

Story Circle Journal

Volume 9 Number 2, June, 2005

The newsletter for women with stories to tell...

Sister of the Soul, Girlfriend, Gal Pal, Buddy, Best Friend...

By Lee Ambrose

Any woman who has a really good female friend has probably assigned one of these names to her friend. It matters not what we call them; our female friends are a vital part of our lives.

If we are truly fortunate, we will each discover a Sister of the Soul at some point in our lives. Some may have already found her. Some may still be waiting for that opportunity. She may have been part of our lives for as long as we can remember. For others, the woman who becomes our best friend is found in the most unassuming and unexpected places.

Writer Louise Bernikow says, "Female friendships that work are relationships in which women help each other belong to themselves." Now, I don't know Louise Bernikow, but somehow I have a feeling that she must have known what we at Story Circle Network have come to know—that the bonds women share as they begin to realize their own potentials and share their own stories are some of the strongest bonds we, as writing women, can create. Whether we are writing about the joy of friendship or about its darker side (and, yes, friendships can take us into dark places and show us the worst of ourselves, as well as the best), we are telling and sharing our truths. And that is what counts.

Every month as SCN's Internet Chapter members post our stories, our responses to others' stories, and our insights into the reading circle's book of the month, we are doing just as Bernikow suggests—helping one another to belong to ourselves.

When we share our stories, we are helping one another to become a true, authentic self. As members of Story Circle Network, we should always remember to tell our circle-mates what an important role they play in our writing life. In the various circles, we can do this by giving them the encouragement and feedback they deserve in response to their writings.

Offering our own stories is a means of sharing the fact that rarely have we been the only one in a particular circumstance—the ways in which we have dealt with the circumstance may differ but many of us have been on the same or similar paths at some point in time. Just knowing that sometimes gives voice to a story that has been fighting to be freed for one of our members. The truth, honesty and courage that we show in our writing gives truth, honesty, and courage to others who are just starting on their writing path. We give our Story Circle Network friends the gifts of our eyes, our ears, and our hearts as we share our deeply personal stories.

This year, the annual writing competition will become a platform for us to honor those friendships we so treasure. The topic of "Women and Friendships" offers so many possibilities to so many writers. As you craft your story for the competition, it is my hope that you will also find a way to share it with that special woman who has made a difference in your life. ❖

Enter SCN's
Susan Wittig Albert
Lifewriting
Competition,

2005

This year's topic—friendship
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Letter from SCN's President



The *LifeLines* Retreat was delicious. Maureen Murdock exceeded our expectations with her thoughtful presentation and her ability to help us reflect upon the situations about which we wrote. I came away from our second *LifeLines* with the intent to write more regularly and to dig around in my innards for my often well-hidden feelings, light and dark, even if only for my own eyes. More than ever do I realize that, like a pearl, my story is multi-dimensional, and only after peeling each layer of nuance will I reach my core.

Not only was Maureen wonderful, so were the women gathered to celebrate their lives and the renewal of

spring, as well as the food, the weather, and the gardens of the Festival Hill Campus. If we had not planned a Story Circle Network board meeting for the following Monday night, I would have enjoyed staying on and writing more deeply about each of Maureen's prompts.

But to the board meeting I drove, and at the board meeting we voted for some important changes in SCN. First, Patricia Pando of Bainbridge, Georgia, frequent contributor to these pages, has replaced Leilani Rose as vice president and president-elect of SCN. Leilani has consented to remaining on the board, for which I am full of gratitude. There have been many times in my term as SCN's first, non-founder president where I have hesitated and questioned. Leilani has always been there for me, giving sage advice and guidance. Patricia, full of energy and new ideas, is our first out-of-state president-elect. We truly are becoming a national organization.

The other major decision at the April board meeting was to raise the dues for the first time in six years, from \$25 per year to \$35 per year. You will find that reflected in this *Journal*, on our website, and in our new brochures. Please remember that we do have a Sugar Bowl, to help those who wish to belong to SCN and find paying our dues difficult.

I'm on the road for SCN in June. I'm heading towards Dallas to meet with some of the 30 or so SCN members in that area. If you are one of them, be on the lookout for an invitation to meet at one of the La Madeleine restaurants on June 11th. And Robin Edgar in Charlotte, NC, is hosting a different *LifeLines* writing retreat endorsed by SCN this September. Sometime in the coming year, we hope to lead a *Writing from Life* in another part of the U.S. Activities abound within SCN. Read about them and much more in this newest *Journal*.

Judith Helburn

Judith Helburn
President, Story Circle Network

Story Circle Network's Mission

The Story Circle Network (SCN) is dedicated to helping women share the stories of their lives and to raising public awareness of the importance of women's personal histories. We carry out our mission through publications, a website, classes, workshops, writing and reading circles, and woman-focused programs. Our activities empower women to tell their stories, discover their identities through their stories, and choose to be the authors of their own lives.

Story Circle Journal

STORY CIRCLE JOURNAL 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. If you have special mental-health needs, please see a healthcare professional.

Editor: Jane Ross
mjr@io.com

Contributing Editors:
Mary Jo Doig
Patricia Pando

We welcome your letters, stories,
and suggestions.

Editorial Address:
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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.

Tend and befriend

Women Moving—Moving Women

Sister Mary Sullivan has been a member of the Congregation of Cenacle Sisters for 48 years, a Catholic order whose mission centers around bringing spiritual retreats to the community. She has given retreats and spiritual direction in England, Ireland, Holland, Newfoundland, the Philippines, and throughout the United States. In this article, Mary tells how the tending and befriending that she witnessed in these retreats helped to heal disconnected lives.

“Desperate housewives.” That’s how they described themselves.

It was 1967. I had been a Cenacle Sister for 10 years and was then living in a retreat center situated in Suffolk County, Long Island, New York. In my area the population surge was so great that at least 250 new housing units a week were being newly occupied by young families.

Many of the new residents were mothers of young children who had recently moved out from the city into our suburbs, the “bedroom communities” of New York City. In the move, they left behind families of origin, familiar neighborhoods, strong support systems, and good public transportation. They longed for adult relationships. Their husbands needed the family car for the daily commute into the city. That meant they had no means to get out and about. Food shopping, trips to the library, any adult activities were relegated to the evening. Their husbands reached home long after the children were put to bed; the wives instantly headed out the door to go for necessary supplies or to parent-teacher conferences. Quality time with spouses was lost. They felt isolated.

Even their churches, both Protestant and Catholic, unable to keep up with the demand for new parishes and sufficient staff to service their needs, seemed to have deserted them. They asked the women to instruct their own children in religion classes. Not trained, the women felt inadequate to the task. They felt as if God, too, had abandoned them.

Seeking to reestablish a connection, the Catholic women of the new communities jammed our retreat center on the weekends. Their weekends at the Cenacle Retreat Center seemed like a quick fix for their isolation, but I soon realized this was not the answer. These women had to be met on their own turf as who they were. Only then would they feel that God was not aloof or indifferent to their needs and desires but a presence companioning them in their daily lives.

How to accomplish this? I asked one of these women to find ten other women. Would it be possible for them to meet once a week for a three-month period in her home at night? Then I asked the key question—would she be willing to work with me and give these women a retreat?

She gasped. The Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) had

ended just two years before in 1965. Until then, only priests were trained as retreat directors. After Vatican II, the Catholic Church’s window was wide-open and religious sisters and laity were allowed and then encouraged into retreat work. But in 1967, what I was suggesting seemed quite radical.

I challenged her. “I’m qualified in giving retreats. But you share the other women’s struggles, their desires, their needs.”

We gave one retreat; then two at a time; then four at a time. Women throughout the island were clamoring to make them. God became real to them again. God became their companion. And God became all that in their daily milieu. They no longer felt that God was separate from them. And they were no longer desperate.

The level of trust was high. I remember one day a retreatant sharing with the group that she had had an abortion. It was a medical decision; her life or the baby’s. Not even her mother knew. A friend got up, crossed the living room, knelt in front of her and said, “I beg your forgiveness for all the times I have spoken so insensitively about abortion.” There was healing at that moment.

We grew—from Suffolk County, to Nassau County, and later to other states. We were soon giving retreats in 26 states, in Newfoundland, Bermuda, England, Ireland, Holland, Chile, New Zealand, and Australia. Within a few years, we began to receive both men and women and people of all faiths. Our retreats became wide-open territory for all faiths, for all genders, for all walks of life, for all situations, even retreats for those with AIDS.

We trained women—prisoners, widows, teachers, those involved in twelve-step programs, senior citizens, women living in the bayous and on Indian reservations, college students. It took off! And the key reason it took off was *women*.

I remember a group in Ireland. Political factions split the country apart. These mothers of adult children on either side of the Catholic-Protestant conflict tried to surmount their differences. One of the women’s sons was the designated assassin of the son of another woman in the group. Each mother knew it; each mother suffered. But each reached out, forgave, and reconciled.

*These women
had to be met
on their own
turf as who
they were.*

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There was Kay. One week as she shared her prayer with us she told of a bedtime ritual she had with her youngest son. He was two years old. Kay would sit him on the kitchen counter and change him into his pajamas. He would then cry out, "Mommy!" And she would reply, "Jimmy!" and he would leap into her arms. "I'm learning from my son that God is always there for me to leap into His arms—if only I would learn to trust my God as Jimmy trusts me to always be there for him."

Women, who shared struggles, confidences, and deep personal prayer united, became as one. When each woman finished her retreat she promised to pray for another who would make the next retreat. Bonds were then forged beyond neighborhood, beyond lifestyle, beyond country, beyond factions.

Women moving; moving women. Women tending, tending women. Women bonding, bonding women. Women befriending, befriending women. Women reconciling, reconciling women. Women healing, healing women. Women being, being women. ❖

I Am Mary

Sister Mary Sullivan provided this poetic biography.

I am Mary, daughter of Ruth.
I was formed by parks, rivers, canals, and sunsets into silence and solitude.
I was scarred forever by my Father's death.
I was loved into femininity by my Brothers, Joe and Ted.
I was welcomed into womanhood by my Cenacle Sisters.
I was shaped by words into living metaphors that translate my life into God's language for others to read and to hear.



SCN Sugar Bowl Aids Truth-Be-Told Inmates and Others

A number of women have asked us to help them find sponsors for their SCN memberships. To meet this need, the SCN board of directors set up a scholarship fund in 2002, called the Sugar Bowl.

This year, we are sponsoring 21 women in prison with Sugar Bowl scholarships as well as a number of women overseas and others who just need a little extra help. We hope you'll become a contributor to this worthwhile program. To add your contribution to our Sugar Bowl Scholarship Fund, send a check to: Sugar Bowl, Story Circle Network, P.O. Box 500127, Austin, TX 78750-0127.

You may also use PayPal to pay on the SCN website at www.storycircle.org/Donations/sugarbowl.shtml ❖

Truth Be Told: Prison Women Graduate from Talk-to-Me Classes

We follow up on our March article about the tending and befriending that happens in the Truth Be Told classes for prisoners with this account of a class graduation ceremony, by Truth Be Told co-founder and teacher Carol Waid. This article is reprinted from The Truth Teller, Vol. 1 No. 2, the newsletter of Truth Be Told.

On March 25, we sashayed into ceremony, graduating 41 women from our eight-week Talk to Me classes. Eight women were chosen to share the story of what led them to prison in a 5-7-minute presentation. One woman read her creative writing entitled "A Day in Prison." Another woman shared her story with movement, and 15 others danced their prayers, dedicated to those who had lost loved ones while incarcerated.

Talk to Me graduation is not just about receiving a certificate of completion or cracking open one's life story; it is also about birthing anew. Many of these women have never spoken of the traumas, the abuse, the neglect of their souls and spirits. As they began this process, many would leave their desk chair and approach the lectern, trembling and holding their breath, gripping the visions of the events that they were about to release. Spitting out the violence of their past causes, again, some of the anguish that once took place. Breathe. Breathe.

Graduation is also a ceremony of building community between the "free world" people and incarcerated women. Respectful listening is the tool that connects the hearts, setting the mind into silence and letting the emotions seesaw with joy, laughter, tears, and awe. Recognition sets in and love builds a bridge, uniting.

