

Story Circle Journal

The newsletter for women with stories to tell...

Volume 6 Number 1, March 2002

Stories from the Heart...A Circle of Creativity

"When you open your heart, you open your mind," writes Beth Mende Conny, author of *What Highly Effective Women Know*. On the weekend of February 8-10, more than 150 women from across the country came together in Austin, Texas, to do exactly that at Stories from the Heart 2002, the first Story Circle Network conference. Blessed with heart, intelligence and humor, they found inspiration and direction in this magical gathering of gifted women.

At Friday's registration, attendees were presented with programs, designer journals, collectible prints, and chic Story Circle tote bags stuffed with goodies. The program opened with a workshop, Spirit Soaring: Wings of Creativity, led by conference coordinator Judith Helburn. (Judith is a seminar leader affiliated with the Spiritual Eldering Institute. She has written numerous articles on aging, spirituality and creativity.)

Judith explained that reconnecting with our spirit means reconnecting with our creativity—with new ideas, new dreams, new stories. Demonstrating methods for drawing on our creativity, she asked participants to write brief stories about an orange passed among them, and then to create a group poem, each woman contributing one line. The verses illustrated with humor, wisdom and passion the women's connectedness as well as their individuality.

Judith spoke of the myths that form our lives and encouraged everyone to see their writing as an opportunity to challenge prevailing cultural myths and to respect the voices of their internal archetypes—inner child, elder, and policeman. Most importantly, she urged all to experience the rapture of being alive. The perfect introduction to *Stories from the Heart*, this workshop definitely had heart!

Later that evening, conference goers heard an enlightening presentation called *Wild Heart, Wise Heart—How to Tell Where to Go*, by Betty Sue Flowers, Ph.D., director of the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library. Betty Sue is an award-winning teacher, poet, editor and consultant to government and international corporations. She has collaborated with Bill Moyers to produce four books from Moyers' PBS television series.

The audience sat spellbound as Betty Sue spoke of writing as a journey to freedom and wisdom. She offered a metaphor of life as a circle with a line intersecting it. Often we become caught up in the circle—our daily routines—and miss the story represented by the line—our progression. The circle of our daily lives can become a cultural prison when we allow them to be built upon cultural myths, such as the hero myth (Ideal = Excellence); the religious myth (Goodness = Obedience); the scientific myth (Reason = Truth); and the economic myth (Money = Success). The Wise Heart understands that her future may be influenced by these myths and pushes herself to break free of them, knowing that her Wild Heart's freedom to create depends on her willingness to step outside the stories the culture tells about her. "Dwell with both your Wise Heart and your Wild Heart," Betty Sue urged. "What do you plan to do with your wild and precious life? Push the critic back so Wild Heart can write!" Following a lively Q&A session and a standing ovation for Betty Sue, everyone enjoyed a dessert reception—a delectable ending to a delightful day.

The second day of the conference was filled with even more inspiring activities. In addition to the workshops, a lunch program titled *Straight from the Heart* featured inspirational music. Beth Ullman, a popular local artist, has written and performed as Bethani for 15 years. She sang original spiritual/meditation songs from her CD entitled *Go Within*.

*I took a deep breath and
listened to the old bray of my
heart. I am. I am. I am.—
Sylvia Plath*

*My heart is like a singing bird.
— Christina Rossetti*

*A joyful heart is the inevitable
result of a heart burning with
love.—Mother Theresa*



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Who We Are & What We Do

Women will starve in silence until new stories are created which confer on them the power of naming themselves.--Sandra Gilbert & Susan Gubar

Who We Are

The Story Circle Network is a national not-for-profit membership organization dedicated to honoring women's voices and celebrating women's lives. Our membership is made up of hundreds of women in 41 states and four foreign countries who want to explore their lives and their soul-journeys through life-writing--writing that focuses on our personal experience, through memoirs and autobiographies, in diaries and journals, in personal essays, in poetry, in drama. The Network is for every woman who aims to claim the power of her experience, who wants to map her journey, and who is determined to name herself.

The Story Circle Network was founded in early 1997 by Dr. Susan Wittig Albert. We are guided by a 17-member board of directors and incorporated as a Texas not-for-profit corporation. Our activities are funded by the annual dues of our members, through our educational programs, and by the gifts and grants of our supporters. Our National office is located in Austin, TX.

What We Do

Publications. Our major organization is the quarterly *Story Circle Journal*, where we invite members to publish their writing. In addition, we publish an annual anthology, an award-winning website (www.storycircle.org) and other occasional publications. On our website, we host one of the largest women's book review collections on the Internet. You can find it at www.storycircle.org/BookReviews/ and a Speakers Bureau, where members can showcase their writing-related programs.

Chapters. To join a chapter, a member must also join the National organization. We currently have two chapters, one in Austin and one on the Internet. The Austin Chapter sponsors four writing circles and a reading circle, and schedules 4-5 additional meetings and Be Our Guest programs annually. The Internet Chapter currently has 11 writing circles and a reading circle, emails free weekly writing prompts, recognizes a "Writer of the Month," and offers on-line classes and workshops. If you are interested in starting a Story Circle chapter in your community, you may call the office for information or visit our website.

Writing From Life Workshops. Twice a year (May and October), in Austin, we offer a Writing From Life Workshop. The workshop is writing-intensive, and staffed with experienced Story Circle facilitators. For information, call the office or go to www.storycircle.org/Workshops.

Conferences. In February, 2002, we held our first *Stories from the Heart* conference in Austin, with 18 presenters and participants from across the US and Canada. We hope to host our second conference in February, 2004.

Writing Retreats. In Summer, 2003, we're planning a 4-5 day writing retreat in the Texas Hill Country, featuring Story Circle facilitators and a nationally-recognized seminar leader.

Special Programs. In 1998, SCN received a grant of \$100,000 to fund 50 workshops for senior women in the Austin area. We called it the Older Women's Legacy Circle Project (OWL-Circle Project). The two-year grant-funded phase is over, but the workbook and facilitators manual developed and tested during the project are now available for use in a variety of senior-oriented settings, such as churches, residences, and nursing homes. For information on how to purchase this kit, call the office or go to <http://www.owlcircle.com>. In addition to the National OWL-Circle program, we also have an Austin-based program, directed by Pat Flathouse. Memoirs written in the original grant project have been collected into a book, *With Courage and Common Sense*, that is under consideration at the University of Texas Press.

Story Circles. Around the country, many women have created informal story circles where women can share their lifewriting. If you would like to start a circle, you may call the office for information or visit our website, where you can print a Story Circle facilitator's manual. Women do not have to belong to Story Circle to participate in these informal groups—but of course, we hope they will want to join!—*Susan Wittig Albert*

Story Circle Journal

STORY CIRCLE is a quarterly newsletter, published in March, June, September, and December. 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. This newsletter is provided for information and is not intended to replace qualified therapeutic assistance.

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Missed Issues: We try to ensure that *Story Circle Journal* arrives in your mailbox four times a 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 newsletter!

*Journaling Your Life***Journaling a Memoir: Looking for Patterns**

This is the third of a series of four columns by Cindy Baum. Cindy has daughters in high school and college, a son in first grade, and is homeschooling her youngest daughter, 12. Besides being a mom at home, she is a freelance magazine writer, journaler, and loves pen-and-ink letter writing. Cindy and her husband Brad have been married 23 years.

It can be overwhelming to read through years of journal entries with the idea of drawing from them enough cohesive material to write a story of your life. In a sense, the journals are the research, the notes we've jotted down along the way, but they can seem like slides out of order on a screen, loose and disjointed thoughts needing to be organized so they give a true picture of the story we want to tell.

In her book *Leaving a Trace*, Alexandra Johnson suggests that we look for journal entries that return to a persistent memory or single words, phrases or names that appear frequently. In other words, look for patterns in the journals. For example, if you find in your journals that you frequently make references to a parent or sibling, begin looking for specific stories that you can expand upon. Johnson gives the example of someone who realized that her journal entries about her father often included references to his hands: his hand holding hers when she was seven years old, his hand slipping money into her hand when she was visiting from college, later stroking his arthritic hands and in his last moments of life, holding his hand and "feeling the final stream of energy through his hand to mine." These images from the journals gave her a clue as to how to focus and frame the entries into a story of an unbroken father-daughter connection. For others, the pattern may be a reference to a place or an incident that has become a central focal point in a person's life.

I recently read through one of my journals from five years ago and was surprised to find that I seemed so bitter. I didn't remember consciously feeling that way, but evidently I was dealing with a number of difficult issues at the time. Seeing the situation in retrospect made me realize that I had been going through some changes (I had just turned 40) and was facing some disappointments. It bothered me that someone might read it and think I was

bitter, so I was compelled to write an addendum on the inside back cover of the journal saying that I did grow out of that turmoil and things did get better. However, when I later read the journal in the context of previous and subsequent journals, I could see a larger pattern of disappointments which also revealed a more subtle pattern of longing to change areas of my life. Happily, the journals also revealed that I was able to move past many of the disappointments and take action on what wasn't working for me.

Reading through past journals specifically to find the patterns can give us a springboard for our story and reveal what is important, whether or not we realized it at the time or not. To begin linking patterns, group the "snapshots" in your journal into categories, such as longing, fear, conflict, key influences, hidden lessons, secret gifts, challenges, unfinished business, and untapped potential. Each category corresponds to a way we engage or hold back in life.

To organize years of journaling into categories like these (or others that are important to you) requires going back through the journals, posing each life pattern as a question. Where are the "snapshots" of fear, for example? Or lessons learned? Or influences? For example, if you have written often of the frustration of dealing with a difficult relative, perhaps you are really exploring a pattern of unfinished business, or discovering how to speak up when wronged—which may have led to a greater independence in general. As you find these patterns of hopes, dreams and goals, you may also find untapped potential or hidden gifts that need to be developed.

Reading through volumes of journal entries in search of patterns is not a process that can be rushed. Stories must wait months and even years until we are ready to tell them. When we know how to begin looking for them, we know we have a place to start, even if we only write a few pages at a time.

Working with Patterns

❖ To frame stories covering several years, pick a single life pattern and look for it as you read through past journals. Or, if you can work comfortably with multiple patterns, highlight the journals, using a different colored marker for each pattern.

❖ Keep a notebook handy as you read your journals, and jot down the dates of entries that you want to expand upon, or entries that form a pattern. Begin indexing a new journal or the journal you are currently writing. Once a month or so, go back and highlight the patterns you found in previous journals and make note of the dates in your notebook.

❖ As you read past journals, watch for single entries that record specific incidents that, although you probably weren't aware of it at the time, shaped the way you view your life now and reveals a shift in a pattern. It doesn't have to be an earth-shattering revelation. Perhaps it was a situation in which you gained confidence that you didn't have before, or took a different view of yourself than usual.

❖ If you are journaling to tell your life story, consider writing only on the front side of each page of your journal, so that you can go back later and add what wasn't said at that time. What was omitted in the entry that you see more clearly now? Use the back of the page to expand and explore.

❖ Consider keeping specific journals for each of the patterns you discover. For example, if you find a pattern of untapped potential or strengths, focus your journaling on ways to expand that potential and record your progress. If you find an area of repeated conflict, focus on resolving the conflict so you can move on.

Writing and Healing

The Body as Teacher

Psychologists tell us that frequent, regular, uncensored writing about our daily lives can be profoundly therapeutic, especially when we connect with others through that writing. Debbie Tripp, M.A., is a freelance writer and teaches Writing for Healing and Self-discovery. She is a member of the National Assn. of Poetry Therapy and a recipient of the Wisconsin Regional Writers' Jade Ring Award for writing excellence. Email: debbietripp@hotmail.com.

Four Techniques to Try

❖ **Body Scan.** Close your eyes and take a few deep breathes. Start at your head and slowly scan your body from head to toe. Pay attention to unusual or more intense sensations. When you complete the scan, grab your pen and start writing.

❖ **Dialogue with a body part or symptom.** This can be used any time you are curious about a particular symptom or sensation. Give the body part or symptom a voice and ask it to tell you what it wants or needs. Use your imagination and let it answer. This may feel awkward at first. You might want to let the symptom answer by writing with your non-dominant hand. Play with the technique to see what works best for you.

❖ **Lists to detect your truth.** Quickly make a list of irritants or topics that are important to you. Don't stop and don't think or judge as you make the list. When you are finished, slowly read over the list while paying attention to your body's reaction. When you come across a strong sensation, that is your clue to freewrite for more information.

