



## A Conversation With *Heather Summerhayes Cariou*

by Susan Wittig Albert

**Heather Summerhayes Cariou was born and raised in Ontario, trained at the National Ballet School of Canada, and was a founding member of the Ontario Youtheatre and the Center for Actor's Study in Toronto. She enjoyed a professional acting career for twenty years across Canada and off-Broadway. She now lives on the Hudson River in New Jersey with a view of New York City and is working on a novel and co-producing the feature film "Make Believe" with her husband, stage and screen actor Len Cariou. She is a member of the Story Circle Network.**

*Your sister died in 1980, and your memoir was published in 2007. When did you begin to write?*

I first began to write in 1983, the summer I moved to New York City from Canada, to be with my love, Len Cariou. I had left behind my country, my family, my friends, and my career, for a time, to explore deepening this new relationship. I told Len the story of my sister asking me on her deathbed to "tell our story." She had said, with her typical use of both humor and pathos, that though she didn't think I was a bad actress, she felt my calling was as a writer. She said I wouldn't meet the people I needed to meet to become the person I needed to become if I didn't write. So, Len and I are sitting in this bistro in Chelsea, and he took my hands in his, and told me I MUST write this story. Though we had no idea where our relationship might take us, he promised me solemnly that he would support me in every way possible while I undertook this. We laugh now about the fact that he didn't know it would take me twenty years.

*The writing itself clearly took enormous courage. What aspect of it was most difficult?*

I relived everything entirely. Science tells us that when we remember, the body can't distinguish the difference between the real incident and the memory. That's why it hurts to remember. The memory is in the body, so we go through the same pain as if we were experiencing it for the first time. There were many, many, many days when I sat down to write, and then just lay on the floor wailing and crying, and then got back up and finished the paragraph. But I couldn't not do it. I had promised. And I thought if my sister Pam had found the courage to live her life, I could find the courage to write about it. She was always with me in spirit as I wrote, telling me I could do it, believing in me when I didn't believe in myself. So was Len. So were my best friends, and the women of the International Women's Writing Guild. The courage wasn't mine alone. It came as a gift of love from a lot of other people, and I didn't want to let them down. Oh, and the other thing that was difficult was learning to write metaphor. I knocked at that door for a long, long time.

*Has the publication of this very personal memoir changed your life (public life, private life) in any way?*

Unquestionably. I have found my calling, as my sister predicted. I feel validated, not just by the warm response from readers and

critics, but because I DID IT! I stuck with it the whole way, and I validated myself by doing so. I am proud of myself for what I produced, and I know that I can grow to be an even better writer than I am now. I'm so excited by the prospect. And I absolutely love making personal appearances, being out in front of an audience, talking about the writing process, and what I learned from my life and from Pam that might help and inspire others not to give up. So I feel I didn't waste those years when I was an actress, because it's all coming together now in a way that feels authentic. I have a sense of true self-worth, perhaps for the first time in my life, at the age of 55.

*When your sister was diagnosed with cystic fibrosis, you write, "It was as if my family had crossed the waters to a foreign land. We became immigrants in our own lives, leaving behind our identities and relationships as we had known them." That's a powerful description. What do you mean by it?*

A diagnosis of catastrophic illness changes everything. It's a thick line drawn down through your life, separating the before and the after. After, your dreams and goals are altered, or the path toward them may become more rugged. The course you take throughout life, the way you make choices, your strengths and vulnerabilities, are all informed by the illness. Not necessarily defined by it, but definitely informed by it. And often your past choices, and your relationships as they are, become crystal clear. You see everything in a new light. You get different ideas about what's really important. And you find out very quickly who is going to peel away and who is going to stay with you for the long haul; who's going to stand up and who's going to crumble. Even what aspects of yourself you can count on, and which you can't, it's all new, almost foreign.

*Throughout your girlhood and teen years, your relationship with your mother was profoundly troubled. "She had no idea how much I needed to be held," you say at one point in your book. Yet your mother urged you to "tell the truth" in your book. In what ways did the writing itself change your relationship?*

My mother is my hero. She is so completely, beautifully human. She feels every feeling completely. She embodies both the practical and the spiritual and knows when the time has come to be one or the other. I have learned so much about her from writing about her. That's how I discovered her as a human being. We all

tend to mythologize our lives. In writing *Sixtyfive Roses*, I attempted to get past the myth, and in doing so, I found out things about my parents I hadn't known before, that had been hidden from me by my own false assumptions and flawed perceptions.

