



TRUE WORDS

from

Real Women

**An Anthology of Life Writing
by the Women of Story Circle Network**

Edited by Mary Jo Doig

Layout by Robin Wittig

*An Annual Publication of Story Circle Network
The Organization for Women With Stories to Tell*



At the Bridal Salon

Amy Greenspan, Austin TX

At the Bridal Salon
We shop for wedding dresses
And my daughter's face at four is all I see.
Eyes wide, she wore a child's sweet wonder,
That's spilling now from under billowed lace.
The future fills her smile.
The past fills mine.

October 2011

Letter from the Editors:

We are grateful that Story Circle Network brings together such a rich tapestry of wise, wonderful women from all over the globe who are dedicated to life-writing. Our members know the moments of our lives are both fleeting and incredibly precious, and that whenever we record and share them, something extraordinary happens: we experience a powerful circle of connection with each other in which we discover that our individual stories are often universal stories also.

We feel so privileged to have spent these recent weeks working with your exceptional stories and poems. Please know we have taken much pleasure in our respective roles of preparing your words and then presenting them on the pages that follow.

It has not been possible to publish all the submissions received within these 28 pages, despite the compelling nature of nearly all our entries. Thus, we encourage you to go online to <http://www.storycircle.org/members/pdfs/truewords.pdf> where you will read many more entries and where we anticipate you will also be as moved by the wisdom, insights, courage, honesty, and splendor of all the submissions as we have been.

We have several thank you's for the many silent others who have played a part in this anthology:

- The SCN Publications Committee, who oversees and guides all SCN publications with thoughtful wisdom.
- Peggy Moody, our Executive Director. Susan Albert once said words that reflect our gratitude for Peggy: "Thank Goddess for Peggy, who keeps us all pointed in the same direction and in touch with one another!" And so much more.
- Susan Albert, SCN founder, whose vision and dedication to women life-writers birthed SCN, an immeasurable gift to us all.
- Mary Jo would like to also thank:
 - ~ Jane Ross, for her generous mentoring many years ago when she first became True Words editor
 - ~ Amber Lea Starfire, for her kindness in sharing the excellent processes she developed for the 2009 and 2010 Anthologies.
 - ~ Robin Wittig, with whom it is—without fail—simply a joy to work with each quarter on the Journal. This, our first team venture with the Anthology, has been no exception.
- Robin also must acknowledge Mary Jo for her absolutely tireless efforts to collect and perfect the stories we present, not only in this Anthology but also in the quarterly Journal.

Thus, we come back full circle to thank each woman who sent in her stories and poems for the 2011 Anthology. Your commitment to life-writing has placed this beautiful gathering of words in all our hands. Enjoy!

Warmest regards,
Mary Jo Doig, Afton, VA
Robin Wittig, Woodland Park, CO



October, 2011

Table of Contents

At the Bridal Salon	Amy Greenspan.	Cover
Early Morning Sonata at Beemer's Pond	Sue Schuerman.	3
Summer Nights	Carol Ziel	3
Moonlight Gardening	Terry Schreiber	4
Communion on a Sunday Morning	Constance Moylan	4
Hiking in Autumn	Sandra Simon	4
Hug Habit	Kali' Rourke	5
Professional	Lois Halley	5
The Best Ingredients	Helen Leatherwood	6
A Bright Sunny Day	Katherine Ayers	7
The Power of Pebbles	Cathy Scibelli	8
Over Too Soon: 2008	Pat LaPointe	8
My Mother's Gift	Andrea Savee	9
Summer Flight	Amber Lea Starfire	10
The Sweater	Evelyn Moore	11
The Watcher	Teri Heard-Ralbovsky.	12
The Colors of Christmas	Jan P. Hall.	13
Christmas Heartbreak	Doris Ayyoub.	13
Running Away From Home	Sara Etgen-Baker.	14
Communion	Rebecca Keunstler.	15
Joy of Dancing	Victoria Jessop.	15
My Bohemian Rags	Donna Remmert.	16
Remembering August, 1959 - Northern Wisconsin	Susan Flemr.	17
Marriage	Juliana Lightle.	17
Woven	Amy Greenspan.	17
May I Help You?	Linda Sievers.	18
Bridges	Marcy Bashore.	18
A Small Miracle	Khadijah Lacina.	19
True Colors	Dorothy Ross.	20
About Loss	Joan Ellis.	21
Blown by Winds of Change	Nancilynn Saylor.	22
It's a Deathing, My Friend	Lynn Weiss.	22
What Has Frayed	Anne Marie Cheney.	22
Spiritual Editing	Samantha White.	23
The Sculpting of My Life	Lynn Weiss	23
Code Blue	Julia Atwood.	24
Reunion	Judy M. Miller.	25
Labor Day Weekend	Carole Sanford.	26
Where Has Summer Gone?	Grace Fiandaca.	27
Ballad of Owls and Hounds	Barbara Carr.	28



Story Circle Network

True Words from Real Women is an anthology, published yearly. It is written by and for women who want to share their experiences. Its purpose is to encourage readers to become writers, guide women to set down their true stories, and encourage the sharing of women's lives. It is not intended to replace therapeutic assistance.

Anthology Editor

Mary Jo Doig
maryjo_d@yahoo.com

Layout by

Robin Wittig
robinlynn7133@msn.com

©2011 Story Circle Network
Copyrights to all contributed works
remain with the authors.

Membership Rates

One Year: \$45 US
\$55 Canada and Mexico
\$60 Elsewhere

Foreign Memberships: International
Postal Money Order only, please.

Back Issues

Back issues are available as first-run or photocopies. 1-9 issues \$5 each; 10 or more issues: \$3 each. Add postage as follows: \$1.25 for 1 issue, \$5 for 2-5 issues, \$7.50 for 6+ issues.

Missed Issues

We try to ensure that the *True Words Anthology* arrives in your mailbox each year. If you miss an issue, send us a note and we'll mail you a replacement.

Change of Address

If you move, please tell us. Unless you send us your new address, we can't guarantee that you'll receive your anthology and journals.

We write to explore our profound Mother, Nature...



Early Morning Sonata at Beemer's Pond

Sue Schuerman, Cedar Falls IA

The curtain rises to unveil a barren tree quivering in the wind, a rich hint of a cold, crisp day. I throw the blankets over my head and try to ignore the excited chatter of my photographer-husband, "Get up. We must get there before the birds fly out."

Hmmm. Bill didn't get the memo that this is a vacation day—meant for sleeping in, drinking hot tea in my jammies, or reading a mystery while wrapped in Grandma's handmade quilt; in other words, hibernating. There's no use arguing. We're heading out—and soon.

We are traveling to Beemer's Pond to photograph trumpeter swans. The hour and a half drive is sprinkled with talk of Iowa's autumn landscape. Amber waves of grain have turned to brown rows of stubble this November day. We have not yet received a blanket of snow to cover the monochrome palette. We spot a Red Tail hawk perched on a fence post, but very few creatures, feathered or human, stir on this frigid morning.

A curve in the gravel road brightens my face and transforms the drab landscape. I spot an ice covered pond surging with life, the reward for our early morning journey. Hundreds of trumpeter swans, Canadian geese, and mallards have claimed Beemer's Pond. Before I can pull on my sweatshirt, heavy coat, boots, ear muffs, and scarf, Bill is already heading for the icy water. He is covered from head to foot in winter gear—only his hazel eyes visible as he peers through a slit in his face mask—his bare fingers positioned to snap the elusive perfect shot.

Swans, geese, and mallards call to each other creating a cacophony of sound. The bold, brassy blare of trumpeters directs the high-pitched honking of geese and the nasal quacking of hundreds of mallards. The swans' heads bob in rhythm to an unknown tune. Their graceful movement reminds me of a musician pressing the valves on a French horn.

The performance holds me spellbound. I'm an intruder on a feral orchestra warming up for their morning sonata. The raucous score brims with riotous calls, and the gallantry of out-stretched wings rivals any Vegas stage show.

Vigorously led by the trumpet of the swans, the sonata ebbs and flows until the band of feathered musicians stun their audience with sudden flight. The beat of hundreds of wings stills my breath. Bill's camera is clicking. My hands, poised for thunderous applause, rest in mid air.

"Encore," I mutely whisper.

Summer Nights

Carol Ziel, St. Louis MO

Facilitator of w-ecircle 6 and member of w-ecircle 4



I collect summer nights like some people collect King's coins,
Tossing them into the cauldron of my consciousness
Nights where a purple smudged sky dissolves into inky darkness
And stars salt the heavens.
The tremulous song of tree frogs
Cicadas' nocturnal notes
Fireflies strung together like beads weaving their way thru the firmament
I breathe in the night magic as it breathes in me
And we become a galaxy of cosmic dust and tiny suns.
I rest with the new moon as it prepares to pull us into fullness.
And then I take my place in the Universe.

Moonlight Gardening

Teresa Schreiber Werth, Spencerport NY

I love to play in the dirt. Pulling weeds, transplanting perennials, putting in annuals or bulbs, pruning, thinning. It's all good, clean fun. When we moved into our home forty years ago, there were no flower beds. Shrubs and trees a plenty. No flowers. There was, however, a rambling expanse of yard surrounding our little circa 1953 raised ranch house, begging for the color and texture of growing, blossoming things.

We now have ten flower beds of various sizes and shapes. A master gardener taught me how to create soft-edged, irregular beds by laying out a garden hose and digging along its edge. They're mostly filled with hearty perennials that aren't daunted by our long, frigid lake effect winters.

I try to always put them to bed in the early fall after vigorous weeding so that what appears after the dingy, grey snow piles melt, is orderly and well-groomed. Some years I've done better at this than others. I've learned that one pays dearly for autumn laziness! And once spring arrives, my perennial friends begin to return, one by one. First the double blood root and hepatica, trillium and primroses, the jack-in-the-pulpit, May apples, forget-me-nots, lilies of the valley, and at last, the shiny, propagated ginger and deliciously, variegated hostas. If their beds have been left in good order, I enjoy a beautiful, work-free, springtime display for weeks.

My biggest problem is with the flower beds in the front of our house, which faces directly east. A blazing hot morning sun seems to linger there well into the afternoon, making tending to those three small beds a challenge. I am quite certain you could fry an egg on our front door most summer days! (Although, to be honest, I've never tried.) For me, the joy of gardening is obliterated by the discomfort of gardening and sweating, which attracts those pesky, delta-wing biting flies and threatens

sunburn. Consequently, the front flower beds often get out of control as I avoid spending time in the blistering sun during the few months of summer we have; that is, until I discovered moonlight gardening.

Gardening by moonlight? No, it's not those times when night has descended and you're planting your yellow marigolds by flashlight because you promised yourself you'd get it done today. It's a bit more romantic and even a little practical, plus I am so pleased with myself for finding a way to take care of those front flower beds without having to suffer in the heat!

And, no, I'm not into moonlight planting, the science of planting at very specific times according to the moon's phases, which, practitioners say, maximizes growth with a minimum of water waste. My method is definitely unscientific and delightfully spontaneous!

I wait until there is a full moon. Thank you, Mother Nature, for providing me with enough natural light to tell the weeds from the flowers. I flip on the front yard lights for an extra boost of illumination. In long sleeves and jeans, armed with my garden tools and gloves, doused in a light layer of bug spray, I kneel on a soft, folded towel and dig in! A hearty chorus of peepers keeps me company and maybe the dog, if she is curious. The evening air is cool and mellow, with the sweet scent of freshly mowed grass and newly turned soil. If it's a really clear night, I can see the brightest stars and an occasional satellite blinking on its steady, elliptical course as if it is a twinkling bead, gliding on a gigantic string across the sky. Bugs don't bother me much, and fire flies are a constant source of wonder. Bull frogs in the nearby creek croak and belch with gusto.

Those front flower beds are looking good. Their tending is no longer a source of guilt and procrastination. We have a pact for several summer rendezvous by the light (you guessed it!) of the silvery moon.

Communion on a Sunday Morning

Constance Moylan, Denver CO

Let others to their stone and glass temples fly
As the bells ring out their call
To service.
I service a higher god
A quieter god
Who lingers in the faint beating of the bee's wings against the palest rose petals
Who rings out with the whisper of leaves rustling up a hymn.
Who decrees that a simple communion of homemade biscuits,
the freshest of farm stand strawberries and a dollop of yoghurt
enjoyed fully is communion enough to absolve my sins for one day.
And that tomorrow will—in this summer at least—take care of itself tomorrow.
As we forgive us our sins and trespass not against the day
By hiding from it
Behind pews lined like open coffins
and songs that drown out the whispers of the bees
to follow
to swipe honey on my biscuit
on my tongue and worship
the fruits of his labor
of love.



Hiking in Autumn

Sandra Simon, Austin TX
Judith Helburn Writing Circle,
Austin TX

Sparkling days, too short
Crunching red leaves underfoot
Still faintly fiery
Sweat polishing my wrinkles
Winds stirring old dreams
Grieving blind summer missteps
Heading toward winter

We pen stories of our families and careers...



Hug Habit

**Kali' Rourke, Austin TX
w-ecircle 3**

Hugs evoke beginnings to me. When I look back on the relationships I have had and the most important people in my life, there are always intense "hug memories."

The first was from my mother when I was about ten years old. I have the strongest memory of waking her one morning with coffee and she sat up with a surprised and pleased look on her face. She shifted herself up on the pillow so she could take the cup from me and said, "Thank you, sweet heart!" She took a sip and made a murmur of enjoyment and then she set the cup down on the bedside table and opened her arms to me.

I sat sideways on the edge of the bed and wrapped my arms around her, breathing in her distinctive scent which was made up of Estee Lauder Youth Dew, hairspray, just a touch of cigarettes from the previous day, and something that was just her. She was so soft and she hugged me tight and told me she loved me, and I just thought she was beautiful.

She would laugh so hard at that now. She would say, "Oh yes, first thing in the morning, with my hair every which way and no makeup, I am sure I was breathtaking!" But she was and I will always remember.

The second memorable hug was from my very first boyfriend. We were both twelve and his name was Ricky Nelson—yes, just like the singer. He was the son of one of my mother's best friends and although we lived in adjoining towns, their friendship meant we got to see each other fairly often.