❖ **Sentence Stems.** Use the beginning of a sentence as a springboard phrase to get you going. Just write the stem and then the first thing that comes to mind. If you get stuck, write the stem again to keep you going. Try this: "When I listen closely, my body tells me _____"



When you listen to your body, what do you hear? One of the things I find wonderful and mysterious about writing for healing is how much I can learn from my body when I sit down to journal. It is almost as if there are certain things I need to know and my body gives me a pathway to that particular lesson. Sometimes writing is the decoder the body needs to deliver its message. For instance, I notice I have heartburn and begin to write. I realize the heartburn began right after I tried to ignore a sad feeling. I discovered when I attempted to ignore the sadness, it stuck in my throat and chest and burned.

The body communicates through sensations and the five senses. Some of this we are aware of if we listen to our spoken words, "I have a gut feeling, or "This is a pain in the neck." It is important to tune in to your body to take advantage of these messages. One way I do this in my classes is with some deep breathing and a body scan. We try to relax and notice our physical sensations. After a few minutes of paying attention to the body, we pick up our pens and write. Each class member discovers physical sensations linked to their emotional experience. One member discovers that some of her stronger sensations are linked to concern over her mother. "When I try to deepen my breath, there is a sadness and worry over Mom." Another member finds that the pain in her shoulders reminds her of the pain her father complained of when she was small. She writes, "My pain is my only connection to my dad." As I do a scan, I find that my back feels tight, almost frozen. I write about the tightness. I give it a voice and start a dialogue with it. In the writing, I discover I am "bracing myself "for some anticipated bad news. As I use the dialogue technique to do some problem solving, my muscles begin to relax.

Sometimes I use what I call a "sentence stem" as a direct way to learn from the body. One stem that I find useful is "the wisest thing my body has told me is ____." In this exercise, I write the first

thing that comes to mind and keep writing. Each time I get stuck, I write the stem again and take the next image and follow it. With this stem, I was surprised to find the words "the wisest thing my body has told me is to cry when there is sorrow because muscles aren't designed to store unexpressed grief." This was followed by "The wisest thing my body has told me is to remember that carrying someone else's emotional stuff is beyond the capacity of human muscles."

Another time, I felt fatigue. I wrote that I was dragging bottom. I had a picture in my mind and sketched in it the margins. The trunk of my body felt as if it contained an anchor and I was sinking fast. What issues were hidden in my depths, needing attention? The anchor held many stories for me and it took several weeks of exploration to understand the levels of meaning. One day I tried writing "the tip of the anchor contains ____" and a childhood issue came up. This was an issue that I needed to process and release. Once I was able to do that, the deep fatigue dissipated and I had renewed energy.

There are times when a less direct approach is useful. For example, one morning, I woke up irritable. I had no idea why I felt agitated. I recognized this as a signal to sit down and make a list of the irritants on my mind. Sure enough, among items like *crows in the garbage* and *error in the insurance claim*, was *preparing for a houseguest*. My stomach went flop. There was gold in that flop. As I pursued the physical sensation, I discovered I was anxious about this visit and some unresolved issues with the houseguest. By exploring my irritability, I was able to develop a plan to deal with issues and my irritability dissolved.

Our bodies contain memories, emotions and solutions. Body scans, freewrites, lists, dialogue, and sentence stems can all be useful in letting your body be your teacher. Every clue, each little lesson, is worth your attention. You never know what you will learn.

A Story Circle Member's Story

How My Sister Bought Land and I Took Home a Horse and Burro: A classic New Mexico tale of vision

Winnie Culp lives close to the earth in an 'off the grid' adobe house which she and her husband built in rural New Mexico. Her daily life is fueled by her passion to leave the world a better place for her grandchildren. With a background in marketing, she has worked for regional book publishers and a New Age learning center. Her employment experiences led her into a simple life that included building rock walls and cooking in a Zen monastery. Her website, www.greatgarlicgarden.com, showcases her writings.

I was sitting at my desk reworking my vision. Much like my life, it is a work in progress. I had just reached the part where Grandpa Willie and Grandson Neil go down to the barn to feed my horse—an old gray mare with spots. She is always in my vision and she always has spots.

Slaving away at my computer, I'm watching them from my office window as they descend the hill to the barn holding hands. The phone rings, and I snap back to the present. It's Marguerite, my sister.

"Hey Winnie," she started right into the subject. She's direct that way. "Tell me something. You have experience with this. How long would it take to find a place, buy it, get the financing and all that stuff? Then build something?"

I moved the phone away from my ear and gave the receiver a funny look, as if it was Marguerite herself. The question seemed ridiculous to me—after all, here I was working on my vision. The answer to her question was in her vision and in what she wanted. Only she knew the answer.

"Marguerite, how long do *you* want it to take?" She didn't get what I meant. She went on and on about how it could take months to get approved for a loan and more time to find a place in her price range. Then there would be months for the purchase process and then ages to build something. She sounded overwhelmed by what was ahead.

"Marguerite, how long do you want it to take? You know, it doesn't have to be the way *they* say it has to be." I returned to her concerns. "First off, you don't have to finance with a bank. Owner financed is simple and quick. And as for finding a place, what are you are looking for? What does your new place look like if you imagine it?"

"Oh," she replied and there was silence. Now I could tell she was with me. "There's a great view of the mountains on my land, and trees, plus a rock formation and a cabin with a porch. And oh yes, a hot tub."

I asked if she would rather have a hot spring. She laughed and said, "A hot spring would be perfect."

Marguerite phoned me several days later bursting with excitement. "I found the ideal place. Will you come see it with me? There's a cabin with a porch and a view. The best part is that it's owner-financed and within my price range."

We went to see it the following day. Our excitement was soaring as we followed Marguerite's written directions: turn right off the main road, cross the Chama River, right onto a dirt road, then up the hill to the mesa. The view was breathtaking. As we pulled up in front of the cabin, we were speechless.

I turned to Marguerite and asked: "Do you think you could live here?"

And then her words poured out. "Feel that wind, I'd blow

away. And, look, the owner left all his stuff all over. It will take ages to clean it up and the house foundation isn't where I would have wanted it to be. This sure wasn't designed with a woman in mind."

I laughed, suggesting we find where the women live, and Marguerite joined in. "Yeah, let's find why we came here today. Let's find *my* place!"

"Left or right?" I asked Marguerite as we headed off down the dusty road in my Jeep. We were rounding a curve when we spotted a large red pickup truck coming right towards us. I swerved as we passed. From the corner of my eye I saw a hand in the truck window waving me to stop. I backed up, and as our windows met I had my first introduction to Val.

"Hey, did you see a police cruiser down at the end of the road?" she asked. "Somebody stole my horse and I called the police. I know who did it. I can't believe they stole my horse."

"You're not allowed to steal horses," I stated the obvious. She quickly agreed that it definitely was against the law. I found an opening.

"My name's Winnie and this is my sister Marguerite. She's looking for a place to buy around here. Know of anything for sale?"

"My place is. It's an Earth Ship, made from tires. It has solar and wind power. \$375,000. Right over there, but you can't see it; it's practically underground. And I've got raw land for sale too. But hang around. I'm going to get my horse and be back."

That's when we first heard about Owl Mountain.

Val pointed out its location behind us and said, "Same view, but the land's nestled in the trees with a cool rock formation where the owls land. I'll owner finance. Reasonable payments each month for 10 years. I just had the place dowsed and the guy is sure there's a hot spring under it. Supposed to be the same water vein as Ojo Calliente. The land has been waiting for the right person."

Marguerite almost fell off the car's front seat. When she called me a week later, the closing date was set and a sense of awe and excitement had replaced the tentative tone of our first conversation about land.

"Oh yeah, I almost forgot," Marguerite added as we were about to say goodbye. "Give Val a call. She has a horse and burro that need a good home and she wants to give them to you. Cocomo is the terrorist baby burro and Nubila—she's an old mare."

I didn't have to ask. I knew she was gray with spots. Nubila had been in my vision. She and Cocomo have taken a little adjusting to, but yes, I'm ready to have my dreams, right here, right now in the present.

Meet Other LifeWriters and Learn from Their Stories...

Susie Kelly Flatau: "A Woman Juggling Life"

Susie Kelly Flatau is a writer and speaker who spent over twenty years teaching English in high school and community college. In 1994, Susie founded the Casa del Sol Writing Studio, offering workshops and consultation in women's studies, creative writing, legacy work, book reviews, bookbinding and more. She has authored three books and a fourth will be published next month. She serves on the Story Circle board of directors and belongs to the Austin Writers' League and the Texas Folklore Society. In March, 2002, at the invitation of the U.S. Army, she will travel to Germany to help celebrate Women's History Month. She will share her talk, "So That Every Generation Will Know The Stories," with soldiers, civilian employees, and family members at bases in Dexheim, Hanau, Giessen, and Wiesbaden. Susie lives in Austin, TX, where she works as an editor for Eakin Press. Visit her website at www.wordsbysusie.com

Here are some of Susie's favorite quotations:

Ideas become real at the point of action.
—Proverb

I once had a garden that grew only on dark thoughts, but they needed constant attention and one day I decided I had better things to do.
—B. Andreas

In the middle of the journey of our life, I came to myself within a dark wood where the straight way was lost.
—Dante

I have always known that at last I would take this road, but yesterday I did not know that it would be today.
—Narihara

Story Circle Journal: *You've certainly had a wide variety of writing experiences. Tell us about some of these activities, Susie.*

Susie Flatau: My husband is always introducing me as a "woman juggling life." I think his term sheds some light on the roles that help me identify the professional avenues down which I travel. (Thank goodness you didn't ask me to list the non-professional roles—like every woman I know, that list is infinite.) My years as a teacher cemented my love of working with others in the role of mentor, of "fire starter." I find joy in curiosity and energy in creation. Fortunately, I have been able to transfer this joy from teaching into a freelance arena that includes writing, speaking and workshop facilitation.

When I left the classroom in 1994, I founded Casa del Sol Writing Studio to carry out a career in personal writing as well as creative and inspirational workshops designed to guide others to write, to explore, to gather their life stories. The studio's first activity was the creation of a monthly women's group. We called ourselves the "Fatter than Barbie; Stronger than Ken" group. We gathered to write, to read and discuss women's works, to explore our inner psychology—and of course, to share food and drink. What a delicious platter of spirits shared their lives: women who ranged in ages from 19 to 82 years.

Today, I continue to create and conduct writing workshops of different types with people of all ages—older women and men, middle-school children, and others. I work with such organizations as the Story Circle Network, the Writers' League of Texas, and the National Association of Women Writers.

Most recently, I've been working with a group we call "Women on the Fringe." In connection with my next book, *Red Boots & Attitudes*, our first efforts will raise money for the Breast Cancer Resource Center of Austin. We

plan to meet "as a cause comes calling," and it is our collective goal to celebrate life, to give back to a universe that has given so much to us

SCJ: *Your first published book was called Counter Culture Texas. Tell us about it. How did you come to write it?*

SJ: When I left classroom teaching, I found myself floundering, wandering. I wondered how I would introduce myself to others when they shot that inevitable question my way: "And what do you do for a living?" I knew it was time to pursue another dream, a dream of writing books, but I just wasn't prepared for the mourning, the sense of loss and emptiness I felt when I could no longer reply, "I am a teacher." I began wanting to answer those queries with three of Emily Dickinson's lines: "I'm a nobody/who are you?/are you a nobody too?" But I refrained. I had faith that I would one day be able to respond, "I am a writer."

I spent time in self-exploration, examining my hopes, my dreams, my goals. And when I walked out of the mist, it was clear that it was time to gather tales about people, about places, about legacies—those stories that are the fodder and foundation of folklore. And then fate confirmed this new direction. A close friend, a photographer, suggested that we collaborate on a project, and when we brainstormed, ideas swirled like leaves swept up into a whirlwind, spinning wilder and wilder until I closed my eyes and invited a favorite childhood image: myself at 9 or 10, sitting at the soda fountain counter at Smitty's Pharmacy in League City, Texas. That did it. The vivid memory of that counter and the many hamburgers, French fries, and cherry cokes I consumed while I chit-chatted with the waitress and friends was the "muse that came calling." Within an hour, my collaborator and I had the framework for a book on the "counter culture."

We began our travels off and on for several

months along Texas' back roads (and some main roads), searching for old-time "Mom and Pop" places where a counter still serves as a central gathering place. We didn't have a publisher at that time, but that didn't matter. This was a life journey, and this pilgrim was in search of stories that captured the spirit of these everyday heroines and heroes.