At closure time, the visitors have time to extend their gratitude and appreciation. A visitor whirled about in her pink high-tops and rallied the crowd with her energy and her praise: "Thank you, thank you, thank you!" Phil, an 83-year-old, tipped his hat with gratitude and delight as the circle sang him Happy Birthday.

Another man got up and acknowledged the women for how inspiring it was to hear their experience, strength, and hope. He has worked in many men's prisons and was intrigued at the depth that the women shared from. Another humbly approached the edge of the center to say that women had much to share in changing the world. Yet another got up and tearfully thanked the women for sharing part of her story.

"Their stories are like our stories. Their lives are like our lives. They are mothers, daughters, and sisters. Their lives are not so different from ours," shared my mom. ❖

To find out more about the Truth Be Told program or to be added to the email list, visit the website at www.truth-be-told.org or email info@truth-be-told.org

Take a bow! Spotlighting our Story Circle Network volunteers

Mary Jo Doig: Releasing Her Stories

Writer, healer, journaler, and journeyer through the paths of heart, **Mary Jo Doig**, editor of the Journal's True Words pages, embodies Story Circle Network's mission to help women tell their tales and, through that telling, to grow as women, mothers, sisters, daughters, wives, friends, and human beings. **Lisa Shirah-Hiers** offers this tribute to Mary Jo.



Mary Jo Doig joined SCN and the Internet Chapter in January 2001 because it seemed to fit two lifelong passions: writing and personal growth. She'd always loved reading and writing, earning a Bausch and Lomb

English award in eighth grade and editing her high school's literary magazine.

When her five-year marriage to her high school sweetheart ended, she was left with two sons to raise. After a few months as a single parent, she knew that, in order to support her family, she had to go back to college and finish the degree she had abandoned when she got married. Mary Jo entered college at the SUNY system in Oneonta, N.Y., and earned a bachelor's degree in secondary English with a minor in psychology. "I planned to be an English teacher. In an ironic twist, because I accelerated in college at one point, I graduated in November. Of course every single school in the county where I wished to teach had filled all their slots. So, I went on to plan B—temporarily, I thought." She turned to her minor in psychology. "Because so many people had helped me, as a single parent of two small children, get back into college to finish up, I decided to help others grow and live healthier lives. This has turned out to be my lifelong core professional desire."

She began her social work career helping teenage girls in Cooperstown, N.Y., before remarrying a Catskill Mountain dairy farmer (with whom she has two daughters). After 23 years as a farm wife, she returned to paid work—this time helping disabled adults. When that no longer satisfied, she says "I became a 'career-leaver' and completely reinvented my life at an age when most women are considering retirement." She now works "quietly and happily" at the Free Clinic in Lexington, Va., accessing free medication and coordinating a dental program for county residents. A few months ago, the Virginia Health Care Foundation notified her

that she would receive a You-R-X-ceptional Award at a statewide event this year. She has found and excelled in a career she loves.

Mary Jo credits SCN with helping her make the change. "Born and raised at a time in society when children were seen but not heard, I was essentially silent for my first five decades. When my stories began pushing insistently inside me for release and could no longer be silenced, I began doing intensive personal work that included writing and reading. I was particularly drawn to Story Circle Network, in part, because I'd read Susan Albert's mysteries, then her book *A Work of Her Own*, and closely identified with Susan's career-leaving experience."

Mary Jo believes both ordinary women and famous ones can be role models, helping us to see we are not alone in our struggles. Reading about the lives of famous women, for example, helped her to "grow out of the adolescent belief that the rich and famous have no problems or challenges." She says, "I believe that the more stories we write, share, and read, the more we realize how deeply interconnected our individual journeys are. In the end, we all stand on common ground." Mary Jo had a direct experience with how telling our own stories helps other women tell theirs. When her piece "Requiem for the Abused Child" was selected as Internet Chapter's Story of the Month she says, "I received letters from several women who deeply related to what I wrote. It's very powerful to connect with other women about shared trauma. And it works just the same with lighter topics. When another woman writes about her life in the 1950s and '60s, for example, she will often include details that trigger forgotten memories of my own life during those years."

For a time Mary Jo chose to isolate herself, living alone in the woods while she wrote the stories that could no longer remain inside her. Then she joined Story Circle Network and the internet chapter as a New Year's promise to herself. She shared her writing in e-circle 2 and later in e-circle 9 gaining confidence until finally she felt called to lead a circle herself. She now facilitates e-circle 7. Mary Jo has found that being in a circle and leading one are both rewarding experiences. "Since joining SCN, I have been heard unflinching with caring, compassion, and wonderful support. In turn, I seek to hear other women's stories with the same gifts that mine are given. The circles, I found, uphold, celebrate, and weave our truths together until I have come to see how we are all related as women. To move from essential isolation to this point is

Lisa Shirah-Hiers is a freelance writer and piano teacher in Austin, Tex. She has published articles, essays, and book reviews in the *Texas Episcopalian*, the *Hill Country Sun*, *AustinWoman* magazine, *Austin Monthly* and online.

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profoundly life-changing.”

In September of 2004, Marie Buckley retired as editor of the True Words from Real Women column in the *Journal*. Mary Jo saw the advertisement for her replacement and “was drawn to it like a hummingbird to nectar.” She knew Marie as the facilitator of the e-circle Mary Jo had joined in 2001. Mary Jo says the editor transition was “delightful” and calls Jane Ross and Marie “stellar role models and teachers.”

As an editor, Mary Jo makes her selection of stories for the True Words pages based on several factors: the topic originality, writing skills, voice of the writer, varied ethnic backgrounds and geographic locations, whether or not the writer has been published in the journal before and, if they have, how recently. “There are always many wonderful pieces that are not published and I always want the writer to know that non-publication is not as much about skill or topic as it is about space.”

An avid journaler since her teenage years, Mary Jo believes the best way to approach lifewriting is to write for yourself first. “I deeply love the process. I write to understand, grow, and heal. After I write a piece, I think about whether it is just for me or to share with my family, my circle members or an even broader audience.”

Though her early journals were misplaced, she says she has “many bits and pieces of life-writing in letters and notes.” She does most of her writing at the computer, filling many binders with printed as well as a few hand-written pages and drawings. She studies her journals and writes notes in the margins to find patterns in her relationships, trace dreams, and follow her children’s and her own growth. Her discoveries become inspiration for memoir pieces. “Aside from recording daily happenings, thoughts and feelings, journaling is valuable in two other ways: problem-solving and healing.” It helped her problem-solve her way out of a relationship, several years ago, one that had many red flags associated with it but that she had clung to because she so wanted it to succeed.

Journaling helps her heal from the losses in her life. “On anniversaries and other days, I write letters or poems to the person I have loved and lost. For example, even though my son, Keith, has not been physically present in my life for more than 30 years, I can still share my feelings with him and hear how he would respond. It is profoundly comforting and healing.”

This year, Mary Jo is trying something a little different, combining her love of memoir writing and her sewing hobby to create a quilt telling her life’s story. She also plans to start a writing circle in her local area. “Each step into SCN has been the most rewarding at the time and led to the next. It’s been a wonderful progression.”

What Mary Jo most wishes women knew about SCN is how valuable sharing our stories can be. “We discover by sharing our stories how deeply bonded we are. Telling the truths of our lives is so important and powerful that through that process, we give and are given to, we nurture and are nurtured, and the circle of our connectedness moves to ever deeper levels.” ❖

The April LifeLines Writing Retreat in Round Top, TX

Duffie Bart
Santa Barbara CA

I wasn’t sure I wanted to travel from my home in California to a small town in Texas called Round Top, but my interest in memoir writing prompted me to say Yes to the LifeLines Memoir Writing Retreat at Festival Hill. I had no idea I was heading toward a stunning 200-acre complex that offered annual summer concerts in its now-famous 1,100-seat Concert Hall and Old Chapel.



Author Maureen Murdock (*The Heroine’s Journey* and *Unreliable Truth*) was our excellent facilitator, leading us through challenging exercises with her own special skill. She gave us writing assignments that unlocked our feelings and triggered the flow of our writing. She read passages from her new book *Unreliable Truth*, in which my favorite sentence is: “The

way we tell our life story is the way we begin to live our life.” The women at the retreat were a courageous group, willing to read their poignant and often dark stories aloud. Their honesty and vulnerability as they read was powerful. I listened, transfixed, as I watched each face and heard the emotion in each voice as they read. I kept my handkerchief close at hand.

Maureen also read a few short memoir pieces that demonstrated the points she was addressing, including these:

1. You need not write your memoir in a linear way.
2. Use your senses to stimulate your memories so that you will “show” your story rather than “report” it to the reader.
3. Locate your theme.
4. Ask yourself what more you wish to know about it.
5. Leave things out. (Major lesson #1 for me.)
6. But include the detail that gives your narrative its originality.

Maureen’s first writing assignment used the photos she had asked us each to bring: she asked us to write about the feelings the photo evoked. She asked that we give ourselves time to ruminate, to reflect, to let our senses guide us to the underlying patterns about ourselves we wished to write about. She read us a story called “The Bicycle” by James McBride, an African-American author who describes his white mother riding around the neighborhood on an outdated bicycle her late husband had brought home. Hearing this piece and reading it again in the quiet of my cabin, it was the perfect example of an author writing from his senses rather than from his head or place of ego (major lesson #2 for me).

I’m excited to have learned of so many fine memoir writers who I did not know about before—Maureen among them. Her book *Unreliable Truth* is a superb guide for any

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Meet other lifewriters and learn from their stories

Robin Edgar: Reminiscences That Heal

Robin A. Edgar is the author of In My Mother's Kitchen: An Introduction to the Healing Power of Reminiscence and an active member of SCN. Robin's book combines her own memoirs of her childhood and her mother with hands-on exercises developed in her workshops on the healing power of reminiscence. Robin presents her workshops throughout the country and this fall will lead an SCN writing retreat in her home state of North Carolina, our first such event outside of Texas. In this interview, Patricia Pando asks Robin about her life and work.

Not all memories are about happy times. Some recount painful experiences or times without harmony. Celebrating the laughter and the lessons within is what brings comfort.

—Robin Edgar

Once you have mastered recording meaningful moments from your past, you can begin to find rituals to celebrate them.

—Robin Edgar

SCJ. *Tell us about your growing-up years. Clearly your mother was a very important person in your life.*

Robin Edgar. My mother was a career woman and worked as a pattern maker for dress designers before she married when she was 35, which was old for her generation.

When I was very young, she had to work in her bridal shop to support us, but from the time I was three years old, she worked at home as a seamstress so she could be there for me and my sister, who was 14 months older. I used to love to entertain her customers as I practiced piano or read them my stories.

SCJ. *When did you become interested in writing?*

Robin. I can remember being scolded for not going outside to play when I was around eight years old because I loved to sit at my desk all day and write books and stories.

SCJ. *Did you dream of being a writer as a child or young person? Or did you come to it as an adult?*

Robin. I dreamed of becoming an actress as a child. Inspired by Shirley Temple and Loretta Young as well as Carol Burnett, I became a theatre major and joined a production company, working as a professional actress and mime for over 30 years. I always wrote on the side, though, and would say, "If I were not acting I would be writing." I actually use the acting technique of sense memory to help people connect to significant memories in my workshops. Your senses are tied to your emotions and it is scientifically proven that the stress from emotions trigger the biological process the brain requires to consolidate long-term memories.

SCJ. *In your book, In My Mother's Kitchen, you offer your own reminiscences as a part of your approach to help people who are coping with loss. Did writing this book change your feelings about your life and your family?*

Robin. Although I had been interviewing seniors about their memories for newspaper articles for many years, I never thought to do it myself until I was asked to teach a class on writing your life story for the John C. Campbell Folk School in North Carolina. I realized that I could not teach my students to do something I had never personally done, so I wrote about my life. This was five years after my mother had passed away, and as memories about my mother poured onto the page, I rejoiced about the time we had together and the sadness of her absence was assuaged. The reminiscence process helps you to recognize and to be thankful for the individuals and events that shaped your life. Seeing events through adult eyes also helps you to understand and forgive.

SCJ. *What role do you see for storytelling in today's literate and technology-driven society?*

Robin. Before there was a written language, oral societies used storytelling to explain and preserve their cultural history. Songs, chants and fables used rhyme and movement to act out and preserve the memories of ancestors as they explained the world that was both seen and unseen. The repetition of these stories created an affirming affect on individuals and helped to establish their value system.