He was sweet, romantic, a lovely boy with dark hair, green eyes, and freckles. Our first hug came on a summer day while all of the kids were playing in the back yard near an old house that was empty at the time. It had a wide front porch with steps that splayed across it, and we sat next to each other in the dappled sunlight, just holding hands and talking about nothing in particular.

You know how, sometimes, you just know something is going to happen in a relationship? Even at twelve, I guess I had developed that faculty, because suddenly

I got just a little nervous and sure enough, that long, strong arm looped around the back of my head, down to my shoulders, and he was holding me. I remember turning to him on the stair, angling my face toward his and just looking in his grass-green eyes as I put my arm around him, too. We just sat there, content to be hugging each other and I thought, "This is what love is like."

The last memorable hug from Ricky happened two years later when I left home to pursue my singing career. It was awkward, sweet and so poignant, as though we both knew somehow that it was a goodbye forever. We never saw each other again.

The most important hug in my romantic life, however, came many years later when I was twenty-seven. I had joined a video dating service a few years before and one night in March brought my first date with my future husband. We had a great phone conversation earlier in the week and I had anticipated our date since then, picturing the dark-haired, bearded guy with sparkling blue eyes behind his aviator style glasses (it was the '80s!) that I had seen on the introduction video.

The knock came on my door and there he stood. He was about six feet tall, very thin, and had no beard. To my shocked eyes he appeared about thirteen years old without it. I covered my dismay as we went to dinner and then for a walk, and I had a wonderful time. He was funny, charming, very assured, and took it quite well when I pointedly said, "I really liked the beard."

The hug occurred at the door as he was about to leave. As I mentioned, he was quite thin and I am a tall, full-bodied woman so I was a little apprehensive about the hug. Was I going to feel like I was hugging a teenager? Would he think I was too big for him? Would this be totally awkward? All of these thoughts raced through my brain, but I need not have worried. His hug was just like him: warm, strong, solid, and so nice. We just

fit together and that should have been a hint to me, but it wasn't and that is another tale to tell.

Next came the first hug for each of my daughters as the doctor gently laid her on my chest after birth. Their first hugs for me clutched on like I was a life raft in their ever-changing seas as they grew into toddlers.

Hugs from dear friends in celebration, in welcome, and in sorrow or comfort: these are landmarks in my memory and writing about them makes me want to give some more out today!

Professional

Lois Halley, Westminster MD

The red eye blinks
a split-second before
the brown-skinned man
pushes through the double doors.

Thrusting into my arms,
a small chocolate-colored boy,
"He ran in front of my car;
I could not stop."

I am already running,
an intern on my heels,
watching the red ooze
from nose, eyes, ears.

"Where is the peds ambu?"
"Here, here," I shove it
into his hands.

A desperate attempt to inflate
the tiny lungs.
Pronounced at 10 p.m.
Is that the siren's plaintive call?
A mother's anguish,
"My baby! My baby!"

Don't become emotionally involved,
we were taught. Be professional.
You can't do your job
if feelings interfere.

We defy the teachers,
student nurse and student doctor.
Embrace not in romance,
but in grief.

Hurry, dry the tears
The red eye is blinking.



The Best Ingredients

Helen Leatherwood, Beverly Hills CA
w-ecircle 6



My Aunt Millie made the best egg custard I've ever tasted, creamy and rich with a perfect texture, not too runny, not too thick. This was one of my father's favorite desserts, and when I was growing up, every three or four months, we'd drive the twelve miles out to the tiny town where Aunt Millie lived with her husband, Uncle Charlie, for a visit and the promise of her egg custard.

Aunt Millie and Uncle Charlie seemed so old to me then, but now when I do the math, I realize they were both only in their early sixties. According to my parents, Uncle Charlie inherited a lot of money from his rich farming family and also worked much of his life as the president of a local bank. This provided enough money for Aunt Millie to wear mink coats at a time when other people were scraping pennies together for groceries, and to allow Uncle Charlie to sail around the countryside in a fancy convertible, a big cigar in his mouth.

Their home was not grand, but the front room was filled with many antiques, including a rosewood piano. The furnishings were old-fashioned but high quality, even through a child's eyes, with wood polished to a high gloss, along with glassware that gleamed crimson and green. The room smelled of fresh lemon oil, and I realize now that Aunt Millie, anticipating our visit, no doubt polished the furniture every time just before we arrived.

The kitchen was always spotless, as was every corner of Aunt Millie's house. The only thing out of place was Uncle Charlie, who was always sitting with legs outstretched on his recliner in the back room. The television was always on when we visited, and Uncle Charlie, freshly shaven but still in his pajamas and robe, sat staring wordlessly at the screen.

"Charlie, Fid and his family are here," Aunt Millie would

say once we'd all dutifully filed into the room and formed a half-circle round his chair.

Uncle Charlie made a low growl, which Aunt Millie interpreted as, "Charlie is saying hello."

We—my parents, two brothers, and I—would go up, one by one, and kiss Charlie's cheek, which smelled of freshly applied Old Spice, then we'd go out to the back yard and sit on the gliders and matching chairs that were grouped together under the shade of an oak.

Aunt Millie, always neat in a print dress and apron, served freshly squeezed lemonade from a tall clear pitcher into glasses with blue sailboats painted on them. As the ice tinkled in the lemonade, she pulled a light blue napkin off of a plate filled with chicken salad sandwiches made with sweet relish and mayonnaise and served on triangles of crustless Wonder bread. As she and my parents chatted, I sat with my brothers on one of the gliders—the glass of lemonade sweating from the coolness of the ice and the heat of the day—and dreamed of when our visit would end and we'd get the egg custard that was never spoken of, but which was as constant as Uncle Charlie.

I couldn't imagine Uncle Charlie as ever being young, much less handsome and rich. He was, for me, a slack-jawed shell of a man who looked as if his constant care caused my sweet aunt to live a dreary, one note life. It was clear by the way her otherwise sad face brightened when we arrived, that Aunt Millie's life was lonely. After all, her constant companion had been struck dumb by what my mother referred to as "a death-blow stroke," and though he could walk with assistance, Uncle Charlie could do nothing for himself except sit in his recliner and stare at *The Price is Right*.

My aunt called my father "Fid" rather than George, his real name, because he'd loved the sound of the fiddle when they were growing up. Only she and her younger sister, Aunt Lucille, called Daddy that, and they both said it with love in their voices.

Finally—and it sometimes felt as if we'd been there since before dawn—Daddy would rise to leave, which prompted Aunt Millie to disappear into the house. For some reason, we were never required to say good-bye to Uncle Charlie, probably because he often fell asleep during our hello. Soon Aunt Millie would return carrying a paper grocery bag, her palm supporting the bottom. Inside, we all knew, were two quart jars filled to the brim with her delectable egg custard.

To this day, egg custard remains my very favorite dessert, though I've never found anyone who can make it as well as Aunt Millie. Perhaps it was the anticipation that went into its preparation—of lively talk and laughter—that made her custard so good. Or else two ingredients that distinguish it from all the others I've ever tasted—gratitude and pure love.



We remember our fathers...



A Bright Sunny Day

Katherine Ayers, Makawao HI
Jasmyne Boswell Writing Circle, Maui HI



My Dad always said, "You just got to get out there in the ring, and fight," and that's what he did for his whole life.

He fought and emerged victorious after a burst abdominal aorta and emergency surgery, survived an operation on his gall bladder and small intestines that were being strangled by scar tissue. When he got diagnosed with macular degeneration, he continued to read heady scientific articles with a large magnifier and a bright light. When I was a kid I remembered he stayed up many nights past midnight reading legal briefs. He sued Minnesota Mining for patent infringement, and he won.

In his late eighties and early nineties he fought against illness and death. I felt powerless as I watched his health decline, but realized that there was nothing I could do to alleviate his suffering. First he broke his hip, then he tripped on his sneaker shoelace, fell and cracked his nose on the concrete pavement, injuring his neck. He had to walk with a cane, then a walker. In the end he succumbed reluctantly to a wheelchair.

The last time I saw him, he was sitting in his wheelchair reading with his very bright spotlight and magnifier. He was dressed in a tailored wool jacket, even though the heat in his apartment was set on high. He could barely turn his neck due to numerous neck injuries he got from playing football and soccer.

When he saw me, he turned up his hearing aid. I moved closer until I was right in his face. "It's been good hanging out with you, Joe," I told him. He nodded and a lone tear made its way down his flushed left cheek.

There was genuine delight and optimism in his eyes as we said goodbye.

When I got home, I decided to call my friend, Sally, remembering that she knew about Tibetan Buddhist practices around dying.

"What does he believe in?" she asked. "Jesus? Buddha?"

"Nothing," I answered. "As far as I know, he thinks that this life is it."

"How do you think he would feel about a bright sunny day?"

"He could probably relate to that," I responded.

"Well then, tell him that when he is ready to go, to gather all of his energy into his heart and then shoot it out of the top of his head into a bright sunny day. Say to him, 'Do not be afraid. Any bright lights or loud noises you hear have to do with the greatness of your own mind.'"

"Oh," I said, "I don't think he'd buy that."

"It doesn't matter," she retorted. "He'll receive it anyway if you send it to him mentally or psychically. You'll know that it worked because his response to you will change."

I practiced sending per Sally's instructions. My Dad's response to me did change. The next time I phoned him, there was a genuine

and spontaneous and joyous quality to his voice as he said, "How are you, darling?"

Darling. Wow, I liked it. He even said he loved me just before we hung up. This was an amazing crack in his business-as-usual shell.

My Dad died at age 94 in the winter of 2000. A couple of months later, I called Carol, my Dad's trusted friend and caretaker.

"Great to hear from you," she said.

"Thanks," I said. "How are you doing?"

"I'm really tired of the snow!"

The last time I saw Carol she was viewing my Dad's dead body. Standing next to his blue stainless steel casket, she patted his hand, tears ran down her cheeks as she sputtered, "God bless you. I'll miss you."

On the other end of the phone, Carol said, "I really miss him and I asked him to give me a sign that he's okay, but he didn't."

Moved to tell her my experience, I said, "I woke up the day he died at about 3am. I was groggy, grumpy, and irritated, and I just wanted to go back to sleep. I finally decided to just relax into what I was feeling, which was quite frustrated and lightheaded. As I settled down, I felt a distinct presence in the room; a sense of my father. He appeared to be delighted and I heard words exclaiming, 'I'm free! I'm free!' and, 'I made it!' over and over again.

"The energy in the room felt celebratory. I mentally acknowledged his exuberance and newfound sense of freedom, mentally sent him a thought something like, "Good going," and I fell back asleep.

"Less than two hours later the phone rang. It was his secretary, Peggy. 'I waited awhile to call you, as I know it is early there. Your Dad passed away a few hours ago.'"

Carol was quiet on the other end of the phone. "I've been to the cemetery to visit him. The mausoleum feels creepy."

"He's not there," I said.

"I know," she affirmed, "but it helped to go there and put a rose bud on the door. I didn't get a sign then, but now I've gotten a sign from you."

I look out the living room window and notice that it's raining lightly. I tell Carol about a delicate rainbow that is forming, that is silhouetted against pines. Was my Dad telling us, "I'm okay?"

"Looks like we're getting another sign," I said.

As I sit down to write and tell this tale, the rain stopped and the sun came out. It's a bright sunny day.

In the summer of my ninth year, I decided I had to have a Pebbles Flintstone doll. I have no recollection why this happened. Maybe a clever advertising campaign got inside my head and brainwashed me. Or perhaps one of my friends received the doll as a birthday present. Whatever the reason, I wanted that doll very badly, and the quest to get my parents to buy her became almost an obsession.

I tried to bring up the Pebbles Flintstone doll at every opportunity and I was not subtle. I cut a picture of it out of a magazine ad and hung it on my bedroom wall. I would say goodnight to the picture each evening when my mother came to tuck me in, and I remember one night patting the sheet next to me and saying, "Wouldn't it be nice if I had the Pebbles doll there to cuddle?" I would line up my other dolls and tell them, when a parent was in hearing distance, how Pebbles would be joining our family one day soon. I set a place for her at my little dolly tea table.

Whenever one of my parents would walk in the living room while I was watching the Flintstones cartoon, I would say something like, "Isn't Pebbles cute? I just love her." One day while my mother was ironing, I walked back and forth, then in and out of the room until she asked, "What are you doing?"

"I'm imagining how much fun it would be to push my Pebbles doll in my doll carriage," I told her

Looking back, I admire my persistence in light of the huge obstacle I faced. My mother was a thrifty New Englander who couldn't rationalize the idea of spoiling a child with something she considered a "big present" for no special occasion. Ice cream pops, a little Golden book, or a 15-cent Disneykin toy were "no occasion" treats.

"A doll is a birthday or Christmas present," she explained to me very clearly whenever I brought up the subject. "You don't need a doll now. If you still want it by Christmas, we'll see." My father offered no opinion whenever he heard my mother say this, so I assumed he agreed.

Nevertheless, with the relentless optimism of childhood, I continued my campaign for several weeks.



During my years of training in clinical psychology and through my own years of therapy, I was taught that the relationship you don't discuss is most likely the one that had the greatest impact on your life. I spent many hours talking about how Mom's behavior and attitude affected the person I became and, as such, the problems on which I focused in therapy. I can remember only a few times when I talked about my dad. However, as he approached age 88, I found that I could no longer avoid thinking about our relationship.

From about nine years of age, due to my mother's neurotic behavior and long held feelings of anger towards my dad, I became my father's "partner." From that time until I left home at eighteen, I met him at the door each night as he returned home from work. I would greet him, hug him, and take his hat and tie. He would sit down to eat the meal I cooked for the family. If there were errands to run such as grocery shopping, I would

The Power of Pebbles

Cathy Scibelli, East Norwich NY
w-ecircle 8

Then one night my father pulled into the driveway after work and got out of the car holding a big bag in his hands. My mother was in the yard stoking the charcoals on our barbecue. "What's that?" she asked, gesturing to the bag as my father went over to kiss her. "Just something," he answered and grinned at me where I sat petting my cat under our apple tree.

Somehow, instinctively I knew what the "something" was and I jumped up and ran over to my father. "Let me see!" I yanked on his arm and he handed me the bag. As soon as I peeked inside, I saw the box with the lettering "Pebbles." I pulled it out yelling, "Yay!" and reached up to hug my father. My mother gave him one of "those looks" and asked, "What did you do that for?"

He just grinned and shrugged.

