



# Story Circle Journal

Volume 9 Number 1, March, 2005

The newsletter for women with stories to tell...

## Women's History Month —Celebrating Women's Achievements and Women's Stories

By Jane Ross

As recently as the 1970s, women's history was an unknown topic in U.S. schools and in the public consciousness, says the website of the National Women's History Project. That began to change only in 1978, when an education task force in Sonoma County, California, launched a Women's History Week to coincide with International Women's Day in March. The program was a resounding success and, within two years, dozens of Sonoma county schools were planning special programs for Women's History Week.

Word spread about the Sonoma County Women's History Week celebration, and soon similar celebrations started around the country. That's when the founders decided to seek a congressional resolution declaring a National Women's History Week. In 1981, Senator Orrin Hatch and Representative Barbara Mikulski co-sponsored the resolution. State departments of education across the U.S. began to encourage celebrations of National Women's History Week as a way of promoting equality of the sexes in schools. Maryland, Pennsylvania, New York, Oregon, and Alaska were among the first states to develop and distribute curriculum materials to all of their public schools. Within a few years, thousands of schools and communities were celebrating National Women's History Week, supported and encouraged by resolutions from governors, city councils, school boards, and the U.S. Congress.

In 1987, the National Women's History Project petitioned Congress to expand the national celebration to the entire month of March. Each year, programs and activities in schools, workplaces, and communities have become more extensive, as educators, historians, and women's groups have developed and shared program ideas.

The popularity of women's history celebrations has sparked a new interest in uncovering women's forgotten heritage and celebrating women's achievements. In 2000, a group of energetic women, led by Dallas native Cathy Bonner, opened the Women's Museum: An Institute for the Future. Based in Dallas, Tex., the museum is part of the Smithsonian Institution's network of affiliated museums and has allowed the Smithsonian to send part of its collections related to U.S. women's lives and achievements out from Washington D.C. to other parts of the country. The philosophy behind the Women's Museum is based on a quote from Eleanor Roosevelt: "The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams."

Here at Story Circle Network, we are all doing our part to record women's history, though we may not realize it. I'll bet that the women who participated in SCN's first Older Women's Legacy (OWL) writing workshops in 1998 never thought of themselves as writing history. But in 2003, a selection of their stories appeared in the SCN anthology *With Courage and Common Sense*. I asked Theresa May, the Editor at the University of Texas Press who nurtured the book

(Continued on page 23)

*I want to do it  
because I want to do it. Women  
must try to do things as men  
have tried. When they fail,  
their failure must be but  
a challenge to others.*

—Amelia Earhart, Aviator  
(1897–1937)

### *In This Issue . . .*

- Women's History Month....1*
- President's Letter....2*
- Tend and Befriend....3*
- Prison Stories....4*
- A Land Full of Stories....5*
- Take a Bow, Susan Albert....6*
- Reading Stories for the Blind....7*
- Meet Other Lifewriters....8*
- Books for the Journey...11*
- True Words from Real Women...12*
- A Reader Tells Her Story...19*
- LifeLines Retreat Registration...20*
- Glimpses of Yemen...21*
- Kitchen Table Stories...22*
- Story Circle News Roundup...24*
- Story Circles—The Heart of SCN...25*
- The '05 True Words Anthology...26*
- Members in Print/Market Watch ...27*
- The Back Page...28*

# Letter from SCN's President



Happy Women's History Month!

The theme of Women's History Month this year is "Women Change America," which honors and recognizes the role of American women in transforming culture, history, and politics as leaders, writers, scientists, educators, politicians, artists, historians and informed citizens. Some of the writers who appear on the list of women who have been honored for National Women's History Week and National Women's History Month are Maya Angelou, Pearl Buck, Rachel Carson, Emily Dickinson, Katherine Graham, Helen Keller, Emma Lazarus, Maxine Hong Kingston, Margaret Mead, Toni

Morrison, and Gloria Steinem. And I am certain that there are many more women writers on the list whose names I'm not familiar with.

We in SCN can celebrate Women's History Month as well. Wouldn't it be fun to pretend to have a conversation with a famous woman? What would we ask? What might she say? Perhaps, in our writing for the month, whether in a circle or on our own, we could write of the time that we met or even spoke to a woman who might be honored. Way, way back when I was attending the University of Wisconsin, I spent a few minutes talking with Eleanor Roosevelt. It was an honor to even be in her presence.

We in SCN know that women do not have to be famous to be a part of history. That is what memoir is about. The formal stuff is already in the books. We get to fill in all the interesting details surrounding the hard, sometimes dull, facts. A woman I know was part of the U.S. non-governmental organization group accompanying the official U.S. delegation to Russia to negotiate with Mikhail Gorbachov when the Iron Curtain was weakening. She was the one whose story was featured in the international press and whose picture was plastered all over Moscow when she had the audacity to stand up, shake her finger at those pompous men and tell them they were acting like little boys. She went on afterwards to receive her Ph.D. in International Mediation after she was 70. She and we are the ones who live history.

On another subject, we are looking forward to our LifeLines Retreat at Festival Hill with Maureen Murdock. Our Texas wildflowers will be at their peak and the herb gardens at Festival Hill will be exploding with new growth. I'm told that some of the veggies at our lunch and dinners will come from their gardens. I cannot think of a place and time that could be more conducive to writing about our own life growth and changes. Spring is the time for our creative sap to rise. There may still be a spot waiting for you. See p. 20 or check [www.storycircle.org](http://www.storycircle.org) for details.

So this spring, let's look back at all of the women whose achievements have helped us become who we are. And let's look forward to the future and to taking our turn to guide and mentor younger women along their way. It is our way of paying forward for all we have received from the women who have created our history.

*Judith Helburn*

Judith Helburn  
President, Story Circle Network

## 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](mailto:mjr@io.com)

Contributing Editors:  
Mary Jo Doig  
Patricia Pando

We welcome your letters, stories,  
and suggestions.

Editorial Address:  
PO Box 500127,  
Austin TX 78756-0127  
ISSN: 1093-7528

©2005 Story Circle Network  
Copyrights to all contributed works  
remain with the authors.

### Membership Rates

*One Year \$25 US*  
*\$30 Canada and Mexico*  
*\$35 elsewhere*

Foreign Memberships: International  
Postal Money Order *only*, please

**Back Issues:** Back issues are available either as first-run or photocopies. 1-9 issues: \$5 each; 10 or more, \$3 each. Add postage as follows: \$1 for 1 issue, \$3.50 for 2-5 issues, \$6 for 6+ issues

**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*

## *Talk to Me—Friendship*

*Imagine the effect friendship and listening relationships could have on the lives of a group of women who live under some of the most stressful conditions imaginable—in prison.*

*Nathalie Sorrell, Carol Waid, and Suzanne Armistead are the founders of and partners in a non-profit organization called Truth Be Told that offers writing, speaking, and movement classes to women in prison. They explain how tending and befriending is bringing new hope to women in prison and new strength to their organization.*

In February 2000, needing to escape the guilt she felt at having an easy life she did nothing to deserve, Nathalie Sorrell volunteered at a prison near her hometown of Austin, Tex. At the suggestion of a prison warden, Nathalie began offering public speaking classes, which she called “Talk to Me.” In April 2000, Nathalie invited Carol to tell her story to her “Talk to Me” groups. Carol stayed on to become an integral part of the classes. In 2002, Suzanne came to a graduation ceremony and decided to stay and begin work with the classes in movement. The three women working together decided to form Truth Be Told, an organization that provides transformational tools for women in prison.

Carol now runs the Talk to Me—Circle (writing) classes and Suzanne runs the Talk to Me—Movement classes. All three women use their personal, ongoing stories to illustrate the values they are teaching in their classes. The classes focus first on owning the experiences and choices that brought the women prisoners to prison.

Nathalie’s story involves being a gregarious child who was told to “hush up and sit down” repeatedly by a quiet, introverted father. “I never got the message that the gift of gab was actually a gift—but it is!” The women who come to her classes tend to be extroverts who long for a captive audience.

“My challenge,” Nathalie says, “is to demonstrate how to capture someone’s attention and to keep it by revealing the fascinating and sometimes humiliating stories of our life, rather than by preaching! These women are so eager to help others to *not* follow in their footprints. But we all learn so much more when we can hear a personal story and take what we identify with instead of being given advice.”

Says Carol Waid, Talk to Me—Circle (writing) facilitator, “A myth we combat is that you can’t make friends with women in prison, and you can’t trust anyone here.”

In their own relationships with each other and in their classrooms, Nathalie, Carol, and Suzanne create a space where everyone owns the responsibility of making this place safe for revealing generational secrets. When carefully guarded stories are shared, the relationships between tellers and hearers drop immediately from superficial and distrustful to astonishing depths of trust and intimacy. Living among hundreds of inmates with no outward privacy, women contain their memories, thoughts, and feelings tightly. The truth-telling

done in these classes relieves the stress of terrible loneliness.

Says Carol, “I can relate since, only a few years ago, I did not know that my acceptance of the true gift of friendship could convert me into being a friend.

“I have an orchard now, but not that long ago I was a weed with barely a sprout, and my inner world was a desert. My idea of girlfriends gave me as much joy as a wounded deer would feel looking up at a buzzard circling overhead. They were my competition, and I had no desire to open up my heart for them. This belief has now become mulch, fertilizer for the love, consistency, and trust that I am growing in my garden of friends.”

Carol reflects on another benefit she has gained from the friendships with her partners and the women in prison: “Since getting to know menopause first hand, as I have one hot flash after another and moods that swing from sunrise to full moon, I become aware of how important it is for me to go to the prison and share the fruits that I have received from my friendships.”

Carol’s classes tend to attract the introverts, women who feel deeply but have to struggle to speak aloud their painful stories. Carol tends their feelings of fear by telling her own stories of growing up in a situation similar to theirs.

Suzanne Armistead, the dancing partner, teaches the inmates to tell their stories through the language of movement. The women take a big risk in demonstrating their truth through movement to an often disrespectful crowd of observers. Nadia was a Jamaican inmate who won the hearts of all three facilitators and eventually became an enormous draw for the Truth Be Told classes.

Says Suzanne, “Nadia helped herself by dancing in her room or pod and risked all kinds of rejection and criticism. She vented in class for some time about how many of the women in her pod judged her harshly. She was in great pain but she did it anyway. It helped her move out of the stuckness that had been with her for months. Many women came to the Talk to Me—Movement and Show Me Spirit! classes wanting what they had seen in Nadia.”

Suzanne’s own journey is one from being an expressive child, sometimes shamed for drawing attention to herself or being silly, to becoming this extraordinary, gifted performer/

*(Continued on page 4)*

---

*“A myth we combat is that you can’t make friends with women in prison.”*

---

(Continued from page 3)

mimic who is beloved by her partners and the inmates. Words are her second language. Tending and befriending her own active physical self has been essential to make her classes a safe place for the inmates who are drawn to her offerings, often poor students who couldn't sit still in class.

Reflecting on what she has gained from participating in the Truth Be Told team, Nathalie Sorrell says, "Becoming a partner in an organization is the hardest thing I've done since parenting my teenagers. I love my partners. They are as committed to their own personal and spiritual growth as I am. We each get deeper into our own character defects and egos as we work together—and then we each get humbler and more awake to our own and each other's value and creative gifts. We have to work through the tensions that arise from doing such intense work." She has no doubt that tending these friendships is essential for restoring her sanity and making her a more effective facilitator. ❖

## *Truth Be Told—Sharing the Love*

*Nadia, the graduate of the Truth Be Told program, was held by INS after serving her time. She wrote to Suzanne Armistead (Talk to Me—Movement teacher) from a holding tank in Laredo, Tex.*

To keep myself from worries, fear and depression, I do Truth be Told presentations here at CCA Laredo. I tell the officers about you and, with the little Spanish I learned, I am telling the detainees about you. I have told the English speaking detainees my story and they have shared theirs with me.

I can't stop dancing. I show this Cuban lady hand dance. She caught on real fast. She loves it. She has a beautiful voice and every day she sings and I dance a lot of flowing and stillness. This one lady said to me, "How did you know what she was singing about?" I said, "I didn't. The song was in Spanish. All I knew was the song was about God and I just danced from my heart." She told me it was beautiful. I told her I thank you for that.

You showed me a beautiful gift that I will cherish and keep alive for the rest of my life. The girls want to dance like me and I remember how after I seen you dance for the first time, saying 'I want to move and dance like her.' I told the girls there's not a right and wrong way to move. Just flow and allow your spirit to guide you. Stay in the moment. These ladies from all different countries dancing in their yellow uniforms was just beautiful. I wish you could have seen ...

I thought to myself maybe God allowed me to be here in Laredo to share my story and dance and show how to receive great Peace through moving in the spirit. I shared so many things I learned with these ladies through being in TBT and the workshops. They think I am crazy. I make music with my hands, and make all kinds of music with my voice. The girls join me and it turns out to be beautiful music. My point is that I am giving back the wonderful gifts that you, Nathalie, and Carol gave me. I simply can't keep them to myself.

*Nadia D.*

## *Inside Out: Thoughts We Never Send Home*

**Janie Elliott**  
Marlin TX

Think about wearing the same white pants and shirt that the other 1300 women you live with wear, day in and day out for years and years. Spending your days and nights in a space most people wouldn't keep their dogs, the size of a walk-in closet. Always looking over your shoulder for a blade, a billy, or a hard-on. Visiting a prison is nothing like hearing those big doors slam shut.

Locked in with rage, hate, anger, and bitterness laced with a steady stream of profanity that would curl a sailor's hair. Attitudes from hell push us to our knees in prayer for safety with a promise of becoming a celibate monk if God will allow our survival and give us another chance.