Ultimately, a regional publisher picked up the work, and the result is a book graced by the spirit and history of 44 landmark gathering places—diners, dancehalls, honkytonks, drugstores, and more—and the women and men who shared their stories. By the time the book was published, four of the people I had interviewed had died and three of the old businesses had closed their doors. Those occurrences confirmed the importance of this work for me. People and places are mortal, their stories are immortal.

SCJ: *Another of your projects has resulted in a fascinating book called From My Mother's Hands. What's the story behind this book?*

SF: This is a very personal book for me, and it's hard to speak briefly about its energy and spirit. First, it's important to know that my mother and I did not have a continuous, kind, and forgiving relationship. Our time together was an uphill-downhill journey. Sometimes we rested in separate and opposing valleys, sometimes we picnicked lovingly on the same hilltop. Fortunately, we were enjoying the world from the same hilltop when they diagnosed her lung cancer. After 15 hard-fought months, Mama succumbed; she was only 59 years old, just a baby in terms of a lifetime. When she died, I experienced an un-tethering. I sank into a depression, a fog of self-sorrow

But optimism and hope were among the many blessings and qualities my mother passed along to me. Although she was often struck by arrows of hard luck, despair, loss, and anger, she never lost faith and was not afraid of hard work, of re-focusing and exploring a new direction. So, once again, I walked through the mist and fog, and saw the next chapter of my writing life. I had no inclination to write about our relationship, but was driven to compile a work in which daughters could pay tribute to their mothers, their mentors. Fortunately, the publisher of *Counter Culture Texas* had asked me to submit another book proposal. I did, this one named for a journal entry I had written while on a two-week trip in Spain to heal from Mama's death: *From My Mother's Hands*.

I selected a format that would allow me to honor the daughters' words. I spent two hours

with each interviewee, tape-recording their thoughts, their tributes, their images of mothers. Prior to the meeting, I gave each one the interview questions, which allowed them to think ahead. The tape recorder freed me to listen, to connect the dots between information, and to think on my feet. It also enabled the interviewee to speak as she thought, without worrying about whether I was getting all of her words. Back in the studio, I transcribed each daughter's words into a computer file. If I had received photographs at the interview (the book contains over a hundred), I had them copied and enlarged and hung them on the wall near my computer so I could see their faces as I transcribed: for me, visual images stir up the creative process. This transcribing, while it was often challenging and time-consuming, allowed the daughters' words to play again in my mind. I noted the nuances in their voices, cried again at their tears, and smiled at the burst of laughter captured on tape. I fell in love with both daughter and mother over and over again.

The next step was to carefully edit their words into a narrative that would flow as naturally as a conversation, and to write profiles of each daughter. My editor also suggested that I collect a recipe from each daughter. At first I resisted, since I don't spend a lot of time cooking, but in hindsight, I am grateful for the idea. The daughters loved talking about the food their mothers created, whether they were gourmet dishes or comfort food.

As I share these stories at my speaking engagements, those women are in the room with us. Their stories touch hearts; their words evoke memories. And women often write to tell me that the book has inspired them to interview their mothers, or begin their mother journals. For me, that is an intense emotional reward.

SCJ: *Your latest book takes an entirely different direction. Tell us about it, Susie.*

SJ: Yes, and I *love* going in different directions! I'm one of those women who cannot do the same thing over and over and over again. I often tell audiences that my writing is like my garden—untamed and filled with surprises, like the shamrock amid the oregano, the daffodil periscoping up through the santalina, or the Mexican mint marigold in low mounds, among the lavender. So it is no surprise that this third book, *Red Boots & Attitude*, is altogether different from my first two works. When I see it in terms of my writing goals, however, it becomes clear that *Red Boots* is just another step on the path down which I'm traveling in

*Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul
And sings the tune
without the words
And never stops at all.
—Emily Dickinson*

*I cannot dance upon my Toes—
No Man instructed me—
But oftentimes,
among my mind,
A Glee possesseth me.
—Emily Dickinson*



*For a long time she flew
only when she thought no
one else was watching.
— B. Andreas*

*Countless events that
seem to distract us from
our lives are sometimes
the very things that give
them meaning.*

*And where the words
of women are crying to
be heard, we must
each of us recognize
our responsibility to
seek those words out,
to read them and share
them and examine
them in their
pertinence to our lives*
—Audre Lorde

*These women heal us
by telling our stories,
by embodying emotion
that our everyday
can't hold.*
—Elizabeth Alexander

*The world
is made up of stories,
not atoms.*
—Muriel Rukeyser

my life work.

In the two decades I've spent sharing the works and voices of American authors with students, I found myself yearning for more women's words, women's voices. Call it serendipity or synchronicity, but when the next messenger came knocking, I knew it was time to honor that yearning. The result is a deliciously diverse collection of fiction, non-fiction and poetry (65 works in all) by 34 veteran and emerging Texas women writers from diverse backgrounds and heritages.

One of the many strengths of the book is that the reader does not see the author's work through a keyhole. Each author had the opportunity to submit up to three works, in the same or different genres. There is a photograph and a profile of each author.

The title, *Red Boots & Attitude*, makes me want to slap my knee and do a Texas two-step. Every time I say it, I throw my shoulders back and grin. The title came about during a brainstorming session with the book's coeditor, Diane Fanning. We were laughing about life and love and women and writers, and those three words just popped into our conversation. You know when a good thing comes your way—and there it was, the title and "green light" for a new project.

SCJ: *As a lifewriter, you've mostly focused on helping others tell their stories. What about your own lifewriting? Do you journal? Are you writing or planning a memoir?*

SJ: When I'm asked about my own personal writing and journaling, I feel a twinge of guilt. But this lessens all the time, because I have so many ideas

in my head. I've kept a journal—actually a multitude of journals—for approximately three decades. Along with those notebooks, my files are filled with essays and poetry and short stories and story ideas and one-liners and partially written works. I even have an entire rough draft of a novella that needs polishing. I have walked with my fiction, blindfolded, out to the end of the critic's plank once, and was fortunate to have that short story selected for inclusion in *New Texas 2000*.

As I see it, my works are more often than not bits and pieces, snippets, taken from the universal life story in which I exist. As a writer, I use the life that surrounds me in all my works. I simply give myself permission to "blur the edges of reality." I know that one day I will allow myself the greatest gift, the gift of time, to sit still and put my "true" life story into stories. But for now, I am a stone skipping across a mountain lake, dancing on the diamond sparkles cast by the sun. And with each connection of stone and water, a strange thing happens. For a millisecond, I touch the earth, and then, just as quickly I am airborne again and dancing into the unknown.

What I do know is that organizations such as Story Circle Network are essential to my writing life, to my lifewriting. There is a creative flame in the synergy of women who gather and share and encourage. As I look ahead, I see a folder, a file cabinet, a studio crowded with ideas. Ideas I wish to bring to tangible form. And as I look around, I see I am surrounded by beautiful women who are overflowing with stories, and their words must be preserved. That is the spirit and philosophy of Story Circle Network.



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Books for the Journey

In each issue, we review books that teach us something important about women's stories. If you have a favorite book you'd like to share, send for our Reviewers Guide or go to <http://www.storycircle.org/ReviewersGuidelines.shtml>. We welcome your reviews!

From My Mother's Hands, by Susie Kelly Flatau (Republic of Texas Press, 2000, ISBN 1556227868). Reviewed by Paula Stallings Yost, Yantis, TX.

With a masterful hand of her own, Susie Kelly Flatau has captured the compelling dynamics of a positive mother-daughter relationship within this book. The enchanting tributes to their mothers by 33 prominent Texas women will entice readers to embark on their own reflective journey home to their mothers' arms.

This eclectic collection contains moving personal histories of some of the most influential women in Texas. They come from a variety of cultures and with careers as divergent as astronaut, ballerina, rancher, senator, attorney, and writer. Liz Carpenter, author and former press secretary to Lady Bird Johnson, credits her mother for her rich inheritance of warmth, humor and love of history.

Mother gave me such a love of those who have gone before that she shaped my career without knowing she was doing it.

Teresa Palomo Acosta, poet and educator, details her mother's struggles as a Mexican immigrant who went to work in the fields of Texas at the age of five.

I think her legacy for me will be that she helped me become a writer. She gave me the quiet time and she gave me her legacy by telling stories and letting me put those stories down in some way.

Lillian Dunlap, a retired U.S. Army Brigadier General, speaks of her mother's legacy of love.

I guess Mama's legacy is love. Our family loves each other, and you don't see that in a lot of families. I've worked with kids who've never been hugged, who don't know what a hug is, but Mama hugged and she loved.

This tapestry of memories, photographs, and recipes illustrates the powerful influence of the strength, wisdom, and love passed on from one generation to the next. Each story includes the daughter's unique observations and emotions about her mother, describes lessons learned, and offers a profile of the daughter.

Sadly, Susie Flatau lost her mother to cancer in 1990. She writes that she was inspired at that moment to write this book. Despite a rather rocky relationship with her mother, she began to recall the happy times. "And so it is that my mother's spirit traveled with me as I interviewed the beautiful women who shared their stories for this work," wrote Flatau in her dedication of the book to her mother.

Certainly not all mother-daughter relationships are idyllic. But the memories, legacies and stories live on within every woman. Flatau has created a must-read for all daughters and mothers. Pardon me now—I must call my mother.

Counter Culture Texas, by Susie Kelly Flatau and Mark Dean. Republic of Texas Press, 2000, ISBN: 155622737X

If you've never been to Texas, you'll want to come the minute you open this nostalgic book—and if you're lucky enough to live here, you know the authors got it right. *Counter Culture Texas* is about those old drugstores, diners, and honky-tonks that are the center of small-town communal life. It's about counters and the folks who prop their elbows on them while they sip coffee or a beer and complain about the weather or the election. It's about culture and conversation and friendships that connect. Sadly, some of these old landmarks are disappearing, but they'll live on in Susie Flatau's lively descriptions and Mark Dean's stunning black-and-white photographs. No doubt about it, this is the essence of Texas, distilled along back roads and in the far corners of the state. But more, it's the essence of the past for every woman who remembers perching on a twirly stool, sipping a cherry coke, and sneaking peeks at her ten-year-old self in the mirror over that Formica counter.—Reviewed by Susan Wittig Albert



We enter this world in a state of innocence and hope to leave it having attained wisdom, and in between these events there are two factors that strongly shape our quests—life occurrences and mentors. And so it is that From My Mother's Hands is a work inspired by Texas women who share the intimate moments and positive influences of their first mentors—their mothers.
~Susie Kelly Flatau

A mother is a person who seeing there are only four pieces of pie for five people, promptly announces she never did care for pie.
—Tenneva Jordan

And so our mothers and grandmothers have, more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see—or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read.
—Alice Walker



True Words from Real Women

In this section of each Story Circle Journal, we publish members' contributions of poetry and prose. Write for our Writers' Guidelines, limber up your ballpoint pen (or your typewriter or computer) and send in your contributions. We want to hear your stories!

Friendship

When I think of the word "friendship," when I think of a person with whom I have a friendship that is true and runs deep... my heart bursts open. A feeling of such indescribable joy washes over me, I want to jump high into the sky, arms flung wide in celebration.

Friendships, of course, can exist on different levels, ranging from a kind of daily, casual communication to the more deeply personal and explorative kind, depending upon the needs and expectations of each individual. All friendships, however, whatever their nature, can, in my view, arouse a mutual love that is genuine, and staunchly loyal.

The friendship that means more to me than any other is with a woman named Linda. When I think of her, I smile because I am aware that she knows more about me than I know about myself; there is no one else in my life about whom I can say this. I know that this friendship is among the greatest gifts I have been given, a gift for which I say thank-you every day. With my friend, I am totally myself, able to talk about my dreams, my fears, my every feeling... without inhibitions, without shame, without ever feeling judged...because I feel totally known and accepted by her. I believe I have been able to take chances and risks, gained insights and learned lessons that might have slipped by me without the healing power of her love, without her unwavering support and encouragement, without the example of the indomitable spirit with which she lives her own life.

We have been there for one another over the years in both good times and bad; and we continue to share both our joys and our disappointments. This friendship—so based on our open and honest sharing of the events in our lives, often down to the most minute detail—nourishes me daily and I can hardly imagine being my happy self without it.

Dorothea (Duffie) Bart
Monterey CA

Hattie

Hattie was my mother's oldest friend. They met at a Texas college where Mother was a student, and Hattie, a few years older, was the registrar. They honed their friendship on long walks around the campus lake. In 1935 Mother graduated and wangled Grandmother's permission to go with Hattie to Columbia University graduate school in New York, Grandmother mistakenly envisioning Hattie as a chaperon. They had an exciting time, seeing plays, concerts, and museums. And dates—lots of them. Once they even went on a picnic in the afternoon, then rushed back in the nick of time

to throw on evening clothes to see two different fellows. I know because Hattie let me read the amazingly detailed daily letters she wrote her mother. They already showed the optimistic spirit she's had all her life. Interesting to see your mother as a supporting player in someone else's life story!