In today's literate society we still need this powerful connection. Part of my art and work is to foster this creative spirit in others, which is why I focus my writing around and teaching on reminiscence. As individuals recall and record the stories about individuals and incidents that shaped

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their lives, they can celebrate the similarities and differences across generational, socio-economic, and ethnic lines.

Not all memories are about happy times. Some recount painful experiences or times without harmony. Celebrating the laughter and the lessons are what bring comfort and affirm one's own culture and belief system. As a writer, whether I am working on a story for publication or an entry in my journal, I draw upon this healing power of reminiscence to tell the story.

When I put together the syllabus for a writing course that I taught at the John C. Campbell Folk School in Brasstown, North Carolina, I used written accounts of memories about my mother, whom I lost to cancer, as examples. The stories identified and celebrated the wonderful qualities that made my mother who she was and also defined how her life affected me as an individual. This process and its outcome is what my new work is all about.

Our society today tries to tell us that our stories are not important; that other people's stories that are printed in books are more valuable. I am on a quest to get people to recognize that everyone has a story to tell and that their stories are essential ingredients in their family recipes.

SCJ. *On your website (www.robinedgar.com) you discuss the "healing power of reminiscence." (This is also the name of your workshops.) How do you perceive the role of memory in healing?*

Robin. I liken it to what happens to Jimmy Stewart in the Frank Capra Movie "It's a Wonderful Life." Looking back on significant memories, you find that lemons turned to lemonade, or that you did make a difference in your loved ones' lives. You can also find a way to forgive through finding the laughter or the lesson in unhappy memories. It softens hardened hearts and helps to resolve unresolved differences. It also helps with long-term bereavement.

SCJ. *You mention the importance of celebration and laughter. Life writers often focus on the traumas and unhappy times of their lives. You encourage people to recount the happy times as well. Please expand your comments on the importance of using happy memories as a means of healing.*

Robin. Finding the laughter is not just about remembering the happy times. It can also mean looking back on hard times or awkward moments, like the time you got caught using the family car, or an embarrassing moment, and laughing at them. The example I use in my workshops is about the time I walked through the entire airport with the back of my dress tucked into my underwear! It was not funny at the time, but it always gets a good laugh now. Many people in my bereavement workshop for hospice find that recalling funny stories about their lost loved one is the key that finally unlocks their grief so they can move on.

SCJ. *Ritual plays an important role in your workshop. Explain what you mean by "ritual." Does ritual play a role in your personal life?*

Robin. A ritual is the repetition of a meaningful act, which brings a sense of calm, comfort, or celebration. It is very personal and can be as simple as walking down a certain street or stopping to smell the flowers or eating a double cheeseburger. Rituals come as naturally to us as breathing, but we have somehow lost permission to practice them or recognize their importance. Once I wrote the stories about my mother for my book, I realized that I had many rituals to celebrate my mother, like: cooking her recipes for special occasions or simply when I missed her; or repeating sayings that she had; or playing the cloud game.

SCJ. *In your book you tell how you plan to hand down the memory and methods of your mother's mandel bread to your own children. What are other traditions you plan to pass along?*

Robin. Birthday dinners, playing Scrabble together, looking through photo albums, watching favorite movies.

SCJ. *Describe what we might expect if we were to attend a "Healing Power of Reminiscence" workshop.*

Robin. My workshops are very hands on and interactive. I demonstrate reminiscence techniques using your senses and then get everyone to follow their noses to a smell that takes them back to a place and time in the past. Once they are there, they describe where they are, what they are doing, who they are with, how they are feeling, etc. It is in the telling of the story that the significance emerges. Then everyone "interviews" each other to learn the details that add color to the black and white words on the page. ❖

—Email interview conducted by Patricia Pando

*In My Mother's Kitchen:
An Introduction to the Healing Power
of Reminiscence
by Robin Edgar*

Published by Tree House Enterprises
ISBN 0-9723770-7-7 (pb) 128 pp, \$11.95

Order through our book review website:

www.storycircle.org/BookReviews

Look for **Robin Edgar** on the Alphabetic Index and click on the picture of her book's cover to order from Amazon.com and benefit SCN through your purchase.



LifeLines Lifewriting Retreat with Robin Edgar and Pat MacEnulty in the mountains of North Carolina September 9-11, 2005

What is the LifeLines Lifewriting Retreat?

Join us for a women-only weekend lifewriting retreat, led by **Robin Edgar** (author of *In My Mother's Kitchen*) and Pat MacEnulty, at beautiful Wildacres, situated on 1,600 acres at an elevation of 3,300 feet atop a mountain called Pompey's Knob, near the Blue Ridge Parkway in Little Switzerland, North Carolina.

About halfway between Asheville and Blowing Rock, Wildacres is a true retreat, undisturbed by traffic or noises of the city. The 1,600 acres are adjacent to the Blue Ridge Parkway and thousands of acres of the Pisgah National Forest. The buildings are modern yet rustic and provide a very comfortable setting for the programs offered. Guests stay in two lodges, which have 57 bedrooms. Each room has a private bathroom and accommodates two guests. There are no televisions or telephones in the rooms.

This retreat is open to any woman who is interested in lifewriting—regardless of skill level or experience. We want this to be an intimate retreat where we can really talk and listen to each other's stories, so we are able to accept only 12 participants. We expect these 12 places to fill very quickly, so please register as soon as you can!

What is included in my registration fees?

Your registration includes:

1. Five workshop sessions with Robin and Pat (Friday evening; Saturday morning, afternoon, and evening; Sunday morning)

2. Family-style meals: Friday dinner; Saturday breakfast, lunch, and dinner; Sunday breakfast
3. Drinks and snacks during breaks
4. Two nights stay in double-occupancy accommodations (two twin beds in each room) in the South Lodge. Check-in time is 4 p.m. on Friday; check-out time is after breakfast on Sunday.

What is the refund policy?

Cancellations are accepted until August 15, 2005, and are subject to a cancellation fee of \$50. After August 15, we will refund your money only if we are able to fill your place from our waiting list.

How can I pay?

Registration fees for this weekend retreat are \$225 for SCN members, \$250 for non-members. To register, contact Robin Edgar at robinedgar@earthlink.net or use the registration form below. Mail checks to:

**Robin A. Edgar, 5919 Lakeview Drive,
Charlotte, NC 28270.**

Questions?

Contact Robin Edgar at robinedgar@earthlink.net or phone (704) 365-6538.

MORE INFORMATION AT:

www.storycircle.org/LifeLines/NC



LifeLines Retreat in North Carolina *Registration Form*

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____ - _____

Phone numbers _____

Email Address _____

I am enclosing \$ _____

Check here to request vegetarian lunch/dinners

Copy this form and send with check or money order to:
Robin A. Edgar
5919 Lakeview Drive,
Charlotte, NC 28270

This is a gift registration from (your name, phone, email)



Books for the Journey

In My Mother's Kitchen: An Introduction to the Healing Power of Reminiscence, by Robin Edgar (TreeHouse Enterprises, 2003. ISBN 0972377077). Reviewed by Judith Helburn

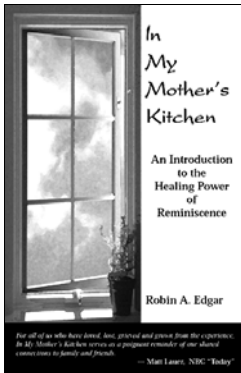
Robin Edgar's book is a comforting, charming memorial to the loving relationship she had with her mother. It could have been just that and still be an enjoyable read; however, Edgar takes the reader further by suggesting rituals to call up special times with a lost loved one and exercises to help one write family stories.

In My Mother's Kitchen can be read in a single sitting, yet it is worth returning and savoring the memories which Edgar's reminiscences trigger. She writes of her mother's disapproval of the young Edgar's experimenting with makeup. I immediately recalled my own father telling me, "Wipe that lipstick off your face. You could paint the side of a barn." I imagine many women have a similar memory that would make a great story to pass on to our daughters and granddaughters. Or don't they wear makeup anymore?

Edgar writes of her mother's illness when Edgar is 15 and of her mother's struggle for the next ten years. However, this is not a sad story. Instead, it is a celebration and a savoring. Each vignette is charming within the four chapters: Where to Begin: Follow Your Senses; Keep the Memories Alive: Laughter Is Good Medicine; Look for the Lesson: Hindsight is 20/20; and Treasure the Touchstones: Make Rituals from Memories. I felt that the author was talking to me.

The book has been used by families in Hospice and grief counseling situations. Joy Johnson, founder of The Centering Corporation, a bereavement resource center, in her foreword calls *In My Mother's Kitchen* one of her favorite tools.

This is a gentle book for pleasure now and for healing when we need it. ❖



When I was a girl and the world broke, I thought I would always divide my life by that night in the mountains—the day before, the day after...I remember the surprise I felt to see the sun rise that [next] morning. But the sun rose, as it always did, as it always would. And I lived, and the world I knew died.

—from *The Secrets of Jin-Shei* by Alma Alexander

And then they sat and watched in wonder, the old woman and the two children, as the stars shimmered into life, one by one, in the summer sky.

—from *The Secrets of Jin-Shei* by Alma Alexander

The Secrets of Jin-Shei. Alma Alexander. (Harper, San Francisco, 2004. ISBN 0060563419) Reviewed by Judith Helburn

There are two types of sisters, those of blood and those of the heart. Although both kinds appear in *The Secrets of Jin-Shei*, it is sisters of the heart (*jin-shei*) who dominate this tale set in the ancient, mythical Chinese kingdom of Syai. Eight girls pledge their loyalty, first one to one, then to each other as they grow out of their early teens and into adulthood. Eight girls, a healer, an artist-poet, a warrior, a gypsy, an alchemist, a wisdom keeper, a do-gooder turned rebel, and the Empress along with a gentle ghost create a bond in sisterhood which ties, tears and destroys, and then heals.

Tai writes in her journal of the sisterhood using the secret women's language, which historically existed in ancient China. As a young child, she slips into the Imperial gardens of the summer palace to write and sketch, and there she meets another young girl, first in line to become the next Empress. Antian, the princess is enchanted with the joyful younger girl and asks her to become *jin-shei* and so the sisterhood begins. The gods interfere by sending an earthquake, which Tai survives. The first words of the novel and the first words of Tai's journal drew me into a whirl of friendship and support, trust and mistrust, religion and court intrigue, healing and sorcery, ambition and renunciation and always loyalty to the *jin-shei*—even to the death.

The magic of Alexander's prose enticed me into several late nights to follow the intertwined lives of the eight sisters. I became a shadow following their living and loving, and even hoping that what was to be somehow might not become.

Alexander takes the liberty in her mythical kingdom, of introducing an evil, handsome sorcerer, a disfigured and powerful King of the Beggars, and a lonely, crafty Empress, all of whom crave personal power and destroy to attain it. However it is Tai, the quiet, joyful *jin-shei* sister who loves the most and is loved the most, who ties them all together. She is the one, towards the end of the story who is able to clear a path after the chaos of intrigue and unrest towards a more stable and peaceful kingdom.

Women's friendships make a difference in our world. Here is a story of how women's friendships change a mythical and engrossing history. Mystery, romance, violence, magic, adventures, characters who could be our friends, women with amazing skills and unbounded devotion to one another. What more could one ask for? This is a book which draws us into its depth and magic and holds us to the last words. ❖

True Words from Real Women

In this section of the Journal, edited by **Mary Jo Doig**, we publish members' contributions of poetry and prose. The theme of this issue's True Words section is "Prisons," both real prisons and those we carry in our minds.



A Very Happy Day

Nancy Rembert

La Marque TX

My release process from prison was nerve-racking, but it was my very last taste of prison, so I bit my lips and endured. My son was supposed to pick me up from Gatesville reception, and I focused my energies on the pending happy reunion. However, he never made it, and I was forced to endure the van ride to the Killeen bus station in too-long-too large-scrubs and an old thrift-store man's shirt.

I was sitting in the bus station dreading the nine-hour layover in Houston, which would put me in Galveston an hour before my first parole appointment the next morning, when my son suddenly appeared at my side. He had followed the van to the station. I threw my arms around him and hugged him hard and long.