Life is so very different in here. Response is a no-no. Emotion is void, and obedience is mandatory. So when we try to appear "normal," it's somewhat distilled. Some say manic, some bi-polar. Definitely not yourself. I challenge you to spend years behind bars and define "normal."

But as long as there is breath in me I have hope, and as long as I have hope, there is a reason to keep on. Thanks to people like Nathalie Sorrell who help me by sharing her experiences and teach me through guidance and counseling. Women like her who give up their time and put their energy, hearts, and souls into helping those of us who are blindly seeking the light at the end of the tunnel.

In Nathalie's class I've gained many insights. I've learned to journal my thoughts and feelings, to weigh the possibilities. I've learned the importance of relating, allowing options, reasoning, and insights to dispel the "shoulda-coulda-wouldas."

In relationships I see how to transform rather than conform. There is a time and place for both. Now more times than not, I'd rather not follow, not conform, but transform by the renewing of my mind.

Nathalie is helping me to perfect these skills, and I pass them on to others, mainly my children, who by the grace of God, have not given up on me but have learned from my mistakes.

God is a good God and, though I will be starting over from scratch, I now have skills to help. I know not only what to do but what not to do as well. ❖

*Janie attends Nathalie's Relational Bible Study Class at Hobby Prison in Marlin, Tex. This class is not part of the Truth Be Told program, but the tending and befriending works just the same!—Ed.*

---

To find out how you can help the Truth Be Told program, visit the website at

[www.truth-be-told.org](http://www.truth-be-told.org)

or email [info@truth-be-told.org](mailto:info@truth-be-told.org)

*A Land Full of Stories*

# Bear Gulch

*EJ Phillips submitted this charming story of a magical childhood place to the new SCN anthology A Land Full of Stories: Women Write about the Southwest, to be published by the University of Texas Press in 2006.*

I am 10 years old as I reach up a wee bit higher with first one hand, then the other, clinging to the round, sandpapery surface, my arms outspread and fingers grasping tightly. Inch by inch I scale the rock until I reach a small scooped-out hollow carved by wind and rain. I wiggle into the little nook, then turn and peer warily over the edge to see how high I have climbed. Cautiously I creep up a few more steps until I stand atop an enormous boulder; a gray, stone fortress standing guard over the arroyo that stretches out beneath me.

My grandparents called this place Bear Gulch. Located in southern Colorado, this gully-riddled, jagged mountain-side was dotted with straggly cedar trees that struggled to stay alive. Covered with smooth rocks, sharp-edged rocks, little rocks and big rocks, it was a place where big black bears and little brown bears once roamed, built their homes, and hid young.

From where I sat on the rock, I could see below, first curving south, then back west, the dusty, narrow road as it meandered up to where my grandparents' home sat tucked against the mountainside. Weathered and gray-brown, the hewed stone house blended in with the rocky hillside as if it had rolled in on the same prehistoric tidal wave. Sometimes I wondered if Grandpa had carved his house out of one of those boulders.

Grandpa was a round, not-too-tall man, always with a sweat-stained, grey felt hat snug on his head. He raised goats, probably the only food-producing livestock that could survive on this barren hillside. North of my perch, I saw Grandpa's goat pen, pebble-strewn with straggly wire and fence posts a bit askew. There, two goats stood munching on prickly pear cactus and tough, growth-stunted, scrub cedar trees.

Grandma was a slow moving, soft-voiced woman, her graying hair pulled back in a bun. She raised children. Eight of them. Five boys and three girls that now all had families of their own. Every August the family pilgrimage to Bear Gulch brought aunts, uncles, and cousins to Grandpa and Grandma's home. At night, the living room floor of the old house became a nursery of angelic faces snuggled down in patchwork quilts.

Grandma cooked breakfast for all those hungry kinfolk on a big, black, wood burning stove. Even today, fifty some years later, I hear the "perk-burble-perk" of the coffee. I smell the salty, home-cured bacon and the hot pancakes. That was Grandma's specialty—pancakes. Yellow batter sizzling and spitting as she poured it on the smoky, cast-iron griddle. I

remember standing on a scarred wooden stool to look as the top of the pancakes began to bubble. I watched her flip them over, then scoop up those two crusty brown circles and slide them onto my plate. She piled on a mound of yellow butter, slathered the whole with homemade syrup then, with her spatula, she pointed me to the planked wooden table, its top and benches pocked by the pocketknife-carved names of my father and his four brothers, scratched as they waited for their breakfast.

Up the hillside to the south, was the weathered roof of old Rockvale School, a one-room building where three of my uncles had hunkered over pine desks, pencils in hand, trying to learn readin' and writin' and 'rithmetic. Most of the shingles had blown off the roof and down into the valley. The windowpanes were shattered long ago by weather or destruction-bound people. Dirt, rainwater, and snow stained and streaked the panes that were still there. Not that I could see all that from here. I only knew about it because my uncles had once taken me there.

To the south was the rugged valley that gave Bear Gulch its name. Not much of anything green grew in that valley. Mottled, dull, gray-white mountain ridges, razor-edged, rose up abruptly from the dusty ravine. I could see those spines clearly in that mid-afternoon Colorado sun. And caves. I never saw the caves, but Grandpa told me about them. Described to me how he hid behind a rock and watched as the bear cubs tumbled and played just outside the dark cavernous openings.

From my lookout on the boulder, I could see humps of pale, dry, powdery clay on the floor of the ravine. Men once dug in that clay hoping to find a few pieces of coal to warm their homes. "Not an easy place to live, this gulch," Grandma had said many times.

For me, this was a magic place. In the daytime, my cousins and I ran as wild as Grandpa's goats. We climbed up the mountain, then wandered down toward the gullies.

"Don't go down in that ravine," some mother or aunt would call out. "You'll fall in the underground river." An underground river! How deliciously shivery! We were not sure where the river was but we could hear the faint rumble of water—couldn't we? It never occurred to us that if it were underground, how could we fall in.

Today my grandparents are gone, the house no longer stands, and somehow, the rock has shrunk. But my sixty-year-old heart remembers Bear Gulch and the enormous stone sentinel that stood strong and proud over a castle filled with love, that protected my grandparents' home, kept it safe and gave me a rocky wonderland for my rambling feet. ❖

---

**EJ Phillips** lives in Santa Fe, N.M. She is the editor and publisher of *WOMAN: What She Has Done with Where She Has Been*.

Take a bow! Spotighting our Story Circle Network volunteers

## Susan Wittig Albert: Mentor to Many

Throughout her career, national best-selling author and founder of the Story Circle Network Susan Wittig Albert has been a champion of women and women's voices. As we celebrate Women's History Month, **Lisa Shirah-Hiers** offers her personal tribute to Susan and speaks for all of us who have been blessed by Susan's generosity, energy, and vision.



Destiny seemed determined to throw Susan Albert in my path. A new mother in 1999, I was reevaluating my former career and trying to decide what I really wanted from life. As so often happens, help came in the form of a book. Susan Albert's book, *Work of Her Own: A Woman's Guide to Success off the Career Track*, put into words exactly

what I felt: success-at-all-costs was a poor way to live.

A few years later, I learned about the Story Circle Network. I found the internet chapter and joined my first circle. Like many of us, I had always wanted to be a writer but lacked the courage to try. SCN changed all that. It wasn't until much later that I discovered I owed both the book and the organization that changed my life to the same Susan Albert.

Susan began her career in academia, rising through the ranks to a prestigious vice presidency at Southwest Texas State University in San Marcos, Tex, (now Texas State University). But by the mid 1980s she felt disillusioned by university politics and disconnected from her own life. She took an unpaid leave, ostensibly to write a book. Instead, she underwent an intense self-examination. She realized she no longer wanted her high-pressure job or the 60+ hour weeks that came with it.

In the preface to *Work of Her Own* Susan describes how painful this period was for her. "How do I say how lonely I was in those months, especially for other women? Lacking role models, I had copied my professional behavior and my commitment to work from male faculty and administrators. Now I needed to hear how other women made space for personal lives in the midst of their work lives. I needed to know how they had achieved the balance I had failed to find." Her friends didn't understand. They accused her of abandoning a position from which she could help other women succeed. Their criticism hurt. But Susan knew she couldn't go back. She turned in her resignation.

---

**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.

Over the next few years Susan and her new husband Bill wrote and published over 60 young-adult novels. Susan launched her own China Bayles mystery series and co-authored a Victorian mystery series with her husband under the pseudonym Robin Paige. She had discovered, to her delight, that it was possible to make a living writing and still have plenty of time to enjoy hobbies and friends and to savor country life on the farm that she and Bill had bought in Bertram, Tex.

Susan knew from experience that other women desperately needed the mentors she had lacked in her self-transformation. That was why she had written *Work of Her Own*. Now women needed a guide book they could follow to re-create their lives. Even if she was no longer an administrator, Susan still wanted to help women make their dreams come true. So in 1996, she published *Writing from Life: Telling Your Soul's Story* (reissued in 2004).

In an appendix to that first edition, Susan described how important story circles are if we really want to understand our lives. "We live our lives with such intensity and engagement that they are transparent to us. We eat, sleep, dream, breathe them. We are like fish swimming in the ocean. What fish imagines itself surrounded by water, or knows that there are creatures that breathe a lighter, brighter air? When I write my story—the whole of it, or bits and pieces—I can see it and see myself in it. When I share my story and others share theirs with me, I can see my life much more clearly."

One year after *Writing from Life* was published, Susan and a group of Austin, Tex., friends sat around a kitchen table discussing the book and the importance of journaling and peer support when a woman begins to tell her story. She wanted women to have ready access to the story circles she had described in that first edition. Out of their conversation the Story Circle Network was born.

From the very beginning, Susan was the life-blood of the organization. She became our first President, edited the *Journal*, and facilitated writing workshops. She gave us her time, talent, energy, and vision. She provided books for door prizes, held benefit book-signings, and in myriad ways worked to keep SCN vital and growing. Like a good mother, she birthed and reared us. Then last year, like a good mother again, she stepped aside so we could find our own wings.

Susan was no longer vice president of a university, but she was still a mentor to women. Her scope reached far wider than it ever would have in academia. Her books and Story Circle

Network gave me and many others the courage to write and publish for the first time. I sold my first article and posted my success on SCN's Members in Print web page. Shortly after, Susan asked me to write an article about her soon-to-be-released Beatrix Potter mystery series. *Austin Monthly* magazine jumped at it and in a space of weeks I was sitting across the table from my icon and role model, and now my mentor as well. I was nervous. But I was determined to make good and help Susan launch *The Tale of Hilltop Farm*.

Talking over tea, I discovered that this best-selling author, SCN founder, and lifewriting guru, who had influenced my life in so many ways, was also a friendly, sincere woman who liked comfortable clothes, nature walks, and herb gardening. Her multiple talents and prestigious résumé weren't intimidating, because she was as interested in me as I was in her. I was keenly aware that her inviting me to write an article was a boost to my own career, a boost that she seemed delighted to offer. At many points along the way, Susan stopped to ask me about *my* life and made me conscious that my story really mattered. And this, I finally realized, is her greatest gift: the ability to help women discover their own voice and find the confidence and passion to be their true self.

In addition to her work writing and mentoring, Susan's work as an editor has extended her influence well beyond Story Circle Network. In editing the anthology of OWL stories, *With Courage and Common Sense*, she has ensured that the historical record will balance the well-documented recollections of men with those of women living the momentous decades since World War I. As Susan says in her introduction, "We have chronicles of wars, explorations, governments, inventions, and religions. What we lack is a clear record of daily domestic life...how people felt, how they responded emotionally to the daily challenges of ordinary lives." The new anthology Susan is working on, *A Land Full of Stories*, will record women's personal experiences of living in the Southwest of the U.S. Both of these books have encouraged women writers and will help preserve women's voices, ensuring their experiences are on record for future generations. ❖

## *SCN Lifewriting Contest Renamed in Honor of Susan Wittig Albert*

The vote was unanimous and heartfelt. At the January 10 SCN Board meeting, it was decided that the annual lifewriting contest will henceforth be named the Susan Wittig Albert Lifewriting Competition, to honor the tremendous contribution Susan has made towards encouraging women to write about their lives.

This year's contest topic will touch on the role of tending and befriending in our lives. Look for more details in the June issue of the *Journal*. ❖

## *Reading With Courage and Common Sense for the Blind*

Sue Bilich  
Austin TX

I first picked up the book *With Courage and Common Sense: Memoirs from the Older Women's Legacy Circles* last year. I bought it because I knew that my daughter-in-law's mother Mathilda Mimun had written a couple of stories for this book. I enjoy my *Machitunum* (Yiddish for in-laws), and I thought that it would be wonderful to see what Mathilda had written. I decided to read these stories for Austin Information Radio (AIR), located on the campus of the State School for the Blind and run by Doug Foxworth, station manager (who is also blind). AIR provides a special hookup for people who live within a 45-mile range of Austin and are challenged in one way or another. I volunteer there once a week.

I began to read each story and found myself fascinated with what all of these women who contributed stories had to say. It took me about six weeks to read out loud this whole book. Both Doug and I enjoyed all the stories.

I also narrate at the Texas Talking Book Program, once a week. This program is more restrictive in that we read from books that are Library of Congress-approved and written by Texans or about Texas, as well as articles from various Texas magazines. These recordings become "books on tape" for the blind and/or disabled. When *With Courage and Common Sense* appeared on the shelf of books to be read at the Texas Talking Book Program, I spoke up immediately, saying that I wanted to record it. So I began reading it in the fall.

It usually takes a while to complete a book because, as a volunteer, I only go in to record once a week. My monitor (the sound engineer) has really enjoyed the candor, honesty, and love that shapes each story. As the person reading these stories, I laugh or am sometimes near tears by the end of each woman's story.