Early on Hattie got a job at Columbia, then moved to the State Department and retired at 83. Although she had opportunities, she remained unmarried. Mother married in 1940 and moved to Virginia. When I moved to Washington in 1981, I built on my childhood acquaintance with Hattie.

Mother died of lung cancer in 1990. When Hattie came to visit her in the hospital, she asked Daddy for some time alone so they could enjoy youthful memories. They agreed that the good Lord must have been looking out for them, with all the adventurous stunts they pulled. Later, Mother made me promise to get Hattie a birthday present if she wasn't there to do it. Thus I found myself wrapping up Mother's favorite evening purse. I told her Mother's instructions, and finished with, "So this is from Mary Hope." Both of us were close to tears.

Hattie gradually lost much of her hearing and sight, and had a stroke last year. When I take her flowers in the nursing home, I'm not sure she knows my name, but she knows I love her. It's as if I am continuing that friendship started all those years ago on those walks around the lake.

Mary Faith Pankin
Arlington VA

Renaissance Woman

I still use the eyebrow brush she gave me. It was she who suggested that darkening my eyebrows would enhance my appearance.

In the early 70's in Nebraska, Anne spelled her name with an "e" at the end, wore a long flowing skirt and called us guests when we came for dinner, and made all red sauces from scratch. She called her children by two names—John Charles and George Michael—and the family dog was a Japanese Akita, a breed practically unknown in the state. Anne grew a dozen varieties of African violets, crafted miniatures for a Victorian dollhouse, and composed quick sketches of black-capped chickadees feeding in the falling snow.

"I'm a Renaissance woman," she smiled across the table at the Officers' Club where we were lunching. I nodded, gazing at her dark hair pulled back into a bun from her smooth classic face, the earrings swaying next to her full red mouth, and her long fingers around a glass. Anne was life shimmering—outside the cocoon.

Marie Buckley
Hillsboro OR

Bikin'

When George Harrison died recently, I began to think about how the Beatles music had touched my life. One of my favorite memories includes a Beatles song. The funny thing is, it was not a momentous event but a quite ordinary day. What made it extraordinary was the feeling of pure joy I experienced.

I was about thirteen at the time and had spent the night with my best friend, Rhonda. I loved staying at her house partly because her family was so different from mine and partly because I thought she was the coolest person I knew. She had a mini-bike and we would have the best times giggling and talking as we swerved from side to side on bumpy country dirt back roads.

On this particular day, as we were riding the bike we spontaneously began to sing, "Hey, Jude" at the top of our voices: "La, la, la da da da da, la da da da, hey, Jude!" Our long hair streamed out behind us in the wind, the sun shone on our shoulders and there was nothing on our minds other than having fun on a sunny Saturday morning. Every time I hear "Hey, Jude" I think of Rhonda and that day and I still feel that perfect happiness.

Charlotte Hamrick
New Orleans LA

My Paul

Paul came into my life when my mother and her sister gave birth to us just four months apart. Obviously, he was my cousin, but became my best friend for life. We grew up together and were hellions as children. When we became teenagers, we made the commitment to marry each other as soon as we were legally able.

He was everything I wanted in a man—loving, gentle, playful, musically gifted, a chef, a decorator, a gardener, and much more. Paul had great attention to detail and was organized to a fault—which are also my best and worst qualities.

But when we turned twenty-one, and I thought our life would begin together, my dream guy walked off into the sunset with the man of his dreams.

Doris Anne Roop-Benner
Richardson TX

Best Friends

"Have you ever eaten fried green tomatoes?" my friend Denise asks as we peruse the menu at the Whistle Stop Café in Fairfield, VA. Above us, a model train clickety-clacks around the perimeter of the room on suspended track. Outside, the Blue Ridge Mountains silently exude their majesty.

I look across the table at her twinkling blue eyes. "Nope. I've made green tomato pie, but never fried them."

"Me neither. Want to share a plate?" she asks.

"Absolutely."

I am deeply enjoying this time with my friend. Since my move to Virginia, Denise and I now live five hundred miles apart. But we have not let distance become a barrier to our friendship.

A week ago, as Denise drove south to visit her grandparents, I was traveling north to visit my family in New York. We met just off I-81 in Bethel, PA for a wonderful two-hour lunch.

Now, a week later, I am back home in Virginia and she is traveling from Tennessee to NY. She spent last night at my cabin and after our breakfast, she will head north again.

Our friendly waitress brings a plateful of hot golden, breaded circles—fried green tomatoes. Mmm. Delicious, we agree.

Three hours later, following eggs, biscuits, coffee and conversation, we have hugged, planned our next visit, she's on I-81N and I am back home—reflecting upon the richness of our friendship. She's shared so many of my best times and some of my absolute worst.

Always, she has accepted me unconditionally, listened with wisdom and wit, given me honest insight and gentle nudges. Our friendship is a mutual exchange that leaves us renewed, energized and eager for our next visit.

A few nights later I decide to watch the video, *Fried Green Tomatoes*, a marvelous story about friendship. Near the end, Jessica Tandy tells Kathy Bates, "You just reminded me about what the most important thing in life is. Do you know what I think it is?"

Bates replies, "No, m'am."

"Friends," Tandy says, her aged voice filled with emotion and wisdom. "Best friends." Yes. Truly, one of life's greatest blessings.

Mary Jo Doig
Glasgow VA

Looking Ahead

Each issue of the *SCJ* is loosely organized around a particular theme. While we do accept non-thematic writing, we give precedence to stories written on the theme of a particular issue. **Members only, please.** And do make sure that your stories are **350 words** or less. We receive so many contributions that we must reject longer stories. Here are the upcoming topics and deadlines:

Feels Like Home—May, 2002 (due April 15)
Building Bridges—August, 2002 (due July 15)
Songs to Sing—November, 2002 (due October 15)

If you can send your writing via email or as a Word attachment, the editors will love you. If you type your story on an Internet computer, all you need to do is **highlight** the text, **copy** it, and **paste** it directly into an email message. (This will eliminate lots of extra typing!) Send your work to Marie Buckley, marie@aracnet.com. If you submit typed or handwritten stories, please make sure that every word is legible. Mail to Marie Buckley, 1070 N.E. Sturgess St., Hillsboro, OR 97124-3330

More True Words

The Friendship Quilt

Like the intricate patterns of a quilt, friendships weave in and out of our lives. First, there was the boy in my kindergarten class with whom I played in the sandbox. He said that we would get married some day. There was my neighbor, Nora, who lived across the street from me. She was one grade lower than I in school, and we used to argue a lot. Annette was the girl in elementary school that I used to giggle a lot with. I still have the museum picture that we posed together for, during a class fieldtrip.

Then there was Kim, the friend I hung around with in seventh grade. We met through gym and choir class. She used to smile a lot. Tom was my first romantic friendship. He had wavy red hair and freckles. We went to a seventh grade dance together. Others of that nature existed and vanished throughout the years.

When I was in eighth grade my father drove me to Laura's sleepover. He had a hard time finding it because it was located in a secluded enclave off Lake Michigan in Miller Beach. We had a fun time together in science class.

Then there were friendships I made through my youth group. I completely lost touch with Vicki. What happened to her?

In addition, I developed friendships through my place of worship, and teacher friends through my teaching job. I used to sit on the bleachers in the summer with Barbara, a teacher with whom I had a room next door. We used to watch our daughters play softball.

Yes, friendships weave in and out of our lives. But the binding ones are those of family and pets. These don't drift away according to life situations. These always remain.

Sharon Blumberg
Munster IN

Friends Who Helped Change Lives

Little did I realize, when Carole and I greeted each other at the airport, that our first visit in 15 plus years would change the course of the rest of my life. She didn't plan to stay more than a few nights, so, in addition to the tourist thing, we talked, talked, and talked some more.

The unforgettable dialogue occurred when Carole asked me if I'd ever written a list of traits I wanted in the man I wanted to marry. She knew that I wanted another shot at marriage and, being a true friend, she wanted to help me find that right person.

On March 15, we made the famous list. We found ourselves serious one minute, and howling the next. We thought of things like good teeth and breath, and other funny stuff we chose not to write down. But mostly we included the important stuff. I found that after experiencing life for 58 years, I had no problem pinning down what really mattered.

The morning after Carole left, I spent time refining my list. I emphasized having a man of God's choice and mine and having

a relationship God would bless. When I finished, I put the list in my journal where I'd see it every day.

I didn't have to wait long for that person to come into my life. On Friday, March 21, 1997, I met Max. Believe it or not, he matched the qualities that really mattered on my list.

Max, whose wife had passed away very suddenly in 1995, and his niece, Sherri, traveled together during the summer of 1996. Sherri recognized Max's struggles to start a new life for himself. Ironically, she suggested that he make a list of things to do to begin again.

Max and I started dating and married on September 20, 1997. Ever grateful, we marvel at God's timing and the timing of two encouragers, Carole and Sherri. Figuratively, they took our hands so that now we can literally hold hands.

Carolyn J. Scheider
Austin TX

Flower Girl

When I was eight years old I'd go to Hillside Cemetery with my Uncle Will or my mother to put flowers on the new grave of my older sister Linda. Her headstone was clear and shiny, with pictures of flowers and birds—"Our Little Sweetheart," it said. I was the one who chose the headstone and rode in the back seat up Allesandro Road past the antique mansion where the nuns lived, around the curve past the sheep on the hill, and on through the black metal gate.

Linda was buried next to Robert C. Clarke, who would have been my age, and only had one date on his headstone. This led to questions my mother had little patience for. "How do you think he died? Was he born dead, or did he die later? Do his parents still live in Redlands, or did they move away? Do you think they still remember him?" But my biggest question remained: "Why doesn't someone bring him flowers?" His tiny grave didn't even have a metal cup for flowers. This affected me so deeply that I immediately appointed myself Robert's gravekeeper.

Uncle Will always let me put a few daisies, carnations, or stock on Robert's grave, but when I went with my mother, she was often irritated with my relentless flower request. "No," she said. "We have other graves to visit and there won't be enough." When repeated begging didn't work, I walked up the grassy hill to search for flat purple dandelion flowers that grew between the graves.

One day there were no purple dandelions and my mother wouldn't share. So I decorated Robert's grave with the only thing left to use—a piece of soft bark I pried off my favorite tree. I felt bad giving him bark instead of flowers, but I'd have felt worse if I'd left him nothing at all.

Decades later, Linda's headstone is as faded as his, and his is as familiar to me as hers is. Standing alone now, in the silence of the breeze, the sunlight, and the mountains, I still leave dandelion flowers and pieces of bark for my sister Linda and Robert C. Clarke.

Marcia Brannon
San Juan Capistrano CA

A Letter

Dear R,

I'm writing to say that I've finally realized that we are no longer friends. Perhaps this comes as no surprise to you. Maybe we never really were friends. It's possible that it was just circumstances that brought us together, and habit that has kept us together for the past eleven years.

In retrospect, there were many times we didn't agree. Always it was you would make the final decisions. Things were always so much more pleasant if I just went along with the plan. I'm tired of your moods, your bossiness, and your temper. I know that you haven't been happy for some time now. I'm just not taking responsibility for it any longer.

For the past several years, I've tried to change our relationship. I've spent more time with you. I've spent less time with you. (Maybe you just needed some space.) I've tried to remember the "good times", and tried to plan some new ones. I've made excuses for your behavior, and made apologies. I've tried to discuss it. I've tried to pretend it's not happening. I'm finished.

Ultimately, I needed someone else to point out your behavior to me. "She's not your friend, Erin. Friends don't treat each other like that." BAM! Suddenly, I'm six years old, and my sister, Patty is dragging me from the backyard into the house.

"That girl is not your friend! You've been waiting for her to come back from the bathroom for over an hour. I can't bear to look at you standing out there any longer. Don't you get it? She went into her house and out the front door. She's been playing with someone else this whole time. She just doesn't like you."

Well, it's a whole new year, and I'm not six anymore. The gift I'm giving myself is some emotional distance. I may need to work with you, but I don't have to get dragged into your moods. I'm getting some self-respect. It just might be the beginning of a better friendship with myself.

