lives of young girls and boys are as at risk from poverty, prejudice, crime, and indifference, even death by murder or suicide, as at any time in our history, we remember out loud and in print that what we are doing first in our work among teachers and schoolchildren (before raising test scores and economic prosperity) is saving lives: the lives of our children, and of one another, through our networks of care and shared work such as that exemplified by NCTE, CEE, and the Women in Literacy and Life Assembly.