He had a set of clothes for me, shoes, some make-up, and perfume, so I changed in the station bathroom and fixed myself up. Then I met my little grandchildren for the first time. Throughout the trip home they vied with each other for attention from me. I felt so loved. It tugged my heartstrings in a very good way.

First, we went to Wal-Mart where my son bought me two new blouses and jelly beans. Next, we went to KFC. I ordered fried chicken and French fries, and it was delicious! We got lost a couple of times, but we finally made it to La Marque around midnight.

We pulled up to my sister's house, where I will be spending the duration of my parole. My sister and I couldn't hug each other enough. On my bed was a birthday present and Easter gift, and the whole bedroom was filled with clothes, shoes, make-up, perfumes, and all sorts of other gifts for me. I was elated and cried a little. We stayed up all night talking, as we didn't want to risk going to bed and not getting up the next morning for my first parole appointment. What a wonderful homecoming. ❖

House Arrest

Erin Philbin

Pittsburg PA

Some people are dragged into prison kicking and screaming. I find myself in a prison of my own design; one built up slowly around me. I'm a woman possessed—by my own possessions. Martha Stewart got out of jail this week, beginning a period of house arrest. That should be my

sentence; perhaps in six months I could start to get my house under control.

I hear of Martha, walking around her property, stretching her legs, visiting her horses, and I wonder how long it has been since I've been able to walk through my own house. My floor is a minefield. I take the shuffling steps of one on a chain-gang lest I step on an action figure or one of 30,000 Lego pieces.

How do these things happen? I dream of a beautiful home with minimal decor. I must know plenty about interior design. I have 12 years of *Architectural Digest* in my home, stashed among mysteries, mail, and manuals on *feng shui*. I borrowed a book on de-cluttering from the library, lost it, and accrued a fine of \$15 before I found it under a cushion and returned it unread. My closets are jammed with outfits that no longer fit—complete wardrobes in three different sizes. On good days my current clothes are heaped on the floor into two piles: clean and dirty. On bad days the piles blur, and a sock caught in the middle is subjected to a judgment call depending on how badly it is needed.

Everywhere I look, I see evidence of my passions overwhelming me. There are story beginnings holding their breaths for a happy ending. Mountains of yarn, crochet hooks, floss, and needlepoint canvasses wait to be rediscovered. Art dolls anticipate arms, faces, or a good home. If I get another hobby, my home may explode.

And yet, there is always hope. It is a time for new beginnings. Spring is just around the corner, and I can be there to meet it. I just need to clear a path to my door. ❖

Outside In

Shawn Alliado

Orange CA

Recessed deeply into the wall, a small window stood sentry in the very old house. I was a young child; we complemented one another well. This became my new playground and I watched below, where my body couldn't go. Birds built a nest and dropped eggs, flies found no exit, and time dragged slowly as morning bowed to night. Pneumonia was my bedside companion. I wanted to escape; this window was the only way out.

The wood panes were coated with many colored layers, painted shut. I barely fit inside the tiny alcove; tucked inside I listened to faraway sirens, cars stopping and going, life moving on without me. I discovered another way out.

This is where I met my vivid imagination; I became a

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More True Words . . .

(Continued from page 11)

silent voyeur. I traveled from isolation, my thoughts gained courage, and I began to think deeply for this first time in my life. There were no distractions or interruptions of ritual. I was excused from our family unit by default; my participation was limited in all duties. However my mind was expanding! It was a fearful time, bold, exciting to begin this process of questioning everything, and it was very secretive. These were my own gardens to delve and investigate, for what grew here was a mystery searching for answers.

I was on the threshold of change; my consciousness was introducing its 'self.' Being ill was a trap that led me to my inner world. I had full permission to wonder with unlimited boundaries.

There was no turning back. Now I was aware, different. I could see my father's anger, my mother's sadness, and I witnessed the foundational construction. I knew why ants worked together for mutual benefits, and cats came alive at night by nature. Every mysterious interlude had a purpose; significance united the pieces of my life puzzle.

I crossed the threshold of my soul and my childish innocence was sacrificed. I could no longer be held accountable through ignorance. I was an official participant in the way of the world. ❖

Leaving a Prison

Sandra Simon

Austin TX

One spring day in 1974, I drove to the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, to deliver a letter declining a position in their neurobiology institute. The letter said that I was postponing my participation until the following year, but I knew that I would not return. I was making my escape. My stomach churned and ached, and my heart pounded.

Since high school in the late 1950s, studying had protected me from the chaos of my home. My parents had escaped the Holocaust, but they had suffered terrible losses. They never spoke of it to my sisters and me, but at any time their grief and pain might surface. It was confusing, sad, and frightening.

I went into biochemistry. I loved so much about science: the clear concepts, the orderly experimental approach, the leaps of creative vision and incremental additions of new knowledge. The demanding work was also my refuge.

Now, years later, I was changing. I began to feel my refuge as a prison. The women's health movement was beginning and I wanted to join that work. I wanted children, and to have time and energy for them.

Working on my experiments late at night, I would think in despair, "I might as well just be a man." I wanted out.

Escape was full of unknowns. What, in fact, would I do next? What about all the people who had helped me; how

could I disappoint them by walking away from the work? How could I justify my decision? After I had handed in my letter, I looked at the gray, choppy water in the harbor with renewed panic—where was my safe place now?

Then, as I drove away, I felt the fear loosening. My heart still raced, but now I also felt excited, almost giddy.

In time I came to realize that my world was not so dangerous; I could leave that fortress. Outside of it, I could deal with each day, and I would grow in new ways. I remember that, along the road home, I saw the dogwoods and azaleas gloriously in bloom. ❖

A Prison of Resentment

Leona Urban

Pflugerville TX

We had been together on a vacation for nine days. It was about time to build up a resentment toward him. We were having too good a time; it was time to poison my present. I decided that he had talked too much that day and had given my sister too much advice. He acted like he knew everything, and even joked about starting a support group for people who were perfect, so that I knew he could see his own character defect. I quickly retreated into my own character defect by deciding that he *should* be perfect, should stop monopolizing the conversation, and let someone else talk—like me.

It did finally occur to me that perhaps I got on his nerves just as much as he got on mine, and he didn't complain. I could see myself in a mirror. I had been thinking the last few days about how I always thought I was right, how I knew everything, how I knew more than other people, and I never hesitated to let them know by offering them my advice.

Perhaps that was what was bothering me. When I kept on thinking that he should be perfect, that he shouldn't be human, I felt like I was in a vise. My thoughts went round and round in my head with nothing new coming out.

I finally realized that I'd been coddling this resentment like a baby the last couple of days. I decided to turn this furry ball with hard wiry hair over to my higher power. Then I called my friend and told her about my resentment.

Voilà—I was free! I felt better. He came home and I was able to be civil to him. And I no longer had this resentment in my mind keeping me from enjoying the sunshine that day. ❖

I Forgot Your Birthday This Year

Barbara Smythe

West Covina CA

My life is measured by your place in it.
There is the before you and the after you,
The 'time out of time' with you,
But I forgot your birthday this year.

Missing you is as constant and without thought as breathing,

I hear myself talking to you as though you were here,
 “Look Love, the roses we planted are coming back again.”

But I forgot your birthday this year.

I do remember how your eyes lit up whenever you saw me,

How special I felt when you grinned and said, “Hello Sunshine!”

How my soul felt like it had come home in your arms,
 But I forgot your birthday this year.

Is this forgetfulness some sign of acceptance?
 Is this what they call healing, or has a part of me died too?
 All I know is my heart feels homeless...
 And, I forgot your birthday this year.

I am a lighthouse with lights burning dim,
 Searching the horizon where your ship sailed out of view.
 Does it count that I’m still waiting, longing—
 Even though I forgot your birthday this year?

Where I Went

Stephanie Barko

Austin TX

With twinkling fairyland wonder, up I went.

Through the stratosphere, across the ionosphere, over the aurora borealis and into Milky Way galaxy I hurtled. It was three summers before Neil Armstrong would land on the moon.

I was upstairs in an old French farmhouse.
 It was three o’clock in the afternoon.
 The bedroom door was closed.

Most everyone was out in the fields that day, but I was lying on my back on the floor, eyes shut, shooting through space, making history as the first female astronaut.

Infinite stars glowed shimmery white against a midnight blue background as I floated out in my spacecraft, away from time and earth. Zooming farther and farther beyond, the universe seemed to magnetize me. Surprised by G-force changes from velocity shifts, I giggled inside my weightless body as I searched for distant planets.

Then I heard the alarm. My fuel gauge was low. I fired up the first leg of my long, parabolic path down to earth when it hit me right in the gut—space sickness. I had forgotten to latch my seatbelt. Suddenly wanting out of my fantasy, I ejected to earth with a thud.

I was back in the old French farmhouse.
 It was three fifteen in the afternoon.
 Most everyone was out in the fields.
 And his hands were still on me. ❖

Alcoholic’s Wife

Marion Hunt

Berkeley CA

Al Anon?
 All alone.
 Tied up.
 Tied down.
 In love,
 And out.
 Pushed and pulled,
 Abused and loved.
 Time undetermined.
 No place to hide
 From alcoholic anger.
 No where to go,
 But no way to stay.
 Trapped outside his bottle
 I study him cautiously
 From a safe distance
 The man inside.
 Wondering what put him there,
 Hoping he’ll find the strength
 To come out
 And join me in our life together.

The Walk

Barbara Krause

West Lafayette IN

I walk for those who cannot. With each step I remember my mother, bedfast and lonely. She would love to rustle her feet through the dry leaves as now I do. I inhale deeply and feel my lungs expand, oxygen bringing health to my body, energy to my feet. I send this cool health to her in my mind.

I walk through the rain. I walk for the little boy in the hospital who cannot feel rain on his face. He would run and shout and I feel this joy and send it to him. Rain drips from my hood and runs down my nose. Is my nose running or is it raindrops making my nose tickle? How he would laugh at this puzzle.

I stop to watch a squirrel. He scurries to the top of the tree, dragging a plastic bag to line his nest against the coming cold. I think of a young neighbor working two jobs for food and rent for his family. He has no time for walking, for watching squirrels. He must line his own nest.

I watch a stream of clear rain wash down the gutter, carrying leaves to the drain. A refugee far away scrubs clothes in a stream of dirty water behind chain-link fence. She would like to wash those clothes here in the rain, let them dry stiff in the cool breeze instead of in dusty desert wind.

I watch a neighbor walking her dog. The small terrier frolics happily, investigating each mysterious scent left by his predecessors. His joy is pure. He trusts his mistress. I walk for his brothers and sisters in the animal shelter who have no

(Continued on page 14)

More True Words . . .

(Continued from page 13)

home, no master or mistress to walk them. Cages keep them safe, but there are no new scents to excite them.

I hear a swish of cars in the rain, a far away siren, children playing; I see rain, dry leaves, carelessly tossed trash; I feel raindrops, concrete underfoot, cool breezes. These cannot be known by those imprisoned for whatever reason. I walk for myself, but I walk always for them. ❖

Imprisoned Soul

J. J. Zeikus

Austin TX

The bars that imprison me are invisible. They are thick, solid bars of fear. They effectively keep me in but they don't always keep evil out. Nightmares slip through nightly. The fear has become my steadfast companion. It goes with me every day and sleeps with me every night.

The invisible prison bars are occasionally visible to women who live behind their own invisible bars. There's a certain look in the eyes that connects us. We don't talk about it but we both know it's there. We may acknowledge it with a nod, or we may look away too fast.

There are security systems to keep me safe from evil without, but there are no systems to protect me from the one who gave me a gold band and then hurt me behind closed doors. Even state law permits a man to rape his wife, though the law was recently amended to make it illegal if he left bruises. I traded my right to say no for a little gold band. Too bad that detail was not mentioned on the application for a marriage license.

I did divorce, and that offered some relief. But divorce is just a piece of paper, and my fear is not of the paper but of the

man who swore that I could never get away from him. He can always find me whenever he wants. Even though he has never physically come back to hurt me again, he continues to haunt my nights.