Nearly fifty years later I can't remember much about any other doll I had. I remember very few of their names. I know I had Thumbelina because I remember the wind-up mechanism on her back never worked right and she didn't roll over the way she was supposed to. I had a doll named Blabby that made a weird noise that sounded like "Wack-oo" when you squeezed her stomach. I'm pretty sure I had a Chatty Cathy doll, too, because I remember people teasing me about the doll when it came out. I don't know if I received those dolls for Christmas or my birthday and I don't remember playing with them.

But I remember how special I felt when my father bought me that Pebbles doll for no apparent reason other than he knew it was something I really wanted. I carried it around, slept with it, and played with it for several years, and still regret that I gave it away when I was in high school and felt I was "too old" to have dolls decorating my room. Whenever I think of that moment when he presented me with that doll, I can still see his grin and his eyes meeting mine in that conspiratorial way. My father died 40 years ago, but the loving bond he created in that one act in that one moment will never die.



Over Too Soon: 2008

Pat LaPointe, Prospect Heights IL
Facilitator for w-ecircles 9 and 13

accompany him after dinner. I was the one who would fill him in on what was happening with the rest of the family. I did his laundry and ironed his work shirts. I tried, in a way that only a young child or teenager was capable of, to listen to his complaints and concerns about Mom.

When I left home, and after many years of therapy, I told him of my intention to confront Mom about many things that occurred during those early years. His adamant response that I not confront her surprised me, saying that if I did she would probably end up in a psychiatric hospital. Until then I had no idea he understood how disturbed she was and I was stunned to realize how protective he was of her. It was only much later that she gained insight into her past behavior and I saw how valid his concerns had been when she fell into a deep clinical depression.

Years passed and Mom recovered with the help of medication and therapy. She had to deal with her own demons and then had the role of caring for most of Dad's daily needs. Dad's kidneys were failing and even with the help of hearing aids, he became basically deaf. He slept most of the day and had difficulty not only hearing but also understanding what he was being told. His memory became sketchy from day to day.

He was still dependent on me for many things: his doctor visits, his medication, and his finances. When the three of us went out, it was me who guided him and his walker and who steadied him as he walked. When we ate together I prepared his plate and cut up his food. He had lost many of his teeth but felt that getting new ones would be "a waste of time and money."

Each year before Christmas, Mom and Dad came over to my home so that Mom could help me wrap the Christmas gifts. It was that day last year that not only brought back all the memories of my taking care of Dad in my childhood but which forced me to really understand the man he was this day.

I picked them up and drove them to my house. When we arrived I opened the car door to let Dad out. As I did he said, "Help me." He had never said this before. I took his hand but found that this was not enough. I had to wrap my arms around him to guide him to the door. I looked at him and saw not only appreciation but a tear in his eye.

Later we sat down to dinner. As always, I prepared his plate and cut up his food. As dinner progressed I watched as he took

food he found difficult to chew from his mouth and placed it to the side of his plate. This was something I'd seen him do many times. However, moments later I looked over again at him and saw he was having difficulty remembering what he had already tried to eat and what he hadn't. Dad was always a very proud man and I was torn over whether to help him or not. I sat there feeling myself tear up as we finished the meal.

When I took them home I again reached out to help him to the door. Again he said, "Help me." It was no less a shock for me to hear this again. When I had them safely inside their home he grabbed my hand tightly and said, "Thank you." His grip became even stronger as he looked me in the eye and said, "Please take good care of yourself." This was a moment of intimacy that I had never before experienced with him. Without thinking or hesitating I put my mouth right next to his hearing aid and, with a whisper, responded in a way I can only remember having done maybe once or twice before: "I love you, Dad."

At Christmas nearly all my attention was focused on Dad. I wanted to feel close to him and try to bury the thought that this might be his last Christmas. He seemed to be paying attention to what was going on even though he could barely hear the conversations. When everyone else had gone and I was helping to clean up, he again took my hand and said, "It's all over too soon." I knew in my heart he wasn't talking just about Christmas.

2011: In the past three years Dad's dementia worsened and his health failed. He passed away on July 1st. Although he lived to 91, for me, his life was "over too soon."

and our mothers...

My Mother's Gift

Andrea Savee, Lakewood CA, w-ecircle 15

My mother wrote these poems in June of her seventy-ninth year. My mother, Beulah Irene Hagedorn, died June twenty third, two thousand four, six days before her eighty-third birthday. She left me all the words she'd ever written.

A flat rectangular dress-box splits at the seams with hundreds of pieces of yellowing paper of various sizes. She began writing at age sixty following the end of her thirty year marriage. She wrote to save her life and her sanity, always in her usual steady and elegant script.

In the last decade of her life, she spent months in the large upstairs bonus room of her house assembling a photo album. Pressed between the plastic sheets aren't pictures, but typed pages of poems and thoughts, remembrances filled with sorrow and grief, rantings and regrets. Eventually, reconciliations, revelations, and peace:

I stayed and faced my demons where I had created them, where I found them—in the bedroom, at the dining table, in my children's eyes, my ex-father-in-law's groans, my ex-mother-in-law's strained struggle to cope, and the dark accusing hours when my inner voices badgered me into hell and back. Finally, I walked through the night into the day repeating a litany of God's promises of love and forgiveness, forgiving everyone in memory until I came to myself.

I grew up hearing a fairy tale that turned out to be the story of my own beginning. She recorded this on one of her pages: *My fourth child was conceived on August twenty seven, nineteen hundred and fifty nine because I knew from an unknown source deep within me that there was a child who would be a special gift to me.*

I grew up hearing my mother's story from its beginning and living it with her to its end. In my hands now is her life in her own words deconstructed and reconstructed on the page. Words no one else has ever read.

Until now.



When I Die

When I die
close my eyes.
I will have
gone away.
Keep the news
quiet.
My departure will be
unnoticed,
except to you
who hear me
and watch.
Be quiet yourselves.
Hold no public services.
Sing a song
you like,
and deal with loss
your way.
I will watch.
Let no one look
at my empty body.
Give it back
to the earth,
quickly, quietly
and move on.
God watches.

1921

No one
Came
to the
chamber
where
I waited
Inviting
Me
to be born.
I slid
Down
the corridor
and entered
this side
of life
in a small
square room,
out
of a
nineteen
year old girl
to a
twenty year old
boy
who held
me and
whispered
"Welcome."

Summer Flight

(excerpt from my memoir in progress,
A Mother Like Mine)
Amber Lea Starfire. Napa CA, w-ecircle 12

Fifteen minutes into a twenty-minute flight from Denver to Colorado Springs, darkness closed in on us. When we'd lifted off the tarmac the clear sky held only a few scattered clouds. Now, thunderclouds wrapped around us and the sky went black. We could barely see the tips of our wings. Rain and hail pounded the windshield. Our one-engine plane dipped and rose and tipped, my stomach flip-flopping with it. Veins stood out like blue cords on my mother's hands as she fought to control the plane, which rocked from side to side like a toy in the hands of a great, malevolent monster.

Jagged knives of lightning pierced the darkness, accompanied by explosions of thunder. I screamed, covered my ears, certain we would be torn to pieces and scattered over the landscape below. In the seat behind me, my ten-year-old brother Michael was either yelling or laughing maniacally, I couldn't tell for the din of the storm.

My mother decided to try to outrun the tempest. Aiming the nose of the plane toward a thin grey line on the horizon, she flew the 180 Cherokee as fast as it would go—125 miles per hour. But the storm clamped its jaws around us.

Four days before, on June 16, 1967, we'd posed for local reporters before taking off in our rented one-engine Piper for a two-month tour of the United States. We were a photogenic threesome: my mother trim in her brown leather flight jacket and short wavy hair; me, prepubescent and awkward, standing close to my mother, emulating her confidence; Michael, in jeans and short sleeved, button-down shirt, scowling against the sun.

In those days, a woman flying solo across the U.S. with two children was daring. Before we left, my mother had shrewdly promoted us, gaining sponsorships from aviation companies, hotels, and resorts, which in turn would benefit from the publicity we brought to them. We'd spent that morning with journalists and the President of an aviation map company, delaying our takeoff until midafternoon. Before now, my mother had not realized that flying so late in the day could be perilous.

"Look for a place to land," my mother yelled over the roar of the wind and rain. "A field, a road, anything!" Her arms strained and trembled as she continued to battle the storm. Glad to have something to do, Michael and I squinted through the darkness. Sometimes, we could make out the faint outlines of fences, the green and yellow of fields thick with corn. We'd been flying for over two hours and had no idea where we were.

"Dear God, please don't let my children die!" I heard Mom say. "I'll do anything, just let us get through this."

"I stared at her open-mouthed. My mother was an atheist. Hearing her pray terrified me more than anything that had happened so far. Always in control, she belied fear—even to herself—fiercely

attacking anything that tried to hold her back from what she wanted. And she always won. I had never heard her plead or bargain—let alone with a god whom she did not believe existed—in any of the risky situations we'd been in during our travels around the world two years before. I'd never doubted my mother's ability to keep us safe. Now, hearing her pray undermined everything I had thought to be sure; if my mother didn't know how to get out of this situation, then no one did, and we might really die.

"Look!" Michael yelled, pointing. He'd spotted a small airstrip with a red-roofed hanger and a few planes.

On our first two approaches, the wind blew us right off the runway. On the third try, we approached as if to land on the gravel to the left of it. We touched down. The plane rocked and bounced, threatening to veer off into the ruts of the ploughed field next to the strip, but we were on the ground! We taxied to a tie-down spot, pushed open the door, and struggled to hook the chains to the wings with our small hands. Rain drenched us and the wind pulled at our clothes and hair.

Grabbing our shared overnight case, we ran to the small airport office. It was closed, so we walked to the country road that fronted the airport—empty as far as we could see—and waited. After a short time, a battered red and white truck came in our direction. We stuck out our thumbs.

The truck stopped and a man with a deeply tanned and lined face rolled down the window. "Climb in," he said. The three of us crammed into the front seat, water draining onto the floorboards and into the upholstery.

"I saw you come down," he said, "thought you might be in some trouble and came to take a look."

I thought that was just about the nicest thing I'd ever heard. The man told us we were still in Colorado, in Las Animas about 125 miles southeast of Colorado Springs, and drove us to the nearest motel.

Getting ready for bed, Michael teased me about being afraid. Holding his head in his hands and rolling his eyes up so that all we could see were the whites, he pretended to scream. "Aaah! Aaah!" he wailed. "We're going to die! We're going to die!"

I threw a pillow at him. "You were scared too, you little liar!" But I started to laugh, because he was right, and because it all seemed so funny now.

Mom laughed, too. I tried to tease her about praying. "I did not!" she said. Her still trembling hands betrayed her, but the denial comforted me: it felt like the mother I believed in had returned, and that mother would never admit that she'd been scared enough to pray.





The Sweater

Evelyn Moore, San Antonio TX
 Marcy Bashore Circle, Writing From the Heart;
 San Antonio TX

I have always pictured myself as a creative person, but thinking back now I have a little trouble remembering the early things I created. There were childhood potholders I wove out of stretchy rounds of fabric, over and under, over and under on the little metal loom. Later, there was the sign I drew with the face of a kid, eating a popsicle. This signage we used for the stand in our backyard where we sold the homemade frozen treats to our parents. I remember the drawing looking quite cartoonish, but that's about all.

The first really creative piece I remember came a little later. It must have been when I was in the seventh grade, or at least the first year I took a home economics class in school. We had just completed sewing an apron under the watchful eye of our teacher. I had received a grade of A-. I was ready to sew on my own.

Christmas was quickly approaching and not knowing what gift to give my mother, I decided I would sew something for her. We had not learned to use a pattern in class yet, and even I knew that making a garment was way above my level of expertise. A hemmed cup towel and a simple gathered half apron that tied at the back of the waist were the extent of my sewing experience.

I decided on a sweater. I will call it that for the lack of a better descriptive term. Using a gray sweatshirt I purchased for two dollars at the neighborhood dime store, and whatever trims I could find in my mom's sewing machine drawer, I set about creating a masterpiece for my mother's Christmas gift.

Slit the shirt up the front, cut off the ribbing at the neck, cuffs and the hem. *This doesn't seem too hard at all*, I thought. I had an assortment of rickrack and ribbons to work with, but not enough of any one color group to complete the project. *What the heck, I'll just use it all.*

The project started out okay as I recall, but things quickly went downhill. It's harder than you would think to sew the really tiny rickrack, especially on a fluffy sweatshirt. Around the neck, down the front, and around the hem I sewed. Row after row the colorful edgings painted my mother's gift. Some rows seemed to go on straight, others not so much. I ripped out the stitching, not so straight down the middle of the trim, several times before I thought it was good enough. Or I just gave up. The sewing machine began to jam; fuzz from the inside of the shirt lodged in and around the bobbin case: thread knotted up on the inside of the sweater. *At least it won't show when she wears it*, I thought.

Somewhere in the stitching and ripping process, I pricked my finger and a small smear of blood got on the upper left shoulder of the shirt. *No problem, I'll wash it out when I finish.* I turned up the cuffs, added a few more rows of trim, and the sweater was complete. Into the washer it went. A little detergent and hot water, then some gift wrap and ribbon. I couldn't wait for Mom to see my creation.

Out of the dryer, the shirt didn't look quite right. The rickrack was puckered, the saw tooth edges curled. I ironed the trim the best I could but it never really laid flat. The bloody smear on the

left shoulder was now brown. I didn't know hot water would set blood stains.

With much care, I wrapped my creation and placed it beneath the decorated tree. The anticipation of giving my mother her gift was almost more than I could stand. On Christmas morning I proudly presented the package to her.

"I made this for you, Mama," I beamed.

She carefully loosened the tape, trying not to tear the paper, and set the bow aside to save for use another year. As she lifted the gray sweatshirt with rows and rows of colored trim out of the box, tears welled up in her eyes. My heart seized and panic set in. *She didn't like it*, was all I could think. *I should have bought her something: a bottle of perfume, a new wallet perhaps.*

Then, "Oh Evelyn, it's beautiful, I love it," she said as she pulled me to her and embraced me for what seemed like forever. I melted against my mother's chest. With the sweater folded on her lap, I noticed her fingers lightly caress the stain on the left shoulder. She didn't ask and I didn't offer an explanation. I think mothers just know about these things. She told me it was perhaps the most beautiful sweater that she had ever received, as she pulled it on over her night gown. The slit up the front may have been a little off center and the sleeves seemed an awkward length but she never let on that she noticed or cared.