I know what makes America so great—it's because we have strong compassionate women here. I've truly learned a lot by listening to their hardships; like when Mathilda had to leave her family in Tunisia after she married and didn't get to see her mother again. I learned from Shirley Hurwitz about the hardships during World War II. I learned about competition and what mistakes can cost you in "Hey, Maud Farkle" by Paula Stephen Bishop. I learned about loves lost, loves found, and the Depression—and hey!—life's not so bad after all!

My husband retired from the military right before we moved to Austin in 1975. I guess I have a lot that I can share too, and I plan on doing so. I've always wanted to write my memoirs but I was afraid that someone would have to die first before I could disclose stories about my life. (Just kidding!) I recently joined OWL, and have attended a couple of workshops. It's amazing how the moderators can pull stuff out of your brain. I can't wait to attend my first writing circle meeting this month. Who knows what stories lurk in the heart of *this* woman! ❖

*Meet other lifewriters and learn from their stories*

## Barbara Gates: Searching for Home

*This month marks the publication in paperback of Barbara Gates' insightful memoir *Already Home: A Topography of Spirit and Place*. *Story Circle Journal* interviewed Barbara by email shortly after the tsunami struck Southeast Asia and asked her about her life and work, her book, and the lessons we all can draw about the meaning of home from the cataclysm that left so many in Asia homeless.*

*I've taken on what I call "shellmound mind." This is an experiment in imagination. Can I risk that ancient experience of home, where categories such as household and church, garbage dump and cemetery—so separate in our current world—converge?*

—Barbara Gates in *Already Home*

*All messages seem to point to the same conclusion: I may not own this great flood of life events—this continually shifting, arising, and dissolving homeless home—but how I act and think feeds into it.*

—Barbara Gates

**SCJ.** Please tell us about the path that brought you from your childhood in the Northeast U.S. in the 1950s to the place you now call home in the San Francisco Bay area.

**Barbara Gates.** For much of my life, I've lacked a sense of home. My parents split up when I was four, and I shuttled back and forth between my New York City artist mom and my New England professor dad; I never felt settled in either home. As I see it now, much of the trajectory of my life—both relationships and work—has been fueled by a passion to reverse a sense of homelessness. In Cambridge, Massachusetts, I sought a sense of home in joining with other teachers to found and run a community school. But in the wake of my dad's death from cancer, I had a tantrum with everyone close to me, destroying the fragile beginnings of home with my boyfriend and with the teachers with whom I was creating a community. I left Cambridge for Berkeley on the run. I gradually began to settle into life on the other side of the continent in an unfamiliar place.

It wasn't until a crisis—grappling with breast cancer and facing my own mortality—that I began my unconventional pilgrimage to explore the terrain right where I was. Through daily walks, research, imagination, and meditation practice, I became intimate with my home place—inner and outer.

**SCJ.** You share a sense of home with communities of writers and of Buddhists. How did you find these vocational and spiritual homes?

**Barbara Gates.** As far back as I can remember, telling stories and writing have been vehicles for me to tap into what I think and feel, to heal what feels broken. I have developed kinships with others through writing—as I edited my high school newspaper and the Bennington College literary magazine, co-wrote a book about teaching women's studies and, for the past twenty plus years, co-edited the Buddhist journal *Inquiring*

*Mind*. Some of my most tender intimations of home have arisen as a co-founder, co-editor, co-writer, through a creative back-and-forth with other writers exploring the nuances of words, images, and sentence rhythms.

Buddhism was the first spiritual tradition to which I was drawn. Raised alternately by my agnostic Jewish mother and my atheistic once-Unitarian father, I hadn't found "home" in either temple or church. When I was in my twenties, my friend Jonny Kabat (later to become Jon Kabat Zinn) taught me to meditate. On his way to lead the early morning sitting at the Cambridge Zen Center, he dropped by my communal house to sit with me. When my dad died and my life seemed to fall apart, I began to turn towards a committed meditation practice. I went to Naropa Institute in Colorado to study vipassana meditation with Joseph Goldstein. Since then I've found some community with other meditators, particularly, with Wes "Scoop" Nisker and my other *Inquiring Mind* colleagues. But it has been through Buddhist practice itself—through learning to settle into the present moment—that I have truly accessed a sense of home.

**SCJ.** Your book, *Already Home*, grew out of seven years of journaling, reflection and research as you sought to understand deeply the meaning of home. At what point did you become aware that your work would result in a book and that others might be inspired by your journey to explore these questions for themselves?

**Barbara Gates.** For many years, my column in *Inquiring Mind* explored Buddhist themes through stories of daily life. In response, readers sometimes wrote to tell me how moved they were by my stories and reflections. Some suggested I should write a book. After the cancer diagnosis, the writing I was doing became an essential practice for me. I felt as though I was writing for my life. My friends, Joanna Macy and Wendy Johnson (both Buddhist teachers and deep ecologists), asked me to join with them to form a

three-woman book writing support group. “You’re writing a book aren’t you?” asked Joanna. It seemed I was! As the group read though all of my columns, we saw common themes: family, neighborhood, and community. These became the basis for the book.

**SCJ.** *Once you had decided to write a book, how did the book evolve?*

**Barbara Gates.** When I first started writing, I hadn’t yet conceptualized the theme of “home.” As I wrote about the terror of dying young and of leaving behind a motherless five-year-old, I began to see how out of synch I felt with myself and the world. I sought connection with the streets of my neighborhood, with human neighbors, with other animals and growing things. So I broadened my attention beyond “woe is me” to the healing of the terrain and I broadened my sense of mortality to include the vast impermanence of evolving life. Gradually, I recognized my own longing for belonging. I saw that I was writing about home.

When I wrote a chapter, I usually began with a resonant image, something I’d seen or experienced which called to me. I didn’t know where it would lead. Take my relationship with Dee, the homeless woman who used to sleep in our family car. It wasn’t until I wrote a number of stories about Dee that I saw her pain and violence in myself and I saw my own feelings of homelessness. Through that writing, something began to heal for me and I recognized a common human yearning to be embraced in safety and forgiveness. So this writing offered me insight into myself, into Dee, and into all who are subject to the uncertainties of life.

**SCJ.** *For me, one of the most beautiful aspects of *Already Home* is the straight forwardness of the language you use and the naturalness with which you connect Buddhist philosophy with down-to-earth experience. How did you come to write in this way?*

**Barbara Gates.** I’ve always wanted to open up possibility for those who might ordinarily be shut out. In the 1970s I was a cofounder and staff member in a school for low-income kids who dropped out of the public system. I hoped to offer them experiences in learning and self-governance that they probably would never have had. Likewise, I’ve wanted to offer insights gleaned from Buddhism to those who might not have access to them otherwise. After all, Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike experience disconnection from themselves and their world. So, in the hope of passing on the teachings to those who might not be comfortable with Buddhist terminology, I’ve told stories instead of preaching philosophy.

Here’s an example. I tell a story of an adventure I had with my just-skunked dog, Cleo, in the back of a pickup truck swerving down a winding road. Responding to Cleo’s terror when she careened back and forth, I found myself embracing her, anchoring the two of us amid tumbling shovels and ropes. In that hug, skunk stink alchemized into gamy life stink. Following this incident, I coined the term “skunk practice.” This became a metaphor for me of a way of fully living life, of embracing what seemed unembraceable, including heartache

and loss. It’s a version of Buddhist mindfulness practice.

**SCJ.** *Already Home woke me up to many aspects of my neighborhood and community that I had paid little attention to in the past. Have you received a similar response from other readers? Is the book changing the way people view their home environments?*

**Barbara Gates.** Many readers have told me that the book led them to realize that didn’t know the names of their neighbors or much about their home places—where their water came from, whether there were toxic chemicals in their local air or ground water. Readers from far-away places—from Israel to British Columbia, from New Zealand and France—have started writing and photography projects in their neighborhoods. Others have investigated remains of native settlements that preceded them in their home places. Still others have begun to notice their inner terrain and to try out meditation.

**SCJ.** *What suggestions would you make for the many life-writers in SCN who might be interested in exploring their own understanding of home and using this as a catalyst to deepen their writing?*

**Barbara Gates.** I suggest carrying a little back-pocket notebook as you take walks through your neighborhood. Scribble observations—scents, colors, textures, lists of debris, vegetation, graffiti—as well as unexpected images, memories and insights as they arise. Later, copy those into journals. At another time, read them through and circle favorite details, phrasings, metaphors, new understandings. When you are ready to write, draw on these treasures. Often you will rediscover observations, even musical language, that you didn’t even remember you had scribbled down—rich fodder for your explorations of home.

*(Continued on page 10)*

*Already Home:  
A Topography of Spirit and Place  
by Barbara Gates*

Published by Shambhala Publications  
ISBN 1-59030-165-X (pb)  
240 pp, \$14.95

Barbara Gates shows us the way to find a deeper connection to our family, our neighborhood, and ultimately all that lives, through her own inner and outer journeys.  
Order through the SCN book review website at:

[www.storycircle.org/BookReviews](http://www.storycircle.org/BookReviews)

Look for **Barbara Gates** on the Alphabetic Index.

See Barbara Gates’ website: [www.barbaragates.com](http://www.barbaragates.com)

(Continued from page 9)

**SCJ.** *In the wake of the tsunami that struck in December 2004, I know that you have been reflecting on the scale of homelessness in Southeast Asia. What can the tsunami teach us about the idea of home and the solidity that we give to this idea?*

**Barbara Gates.** For many, a sense of home is strongly identified with a yearning for stability and security. But an understanding of the nature of home can be radically informed by reflections on the vast impermanence of the natural world, epitomized by the recent tsunami. Awareness of the ongoing evolution of things—the perspective of vast shifting time and space—is essential to insight into who or what we are and our place in the world. As devastating as tectonic violence can be to human life, the constant recycling of the earth’s crust makes for rich soil, allows for a lush and habitable planet. Powerful jolts, such as the one that led to the tsunami in Southeast Asia in 2004 may be the heartbeat of the earth, perhaps essential to the evolution of complex life (our planet’s first organisms having probably arisen in the deep sea alongside volcanic gashes).

Throughout *Already Home*, I have juxtaposed small personal events (such as my own confrontation with mortality through breast cancer) with the vast impersonal evolution of the place and its inhabitants. I begin the book by evoking the movement of tectonic plates along the San Andreas Fault slowly tearing apart California. From a Buddhist point of view, the evolving elements are operating according to the impersonal laws of cause and effect. Earthquakes and volcanoes, hurricanes and tornadoes are happening all the time as the planet evolves—leaving individual lives inherently insecure and unpredictable. What is important is our response. We need to train ourselves to respond with wisdom and compassion. Home might be seen not so much as a place but as a way of relating to pervasive and ongoing change.

**SCJ.** *In this world there are many indigent people living on the street and many others who, though they have places to live, still suffer from feelings of “not being at home.” What is the key to our feeling at home?*

**Barbara Gates.** I suggest two intersecting journeys: 1) Get to know the folks next door, the local ecology and its history, see that *who* you are and *where* you are cannot be separated. 2) Through meditation—train your awareness to open to the inner terrain of body and mind. A true sense of home cannot be found in a house or, for that matter, any “thing” subject to vicissitudes of shifting winds or shifting earth. You may not be able to control whether your family stays together or whether your house is stable. But you can train the mind to be stable, to include whatever comes your way. Such stability and inclusiveness of the mind is essential to the recognition that you are already home, that you have been home all along. ❖

—Email interview conducted  
and edited by Jane Ross

A chapter from *Already Home* was included in *The Best Buddhist Writing 2004* (Shambhala, 2004).

## True Words...

### Soil Study at Sugar Hollow Near Charlottesville, Virginia

Melanie Alberts  
Austin TX

By the creek bed beneath waves  
of drowned grass  
I help you, the future science teacher,

dig a hole twenty inches deep.  
First quarter inch yields  
river sand, no mystery.

The grains in your hand  
are prisms of green and amber quartz,  
but the field guide

written by a Japanese scientist  
to standardize the globe’s soils  
insists it is brown. So it is.

You flick the sand from your hands.

As you study the hole I, the poet, see  
that Demeter’s been to Sugar Hollow.  
Hungry to turn the land stark

and cold she’s shaken the leaves down  
around us. You say a front is coming in.  
It flows between us like her black cape.

I say *You know how spring smells  
of earthworms, summer, onion grass?*  
You nod. Autumn air rifles through clumps

of leaves in the crotches of trees.  
Winter is white breath and ice.  
I stand staring into the hole we dug,

it looks warm and deep. Your hand comes up  
with a slice of clay you roll in your palm, sniff.  
I say it’s the color of dried blood but

the book corrects me: this clay is brown.  
I step close and take its photograph,  
you smile, sprinkle it into a little bag.

Seven bags later the hole is filled.

We cross the plain, the bending grass,  
carry shovel, spade, book and bags.  
Back at the car, the unpaved road,

you kiss me for the first time.  
I feel like a seed stretching  
blindly, finally, through the brown dirt. ❖

## Books for the Journey



*Already Home: A Topography of Spirit and Place*, by Barbara Gates (Shambhala Publications, Inc., Boston 2003. ISBN 1570624909 hb; 159030165X pb). *Reviewed by Mary Ann Moore.*

Ocean View in Berkeley, California, is home to Barbara Gates, a freelance writer, editor and co-founder of the Buddhist journal, *Inquiring Mind*. Barbara spent seven years writing this memoir while observing everyday events in her family and on her block, exploring the natural and human history of her house and area and being in tune with the inner workings of her own mind. While writing and exploring, she found an interrelation among her observances and learned to truly inhabit her home by uncovering the many layers of its history.

Barbara wanted to be open to an identity that was more inclusive than her mortal self. To do that she needed to get to know her home place, including all of its darkness and blemishes. Her personal darkness included the diagnosis of breast cancer. Over the years, she said, she continued to find out not only about the terrain but about herself. She learned how self and terrain are inseparable as she was confronted by the impermanence of her body and an endangered world.