Sincerely,
Erin

Erin Boyle
Pittsburgh PA

Friendship

Friendship comes in so many forms. My first real friends were two blind twins in my violin class in grammar school named Dick and Ruby. I used to bring them to my house for lunch. My mama would make us Jell-O, soup and crackers, and lemonade. Then I would walk them back go school with me. The blind twins would take me into their typing and reading room for the blind. I desired to learn to type and read Braille. I even asked the teacher if I could take classes and learn, since I wanted to work with the blind. She said, "No." I was hurt but accepted the fact.

My next best friend came when I had my tonsils taken out when I was nine years old. A friend brought me a black and white kitten in an Easter basket. I called her Susie. This little

four-legged animal cuddled up to me, purring, and would sleep with me all day while I got better. She grew up and had babies of her own. They would play outside with the chickens, Little Peep and Crème Puff. Susie would even eat the chickens' food. I caught her eating grapes off the table one time. She was a character.

Then my next best friend came when I was 16 years old—my green-eyed, curly haired, ivory-skinned baby daughter. Her name is Crystal Leigh. Those soft little cheeks, long slim fingers, and the cutest little smile. Crystal would always purse her lips into a perfect little "O" and coo. My daughter is my best friend, forever and always.

Rebekah Taylor
Corona CA

Treadmill Friends

You meet the neatest people on treadmills! Three people come to mind when I think of treadmill friends and I have named them the Humpty Dumpty Lady, the Stained Glass Man, and the New Yorker Lady.

I first encountered the Humpty Dumpty Lady when I began going to the fitness center. She was the ex-officio greeter for those on the treadmills and she welcomed me into the group and introduced me around the fitness center. I call her the Humpty Dumpty Lady because she has a large round body atop spindly little legs. Over time we have become good friends, sharing many secrets and a little gossip as we pad along on our treadmills.

The Stained Glass Man does not actually use the treadmill but walks from treadmill to treadmill talking, while everyone else works out. He merely leans on a machine and talks. I suspect that he tells his wife he is spending a great deal of time at the fitness center without telling her that he rarely does any exercise. I won't tell! I call him the Stained Glass Man because much of his conversation centers on his stained glass hobby. I finally talked him into teaching me to do stained glass and we now share many an hour making window panels, sun catchers and Christmas ornaments. He is a good teacher and he and his wife and I have become great friends.

The New Yorker Lady was much harder to make friends with because she always reads her New Yorker magazine while she walks on her treadmill. However, after the treadmill, we both stretch and we visit. She even taught me some good yoga stretches. She is very fit and it shocked me the day she told me her age and I learned that she is fifteen years older than I am. That made me much more serious about my exercise and stretching.

I treasure my treadmill friends and their friendship has added new dimensions to my life. Hopefully it has also added to my cardiovascular strength at the same time!

Pat Flathouse
Austin TX

And More True Words . . .

The Power of Friendship

I was getting married again, for the third time, and Emilia, my best friend for forty-five years, had agreed to be my Matron of Honor saying, "But this is the last time!"

The Sunday before the wedding Emilia's mother suffered a stroke. She was in the hospital in a coma. We were on the phone daily and with every conversation Emilia assured me that she would be by my side as I married, finally, the man of my dreams. Our moods both soared and crashed several times a day.

The evening before the wedding she called in tears. Her mother was not making progress and it sounded as though they were just waiting for her to die. There was nothing the doctors could do. We wept over the phone as she told me she just couldn't make it to the wedding. I tried to assure her that it would be okay though my heart shattered for her. When we finally rang off, I made tearful calls to my fiancé, my mother and another friend whom I asked to stand in for Emilia. It was not the restful night before a wedding day that brides dream about. But at forty-nine, weddings come with a life of baggage.

The next morning Emilia called and with a voice that fought back tears she told me she was coming. As much as I wanted her there I tried to assure her that she wouldn't ruin the wedding if she didn't come. But she insisted she wanted to be there for me and she made it to my house just in time to change into her dress and get into the limo. We avoided the subject of her mother's situation as we went through the motions of having our pictures taken. She swore she would get an Academy Award for this performance and I believe she would have. She made it through the ceremony and cocktail hour, and left after eating dinner. Watching her leave burned my heart.

This wonderful friend surmounted her own pain to be by my side and I am so grateful. This friendship will last a lifetime.

Renee Howard Cassese
Seaford NY

My Release

I was released from prison 10-30-01 about 11:30AM. My mother picked me up at Reception. As I opened the door and sat in the front seat, I felt overwhelmed. I was actually leaving prison, never to return. We drove away.

We stopped at a store and I got out of the car and walked inside the store to buy a fountain Dr. Pepper and a five-dollar phone card. When I walked out of the store, my mom started taking pictures, and the pictures she took of me that day I sent back to the prison to my friends to let them know I have not and will not forget them. No way will I nor can I ever forget where I came from.

People who are still in prison are human. I am still one of them, just residing in the free world. Thank you, God!

The ride home to Arlington was a change. I got sick from all the stop and go in the car. Yuk, huh? But I am now able to ride without vomiting. I have done all my legal deals such as getting my driver's license, birth certificate, and Social Security card. I also have a job in advertising.

I attend NA and AA meetings three to four times a week. I need my support. As long as I have my support, I have my sobriety. It can be done! I am free! I soon will have a place of my own. I have a life. I have a life to live, happy and clean. I am a survivor.

Tamra Ellis
Arlington TX

Goodbye, Ann

The interstate from Daytona Beach to Jacksonville is hypnotically straight and sterile—a scar across a once lush area of Florida. Three of us, old friends since childhood, pay scant attention to the empty landscape as we talk of old times, comfortable in our shared past.

The purpose of this reunion is to see a dying friend, knowing this will be our final visit. This grim knowledge we keep at bay, and fill the car with non-stop chatter. We grow silent as we approach Ann's house, apprehensive about how we shall find her. Will our visit help? Will she feel our love and compassion?

Then she appears in the doorway and beckons us to come in. Our anxiety lifts as we observe her familiar form and welcoming smile. We gently hug her thin body and begin to relax. I'm struck by how much and how little the four of us have changed. Ann was a prim, conscientious child and dutiful, serious adult. As adolescents we leaned on her common sense when we felt out of control. As adults, our friendship has never faltered.

To our delight she is hungry! Indeed, she enthusiastically devours a large, shrimp salad at a nearby restaurant. My spirits soar irrationally, and I begin to wonder if the doctors are unduly pessimistic.

It is time to go, and she addresses the questions she knows we have. The doctors have advised stopping the torturous treatments, but have left the decision to her. She will fight on, she says. How do you respond to such courage? My goodbye hug is too strenuous, and I realize that her starved dress conceals an emaciated body. Promises are made, platitudes are mouthed as I fight back tears. We turn to wave as we leave the driveway, but she has closed the door.

We elect to take the long way home, going southward on a narrow highway along the ocean front. Perhaps the sight of the restless, living Atlantic will nourish our spirits and dispel our sadness. It helps a little.

Anne Beckner
Austin TX

On Saturday night, women interested in sharing their work met for an open-mike evening. **A Circle of Creativity—**
Continued from page 1

These *Storytelling from the Heart* groups, moderated by Rebecca Roberts, Donna Remmert, and Paula Stallings Yost, were extraordinary showcases of the remarkable talent and versatility of Story Circle storytellers.

The weekend's work sessions were divided into three categories: *Finding Your Voice*, *Serious Stuff*, and *Stories in Many Voices, Many Media*.

♥Finding Your Voice♥

The Nature of Our Lives

Jean L. McGroarty (Battleground IN) has taught nature writing classes and facilitated Writing From Life groups and journaling classes. She currently leads an e-circle for the SCN Internet Chapter.

Jean stressed the role nature quietly plays in our lives, and in our stories. A soft rain tickling a tin roof suddenly may remind us of a childhood visit to a grandparent's farm or a steamy romantic tryst. She demonstrated unique methods for incorporating the natural world into our stories. The most popular exercise involved writing a cinquain, a five-line poem. Here's an example that touched everyone's heart, by Susan Jaeschke:

Moon
Full, luminous
Pulling, prodding, pleading
Stirring together feminine emotions
Circle

Women, Autobiography & Spirituality

Linda Joy Myers (Richmond CA), a therapist and lifewriting teacher, illustrated the power of writing for therapeutic healing by sharing inspirational poetry in a sacred circle. Stressing the value of listening, she explained that deepening into the self is a way to heal and find the true voice within us. She encouraged the women in her session to write about meaningful spiritual moments in their lives. Spirituality, she explained, includes seeking the healing of soul wounds, inner listening and stillness, and the quest for the meaning of life. Linda agrees with research proving that self-disclosure promotes healing, and believes that lifewriting can be a spiritual practice. The women in this session came away with a stronger understanding of the healing potential of telling their stories.

Writing the Stories of Our Lives: Getting Started

Frances E. Reynolds (Columbia MO) is a teacher and lifewriter. She presented tips from Susan Albert's *Writing from Life*, including exercises in writing about a childhood photo and family culture. Participants became especially inspired while drawing a map illustrating their life's journey. Each woman added her special touch by drawing unique pictures or sketching rivers showing the course of their lives. These exercises reflected our spiritual, mental and emotional growth and encouraged us to assess the impact of family culture and the power of place. The camaraderie and emotional support in the group

grew as each writer shared her work. Beginning and seasoned writers came away from the session with newfound confidence.

Passing the Light: How Our Family Stories Influence Us

Jan Epton Seale (McAllen TX) is a teacher and award-winning author of poetry and short fiction. Jan emphasized the influence on our lives of family stories, ethics and beliefs, whether we buy into or reject them. She shared a valuable list of ideas for particular types of family stories: stories about births, deaths, black sheep, rituals, ancestors, illness, courtships, faith, survival, etc. Several women shared stories of unique family traditions. One recalled with frustration having to wait to open her Christmas presents until a special cake was prepared, a single candle lit, and "Happy Birthday Jesus" sung. Of special interest were Jan's tips for elders' stories: 1) Finding the Meaning of Life; 2) Personal Values & Their Changes Over Time; 3) Dealing with Life's Changes; 4) Self-Knowledge; 5) Life & Death Awareness (Cycle of Life); 6) Roots & Traditions.

"The Red Shoes:" A Parable for Today's Women

Lorraine Soukup (Kittery, ME) is a singer, storyteller, and teacher. She demonstrated the principle that folk tales offer valuable lessons about life with an enchanting presentation of "The Red Shoes," a parable about a young girl forced to fend for herself. The heroine proudly fashions a unique pair of red shoes from bits and pieces found in the forest. When adopted by a noble family, the girl is outfitted with fine new clothes and black patent-leather shoes. Her red shoes are confiscated and burned with the trash. Eventually she buys a new pair of red shoes, but her family also deems these unacceptable. Once again she is forced to wear the conventional pair. At last, the girl manages to wear her beloved red shoes...with tragic consequences. The story is a metaphor for every woman's need to create and sustain a self-designed, authentic life filled with passion and vitality. After telling the story, Lorraine led the group in meditation to visualize their own red shoes. Though only one woman was actually wearing red shoes, there is no doubt that all who attended are wearing their own red shoes now.

♥Serious Stuff♥

Outside the Box: Playing with Frameworks for Writing Life Stories

Susie Kelly Flatau (Austin TX) is an author, editor, speaker, and teacher. Given her background, it was no surprise that her presentation was packed with a variety of helpful ideas for framing life stories. She discussed the use of dreams as a catalyst for identifying key questions. What are the events? Who are the characters? What is the significance of both in my life story? She also recommended using a pattern of events as a framing mechanism and explained the use of voice (first or third person, adult or child, or both) and sense of place to ground the story. Metaphorical tips included *lighting* (what gets highlighted and what stays hidden); *script* (write it as you recall it); and *slicing* (the submarine-sandwich approach in which the writer captures everything, or the single-slice approach in which she focuses on a single time period or event). A favorite of the participants was Susie's hint to post the word PERMISSION on their computer as a constant reminder "to do whatever you want, however you want!"

From Memoir to Fiction: Using Novelistic Techniques

Susan Wittig Albert (Bertram TX), is a teacher and best-selling author who believes that memoir can be made more interesting through the use of fiction-writing techniques. She asked participants to write briefly about a scene they recalled in which they were in conflict with another person. Then they reduced the scene to one sentence: the premise of the story. As those were read aloud, Susan offered suggestions for simplifying and clarifying to create a stronger premise. Other highlights of the session were her examples of the use of physical attributes to reflect a character's inner conflict and tips on writing effective dialogue. Participants left energized and with invaluable answers about the fiction-writing process.