After a particularly frightening nightmare, I may spend the rest of the night with a weapon under the covers. I know he can only kill me once, but the terror lives on forever behind the bars that can't quite hide the scars left on my soul. ❖

Home

Vicki Elberfeld

Park Ridge IL

I am trapped by memories, memories which bind me to the house of my childhood. My parents died and I live in their house, our family home, with my sad brother.

The housing market is good I understand.

"Buy a condo," my friends say. "It's so much more convenient, so much less trouble than an old house. It's only bricks and wood," they continue, "and yet you treat it like a human being who will miss you when you're gone."

But my house is a living being with a soul and will be lonely if I abandon it to strangers. Won't the walls feel barren without our paintings and photos and Mom's Amazon blowgun with *curare*-tipped arrows and the big, big map with pins placed in all the places we've traveled?

The fireplace will miss us too—the parties we've had in its warmth, especially our first night in our new home when I was twelve and my brother eight. My folks were just kids themselves and we roasted chestnuts and toasted goeoy marshmallows, glopping them all over ourselves and our new floor and didn't care about the mess one bit.

Rather than leave this house to strangers, I will protect it with my last living breath, for it is the tomb of my mother and

Looking Ahead

"True Words" is organized around a theme. While we do accept non-thematic writing, we give precedence to stories written on the theme of a particular issue. **Members only, please.** We're looking for stories rich in evocative detail, showing the struggles, challenges, and resolutions of real people living real lives. We're not looking for generalized, abstract truths about life. We want to read your stories, not your essays! Please make sure that your stories are **350 words** or less. We may edit your submissions for grammar and spelling. Here are the upcoming topics and deadlines:

School Days—September 2005 (due July 15)

Gifts—December 2005 (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 Mary Jo Doig: email maryjo_d@yahoo.com.

If you do submit typed or handwritten stories, please make sure that every word is legible. Mail to: 531 Steeles Fort Road, Raphine, VA 24472.

father and even my grandmother who finally, finally acquired the courage to leave the husband who did not love her. She finished out her last days in the arms of the daughter who did. I will remain with the ghosts of my family and my pets and the living ghost of my brother whose spirit has left but who sometimes gives me glimpses of the loving boy he once was.

And when he and I have departed, developers will bulldoze the places where we grew and played, our pets frolicked, and our parents made love. Mother's garden will be paved over, and an empty mansion will stand in the place of our beloved home. ❖

Prison of Perfection

Pat Turner
Tyler TX

There she lived
A perfect little life
In a perfect little house
With a perfect little family.

Outside—walls of perfection
Inside—
No friends
No passions
No hopes
No dreams.
She kicked
She screamed
She beat against the walls.

One day the walls closed in
She simply could not move
Something inside her cried
Choose now!
Live or die!

She opened the door
Of the perfect little house.

Outside
Walls of sparkling glass
Began to fall
Leaving cuts and scrapes
Even some very deep wounds.
The pain she found
She could endure.
She was not alone.
There were others out there.
Here she still lives
A much different life
In the same little house
With a less than perfect family.

Outside—no walls at all
Inside
Friends
Passions
Hopes
Dreams
She jumps
She laughs
She decorates the walls!

Prisons—My Sister and Me

Judy Watkins
Hillsboro OR

*Please don't try to imprison me.
I hunger for life, and long to be free.
Don't try to bind me with unseen ties—
Don't ask for answers that would be lies.
Just take my hand! Let me feel your smile—
Without chains or bonds, let's live awhile!*
Peggy Donahue

My sister, Peggy, and I have chosen divergent paths in our lives. While I chose the traditional life with husband, home, and family, my sister chose a life of drugs, prostitution, and ultimately prison. She has been incarcerated nearly as long as I've been married.

But which is more real—a cell with bars on the doors and windows or a relationship where one person feels cut off from her personal hopes, dreams, and goals?

If a husband forbids his wife to work outside the home, color her hair, drive a sports car, or show in any way that she is anything except his other half, is she free? Cannot a woman be a wife and still be an individual?

Inside a prison, women are told when and what to eat, when to sleep and exercise, but there are freedoms too. They are allowed to pursue further education and they never have to worry about where their next meal is coming from and where they will sleep at night. To many, that is a blessing. My sister says being broke and poor is worse than prison.

We are both in our sixties now and have found our ways to live without chains and bonds. She dedicates her life to counseling drug addicts and alcoholics. She hopes to help them find the path in their lives that leads away from prison and/or death. Using her life as an example, she tries to give them hope without pain.

I broke my prison bonds in my mid 30s. I completed my education and enjoyed a career. My husband learned the word compromise and saved our marriage in the process.

Prison bars or prisons of the mind—both are real. Both hurt. ❖

*More True Words . . .***My Very Own Prison****Duffie Bart**

Santa Barbara CA

I was born into a high-security prison. I say high-security because I was a most astute warden who saw to it that I did not escape.

I was born in Germany, the same year that Hitler took over the fate of Germany for twelve catastrophic years, and I carry many fears. I tense up at the sight of any uniform, and shoes that make a clacking sound like boots terrify me; I distrust all in a position of authority.

Even sadder, I distrust myself. For many years, I have been unwilling to say and do what I honestly feel, certainly not for fear that I will be locked up or carted away but for fear that I will anger those close to me, that I will not be accepted for who I truly am.

I became a servant to my ex-husband and spoiled my children, giving them all they asked for. I accepted invitations I did not wish to accept, jobs that did not interest me.

I was sure this was the way to get love and believed I was fine until one day a teacher in a psychology class looked me square in the eye and said, in a most kindly tone, "Are you really fine, Duffie?"

I loved this woman and the caring in her voice reached my soul. I began to cry. The powerful defenses I had built began to crumble. No one was more surprised than I.

It was the first day of my understanding that I was not fine, the first day of what began, for me, a lifetime of slowly-increasing liberation. The door to my prison had opened but today I continue to have instances where I protect myself unnecessarily, and find myself back in my old familiar prison.

I have appointed myself my own parole officer, checking daily that I am true to who I am. I pay the high price of regret when I am not. I like the "me" that is emerging and am grateful to the teacher who helped me to fly free. ❖

Visiting a Prison**Mary Ann Reynolds**

Austin TX

I have worked my way through countless metaphoric prisons in my life, but today I want to write about visiting a prison in Lockhart, Texas. I was friends with Suzanne Armistead, who was so passionate about the work she was doing with women there that, curious and a little envious, I decided to take her up on her invitation to attend a graduation.

I had to provide my driver's license number a couple of weeks in advance. I was given a description of how to dress—conservatively—and told that I could only take in my driver's license and an unopened bottle of water.

We caravanned to Black's BBQ in Lockhart. After we ate, Suzanne and the other founders, Nathalie Sorrell and Carol Waid, talked to us about the prison rules, the classes they teach, and the vehicle for their work, the non-profit Truth Be Told.

Then we caravanned to the prison, which is a large building with a high chain-link fence and barbed wire. We left our driver's licenses at the front desk and went through heavy metal doors to the gym.

Did you know that in prison, there is constant noise with no softness to muffle it? The PA system loudly interrupted several times. The toilet next to the gym roared when flushed. The sound of metal doors clanging shut was pervasive.

The inmates greeted us warmly. We sat commingled in folding chairs, and the ceremony began. Several women had been selected to share their stories. For many, it was the first time they had told their stories to compassionate witnesses.

The courage and honesty it took to share these stories—of mistakes, abuse, fear, regret, loss—was deeply moving. Tears often sprang to my eyes, and my heart opened wide. I was surprised again—by how much love and tenderness was present in that loud, plain gym.

There was something deeply humbling and loving present with us at that graduation. I understood Suzanne's passion for her work. I later agreed to serve on Truth Be Told's board of directors, because I, too, feel passionate about this work. ❖

Be Part of a Writing Circle

Need help starting a story circle in your town? From the SCN home page www.storycircle.org look for the heading "How to Start a Story Circle," in the left hand navigation bar.

Want to join an established writing circle? To see the current list of writing circles that meet around the U.S. and the world, visit www.storycircle.org/circles.shtml

If you already lead a writing circle, be sure and let us know, so we can add you to the web page. That way, you and your circle members who are SCN members will be eligible to submit stories to our anthology as well as for other benefits. Email Peggy Moody at storycircle@storycircle.org



Join us for the fall *Lifelines Lifewriting Retreat*, featuring authors Robin Edgar and Pat MacEnulty

September 9-11, '05

Wildacres, North Carolina

See details and sign-up on p. 9

A reader tells her story

Heart Songs from Baghdad

In our "Reader tells her story" column, we print a selection from the fine writing found on the Internet Chapter's Story of the Month page. In this story, Nancy Alain writes of her experiences as a foreign service worker in Iraq.

The tension, which led up to the historic Iraqi elections was not totally in my consciousness, until I was able to exhale the day after the elections. For weeks, I was in a perpetual state of stiff muscles, tensed-up lips and short, surface breathing—just enough to sustain life. Today, the day after this frenzied past year, building to one day, it is painfully quiet in the Presidential Palace. We are tired, relieved, exuberant, worried, and so proud of our Iraqi colleagues. I am personally sad that my friend Riyadh could not be here to vote and I quietly grieve again for the loss of yet a second friend and colleague killed by a rocket when it entered her office in the palace, just two nights ago. Two friends lost in a span of three weeks.

I also continue to be perplexed, as the world continues to be pessimistic, even as they watched brave Iraqis shout, "we are as mad as hell, and we aren't going to take it anymore." And then I ask what do you want? What, what is it that keeps your pot so stirred, that you cannot see the beauty in what occurred yesterday? Doesn't its sheer history sing to your heart?

It cannot be summed up, or the sense of it injected into veins, what two generations of oppression can do to an entire society living under a dictatorship, during which you could be killed just for thinking, feeling, and being. One observes the indecisiveness of a people who was forced to stop thinking and never empowered to do anything, hence the challenges we have encountered building a new decisive army and police from zero. They've lost the power to feel, hence their level of acceptance at the violent acts of sadistic terrorists against their families. The whole society, in order to survive years of unspeakable brutality at the hands of just a few, simply quit being. Rather, they played a waiting game to see how long they could survive the regime. Few Americans have been forced to their knees and experienced this special state of grace.

It will not now miraculously become easier. The Iraqis have a long and difficult path that must be charted and cleared before taking the next step. But the boost this election has given the people of Iraq should be noted for its message, and we should be humbled by their pride and brave deed. They risked their lives just to vote, just to vote.

Nancy Alain joined the Story Circle Network and Writing E-circle #13 in December, 2004.

Today my heart sings. All of us who have worked—no, toiled—so hard to give these people back their lives and their hope can all sing a new heart song, at least for today, this flickering moment in history.

I returned to Baghdad after a three-week Rest and Recuperation. The trip is raw from beginning to end. Getting out of Iraq is an arduous, tentative and dangerously difficult procedure, one that does not include porters, luggage conveyors or even a concrete building. Just to get to the makeshift tents at Baghdad International Airport (BIAP) military air base, one must ride from the Presidential Palace in an armored bus wearing a heavy, bulky, armored jacket and helmet while transiting the most dangerous road in the world. We then schlep our own luggage some distance over stone and

gravel to have it strapped and loaded on to the C-130 we hope to board the same day. That is always iffy, but not to worry. Cots have been set up should you have to spend the night in the tent and they're located not too far from the unisex porta-potties, and porta-showers.

Finally, we passengers climbed aboard and strapped ourselves in to be catapulted through the dangerous and unfriendly Iraqi skies. This two-hour flight to Amman, Jordan, took 16 hours. An engine failed in flight, and we were forced to land out in the middle of nowhere, somewhere in Iraq in the dark. Fortunately, the engine could be fixed and we continued to Amman. I was nervous to begin the journey again with a "fixed" engine, but I was far more nervous to stay where I was on the ground.

Once in Amman, I raced to catch the 3 a.m.

onward flight, and endured aisle-side economy seating for 15 hours. My vacation started with my sleeping day and night the first week. The second week, fully recovered from jet lag but not fully recovered from 14-hour workdays, seven-day workweeks, I continued this one long sleep marathon. The third week I drifted from Wal-Mart to strip mall, wandering in a fog. I decided to buy some hot sauce to bring back with me, and was too overwhelmed by the seemingly endless array of choices confronting me. Just how different can 30 different varieties of tomato hot sauce be?