Buddhist mindfulness practice helped Barbara give names to new practices, such as “skunk practice,” when her dog Cleo encountered a skunk on their walk one day. “Skunk practice” became a new mindfulness practice that was inclusive. It didn’t leave anything out, no matter how dark or scary, “no matter how much it stinks.”

Through encounters with neighbors, research into the previous owners of her house and walks with her dog, Barbara also learned about the Ohlone Indian shellmound on the north bank of Strawberry Creek. Archaeologists have found that people lived on these mounds for thousands of years as far back as 3700 B.C.E. (Before the Common Era). Evidence shows the shellmounds were intentionally elevated villages with storage pits, earth ovens, and hearths on top of ancestral remains.

“Shellmound mind” became Barbara’s new experiment in her imagination. She asked herself, “Can I risk that ancient experience of home where categories such as household and church, garbage dump and cemetery—so separate in our current world—converge?” She began to see both garbage in the local dump and human remains in the cemetery as “stations in an immense recycling plant.” “I see the two juxtaposed in the vast shellmound home of our world—where life breaks down, feeds the gulls, the worms, the bacteria and feeds into new life.” Shellmound mind, Barbara said in an interview, “is a state of dynamic awareness, where dread, disgust, anger and other difficult emotions are compost for insights that enable us to live in place.”

The author set out to look deeply into herself and into her Ocean View neighborhood, where she discovered the whole cosmos. In doing so, she inspires others to step beyond the comfortable and take more risks. The risks can involve exploring new territory, including the garbage dump and the cemetery, observing the street outside your window, and entering new emotional terrain.

The title of the book comes from Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh who wrote about the whole cosmos being found in a piece of paper or in our bodies. He said, “...meditation means to look deeply, to touch deeply so we can realize we are already home.” *Already Home* is an invitation to cut doors in our fences, share dinners and silence with one another. The book also reminds us that as we sit comfortably in our warm homes, there are homeless people outside. As Barbara became intimate with the place where she lives, she said she “...settled more fully into a wide sense of myself [and] began to glimpse an inner sense of home.”

Barbara’s story truly inspired me. It is helping me connect to the land on which I now live in southwestern Ontario. *Already Home* is also a great tool for the “Writing Your Way Home” classes I teach. Visit her website at [www.barbaragates.com](http://www.barbaragates.com) to find out more about the author and her work. Her “Questions for Reflection” offer the reader an opportunity to reflect on her own home territory. ❖

*Over the years, mine has become an unexpectedly all-consuming quest involving daily walks or runs, friendships, research, and imagination. I am continuing to find out not only about the terrain, but about myself.*  
—Barbara Gates, in *Already Home*

*I follow the spirit of journals I've kept over many years, where everything—personal diaries, maps, shopping lists, seismic reports, and tide logs—is always kept in the same notebook. I explore the terrain where I live through myself, myself through the terrain.*  
—Barbara Gates

*What is beneath the pavement here? What is hidden deep in time? Drawing on my study, I try to imagine this area as it must have been before it was developed. I see broad tidal marshes, pickleweed, and cordgrass swamps where sandpipers and bitterns feed and breed.*  
—Barbara Gates



## True Words from Real Women

*In this section of each Story Circle Journal, edited by Mary Jo Doig, we publish members' contributions of poetry and prose. The theme of this issue's True Words section is "Decay and Regeneration."*

### Leaves of Friendship

**Susan Jordan**

Talent OR

The photograph of an old friend and me slipped out from a stack of papers on my desk. What I like best about the photograph is the spray of variegated fall maple leaves in the background.

I'll call the woman in the photograph Mrs. X because we no longer see each other. We used to work together, and our friendship grew out of commiseration about a difficult employer and a chaotic project. I liked her calm nature, and she liked my take-charge leadership. We both eventually left the company, and I moved about two hundred miles away.

Mrs. X and I kept in touch for a while. She called and said she needed a break, and asked if she could visit for a weekend in October. I said yes.

The visit with Mrs. X started off with a long walk through the country lanes near our property. A gentle breeze tugged at the bronze, red, and gold leaves on the trees and leaves fell to carpet our path. The sun warmed our backs, and we took off our gloves and hats.

Mrs. X set a good pace because the anger of her words pushed her feet hard against the pavement as we moved toward the top of a small butte. When we stopped, she was spent and I was numb. I didn't know how I could listen to another twenty-four hours of the verbal evisceration of her husband. As we continued the walk, I concentrated on the patterns of the leaves that crunched beneath our feet, while mumbling words of encouragement that were overrun by her exclamations of, "but you don't understand!"

But I did understand. I understood that this friendship needed to fall away from my life. Just like the changing leaves, the friendship had enjoyed a few bright moments, but the season was over.

Mrs. X called again last October and asked to visit. Her divorce was final and she needed to get away. I gently told her "no," and then I went out to rake leaves before planting my spring bulbs. ❖

### Finding a Reason for Hurricane Season

**Kathleen Baker**

Tampa FL

A bald patch of black dirt, in an otherwise manicured carpet of green grass, marks the place in our yard where the grand oak used to be. Charley bullied it. Frances and Jeanne pummeled it. When Ivan arrived, the once magnificent tree

listed toward the ground, its branches broken and stripped, the roots upended and exposed.

Charley, Frances, Jeanne, and Ivan were unwanted visitors during the summer of 2004. For six weeks, my life and the lives of my friends, family and co-workers were held hostage by the whims of Mother Nature. Week after week, we were either preparing for, being ravaged by, or cleaning up from one or another of four hurricanes.

It is unusual in this part of Florida to experience one major hurricane in a summer. Four storms were unprecedented. Those of us living in the projected paths of these raging weather systems were stunned with disbelief as one storm after another marched across the state. Months later the events of the summer blur together like a bad dream, leaving the question, "Did that really happen?"

The newspaper and TV images of the storm damage were dramatic. The destroyed homes and ravaged towns are only one part of the story. What the pictures don't show is the connection and determination of the people who lived in those damaged houses and worked in the destroyed businesses to replace and rebuild. Born out of the common experience of disaster, the positive results of this strong-willed resiliency have yet to be measured as the rebuilding process begins.

The patch of black dirt in my backyard holds both a reminder of what was and a promise of what will be. Spring, the ideal time to plant new seeds, will be here soon. We plan to replace the old oak, not with one but several trees. One lesson we learned from the terrifying events of the past hurricane season is that trees, like people, survive disasters much better not by standing alone but by being a part of the community. ❖

### Love, Ashes, and Life

**Marti Weisbrich**

Leavenworth WA

Slabs of bark and twisted, semi-frozen fir branches were the most romantic gifts that I ever received from my husband, for they saved my life. We were new transplants to Washington, having moved from Maui in December, 2003. On a drive around Lake Wenatchee in central Washington, we drove a little off the beaten path. When we attempted to drive back down a lightly covered snowy road, our car spun out over an unforeseen patch of black ice and went over a small ridge. Climbing out of the car window, we realized that we had to hike down the mountain. At 4:30 pm, it was fast getting dark and not a car was in sight. We hiked and hiked, a little ill-prepared but having the foresight to be wearing ski vests, hats,

and gloves although I had on regular shoes, not boots.

After five hours, I simply couldn't go any further and wanted to go to sleep. My husband of 34 years, who had joked and prodded me along over the five hours, realized that I was simply too tired to continue. He found a clear spot alongside the road and proceeded to build a fire with twigs, fallen branches, pine needles, and anything else he could get his hands on.

I lay by the side of the road and he covered me with slabs of bark and fir branches. I must have dozed off for when I awoke, it was morning. I could still smell the wonderful fire smoke and saw my husband moving about, adding bits and pieces to the fire to keep it going. He had stayed up all night, keeping me alive with the fire.

From the decayed bits in a forest, I was regenerated with nature's generous offerings and the remarkable love and dedication of my husband. Finally awake, I helped my husband put out the miraculous fire and we proceeded down the road for two more miles, at last finding sanctuary and help at a gravel-and-sand quarry. ❖

### **Mulch for New Beginnings**

**Nathalie Sorrell**

Austin TX

In 2000, I began working with women in Lockhart Prison, teaching them to tell their stories. I started for one primary reason: to escape my guilt for being a "have" in a "have-not" world.

At age 52, a passionate, unashamed church lady, I had been a happy retreat leader and Bible teacher ministering to other church ladies for fifteen years but the boundaries of my comfort zone contained primarily people like *me!* Middle-class American white women, educated, spiritually charged, addicted to nothing more lethal than personal growth seminars, mystery novels, organizational and parenting books.

Outside my comfort zone there were people I passed every day at home in Austin, traveling on vacation, or while accompanying my husband to conferences. I avoided seeing them holding hand-lettered signs by the curbs, sitting with open hats, guitar cases, or tin cans against buildings in San Francisco or New York, standing in line outside blood donor centers or soup kitchens, or simply waiting—silent, weary faces glimpsed peripherally at bus stops.

My assignment at Lockhart was to teach public speaking skills to women in prison. Our plan was to bring in juveniles on probation to hear them tell their stories. We advertised with hand-crayoned posters: TELL YOUR STORY! Help someone NOT follow in your footsteps.

The women showed up, at first cautiously, and participated eagerly. For the past five years now, we have had waiting lists for the class they renamed "Talk to Me."

What is it about? In short, and in the language many of them speak, "it's about recycling shit from the past into fertilizer for a future." The women in my educated circles might say it's about decay and regeneration.

These wounded women speak unspeakable secrets from their past and tell how they led to destructive, self-defeating choices, in hopes that someone hearing might make a healthier choice.

Now, this level of truth telling has regenerated me, and I'm bilingual—I can speak biblical language and I can speak prison jargon. You might say my own life stories have been born again, for a useful purpose. ❖

### **Grandmother Garner**

**Louann O'Bannion**

Austin TX

Grandmother Garner could not stand for cows to be cold in the winter. She would get restless and pace around the kitchen, periodically looking out the window in hopes that the weather was better or that the cows had found shelter under the trees. In her mind, no animal on the farm should be without anything. When the dogs were fed, she would stand with a stick to shake at the larger dogs until the smallest one could eat its fill.

Her heart was so good it did not seem right that she should ever die. Someone should have been shaking a stick at mean old Death when it came for her, but that could not be.

After her funeral many of her things were packed up and brought to our house: an antique buffet, chairs, and an old rusty colander with a wooden pestle. Everything seemed utilitarian and humble—but old, like she had become.

My favorite item was an old quilt Grandmother probably had made when she lived in a dug-out. The backing was almost as coarse as burlap and the stitches were long and uneven. The fabric was threadbare in spots. It couldn't last long, so I packed it away. We showed all these things to our sons and told them her stories.

Our sons learned to love her, and their other grandparents, through these stories and quilts and antiques. It did not surprise me a few months ago when my older son (only two when Grandmother died but now thirty) called and said, "Guess what, Mom. I'm making Garrett a quilt out of our blue-jeans. Can you tell me how to put the binding on?"

I thought of Grandmother Garner making that quilt from old shirts. Now my son is making his son a quilt. And that little boy, who slightly resembles his great-great-grandmother, loves animals as she did. He has six horses, five dogs, and three cats at his place, and they are all very well cared for—especially in winter.

Grandmother Garner would be pleased. ❖

### **Circle of Days**

**grace Forrest-Maestas**

Polvadera NM

Decay. Regeneration. The circle revolves. It is everywhere—plans achieved or abandoned, phases of our lives, and even in gardens. All things begin and end, one day and one night at a time.

*(Continued on page 14)*

## More True Words . . .

(Continued from page 13)

Waking from sleep I fumble to the kitchen, turn on the lamp, set the kettle to boil and the match to the kindling in the wood stove. Turn off the lamp and sit in the softness of pre-dawn dark to wait for the hiss and crackle that will signal the beginning of the ritual of regeneration.

Coffee in cup, warmth from the fire, I switch on the lamp and begin to write—fragments of dream, hopes and fears, images of cloth and feather, bead and string, the glimpse of a face that will be the next “doll figure” wanting to appear, small drawings, a word or two that echoes through the mind asking to be remembered—until it’s all there.

Fold a new page in half. On the first side... what “needs” to be done:

- Clean dog bowls
- Grocery list
- Work
- Post office/money order
- Copy paper
- Water bill
- Bank and feed store

Turn to the second side, white and empty... what “wants” to be done:

- Find wire for armature of new figure
- Find fabric with “night” design
- Walk ditch bank, forage salt-cedar twigs
- Turn compost
- Re-tie gourds to fence that Wind has scattered

Sun rises; pale light is splayed across the page. The day begins and, with folded paper on the passenger seat of the pick-up, I set out.

Sun sets, casting a thick amber glow. Fire crackles, dishes washed and dogs fed. The folded paper is back on the kitchen table. On the first half, all accomplished; on the second, only half.

Tomorrow I’ll begin again. ❖

### The Redemptive Power of Friendship

Duffie Bart  
Santa Barbara CA

Without realizing it until recently, I have lived in fear much of my life. I was afraid to say what I thought and felt, afraid to do what I believed to be right. My courage went underground and, like a neglected muscle, a part of me gradually weakened and decayed.

And so when my new husband said he had no interest in continuing a relationship with my dear friend, Katie, whom I’d known since I was fourteen, I said nothing; without explanation, I disappeared from her life.

For many of my married years, I was happy. My husband was a successful man in his profession and I respected him. I was proud to be his wife, proud of the affluent life I had married into.

My two daughters were born. I had always wanted to raise two children and my husband, absorbed in his work, left me to enjoy my motherhood. From time to time, I thought of my friend though I tried hard not to. The years passed, my daughters became teenagers, and the day dawned when I had to face the fact that my marriage had disintegrated.