My mother wore that sweatshirt sweater for years to come. She even re-sewed some of the rickrack that came loose after many washings. When I questioned why she just didn't throw that old thing away, she said, "Because you made it for me, and I still love it." She would quickly change the subject in an effort to suppress the emotion in her eyes.

You know, in spite of all of the time that sweater spent in the washer, the blood stain, though lighter, never came out. I don't think she would have had it any other way.



...and find childhood threads that interface with our adulthood...

As I pace shin deep near the water's edge, cooling off in the water for a few minutes, I watch my seven year old son splash and swim with his friends a few yards away. Standing sentinel like this, a school of sunfish swimming around my legs, reminds me of a day in late summer, very much like this one—white clouds brushed across a robin's egg blue sky with a light breeze providing a respite from the intensity of the sun—when Mom parked underneath the maple tree, our usual spot, not far from the water's edge.

Before our station wagon settled into park, Mary and I had the doors open, jumping out, bare legs tearing away from the hot vinyl bench seat with the ripping sound and subsequent sting of a Band-aid torn away from tender skin. Barefoot, dressed in matching green and mustard, floral patterned baby-doll bikinis with little ruffles on the bloomers, we raced each other across the prickly, dry, late summer grass to the water's edge while Mommy finished unloading the car.

The afternoon stretched out lazily before us, an indulgent blend of flavors and textures: the salty, sweet taste of my greasy fingers as I licked the last of Mommy's cornflake coated, picnic chicken from them; the slippery tickle of the sunfish that swam near my legs as I waded near the shore; the cool, silkiness of the water against my skin; and, the warm caress of the sun on my face and shoulders, like a reassuring hand, as I popped up out of the water.

Like baby seals, Mary and I spent hours chasing each other in the water doing flips and underwater summersaults. When we were tired, we'd drag our bodies, beaded with water, up onto the warm, hard surface of the dock to sun ourselves.

I don't remember what Mom did. Like I do today, she probably paced the shore. Maybe she dipped my infant brother, Larry, gently in and out of the water or supported his little body to float gently on its surface for his first swimming lessons. Maybe she read while he napped; one eye on the page, the other on us. Much like I have today, never really free of duty as watcher.

However, I do remember the sound of her voice calling us, "Girls," high pitched and sing-song, breaking the silence of late afternoon when the din of other children splashing and playing and the roar of motor boats subsided. She stretched out the one syllable word to two so it sounded more like "gir-rels."

Eyes closed; water logged; dozing in the late afternoon sun on the warm dock. Rocked gently in rhythm with the soft breeze; tiny waves splish-splashed against the side. Her call startled us out of our half sleep. Summoned, we slipped back into the cool, late afternoon water and swam to shore.

Mom greeted us with soft bath towels. "You two are little

The Watcher

Teri Heard-Ralbovsky, Chelmsford MA
w-ecircle 11

brown berries," she cooed as she rubbed our sun-bleached hair and bronzed skin dry. Sunscreen was not a part of our summer wardrobe in those days.

She left us seated on the picnic blanket, wrapped snugly in our towels and Larry asleep between us. Calling over her shoulder, "Teri, you're in charge," she walked toward the water for a quick dip. After a day of watching and waiting, it was her turn to swim away; briefly freed of her role of watcher, the mantle temporarily passed on to me.

The water had darkened to a deep blue—almost black—flecked with golden shards of sunlight that glinted back at me like the eye of a snake. As I watched Mommy's slender legs being swallowed inch by inch as she waded away from shore, I hugged my knees to my chest. When she reached the spot where the skirt of her bathing suit floated around her waist like a tutu, she drew her slender arms up into a triangle over her head and dove underneath the surface; swallowed whole by the dark water.

My tummy got that sick feeling deep down.

A shallow breath in and out until her head and arms broke the surface of the water. Using long, straight, slow strokes, she swam toward the rope in the middle of the lake where boats had sped back and forth trailing water skiers earlier that day.

We weren't allowed to swim out that far; it wasn't safe, Mommy told us. She didn't say why, but I guessed

it was because the giant clam lived out there. That's why there was a rope marking the spot. No swimming; only boats.

Based on the area that was roped off, the clam must have been huge, even bigger than the one we'd seen at the Natural History Museum in Cleveland a few weeks ago, the one that was so large both Mary and me could curl up inside.

Mommy was halfway to the rope. I glanced sideways at Mary. Her head was resting on her knees, more tummy sickness like when I swing too high on the swing. Mommy kept swimming. She was getting smaller and smaller and I had to scrunch my eyes to see her head just above the water's surface.

Maybe she'd turn back now.

Larry started fussing. I put my hand on his belly and gently rolled him from side to side like a little dough ball. *Turn back now, Mommy*, I said inside my head. But, she was still swimming away. Larry fussed louder. I felt for the pacifier, but couldn't look away from the water. I found it and found his mouth.

When Mommy reached the rope, stopped, turned and then dove beneath the surface, I sucked in my breath and started counting—*one...two...three...four...five...* until her head and arms broke the surface of the water. Exhaling belly flutters, I watched her swim long, straight, slow strokes back to us.



When I was a little girl, Christmas was always bright and gold. My heart beat faster as each day of December passed—snail-slow in the beginning, then much too quickly. As the Special Day approached, Christmas Eve day was the most difficult day. *Had I been good? Did I say my prayers? Help Grandpa around the house enough? Suppose I forgot something; would Santa still come? My little mind spun like a top. What if...?*

My teen years brought changes in how I felt about Christmas; subtle in the beginning, then like waves of midnight blue the day I discovered a closet full of goodies and realized everything there was what I asked Santa for. I was crushed; my heart broken. It seems I cried for days. On Christmas morning I broke Grandpa's heart; I refused to open a single present or speak to him because I'd learned that Santa was a lie. I knew I'd hurt Grandpa because he took a long walk without me—something he'd never done before. And the presents under the tree? Sometime later I relented and took them to my room where I opened them sadly. I eventually told Grandpa, "Thanks," and gave him a hug, but I could tell his feelings were still a little bruised.

Adulthood was almost-bright; tempered with reds and greens. My foster-kids brought Christmas out of the shadows as

The Colors of Christmas

Jan P. Hall, Midwest City OK
Jan Hall writing circle, Midwest City, OK

I saw my child-self in them. "Was I good?" "Did I help out enough?" "You heard me say my prayers every night, didn't you?" "Will Santa be able to find me here?" "I hope Mama's not lonely..."

I did my best to lift them up and wipe away their tears. Sometimes it worked; other times it didn't. Either way, Christmas morning made everything right. As I watched their joy and wonder and appreciation for even the smallest gift, I learned anew the simple happiness of the Season.

Now, in my sixty-second year, this special season brings a kaleidoscope of colors that have changed again. The bright gold of childhood is still there but muted; the midnight-blue waves of my teen years lap at a distant shore. The reds and greens of adulthood and foster-kids are the most noticeable; given an infusion of life because of an orange and white kitty, an almost-daughter, and a golden-haired seven-year-old with an ancient soul.

One new color has joined the spectrum, though; a sometimes-sad blue-ness that surrounds an empty chair in my heart. I don't yet know if I like this new color, but I am learning to accept it one day at a time; hoping against hope that the blue-ness will gradually soften into a gentle light-ness of spirit as I journey toward a new one-ness.

We write about lessons learned and gifts from our childhood...

I was in third grade the year of our memorable family Christmas of 1943. We lived in a little rented apartment near

Pioneer School in eastern Oregon where Mom was principal and eighth grade teacher. This was our home during the week for Mom, my brother Jim, and me because our permanent home was 40 miles away at the government camp below the Owyhee Dam where my dad worked. Such a living arrangement made it possible for my brother Jim and me to attend school. In December of that year, Pioneer School closed two weeks prior to Christmas due to an outbreak of scarlet fever.

When Mom learned of the early-vacation closure, she piled us in to our Model-A Ford coupe; drove to Nyssa where she charged a large box of holiday food at Wilson's Super Market; oversaw the tie-down of a small fir tree in the Ford's rumble seat; and claimed packages from the post office that Santa delivered via Sears catalog. Then she telephoned Dad that we were on our way to the dam. Dad monitored our travel time because more than once he had been required to drive the government pickup to our rescue when we were in trouble. We sang songs, led by Mom while we chugged along the bumpy, snowy road; driving past the haunted house where we kids always held our breath until we passed because that kept the ghost from following; past Snively's hot springs; hurrying through the rocky railroad tunnel before any rocks could tumble down; and on in to the warm welcome of the lighted camp.

Our arrival was punctuated with badgering started by Dad, who was often a greater kid than us. He began while we unloaded the car, "Jo, you're home two weeks early. Everything is ready. Let's celebrate Christmas this weekend." Of course we kids loved the idea! Not so, was Jo's opinion!

Christmas Heartbreak

Doris Ayyoub, Yakima WA

"Jesse, how could you even think of such an idea? We must enjoy a proper Christmas at the proper time."

But Dad had spent the previous lonesome week without his family, planning his argument. He was ready to party and would not let up. Joined by our eager voices, Mom eventually gave in. "Okay, I'll prepare the food while you children set up the tree. But remember this well, if we have Christmas early not one thing special will happen when the real Christmas arrives."

We decorated the tree with zeal, ate a quick late supper, and tumbled in to bed. The next day we ate our ham and potato salad and squealed over our gifts. Mine was a much beloved doll which I quickly named Nannette. Jim received a real submarine that would submerge and reappear in the bathtub water. The family gift was a glorious game called "Pieces of Eight," played like anagrams in which players earned gold and silver cardboard coins by correctly arranging letters into words using clue-cards. There were bags of candy and new books. I remember receiving at least two new Nancy Drew mysteries.

Over the next two weeks, we delightedly enjoyed our gifts and listened while Mom read to the family. The calendar alerted me to the fact that December 24th had arrived. My thoughts began to stew. *I know Mommy said that Christmas won't come again because we celebrated two weeks ago. But I think Santa might not agree. Tonight I'm going to hang up a stocking on the heat register anyway. Santa will come like he always does.* So I hung my hopeful stocking and trundled off to bed.

Alas! I woke in the early morning to discover nonexistent treats and treasures. Nothing! My limp sad stocking sagged on

Cont. on page 14

the cold register. I have often thought about the lesson my Mom was trying to teach. She surely must have been tempted to satisfy my little girl longings. But in the end she opted for helping me learn something much more important. All choices and actions have consequences.



Running Away from Home

Sara Etgen-Baker, Allen TX



North Texas summers are always hot, humid, and quite dry; but in the summer of 1959 North Texas felt like a furnace, for the scorching sunlight and intense heat ignited one of the worst droughts on record. I was about nine, old enough to remember that the sidewalks sizzled and roasted my bare feet, and the July heat permeated the already parched ground in front of our home, leaving huge cracks and crevices. The grassy lawns, yellow and burnt, smelled like bales of hay that had been sitting in the summer fields too long.

We couldn't afford air conditioning so mother always opened the windows wide, even though the air outside was motionless. As the day progressed the heat singed the air in our tiny two-bedroom home frequently making it feel stagnant, oppressive, and suffocating. I often spent my summer days quietly sitting by the open windows reading a book, and—despite the motionless air—smelling the sweet scent of Mother's honeysuckle vines.

Occasionally, I escaped outdoors riding my Schwinn bike up and down the neighborhood streets, pedaling at white heat speed until I could feel bursts of warm air blowing across my face and shoulders. When I stopped, though, I could both feel and see the heat waves rising up around me—baking my bones and roasting the rubber tires.

I thought about riding my bike to the city pool and jumping into the cool, clear water. I stopped, for I knew better than to go without asking my mother. So I pedaled home as fast as I could and offered up my seemingly simple solution to the summer heat.

"It's soooo hot, Mama! May I go swimming today?"

"No, sweetie, you may not. It's too expensive to go swimming," Mother explained.

"But I want to go swimming; all the other kids are going swimming," I pleaded.

"No!" Mother exclaimed, "Don't ask me again!"

I pouted, ran past her, and shouted, "Well, fine! I'm running away from home—to Granny's house. I bet she'll take me swimming."

With that proclamation, I entered my bedroom and slammed the door—huge mistake. My mother had zero tolerance for back talking and door slamming. Granny lived 20 miles away and too far away to pedal on my bike. What was I thinking? I thought to myself.

Surprisingly, Mother didn't immediately appear at my door. Eventually she opened it, brandishing a doll suitcase and a brown paper bag stating, "If you're going to run away, you'll need a suitcase. Let me help you pack a few things."

I know it did not destroy my faith in Santa. He still arrives in regular fashion. My own little girls were often commanded to halt beside a closed bedroom door when they heard a hearty, "Ho, Ho, Ho," which meant, "Don't you dare enter. Santa is busy working in here!"

With that, Mother opened my dresser drawers; grabbed a change of clothes and my pajamas; then gently closed the lid and said, "I've called your grandmother, and she's expecting you. Oh, here's a sack lunch with a peanut butter sandwich and bag of potato chips. Now, give me your wrist."

Next, Mother tied one of her delicate handkerchiefs around my wrist and told me, "Be careful with this. Inside it is 25 cents so you can stop along the way and get something to drink."

I was speechless and dumbfounded as she took my hand and escorted me out the front door, placing my lunch sack and tiny suitcase in the rear saddlebags of my Schwinn bike. She hugged me and said, "Now call me when you get to Granny's house. I love you."

She calmly turned around, went inside, closing the screen door behind her. Even though my ego was bruised, I had to save face. I felt that I now had no other option but to hop aboard my bike. So, I rode my bike to a nearby park, camped under a huge shade tree, cried, and listened to the locusts' soothing summertime lullaby. When I awoke, I smelt the handkerchief; it smelled like my mother. I knew I had to go home.

As I pedaled home I wondered what I should say and do if Mother would, in fact, let me back home. I parked my bike, removing the suitcase and sack lunch, then gingerly opened the screen door. As I entered the living room, Mother momentarily looked up from her crossword puzzle and said, "Glad you're home."

I returned to my bedroom, unpacked my suitcase, and then ventured back to the living room where I sat next to Mother on the couch. She hugged me in silence, smiled, and kissed me on the forehead. Thankfully, my mother was not prone to indignation, guilt, or "I told you so."

