

## The Meaning of Querencia

Juanita cites Barry Lopez's *The Rediscovery of North America*: "Lopez explains that *querencia* is a place where one feels secure, 'a place from which one's strength of character is drawn.' In Spain, it is the place in the ring where the wounded bull goes to renew his strength and center himself, ready for a fresh charge. What a beautiful concept: 'A place in which we know exactly who we are. The place from which we speak our deepest beliefs.'"

----- "Querencia – A place where one feels at home " -----

Georgia Heard, *Writing Toward Home* (Heinemann 1995)

"The more I write, the more I have the urge to write, and the closer I come to finding my way home.

A few summers ago I experience my first—and last—bullfight, in a small French town near the Spanish border, where Picasso once lived. When the gate to the ring opened, the beautiful, confused bull burst in like wind, radiating power as he circled amid the shouts of the spectators. The matadors hid behind walls like scared children, studying the bull carefully. The banderillero approached on his horse and pierced the bull's neck with the banderillas—barbed swords. The swords hung from the bull, blood streamed down his shoulders. It was then I learned about *querencia*.

In Spanish, "*querencia*" describes a place where one feels safe, a place from which one's strength of character is drawn, a place where one feels at home. It comes from the verb "*quiere*", which means to desire, to want.

The wounded bull retreated to a spot to the left of the gate through which he had entered, to rest, it seemed. He had found his *querencia*: a place where he felt safe and was therefore at his most dangerous. The matador tries not to let the bull find this place, because it increases the danger to himself. For the bull, it is a place where he believes he can survive this unfair game. Unfortunately and cruelly, he almost never does. It is said that if the same bull were to fight more than once in the ring, every matador would die; once an animal learns the game and stands in his power, he cannot be defeated.

Animals have *querencia* by instinct. The golden plover knows every year where to fly when it migrates. Rattlesnakes know by the temperature when to lie dormant. In winter, sparrows and chickadees know where their food is and return to the same spot again and again. *Querencia* is a matter of survival. A nest, a mole's tunnel, is *querencia*.

Humans have *querencia*, too. We know where we feel most at home. Our bodies tell us, if we listen. There are certain seasons during which we feel more at ease. Certain times of day when we feel safe and more relaxed. Certain climates. Terrain. Even the clothes we wear make us feel more at home.

When I meet people I like to ask them what their *querencia* is. Some know immediately: mountains, the city, near the ocean. But many don't know. Having a sense of where we feel most at home is a way of keeping grounded; it can give us that sense of rootedness and safety. Some people's *querencia* is linked with nature: the sound of wind in the pines, the call of a loon, the salty smell of the ocean. Some feel most at home in a crowded cafe or in a public library, voices humming softly around them.

Recently, I was talking to my friend Don, telling him about *querencia*. He said, "Yes, *quiere*—it means the wanting place." He helped me realize that for writers, that burning urge to write is our *querencia*. In order to feel at home we have to be writing. We feel awful if we haven't written in a week, if we don't write in our journals every day. Writing is a way of finding and keeping our home.

At home, in daylight, I retreat to my study to write, to gather strength, to fill up again. I feel most at home during the day, sitting in my writing chair with my feet up, a cup of coffee or tea on the desk. It's difficult for me to find my *querencia* and write at night.

When I don't have quiet in my life I sometimes ignore the pull toward that chair: it seems more important to make phone calls and pay bills. But I'm ignoring the voice that will lead me to safety, take me home. My body knows it. I feel cranky and life seems dull. The more I write, the more I have the urge to write, and the closer I come to finding my way home.

Reflection Exercise: Write about where you feel most at home, where your *querencia* is. Describe it in such clear detail that you feel you're there. Gather photographs and pictures of your *querencia* and tape them to your wall or carry them with you. Search for your *querencia*. Keep asking yourself: Where do I come from? Where do I feel most at home? Where do I feel most happy and relaxed? What is my ideal writing environment? Where can I write with my full powers?"