After much ambivalence, I filed for divorce. And as I did so, I thought of Katie and did not push her away. My heart felt heavier than I could bear but I did not hesitate: I picked up the phone.

Miraculously, she answered.

“Katie,” I started, my voice wavering, the tears beginning. I could not say more. After a moment’s silence, I heard her soft and gentle reply, “It’s okay... really, it’s okay.”

I still cry as I now remember this phone call. We telephone or e-mail every day now as we did from the first day we met, though email did not exist in our youth. And, with every breath I take, I feel the part of me that became strong again—thanks to the kindness of my lifelong friend, Katie. ❖

### Decay and Regeneration: Sail Frog

Diane James  
Marlin TX

While it is true that one must die to live, the paradox of decay and regeneration brings to mind the story of a frog that my daughter, Megan, then four years old, found while we were at the park.

Afterward we piled into the car and headed for McDonald’s. Unbeknownst to me, the baby frog had joined the family.

I noticed Megan was having trouble with her seatbelt. Her little hands were occupied with her new companion. They don’t serve frogs in Mickey D’s, so she opted to stay in the car with her froggie because he would get loose if she left him.

That didn’t work for me, so I located an empty Big Gulp cup, and we put froggie in the cup with holes in the top for safekeeping.

When we returned to the car, Megan was crushed to find the cup tipped over and the lid off. Froggie was gone! Frantically she searched the car, sobbing in anguish.

The following week at the car wash we found froggie under one of the floor mats. He was now a “sail frog,” a thin leathery shape.

“My frog,” Megan yelled. I told her to discard the decayed amphibian in the trash bin. She fussed all the way to the bin, and on the way home, told stories of the frog as if it had lived with us her whole life.

The next day, I was checking pockets as I put clothes into the washer and, to my surprise, pulled out the sail frog from Megan’s pants. Just as I tossed it into the trash can, Megan walked into the room and hollered, “My frog!” She dove head first into the can and came out with her froggie.

We finally put her froggie in her scrapbook for complete regeneration. ❖

**The Mighty Oak**

**Sharon Blumberg**  
Munster IN

I once read that when a tree is threatened by elements such as fire or drought, it twists beneath its bark to reinforce and make itself stronger.

About thirteen years ago, after a few years of teaching under my bough, and after being yanked from freedom's womb, I returned to the world of teaching. Before that I was home for eight years raising two fine children. Little did I realize the eye-opener I was in for! I was to teach junior high Spanish and language arts.

After my first evaluation by the principal nine weeks into the school year, in October, I learned how poorly behaved my classes were. In addition, I lacked the proper training and confidence to adequately serve my students. To say the least, I was unorganized, resulting in a disheveled-looking desk, with papers strewn over it, this way and that.

In February, after a number of remediation steps failed to bandage my sinking ship of classes, the principal told me that I would not be returning the following year. Why this came as a shock, I will never know. I greatly mourned this loss at the time.

The next few years that followed, I worked hard to build up my confidence. I did this by going on what seemed like endless teaching position interviews as I substitute taught.

After much hard labor, I gave birth to my present junior-high Spanish position of the last ten years. However, with my reinforced strength, I hope to still overcome greater challenges. I will do this as I weather the elements as a mighty oak. ❖

**Harsh Finale**

**Marcy R. Wooldridge**  
Lafayette IN

Yes the stench is awful, but how can I *not* love her? How can I not tolerate it when both of my hands and even my mouth recoil at touch and smell? My senses reel, and yet as she reaches out to beg for a hug or kiss, how can I refuse?

My mouth barely brushes her cheek while avoiding her lips. My arms gently caress her thin, stooped shoulders.

The odor of decay hovers in her room like a moldy sheet. She hasn't had her morning bath. The nurses avoid her room while the single aide has far too many to bathe and dress. Her bowels have moved and I force myself to breathe through my mouth, inhaling the bitterness of reality.

A newborn is quickly cleaned, wrapped in a soft warm blanket and placed in waiting arms. That is a blessed event. So how is it that old age and its soiling is too often tended with such cold neglect.

For years, Gladys sacrificed her own health to care for others. Delicious smells from her kitchen, Avon-scented bath powder and line-dried clothing, had once permeated her home. I sit by her bedside knowing this final odor will linger as part of my memory of my mother-in-law. The slow deterioration of her body, the stale breath of unwashed dentures, her fouled "Depends" have tarnished those sweeter memories.

In the early years of my marriage, this woman was intimidating, but I have learned so much from her. Today I sit filled with love and respect for her.

Oh God, help me cling to those more fragrant memories with a kinder, more generous heart. ❖

*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:

**Prisons**—June 2005 (due April 15)  
**School Days**—September 2005 (due July 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.

For our June '05 prompt, True Words pages editor Mary Jo Doig says: "Prison bars can be literal or metaphorical. Consider a time or situation that caused you to feel or be imprisoned. How did you get beyond your prison bars? In what way did the experience change you?"

## More True Words . . .

### Yellow Leaves Carolyn Vanderslice Portland OR

I walk across the parking lot  
under a gray sky,  
keys poised as I near the car.

Whispers, small rustlings,  
soft susurrations surround me.  
A yellow leaf lands at my feet,  
then another and another.

The sun shines through the clouds,  
just for a moment,  
and lights up the leaves.

As if the world were waiting for a signal,  
a breeze sighs by and stirs the leaves,  
and the tree lets them go.

They drift gently down  
into a golden ring around the roots.  
Two land on my shoulder.

Perhaps the tree is giving me a gift,  
a bright memory to warm me  
in the coming winter rains. ❖

### Wind-Borne Smiles Carolyn Blankenship Austin TX

How I love this wild wind! Colored leaves skittering across the pavement, tumbling through the thin sunlight. It makes me smile, makes me grin—you know, that “I’m-gonna-do-something-irresponsible,” teeth-baring-cheek-lifting-lip-splitting grin that lets the wind pour down your throat and makes your blood dance through your veins, flatly forgetting that it pulses through a body that is no longer young.

Oh, I could run back then! Run with the wild wind, feet flying over dead leaves and dried grass, while that wind tossed my hair and skirts about me and blew flirtatiously in my ear, “Faster, run faster!”

“Aren’t you freezing?” my concerned mother would inquire when I finally let myself be blown in the door. “Your feet are like blocks of ice!” She would put warm hands to my cold red cheeks and ears, while I breathed in the smell of the fresh wind in my clothes and hair and replied, “It feels good! I love it out there!”

Now my feet are like blocks of ice from November through March, and I feel it. I couldn’t run a block if I were being chased by demons from hell. But I tilt my head to the

bare-limbed trees and push my face into the chilly wind. My heart races across the neighboring lawns with the crackling leaves to points west and beyond, and that irresponsible grin is reborn amid my wrinkles. ❖

### The ‘D’ Word Transformed Author’s name withheld

Decay signifies a shift in relationship—like the elm’s leaves detaching from the tree to mold upon the ground. Recently my 16-year-old marriage ended. My hope of renewed love plummeted the day I overheard my husband speaking in a lover’s whisper to his 17-year-old niece, after I’d discovered papers for her abortion in his car and noticed that three-quarters of his cell phone calls were to her, many during the wee morning hours when the girl’s mother, my husband’s sister, was working graveyard. That day I finally woke up to realize that my husband chose to sleep on the couch not to watch late night T.V. but to facilitate late night rendezvous with his unsupervised niece. Like the biblical Saul, the scales fell from my eyes.

I, the faithful wife, had stood by my husband through six months of marriage counseling during which time he’d denied his sister’s accusations of seducing her daughter. And I’d believed him. I’d believed him and I’d loved him until I saw with my own eyes and heard with my own ears. When I discovered a tape of a secret trip he took with her and found her earring in my bed, then the months of betrayal and deceit hit me like the stench of rotting leaves. The asphyxiating weight of emotional abandonment closed around me. I felt I would never be loved again. I felt that I had nothing left to live for, except my daughters, who needed my love and protection. For them, for myself, I petitioned for divorce.

On New Year’s Day, a rainbow arced in full spectrum across the wintry sky and reminded me of the promise of spring. Though I am steeped in grief, the constant flow of the seasons comforts me. Even in the midst of harsh winter storms, mud slides, and tsunamis, I can trust in the hidden moistness of a composting earth and know that a transformation is taking place, giving birth to something new. ❖

### Going On Tracy Pace\* Cypress TX

It seemed much easier, when it was harder. The twins would wake me every two hours during the night as babies, then randomly for another twenty years. We couldn’t afford to heat the house which was falling down around us. Or to get the cats spayed, so they regularly presented us with kittens. I would knock on doors around the neighborhood to find them homes, and made several good friends that way. We still have one cat, a grand old tom called George, which Jen took with her to university. He’s the last of a long line and I’ve often thought wistfully, *no more kittens...*

There will be more babies though. Tom, my eldest by 45 minutes, dropped by yesterday to announce his girlfriend is pregnant, that they're delighted, and ready to bring forward their wedding. I had no idea they were planning a wedding and now sit surrounded by the brochures and magazines which Angie's mother, who clearly did, brought round earlier.

"Of course, they'll live with us," she told me happily, excited. "The empty nest never appealed to me..." this last with a glance at papers strewn around my sun-room office.

We built the sun-room when Tom and Jen were small. Here I read to them, watched them play, supervised their homework. It's where Ted and I sat in the evenings, peaceably watching dusk fall. A million memories are in this room. Soon after the kids left, my husband died and I would sit here for hours, numb and silent, reminiscing, trying to find my way through the dark narrow tunnel of present back into the past. When the depression finally lifted, two springs had gone by unnoted.

The sun is setting now, as I approach the desk and pick up my pen. I'm glad the kids are planning the future with their own struggles, their own dreams. So am I. The memories they helped create are what I write about. I found my way back to the past... and it became my future.

Tomorrow I'll start knitting for the baby and looking for a kitten. ❖

*This story was told to Tracy Pace by a friend—Ed.*

### Joy in the Morning

Susan Mason  
Buchanan VA

Decay. It begins at the moment of regeneration: the cycle of all life. Every morning I anticipate a moment of regeneration, the best part of the day. From my window I look onto a hillside, the actual point of the sun's origin hidden. I see only the line of trees: evergreen, center-front, and hardwoods—locust, oak and maple—all with bare branches like a fringe of black lace against the pinkening sky, the effects of the sun reflected in the rosy cirrus clouds drifting above.

Today the window dressing begins with a demure pink line along the lacy edge, crescendos like a Brahms movement then slips back, fading into a pastel blue at the height of my window. This is my daily reminder of the brevity and beauty of life.

Life is full of the symbolism of decay and regeneration. My father died in the evening, just before Easter. My first grandchild was born in the morning, just after Christmas. I witnessed neither event although I was blessed to share a reading from my father's Bible at his funeral, and equally fortunate to cradle Sophie in my arms shortly after her birth.

I remember my father at the periphery of family gatherings, observing but not participating. I remember him with his morning coffee, the lit end of his cigarette rising and

falling in the dark. I remember his coming to my defense in the fourth grade when I was wrongly accused of some now-faded infraction and assigned a "task" as penance. I remember his expertise as a pilot with my junior-high assignment on flight. His actions and his work ethic expressed a love I did not comprehend as a child.

His great-granddaughter is a beautiful little girl he never knew. I started a "Book of Letters for Sophie" before her birth; she'll have a piece of her "Graham" when I'm long gone. Together, we enjoy reading, playing horses, and sleepovers. We delighted in a sleepover on the eve of her fourth birthday.

Thursday morning, grace illuminated the best part of the day when Sophie eagerly whispered, "Graham? Am I four?"

Regeneration. ❖

### S.A.D. No More

Mahani Zubedy  
Austin TX

Another no-sun day and I have not ordered the full-spectrum light that will cure my now named affliction—Seasonal Affective Disorder. I shine the cheap 25-watt table lamp onto my face in lieu of the \$250 variety. Light surely reached my retina for already I can strike three things off my to-do list and even my period has come.

Let there be light I say. Shine in and melt the calcium clogging my muscles. Shine and spread like honey lubricating my joints.

Now I know why people move to Florida. I wake up bent, my arms hang as if shortened, my feet splayed as I waddle to the kitchen, chin first. What do shoulders relaxed with the chest cage opened feel like? My shoulders are turned in, my chest pushed back, fingers close to my chest curve like I'm holding invisible poles. I'm holding on to warmth.

Move, I tell myself, make heat. Pick up the jazz shoes, jacket, and dance bag Alia left—a trail from the front door to the middle of the living room where she drops all as if to say: this is as far as I'll carry.

Move, put away the dishes, stack yesterday's in the dishwasher, use the long-handle scrub to rid get of rotten food so I don't have contact with ice-cold water. Cold—like news on the radio in November.

Wipe the counter tops using big circles. Stretch. Breathe. Sweep floor with short, dirt-gathering strokes. Mop. Stretch. Breathe.

I choose movement (and a clean kitchen). I choose making heat. I choose Cubanismo. I choose Mambo. Thaw shoulders, thaw. ❖

---

*Just don't give up trying to do what you really want to do. Where there is love and inspiration,*

*I don't think you can go wrong.*

—Ella Fitzgerald, Jazz singer (1917–1996)

## More True Words . . .

### The Gift of Song

**Illia Thompson**  
Carmel Valley CA

The women who taught me little, now allow me to learn much. Silences then are not necessarily silences now.

As I hungrily ask my mother for wisdom, or absorb these gifts from her presence, I know that she knew not earlier the language to speak which I needed. Her mother barely spoke at all except in words held distant and surrounded by ice, and her mother's mother died young. No words to her daughter from the grave.