Cameo Life Stories: Penning Your Portrait in Words

Deborah Hansen Linzer (Paradise Valley AZ) is the president of the National Life Stories Center. She stressed the importance of making history more complete and accurate by including women's stories. She discussed creative techniques for retrieving, organizing and recording memories. Each participant received a questionnaire designed by women and women's history scholars, and learned how to preserve their autobiographies in the Arizona State University West Fletcher Library archives. Many left the session determined to share the questionnaire, an excellent tool for women interested in writing their life stories, with their mothers, sisters and friends. For more information about the National Life Stories Center, go to www.thestoriescenter.org.

Interviewing the Important Women in Your Life

P.J. Pierce (Austin TX) is a teacher and author whose collection of women's interviews (*Let Me Tell You What I've Learned: Texas Wisewomen Speak*) will be published in August. P.J. explained her methods for getting the most from an interview. "Start with the easy questions first," she suggested. "When interviewing someone about her life and what she has learned along the way, I find that the way to get her to relax and talk is to ask her to talk about her childhood." P.J. emphasized practical matters (take fresh batteries for your tape recorder) and personal style (nod your head and utter "um" from time to time). Her enthusiasm and experience encouraged participants to interview family members and/or community leaders.

The Nitty Gritty of Self Publishing

Donna Remmert (Austin TX) is a writer and teacher. **Terry Sherrell** of Morgan Printing in Austin, assists clients with the production of their books and newsletters. In this nuts-and-bolts session, Donna shared her experience with her self-published memoir, *The Littlest Big Kid*, now in its second printing. Then Terry and Donna discussed four key aspects of publishing: manuscript preparation ("edit, edit and edit again"); production (choosing a cover, designing the page, printing, binding, and packaging; marketing and distribution (getting your book into the hands of buyers; and financing (pricing, paying, and recouping your expenses.) Participants received their money's worth in this

session, including a list of resources for writers and publishers, a "no surprises" checklist of information required to obtain a cost estimate, publishing guidelines, and their choice of a free book published by Morgan Printing.

Using Genograms to Identify and Map Your Life Stories

Annette Riggio facilitates a Story Circle in San Marcos TX. She began by defining genogram: a multi-generational family tree that includes themes like family roles, character traits, and occupations. Annette explained that the genogram process captures the drama and dynamics of families and may help identify new, compelling stories or explain complex stories via a fresh perspective. She demonstrated how the genogram maps the family structure and records family information through the use of specific symbols and lines. Whether or not the genogram includes the basics, the details, or distances (emotional components) of our families, it is a powerful tool for self-exploration. Annette bravely illustrated this point using the genogram of her intriguing family. With down-to-earth charm and a sense of humor, she discussed the value of seeking patterns that explain who we are and help us determine our purpose. No matter the dynamics, our families can then be viewed as a positive influence in molding our essence, or who we are meant to be.

♥Stories in Many Voices, Many Media♥

Mythologically Speaking: Creating Your Personal Myth

Carolyn Blankenship (Austin TX) is a teacher and facilitator with an ear for fairy tales. Carolyn explained that myths provide a way of saying bigger things and dealing with issues unsuitable for literal expression. When she asked participants to name a few common myths, one woman commented, "I grew up hearing that any girl can be Miss America. I knew *that* myth was wrong!" Another offered, "The Golden Age Myth: Everything will be beautiful because your children will grow to respect you and to be independent." Next came a discussion of the influence of childhood fairy tales on our lives. "Little Red Riding Hood" illustrated the plight of helpless, naive females to some. One woman strongly related to "The Little Engine That Could," while another hated it. "Sleeping Beauty" taught one participant that "Even in a coma, a woman can get a man." Carolyn ended the session with a myth-writing exercise. Participants filled in the blanks of a basic heroine's quest story with their own heroine, describing her environment, actions, emotions and individual quest. Each left with her unique personal myth and a new way of looking at life stories.

Writing Out Loud

Deborah Morgan (Camrose, Alberta, Canada) is a literacy teacher. She mesmerized her audience with a story about the development of the Chapters Program, her literacy/life skills program designed for and by women on social assistance. The program's successful agenda includes writing activities—a challenge for some of her students, who had never even been to a library. Today many of those students have become training assistants and work with the program throughout Canada. Attendees at this session practiced a few of Deborah's simple, non-threatening training exercises. In one particularly revealing exercise, each person stated her name and told, if she knew,

where it came from and what it meant. In another, Laurie Kehler, Deborah's assistant, distributed keys to everyone and asked that they write about what their key might open. It soon became obvious that even the most hesitant new writers, at all skill levels, can learn to write from the heart.

Art (Clay) as Teacher & Tool for Discovering Your Story

Rebecca Roberts (Austin TX), an award-winning potter, told participants, "My life is clay." For a short time, clay became their lives, too, as they played and wrote in her workshop. First Rebecca helped everyone relax and move into a meditative frame of mind. Eyes closed, each woman then shaped an orange-sized ball of clay into a pinch pot. When they opened their eyes, everyone was surprised to find that each of the more than 20 pots was unique. No two were alike, just as no two women were alike. Afterward, participants wrote about the clay encounter and shared thoughts about the process and the discovery as it related to their inner lives and stories. Rebecca admitted, "My artwork has repeatedly shown me truths about my life's process that had previously been hidden from my consciousness."

Between Generations: Mothers & Daughters Sharing Our Life Stories

Carolyn Scheider (Austin TX) is a teacher and Story Circle facilitator who encourages girls and women to span generational differences by sharing their achievements. When daughters, mothers, and grandmothers celebrate their successes, they foster respect, caring and cooperation, and strengthen their family ties. Carolyn illustrated these points in a discussion of her work and the introduction of Girls' Club contributors, including "Sue and Crew": community activist Sue Peterson, her daughter Katie, her mother Ruth, and others. As they described their glories (successes), gifts (aptitudes, attitudes, and education) and graces (luck of the draw), these women found that values and talents formed a bridge between generations and strong bonds among family members. Session participants were asked to list their own successes and contributing factors. That exercise was followed by a lively discussion of the benefits of sharing these stories with older and younger women.

Preserving Memories Through Scrapbook

Kathryn Quintana is a consultant and instructor at the Scrapbook cupboard in Austin, TX. Participants in this hands-on workshop learned to create a truly memorable story through the use of pictures, words and memorabilia. Kathryn talked about the basics and demonstrated some of the tools available to help even non-artistic types produce eye-catching pages. She showed how adding words from our journals, family stories, and quotes from kids to the pictures can result in compelling stories. Students who brought pictures tested some of these techniques using various cutters, glues and trimming devices to create a page or two as a start on their own scrapbook.

Woman Speak: On Love & Marriage

D. Phelps, (Bulverde TX) teaches the visual and performing arts. Her session was a delightful change of pace. The women in this workshop were asked to write a very brief story involving a long-term love relationship. Next they were asked to break the story down to four key words. In groups of four, they

helped each other develop body movements and sounds that represented those words without actually speaking them. What a challenge! Finally, groups enacted their body messages while encircled by their classmates. The women forming the circle accompanied the groups' movements with the sounds (moans, sighs, ohms, oohs and ahs) selected by the group members. Some women were also provided with rocks for banging, a drum to beat, and a rainstick to rattle, creating a rhythmic background. All the women's stories were as different as their physical interpretations, but by the end of each group's performance, the rhythm, sounds and movements blended amazingly into one perfectly choreographed dance of the soul.

Stories from the Heart 2002 ended with a magical farewell luncheon on Sunday. Vocalist and songwriter P.Jae Stanley (Whitney TX), captivated the audience with a moving performance of her original melody, "One Love," which seemed to have been written just for that moment and that place. As P.Jae sang, the room came alive and the circle of inspiration, creativity and love that began on Friday became complete. The words of the chorus echoed the emotions of the day:

One Love, we've got to come together now
One Heart, because together we know how
One Hope, believing everyone can see
One Love, One Voice, yeah, singing loud and free
One Choice, moving on so we can be
One World, including you and me
One World and One Love*

Dr. Susan Albert, founder and president of Story Circle Network, closed the conference with a history of the organization: Who We Are and What We Do. (You can find the text of her

This article was written and compiled by Paula Stallings Yost, Conference Reporter (Yantis TX), from session summaries provided by eight SCN members: Melanie Alberts (Austin, TX); Penny Appleby (Austin, TX); Judy Fettman (Ann Arbor, MI); Linda Jones (Austin, TX); Jean McGroarty (Battle Ground, IN); Leilani Rose (Austin TX), Danelle Sasser (Austin, TX); Linda Wisniewski (Doylestown, PA).

talk on page 2 of this *Journal*.) The conference closed with Susan's heartfelt words of gratitude, "Each one of you is an inspiration to all of us. That's what Story Circle is all about!"

*Used with permission



An Ode to Stories from the Heart **By Margaret Long, Austin TX**

What did you learn, Margaret?
Oh Mother, the most exciting thing!
Did you learn about organizing your story?
Oh yes, but more than that!
Did you learn more about how to find your own voice?
Yes, but--
Did you learn about parables and metaphor and myths?
Yes, but the most--
Did you learn about interviews, and point of view, and

True Words 2002 Available, Other Publication Opportunities Open to Members

SCN has recently published its second annual anthology of members' writings, *True Words from Real Women*. This year's 20-page anthology was edited by Carolyn Blankenship, of Austin TX and contains 29 stories by SCN members in the United States and Canada. It is mailed free of charge to new and renewing Story Circle members.

To compile the anthology, the Network collects its favorite stories from among those written in the previous year by women who have participated in various activities of the Story Circle Network. These include stories from a "Writing from Life" workshop, stories from local Story Circles or our Internet Chapter's e-circles, and stories that have been submitted for publication in the *Journal*. This year, we have also dedicated a section of the anthology to writings published on *Give Sorrow Words*, our web site that collects responses to the disaster of September 11.

"I was amazed," Carolyn said, "at the quality of the writing that was submitted by our members, and I felt privileged to be the first to read many of the submissions." She added that she was delighted at the wide variety of styles and subjects presented and enjoyed grouping and arranging them for publication. "The level of honesty and depth of emotion found in many of the pieces was particularly moving," she said.

Carolyn is a member of the Story Circle Network Board, facilitates a Austin Chapter Story Circle, and leads workshops for the Older Women's Legacy Circles memoir program. She has developed and taught a variety of programs over the past 15 years, including training programs for volunteer facilitators, grief and loss support groups, for churches, schools, universities, prisons, and many other organizations.

Other Publication Possibilities

The Story Circle Network offers a number of publication possibilities for its members, according to Susan Albert, editor of the *SC Journal*. "Our mission is to honor women's voices and celebrate women's lives," Susan says. "We are working hard to broaden the number of venues within which our members may publish their work."

The most important of these venues is the *Journal* itself, which is published quarterly. Each issue contains 15 or so stories in its "True Words from Real Women" section, for a total of about 60 stories a year. This section is edited by Associate Editor Marie Buckley, who works from stories sent in by members. (See "Looking Ahead," at the bottom of page 11, for submission instructions.)

In addition, the *Journal* publishes the winning essays of SCN's annual Carol Landherr LifeWriting Competition, as well as columns written by members (such as "Journaling Your Life" and "Writing and Healing"). An additional full-page essay, "A Reader Tells Her Story," is solicited for each issue by Associate Editor Marie Buckley.

Currently, the University of Texas Press is considering SCN's book manuscript, *With Courage and Common Sense*, for possible publication in 2004. "If the Press accepts this book," Susan Albert says, "SCN plans to submit a proposal for a second collection, probably focusing on women writers in the South and Southwest."

Keep those pens and computers going, gals, and those stories coming. The Story Circle Network offers plenty of opportunities for you to see your work in print!



We're Filling Our Sugar Bowl! Will you help?

We regularly receive requests from low-income women and women in prison, asking us to help them find sponsors for their Story Circle memberships. In 2001, the SCN Board of Directors approved a scholarship fund to meet this need. We call it our Sugar Bowl—a sweet place to put that little bit of extra money that you've got in your pocket.

In 2001, 14 members of SCN were sponsored through Sugar Bowl scholarships. We hope you'll become a contributor to this worthwhile program. To drop your dimes, quarters, and dollars into our Sugar Bowl Scholarship Fund, send a check to Sugar Bowl, Story Circle Network, PO Box 500127, Austin TX 78750-0127. You may also use the PayPals system on our web site. No amount is too small, of course—all those coins do add up!

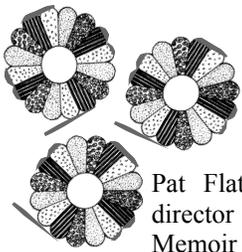
The Sugar Bowl Fairy will give you a big hug.