Instead, she lovingly taught me a life lesson without ever saying a word: running away is never a solution for disappointment, frustration, and anger.



Communion

Rebecca Kuenstler, San Antonio TX
 Marcy Bashore Ccircle, Writing From the Heart
 San Antonio, TX

gave me many gifts, rare riches, like fossils and arrow heads. Other, less tangible, treasures became bound to my being, as well.

I was born in a small town at the edge of central Texas where west Texas begins. A fact of life in that rural environment was the presence of firearms. I use this word rather than "weapons" because it is a very significant distinction. The guns which were part of my upbringing were for hunting and putting food on the table, not for sport. Protection was an afterthought.

The proper handling of firearms was a meaningful matter, and I watched enviously as the boys I grew up with went through various rites of passage betokened by guns. Short on philosophy, they probably could not have articulated what it meant to be allowed to own and be responsible for a gun. To be considered mature enough to handle and hunt with a .22 rifle was a giant step toward becoming an adult. It was an integral part of becoming a man, and the gravity of gun ownership was not lost on them.

Boys usually began learning with BB guns, graduated to pellet guns, and reached a plateau of maturity with .22 rifles, which were often received as birthday or Christmas gifts. To be given a rifle or shotgun which had belonged to one's father or grandfather was an honor and a symbol of trust. It was part of the family legacy.

These were the boys who learned the rules of life early. They learned to say, "Yes, sir," and, "Yes, ma'am," when spoken to. They learned a day's work was long, hard, physical, and bound to the land. They learned a hunting rifle was a tool and a friend, not a toy. And they learned, "In the midst of life we are in death."

As a child, and a girl, I was not allowed to carry a gun or shoot, but hunting still took on great significance for me. I learned to love the family ritual of rising early, dressing warmly, and driving through the dawn to spend the morning tracking deer or quail.

While my parents hunted, I walked beside one of them, usually my mother, and played "the quiet game" for what seemed like hours at a time. As tedious as the quiet game was, it also

I learned how to be still, to observe, and to listen—to everything: the sky, the trees, the birds, the bugs, the plants, the animals. I also learned the names and habits of a great many of these beings. I learned the Mourning Dove says, "No hope. No hope." And the White-winged Dove says, "Who cooks for you? Who? Who cooks for you?"

The sensory experience of being out of doors on those days was so potent I still can summon very easily the smell of my father's hunting jacket. He would hug me, and on him would be the mingled scents of cold air, coffee, cordite, dust, grass, sweat, tobacco, wood smoke, and the essence of hundreds of leaves brushed against and broken.

I also learned early on the condition of the countryside, and its diverse inhabitants, was directly related to our family and our fate that year. To have venison, quail, dove, or wild turkey on the table literally was to "...eat the fat of the land." To relish the rewards of a good hunt was a way of participating in something greater than ourselves. It was my rural family's sacrament of communion.

However, that was many years ago. Few hunters are able to spend hours walking up a buck. The land is no longer big enough. Dressed in, and surrounded by, gear from specialty shops and catalogs, they endure in blinds and wait for deer fed by machines to stroll across their line of sight, or wait for turkeys to flock to the feeder, or wait for the signal to begin searching for birds released from cages.

But sometimes on bone-chilling mornings when the sun begins to rise, and the mist hugs the low spots, and a dove makes the sound of wind blowing through a hole in its heart—sometimes, for an instant, these waiters, who would be hunters, feel the land. And they sit in reverence for being part of the whole and are nourished by it.



Joy of Dancing

Victoria Jessop, El Cajon CA
 w-ecircle 7

with rubble. We danced with joy because there was no more war, and the world would be at peace.

World War II ended just before my ninth birthday in 1945. In Exeter, as elsewhere, we celebrated wildly when VE Day came, and then we waited, confident that the war in Japan would also be won, though many worried about our fighting men in that Axis of War. Then after the dropping of the Atom Bomb in Hiroshima and Nagasaki that August, the war did end, and we observed VJ Day even more enthusiastically.

There were the street parties that took up whole rows of streets, as well as other activities. Food was scarce and rationing hard, but the people managed a feast—spam sandwiches, jam sandwiches, current buns and lemonade. The celebrations went on all day, but we didn't stop then. In the long, light summer evenings, we all danced for hours.

The Helston Furry Dance is from a Cornish medieval Mystery play—though we neither knew or cared—and we danced in long lines, in and out of houses, and down the middle of the roads where the houses disappeared, and were replaced

Twenty five years later my Navy husband was assigned to Yokosuka in Japan. The whole family spent three years there, delighting in the Japanese culture in Hayama, a friendly seaside village. We often joined in the village activities, but what we loved best was the Bon Festival. The local Gaijin went down to the beach in the short, dark summer evenings when the Bon Odori was performed, welcoming the spirits of the Ancestors who came to visit for a month. We wore our cotton Yukata and danced bare-foot; the waving lanterns lighting up the long line of dancers on the beach. By the huge bonfire, high on a rickety stand, a lone drummer, his bare torso glistening with sweat, beat out the rhythms of the dances, accompanying the shrill songs from the record player. And as we performed the graceful hand and leg movements Fuji-san had taught us, with joy we danced the evenings away.

...and our young adulthoods...



"Calm down, Mother," I said on a rare long distance call home. "Staying in Madison over Thanksgiving vacation is the right thing for me to do. I need to earn extra money waitressing, to buy essentials like soap, shampoo, and Kotex."

"You're clotting again, you need to..."

"No, I'm not clotting again, Mother. That was way back in high school, so get over it. Tips are double on Thanksgiving and I'm staying."

I earned a whopping \$18.00 in just one day.

On the way to get essentials the next day, I bumped into a bearded bohemian selling used clothes from the back of his vintage Volkswagen bus.

"Need some hip rags?" he asked. I hadn't talked to a single bohemian since college started. This was my chance.

"I'll have a look anyway," I said, eyeing a black full skirt with an uneven hem and a flash of purple going from front to back.

"The perfect top for that skirt is this tie-dyed tee shirt. It's got a hip matching headband," he said, putting it on me going across my forehead instead of under my hair.

"And this pair of dangly earrings? What kind of stone is it?"

"It's real lapis, the philosopher's stone, and a symbol of transformation."

"Wow, transformation. I like that." I stroked the soft suede of a huge tan handbag with fringe that hung almost down to my knees, amazed that I liked it, so different from anything I'd ever owned.

"My price for everything if you buy today is only \$15.00. After students start returning on Sunday, it'll be double. The dressing room is behind the madras curtain at the back of the bus," he said, pointing.

"Okay, I'll at least try things on," I said as I climbed into the bus.

Is this guy really a UW bohemian? I wondered, after having dropped my Liz Claiborne plaid slacks onto the dirty floor. *Rapists also have shaggy beards and wear dirty jeans with holes in them. He might drive off while I'm changing. Take me to some deserted place in the back woods of Wisconsin and rape me!*

I stepped into the skirt and pulled it up so fast that my finger poked a tiny hole into the thin cotton gauze, up at the waistline where no one would notice. Then I quickly removed my reindeer sweater and pulled the tie-dyed tee shirt over my head. *How silly of me,* I thought as I peeked out the curtain and saw the bohemian smoking a cigarette while waiting. Just because he looks like a derelict doesn't mean he is one. Sloppy dressing is the popular look for students who wanted to be different.

"Man, you are one cool chick," he said when I stepped out into the sunshine.

"What about shoes?" I asked. Saddle shoes and bobby socks don't go with the outfit, do they?"

"Try these," he said, handing me suede boots with fringe like on the handbag. They were a size too big and I loved them.

My Bohemian Rags Donna R Emmert, Boulder CO Facilitator of Donna R Emmert's Writing Circle, Boulder, CO

"How about \$12.00 for everything?" I asked.

"Done deal," he said, extending his dirty hand. I didn't want to be rude so I shook it, reminding myself not to poke my finger through my bubble gum until I washed my hands. Was being dirty a requirement for being a bohemian?

I stuffed the clothes I'd been wearing into my new fringed handbag and headed for the student union, hoping to find a few bohemians in the Rathshellar where they usually hung out.

The place was practically empty; only one table way off in a dark corner was occupied. A girl with long straight hair was wearing a headband just like mine. The five others were guys: shaggy bearded and long haired, wearing ragged and dirty tee shirts. They stared at me as I waited for the hamburger, fries, and coke I'd ordered.

Should I go over and introduce myself? I wondered. Of course I should. But I'd better be careful. Bohemians are sometimes Communists. I won't sign anything; heaven forbid if McCarthy should threaten to blacklist me the way he's trying to nail Marilyn Monroe.

As I started my walk over to them, I did a really dumb thing. I smiled. Bohemians don't smile. I knew this but my face did it by instinct.

"Mind if I join you?" I asked as I pulled up a chair.

"Yeah, we're hungry," the wimpy looking one sitting next to me said as he grabbed my burger and took a bite. "All for one and one for all, right?"

"Sure, why not," I said, trying hard not to smile or look too mainstream. The burger was gone before I'd taken even one bite and my fries got put in the center of the table and were devoured almost instantly.

"How come you guys didn't go home for the holiday?" I asked as if I didn't care that they'd just eaten my lunch.

"Thanksgiving? What's there to celebrate? That we slaughtered Indians and claimed this land as our own?"

"Thanksgiving for what? Because we live in a land of plenty and can stuff our guts until we're sick? No thanks, I'd rather just smoke weed and pretend I don't exist," said another.

"I know," said this guy with a piece of a French fry stuck in his beard, "we should be thankful that we've got bombs big enough to blow the whole world into oblivion."

"The Russians also have bombs that can blow the whole world to bits. Don't we need to defend ourselves?"

"That's a lot of bourgeois crap," the wimpy one shouted. "They developed weaponry only to defend themselves against us."

"So, you're a Communist?" I asked.

"Holy shit," he said while everyone howled with laughter, "that's like asking if the pope is Catholic."

They didn't seem to want to talk to me anymore, so I excused myself and went upstairs to watch *Days of Our Lives*.

We write about our relationships. . .

Remembering August, 1959—Northern Wisconsin



Dear Bob,

Susan Flemr, Fairfield Bay AR

There on the dock, after we counted falling stars for an hour or more in remarkable silence, broken only occasionally by a wailing loon, you asked, "What would you say if I kissed you?"

You didn't wait for my answer. You reached for my shoulders, turned me toward you, and pressed your lips gently into mine, for a brief time.

My response came as my cheek nestled into your shoulder. "I would say 'thank you'," I responded in a shaky whisper, as the steam from my breath and tears collided with the cold August night air.

Those warm tears sent the fragrance of your plaid wool jacket into my nostrils. I can still smell that warm wet wool now, some fifty years later.

I understood that the kiss was your gift to me. We stood clinging tightly to each other, on wobbly legs. Both trembling. Me, because my teenage fantasy had come true. You, because you had never kissed a girl and were learning you probably wouldn't be kissing many more.

Your tears soaked through my long hair, wetting my ear as you whispered, "I do love you, Susan." I heard your struggle to convey the great unspoken meaning in those words.

Neither of us completely understood, but we did. You were gay. Only we didn't say "gay" in the 50's.

I refuse to use the word "queer!" I think that was the descriptive word used then. There were other things said behind your back at school because you avoided team sports, enjoyed classical music, and were a top scholar. All of those things made you attractive to me. The boys secretly laughed about your effeminate mannerisms. I saw you as gentle and caring.

This was the final night of our last summer vacation as teenagers before you went off to college and I returned for two more years of high school. The two weeks we spent each year

for the past five years would now be memories I would relive each time I heard the song *Twilight Time*, ate freshly-picked blueberries, swam in a cold northern lake, or thought about that longed-for kiss.

Each year you came running to find me the minute your family car was unpacked and for two weeks each summer we were inseparable. We hiked miles on dirt roads, smelling the pine and finding scrubby patches of wild blueberries. We would fill our metal pans full of berries and proudly bring them home to our families for breakfast. We spent hours swimming, catching frogs, building sand castles, playing board games on rainy days, and talking about our dreams.

You admonished me never to worry about my height, weight, or appearance, and encouraged me to just be true to myself. That was a novel thought for me at the time—a message you repeated over and over. I understood later that you desperately needed to hear it too.

After graduating at the top of your high school class, you went off to college, graduate school, then on to teaching and writing. You published well-documented and well-received books. You lived in Greenwich Village, Manhattan, NY.

You died at age 43 and your memorial service was held at St. John's-in-the-Village Episcopal Church. This church now has an active ministry to gay and lesbian youth struggling with their place in this world. Yes, dear Bob, young men and women still struggle as you did on that dock so many years ago.

May our world answer their tears with more than bullying words and the lonely wail of the loon.

With love,
Susan



Woven

Amy Greenspan, Austin TX
w-ecircle 4, Austin Reading Circle



Our years together, textured threads,
wool and silk entwined,
spun supple on the spindle once,
light in agile hands.

Knotted, messy, faded, frayed,
threads turn thick with time,
wind slowly now, a clumsy yarn held
tight in fragile hands.

Wool still warms.
Silk still soothes.
We lift the fabric from the loom,
drape our days in love.



Marriage

Juliana Lightle, Canyon TX

I remember the time he touched my face, melting me.
I married him; my face slowly, inexorably froze.



She stepped into the hallway to answer the phone, tap dancing sounds clacking behind her. She heard piano scales from down the hall stutter, stop, and resume as the caller asked to speak with the voice teacher. She crossed the hall and knocked three times, the signal to answer the phone. A young soprano lilting *Parsley, Sage, Rosemary, and Thyme*, stopped singing. A crackly old voice said she was on her way. She turned to go back into the dance studio and saw him sitting on the bench, waiting.

"May I help you?"

"Oh, I would like to talk with the dance teacher about taking ballet classes."

She said if he could wait until students left the studio; the dance teacher would be free. He thanked her, they smiled at each other, and she went back into the dance studio, and sat next to the music files to study for her Algebra exam.

Soon, he came through the door; mirrors lining the wall reflected his image as he passed in front of her. *There goes your first husband*, and then she heard him ask the dance teacher if she taught the Cecchetti or Russian style, and could he take private lessons. The teacher said if he wanted to do *pas de deux* work, her young assistant would be available. He seemed pleased and scheduled his lesson for the following week.