Yet I, pioneer woman, speak the tongue, somewhat tentatively, of my daughter and my granddaughter and we learn and play with this common language. I talk of unicorns and angels and anger and fear and all else that arrives to be spoken. Slowly, shyness dissolves.

The frozen, silent chain that trapped women in my family forever backward in time, today finds each link separated. The links pile, neatly stacked like wood, obsolete except as playgrounds for small woodland creatures, such as field mice or rabbits, seeking protection. Thus entrapment transforms into a place of nourishment and safety, having turned silence into voice into song which I now present to my expanding family of sisters—those who become like family as we talk and find our songs. ❖

### Flashes of Inspiration

**Renee Cassese**  
Hicksville NY

I've taken to keeping the bedroom window open at night, even when the temps are down in the teens. My flannel pajamas are packed away and I no longer sleep beneath a down comforter. Menopause has hit and soy tablets now stand beside my daily vitamins. As I watch wrinkles deepen and every part of my body sag, I think about things I once did with ease and grace. Once I ran down the stairs; now I descend each step carefully and deliberately. Once my jeans skimmed over a flat stomach; now the zipper strains with each breath I take. I have to walk twice as far and twice as fast to lose half as many pounds.

Isn't menopause wonderful? Well, yes it is.

I feel heat rise and radiate from my belly even when the air is cool. I feel my face and throat turn red as though I'm caught in an embarrassing moment. The skin beneath my breasts is constantly damp with sweat, because when a woman enters menopause she sweats rather than perspires. But good things are happening too.

Within the heat that swamps my body lies a wave of creative energy that I ride upon as it fills me with inspiration—not only for writing, which I have always had, but for new creative endeavors. I always liked art but never

pursued it. Now I follow the inspiration like a lost puppy. I crave it. It started with scrap booking, spread to artistic collage, altered books, greeting cards, and Artist Trading Cards.

I have stockpiled every type of art magazine that fits my present media and filled my writing room to the walls with art supplies. Creativity bubbles and brews and I cannot escape, nor do I want to. I am thrilled by this energy and amazed at what I have begun to create, not only in my projects but also within myself. I am content with myself and if I must endure a few hot flashes in order to have this wellspring of energy, then so be it. And for that I am grateful. ❖

### Decay and Regeneration

**Lucy Ann Albert**  
La Mesa CA

When I was young I thought there was no higher calling than learning and no greater profession than teaching. So when I married a college professor I actually thought I had my life arranged to perfection. He was a teacher, I became a mother, and we were each totally but separately involved in our life's work.

I nurtured, loved, and raised our three children, and was proud of the adults they became. When they left to build their own lives, I turned to my husband. When he retired, he didn't turn to me.

He continued to write, research, and collect books. I wanted to explore the world, travel, make new friends. We each dug further into our separate worlds in which we had developed different values, tastes, and interests.

There came a void, an emptiness between us. And in that emptiness grew resentment and anger that our relationship was no more. Or had it ever been? Had our children filled that vacuum? Or had we changed?

I entered his world of research, his writing, his book collection. But the void remained. Our togetherness was only about his writing, our communication just a paper one. The gulf expanded, squeezing out my identity. Petty things loomed large; we argued about writing, filing, sentences. Our home was inundated by his collection of books, and I was smothered by the sterile white paper and the stiff black words. I was suffocated without life, friends, and the outside world.

I left him.

It was difficult to pack; I could hardly lift my suitcase. The door of the car was heavy to open. It took all my energy to shift into gear. But after that first tap on the accelerator, as I drove forward, my body relaxed, my chest lifted, and my shoulders felt like fifty pound weights had been removed. I breathed deeply and inhaled life again. I was free.

It may be contrary to the norm to experience the end of a thirty-year marriage as decay, and divorce as regeneration. But for me, that's the way it was. ❖

*A reader tells her story*

## *Ground Zero, One Year Later*

*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 moving story, **Shawn Alladio** bears witness to history at the one-year memorial service to the victims of the terrorist attack in New York on September 11, 2001.*

The wind was eerie and powerful—it stirred your soul. No matter how much you wanted to hide, the wind exposed everything. Strong gusts ripped away all the media tents that were set up for the hungry news hounds to capture the silent pain and grief of the families. The wind played with everyone, made people uncomfortable—the dirt washed over our hair, into our eyes, our mouth, and our ears. Nothing escaped the coating. The wind chill was powerful—it pushed us and made us want to hide. It felt as if all the thousands of lost souls were riding those winds, wrapping themselves around the spectators, the grieving families, the orphaned children, the widows, the survivors. There was anger in the air, and the wind would not let us forget. We were miserable in our exposure. The dirt did not stay deep down there at the bottom—it escaped, it rose and settled out of that pit of despair. The photos were ripped, the flowers dried out, the memorials left by loved ones caught air and flew away into the spiraling, unseen dust devils, rising up and out of the Pit. And this wind made everyone much quieter—the tears fell with no sounds, no sobbing; just silent falling, rolling down, unchecked; it didn't matter.

My daughter Kyla and I start our walk down the ramp that is the way out and the way in. This is where the trucks, the workers, the firemen, the police, the volunteers, everyone walked or drove down to remove the final remnants of two 100-plus story structures of metal, glass, and building materials, and bits and pieces of what once were living beings. Their families are coming here, some of them for the first and last time. I turn to look at the honor guard, people from all the services, in uniform, lining both sides of the ramp. I feel enormous respect as I descend, feeling weak, vulnerable, and utterly overcome with the emotion of this day.

The families move about in slow motion, absorbing every detail of crunched rock and dirt piles. Time stands still and thoughts chase back to that dark day. Groups of families huddle in clumps, collapsing, sobbing, looking nowhere in particular, a private ceremony with no body to release. Many leave photos, letters, mementos on the ground. They take piles of stones to hold the memory pages against the trickster wind. And then other people walk over the remains and the evidence is trampled.

Children walk by in their fathers’ uniforms, oversized and baggy, realizing something is happening but not quite sure—a whole year has passed now. Mothers walk by holding above

their head a photo of a face that is frozen in a beautiful smile, looking for a media camera to capture the face, to see who they were, who they are, who they lost—to remember; for everyone to remember. A brother begins the walk into the pit. He holds an American flag above his head, his arm high. He says nothing; his mouth and jaw are fixed. There is rage, seething rage showing. Protesting to everyone all over the world the injustice, he parades in front of the cameras. For two hours, he holds the American flag above his head. He is one of the last people to leave the pit. He says nothing; he never puts his eyes down; he never casts his head low; he holds his head high, looking fierce at everyone.

A secret service officer approaches me and asks me if it would be alright if a woman came and spoke to me. She had lost her husband. She seems fragile and in so much pain. How can she manage this day? We had spoken several times before. The last time I saw her, as she was being tenderly escorted away, she turned back, touched my arm, looked at me, smiled, turned, and slowly, defeated in grief, moved away like an old woman. This time, I say nothing; just cry. That is all.

I look down when I walk, avoiding the memorials. I step over a green golf ball and realize I know whom that’s for. A photographer named Joe McNally had given me a copy of his book, *Faces at Ground Zero*. Today I recognize so many families and lost ones in the Pit from seeing them in his book, and here is the golf ball I saw in its pages. I feel connected to this woman who perished. I had seen the picture of the grandmother holding her grandson. This is Liam’s grandma!

We are standing at the top of the ramp. The wind has not subsided. Massive crowds line the east-side viewing platform. The sounds of the streets return. I turn to film the last view I will ever have of Ground Zero. Familiar faces pass the lens. I want to film for three minutes in silence as the firemen, lifesavers, families, volunteers slowly and heavily walk up the ramp and out for the last time. The video is a moving exposure of the grief of a nation, a family, and the world, rolling moments of pain and release.

A man in a yellow shirt, holding the hand of his little girl on his left and his little boy on his right, is taking very heavy, laborious steps towards my camera. People part and they appear—their presence alarms me. I move out of their way. The father doesn’t even notice me. He is somewhere else. The family slowly passes by. I finish filming and turn. He is standing behind me, looking back towards the sky and down into the deep recess. Tears are streaming down his face and the children’s. They stand there, hopeless, helpless, shoulders heavy, their bodies are collapsed, their faces etched in a terrible sadness. This was a final farewell. ❖

---

As a trainer for emergency services throughout the country, **Shawn Alladio** knew many of the emergency response victims and their families personally. Shawn lives in California.

*Workshop registration*

# *LifeLines Lifewriting Retreat*

**What is the LifeLines life-writing retreat?**

The retreat is a two-day SCN event for those seeking to deepen their lifewriting, to be held April 8–10 at the Festival Hill campus in Round Top, Texas, about an hour east of Austin. The facilitator for the weekend is acclaimed writer, Maureen Murdock, whose books *The Heroine's Journey* and *Unreliable Truth: On Memoir and Memory* have been an inspiration to thousands of women.

**How can I pay?**

Registration fees are \$325 for SCN members and \$350 for non-members. (Non-members who join SCN before the end of the last session on Sunday will have a portion of their registration fees credited towards their membership.)

You can pay online (electronic funds transfer or credit card) or by mailing a check to the SCN PO Box number below.

**Register online at:**

[www.storycircle.org/LifeLines/frmregister.shtml](http://www.storycircle.org/LifeLines/frmregister.shtml)

**Mail checks to:** Story Circle Network, P.O. Box 500127, Austin, TX 78750-0127.

**What is included in my registration fees?**

Your registration includes:

1. Five workshop sessions (Friday evening; Saturday morning, afternoon, and evening; Sunday morning)
2. Meals: Friday dinner; Saturday breakfast, lunch, and

dinner; Sunday breakfast

3. Snacks and drinks during breaks
4. Two nights stay in double-occupancy accommodations (two twin beds in each room) in the Artist's Residence building. Check-in time is 4 p.m. on Friday; check-out time is noon on Sunday.

**What is the refund policy?**

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

**Will SCN provide transportation?**

For those flying to the workshop, we will not provide transportation to/from the airport. However, we will serve as a go-between among those needing transportation. Let us know your transportation needs when you register.

**Questions?**

Contact us via email: [storycircle@storycircle.org](mailto:storycircle@storycircle.org) or phone: 512-454-9833

**MORE INFORMATION AT:**

[www.storycircle.org/LifeLines/](http://www.storycircle.org/LifeLines/)



## *LifeLines Retreat Registration*

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_

Phone numbers \_\_\_\_\_

Email Address \_\_\_\_\_

I am enclosing \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Check here to request vegetarian lunch/dinners

Mail your check to:  
Story Circle Network,  
PO Box 500127,  
Austin TX 78750-0127  
or use your credit card at  
[www.storycircle.org/  
LifeLines](http://www.storycircle.org/LifeLines)

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

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

*Snapshots from afar*

## *Glimpses of Yemen*

*Khadijah Lacina shares a collection of word portraits of Yemen, her home for the last two years.*

The world here is crisper somehow, life clearer, each breath a breath of eons.

I remember my first glimpses of Yemen, riding through the early morning streets of Sana'a crammed into the back of a falling-apart van with my husband, five children, three Yemenis and all that we owned in the world. Dog packs roamed the streets, and every so often we were stopped by contingents of soldiers who would lean in the driver's side window and shine their flashlights over all of us, looking for guns. I remember turning this over in my mind...was this a good thing or a bad thing, that they had these checkpoints and searches? I finally decided on good, and felt a bit calmer. Clearly life here was different than life in little Liberty, New York; I simply had to be ready to taste it and see.

The Old City is a warren, a honeycomb of narrow, unpaved streets, sometimes not even wide enough for two to walk abreast, that twist and turn through a maze of four- and five-story, narrow, clay-brick houses. It is not easy to get lost, though; you know that eventually you will end up at one of the *babs*, or gates, in the city wall and be able to get your bearings. The largest of these is Bab Al Yemen, full of shops selling everything from models of Sana'an houses to bug killer. Men sit cross-legged on mats, leaning against the cool walls, their wares spread out before them, calling prices to you as you brush by them. They sift through their piles of raisins and nuts and create fantasy castles and mountains with henna, built up and swept away with a flick of their hands, temporary tributes to the history and reality of Yemen.

As you ride out into the country, you see the truth on which they base their henna sculptures. You see where the character of the Yemenis is rooted—in these high, craggy sepia creations, filled with pockets of fertility and lush greenness. Their kindness is blended with the acceptance of an often-harsh reality; the skies mirror their generosity and largeness of spirit. As the mountains flow into desert or plain and eventually into the sea, each moment of life here is a portrait, a snapshot, a breath to be taken and savored.

Snapshot: Minutes after giving birth in the women's hospital, I lie in a room with two other new mothers, my new baby boy wrapped in my arms. The room is a swirl of color and darkness, each of my roommates tended by her mother and at least one other relative, some in the traditional blue, red and yellow cloaks, others wrapped in the more modern all black. I am alone, and the women immediately fasten on that

fact, ignoring that I am American, that my Arabic is primitive, at best. A woman should have her mother with her when she has a baby; it is a simple fact. They shower me with attention, share their food and drink, and help me with the baby. As they settle down on the floor to rest, talking and laughing and celebrating life old and new, I feel accepted and loved.

Snapshot: A cold winter night in the village, away from electrical lights and the incessant beeping of big city cars. I had forgotten what country sky was like, forgotten the wonder of looking up and being drawn into a landscape of otherworldly beauty. My husband tells me, "Just look at that sky, those stars, Khadijah," and I do, and am uplifted into their midst, buoyed up by their sheer numbers. The falling stars rain around us, each finding its target, signs of the power of the One who created us and placed us in this place, at this moment, and gave us the gift of this wonderful, wide, fire-filled sky to bathe in.

