



A Conversation With Mary Gordon Spence

by Lisa Shirah-Hiers

Mary Gordon Spence has lived an interesting and diverse life full of surprising twists and turns and what she calls “magic moments.” A gifted speaker, humorist, commentator and author of *Finding Magic in the Mundane*, Mary Gordon (she goes by a double first name) will be our Sunday luncheon keynote speaker at the Stories from the Heart Conference on February 7, 2010. Lisa Shirah-Hiers interviewed her via email for the SCJ.

SCJ: Your website says you grew up “in a small Central TX town where family storytelling and sing-alongs were everyday rituals.” Tell us about your childhood and how it influenced the person you are today.

MG: My daddy grew up with little parental supervision in Eagle Pass, along the Mexican border, in an environment glorified in Wild West movies. My mother had a storybook growing up in a highly educated, refined Tennessee family who moved to McAllen, where my granddaddy practiced law and worked to end political corruption. The blending of these two families provided a rich, diverse environment for my brother, sister and me.

Daddy was 6’5” tall; Mother was 5’4”; and my sister got around in a wheelchair. So for easy access in my household, we had wash rags nailed to the ceiling and showerheads two feet from the ground. Those spatial features weren’t the only things that separated my family from the others in Brownwood, Texas. We had loaded guns in the den and fine china in the dining room, deer blinds in the backyard and a piano and history books in the living room. What my parents had in common was devotion to our family and a belief system that even the most disenfranchised deserved a place at the table. Conversations were always lively in our family—we discussed politics and current events and had a more global perspective than our friends. We celebrated every holiday and were as comfortable frog gigging (frog hunting) with Daddy as we were in community theatre productions with Mother.

SCJ: You changed your major several times in college. What were some of the majors you considered before you settled? What did you finally choose?

MG: It’s beginning to make sense to me, now that I think about it. I didn’t realize at the time that changing majors would set the stage for the many paths I’ve explored since that time. I majored in music—my first love—but felt limited by the time I had to spend in the practice room. I then majored in sociology and philosophy until my daddy said I had to get a teaching certificate.

SCJ: You earned your MA from La Universidad de las Americas in Puebla, Puebla, Mexico. What was that experience like? How did you wind up in a Mexican University?

MG: I’ve always said that *mi corazón es Mexicana*, (my heart is Mexican), so when the person to whom I was married finished his Ph.D. and was offered a teaching position at la Universidad de las Americas, I was raring to go! The MA program in Intercultural Education with an emphasis on Teaching English as a Second Language was right up my alley—a melding of my intellectual curiosity and my teaching abilities. I also taught English in Mexico so there are lots of second-language-learners speaking Texan.

SCJ: Your website says you’ve “taught kindergarten to college, written Texas history materials, drafted legislation, directed state-wide environmental programs and worked for a former president and [as] a magazine editor.” Now you give speeches, emcee, work with schools as a TEA-Certified Team Builder, write newsletter stories, coach writers and presenters, blog, write for the Austin American Statesman and broadcast commentary on KUT! What do you find most rewarding about your varied career?

MG: I’ve always been open to new possibilities and one thing seems to lead to another—it only makes sense after you look back on it all! I’m curious, I’m flexible, and I love new challenges. I accept necessary losses. Except for my roles as mother and grandmother, my favorite one is that of engaging, educating and entertaining adults through speaking and writing. (Speaking is my favorite.) I love that instant connection with people. Maybe the common thread among all the things I’ve done is my love for bringing a fresh perspective to tired, worn out subjects.

SCJ: A frequent comment from your keynote audiences is that you have a wicked sense of humor. Where did it come from? How has it helped you in your life and work?

MG: I have a keen, quick sense of humor, and it keeps me entertained. It’s a gift and a talent that everyone in my family shared. And being able to use it to explore less traditional ways to look at things is such a joy. The most boring presentation I ever heard was *about* humor; I never talk about it. I simply have it, and do it. There are studies that show that laughter prepares the brain for learning. That’s my story, and I’m sticking to it.