At first, they moved slowly together: she demonstrating, he following. She noticed he had short bowed legs, a stilted manner, but he worked hard. Their pace quickened with the music. Strong in his shoulders, he lifted her overhead then positioned her on one leg and promenaded her around. She twirled under his arm and danced to the far end of the room. Eyes following her, he waited. She turned to face him and ran to leap into his arms as the music rose to crescendo. Each, drawn by the beauty of the classical form, transcended the ordinary into the sublime as they surrendered to the moment. Gently he put her down. While the last measures of music softened she gracefully lowered herself to one knee in a deep curtsey, her gaze finishing downward. He

May I Help You?

Linda Sievers, Cedar City UT

took her hand as though holding a precious stone. Uniting them as one poetic figure, he bowed to her. The music ended. Their breathing merged as their reflected images etched into the mirror.

Famished when his lesson ended, he invited her and the teacher to join him for a beer and a bite to eat. Underage, she could not drink, but she could always eat. She discovered over dinner through jokes and funny stories that he loved to climb mountains, was five years older than she, and a chemist at Pillsbury Mills. Coily, she smiled when he looked her in the eye and said he was "Pillsbury's Best."

So began her friendship, then courtship with the man who would become her first husband. She lost her virginity. She had a child. They got married. They divorced, over forty-five years ago.

He died this past April just hours after she dreamed he embraced her tenderly as they had once danced together. Cancer took him fast. He had it everywhere, even in his heart. She did not know people could get cancer of the heart. Their daughter, with him before he died, held him in her arms as he cried.

Drawn by his joking nature, his funny stories and laughter, and the timeless beauty they created when they danced, she recalled their love notes, each trying to outdo the other by spelling words and phrases backward, or creating puns suggesting multiple meanings.

But he was not a faithful husband; that is what broke them apart. She did not want to stay married to a faithless man no matter how much he could make her laugh. Yet, in her dream, when he embraced her with his soul before he died, she knew that in the purest place of his heart he had loved her from the moment she had asked him, "May I help you?"

Bridges



Marcy Bashore, San Antonio TX
Facilitator of Writing From the Heart Writing Circle,
San Antonio TX

The bridge connecting us
long neglected, stands swaying
tangled vines impedes a sure path.
Yet my heart bleeding and raw
beats strong for what once was true.

I tuck my ME inside a safe protected place
and take a tenuous step toward an unseen path.
Will the bridge break, will I be a forgotten
piece of your life, never a joyful memory
with shared laughter, good times all denied
in your conscious hurting proclamations?

The past lies withering unfed because
you won't risk rutted, muddy places
that may finally build a thing of beauty
tempered by the fires of life's trials,
something which could bind us close
together again.





A Small Miracle

Khadijah Lacina, Shihr Yemen
w-circles 3, 12, 14, and 4

*First comes love
then comes marriage
then comes a baby in a baby carriage*

Well, not quite.

After I became Muslim in college, I was advised by many different people to begin looking for a husband.

One day I got an envelope in the mail from my brother, with a copy of a Muslim magazine, *Islamic Horizons*, inside. I leafed through the pages and saw that he had circled a couple of classified ads. Personal ads, that is, place by Muslim men looking for wives. I leaned over, interested to see what kind of guys my brother would pick out for me.

The answer was, not the kind of guys I would pick out for myself!

Idly, I glanced over the rest of the ads, and one immediately caught my attention. I no longer remember the exact words (though I do have the magazine back home, safe in my hope chest), but in essence it said that the brother was the same age as I, was interested in studying Islaam and living it, and in building a homestead in Alaska.

I put the magazine down and went on with my day, but my mind kept returning again and again to that ad. I wanted to learn about Islaam as well; I had been Muslim only a year or so, and had very limited access to books and materials about my chosen religion. A homestead—I was so not a city girl—a place in the country where we could raise vegetables and animals, not to mention children, would be ideal. And Alaska had long been a dream of mine.

So what was I waiting for?

I resisted writing back for a couple of days, then gave myself up to the inevitable and wrote a short note, describing myself, my little boy, and some of my hopes for the future. I mailed the letter, promptly moved the whole thing to the back burner, and got on with living my busy single mom college student life.

Then one day two things happened almost simultaneously. I opened the little mail box on the porch, balancing my backpack and my baby while trying to hold the back door open with my foot. There was big fat envelope in there, with a typewritten address on it. No one I knew, I thought. I deposited the baby on the couch, the backpack on the floor, and was about to sit down to open my mysterious letter when the phone rang.

I answered it, and there was a voice I had never heard before on the other end.

"Assalamu Aleikum. This is brother Khalil. I was calling because I wanted to know if you received my letter?" the voice asked, carefully.

I was about to say, "No, and I have no idea who you are," when I realized that Khalil was the name of the person who had sent the envelope on my kitchen table. I replied that I had indeed received it, but that I hadn't had a chance yet to sit down and



read it. He apologized for calling, saying he just wanted to make sure it had come to me, and that he would contact me again at a later time.

To say I was intrigued by this quiet voiced, soft spoken man would be an understatement. I gave the baby some cookies and milk, and sat down and read that letter. He had included a photograph of himself, so I could connect up his voice, his thoughts, and his appearance, though I had never seen him in person.

The rest, as they say, is history. We corresponded for a couple of months, and he finally asked for my photograph, making it clear that he intended to ask me to marry him. I sent one to him, me in a long denim skirt, a long sleeved white blouse, and a white scarf, twirling around the living room. I was afraid I might look a little weird and hippie for him, but he liked it! He asked, my brother and I said yes, and we set up the dowry.

In Islaam, the men pay the dowry to the woman herself. It is not for her family, but for her personally, contrary to the perversion of the dowry in many cultural traditions. Most people ask for money and jewelry. I asked for a set of proper hijab, the Muslim woman's covering, including a veil.

He quit his job and drove out to Wisconsin where three days later we were married in a quiet Islamic ceremony at the local masjid. His mother and sister attended, as did my mother and sisters. My father refused to come; but that is another story for another time.

There are so many miracles in this story, it still fills me with wonder that it ever turned out as it did. First of all was the magazine ad. I never would have considered answering an ad, and he has since said that he was skeptical in placing the ad. But something about the few words he used caught me and allowed me to step outside my usual behavior. Secondly, is that from that first day, when I received his letter and heard his voice, my heart opened up to him in a way that was totally unexpected. I was used to the boy-meets-girl, boy-dates-girl paradigm, and this was totally different. I found myself looking forward to his letters and thinking about him time after time throughout the day. I felt comfortable with the idea of him being a father to my baby—and I was very committed to finding a good one for him! I can honestly say that I did feel love for my husband before we married, but that I have truly found out what love is and what it can be in the nineteen years since then.

And that is the greatest miracle of all!



RoseAnne, the color stylist, said there were only three colors I shouldn't wear: red and white and black. "Your eyes will look bloodshot if you use red lipstick," she said, "and a white blouse will make your teeth appear yellow instead of pearly." She warned that black was the worst possible choice for me. It would render me sickly-looking—a walking corpse.

Each of RoseAnne's admonitions spelled trouble for me. Tennis was my sport and tennis whites were my indulgence. Red was, and is, my husband's favorite color. Bill has always loved to see our two girls dressed in red. He's happy when I buy red clothes for myself, too, but I seldom do. I prefer black. Simple black. Elegant black.

In 1985, when RoseAnne inspected my wardrobe, most of the basic blacks in my closet were remnants from my years of working in New York City twenty years earlier. In Manhattan, women of all ages dress in black year 'round. My favorite outfit in those long-gone Madison Avenue days was a braid-trimmed black suit, à la Chanel. With a quick change from pearls to rhinestones, I could make the switch from office to opera while the taxi driver negotiated cross-town traffic on the way to Carnegie Hall.

When I first moved to San Francisco I shared an apartment with a friend who was also a Manhattan transfer. Patti and I had each toted one good black cocktail dress across the country. Her little black dress was a full-skirted faille by Suzy Perette, perfect for dancing, and my LBD was a slender column of crepe de chine that made me feel like Holly Golightly.

I took a seasonal job at a Sierra ski resort in 1961, the winter following the Squaw Valley Olympics. An international aura still pervaded the Tahoe area, so my black turtlenecks and leggings raised no eyebrows among the Mod set at Sugar Bowl Lodge, where I worked. And when I met Bill Ross there, his propensity for bright colors didn't raise an immediate alarm. Lots of the post-Olympics hangers-on, particularly the Italians and the Canadians, wore colorful après-ski clothes. It was only after the ski season, when we descended to the flatlands, that I began to see red. He once showed up for a date wearing his red letterman's sweater. I knew he had played football in college, but I didn't think he needed to advertise the fact. Good thing it was dark in the movie theater.

In the summer of '62, when Bill and I decided to get married, we planned a small wedding in San Francisco, attended by close family and good friends. At Saks on Union Square I found a white satin dress and jacket combination—in the style that Jackie Kennedy made famous. The only trouble was that my bra straps showed at the neckline of the dress.

"No problem," said the very French saleswoman, swooping

True Colors

Dorothy Ross, Davis CA

out of the dressing room. She returned, holding aloft a dainty Christian Dior creation with wide-set, narrow straps. Absolutely perfect and absolutely gorgeous—except it was black lace.

"Doesn't it come in white?" I asked. The clerk sniffed, "White is underwear; black is lingerie." She assured me that the black wouldn't show through the heavy satin of my dress—and she was right.

Years later, while looking at our wedding pictures, Bill told me that he hadn't been crazy about my nuptial plumage. When I pressed him for specifics, he admitted that my wedding dress was not what he had envisioned—too angular and current. He had dreamt that his bride would float down the aisle in something softer and lacier, long hair tumbling to the shoulders under a frothy veil. And I had been so happy to find a little pillbox fascinator covered in white feathers, with just a wisp of veiling, to perch atop my French twist. Obviously he hated the whole look. Well! I took a deep breath before telling him how shocked I had been to see him waiting at the altar in a brown suit and cordovan wingtips! It had never occurred to me that a man would

choose anything but black or dark grey for even the most informal wedding.

We've been together for almost fifty years, but Bill still doesn't appreciate what he calls my New York 'hood' look. What I see as sophisticated he regards as gloomy. I say classical; he says funereal.

"It's timeless," I tell him.

"It's joyless," he replies.

The only pitch-dark purchase Bill ever endorsed was the tall, Cossack-style, black fox hat that we bought at the old City of Paris store in San Francisco after seeing *Doctor Zhivago*. I still have that furry toque.

It hasn't been out of the hatbox in years, but neither of us would part with it.

I don't exactly hate red, but I do have mixed emotions about it. The universal appeal of this prime primary color makes it the perfect choice for children's sand pails and their shiny wagons. But as an adult, I identify red clothing with the stop sign icon—designed to arrest the eye. When I'm dressed in red, I feel as though I'm wearing a plaque that says, "Look at me!" I'm not comfortable in the limelight.

Where color is concerned, ours is truly a mixed marriage. Bill continues to favor bright red, followed closely by blue, especially blue denim. And, more than fifty years after leaving Gotham, I still gravitate to racks of blacks. But, while we are both true to our colors, we're partners until death do us part. If I die first, Bill will have no trouble finding a suitable shroud in my closet. And if Bill should predecease me, I promise to honor his lifelong preferences and bury him in Levi's and his red varsity sweater—in a closed casket.



We write our way through pain, trauma, and tragedy, and we heal...



About Loss

Joan Ellis, Atlantic Highlands NJ

I finally understood what life is about; it is about losing everything. Losing the baby who becomes a child, the child who becomes an adult, like the trees lose their leaves. So every morning we must celebrate what we have.

Isabel Allende, 1995

I finally understand that I was raised in a culture that revered the process of building without ever teaching me that whatever we build cannot last. In 1950, I left a college I loved to marry a man I loved. You couldn't do both then. We lived in six cities in ten years at the direction of the corporate culture that was the life blood of Ivy League students in the '50s. I had a little girl in Wilmington, a little boy in Chicago, and another little boy in Neptune, NJ.

In those days, the bargain was, "You earn the money and I'll do everything else," so while he earned, I made homes in a string of small apartments and then a first house. Because every move meant another rung on the ladder, and because the five of us were driving away together in the family car to the next job, we were happy. But each time I left a piece of myself behind—in New Haven, Washington, Chicago, Baltimore, Wilmington, and Milford.

By the time our last little guy was born, we were settled in New Jersey where my husband spent the next 35 years building a company. Together we built snow horses and coasted down hills on sleds; we rolled and played all day and slept well all night; and then came kindergarten for each and they would never be all mine again.

They went off and began giving pieces of themselves to their teachers and friends. By ninth grade they were a little distant and awkward and searching. We had tried to raise them to fly free, but watching them go hurt way down in that reserve I hadn't even known I had.

Our company grew and one son came home to run it, and it grew some more, so he moved it to an industrial park and moved himself, his family, and a division to Maine. Now I walk down the streets of the waterside town where we began, and it feels as alien as I feel empty. We started in a one car garage, then a store front, then a converted Safeway, all more steps in building.

We both had dreams that our buildings would be filled with employees who liked their work, that the whole would nourish our family. We were proud that the annual company picnic had grown from five to two hundred. My husband loved having lunch with his son, the young president. Now three children and eight grandchildren live in New England. The children are gone, the company is gone, the blank slate we began to draw on in 1950 is blank again.



We lost our marriage of forty years, not in anger, but over strong and opposing visions of how life could be from then on. I needed time of my own, he needed to travel and explore. I don't remember once in all the years of raising my children ever wanting to be doing something different. I was one of those who bled into motherhood and stayed there with a full heart. I needed peace.

At 64, I was building a new life and yet I was very sad—for the loss of homes we made, for the Friday nights at McDonalds (before we knew how to eat) and the movies, for political arguments at the dinner table when we didn't have to be careful of the chemistry, for coasting with little people clinging to my back, for trying to undo frozen red laces on little ski boots, for the full heart that knew five people would love each other forever.

Why do people say, "It's only a material thing, it's people that matter?" Not for me it isn't. Not when a boat brings back a dark haired little girl standing in the prow, a gymnasium brings back a little red haired boy dressed as a wooden soldier in the rhythm band, a pile of sand brings back a little girl making a birthday cake with sticks, a baseball brings back a towhead building his own pitcher's mound.