Snapshot: The water pump broken, daily water must be pulled up from the well under the building. The first thing you hear is the children, running through the entryway, laughing, singing, talking in their high, sing-song voices. Then the women come, heralded by the closing of the doors and the clanging of buckets for water drawing. The heavy lid of the well is removed as the older sisters sit down along the wall and pull their face veils down. One of the younger women starts the water gathering, dropping a bucket down at the end of a rope and pulling it up when it is full. She then spills

this water into the cleaned ghee containers they use for storage. As the water gatherer gets into the rhythm of the work, she is engaged in conversation with the other women. They discuss children, neighbors, family, what they have been studying—everything but the task of water gathering that they are engaged in. They tease and joke and laugh as they each take their turn gathering water. Sometimes one of the younger women will simply gather it for everyone, if the discussion is lively enough. When everything is full, the women pull their cloaks around them, put their containers on their heads, and head back to their homes—until the next time comes to gather the water.

Snapshot: An email telling me of the death of my sister, words on a flat screen refuse to take on full meaning without a voice to go with them. I flee to our rooftop sanctuary and lean out over the edge, looking for reality. I see houses built as they have been built for hundreds of years. I see a young girl in a multi-hued traditional dress, using her stick to guide her goats down the dirt road to graze. Mountains reach up into the sky, villages growing out of their sides like parts of their rocky selves. The sound of distant thunder, the smell of impending rain, the rebirth of ages, and I am whole again. ❖

---

*They create  
fantasy castles  
and mountains  
with henna,...  
temporary tributes  
to the history and  
reality of Yemen.*

---



---

**Khadijah Lacina** is a homeschooling mother, an herbalist, student, and translator, and she loves working in many different textile arts, in addition to writing.

*Kitchen table stories**In My Mother's Kitchen*

**Robin Edgar** remembers a special place in her mother's kitchen and a sweet bread her mother made that is still a family favorite.

My mother's kitchen may have been tiny but, as far as she was concerned, it was just the right size. She used to say, "I can clean the floor with two swipes of the mop." Everyday, at four o'clock, she would set aside her dressmaking chores and whip up the most delicious family meals with barely enough room to turn around in that cozy space.

As a child, I would position myself in a chair by the doorway with my feet propped up on the white enamel gas stove to watch. As she chopped, measured, and stirred, we passed the time, talking about everything from Grandma's bootleg wine that she made in the bathtub to what I wanted to be when I grew up. Whenever she lifted the lid from one of the pots, the aroma of homemade chicken soup or pot roast swirled to the ceiling, and the casement windows, wound tightly shut against the winter gray, would fog.

It felt so warm and safe in my special place by the kitchen door. I have so many kitchen memories that remind me of my mother and her love.

Her mandel bread, for instance, was my favorite treat as a child. Even after I left home, she always had a fresh batch waiting for me whenever I came back to visit. When she moved to Florida, she discovered that the bottom of an old aluminum ice-cube tray was just the right size to bake this semi-sweet Russian pastry in her toaster oven, so she didn't have to turn on the big oven and heat up her whole kitchen. When my children marry, I plan on giving them their own set of old aluminum ice-cube trays, along with their grandmother's recipe, so they can carry on her tradition of love and good eating.

So many smells, sights, sounds, and happy stories bring back memories of my mother's kitchen. The other day, I was in an antiques store when my gaze fell on an object whose shape was so familiar that I instinctively reached over to pull its black plastic knob. It was a white enamel breadbox and the mere sound of the door creaking open filled my thoughts with the contents of the breadbox that sat on top of the refrigerator in my mother's kitchen. The aroma of her baked-from-scratch chocolate cake (without the icing because there was enough sugar in it already) came to me as if it were sitting right there in its usual place.

On Saturday afternoons, my mother would haul out the old Mixmaster to make her wondrous cakes. I loved to watch as she deftly blended the ingredients, one by one, into the mixing bowl. With a spatula in one hand, she scraped the sides

of the turning vessel, while the other hand nudged the bowl to turn a little faster. Hypnotized by the motion of the creamy mixture swirling toward the center, I waited patiently for her to turn off the switch, eject the beaters, and tap them on the side of the bowl before handing them to me to lick. She also mastered the art of gently folding fluffy mounds of egg white into a sponge cake batter so that the finished product would rise to incredibly edible heights. As many times as my sister and I try today, we never seem to make a chocolate cake that tastes quite the same or get our sponge cakes to rise quite as high as hers.

Now she is gone and, as an adult with children of my own, I wish I could still wedge myself between the kitchen chair and the stove and prop up my feet so we could talk—just once more. Instead, when I miss my mother, I cook her pot roast or chicken soup for my family and friends. As we sit around the table, enjoying the meal, I feel warm and safe again. ❖

**Grandma Sandra's Mandel Bread**

2 cups self-raising flour  
(or 2 cups plain flour plus 2 tsp baking powder  
and ¼ tsp salt)  
1 cup sugar  
¼ cup oil  
2 eggs  
¼ tsp vanilla  
Nuts and chocolate chips (optional)  
Jelly, yogurt, or sour cream to moisten dough if necessary

Sift flour, sugar, and dry ingredients in a bowl. Add remaining ingredients and blend until smooth. Batter should be the consistency of your ear lobe. If it is too dry, add jelly, sour cream, or yogurt. Place in greased pans (or the bottom of two aluminum ice-cube trays). Allow to cool, then slice. Place slices flat on a cookie sheet and toast each side at 350° until golden brown. ❖

*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](mailto: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.

---

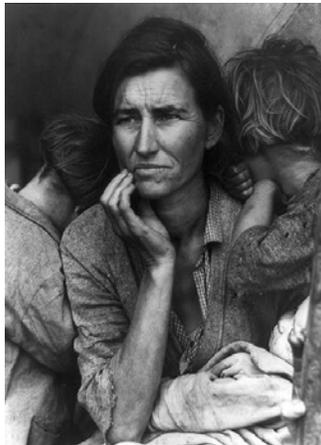
This story was adapted from *In My Mother's Kitchen: An Introduction to the Healing Power of Reminiscence* by **Robin A. Edgar** (Tree House Enterprises, 2003). Robin lives in Charlotte, N.C.

*Women's History Month* (Continued from page 1)

through to publication, why she felt the stories deserved a place on U.T. Press's prestigious history and women's studies lists. She told me, "While all the [stories] talk about daily life and the more mundane world, they also provide a fresh perspective on the larger events that marked the Twentieth Century and help us to relate to those global forces in more human and meaningful ways." Theresa feels that individual lives are like the cellular units that make up larger organisms. "We cannot hope to fully understand the whole [of human history] without having some deep knowledge about the parts," she says.

In a world where rapid change is the norm, Theresa believes we have an obligation to capture the moments and days and weeks of which our lives are made, so that our granddaughters and great granddaughters can learn both from our successes and our failures. "If we do not take responsibility for remembering and recording and publishing our own stories," Theresa asks, "then who will?" We need the women who come after us to know that, while life always presents struggle and challenge, there are always strong, resourceful women who are willing to persevere and even to prosper in the most difficult of circumstances.

In 2004, the manuscripts and other documents relating to the book were accepted for archiving in the Southwestern Writers Collection at Texas State University in San Marcos—



yet another way in which the OWL writers' words are preserved for the historical record.

While researching the origins of Women's History Month for this article, I came across the photograph at left on the Library of Congress website. Taken by renowned photographer Dorothea Lange in 1936 when she worked for the Farm Security Administration, it became an emblem of the suffering of the Depression-era farm worker. The photo entered the historical record with the dispiriting caption, "Destitute peapickers in California; a 32 year old mother of seven children." But reading further, I learned that this woman had a name—Florence Owens Thompson—and that she was an active participant in farm labor struggles and a native American from Oklahoma who had traveled to California looking for work. Her daughter later commented, "She was a very strong woman. She was a leader. I think that's one of the reasons she resented the photo—because it didn't show her in that light." I found myself wondering, if Florence Thompson could have chosen her own caption and told her own story back in 1936, what would she have said?

As members of Story Circle Network, we are already committed to telling our own truth and recording our own history. We already know that the photographs of our lives need to have captions and stories of our own choosing. Only then will history reflect our experience (and all women's experience) not as the object of someone else's observations but as the subject of our own reflections. ❖

Here are some ideas to help you mark Women's History Month:

- Share your own story—with family, with friends, with the kids at a nearby school.
- Choose a period of history you're interested in and read a memoir by a woman who lived through that time.
- If you belong to a book group, suggest that the group reads the memoir of a woman you admire.
- Read a woman's memoir aloud for the blind or disabled (see Sue Bilich's article on p. 7).
- Find out if libraries and schools in your area will be marking Women's History Month and offer any resources you can to help their programs.
- Check out the website of the National Women's History Project for other ideas and resources, free brochures, and links to events planned for this month: [www.nwhp.org](http://www.nwhp.org)
- Visit the Women's Museum in Dallas or check out the website at [www.thewomensmuseum.org](http://www.thewomensmuseum.org)

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

Published by Tree House Enterprises  
ISBN 0-97237-707-7 (pb) 128 pp, \$11.95

*In My Mother's Kitchen*, an introduction to the reminiscence process, demonstrates how to recall and record significant memories that recognize and value the individuals and incidents that shaped your life.

Order through our book review website:

[www.storycircle.org/BookReviews](http://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.

---

*Energy rightly applied can accomplish anything.*  
—Nellie Bly, Investigative journalist (1864–1922)

# 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](mailto:mjr@io.com).

## Story Circle Board Report

The SCN Board met at La Madeleine restaurant on Jan. 10. President Judith Helburn chaired the meeting, which was attended by 16 of the 20 members. Members reported their contribution of 625.5 volunteer hours to SCN activities since the last meeting. A total of 2,457 hours were contributed during 2004.

The board:

- 1 Reviewed and approved the minutes of the October meeting and the Treasurer's Report.
- 2 Welcomed Jane Ross to the board.
- 3 Discussed the possibility of offering a series of workshops based on Christina Baldwin's new "Lifelines" tapes and deferred the decision to the April meeting.
- 4 Confirmed plans for the Nancy Aronie workshop scheduled for June 5.
- 5 Authorized an increase from \$1.00 to \$3.00 in the fee for the "Facilitator's Guide".
- 6 Received reports from the Chapter Development, Circles, and Financial Management ad hoc action committees. Committee recommendations will be discussed and acted on at the April meeting.
- 7 Revised the bylaws to allow the immediate past president to serve on the board for one year or more.
- 8 Discussed proposals to produce an SCN cookbook and to create a member services web page where, for a small fee, SCN members could advertise services directly related to the SCN mission. Decisions on the proposals were deferred, pending further research, to the April meeting.
- 9 Changed the name of the annual writing contest to the "Susan Wittig Albert Life Writing Competition."
- 10 Selected February 3-5, 2006 as the tentative date for the next SCN conference.

The next board meeting will be held April 11, 2005 at La Madeleine.

—Report by Leilani Rose

## Austin Chapter

The Austin Chapter finished up 2004 with a delightful holiday party featuring a presentation by Rebecca Roberts about her recent trip to India.

Rebecca is our new program chairperson for the chapter and she has already lined up several "Be Our Guest" programs.

Donna Remmert and Mary Elizabeth just finished a presentation in which they blended dream analysis and astrology. It was a very interesting and eye-opening experience and the Austin Chapter hopes to present this program again in early summer. We would really enjoy hearing from readers who have suggestions for other programs that our membership would find interesting. Send your ideas to [Rebecca@rebeccar.com](mailto:Rebecca@rebeccar.com)

—Report by Jackie Newman

## Internet Chapter

The Internet Chapter has been stretching its wings over the past few months!

The reading e-circle is growing larger and stronger. Members of the reading circle have been enjoying timely writings by women, for women. One amazing truth rings through all of the book discussions. The published authors have led lives not unlike our own in some ways. They give voice to the things we value, fear, or desire. They allow us to see that each woman's story is worth sharing.

Among the writing e-circles, our numbers have increased dramatically over the past few months. We have been able to revitalize the 12 already formed circles and add not one but two new circles to the chapter. With 14 circles writing monthly life stories, we have certainly written enough to fill an anthology or two. Many of our members have been actively searching for avenues to publish their works—some have met with success, many are still searching. But, the point of the matter is that our members are writing and striving to tell their stories in whatever manner best suits their needs.

Among the 14 writing e-circles, we have one circle dedicated to the craft of writing poetry. While it is operating at maximum capacity, we recently have had a volunteer to facilitate a second poetry circle should one be needed.

During the upcoming months, the Internet Chapter circle facilitators will begin receiving the new E-Circle Facilitator's Newsletter. Topics will vary but the goal will remain the same—to fulfill the mission of Story Circle Network: "The Story Circle Network is dedicated to helping women share the stories of their lives and to raising public awareness of the importance of women's personal histories."

—Report by Lee Ambrose

A warm **thank-you** to these members for their referrals:

Susan Albert	Mary Ann Reynolds
Ellen Collins	Leilani Rose
Judith Helburn	Danelle Sasser
Patricia Pando	Jackie Woolley
PJ Pierce	Heather Young

*Starting a story circle*

## *Story Circles—The Heart of SCN*

*When we announced the call for submissions to the True Words anthology in our last issue, several members asked why only those who belonged to a writing circle, an Internet Chapter e-circle, or a reading circle could submit stories. This seemed like a good moment to reflect on the importance of the circle idea to SCN.*

Story Circle Network was so named by its founders for a reason. They felt that the greatest healing benefits come from writing in circle. Christina Baldwin, author of *Life's Companion*, the groundbreaking book on the healing power of journaling, believes that circles not only provide us with a supportive community but they help us access our wisdom. They provide us with a venue to learn from each other. And those of us in an SCN story circle can attest that this works even when the circle meets around a rectangular library table!

Marie Buckley has been facilitating a writing circle in her hometown of Hillsboro, Oreg., since 2000. She feels there is a special joy to seeing and hearing each woman read her own story. "Some stories (let's face it) are not the same on paper or the screen without the inflection of the writer's voice when she reads her work."