LifeWriting Tips....

A Personal Dictionary

When we write our memoirs, we may overlook the fact that some terms are uniquely ours. Terms vary from area to area, and some families create their own meanings for certain words. This can cause our readers to miss something special or funny in our stories.

So, create a personal dictionary. Start by making a list of people you know and have an important part in your life. Tell who they are, how you met them and what they meant to you. List special traditions or holidays, explaining what was special about them in your family and how they were celebrated. List words that are unique to your area, culture or family and explain them. Add other items you can think of that are unique and need explaining. Keep this dictionary on hand to add to as you write new experiences.—*Margaret Knorr lives in Charleston, WV. Her website, club and monthly newsletter, Writing for Life are devoted to journaling. www.writingforlife.net. She teaches journaling workshops at Inspired2Write.com.*



Pat Flathouse Appointed As Director of the Austin OWL-Circle Memoir Program

Pat Flathouse has recently been appointed as director of the Older Women's Legacy Circle Memoir Program (OWL-Circle) in Austin TX.

The OWL-Circle memoir project, which takes women's quilts as its emblem and model for story-making, has become an outstanding example of the Story Circle Network's commitment to honor women's voices and celebrate women's lives. It began in 1998 as a grant-funded program that enabled SCN to create and offer some fifty free memoir workshops for nearly 500 senior women in the Austin TX area. The grant ended in 2000, but OWL-Circle continues, and continues to grow strongly. Nationally, some 20 people and organizations have purchased OWL-Circle Program kits. In Austin, under Pat's energetic direction, it is beginning to take on some exciting new dimensions.

Pat has two degrees in Education and one in religious studies. She has taught or served as a counselor at a school for the deaf, in elementary and college-level classrooms, local religious education programs, and in stress-management workshops. She and her husband have four sons and four grandchildren. When we asked her what she does for fun, she replied, "I enjoy quilting, various forms of needlework, woodcarving, stained glass, weaving, and occasional painting...anything creative with my hands. I also enjoy traveling with my husband, learning more about the history of Texas, and gathering family history stories to add to a large collection of genealogical materials that I have inherited from my grandmothers and have gathered myself."

Through SCN, Pat also became interested in writing about her family. "Currently," she says, "I am exploring a new love of writing all the stories about my family and myself that I have tucked away in my heart for so many years. Through SCN and the OWL-Circle program, I have been given the permission and tools to begin writing down so many stories that I want to share with my family."

Pat has already begun focusing her substantial energies on developing the Austin OWL-Circle memoir program. In January, 21 writers enrolled in two groups at St. John Neumann Catholic Church, and Pat has developed a waiting list for the groups that begin in March. "The women participating in these current OWL groups are most excited about continuing to meet when their five formal sessions are completed," she says. "It has been so amazing to see the enthusiasm for the OWL-Circles and the energetic way that the program has been embraced by people who have heard about it. I believe there is a dire need for this kind of program for women to give them permission to write and share these stories that need to be told."

Pat has ambitious goals for the Austin program's development. She plans to expand the offerings of groups throughout the Austin area, especially in church groups retirement centers, and other organizations where older women gather. She plans to convene a meeting of facilitators

who have worked in the program over the past three years, to discuss who is interested in continuing to facilitate groups, to train new facilitators, and to share what works well with writers who have special needs, such as those in nursing homes, or those who cannot write easily due to physical impairment.

Pat is thinking beyond Austin, too. "I want to take the program on the road," she says, "in the form of weekend workshops." She plans to use these workshops to demonstrate the OWL-Circle materials (the workbook and facilitator's manual) to groups that might be interested in creating their own local OWL-Circle Memoir Workshops. "Currently," she said, "I have three prospective workshop groups in Texas and New Mexico."

Pat would like to help spread the word about the OWL-Circle program both locally and nationally: by contacting groups that are involved with women, storytelling, aging, and writing. She is available for talks and presentations. She would also like to hear from organizations that would be interesting in featuring the OWL-Circle program in their national publications, such as the article that appeared in the November/December issue of *Horizons*, a magazine for Presbyterian women. If your group is interested in scheduling a presentation, or if you know of a publication that might like to do a feature story on women's memoir, you may reach Pat through the Story Circle office (512-454-9833) or by email at pflat@swbell.net.

Pat would like to more closely connect the Austin program with the other OWL-Circle memoir workshops that are currently underway across the United States. Last year, through the OWL-Circle website (www.owlcircle.com), SCN began offering memoir workshop kits (the participants workbook and the facilitator's manual) at the very attractive price of only \$100 to SCN members, \$150 to non-members, and \$200 to institutions. Pat would like to create a nationwide network of OWL-Circle teachers and facilitators, in order to share ideas for using and marketing the program.

"Pat's energy, imagination, and dedication are just what our Austin program needs," says Catherine Cogburn, who directed the original grant-funded program. "The OWL-Circle Memoir Workshops are a vital aspect of SCN. We would like to see them appear in every community in the United States. Older women have many wonderful stories to tell, and we need to help them record these precious legacies before they are lost forever."

These stories were remembered for a reason. Family stories, they were told and retold because they contained essential truths. Life and ourselves were in these stories, whether they were flattering or not, straightforward or opaque, legend or history. They showed us, in one way or another, how to live.

—Elizabeth Ehrlich, *Miriam's Kitchen*

Special Thanks for A Wonderful Conference.....

As Judith Helburn said at our conference, you can't give a party for 150 people without a lot of help! So here is a big bouquet of thanks to all those wonderful people who gave so generously of their time and money to make *Stories From the Heart 2002* a wonderful success.

Our Sponsors

We're especially grateful to The Wardrobe, 1206 W. 38th St, Austin, TX 78705, which sponsored Dr. Flowers' keynote address, and Ronya Kozmetsky, of Austin TX, who made our scholarship program possible. Satay Restaurant, 3202 W. Anderson Ln Suite 205, Austin, TX, Morgan Printing, 900 Old Koenig Lane, Ste 135, Austin, TX, and Central Market, 4001 N. Lamar, Austin TX, contributed to the refreshments.

Door Prizes

Thanks to those who gave merchandise for our door prizes: Susan Albert, Bei Amici Salon, Susie Flatau, The Garden Room, Judith Helburn, Lake Austin Spa Resort, Rebecca Roberts, Donna and Steven Remmert, The Wardrobe, and Melanie Zyck-Alberts.

Stories from the Heart Quilt and Heart Wreath

Sharon Wildwind, of Calgary, Alberta, Canada, has started a tradition with her gift of a stunning wall quilt, especially designed for the conference. Laylee Muslovski, of Belton TX, contributed a wreath of hearts. You'll find these two beautiful items on display at the next *Stories From the Heart* conference, in 2004.

play at the next *Stories From the Heart* conference, in 2004.

Our Conference Committee

Judith Helburn, the conference coordinator, assembled an outstanding team of volunteers to help with the dozens of tasks associated with the conference. They took care of everything from making the workbook covers to covering the registration desk, and we owe them all an enthusiastic round of applause.

Susan Albert, Publications	Peggy Moody, Website, Registrar
Melanie Alberts	Vera Preston-Jaeger
Penny Appleby	Donna Remmert
Lisa Belli, Artistic Designs	Annette Riggio
Carolyn Blankenship	Judie Ross-Bales
Catherine Cogburn	Danelle Sasser
Susie Flatau, Program	Carolyn Scheider
Paula Hatfield	Susan Scott
Linda Jones, Evaluations	Linda Wisniewski
Jean McGroarty, Scholarships	

Entertainment and Artistry

Beth Ullman sang to our hearts during the luncheon on Saturday, and on Sunday, P.Jae Stanley brought us closer together with her "One Love." And Austin wire artist Susan Andrews delighted us with her wild, wonderful, wired women! Thanks to all!

Writing from Life: A Workshop for Women with Stories to Tell

with Susan Albert, Carolyn Blankenship, Catherine Cogburn,
Susie Flatau, Donna Remmert, and Paula Yost

Telling, Sharing, and Shaping Our Stories

Women are natural storytellers, sharing their experiences of work and love, children and challenge, bright hours and dark days. In this weekend workshop, you will learn why and how storytelling can be an important means of self-discovery, self-determination, and transformation. Together, we will discover why personal narrative is a healing art, how our stories can be sacred acts, and how writing the story of our past helps us define a healthy future.

Saturday, May 4 & Sunday, May 5, 2001

Lower Colorado River Authority Complex, 3700 Lake Austin Blvd., Austin TX

\$100 for Story Circle members, \$120 non-members

for details, go to www.storycircle.org/Workshops/

or write or phone Story Circle Network, PO Box 500127, Austin TX 78750-0127, 512-454-9833

Telling a true story about personal experience is not just a matter of being oneself, or even of finding oneself. It is also a matter of choosing oneself.—Harriet Goldhor Lerner

A Story Circle News Roundup

If you'd like to share your writing-related news, or if you're facilitating or participating in a Story Circle, tell us about it! Write to Story Circle Roundup, PO Box 1616, Bertram TX, or email Susan Albert at china@star.net

From the Story Circle Board

Fifteen members of the Story Circle Board and one invited guest (Pat Flathouse, Austin OWL Director) were present for the first meeting of 2002, in Austin TX. The board heard reports from its chapter presidents, workgroup chairs, and project and program directors, and elected officers for 2002. Here are some of the highlights of this very full meeting.

•**Membership Services.** Lisa Belli reported that an analysis of the sources of membership shows that SCN grows best through the old-fashioned word of mouth. Advertising is somewhat helpful, but not cost-effective. The website is also a source of new memberships; since its inception, we've had over 20,000 hits.

•**2002 Conference.** Judith Helburn reported on the many activities of the Conference Planning Committee. Registrations are higher than expected (especially given travel delays and problems). The board discussed some of the dozens of details still left to be resolved, and gave Judith and her team a big round of applause for their wonderful work.

•**Plans for 2002-2003 Workshops and Programs** SCN will hold two Writing From Life workshops in Austin in 2002 (May and October). In 2003, we are planning a LifeWriters' Retreat, a weekend retreat with a nationally-recognized speaker (Christina Baldwin has been suggested), in conjunction with a longer workshop, led by SCN facilitators. It will be held at a retreat center in the central Texas area.

•**OWL-Circle Memoir Program.** New Austin program director Pat Flathouse was introduced and spoke about directions for 2002 (see article, page 19). Sales of OWL-Circle kits on the Internet are continuing to grow (including institutional sales). Susan Albert reported that the anthology of writings from the original OWL-Circle project, entitled *With Courage and Common Sense*, has been revised and resubmitted to UT Press.

•**2002 budget.** The board approved a balanced budget for 2002 that anticipates approximately \$30,000 in both income and expenditures, with the development of a contingency fund. Printing and postage (over \$8,000) is the largest expense category. The SCN webmistress/membership coordinator remains the only paid staff member; all other positions are held by volunteers. In 2001, board members volunteered nearly 1200 hours to Story Circle.

•**Election of 2002 Officers.** The board elected the following slate: President: Susan Albert, Vice President: Lisa Belli, Secretary: Peggy Moody, Treasurer: Penny Appleby. Workgroup Chairs for 2002 include Austin Chapter: Carolyn Scheider; Internet Chapter: Melanie Alberts; Publications: Susie Flatau and Susan Albert; Membership: Leilani Rose; Nominations: Vera Preston-Jaeger; Curriculum: Paula Yost and Susan Albert.

•**Meetings in 2002.** The board will meet April 8, July 8, and October 14.

An Update from the Internet Chapter

Outgoing 2001 IC president Marie Buckley sends this report, via the Internet, of course, and with attached cyber-hugs!

As the Internet Chapter of SCN ends almost two years of existence, we find that with 182 members, over 40% of the 431 national SCN members are IC members as well. This is a wonderful sign that more and more women are experiencing the opportunity to share their true life stories and experiences with other women worldwide over the medium of the internet. As they do so, they are also supporting SCN's efforts to make connections among women and sow the seeds of writing, reading, thinking, and talking with one another across the country.

The Internet Chapter currently has 11 writing ecircles with a total of 69 members and 1 reading ecircle with 20 members. Some of these ecircle members are meeting another face to face for the first time at the conference in Austin in February. This is an exciting time for those of us who will be able to attend! SCN has been extremely supportive in helping members find ways to come to the conference, and I'd like to suggest that if the IC could take on one special project for the upcoming year, it might be to create and develop a fund specifically for helping IC members to travel to the next Austin conference. We are flung far and wide with a couple thousand miles in between!