Mom and Dad both read sections of various manuscripts. Understand, over twenty years there were *many* drafts. At first they tended to take the writing as an indictment of their parenting, and they were quite upset. The book caused them a lot of painful soul searching. But they were always open to discussion, and I am so blessed and grateful for this, because now I don't think there is anything important that isn't out in the open between us. And we got a chance to work on forgiveness, of our selves and each other. When I gave them what I thought would be the final draft, my mother told me it was wonderful, but that they felt I was holding something back out of fear of hurting them. She told me then I had to stand in my own truth, whatever it was, and that she and Dad would find a way to deal with it. She told me to go back and write it again. It took two more years, but it was worth it. They do feel a bit exposed with the publication of the book, but they are intensely proud and supportive. I'm very close to my Mom now. We talk several times a week. Recently, she shared with me that when she hears the song "For Good," from *Wicked*, she thinks of me. I suggest you all download the song and listen! I've got it on my ipod now, and I cry every time I hear it, and think of my Mom.

*You write that you learned "to relinquish the right to own my own physical pain, and suffered the death of my ability to voice it." Can you say a little more about that? To what extent has writing this book given you back your pain, and your voice?*

When you are a caregiver for a person with a painful illness, your own physical pain gets sublimated; it appears less important by comparison. Over a long period of time, this can become incorporated into one's behavior. I was shocked out of this when I finally went to see an osteopath about a knee that had been in pain and swollen for over six months. He was incredulous that I had lived with this condition for so long without seeking attention. I told him my history, and he said, "Don't you know you have the right to own your own pain?" I burst into tears. This was the first time I had been validated in that way, and it was a turning point. I had always been quite vocal about emotional and psychological pain, yet stoic about physical pain. I still have a very high physical pain threshold, so I don't think writing the books has "given me back my pain," as it were, but I have become better at acknowledging pain and seeking help when I experience it. I value myself more, so I give my pain its due. I guess the book has done that for me, in a way.

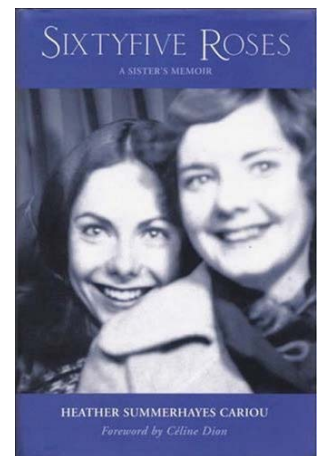
*"Memory has a voice, a vocabulary, its own reflective narrative," you write. "Epiphany may occur in crisis, but reflection cannot. The reflective voice is useless in the face of calamity." Given this fact (and I do agree with it), how do we deal with the difficult challenges life hands us? Do we all have to wait twenty years, and then write a book?*

Pam used to tell me when I was in crisis to go somewhere quiet and listen to my heart. That was good advice. I deal with the difficult challenges in my life now by remembering Pam's legacy: that you can't control life by being afraid of it; that the only true power we have is our power to choose our response to our circumstances; that we must understand the difference between surrender and giving up; and that though there are times when people or dreams must be surrendered, we must never give up. Also, that joy is there for the taking, if care to look for it, even in the midst of sorrow. I also have a card posted on my wall that says "Serenity is not freedom from the storm; it is peace within the storm." Usually, all we have in crisis is the ability to put one foot in front of the other. Meditation, yoga, a long walk, a good cry and a cup of tea, all of these things can put us in a state of reflection however briefly. But the kind of reflection I'm talking about does take time, and distance.

*Now that you've written the story of your life with Pam, what stories of your own will you write?*

I am working on a novel about family betrayal, based on the end of my first marriage, and my uncle's successful attempts to estrange my grandmother from my mother. As my teacher Eunice Scarfe as taught me, I will begin with the truth and then enter the lie. There's a kind of poetic justice in that, now that I think of it.

*Thank you so much for showing us something of the difficult process that was involved in writing this book and for sharing your feelings about it with us. And we'll look forward to reading that novel!*



*I live where the river meets the sea.*

*I live where the waters of the Hudson end their cold journey to the Atlantic. My windows open to the East, the direction Native Americans believe one must face to ask blessings for a new beginning. The morning sun glances off the water strongly enough to blind you. Late afternoon turns the entire West side of Manhattan to flame. At night the rising moon hangs above the jeweled horizon like the Eye of God. The river flows by me, and flows through me. Memory flows through me.*

*I live where the river meets the sea, where push comes to shove, where love and anguish, blame and forgiveness, laughter and sorrow converge on the way to understanding.*

*~Sixty Five Roses,  
A Sister's Memoir*