In a writing circle, the writer gets immediate feedback. She hears the laughter something funny brings or sees the tears in others' eyes as they connect with pain and sorrow. She feels pride when someone says aloud: Wow! The listeners can ask immediate questions and get answers. Not only that, says Marie, but "women can hug one another and everyone gets to eat chocolate together!" The circle members make friends they can do things with, call on the phone, or ask to pet sit when they go somewhere—the benefits are myriad.

Not all the members of Marie's writing circle are SCN members, and that's okay. Says Marie, "I encourage everyone to join SCN, but I don't push them. I tell them, 'It's a good thing. Go look at the website; browse around; see if you like it.' Half a dozen have joined and become active, continuing members."

Right now, there are 19 writing circles meeting in person around the country (plus a dozen more that meet in the Austin area, SCN's birthplace). The SCN board would like to see the number of writing circles around the country rise, since board members know first hand the benefits of writing in circle. The rules for starting an SCN writing circle are simple. The facilitator needs to be a current SCN member but (in towns other than Austin) the circle participants do not. A 20-page Facilitator Guide booklet is available from our main office free to SCN members, to help you form and lead your first circle. SCN also offers to link new facilitators up with an online "buddy facilitator," for those who would like support to get started.

When it comes to starting a writing circle in your own town, Robin Edgar of Charlotte, N. C., has some great suggestions. "Invite anybody and everybody you meet. Don't worry if they will be able to relate to one another." She recommends being flexible with your time slot at first until you get a core of participants. Then set a schedule that works best for the faithful ones. After a few months, get other members to run a meeting or two, so it is not about you but about the circle.

Marie Buckley adds, "Be a flexible, diplomatic person. Be really interested in hearing dozens and dozens of stories. Feel joy that you have enabled women to get together to do this thing. Women sharing true stories is an amazing process, but if you don't feel that way about it, it may not be for you."

When she began her group, Marie created a flyer. A friend who owns a local bookstore agreed to let her group meet in her store on an evening when the store was closed, free of charge. Other venues where story circles are meeting free of charge include libraries, restaurants, community centers, and churches. Several circles meet in the facilitator's home.

There are many organizations and websites offering the writing classes or publishing opportunities. What makes SCN special is the story circle and the community it represents. Circles are at the heart of our organization. So if you don't already belong to a writing circle but wish you did, why not start one yourself! You might even find there are other SCN members already living in your town who would love to join. Just ask our Executive Director Peggy Moody for help letting them know about your new circle. Email [storycircle@storycircle.org](mailto:storycircle@storycircle.org) ❖

*My most profound experiences of wisdom-rising have occurred in circle. I believe circle is an archetypal experience coded in our DNA. When we sit down in the shape of a circle ... we access a lineage of wisdom that is tens of thousands of years old. ... Grounded in this spiritual state, the truest version of the story of who we are and what we are capable of being is available to us. Surrounded by our mutual recognition of each other, the energy to rise up and do what must be done is held in supportive community.*  
—Christina Baldwin

### **Need help starting a story circle in your town?**

From the SCN home page [www.storycircle.org](http://www.storycircle.org) look for the heading "How to Start a Story Circle" in the left hand navigation bar.

To see the current list of writing circles that meet around the U.S. and the world, visit [www.storycircle.org/circles.shtml](http://www.storycircle.org/circles.shtml).

If you 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.

## Stitching Together the Anthology

Carolyn Blankenship

I am the editor of the *True Words* anthology. The good news is: I get to read all the wonderful poems and stories submitted by women from all over the U.S. and from several foreign countries.

The bad news is: I have to take more than 60 pages of stories and condense them to 28 pages and not by reducing the type size!

How different from my experience of editing the 2002 version of the *True Words* anthology! I had 24 pages to fill, but submissions trickled in slowly, the deadline was approaching, and I had nowhere near the necessary material. At that time, the Internet Chapter was in its infancy and 40% of our members were from the very active chapter based in SCN's birthplace of Austin, Tex. I struggled to fill 20 pages with 30 pieces, 10 written by Austinites, the other 20 from around the country.

The decision to move the publication date from January to April has given busy women a chance to get the holiday decorations down and still get their submissions in by the January 31 deadline. This year we have over 60 pages-worth of submissions, and they come from 11 different states, 20 different cities, and four foreign countries! Because our publishing budget limits us to just 28 printed pages, we won't be able to print all the stories. But this year, for the first time we will make all the submissions available to members on our website.

Thankfully, all submissions this year have come via email, making my job much easier. Still, each e-mail must be acknowledged, information gathered so that each woman's city and state can be listed, and membership in Story Circle Network and individual writing or reading circles verified. Then comes the most difficult part—deciding which poems

and stories to use. The editor must read and re-read the pieces to fit together a variety of writing that will represent our diverse organization. Once the anthology is complete, everyone who submitted must be contacted again, to let them know if their piece was chosen.

Finally, we get to the editing! All the unique fonts and fascinating colors must be changed to plain old, black Times New Roman, all the bizarre symbols that computers exchange for punctuation must be deciphered and corrected, and all text formatted into columns and paragraphs. Everything must be checked for proper grammar and punctuation, and some pieces may need editing, which requires more communication and permission from the authors.

Putting the anthology together is like stitching together a crazy quilt: it takes pieces of all types and sizes, the right pieces need to go next to each other, and there must be a pattern, even if it is an informal one. And just like making a quilt, after all the work is done and the printed copy is in my hands, I can open it up with a sigh of satisfaction and pleasure and a little regret at the beautiful pieces that are still waiting for their place in print. ❖

Beginning in April, look for all the anthology submissions to be posted on the Story Circle Network website at:

[www.storycircle.org/anthology](http://www.storycircle.org/anthology)

The username is `truewords` and the password is `scn2005`.



This membership is a gift.

My name and address:

\_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

My phone and e-mail:

\_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

### Join the Story Circle Network!

\_\_\_\_ Annual Membership: USA: \$25 ;  
 Canada & Mexico: \$30; } International MO only  
 International \$35.  
 \_\_\_\_ Austin Chapter: \$18/yr (in addition to your national dues!)  
 \_\_\_\_ Internet Chapter: \$15/yr (in addition to your national dues!)  
 \_\_\_\_ Sample copy of the *Story Circle Journal*: \$5

Mail your check to  
 Story Circle Network,  
 PO Box 500127,  
 Austin TX 78750-0127

3/05

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_ Amount enclosed \_\_\_\_\_

Become a supporting member and help Story Circle Network grow. Check here:

\$50 Supporter     \$100 Sponsor     \$200 Patron     \$400 Benefactor

## 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](mailto:news@storycircle.org).

**Nancy Rigg**, a writer and documentary filmmaker from Los Angeles CA, has two articles and a guest editorial about the water search and rescue response to the tsunami disaster in Asia in this month's issue of *Advanced Rescue Technology* magazine. Go to: [www.advancedrt.com/tocnavo.html](http://www.advancedrt.com/tocnavo.html).

**Robin Edgar** of Charlotte NC appeared on "Charlotte Talks," a local NPR radio program, talking about her story circle on Jan. 26, 2005. You can hear it at [www.wfae.org](http://www.wfae.org) (go to the "Charlotte Talks" archive and look for the Jan. 26 program).

**Lee Ambrose** of Naples FL has a column in the electronic as well as the print publication for *Penwomanship* magazine. "Lee's Book Nook" will feature book reviews of new and classic women's writings. Go to [www.penwomanship.com](http://www.penwomanship.com).

**Katherine V. Gannett** of Cedar Falls IA will have two of her poems, "Fractured Mirror" and "Standing on the Bridge," published in the 2004-05 issue of *Inner Weather*, the University of Northern Iowa's student journal. One of her photographs will appear in this journal, also.

**Elsa Eysenbach McKeithan**, Ph.D.'s book, *Writing the Stories of Your Life: How to Turn Memories into Memoir*, was published in the fall of 2004 and is now available on amazon.com, barnesandnoble.com, talkingstonespublishing.com, and worldwide from trafford.com.

**Kathleen Baker** is the lead author of the article, "The Healing Power of Writing: Applying Experiential/Creative Components of Poetry Therapy," which was published in *The Journal of Poetry Therapy* (V17, #3).

**Linda Joy Myers**, author of *Becoming Whole* and *Don't Call Me Mother*, is publishing a new monthly email newsletter, "Memories and Memoirs." The newsletter offers ideas and suggestions for writing about your life. To subscribe, go to [www.memoriesandmemoirs.com](http://www.memoriesandmemoirs.com).

**Evelyn Cook** has two devotional writings in *Penned from the Heart*, compiled by Gloria Clover.

**Penny Leisch** was selected as the ghostwriter for a local television celebrity called Good Golly Miss Molly, and she is the co-host of a local morning television show, "Your Life A-Z". Molly's column is posted online and also appears in *Loving Pets* magazine.

**Jean Leonard's** book *The Hat Lady* has been published by Regional Oncology Center, Ormond Beach FL. The hat lady makes hats for those who lose their hair due to chemotherapy. The story is about Jean's friend, Eileen Elkin, whose 13-year-old daughter illustrated it. Contact Jean at [hjaustex@aol.com](mailto:hjaustex@aol.com)

## Life-Writers' Market Watch: Opportunities for Publishing

Inspired2Write.com will host "Photography for Writers," Penny Leisch's online workshop to help writers use photos to make more money. To kick off this new partnership, Penny is running an **essay contest**. First prize is a free workshop. Details on her website, [www.pennyspensandpics.com](http://www.pennyspensandpics.com).  
Deadline: March 15

Announcing **two contests from AuthorMania.com**. Writing Contest: short story, any topic, no more than 5,000 words, prize \$1,000. Also Poetry Contest: no word limit, prize \$400. \$20 fee per entry. Mail to: Cindy Thomas, C/O AuthorMania.com Writing Contest, 1210 Co. Rd 707, Buna TX 77612. Check the guidelines at [www.authormaniaman.com/contests.html](http://www.authormaniaman.com/contests.html)  
Deadline: March 31

Colleen Sell, editor of 12 volumes in the **Cup of Comfort** series, is seeking submissions for *A Cup of Comfort for Grandparents*. She's looking for stories about truly remarkable relationships and experiences shared by grandparents and their grandkids. 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](http://www.cupofcomfort.com) (click on "Share Your Story") or email your request to [cupofcomfort@adamsmedia.com](mailto:cupofcomfort@adamsmedia.com).  
Deadline: April 1

Announcing the 2005 **Nimrod/Hardman Writing Awards**: The Katherine Anne Porter Prize for Fiction and the Pablo Neruda Prize for Poetry, with first prize in each category of \$2,000 and publication. Fiction: 7,500 words max. Poetry: 1,900 words max., 500 words min. No previously published works or works accepted for publication elsewhere. \$20 fee per entry. Guidelines at: [www.utulsa.edu/nimrod](http://www.utulsa.edu/nimrod).  
Deadline: April 30

**Texas Highways** is looking for stories to commemorate the end of WWII from Texans who contributed to the war effort here at home. Send memories and any photos that illustrate the story (they will be returned) to: *Texas Highways*, Attn: WWII-TX Box 141009, Austin TX 78714-1009. Please include a telephone number and/or an email address.  
Deadline: April 30

**Penwomanship**, a magazine for the creative woman writer, launches in April and is seeking submissions. The magazine will contain at least 48 pages of women's writing, artwork and photography. In addition to short stories, poetry, and personal essays, we are also seeking short-short humor pieces, advice columns for women on women's health issues and finances, and writing tips. Submissions can be made via email to [submissions@penwomanship.com](mailto: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](http://www.penwomanship.com).

## Thank You!

These wonderful women contributed to SCN's 2004 annual campaign at the supporter level or above or renewed their memberships as a Supporter, Sponsor, Patron, or Benefactor between September '04 and February '05. Thank you!

Susan Wittig Albert	Ann Murphy
Duffie Bart	Jackie Newman
Hazel Baylor	Marie Oser
Anne Beckner	Pat O'Toole
Denise Bell	Patricia Pando
Aletta Bond	Barbara Peters
Bonnie Conwell	PJ Pierce
Mary Jo Doig	Donna Remmert (matched by ExxonMobil)
Jean Fischer	Leilani Rose
Judy Flournoy	Jane Ross
Marsha Fowler	Danelle Sasser
Sharon Freeto	Louise Saxon
Lynda Breckinridge Gaetano	Michelle Stacy
Sandra Gaylor	Daisy Stanley
Helen Ginger	Tricia Stevens
P. Jan Hall	Lori Swanson
Judith Helburn	Mary-Agnes Taylor
Joan McLaren Henson	Marie Unini
Beth Kennedy	Anne Waldron
Marta Luzim	Heather Young
Mary Jane Marks	
Nancy Malvin	
Linda McAffrey	Please let us know if we have mistakenly omitted your name from this list so we can recognize you in the next <i>Journal</i> issue.
Diana McDaniel	
Lynn Mills	
Peggy Moody	

## Lifewriting Contest

*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

Friendships with other women enrich our lives and sometimes even save us. 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. Watch the June *Journal* for details. The contest deadline will be July 15.

If you have a favorite quotation about friendship, we'd love to use it in the June issue of the *Journal*. Email it to Jane Ross at [mjr@io.com](mailto:mjr@io.com) or mail it to 5802 Wynona Av., Austin TX 78756 by May 5.

A few spaces are still available on the

## Lifelines

Lifewriting Retreat,

Featuring Author, Teacher

Maureen Murdock

April 8-10, '05

Festival Hill

Round Top

Texas

See details and  
sign-up on p. 20



**Story Circle Network**  
**PO Box 500127**  
**Austin TX 78750-0127**