My return trip to Baghdad was uneventful. Fifteen hours to Amman, an additional 11 hours of waiting, hoping to get off the ground and back. Exhausted but happy to have landed safely back in Baghdad, I waited an additional five hours

(Continued on page 21)

*...one must ride
from the
Presidential
Palace in an
armored bus
wearing a heavy,
bulky, armored
jacket and
helmet...*

Stories from the Heart III



The Story Circle Network National Conference

February 3–5, 2006

Red Lion Hotel, Austin, Texas

*When you open your heart,
you open your mind.*

—Beth Mende Conny

Mark your calendars and start making plans now to join us in Austin for the *third* national conference of the Story Circle Network!

Stories from the Heart III will bring women from around the country to celebrate our stories and our lives. Through writing, reading, listening, and sharing, we will discover how personal narrative can be a healing art, how we can gather our memories, and how we can tell our stories.

We welcome readers, writers, storytellers, and any woman with a past, present, and future. There will be opportunities to explore difficult or hidden issues, expand our relationships with other women, and discover different modes and media—such as art, dance, and drama—for sharing our stories.

Our Speakers

We are proud to introduce our major speakers—two women with some of the best stories you’ve ever heard! Our Friday night keynoter is Rosemary Daniell—nationally-known writer, writing coach, and founder of *La Zona Rosa* creative writing workshops—talking about “When Strong Women Tell Their Truths.”

At lunch on Sunday, we will hear from Susan Wittig Albert, founder of Story Circle Network and best-selling author of *Writing from Life: Telling Your Soul’s Story*, as well as three mystery series. Susan will pick up where Rosemary leaves off with “Truth and Invention: When Strong Women Tell Tales.”

Our Pre-Conference Workshop

Linda Joy Myers, Ph.D., author of *Don’t Call Me Mother: Breaking the Chain of Mother–Daughter Abandonment* and *Becoming Whole: Writing Your Healing Story*, will present our pre-conference workshop: “House as Dream; House as Mirror of the Soul.”

Our Hotel

The Red Lion Hotel

6121 North I-35 at Highway 290, Austin, TX 78752

512-323-5466; 800-RED-LION

To receive the *low* conference rate (\$85/night plus tax, double occupancy), call the hotel directly (512-323-5466 or 1-800-RED LION) and make your reservations no later than January 20, 2006.

Looking for a roommate? Go to our website, www.storycircle.org/Conference/roommates.shtml or write to the office and we’ll post your information for you.

Our Website: <http://www.storycircle.org/Conference>



Our Conference Website is Open Now!

To register, to sign up for our Conference E-Letter, or to catch up on the news, visit our website.

We’re looking forward to seeing *you* at **Stories from the Heart III.**



Call for Presenters

Deadline: JULY 1, 2005

The conference program will feature **20 presentations organized into four concurrent tracks, with five 90-minute presentations in each track.** Each presenter will receive a \$40 discount from the full conference fee. The ideas sketched out below are just suggestions—be creative! Make sure your presentation includes opportunities for participants to actually write and share their writing. Our conference is built around interactive presentations rather than lectures. The program tracks are tentative and subject to change.

Proposal Guidelines

We especially are seeking proposals with strong audience interaction/participation, rather than lecture-style presentations that primarily deliver information. Please provide detailed information about the methods you plan to use to accomplish this.

NOTE: individual presenters may not create a panel presentation. You may co-present with another person(s); multiple presenters must be named and have bios included within the original application.

When you write your synopsis, remember that it will be used to promote both your presentation and the conference. So take advantage of this opportunity to “sell” your workshop and build excitement about the conference with descriptive, definitive words that go directly to the heart of the matter, explaining your goals for the workshop and the benefits participants can expect. A catchy, definitive presentation title is important. Create something short and sweet that will appeal to conference attendees and whet their appetite. To see a sample proposal that meets the above guidelines, please see www.storycircle.org/Conference/sample.html.

Submitting a Proposal

Go to www.storycircle.org/Conference/frmpresenter.shtml and fill out the proposal form. Or send us **all** of the following information: Name, address, phone, email; whether you’re a member of SCN; title of your presentation; 25-word synopsis; 200-word description; the track to which you think your presentation should be assigned, and a one-page description of your relevant experience. Mail to Story Circle Network, P.O. Box 500127, Austin TX 78750-0127. Or email to conference@storycircle.org.

Tentative Program Tracks

Track A. Circles of Creativity

We invite writing circle facilitators (Austin Chapter, Internet Chapter, “free range” circles, OWL-Circles) to use some of their favorite prompts to lead a writing circle.

Track B. How Do I Do That?

Some possibilities include finding a publisher; self publishing; fictionalizing your story; genre options for personal writing (autobiography, memoir, fiction); organizing and leading life-writing and memoir workshops; writing a family history; feminist theory and women’s self-narrative; theories of narrative and autobiography.

Track C. Reclaiming Women’s Wisdom

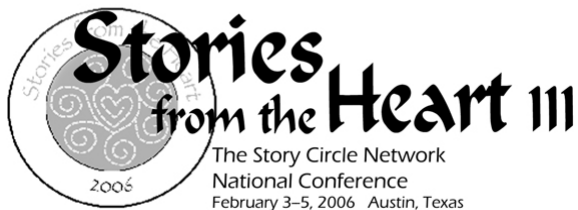
Some possibilities include telling stories that reflect multicultural experiences; telling another person’s story (your mother’s, grandmother’s); techniques for accessing your inner wisdom; writing your spiritual autobiography; telling stories that include several points of view; relating the history of a community, business, or organization.

Track D. Myriad Methods of Storytelling

Some possibilities include telling stories through media such as sculpture, dance, art, poetry, oral storytelling, and scrapbooking or enhancing stories through the use of genealogical research and specific techniques for reviving memories.

Blogs and Lifewriting: Finding Our Voices Online

Calling all SCN Bloggers! We’re selecting a panel of bloggers for our upcoming national conference, Feb. 3–5, 2006, to discuss blogging as a medium for lifewriting. If you’re a blogger, please email Susan Albert at china@tstar.net, with a link to your blog. Please let Susan know how long you’ve been blogging, the focus/purpose of your blog, and whether you’re planning to attend the conference.



Copy this page and send with your check to:
 Conference Registration, Story Circle Network,
 PO Box 500127, Austin TX 78750. To register
 online and use your credit card, go to [www.
 storycircle.org/Conference/fmregister.shtml](http://www.storycircle.org/Conference/fmregister.shtml)

Registration Form

Name _____ Phone _____

Street Address _____ Email _____

City, State, Zip _____ Story Circle Member? **yes no**

If attending on Saturday or Sunday, please note your lunch preference: chicken vegetarian

Session/Day	Membership Status	Early Registration (before 12/15/05)	Regular Registration (12/16/05– 02/02/06)	Registration at the Door	Amount
Full Session (Fri keynote/Sat/Sun)	Member	\$195	\$220	\$245	
	Non-Member*	\$245	\$270	\$295	
Friday Pre-Conference Workshop	Member & Non-Member/Guest	\$25	\$30	\$35	
Friday only (Keynote Speaker /Reception)	Member & Non-Member/Guest	\$25	\$30	\$35	
Saturday Session Only (Includes lunch)	Member	\$95	\$120	\$145	
	Non-Member/Guest	\$120	\$145	\$170	
Saturday Lunch Only (Register by 2/2/06)	Member Non-Member/Guest	\$30	\$40	Not available	
Sunday Session Only (Includes lunch)	Member	\$75	\$100	\$125	
	Non-Member/Guest	\$100	\$125	\$150	
Sunday Lunch Only (Register by 2/2/06)	Member Non-Member/Guest	\$30	\$40	Not available	
				Total Enclosed	

- *Non-Members who choose to join prior to the end of the conference on Sunday, February 5, 2006, will have a portion of their registration fee applied to their dues.
- Cancellations are accepted until January 10, 2006, and are subject to a cancellation fee of \$50 for a full conference registration or \$10 for a one-day registration. There is no refund for Friday's lecture/reception.

Sisters Helping Sisters

If you are a member of SCN and have an annual family income of \$50,000 or less, you may apply for a conference scholarship. These will be awarded in amounts ranging from \$75 to the full conference cost, depending on need and the availability of funds. Additionally, we may be able to assist with travel/lodging (but we can't confirm the availability of travel/lodging money until January, 2006). To apply, go www.storycircle.org/Conference/fmregister.shtml or write to us, telling us how much aid you need (for registration, childcare, travel/lodging). Tell us about yourself and your reasons for applying for a

scholarship. One of the objectives of Stories from the Heart III is to return to our communities and share our discoveries with others. In approximately 200 words, explain how you will help the Story Circle Network achieve this objective.

Scholarship awards will be based on perceived need, the thoughtfulness of your response, and your interest in sharing what you learn in your community (for example, by starting a writing circle or developing other women's story-sharing activities). We want to encourage the attendance of a diverse group of women who want to share their stories and help other women enjoy the benefits of women's story-telling and story-sharing.

If you request a subsidy, you must pay a \$75 deposit towards your conference fees. If you receive a subsidy, you will then pay the remaining fee (the \$195 full conference fee, minus the subsidy, minus your \$75 deposit). This amount must be paid by **January 1, 2006**. If you do not receive an award your deposit will be returned or applied to your full registration.

April LifeLines Retreat

(Continued from page 6)

memoirist, and *The Heroine's Journey* is fascinating in its teachings of myth and its connection to memory and the written memoir.

Throughout my short trip to Texas I was enchanted by the acres of colorful wildflowers, carpets of blue, red and yellow, along the freeway, and in the meadows at Festival Hill. For two days, the air I breathed was fragrant with their bouquet.

On Saturday, we were offered a tour of Festival Hill by the knowledgeable docent, Jack Elvig. When I saw the craftsmanship of the Concert Hall and the Old Chapel, the stone fountains and arches in the blooming gardens, and learned some of the history of the summer music festivals, founded by James Dick in 1971, I felt I was in a place of promise and peace, the perfect place for a writing retreat. It was my first time in Texas but I know in my heart it will not be my last.

Since I returned home to California, I have been thinking about how the retreat has affected my writing. Because it has. I have read more of James McBride. My emphasis may turn more to shorter works. McBride writes short stories and so do a number of other excellent writers Maureen read from and introduced me to.

I am sometimes overwhelmed by the thought of writing my memoir as a book but I feel calm and more secure when I think of writing a shorter piece. Maureen Murdock has helped me to see that. Another way in which she helped enormously is to take me away from my private reactions towards a more universal perspective—ever so much better, more effective, and more rewarding for me as a writer.

And I am now also reading with a different, broader sensibility. It's amazing how we continue to grow and expand our vision. ❖

Heart Songs from Baghdad

(Continued from page 17)

before it was safe enough to return to the palace in the armored bus. That night, I settled into my 7' x 15' metal container/room at about 4:30 a.m. after pulling my baggage along with my exhausted body about a third of a mile from the drop off point over unlit streets, gingerly dodging deep and dangerous pot holes and curbs. Finally back to familiar surroundings, finally to familiar sounds. The patrol helicopters directly overhead were noisily doing their job, and this was followed by the morning call to prayer and then the morning ambulance sirens, indicating the body mop-up crews were on their way to clean up the debris of the innocents.

I am back in the swing of working fast and hard with explosions, rockets, and the five-times-daily calls to prayer over the city loudspeakers. I still cringe when I hear the ritual morning bomb explosion and run about the palace looking for my brave Iraqi colleagues, with whom I have worked for over one year, checking to see if they are here and alive. It wasn't long ago that one Iraqi colleague and I were chatting over lunch. He told me how afraid he was to enter the Green Zone to get to work. The enemy watches, and the enemy could be anyone. I asked him if he took any precautions. None, he said. I told him that he should cover up like some Muslim women and wear a full *burqa*—we would understand; no one would laugh at him. He chuckled and was not deterred. He was standing up for Iraq and for his six little children's future. He was determined to outsmart these terrorist butchers.

Today this friend and colleague was assassinated as he stepped outside his home. He was a wonderful man, and was truly one of Iraq's most intellectual and finest citizens. Another Iraqi colleague came by the office to console me as I cried uncontrollably. I told her how much I worry daily and asked her how could she keep risking her life to work for us. She hugged me and said, "We must not let them win."