How can I explain that I feel sad every time I pass a spot on a mountain where a brave little boy lost his ski and walked all the way from top to bottom alone? How can I explain that I will always love Hyatt hotels because a tiny two year old strode down the dock and said, "Oh my goodness, I like it."? Material things are awash in emotional memories, and they stay with me. Most of the time I do quite well with not missing the smiles of my little people.

I am the only person who will ever know exactly what the college, the marriage, the babies, the company, and the land meant to me. Others mention the success of the company, the excitement of my new work, the accomplishments of my children, my good friends. They are right, and I am grateful.

And Isabel Allende is also right. Life is about losing everything. Every second brings change, and to resist it is to lose what lies in front of us now. That's my hope. I love New Jersey. I love the two rivers, I love my land, my desk, writing my reviews, New York 12 miles away by boat. But sometimes the lovely lenses of my new life go cloudy and I remember the

pieces of myself I have left behind in people and places I have loved. Tragic loss is different, more profound, more grievous. But, like Allende, I finally understand that even what we build in happiness, we build to lose.



Blown by Winds of Change

Nancilynn Saylor, Austin TX
w-ecircles 4, 5, and 6



When ever-changing winds of time
have blown me far off course
and in those paralyzing climes I'd find
I'd sailed to somewhere worse

In those times travelled alone,
I took wisdom from the solitude,
and walked on perilous pathways
nervous fears could not preclude

I was sometimes spun in circles
and felt many lonely years,
on this solitary journey,
crying voluntary tears.

I found an unexpected clearing
in an unpredicted place
Re-tuned my inner compass
and regained my fallen grace

To start again a journey
maybe find my passage back
embracing ancient stories
and fill in some parts that lacked

Held on to precious stories
with a promise to improve
knowing nothing lasts forever;
it is only attitude.

It's a Deathing, My Friends

Lynn Weiss, Lake Dallas TX

In the shadows of the night
In the light of the day,
A feeling resides in my chest.
Not a pain nor depression,
Though unsettling a bit,
The pressure continues to build.
I notice its folds
With caverns and peaks
For my senses to touch.
The edges are sharp,
Dropping off an abyss
Falling far to my center within.
My heart knows the sense,
Of stretching beyond,
To a place I've not lived until now.
Quickening takes place,
Calling gently to me,
To be joined by my friends of today.
Exciting, though subtle,
I wonder at this,

Emotions, I've not quite endured.
But afraid I am not,
Nor uncomfortable today,
For I know that I'm living right now.
In the blink of an eye,
I suddenly see,
What I'm feeling that's new in my life.
It's a deathing, it is,
When an ending takes place,
As a chapter is closed in this way.
I'm joyous to know
A part of my life,
Surrenders, for the new to arrive.
Come join me, my friends,
We release what is done,
And prepare for whatever will come.
But now, let's enjoy,
The deathing at hand
Giving thanks for the ending I live.



What Has Frayed

Anne Marie Cheney, Santa Rosa CA

What has frayed:
My nerves after a day at work
The shirt collar after hundreds of wearings
The bookcover on my favorite book
Leaves in autumn after a windy day
The edges of the page

What has frayed
The coif around the old nun's face
Fringe on the edges of the blue shawl
The cloth rosary
The edges of the carpet, clawed by the cat
Lace curtains hanging in the window
Cuff of the jacket he wore to work every day
The dishrag that has washed a thousand dishes

What has frayed
The threadbare blanket that swaddled the baby
The bonds of friendship that had held them together
Pink satin slippers that had danced a night away long ago
The edges of the photograph of her long dead son
The letter she had read so often it was falling apart

What has frayed
The connection that lay at the heart of their relationship
Toes on the sox he wore when he played basketball
Ballet shoes at the end of a performance
Elbow length gloves she wore to senior prom
The veil from her wedding
The runner that decorated the dining room table at Christmas
The styrofoam ornaments he made as a Boy Scout

These have frayed but the memories remain intact.



Spiritual Editing

Samantha White, Ashland MA

When my memoir, *Someone to Talk To: Finding Peace, Purpose and Joy after Tragedy and Loss*, was published, people congratulated me for my "courageous" sharing of so much that most people consider private. But actually, most of what I had set out to tell about my private life never made it into the book.

In early drafts, the first half of the manuscript was packed with my dark and haunting memories. Laying the foundation for the pages that would follow, I related a long stream of perceived insults and acts of indifference that had left me feeling ashamed and helpless. How else, I reasoned, would the reader be able to understand how difficult it had been for me to extricate myself from my bonds of fear, bitterness, and low self-esteem?

The pain I carried with me, my emotional baggage, weighed me down every day. I was in a second marriage, with a wonderful husband and a new and joyful life. Yet I was obsessed by the hurts I carried, and was telling my husband the same old sad stories over and over again.

"Let it go," he'd say. "That was then, this is now. It's over."

So easily said, so difficult to do! I joked about my "Velcro memory" that couldn't let go of my inner wounds. I hoped my book would be the ultimate catharsis, the last time I would have to tell anyone about the festering offenses and regrets of my past. I would release them into the world, and finally be free of them.

A close friend, talking about something she was struggling with, mentioned her religion's stance against "telling tales" that show others in an unfavorable light. So I was prompted to turn my attention to the potential of my words to hurt others. My concern was not merely the legal one of avoiding libel or defamation, but now also a moral conundrum.

Another friend, a rabbi, explained, "The civil law may look only at whether it's true, but the Talmud holds us to a higher standard. It tells us that to use words that hurt another is a greater sin than the one you are telling about."

As a Buddhist, I had committed to the precept of Right Speech, not abusing the power of words to hurt another. I knew that my complaints involving other people, even if all my words were true, might nonetheless hurt them.

"If I leave it all out," I asked my rabbi friend, "how can I explain my anger and low self-esteem, and how defeated I felt?"

"To make the book the best it can be," he admitted, "and the most helpful to others, you do need to tell some of that backstory, so the reader can relate to why you felt and behaved as you did. The question is, how much really needs to be told, to make it the best and most helpful book it can be? For the answer to that, I think your editor has to evaluate the story and advise you."

My editor read the manuscript with this dilemma in mind and returned it to me with most of the whining and complaining

narrative crossed out. "Not needed," her notes read, "not relevant," and, "unnecessary." All she had left untouched was a single thread of story that wove through the years leading to the pivotal point at which my life fell apart.

"But is that enough?" I asked her. "Does it explain my unhappiness and desperation?"

"It is," she said, "and it does. The other stuff doesn't matter."

So dozens of hurts, regrets and offenses were cast out, never to be exposed to the eyes of my readers. I felt disappointed that no one would ever know the totality of what had led to my feeling so overwhelmed and inadequate. But I moved forward in my writing: adding and cutting, revising and improving, and eventually publishing my first book. After all the long, hard work, my feeling of accomplishment was immense.

Then I noticed that something else had happened, a wonderful and welcome surprise. When I had cast my painful memories out of the book, they had not returned to my previously weighted heart. Having been stripped from the "Velcro" of my memory, they no longer clung to me, infecting my life, robbing me of joy. The act of negating their importance to my written story had served to make them irrelevant to my lived story.

"It doesn't matter," my editor had said. And I found it to be true. None of it mattered anymore. I had examined the past for what was important, and moved on, despite my

not having aired it all publicly.

That is when I realized that good editing is an art equal to writing in its potential for sacredness. It was much more than checking for accuracy, spelling, grammar, and sentence and paragraph structure, but was also extracting the story that needed to be told, and leaving out all that wasn't germane.

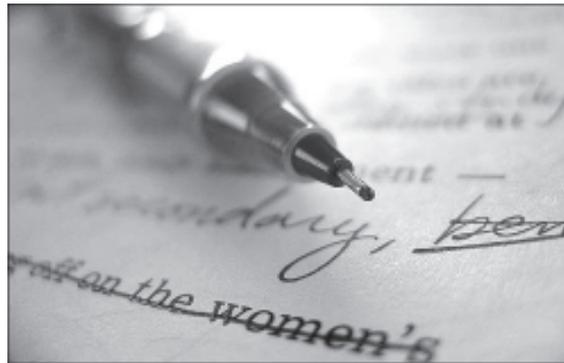
I needed the objective help of my talented editor to do that. What emerged was a golden thread, a pure and simple truth, my real story, the one that mattered.



The Sculpting of My Life

Lynn Weiss, Lake Dallas TX

My inner reality is being carved out.
Pain is the knife.
Sanding vibrations make the luster
To burnish my soul.
No need to fight,
Rather consider accepting,
The creative process;
The sculpting of my Life.



Code Blue

Julia Atwood, Ventura CA

Facilitator of Finding Your Voice Writing Circle, Ventura CA



I was once asked, “If your life had a shape or pattern what would it look like?” Without skipping a beat I replied, “The EKG of a heart attack.”

It is a warm September day in 1968. I am twelve years old, out of sorts with my body, skinny and awkward, and they call me “spider legs” at school. I am flat chested and my teeth are crooked with white calcium deposits that make the rest look yellow. I don’t smile. My father does not believe in braces and what my father says is law.

My mother has cut my hair in a pixie because she thinks it is stylish and cute. I hate my hair, my body, my face, and my twelve year old life. I am not beautiful. I am not even cute. Nothing about me looks like a woman. I look and dress like a boy. I argue with my mother more now because with this new cut I look even more like a boy. I want to wear frilly dresses, ribbons in my long hair, socks with lace around the ankles, strappy black shoes, and carry a handbag. I want to grow up.

My father, a tall, handsome man with piercing blue eyes and chiseled jaw, has a flattop hair cut, and looks just like Clint Eastwood. For all his rugged charm and physical prowess, he is mean tempered and cruel. He is both dangerous and alluring.

My mother is a willow of a woman with warm brown eyes, thick dark hair, ruby red lips, and a radiant smile. She looks like Snow White. She wears cinch-waisted cotton dresses with cashmere cardigans and matching kitten pumps. She pulls her hair back with a thick plastic hair band, which highlights her angular face. She wears pearl post earrings and a single strand of pearls around her neck. My mother is an elegant housewife. She cooks the best fried chicken in all Mono County

I think my parents are movie star beautiful. I am hoping I will someday turn out as attractive as they are.

As I walk home from school, I am thinking that when I get home I will ask my mother if I can try on her wedding dress. Every year I get to take it out of her cedar chest and try it on to see if it fits. I stand on a chair and look in the mirror. I imagine how I will look when I fit into all the hollow spaces.

The second I open the door I am hit with a hot silence that is deafening. I can hear the ticking of the clock. I can hear a faucet drip in the bathroom and the whirling ceiling fan. I can hear ringing in my ears. There is a frightening and profound emptiness permeating the house, a feeling of violation. I walk into the kitchen. The dishes are washed and stacked in the drainer. The dishtowels folded. Counters are wiped, floors swept, rugs in place.

In the living room the carpet has been freshly vacuumed with the Electrolux vacuum my mother purchased from a door-to-door salesman and for which she received a split lip and a broken nose, which blackened both her eyes. There are straight

lines etched side by side exactly eighteen inches wide and three feet long made by the new agitating feature of the Deluxe model she had purchased.

I was there to hear the whole sales pitch so I know the exact specifications. I’d sat mystified as the salesman gave me a cup of dark brown dirt to throw onto the carpet. I looked at my mother as if to say, “Can I really do this?” With her arms folded in speculation and defiance, she nodded okay. I dumped the dirt on the carpet.

“Grind it in there, really make it hard for me,” he’d said. I looked back to my mother. She was growing concerned. If this didn’t work, she would have to clean it up; she would have to explain to my father. I held my breath. I thought I saw her sweating; heard her heart beating. I ran my shoe *hard* back and forth across the dirt filled carpet. In a not quite panicky, but measured tone, she declared, “That’s enough!”

With the showmanship and hand gestures of a magician on the Ed Sullivan Show, he’d activated the magic agitating wand. “The dirt easily and completely disappears,” he’d said in his showiest, authoritative voice. I could feel his power. It was almost holy.

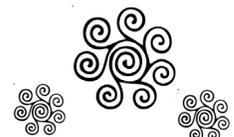
I was sold. I was a believer. I begged, “Can we buy it, Mommy? Please!” Between him and me, she was defenseless. She also got out her checkbook, hesitated and then, with quiet determination, she wrote a check. She did not consult my father on such a large purchase. Even I knew this was dangerous business.

I walk through the living room and down the hall. In the bathrooms the porcelain sinks are spotless, the stainless steel faucets sparkle, and the bathtubs are ring-less from our previous night’s baths. It smells of Pine Sol and Windex. Navy blue towels hang neatly side by side. Everything is in perfect order yet something is missing.

I walk into my parents’ bedroom. The closet is open and half empty. I spin to look at the dresser. Her perfumes and Jean Nate powder are gone. I look under the bed. Both pieces of the Samsonite luggage are gone. On my father’s pillow is a note in precise hand written script.

Doug,
I cannot take it anymore.
You can keep everything.
Do not look for me.
I am done.
Joan

I stand there in my budding womanhood holding in my hands the only goodbye I would see from her. My heart skips a beat. Stops. Then breaks.





Reunion

Judy M. Miller, Zionsville IN

Ten years ago today I was stranded in Albuquerque with my girls: one still a baby and the other, a (thankfully) mindful toddler. We had traveled to visit my college roommate and her family. Little did I know that our stay would be extended well past our intended departure.

I remember disbelief and the shock. The unquenchable fear.

As soon as the first tower was hit, I was on the phone to my husband who had just arrived at work, only to circle back and pick up our son from school. Cell phones became our lifeline during the ensuing separation and the need to be together rose above everything.

Thoughts battered me: *Will I get to watch any of my children grow to adulthood?* and, *Will I ever touch or hold my husband again?*

The day arrived for us to be able to go home and I entered the airport with dread, after seeing my college roommate chased off by the vigilant police. It was a difficult, emotional goodbye; her car was barely allowed to stop and drop off the girls and me.

The airport was inundated with Red Cross volunteers. Someone offered me water as I desperately balanced the two car seats, a double stroller, and a Pack 'n Play, in addition to our suitcase and diaper-bag. While security pulled my luggage apart in the frenzy of the tragedy, a news reporter made her way into my face with a microphone. Me, the Caucasian mom, obviously shell-shocked like everyone else, but all the more conspicuous because of her two Asian babies.