Under the capable leadership of our IC officers for 2002: Melanie Alberts, Lee Ambrose, and Peggy Moody, I expect the chapter to go forward and continue to grow considerably and well. Judy Fettman and I thank all the SCN members for their encouragement, support, and friendship over the distance. We both want to give you all a hug!

An Austin Chapter Update

On January 20, the AC held its first meeting of 2002. Chapter members elected a slate of officers for the year: President: Carolyn Scheider, Treasurer: Danelle Sasser, Publicity (newsletter): Carolyn Blankenship. Donna Remmert has volunteered to work with programs, and Donna Burgess with Hospitality (contacting new members and introducing them to local SCN activities). The meeting also included wonderful readings by Donna Remmert's Story Circle: Donna, Mary Faloon, Beth Kennedy, and Rebecca Roberts.

Upcoming sessions have been scheduled for the following dates (Sundays, 2-4, Colorado Room/LCRA). Other programs may be added.

April 14. Susie Flatau talks about her new book *Red Boots & Attitude*; Readings: Susie's writing circle.

June 23: Carolyn Scheider's and/or Judith Helburn's writing circles read from their work.

August 25th: PJ Pierce talks about her new book, *Texas Wise-women Speak* (tentative); Readings: Carolyn Blankenship's writing circle.

Check the Austin Chapter's webpage for updates and more details: <http://www.storycircle.org/schedule.shtml>

Creating A Family History

Looking for Family History on the Internet

This article was written by Louanne Lasdon, a Story Circle member in Austin TX. Louanne has been researching her family history for several years.

I'm a neophyte at the web, but I've been interested in listening to my family's stories since early childhood. That interest eventually evolved into discovering and documenting my family's roots. It has been a circuitous route but this genealogical journey inevitably led to dipping my reluctant fingers into the technological world. Thus began my timid entry, a few years ago, into the World Wide Web. And if I can do it, anybody can! I don't even have a computer hook-up at home. I used the library's machines and began playing. I will never be an expert, but I will happily share what may be of help to others.

You can type in a few pertinent words (such as *family history* or *genealogy*) into any of the search engines and be overwhelmed with the variety of information and links available. Accessing your specific needs, however, may be a little more complex.

Before you beginning on the computer, it is important to gather all known information about birth, death, marriage dates and places - from the memories of family and friends. This is your best source of information. An extension of telling our own stories is gathering and chronicling from the older generations, as much information as they are capable of sharing. I can not emphasize enough the importance of this step. When you accurately record specific dates and locations, you are already well on your way to adventure.

However, if this information is not available to you, not all is lost. Begin with what you do know and work from there. Every little fragment of information is like a piece of the puzzle. It may rest in a file for a long time before it fits together with another piece to unlock secrets of the past.

Where to Start

1. Create charts. At www.ancestry.com/save/charts/research, you will find the following free forms. ancestral chart, research calendar, research extract, census extraction, correspondence record, family group sheet and source summary. These helpful forms will get you organized. Keep them at your fingertips when looking for additional information. Be sure to keep accurate records of factual information you discover...and note the source of the information in case you discover discrepancies in the future!

2. Read magazines. These provide lots of information and are widely available at bookstores: *Family Tree Magazine*, *Family Chronicle*, *Heritage Quest*, and *Everton's Genealogical Helper*

3. Review census records. Official U.S. records are compiled every ten years beginning in 1790. They can provide wonderful information (it varies depending on the year) such as: names, ages, birthplace, relationship to others, migration patterns, citizenship, ethnic origins, military service, and value of real estate or personal property. An article in *Family Tree Magazine*

(Feb 2002) details how to make best use of the Census Records. There is a 72-year mandated privacy period and April 1, 2002 is the date that the 1930 Census Records will be made available for public use.

4. Surf the Internet. Here are some interesting sites to explore (in no particular order):

www.ancestry.com. A commercial internet site that has more than 800 databases including Periodical Sources Index and the Social Security Death Index.

www.familysearch.com The Church of Latter Day Saints Automated system of Family History information, located in Salt Lake City, Utah.

www.cindislist.com A "gateway" site, with 70,000 links to other sources.

familyresearch.org/sg/state/html. A access state and county Bureau of Vital Statistics for birth, death and marriage records.
citydirectories.psmmedia.com/city/free_statesort.html. Many communities produce city directories. Some of the historical ones can provide great background information and location of business etc

www.nara.gov. National Archives and Records Administration. I did research on this site prior to my visit to Washington D.C. to search records in person

www.memory.loc.gov - Library of Congress

www.ellislandrecords.org. Ellis Island American Family Immigration History Center. I have been fortunate to be contacted over the Internet by distant cousins whom I never knew existed and share many of the same desires to discover and retell the stories about long ago ancestors.. A few years ago, I composed my feelings about this genealogical journey in a poem

Roots

The search of my personal family history
Is a winding circuitous route of
False Starts
Dead Ends
Kernels of Hope
Interesting Leads
Country Roads
Tiny towns shrouded in mist

Old hopes and dreams abound
Within the lives of ancestors long-gone
The Thump
Thump
Thump of my heart resounds

One foot in the Past
One in the Present
I am poised to pursue the Future

Louanne Lasdon 1998

Story Circle Members in Print

What have you published lately? Please send updates to Nancy Rigg, njrigg@mediaone.net. You may also send your news item to news@storycircle.org for posting on our website.

Linda C. Wisniewski of Doylestown, PA, has been very busy. One essay, "Fledglings," which has appeared in the January/February 2002 issue of *The Rose & Thorn* literary e-zine, can be accessed at www.members.aol.com/Raven763/Contents.html by clicking on the Essays column. Linda's short story, "We Believe You To Be Our Mother," was accepted for *The Writers Gallery*, an annual publication of Artsbridge, an artists and writers group in Lambertville, NJ. Two other essays, written for Susan Albert's online "Writing From Life" workshop, have also been accepted. "Fear at Fifty" was published in the January/February 2002 issue of *The Phoenix*, a recovery newspaper in St. Paul, MN. And "Nights in Blue Gingham" has been accepted for the *Chocolate for a Woman's Soul* series by Simon & Schuster, to be published in the sequel that comes out in 2003.

Marie Buckley, Hillsboro, OR, will have an article, "Medicine and Horsemanship: A New Connection" published in *Alternative & Complementary Therapies: The Official Journal of the Society of Integrative Medicine*: <http://www.liebertpub.com>.

Margaret Knorr, Charleston, WV, has started teaching journaling workshops online at Inspired2Write.com. Margaret will be introducing new workshops on a regular basis. For more information: <http://www.inspired2write.com/workshop.html>. Margaret's web page features a monthly journaling newsletter filled with tips, resources, activities, and a journaling club. See www.writingforlife.net, or contact her at atmairear-ad@yahoo.com.

Susie Kelly Flatau, of Austin, TX, continues her writing life. Susie has written seven monthly "Women Writing!" columns for *Women Monthly* magazine. Susie also served as co-author of the revised edition of the book, *Reaching Out to Today's Kids* (Sopris West, 2001). And three of Susie's short stories will appear in her third book, *Red Boots & Attitude*, a collection of fiction, nonfiction and poetry by 34 Texas women writers, slated for a March 2002 release.

Nancy Rigg, Los Angeles, CA, has written a half-dozen in-depth articles about the emergency response to the September 11 attack, including "Sharing Nation's Sorrow: US&R Teams Speed Recovery Effort" and "Words of Comfort" for *Advanced Rescue Technology Magazine*, "The Day the Rules Changed: September 11, 2001, Terrorism and Urban Search and Rescue" for *9-1-1 Magazine*, and "Rescue and Recovery Operations at Ground Zero" for *Fire-Rescue Magazine*. Other recent publications include "Tropical Storm Allison: Texas Swiftwater Rescue Teams Called into Action" and "Austin/Travis County EMS: A Unique Program on the Front Lines of Emergency Response" for *Advanced Rescue Technology Magazine*.

Calm Amid Chaos for Women in Crisis

Personal historian Paula Stallings Yost, SCN board member and founder of Heirloom Memoirs, recently completed a series of workshops called "Healing Stories" for the Women's Center of East Texas in Longview, Texas. Center residents attending the classes were victims of domestic violence or sexual abuse. The Junior League of Longview sponsored the classes.

Throughout the eight workshop sessions, Paula emphasized the importance of journaling and personal writing as a road to self-discovery and self-confidence. She demonstrated the power of the participants' words on paper and in their oral stories as a therapeutic tool—a type of meditation and release important to the healing process.

"Writing offers an avenue for changing the way we relate to trauma," Paula says. "By organizing our thoughts, venting our emotions, and recording details, we begin to see patterns in our lives, identify our strengths, build a better sense of self, and gain hope for the future. And just as importantly, sharing our stories connects us with the world around us. We discover the similarities of human experience and come to understand that our problems do not exile us from humankind. Calm may come amid chaos once we understand we do not stand alone."

Paula faced a great many challenges in organizing and conducting her workshops. While the Women's Center was a sympathetic and hospitable host, it was not always easy to work with its clients. Women might be present for one session and absent from all the rest, Paula reports, and those who were present experienced serious problems (such as psychological and financial crisis, illness, or drug addiction) which made it difficult for them to focus on the workshop's activities. "I often asked them to tell their stories, instead of writing them," Paula says, "since many of the women seemed to be threatened by the writing process." With interruptions in attendance, it was often hard to create an atmosphere of trust, and Paula had to work especially hard on that aspect of her task.

Writers like Paula, storytellers, and other artists across the country are successfully introducing art as a road to healthier lives. Two other Story Circle members, Nathalie Sorrell and Carol Waid, are currently leading a successful story circle for female inmates at the state prison in Lockhart, Texas, and several presenters at the recent conference, *Stories From the Heart*, described story therapy programs in their communities. Though the challenges of this work may be significant, the rewards are

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medium, large, extra-large

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Mini-Stories: Our Readers Share

Laylee Muslovski says: “I am a native Austinite displaced in Belton TX since 1996, where I operate two home-based businesses. Primarily, I am a childcare provider to five inspiring pre-schoolers, and I also have a design business where I market my sewing, drawing, and craftwork. I decided to call it a design business so I could have an outlet for whatever I enjoy creating!”

“I’m a retired counselor who explores herself, her world, and her creativity through journals, speculation, imagination, fairy tales, dreams and myths. Don’t forget archetypes—I’ve met them in myself and they’ve led me on a wonderful journey of healing. Some of my best stories have come from obscure journal entries and dreams.”—*Patricia Jan Hall, Oklahoma City OK.*

“I grew up in Arkansas in the 1940s and 50s, have married twice, had three children who are now grown. I was at first a stay-at-home mom, then I had a career in real estate; and finally, with my second husband owned two successful retail businesses. Now semi-retired, I’ve recently begun to complete the college degree I began in 1957 and am writing my memoirs for my children.”—*Virginia K. Hughes, New Braunfels TX*

“As a survivor of domestic violence, sexual assault, and alcoholism, writing and visual art have saved my life, helped me recognize the sound of my own voice and learn to listen to it, and led me to my life’s work. I’ve spent too much time first giving away my personal powers, then wrestling them back from the people in my world. Now I practice claiming what is mine and accepting responsibility for myself while taking deliberate action toward realizing my heart’s desire.”—*D. Phelps, Bulverde TX*

A Writer’s Dream Prompts Days of Exploration

At a recent SCN meeting, we discussed meaningful writing prompts and where they come from. A few nights later, I dreamed of another Story Circle meeting. It was a casual gathering with no agenda and we lay cozily on the floor talking. Someone asked me, “When you first ruled the world, who were you with?”

The question was sudden and honest, my response immediate. I was “with” myself, complete and completely able to “rule the world.” I was five years old, and I was making mud pies. I had taken the dream-question literally, answering who I was with the “first” time I ruled the world, as opposed to the many other times. The beautiful part is that the answer, in my dream, remains the same as the one I would give now, awake.

When I awoke, I felt wonderful, softly powerful, a state that lingered. I continued to find new questions in this vision—new prompts for writing. Mud pies were a part of the dream. Was I “with” the earth I still love and the clay that has been my life’s work? And how would my answers be different at the other times I “ruled the world”? This gem of a dream offered so many facets to ponder, to write about, and to learn from. What writing prompts have your dreams offered lately? —*Rebecca Roberts. Rebecca writes and creates pottery in Austin TX, where she also serves on the Story Circle Board of Directors.*

Join us for
**Writing From Life: A Workshop for
 Women With Stories to Tell**
May 3-4, Austin TX
 (see page 20)

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