May he rest peacefully in Paradise. ❖

SCN Board Nomination Process

Leilani Rose, Outgoing Vice President

The SCN Board of Directors authorized a change in the board member nomination process at its meeting on April 11th, 2005. Beginning this year, nominations will be formally solicited from the entire SCN membership instead of from SCN board members only as has been the case in the past. Like last year's adoption of a policy that sets aside board seats for members from areas other than Austin, the revision to the nominating process is meant to increase the diversity of the board and to contribute to a broader perspective in plans and decisions affecting the organization. Both changes are consistent with SCN's evolution to a fully national organization. Although still Austin-based in terms of administration, less than one third of the 600 women who compose the current SCN membership reside in Austin.

As specified in the organization's bylaws, the SCN Board shall have at least 12 but no more than 20 members. Except for those elected to serve an unexpired term, members are elected to three-year terms by a majority vote of the Board at its fall meeting. A member may succeed herself. In terms of qualifications, the bylaws state, "Directors shall have expressed an interest in the affairs, purposes, and mission of the Network."

The detailed design of the revamped nomination process is still a work-in-progress. However, according to the general plan, all SCN members will be notified during the summer of the number of vacant board seats, the opportunity to nominate themselves or others as candidates to fill the vacancies and the nominating procedures. Nominations will be made by completing and submitting information about the nominee via an electronic process. Provisions will be made for members who do not have access to a computer. ❖

Kitchen table stories

Sunday Dinner at Ruby Jewel's

Betty Williams was a member of the first SCN Older Women's Legacy (OWL) workshop to meet in Decatur County, Georgia, during March, 2005. She wrote this story about her mother, Ruby Jewel Gaines, as part of that workshop. Betty was born to tenant farmers in nearby Hopeful, Georgia. She dropped out of school to raise her family of seven children and has recently returned to school to pursue her GED.

I'm writing this story about my mother, Ruby Jewel. She was a great cook. Whether she cooked black-eyed peas, collard greens, opossums, raccoons, sweet potato pies, graham cracker cake, or jelly cake—all were wonderful. My mother was known far and wide for her wonderful food.

During the Depression years and in the 1940s and '50s, she found ways to make the food look good to the eye and good to the taste. She always had a large garden, so there were lots of fresh vegetables. We had a milk cow, so there was fresh milk and real butter. Mama and Daddy had chickens, turkeys, ducks, and hogs, too. We didn't lack for fresh eggs and meat. Mama canned vegetables and preserved fruits for the winter months.

I remember Mama used to invite the preacher home for dinner after church on third Sundays. Daddy would leave home. He'd go into the woods and sit until the preacher left.

Daddy didn't go to church, but he didn't try to stop Mama from going. She would start cooking on that Saturday morning. She'd bake a cake and pies and put them in the pantry. We knew not to open that pantry door.

The wonderful smells circled throughout the house. While she was in the kitchen baking, she'd have us in the chicken yard, catching several young, fatted fryers that she had chosen.

My brother Johnnie C. would wring their necks, and my sisters Nora and Doris and I would pick the feathers off. Mama dressed them by cutting them up and putting them in the icebox.

Johnnie C. had a bucket ready for Mama to put the chicken guts in; he liked to fish with them in the pond down in the pasture.

Sunday morning Mama got up real early to finish the Sunday dinner before going to church. She'd make the potato salad, fry the chicken, and boil the collard or turnip greens. How I loved her devilled eggs!

After we got home from church, it was customary for us kids to sit on the front porch nicely and quietly until the preacher, the deacons, and their wives left.

Then we'd see Daddy coming across the pasture. We'd think for sure they had eaten all the food, but, of course, Mama had put food aside for her family.

That is one of the cherished memories of my mother, Ruby Jewel. ❖

Ruby Jewel's Five-Layer Jelly Cake

1 cup butter
 1/2 cup shortening
 2 2/3 cups sugar
 5 eggs
 1 tablespoon imitation vanilla, butter and nut flavor (or substitute vanilla extract)
 3 cups sifted cake flour
 1 teaspoon baking powder
 1/2 teaspoon salt
 1 cup milk



Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Grease and flour five 8-inch cake pans.

Cream the butter and shortening until fluffy. Add sugar gradually, beating constantly. Add eggs one at a time, beating well after each addition. Add flavoring. Sift together the dry ingredients and add alternately with the milk beginning and ending with the dry ingredients.

Pour into cake pans and bake for about 30 minutes or until a tester comes out clean. Let cool. Spread each layer with apple jelly and then cover the outside with orange marmalade.

You have kitchen table stories, too!

We'd love to print them here in the *Journal* (800 words maximum, please, including recipe). Send via email or as a Word attachment to patriciapando@yahoo.com. In the subject line, please type Kitchen Table Stories. If you have no computer, type or write your story legibly and mail to: Patricia Pando, 1600 Lake Douglas Road, Bainbridge, GA 39819.

In January 2003, **Betty Williams** won the EAGLE award—Exceptional Adult Georgian in Literary Education. Winning is getting to be a habit with Betty, as is writing. One of her short stories won first place in the Bainbridge Artsfest Literary Contest in 2004. Now she's thinking about collecting her memoir writings into a book!

Announcing Story Circle Network's Sixth Annual Writing Contest,
The Susan Wittig Albert
Lifewriting Competition

SCN is proud to announce its sixth annual Lifewriting Competition, recently renamed to honor our founder, best-selling mystery writer Susan Wittig Albert.

Topic: This year's topic focuses on friendships among women. Friendships with other women enrich our lives and sometimes even save us. Here are some women's wise words to help you start thinking:

Friends are family you choose for yourself.
 —Jane Addams

*I can trust my friends... These people force me to examine myself,
 encourage me to grow.*
 —Cher

For SCN's sixth annual lifewriting competition, you're invited to write about your personal experiences of friendship and how those intimate connections shaped your story.

Awards: One prize of \$75, one prize of \$50, and two prizes of \$25 each. Winning stories will be published in a special section of the September *Story Circle Journal* and will be featured on the SCN's award-winning website. Upon the judges' recommendation, other entries may be published in later issues of the *Journal* and in other SCN print or on-line publications.

Rules:

- You must be a dues-paying member of Story Circle Network to enter; winners of previous competitions are not eligible.
- There is a \$10 entry fee, which can be paid online or by check (send to the address below).
- You may email your entry (preferably as a Word attachment or copied into an email) or mail it (typed and *single*-spaced, on 8.5 x 11" paper). If you do not have access to a computer or typewriter, we will accept entries that are *clearly handwritten in dark black ink*. Each entry must be titled and **no longer than 1200 words**. To be eligible, the entry must be previously unpublished.
- Be sure that your name and address appear on your entry (these will be removed for the judging process). Include a 100-word bio to be published with your entry if you win. Winners' stories must be available for publication; however, if you wish your story to be published anonymously, we will remove your name. Keep a copy of your entry.
- By submitting your story, you are giving Story Circle Network the right to publish it in the *Journal*, in its other print publications, and on its website. However, authors retain copyright.

Criteria and judging: The judges look for entries that are fresh and original, are written in a clear and authentic voice, are responsive to the topic, and have been polished *and* proofread for presentation in the competition. The most successful submissions are rich in evocative detail and avoid generalizations and abstractions. Entries will not be returned; evaluations will not be available.

Deadline: July 15, 2005. Winners will be notified by August 15, 2005.

Three ways to enter:

1. Go to www.storycircle.org/Contests/ to enter on line.
2. Email your entry to storycircle@storycircle.org.
3. Snail mail your entry to: Lifewriting Competition, Story Circle Network, PO Box 500127, Austin TX, 78750-0127

A Story Circle News Roundup

If you're facilitating or participating in a Story Circle, tell us about it! Write to Story Circle Roundup, 5802 Wynona Ave, Austin TX 78756, or email Jane Ross at mjr@io.com.

Story Circle Board Report

The SCN Board met at La Madeleine Restaurant in Austin, Texas, on April 11, 2005. Sixteen members attended the meeting chaired by President Judith Helburn.

The Board:

- Reported 497.5 hours volunteered for SCN activities.
- Approved the minutes of the January meeting and the Treasurer's Report.
- Acknowledged the resignation of Board member Mary Elizabeth and accepted the Executive Workgroup's nomination of Pat Flathouse to replace Mary Elizabeth.
- Voted to change the organization by-laws to allow any SCN member to nominate a candidate and all SCN members to participate in the Board election. (See the story on this on page 21.)
- Discussed and accepted the Executive Workgroup's recommendations regarding the *ad hoc* committee reports and voted to raise the dues of the organization. (See the membership form for details.)
- Accepted Leilani Rose's resignation as Board VP/President-elect and accepted the Executive Workgroup's nomination of Patricia Pando for the position. Leilani will remain on the Board.
- Voted to an increase in the organizational dues structure commensurate with the increase in individual dues.
- Applauded the progress made in planning the February 2006 SCN conference by Conference Chair Danelle Sasser.

The next Board meeting will be July 18, at La Madeleine in Austin.

—Report by Patricia Pando

Austin Chapter

Austin Chapter (AC) has done the following recently:

1. Formed a new group of volunteers for AC called the Operations Committee (OpCom) to help the Austin Chapter be more effective in serving its members
2. Recently offered a fun-filled Saturday of writing called "Writes of Spring" by Carolyn Blankenship and Catherine Cogburn. Those who attended reported a very enjoyable day.
3. Learned to "Sing from our Heart" at the Be Our Guest (BOG) Program in March that was lead by Susan Lincoln,

founder of the Hildegirls organization. There was a great deal of very enthusiastic participation during her two-hour program.

4. Introduced a new form of AC newsletter that we hope will fit better into all our busy lives. Designed and edited by Danelle Sasser, it's called NewsFlash and it's colorful, it's one page, and it tells the reader what is happening in the next few weeks: short and to the point! Many thanks to Danelle for this great contribution to AC

5. Our next Be Our Guest is on July 10 at the LCRA Colorado Room, with guest speaker Susan Bright. Austin-area members should mark your calendar and watch for the NewsFlash that will describe the speaker and her program.

—Report by Jackie Newman

Internet Chapter

Internet Chapter (IC) members have been very busy during the past few months. Stories, poems, and discussions of the book of the month have kept our members focused on the power of women's words. As we continue to grow in number, we are also growing in confidence, strength, and wisdom through the sharing of our stories, and poems.

During the past quarter, we have highlighted one circle and one member's writing each month in our IC Newsletter. At Internet Chapter, we love to have our members' stories shared with others. For that reason, our members have been encouraged to write to the themes of upcoming *Journal* issues. And, now that our focus is turning to this year's writing competition, the ladies of IC will be writing on the competition's theme as well.

Unlike the local chapters where members meet regularly to share their stories face-to-face, Internet Chapter members have, for the most part, never met one another and yet as the months pass and the stories are shared, our members enjoy a strong bond with one another. The wonders of the Internet are that we can get "almost immediate" gratification for posting our stories to the group and that we can still enjoy an ever-deepening sense of sisterhood.

Our facilitators have seen the first of the new quarterly Facilitator's Newsletter and will soon be receiving the second issue. In the months since the first issue was sent out to each facilitator, there has been much discussion on how we might work to make each woman's SCN experience an incredibly rewarding and affirming one.

—Report by Lee Ambrose

Story circles—the heart of SCN

Leading a Story Circle

What does it take to be a story circle facilitator? Two facilitators of Austin-area story circles, recommend a sense of humor and being open to letting the circle members take charge...

The Muse Amuses

Mary M. Elizabeth

My writing circle meets at the Yarborough Library the first Wednesday of each month. When our meeting was over one day, the librarians called me over to the circulation desk. They wanted to know what all the laughter was about. They said that when my circle meets, they hear loud bursts of laughter throughout the hour and a half that we are there. They wanted to know our secret. They wanted in on the fun. I have to say I was pleased to know that our laughter could be heard beyond the confines of the small meeting room. I was also pleased to know that we were meeting amongst enlightened librarians who appreciate it.

The writing prompts that I use are not intended to elicit humor. It doesn't matter what the topic is for the day, it is usually met with laughter. The women bring humor with them with their intelligence and breadth of life experience.