SCJ: *What did you learn from writing **Finding Magic in the Mundane**?*

MG: I learned that I had enough staying power to get everything done. In order to keep from getting bored, I added premiums at the end of each story—kind of like the ones you get from becoming a member of public radio or television. Mine were zany facts and stories that amused me.

SCJ: *What are some of your favorite “magic moments”?*

MG: I find magic almost every time I leave my house. (I have to stay home a lot to keep from going into overload.) Baptizing my daddy in the Sabinal River; finding a Band-Aid in my purse when someone needs one; pulling out jumper cables to help someone with a dead battery; running into an old friend on the Zocalo (main square) in Mexico City—my days are full of magic moments.

SCJ: *What have you learned about publishing that you can pass on to those seeking to publish for the first time?*

MG: I chose to self publish my collection of stories because I didn’t want anyone to tell me what to do or how to change them. It was a great experience for me. I do recommend that people hire a great proofreader. I claim that the typos in my book are part of the magic. The truth is that I was horrified when I saw them.

SCJ: *How do you nurture the writer in yourself? Do you have a writing practice or any special rituals? If so what are they?*

MG: I write irregularly—usually when I can’t help it. I struggle with defining myself as a writer. If I wrote everything that rumbled around in my head—the zany things I observe and experience or my commentary on things—I wouldn’t be able to do anything else. I might be rich and famous if I had better writing practices.

SCJ: *Tell me a little bit about your blog marygordonspence.blogspot.com Does it have a theme? Where do you find inspiration for your posts?*

MG: I blog irregularly. (Hum, see a theme here?) It would be too boring for me to become a regular blogger. Plus, I’m not at all certain that other people care about what I think.

SCJ: *What were some major turning points in your life journey?*

MG: Discarding things that no longer work for me and embracing new ones—these are major turning points that occur regularly. Some of them are subtle; others are cataclysmic. When I found out that I didn’t have to buy one roll of film and get another one for free every time I went into Eckert stores, it simplified my life immensely.

SCJ: *What things do you think are most necessary to live an authentic and satisfying life?*

MG: Wonder about things; challenge things; embrace things; celebrate things. I am wedded to living a life that’s authentic for me—it’s not always the easy path, believe me!

SCJ: *Are there any new projects on your horizon?*

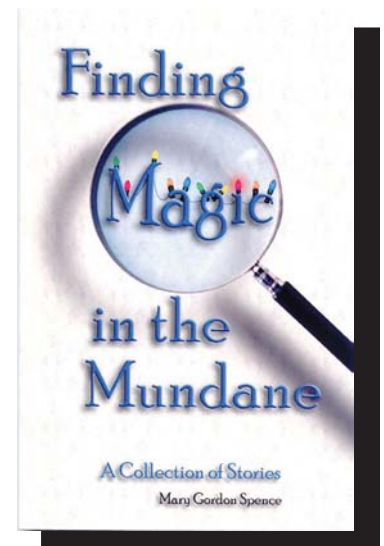
MG: I’ve got several book projects in the works; and I’m planning to get a new screen door.

SCJ: *What are you most looking forward to at the SCN conference this year? Any hints about what you might talk about?*

MG: I am so looking forward to the SCN conference—it will be my first one! Adoring so many women who are involved with SCN puts the icing on the cake for me. I’m sure I’ll tell some stories about life its ownself, and I think it will be one big love fest—at least I hope so.

SCJ: *Is there anything else you’d like to say?*

MG: I think resourcefulness is a major key for thriving. Knowing we have options keeps us sane! There are always other options—always.



Excerpts from “*Finding Magic in the Mundane*”

“I just keep finding more and more magic...it appears when you’re standing on a street corner in Mexico City and run into old friends; when you find an unopened envelope containing a \$500 check or \$20 in the pocket of your winter coat; and when you’re thinking about somebody you miss and they call you.”

“Take good care of your irises. I’m always looking to do more good deeds for poor, neglected plants, and I still carry a shovel in the back of my car.”

Praise for “*Finding Magic in the Mundane*”

“A liberal dose of Mary Gordon Spence is good for our health...and our funny bone.”
~ Ann Richards

“Mary Gordon Spence shows us in bold, sassy style that the tradition of the wry, observant American humorist is still very much alive!”

~ Isaiah Sheffer