I don't remember what the news reporter asked me, nor do I remember my answer. I was focused on the melee and keeping my daughters attached to me, safe, calm. Not five minutes later another reporter and a cameraman approached me, asking me, "Are you going home?" Looking at my girls and thinking of my son and husband, I began to cry. All I could do was nod.

It was a day of compassion.

We flew the first day air travel resumed. People were quiet. Their nerves were frayed, although they made valiant attempts to be brave. I held my girls tightly. I still can't fathom why they didn't fuss or cry; they had to sense my fear.

The flight attendants passed around an American flag (it would later hang in their home office) for the passengers to sign after we were at cruising altitude. We were the first flight up for the airline after 9-11. I cried as I wrote my name, the girls' names, and a heartfelt message on the flag that represents our country's unity and freedom.

I alternated between choking down bile and struggling not to black out every time the plane hit an air pocket. My babies kept me grounded and I focused on them, thankful for the zillionth time that they were with me.

Upon landing after the first leg of our trip home, we were told we were in a different city. There was a problem; we had to wait; we would leave when we could; we would know more when they knew.

My face fell and I struggled for composure. A lovely young Asian woman asked me if she could bring us lunch: "Do your babies eat pizza?"

I told her they did and she asked if she could get it for them. When she returned she would not let me reimburse her. It was a kind gesture and I thanked her profusely.

We were told we would be staying for an undetermined amount of time. I called my husband and told him to pull off the highway—change of plans; he and my son might have to pick us up in a different city.

The pilot asked us to please go ahead and disembark, but to stay close to the gate. The airport was in complete chaos. Moving through the terminal was difficult because of the throngs of people. I saw so many struggle to remain calm and civil. It was difficult to hear the intercom above the noise.

Fear was palpable. No one knew anything.

The girls and I stayed close to our assigned gate and then heard through word of mouth that our gate had been changed and would be boarding soon. We moved to another terminal as quickly as a mama with two small ones could, making it to a makeshift security checkpoint time.

I waited at the end of the line, with two bone-tired babies. Fear threatened to overtake me when an older woman said, "Oh, honey, you look like you could use a hug." She gathered me into her softness and I sobbed into her comfortable stranger's arms, all the while I held my girls. Her kindness allowed me to let off some of the stress and refocus. I will always be thankful for her gift of reaching out to me when I needed it.

The girls and I eventually made it back onto the plane, into the air, and to our airport in Chicago, where we sat for a long time in a sea of planes facing every which way on the tarmac. My husband and son drove three hours to Midway, not risking a longer separation.

I ran as much as I dared with the girls in my arms. It seemed like forever until I saw my guys with huge smiles on their wet faces.

On the interstate I turned back to look at my home city, sparkling on a rare clear night. The Sears Tower stood proudly in her magnificence.

I looked at my daughters, already asleep. My son's hands lay over each one of them, as if to protect them with his brotherly love. He looked at me, smiling, "Mommy, I missed all of you."

"I missed you and all of us, too, baby." My husband and I held hands the three-hour drive home.



We are called to write, and to teach the power of life-writing...



Labor Day Weekend Carol Sanford, Shoreline WA



On Saturday, my restless friend Terri boarded a train bound for Montana and a two-week adventure. “Happy, happy, happy,” she texted. “Why can’t I live on a train?”

Labor Day weekend marks the end of summer. It seems everyone’s left town to squeeze in one last trip to the mountains, the beach, or a Super-Sized Labor Day Blow-Out Liquidation Sale. These last hours between summer and fall, bathed in September sunshine, feel like a luxury. Whether you’re a kid or not, school’s still out and no one wants that feeling to end.

With everyone somewhere else, it’s so very quiet here: none of the usual traffic noise punctuated by car alarms, skateboards, yipping dogs, or teenagers tossing the F-bomb at one another.

In these quiet sunlit moments, I have time to think: not about the past or future, my money worries, my damaged Achilles tendon, global warming, our political system, wars, famine, endangered species, or our dying oceans—all the issues that break my heart. Like Scarlett O’Hara, I’ll think about all that tomorrow.

So I soak up the warm, soothing quiet, knowing it won’t last. In these last few magical hours of summer, my thoughts wander to the women I will soon guide through the Older Women’s Legacy Workshop at the Blakely Senior Residence where I live.

This will be my second workshop at the Blakely; the experience has been a revelation and unexpected blessing. The first time around, no one—including me—knew what to expect. But the OWL workbook is so beautifully constructed that my task seemed simple enough: assure confidentiality; keep everyone on track; make sure we get through all the materials each week; find volunteers to bring treats; reinforce the idea that what is written is infinitely more important than how it’s written.

“There is only one rule,” I told them, “write from the heart. Otherwise, coloring outside the lines is encouraged.”

That first class contained a varied lot, ranging in age from 61 to 90. Some were eager to write and read; others needed encouragement. One of the oldest members, Dorothy, was silent almost to the end, when she finally read a wonderful story about a cross-country trip she took as a child with her family in a model T Ford. She came from a tiny town in Montana, and her story conveyed a child’s excitement about seeing new people and places. That trip, she told us, was the origin of wanderlust that took her all over the world. She literally beamed when the class gave her a standing ovation.

Failing eyesight kept another of the elders, Maggie, from writing and reading, so she simply told us her stories. Toward the end of the Workshop, she confessed that she had once been a singer and was featured weekly as a soloist on a Christian radio station. Maggie had recently attended her brother’s fiftieth wedding anniversary, where a recording of Maggie singing at his wedding had been made into a DVD.

We begged her to bring the DVD to the next meeting, never expecting we’d be stunned to tears and silence by the beauty and clarity of her voice. Nothing about this frail, fragile woman, who always spoke so haltingly and strained to hear, prepared us for her voice. Several in the group gasped as she began singing, *How Great Thou Art*. Her mezzo-soprano voice carried conviction and grew more powerful as she sang. We closed our eyes. The years fell away, and we imagined Maggie as a young woman, singing with hope and joy, and knew but for circumstances, she might have been a star.

Over the five-week OWL Workshop, we shared stories of triumph and tragedy, loss, hilarious sibling rivalries, and true love found after escape from decades of abuse. We learned how families coped during the Depression, and about parents who volunteered to watch the night sky during World War II. Several of us belonged to the Beat Generation and some of us were hippies, who admitted smoking marijuana. Every member recalled precisely where she was and what she was doing when JFK was assassinated and the Twin Towers fell.

After every class, members would thank me with heartfelt gratitude, tell me the Workshop was one of the most rewarding undertakings of their lives, and that they never wanted it to end. “This workshop is wonderful, and you are, too,” they would tell me.

I was taken aback by the gratitude—it seemed so undeserved. Yet something stirred in me. I realize now, as I reflect over this long Labor Day Weekend, what stirs in me is love for these women: their courage to reveal themselves; their struggle to remember and write; their vulnerability; and, yes, their idiosyncrasies.

When I decided to try my hand at the OWL Workshop, I saw it as an opportunity for a personal second act, a way to generate enough extra income to keep body and soul together. But, as I reflect, I know facilitating this Workshop has become a calling.

OWL gives women a safe place to consider their long and varied lives, to laugh and cry together, to reveal long-buried family secrets, to nod in agreement over shared experience, to feel connected, to acknowledge one another’s worth; it has given me a renewed sense of purpose. I feel appreciated and worthy. Although I’m not charging for the workshops I do here in my residence I’m getting more than a fair exchange.

I think about my friend Terri who wants to live on a train, unmoored in so many ways, still seeking something ineffable. I was like that before I started teaching OWL. Now I feel tethered and grounded, knowing I can give the gift of this workshop to countless women for the rest of my life.

It’s growing dark. The last few hours of the Labor Day Weekend slip away. I am content and ready for school to start again.

Where Has Summer Gone?

Grace Fiandaca, Altamonte Springs FL
w-circle 8

I hear the voice of gritty blues player Byther "Smittie" Smith wafting from my 21-year-old son's room. As I look at the topic for this month typed across my computer screen and the blues notes hit my ears, a heavy, forlorn fog settles on my chest. Where, indeed, has it all gone? Those summers, are they lost? Only faded black and white photographs attest to our young selves—my older brother and sister, and me, the youngest. Skinny and tall, we stand in a row and mug for the camera: my brother blond and fair, my sister rail thin with serious eyes, and freckle-faced me with unruly auburn curls.

The heavy canopy of gnarled oak trees surrounds the block we live on. The wide-trunked trees line the road running in front of our house; moss-draped, ancient arms arch across the road and bend to touch midway. When I walk down the middle of our street I think it looks like a cathedral of trees pointing toward heaven. They filter out much of the blazing summer sun but the fecund wetness of the thick summer air envelopes everything. The blanket of trees only adds to the denseness of the sultry days, harboring hordes of mosquitoes and fat, ugly brown roaches that scringe across the sidewalk and out of cracks and corners of our home.

Summer nights we leave the windows wide open and yawning. A mosquito buzzes relentlessly around my head. Wrapped in my damp sheet, pulled up to my neck because I loathe being uncovered, I lie twisting and turning, thrashing about, swatting at the mosquito that dodges my hand and returns to torment me. It's too damn hot to sleep.

But in the early evening, I sit on the front porch enjoying the summer night. It looks inky black out, with no street lights and the leaf-laden branches curtaining our yard from passers-by. The concrete floor is smooth and green and deliciously cool on my bare feet. My mother sits beside me with her glass of iced coffee. I ask to take a sip; it tastes bitter and cold. The clink clank of ice cubes hitting the sides of the glass after my mom lifts it to her lips and lets out a satisfied sigh, is a consoling sound. The orchestra in the trees starts up, crescendos, fades back down. Every cell in my body is attuned, drinking in the mystery of the night, relishing time alone with my mother. We hardly speak; I imbibe the sensory experience. My mother dwells in her own thoughts. It is a snapshot in time where she seems happy and relaxed, when I feel safe and welcome—a rare experience which I savor.

Summer vacation means running bare foot. Once in a while my mother tries to scare us about ringworm, but we pay no heed; it is part of the unspoken contract of the long break from school and scheduled anything, except church on Sundays. Summers promise a few day trips to New Smyrna Beach, about an hour's drive, and living in shorts or bathing suits most of the time. After the beach sometimes we stop at the A&W, where we drive our car into a space, roll down the window, and a waitress puts our hamburgers, fries, and



root beers on a tray that hooks to the driver's side window. Sandy and still damp, we are famished from a day spent playing in the waves and digging in the sand. Have we died and gone to heaven or what?

My mother teaches life saving courses at the local pool, so we get in free. My siblings and I walk to it, our flip-flops slapping the hot sidewalks, clad in swimsuits, with rolled towels—my sister and I with bathing caps tucked inside—secure under our arms. When we hear the whistle we exit the pool for the adult free swim time, which means we beg my mom for a dime apiece to buy Zero bars. Sometimes we get lucky and she obliges; the bar has a hard white chocolate coating and a chewy chocolate and caramel filling. It could be sweet anticipation or maybe it is just the image of the polar bear on the package, but holding the bar in my palm sends cool shivers through me.

A chance to swim—in the lakes, the community pool, our neighbor's pool, or the ocean—means a respite from the unremitting heat in the days when homes, schools, and cars didn't have air-conditioning. We play as long as we can, until our fingers wrinkle like prunes or some parental authority insists we get out of the water.

We form teams with any neighborhood kids we can rustle up and have water fights using the hoses—one in the front yard, the other in the back—as weapons. The goal is to get to the other team's home base without getting squirted. Team bases are the three steps in front of the house and the three steps in the back that lead to our kitchen door. Evenings we run through backyards playing kick the can, pretending not to hear when my mom calls us inside after it has grown dark.

The Chicago blues singer cries out, "*The thrill is gone, baby,*" as I reluctantly leave the reverie of summers long since passed. My siblings and I are on a fast slide away from middle age toward old age. Our own babies morphed into young men and women. Where did it all go? Where have our summers disappeared? Who remembers?

In my fantasy, all the memories—imaginary worlds, dreams not realized—never die but live on in the vortex of black holes to be visited again and by many through all time. No one's story untold or forgotten, no creature's beauty and pathos, no soul overlooked or diminished. But in my darker moments, when I wallow in existential angst, I am again haunted: What if I am wrong? What if that isn't true?

That's usually when I laugh and remind myself: That's why I write. I am called to write it down: remember, transform, or express my experiences and imaginings into fiction or poetry or essay. And I don't just do it for me; it's for the others who shared those summers, too. And for the ones who didn't.

And my son in the next room, listening to obscure blues singers and scanning his black and white film photography to post on his blog? He is called, too. I feel consoled listening to the blues player's gritty voice.



Story Circle Network, Inc.
PO Box 500127
Austin TX 78750-0127

Nonprofit Org
U.S. Postage
Paid
Austin, TX
Permit #215

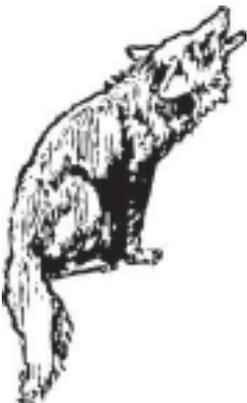
We write about our pets and the animal world...

Ballads of Owls and Hounds

Barbara Carr, Austin TX

When I was eight or nine years old,
My family had driven out into the country
Near Tomball, Texas where we lived.
We parked in the piney woods near Walnut Creek
Where Dad shot a giant barn owl.
Why he did it, I'll never know.
He listened to the owl calling out
To whatever it was communicating with,
Tracked it down as it flew from tree to tree,
And then killed it.

One of the folk legends my Cherokee Aunt Gertie
Always told me and my cousins
When we were children was one
That frightened me.
Sometimes I still think of it.
If a dog howls plaintively
Between midnight and dawn,
When all else is quiet,
It means somebody has died
Because the dog senses the spirit
Of the deceased
Leaving the body.



After I was grown and married
With three children of my own,
In the wee hours of one morning,
On a deserted West Texas highway
Near Knox City, Texas,
Dad heard the owl call his name,
And Mom's, too, when their car
Ran under an eighteen-wheeler
For reasons no one will ever know,
And they died.

And although we did not own
A dog, I heard one of the
Neighbor's dogs howling that night,
Between midnight and dawn,
Just before the phone rang
To let me know
I was an orphan.