Our laughter comes from empathy. We are a diverse group in many ways, but all of us have survived disappointments as well as deep losses. Each of us has come face-to-face with ourselves in circumstances we did not expect. Each of us has gone far beyond our expectations in some way. We have all had loves, if not partners, and most of us are divorced at least once. We have all experienced the mysteries of childhood. We saw them give way to the mysteries of adolescence, which were followed by the mysteries of adulthood. These are the same no matter what our age, our spiritual path, or the nation where we grew up.

Our laughter comes from surprise. We may write about the same topic, but each of us has a unique perspective. We laugh with delight at an unexpected right hook, at righteous revenge, at glorious relief, at secrets exposed, and at those that were better left secret.

I want my writing circle to be a place where the imagination comes to life, even when we write about our realities. One of the greatest gifts to me is the experience of listening to each woman read what she has written. I get to savor other imaginations. They take me to new places and show me things I would not have considered, and they take me to long-forgotten places and make me remember who I once was.

I want my writing circle to be a place where minds can experience each other and where the intangibles of our lives are made real. I believe that our most vivid, intimate experiences are intangible. Our writing lets us share them. We laugh when we recognize that we have so much common ground there. ❖

Facilitating a Story Circle

Mary Ann Reynolds

In March I was so ill from food poisoning that I forgot all about facilitating my circle until the next day. I learned they managed without me, listing topics on the board and doing timed writings. After a tiny bee-sting of deflated ego, I was relieved that they functioned well without me. Being a facilitator means I don't have to do it all by myself every time. We are a circle of writers.

Now I've incorporated this into our structure and ask, "What do you want to write about tonight, ladies?"

Every month for two hours, we meet, write, and share what we've written. We've been doing this for 16 months now. My group does both life writing and creative writing. We like 20-minute timed writings best. Our structure is slowly evolving. At some point I decided to add silence at the beginning to release the monkey-mind of the day. Early, I added a five-minute throwaway writing to start the flow. Things that don't work well with my group, like optional homework, get left behind.

I want every woman in my circle to be published in a Story Circle publication. Please indulge my bragging (or take it as a challenge), but six pieces in the most recent *True Words* anthology came from my circle. One started as a timed writing. Another was a raw account of the aftermath of a shocking loss. Others were poems, which I don't do. (See, they do/don't need me!)

I remember how nervous I was for the first few months, fearful that no one would come or that I wouldn't find inspiration. There is a mix of regulars and occasional newbies, and the muse hasn't abandoned me yet.

We've gotten to know a lot about each other's lives. We've written about grief and change. We've cried together. Writing about our childhood fears elicited tenderness for everyone who ever was a child. What a marvel that each of us faced the dark alone and bravely back then, and now we come together to share these stories in the light and offer each other solace.

The snowflake nature of our stories enchants me. I have written disparate words on the board, and then we used as many as possible in whatever story found us, and each story was distinctly different.

We have laughed as we read our fictional postcards, designed and furnished our very own rooms, and gave voice to animals. We have rewritten our dreams.

My favorite reason for being a facilitator, however, is that I have long wanted to write a story starting with, "A nun walks into a bar..." and I did, in *my* Story Circle. ❖

How Do They Do That?
—Editing the *True Words* Anthology
Carolyn Blankenship
Austin TX

Ever wondered how the writings for a publication like the *True Words* anthology are chosen? Having been the editor of the 2002 and 2005 issues, I can tell you: there is a plan! We thought it might be helpful for our readers to understand what goes into the selection process of this annual collection of poems and stories.

Each year, SCN's anthology editors start with a basic set of criteria to follow in selecting poems and stories:

- All pieces must be written by women who were both current members of Story Circle Network *and* members of an active writing circle. Because the writing circles are at the heart of SCN's mission, we aim to showcase their work and encourage other members to form or join a writing circle.
- Submissions are limited to three pieces per member.
- There is no theme for the anthology, and we accept prose, poetry, and both short and long pieces, though greater consideration is given to shorter pieces. (The word limit for prose this year was 1000 words, and for poetry, 40 lines.) Longer pieces are sometimes published at the editor's discretion.
- Within the framework noted above, first consideration is given to pieces that exhibit excellent writing.
- Next we look for originality of topic. We also look for stories that reflect a writer's personal experience, rather than philosophical or theoretical pieces.
- Finally, we consider cultural and geographical diversity.

Once a submission meets the criteria listed above, it comes down to the editor's preference, the author's

willingness to accept edits, and what fits best into that gap on page 18. (That's usually when those shorter pieces are given "greater consideration.") The editors generally don't take into consideration how frequently a member has been published in the quarterly *Journal*, since the anthology issue only comes out once a year.

Many submitters ignore the word or line limit, sometimes by several thousand words! The anthologies' editors do their own word count and line count. Occasionally, we request authors of long pieces to edit their submissions down to something closer to the limit and resubmit them. And we ask those who send in multiple submissions to choose the three they consider their best and resubmit those. We also sometimes use more than one piece from the same author if the writing is particularly good or fits in well; again, the length of the submissions is a large factor in considering multiple pieces from one author.

This year, I wish I could have guaranteed that every member would be published in the printed anthology. But the size of our membership and the enthusiastic, prolific writing of our members precluded that. I hope that you feel supported and encouraged by the multiplicity of opportunities SCN offers to write, read, and share women's stories from around the world. ❖

Look for the anthology submissions on
our website at:

www.storycircle.org/anthology

The username is *truewords* and
the password is *scn2005*



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Join the Story Circle Network!

____ Annual Membership: USA: \$35 ;
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6/05

Story Circle Members in Print, On the Web, & in the News

Send news of your publications and writing-related activities to Peggy Moody at news@storycircle.org.

Robin Edgar was interviewed for the May, '05, issue of *Today's Charlotte Woman*. And the Charlotte (NC) *Observer* ran a story on Robin's story circle, the Red Tent Society.

Janis F. Kearney, a former presidential diarist and Arkansas native, announces the publication of her book *Cotton Field of Dreams: A Memoir* by Writing Our World Press. The book debuted at the William J. Clinton Library Inaugural Celebration, held in Arkansas in November, '04. Janis visited Houston TX for a book signing tour and reception in April.

Angie Pedersen of Lees Summit MO tells us that her third book has been published: *The Book of Us: A Guide to Scrapbooking about Relationships*. Read more about it at: www.scrapyourstories.com.

Georgia Hubley of Henderson NV tells us that her story, "Monday Morning Blues" will appear in the new book, *Chicken Soup for the Soul—Healthy Living: Weight Loss* to appear August, 2005. Her story, "Missing" (about coping with turning 50 and her mother's Alzheimers) appears in the recently released *Chicken Soup to Inspire a Woman's Soul*.

Ina Albert of Whitefish MT self-published *Write Your Self Well: Journal Yourself to Health* last June, together with co-author, Zoe Keithley. More info at www.writeyourself.com. Ina will be a speaker at the National Planetree Alliance conference in October in Chantilly VA.

Dita Dauti of Austin TX has started a volunteer organization called 400 Voices that represents 400 students of the Trepca School in Stanterg, Kosova (her former school). More info at www.main.org/400voices

Penny Leisch of Tempe AZ says the AWP Job List have published her article "Photos Add \$\$\$" as the feature in the March 2005 bulletin. AWP Job List is a publication of the Association of Writers and Writing Programs at George Mason University in Fairfax VA (see www.awpwriter.org).

Linda Wisniewski of Doylestown PA had an essay published in the February 17 issue of the *Christian Science Monitor's* Home Forum section. Linda also has pieces in *A Cup of Comfort for Sisters*, and *Rocking Chair Reader: Memories from the Attic*, both from Adams Media.

"Accidental Farmer", a short story written by **Beverly Galante** of Wimberley TX has been published by Small Town USA in the book *Growing up on Memory Lane*. For more information, go to: www.smalltownusa.net.

Duffie Bart of Santa Barbara CA writes a bi-monthly column for the weekly *Good Times* newspaper in Santa Cruz CA. She has published two so far, on relationships and rejuvenation.

Life-Writers' Market Watch: Opportunities for Publishing

Cup of Comfort editor Colleen Sell is seeking submissions for two new volumes.

A Cup of Comfort for Expectant Mothers: she's looking for positive personal stories about the memorable experiences of expectant moms. Deadline July 15.

A Cup of Comfort for Parents of Children with Autism: she is seeking personal anecdotal stories (not prescriptive articles) about the unique aspects of parenting a child with autism and related disorders. Deadline October 1.

Stories must be original, true, positive, in English, and 1,000–2,000 words. One \$500 grand prize; \$100 each for all other published stories, plus copy of book. Guidelines: www.cupofcomfort.com (click on "Share Your Story") or email your request to cupofcomfort@adamsmedia.com.

Second Chances Send us your true story about a time you were given a second chance or you gave someone else a second chance that made a real difference, for consideration for a collection entitled *Second Chances*. Approximately 300–1200 words with a beginning, middle, and end. Include a 50-word bio of yourself. You will receive an e-mail confirmation upon receipt of your story. We will notify you by January 1, 2006. Compensation is two copies of the book plus a discount of 40% on your order of additional copies. Send your typed, double-spaced manuscript, bio, and contact information via email to editorial@KeeneBooks.com or by mail to *Second Chances* Submissions, Keene Publishing, PO Box 54, Warwick NY 10990.

Deadline: September 1, 2005

SCN member Julie Gallagher is launching a zine for women in our 50s and 60s called *Releasing Times*. The type of writing that appears in SCN's *True Words from Real Women* is exactly what *Releasing Times* is about: personal, concrete, heartfelt, depicting real experiences. "Our 50s and 60s are a time of transition. We're 'releasing' some of our dreams and illusions, some of our relationships, as well as the nagging voices and misconceptions that have been holding us back," says Julie. Payment for longer pieces is currently 5 free copies of the issue in which you're published. Shorter pieces, such as brief commentary, are not paid at this time. You can submit by e-mail to submit@releasingtimes.com, or by regular mail to: *Releasing Times*, PMB 201, 6077 Far Hills Avenue, Centerville OH 45459. More info at www.releasingtimes.com. Deadline: Ongoing

Penwomanship, a new magazine for the creative woman writer is seeking submissions of women's writing, artwork and photography. Seeking short stories, poetry, and personal essays, short-short humor pieces, advice columns for women on women's health issues and finances, and writing tips. Submissions can be made to submissions@penwomanship.com in the body of the email only or mailed to *Penwomanship*, P.O. Box 235, Pine Lake GA 30072-0235. Guidelines at www.penwomanship.com.

Mark Your Calendar

SCN Events and Deadlines

June Register early for: the September LifeLines Lifewriting retreat in North Carolina; and for the February '06 Stories from the Heart III Conference in Texas.

June 5 Texas Tea and writing workshop with Nancy Slonim Aronie, Austin TX

July 1 Deadline to submit presentation proposals for the February '06 Stories from the Heart III Conference

July 10 Be Our Guest with publisher Susan Bright, Austin TX (free)

July 15 Deadline to enter the Susan Wittig Albert Lifewriting Competition

July 30 Schmooze the Muse—Moving through Writing, 1-day workshop with Peggy Lamb, Austin TX

August 6 Schmooze the Muse—Writing through Reminiscence, 1-day workshop with author Robin Edgar, Austin TX

September 9-11 LifeLines Lifewriting Retreat, Wildacres, North Carolina

September 25 Be Our Guest—open mike, Austin TX (free)

October 1-2 Writing from Life weekend writing workshop, Austin TX

November 13 Book signing with Susan Wittig Albert to launch her new Beatrix Potter mystery, Austin TX (free)

December 15 Early registration deadline for Stories from the Heart III conference

February 3-5, '06 Stories from the Heart III Conference, Austin TX (see page 18 for details)

These events are open to all SCN members and other women interested in writing about their lives. Most events require registration (except free events). Check our website for registration details, place, and time.



Join us for the fall

LifeLines

Lifewriting Retreat,

Featuring Authors Robin Edgar
and Pat MacEnulty

September 9-11, '05

Wildacres, North Carolina

See details and sign-up on p. 9

Story Circle Network
PO Box 500127
Austin TX 78750-0127